Transnational Islamist Networks: Western Fighters in Afghanistan, Somalia and Syria

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Western Muslims have joined jihadi groups in Afghanistan/Pakistan, Somalia and Syria to defend Islam from its perceived enemies. Transnational Islamist networks have played a pivotal role in bringing them to conflict zones by fulfilling three functions: radicalisation through mosques, radical preachers, and the Internet; recruitment which can be conducted either physically or digitally; and identity formation that provides the radicalised recruits with a larger cause to fight for as members of an imagined global community. Transnational Islamist networks are multifunctional entities on the rise.

Keywords: Islamist networks, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia, Syria

In the era of globalisation, transnational networks have become increasingly influential actors in world politics.\(^1\) While the sovereign state still commands significant authority and legitimacy, overt and illicit transnational networks (for example, environmentalists, cyberactivists) have managed to attract support and mobilise resources. In this regard, religion-based networks are particularly active. Due to their spirituality and worldviews, they are better suited to extend over national borders and function universally.

Transnational Islamist networks are horizontal structures consisting of multiple entities that interact with each other for the purpose of promoting a political agenda based on Islam. They usually include Islamic charities, NGOs, legal and clandestine groups, Muslim religious leaders and preachers, and individual followers. Moreover, these networks have a horizontal rather than vertical structure in order to avoid infiltration and repression by state authorities. This is particularly true for those transnational Islamist networks that have become involved in Muslim insurgencies in Europe, Asia and Africa.

\(^1\)See DeMars, NGOs and Transnational Networks, and Della Porta, Globalization from Below.
In recent years, NATO and government forces have encountered a number of Western jihadi fighters who have travelled to Afghanistan and Pakistan. Likewise, in Syria, an increased number of Western Muslims have joined the armed opposition which has been fighting a bloody war against the Assad regime. In Somalia, the al-Shabaab insurgency has drawn support from members of the Somali diaspora in the United States and Europe, as well as converts to Islam. Western security agencies are concerned about the possibility of Muslims coming back home with new terrorist skills. Foreign experiences could significantly increase the effectiveness and efficiency of Western jihadi fighters if they choose to go domestic.\(^2\)

There is an extensive bibliography on how Islamist networks organise themselves, mobilise supporters, and make sense of the social world.\(^3\) This article will focus on the transnational Islamist networks that have brought Western fighters to Afghanistan/Pakistan, Somalia and Syria. First, it will describe the participation of Western Muslims in the aforementioned conflicts based on the available information. Then it will attempt to conceptualise transnational Islamist networks by analysing their three functions: radicalisation, recruitment and identity formation. More specifically, the article will argue that transnational Islamist networks are multifunctional entities that play a crucial role in empowering jihadi groups. Finally, the conclusion will summarise the main findings.

**The rise of transnational Islamist networks**

Islam is one of the most cosmopolitan religions with more than a billion faithful. Nationalism is viewed by many Muslims as a concept alien to Islam, which calls for unity and solidarity among the believers. The cosmopolitan nature of Islam is reinforced by the annual pilgrimage to Mecca, and missionary and educational activities which include international travelling experiences. Thousands of Muslims travel every year to pursue Islamic higher education and many Islamic scholars go abroad to acquire knowledge. Both the Quran and the Sunnah encourage the believer to take a trip for religious purposes; indeed, the term *al-Rihla* describes a journey that is made for the purpose of seeking the divine truth. Proselytism is another important part of Muslim life; *al da'wa* is the call to Islam for both non-believers and those Muslims who do not live by the Quran. As a result, there are numerous international groups that focus on missionary activities throughout the world, with Tablighi Jamaat being the most well known and successful one.\(^4\)

Unlike Catholicism, the Muslim faith lacks a centralised leadership and a monolithic doctrine. In fact, Islam resembles Protestantism which is a polycephalous

\(^2\)Hegghammer, “Should I Stay or Should I Go?”.


