

Pakistan and the Challenge of Foreign Fighters

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Abstract

There is a dearth of literature on foreign fighters before the rise of ISIS in the Middle East. Hence the structural composition of these fighters and their spatial networking is not exactly known. Since the participation of mosaic of fighters as mujahedeen in Afghan jihad, the phenomenon of foreign fighters persists in different theatres of war. In the backdrop of Shia – Sunni split in the region and with an appreciable Shiite population in the country, the trend of raising private militias pervades through rank and file of Shiite groups as well. Moreover, the definitional quandary of ‘foreign fighters’ has also made it difficult to distinguish them from other such actors or elements in the available literature. The challenge of returning foreign fighters involves multiple complexities including prosecution, imprisonment, de-radicalization and post penalizing phase re-settlement where social repulsion and indifference may push them back to their original mindset. The paper suggests different proposals for reintegration of these returnees on account of their mode of apprehensions and detection so that the state and its institutions especially the Criminal Justice System can provide a permanent remedy for their re-education, re-cultivation and re-socialization.

Keywords: Militant, Fighters, Ideological, Political, State Actor

Definition of Foreign Fighters (FFs)

Before we start discussing foreign fighters, it is necessary to arrive at some sort of definition so as it distinguishes them from an insurgent, a terrorist

and a militant. Interestingly, there exist no proper definitions of a terrorist, a militant or an insurgent as the available literature abounds with different variations of these terms spreading on a wide spectrum on account of variegated conflict zone experiences or firsthand involvement of individuals in native/local extreme incidents. All these terminologies pivot on the intersection of political, religious and ideological trends with violence as their natural corollary. Therefore, we use the term ‘foreign fighter’, ‘insurgent’, ‘terrorist’ and ‘militant’ interchangeably. In order to reach at a distinct categorization, we need to divide religious, political and ideological narration into three shades. For example, we can segregate the term ‘political’ into purely-political, semi-political and apolitical respectively. Similarly, the term ‘religious’ can be sub divided into purely-religious, semi-religious and secular. Lastly the term ‘ideological’ can be branched into purely-ideological, semi-ideological and non-ideological accordingly. The violence is categorized as action against the state institutions or the people living in the geographical boundaries of a country.

Difference between an Insurgent, a Terrorist, a Militant and a Foreign Fighter¹

An insurgent is a person who is fighting against a state or a government and frequently resorts to violence which in majority of cases is directed towards Law Enforcement Agencies (LEAs) or state institutions without any or semi-religious base to achieve the political objectives. Whereas, a terrorist is person who may have a political motive but should contain shades of ideological or religious penchant and uses public centric violence as a means

¹ While defining different terms assistance has been taken from Collins English Dictionary in delineating one term or terms from the other.

to achieve the aim. A militant is an individual who often fights for a political or ideological cause and can resort to violence anytime anywhere. This clearly indicates that a militant has a level of training in weapon usage and handling and knows how to fire ammunition with appreciable consistency.

The words like ‘radical’ and ‘extremist’ can now be explained on the basis of definitions of the three terms. A radical or an extremist is a person who is in a dynamic state since such an individual is constantly accepting and negating certain ideas or beliefs psychologically and metastasizing concepts during an evolutionary phase through different means of experiences and impressions.

Once we have explained these terms it may now become quite easy to enunciate the terminology of ‘foreign fighter’. The term ‘foreign fighter’ can therefore be applied to a person who travels abroad through different means to participate in a conflict for multiple reasons. These may be financial, ideological, religious or sectarian to name the few. Moreover, a foreign fighter may also pass through a dynamic phase of extremism and radicalization to arrive at a stage where he or she is mentally ready to participate in a journey of active battlefield experience.

The diagram indicates political-ideological-religious leaning along x-axis whereas different violence trends are depicted along y-axis. Thus, we have the whole spectrum of Ideological – Religious - Political, Non-Ideological – Secular - Apolitical, Violence-against-State-Institutions and Public-Centric-Violence spectrum along the axes. These definitions have been graphically represented in the format below.