\(^4\)On Tablighi Jamaat, see Ali, “Islamic Revivalism”.
branch of Christianity made up of many churches and interpretations. Although politically and economically divided, the Muslim world still forms a large interconnected religious-cultural system. Therefore, individuals can claim and benefit from a global identity as members of the *ummah* (that is the community of believers) that functions as a complex system of transnational networks fostering solidarity and cooperation.\(^5\)

It is common wisdom that the first transnational Islamist networks were established in the early to mid-1980s.\(^6\) The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979 unleashed an unprecedented wave of Islamic militancy. Arab fighters were recruited by Islamic NGOs and charities based in Pakistan and other Muslim-majority countries. As a result, thousands of young volunteers from Arab countries poured into the border areas between Afghanistan and Pakistan to join the *mujahideen* against the Red Army and its communist allies in Kabul. The story of the Soviet-Afghan war and the Arab-Afghans has been well documented;\(^7\) Osama bin Laden and his mentor Abdullah Azzam became famous for their struggle against the Soviet Union. Indeed, *al Qaeda* is a product of the Soviet-Afghan war.

The transnational Islamist networks that brought volunteers to Afghanistan did not disappear after the departure of the Red Army in 1989. Arab Afghans found a new mission during the Kashmiri insurgency (1989-present),\(^8\) the Algerian civil war (1992-98)\(^9\) and the Bosnian war (1992-95).\(^10\) Foreign jihadi fighters also participated in the Russian-Chechen wars (1994-96 and 1999-2001)\(^11\) and the Iraqi Sunni rebellion (2003-09).\(^12\) Currently, most foreign jihadi fighters are involved in three conflicts: the Taliban insurgency, the Somali civil war and the Syrian crisis. The focus of this article will be on the Western Muslims who have been fighting there.

**Afghanistan and Pakistan (2007-13)**

The Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan has entered its eleventh year, but is nowhere close to ending. It is true that the suppression of the Iraqi Sunni rebellion by 2009 generated hopes of an equivalent victory against the Taliban. However, the two insurgencies are clearly different: the former was urban-based, while the latter is cross-border. Despite the US drone attacks in Pakistan’s tribal areas, the

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\(^6\)See Williams, “On the Trail of the ‘Lions of Islam’”.

\(^7\)Randal, *Osama: The Making of a Terrorist*; and Tomsen, *The Wars of Afghanistan*.

\(^8\)Malet, *Foreign Fighters: Transnational Identity*, 203.

\(^9\)See Willis, *The Islamist Challenge in Algeria*.

\(^10\)See Kohlmann, *Al Qaida’s Jihad in Europe*.

\(^11\)See Moore and Tumelty, “Foreign Fighters and the Case of Chechnya”.

\(^12\)See Hewitt and Kelley-Moore, “Foreign Fighters in Iraq”.
Taliban, capable of launching sophisticated attacks, are largely unreachable. Therefore, Afghan insurgents have proven to be resilient.

Very little is known about Western fighters who have joined the Taliban and al Qaeda-affiliated groups in the region. The scarce information that exists on them indicates that they are mainly drawn from three nationalities: Germans, Americans and British. Most of them apparently joined the insurgents when the conflict intensified in 2007.

According to media reports, a few dozen German-born Muslims have fought alongside the Taliban and other jihadi groups against NATO and Pakistani forces. In 2007, ethnic Germans and Turkish Germans formed their own sub-group which was called the German Taliban Mujahideen (GTM). The GTM was part of the Islamic Jihad Union (Jama’at al-Jihad – hereafter IJU), a splinter group of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan which was established in 2002. The IJU is a jihadi-Salafi group closely associated with al Qaeda that has mainly recruited Central Asians and Turks. The IJU has been held responsible for numerous attacks and plots in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia. More importantly, the group has attempted to expand its jihadi operations in Europe.

In September 2007, two ethnic German members of the IJU, Daniel Schneider and Fritz Gelowicz, were arrested for plotting to bomb US targets in Germany. In May 2008, a coordinated police operation in France, Germany and the Netherlands led to the arrest of 10 alleged members of the IJU, all of whom were of Turkish origin. Moreover, the GTM was dissolved in April 2010 when its leaders were killed by the Pakistani army. Apart from participating in terrorist attacks, German fighters have been particularly active in propaganda dissemination through the use of new media.

Americans have not established their own separate group, but have played an increasingly visible role within al Qaeda. Adam Pearlman (also known as Adam Yahie Gadahn) is the US-born spokesman and media advisor for al Qaeda. Bryant Neal Vinas (also known as Bashir al-Amriki), a Hispanic American convert, participated in attacks against the US forces in Afghanistan in 2008 and helped plan an attack in New York’s Pennslyvania Station in 2009. Additionally, two American jihadi fighters, Abu Ibrahim al Ameriki and Sayfullah al-Amriki, whose real identities remain unknown, have appeared in videos produced by the IJU. Also, Americans of South Asian origin have been recruited and trained by al Qaeda to carry out suicide attacks in the United States. For example, Najibullah Zazi and


Faisal Shahzad planned attacks in New York in 2009 and 2010, respectively. Americans are highly valued as a propaganda tool against the US government.

British fighters have established a presence in the region as well. In 2007, MI5 estimated that up to 4,000 British Muslims travelled to Afghanistan and Pakistan for jihadi purposes before and after the overthrow of the Taliban regime, a figure that seems exaggerated. In January 2007, a group of British Pakistanis in Birmingham were arrested for plotting to kidnap British soldiers and supplying equipment to insurgents in Pakistan and Afghanistan. In December 2010, two British converts to Islam were killed in a drone attack in northwestern Pakistan. Furthermore, there are strong indications that more British Muslims have been fighting against NATO troops in Afghanistan.

From time to time, people of other European nationalities have been spotted in the region. In October 2007, the Russian Muslim convert Andre Vladimirovich Bataloff was arrested in Afghanistan by police officers on charges of helping the Taliban to prepare an attack. In April 2013, Pakistani authorities deported three French Muslims who were detained for a year for allegedly planning to travel to the tribal areas and join the Taliban.

The number of Western fighters in post-9/11 Afghanistan and Pakistan is estimated at several hundred, excluding those who never made it to the region. They are rarely known for their military skills; instead, they have been largely used by the insurgents for propaganda purposes. Three factors have discouraged many Western Muslims from joining the Taliban and al Qaeda-affiliated groups in Afghanistan and Pakistan: the geographical distance between the West and the region, the logistical difficulties in reaching Pakistan’s remote tribal areas which serve as sanctuary for the insurgents; and possibly language difficulties for non-Dari and non-Pashto speakers.

The Somali civil war (2006-13)
The Islamist insurgency in Somalia dates back to the early 2000s when the Islamic Courts Union (al-Ittihad Mahakem al-Islamiya – hereafter ICU) was established in

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order to create an Islamic state. Although the ICU had managed to occupy most
of south and central Somalia by the summer of 2006, the group was eventually
defeated by the Ethiopian-backed Somali Transitional Federal Government (TFG).
The Mujahideen Youth Movement (Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen – hereafter
Al-Shabaab) was formed sometime in 2006 by members of the ICU who vowed to
continue the war against TFG and its Ethiopian allies.

The group has recruited both diaspora Somalis and converts. In October 2008,
Shirwa Ahmed, a Somali American from Minneapolis, became the first American
suicide bomber to blow himself up outside a government compound in northern Soma-
lia. In September 2010, a Somali American from Seattle launched a suicide attack
against an African Union base in Mogadishu, killing 21 peacekeepers.22 According to
an investigative report produced by the US Congress’ Committee on Homeland
Security, at least 40 or more American Muslims have joined al-Shabaab and 15 of
them have been killed fighting in Somalia.23 In December 2012, Craig Baxam, a for-
mer US soldier converted to Islam, was arrested in Kenya while trying to travel to
Somalia. He was self-radicalised through the internet and decided to join al-Shabaab
in order to defend territories controlled by the Islamists from potential invaders.24
Besides being foot soldiers, American Muslims have also risen to leadership positions.
The American convert Omar Shafik Hammami (also known as Abu Mansuur al-
Amriki) was a senior member of al-Shabaab who published online his autobiography,
The Story of an American Jihadi, describing his own radicalisation trajectory.25

In addition to Americans, al-Shabaab has recruited up to 50 British Muslims to
fight in Somalia.26 In October 2007, a British Somali carried out a suicide attack
against Ethiopian soldiers in the town of Baidoa. Before the attack, he recorded a
video addressing fellow British Muslims:

I advise you to migrate to Somalia and wage war against your enemies. Death in
honor is better than life in humiliation...To the Somalis living abroad, are you happy
in your comfort while your religion, your people are being attacked and humiliated?27

23US House of Representatives Committee on Homeland Security, Majority Investigative Report on Al
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bab-fbi-agents-cryptology-and-intelligence.
93732117/The-Story-of-an-American-Jihadi . On the ideological development of Hammami, see Anzalone,
26S. Rayment and C. Freeman, “British Muslims Recruited to Fight for al-Qaeda in Somalia”, The Tele-
graph, 18 February 2012, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/somalia/
Although the group has received significant funding and support from the British Somali community, it has not hesitated to threaten the UK with terrorist attacks. In October 2012, when the radical preacher Abu Hamza was extradited by UK authorities to the US, al-Shabaab issued a statement stating that “Britain will pay the heftiest price for its brazen role in the war against Islam and endless brutality against innocent Muslims”. Therefore, the MI5 ranks Somalia as one of the top three countries (the other two being Pakistan and Yemen) that pose a potential terrorist threat to British security.

The endurance of al-Shabaab is phenomenal. Roland Marchal argues that the impressive survival of al-Shabaab is the result of widespread mistrust towards conventional clan-based politics among Somali youth, who seek a new ideological alternative. This may be why the al-Shabaab insurgency has attracted a number of Muslims from abroad. Al-Shabaab has presented itself as a vanguard movement fighting a war against everyone, namely corrupt locals (warlords), aggressive neighbours (Ethiopia, Kenya), and imperialist powers (the US and Europe).

### The Syrian conflict (2011-13)

The Syrian conflict began in March 2011 when protests erupted against the Bashar al-Assad regime. The immediate response of the Syrian authorities was to increase repression. However, the security crackdown proved counterproductive; by the summer of 2011, the confrontation between the Assad regime and the opposition had turned into a full-scale civil war. Since then, the two warring sides have increasingly drawn in different religious communities: the Syrian regime has been largely supported by the Alawite community and other minorities, while the opposition has been mostly Sunni-dominated. To make matters worse, Syria has become a battlefront on which great powers (the US and Russia), regional powers (Turkey and Iran) and non-state actors (Hezbollah and al Qaeda) are fighting a proxy war.

In this geopolitical context, foreign fighters have joined the opposition. According to news reports, a growing number of European Muslims are fighting alongside the insurgents. A study published by the King’s College International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation, between 140 and 600 European Muslims have gone to Syria since early 2011 to fight the Assad regime, representing 7-11 percent of the foreign fighter total.

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30Marchal, “Joining al-Shabaab in Somalia”.

31On the sectarianisation of the conflict, see Salloukh, “The Arab Uprisings”.

It appears that most of them come from Great Britain, Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands.

British men of Arab and Asian origin, as well as Muslim converts, have joined the opposition forces. According to a former MI6 officer, in March 2013, between 70 and 100 Britons had travelled to Syria for the purpose of fighting there. The case of British fighters in Syria first drew media attention when a British and a Dutch journalist, who had been kidnapped by an unknown jihadi group, managed to escape from captivity and made it to Turkey in July 2012. It was later revealed that some of their captors were actually British-born Muslims of South Asian origin.

In April 2013, the German security agencies provided a rough estimate of German fighters in Syria; two to three dozen Muslims have travelled to Syria to join the insurgents. In July 2013, however, Berlin estimated the number of Germans fighting in Syria at more than 70, predicting a further rise in their number in the future. German Muslims have fought in the Syrian cities of Aleppo and Homs as evidenced by YouTube videos. It appears that most fighters are of Turkish or Arab origin.

Tens of Belgian Muslims have also joined the opposition forces in Syria. The cases of the Belgian teenagers, Brian De Mulder and Jejoen Bontinck, from Antwerp have received public attention, because their families have launched a campaign to bring them home; the father of Jejoen Bontinck even travelled to Aleppo to find his son but in vain. In addition, up to 100 Dutch fighters have been recruited to fight in Syria. According to a research survey presented by the Dutch public television in June 2013, 73 percent of young Dutch Muslims questioned consider these fighters heroes, as opposed to 70 percent of non-Muslims who consider them non-heroes; 81 percent of young Dutch Muslims agree with helping the rebels financially, whereas only 20 percent of non-Muslims agree;

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34Pantucci, “British Fighters Joining the War in Syria”, 11.
finally, 41 percent of young Dutch Muslims agree with sending weapons to insurgents, while only 6 percent of non-Muslims agree.⁴⁰ Members of other nationalities have joined the Syrian opposition as well. In February 2013, a former Guantanamo prisoner, Slimane Hadj Abderrahmane became the first Danish fighter to be killed in Syria.⁴¹ In May 2013, an American woman convert was killed in northern Syria, although it is not exactly clear what her role there was.⁴² In June 2013, the Italian convert, Giulano Delneo, was killed in Syria while fighting alongside Chechen jihadis.⁴³ Additionally, Muslims from Ireland and Spain have travelled to Syria for the purpose of joining the opposition forces.⁴⁴

There are several reasons explaining the flow of European Muslims to this country. First, Syria is relatively close to European countries; jihadi fighters can easily reach the territories controlled by the insurgents through Turkey. Secondly, some of the European Muslims fighting in Syria are either native Arab speakers or have knowledge of Arabic which can facilitate their participation. Third, the suffering of the civilian population has received increasing media attention leading to mobilisation of support among Europe’s Muslim communities; while most concerned Muslim citizens wish to provide only humanitarian aid to the Syrian civilians, a small number of radicals view the conflict as an opportunity to join jihadi groups.

**Conceptualising transnational Islamist networks**

Transnational Islamist networks have grown in importance in the last thirty years, as evidenced by their involvement in major Muslim insurgencies. Due to new communication technologies, increased international travel, and liberalisation of capital flows, they are likely to become even more influential in the near future. Transnational Islamist networks have played a significant role in the process of individual participation in jihadi groups by fulfilling three functions: radicalisation, recruitment and identity formation (Figure 1).


Radicalisation

Although the radicalisation process is not the same for all individuals, it is still possible to understand the circumstances under which some Western Muslims turn to violence. During the 1990s and early 2000s, the radicalisation process usually took place in or around a mosque; the Finsbury Mosque in London, the al Quds Mosque in Hamburg, and the al-Fourqaan Mosque in Eindhoven are only some of the mosques that hosted such networks in the past and helped radicalise Muslims in the West. Following the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, as well as the London and Madrid bombings, Western security agencies have closely monitored religious services and attendance at mosques. As a result, Islamist networks have kept a rather low profile in mosques located in European countries and the United States. Yet, there are indications that some mosques have still been utilised by Islamist networks for jihadi activities: the al Qibla Mosque in the Dutch city of Zoetermeer has allegedly played a role in the flow of fighters to Syria; Somali-American fighters have had ties to the Abubakar As-Saddique Islamic Center in Minneapolis; and the Islamisches Informationszentrum in the German city of Ulm was implicated in the sending of jihadis to Afghanistan.

Additionally, networks are often connected to a radical preacher who may or may not be based in a mosque and contributes to the radicalisation of Western Muslims. Abu Basir al-Tartusi, a London-based cleric of Syrian origin, has been particularly active in mobilising support for the insurgents in Syria. Likewise, Abu Bashir, a Dutch-Moroccan preacher based in Zoetermeer, has played an important role in inspiring local Muslims to travel to Syria. The sermons of the US–Yemeni radical cleric Anwar al-Awlaki were a source of inspiration for several jihadi fighters moving to Somalia.

50. Jenkins, Stray Dogs and Virtual Armies, 16.
In many cases, however, Western Muslims have been self-radicalised through the internet. In the post-9/11 period, numerous websites were created by jihadi groups, radical preachers and individual sympathisers. Frazer Egerton has stressed the importance of hypermedia and their impact on the transformation of some Muslims into jihadis. He rightly points to the inspiring role of images (for example, massacres of Muslims, beheadings, explosions). Through the use of hypermedia, Western Muslims are now more familiar with certain insurgencies and thus more susceptible to jihadi messages. From the notorious Hofstad group in the Netherlands to the London bombers, the role of hypermedia in constructing a common perception of the wrongdoings against Muslims and evoking emotions of humiliation and revenge cannot be ignored.\(^{51}\)

Eric Breininger, a German convert to Islam who joined the IJU and established the GTM during 2007, is an interesting example of a self-radicalised fighter. His memoirs, which were posted on jihadi websites after his death in Pakistan in April 2010, explained how he was radicalised in Germany:

I spent a lot of time with Abdullah (i.e. Daniel Schneider) because we lived together now. Hussayn (i.e. a Muslim friend) came to visit us often and we talked about the problems and suffering in the Islamic ummah. We followed the events which were unfolding in the regions of jihad and watched films of Mujahideen fighting against the Crusaders. What really shocked us the most above all was the news about the prisons, and how the Crusaders treated our brothers... I quickly realized that I had to do something against these Crusaders, who are humiliating our brothers and sisters.\(^{52}\)

\(^{51}\)See Egerton, *Jihad in the West*.

Many other Western jihadi fighters have mentioned the overwhelming influence of videos depicting atrocities against Muslim civilians. During an interview on Dutch television in March 2013, a convert explained that he decided to join the Sunni resistance because he “could not sit and watch [on TV] his sisters in Syria being raped and his brothers being beheaded”.\(^{53}\) Zachary Chesser, an American convert who was arrested on his way to Somalia to join al-Shabaab in July 2010, was also self-radicalised online.\(^ {54}\)

In any case, the three agents of radicalisation are interrelated. Radical Muslim leaders often preach in mosques, but also use the internet extensively to propagate their messages. Some mosques have shown videos of atrocities against Muslims to attendees. Not to mention that many propaganda videos have been produced under the guidance of radical clerics. The relationship between mosques, preachers and the internet as agents of radicalisation is represented in Figure 2.

### Recruitment

Recruitment is a very important function of transnational Islamist networks. While it is difficult to have a qualitative picture of Western jihadi fighters in Afghanistan/Pakistan, Somalia and Syria, it seems that they share the same demographic and social profile. The huge majority are males in their 20s and early 30s, usually with no family of their own. Some have received higher education, but others have low-paying jobs or are unemployed. Additionally, a rather large number of them have criminal records and a troubled personal history. However, not all are social outcasts; in fact, some have a good career.

Each network has its own recruitment pool, relying often on ethnic ties: the Afghan-Pakistani network has mostly targeted British and German Muslims, while the Somali network has largely recruited fighters from the tight-knit Somali communities in the United States and Great Britain. The Syrian network is the most ethnically diverse, with no less than 14 European nationalities represented.\(^ {55}\)

The recruitment of fighters is sometimes undertaken by an experienced recruiter, who himself fought in the past and is credited for his bravery and commitment to jihad. For example, the London-based radical cleric Abu Hamza, who had fought in Afghanistan and Bosnia, was an al Qaeda recruiter, sending fighters to Yemen and Afghanistan from the late 1990s to the mid 2000s.\(^ {56}\) Nevertheless, there have also been cases of digital recruitment. In December 2009, for example, five American Muslims were arrested in Pakistan for attempting to join the Taliban;

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\(^{54}\) Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, *Zachary Chesser*.


according to the Pakistani interrogation report, the five men were recruited online.\textsuperscript{57}

A successful recruitment campaign often depends on funding as well. Islamist networks not only have to identify potential recruits, but must also have the means to finance their travel to conflict zones. The sources of revenue for transnational Islamist networks are varied, but probably include donations from wealthy sympathizers and charities, zakat payments (that is Islamic alms giving), and even money laundering, fraud and other criminal activities.\textsuperscript{58} In October 2011, for example, two Somali-American women from Minnesota were convicted for collecting donations for al-Shabaab.\textsuperscript{59} In Germany, Salafists have raised funds for humanitarian relief in Syria, but authorities suspect that a portion of the funds is used to support the insurgents.\textsuperscript{60} In November 2012, three Dutch Muslims were arrested by the police in Rotterdam for attempting to join the Syrian opposition; they had collected funds to finance their journey.\textsuperscript{61} Yet, some Western fighters are self-funded; for instance, a German convert paid 5,000 euro to travel to Waziristan in northwestern Pakistan.\textsuperscript{62}

\textit{Identity formation}

Finally, transnational Islamist networks contribute to the identity formation of Western jihadi fighters. Within these networks, individuals socialise, develop friendships and bonds, and share challenges and achievements. The unit of reference is the ummah, not the nation state. They often read extremist literature and visit jihadi websites that make reference to conflicts in the Middle East, Africa and the former Soviet Union, portraying Muslims as the victims of infidel aggression. Western fighters have come to feel part of the ummah, a brotherhood and sisterhood of 1.3 billion people with whom they can identify. This identification provides opportunities for action.

For the new recruits, the jihad-trip is the equivalent of an internship through which they can prove themselves to their family and friends (who have usually criticised them for their conversion to Islam or their growing religiosity) and, more

\textsuperscript{57} Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, \textit{Zachary Chesser}, 3.

\textsuperscript{58} On the role of Islamic charities, see Millard Burr and Collins, \textit{Alms for Jihad}. For a general view of the financing of Islamist networks, see Barber, “The ‘New Economy of Terror’”, and Comras, “Al Qaeda Finances and Funding”.


importantly, to the larger group – the ummah – which will give them recognition. Their commitment is proven by the fact that they are ready to travel long distances in harsh conditions in order to reach their final destination. Once they arrive in Afghanistan/Pakistan, Somalia or Syria, they probably encounter language problems or may even suffer a cultural shock. Yet, they are highly motivated and committed to the cause of jihad for the sake of defending the embattled ummah. Most of them have endorsed an idealised version of early Islamic history, advocating a return to the golden years of the Prophet Mohammed. In this way, they have joined the quest for the establishment of a Caliphate which would include all Muslim-populated territories.

Indeed, it can be argued that Western fighters have developed a hybrid identity that combines jihadi Salafism with Islamic universalism. They believe that they are involved in an open-ended religious conflict between the ummah and its enemies. They consider it their own individual obligation (fardh ayni) to defend the ummah. In his memoirs, Breininger revealed this new identity

the environment [i.e. Pakistan’s tribal areas] allows the breeding of children free from the kufir (i.e. disbelief) of Western society… This new generation of Mujahideen grows up multilingual. They usually learn Arabic, Turkish, English, Pashtun, Urdu and their parent’s tongue… With God’s permission this offspring will become a special generation of terrorists that is not listed in any of the enemy’s databases. They speak their enemy’s languages, know their manners and customs and are able to mask and infiltrate the land of the kuffar (i.e. non-believers) because of their appearance.63

In a sermon entitled “Lessons Learned”, the American convert Hammami urged Western Muslims to develop a transnational identity centred around the ummah, and abandon ethnic and cultural ties. He argued that

becoming part of the ummah does not happen until you get out of the belly of the beast [i.e. Western countries] and start living in the crisis zones with the Muslims. You start walking in the poverty, living the oppression, and having that feeling of lost hope. This is what it’s really like to be part of the ummah.64

French convert Abu Abd al-Rahman summarised the rationale behind joining the insurgents in Syria in a propaganda video by stating

Prophet Mohammed told us that the ummah is like a single human body – when an organ suffers, all the other organs come to the rescue. It is our duty to come to the rescue of our brothers who have found themselves in a very difficult situation…. the goal of this video is….to encourage you to leave France, to make hijra, and to join us in Syria.65

64http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=osXY2-p6aUk.
65http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SPiayZ8mY0A.
These anecdotal statements point to an identity formation process facilitated by transnational Islamist networks. The new post-territorial Islamic identity, described aptly by Breininger, Hammami and al-Rahman, would eventually create a *Homus Islamicus* who will live and die for the greater cause of defending Islam from its enemies. As a true citizen of the (Islamic) world, his loyalty would lie with the imagined community of believers, the global ummah. More importantly, his survival would depend solely on a transnational network of mutual support based on interpersonal relations and bonds.

**Conclusion**

Hundreds of Western Muslims have joined jihadi groups in Afghanistan, Somalia and Syria. While they constitute an ethnically diverse group, Western fighters have come to see these insurgencies as symbolic battles for the defence of the ummah against its long-standing enemies.

Transnational Islamist networks have radicalised Western Muslims with the help of mosques, preachers and the internet. In turn, radicalisation has led to recruitment; networks have enlisted and assisted a number of Western Muslims in embarking on jihad in Afghanistan/Pakistan, Somalia and Syria. Membership in Islamist networks has often resulted in the formation of a new transnational identity for Western Muslims that glorifies global jihad.

The involvement of Western fighters in Muslim insurgencies could have important security implications for Europe and the United States. If the history of Arab Afghans is a guide, the return of Western Muslims to their home countries may contribute to the outbreak of jihadi campaigns. Since they have already gained valuable skills and experiences, they may later be tempted to target their own governments and societies. Transnational Islamist networks are the epitome of globalisation, and as such require a high level of intergovernmental cooperation to deal with this non-state security challenge.

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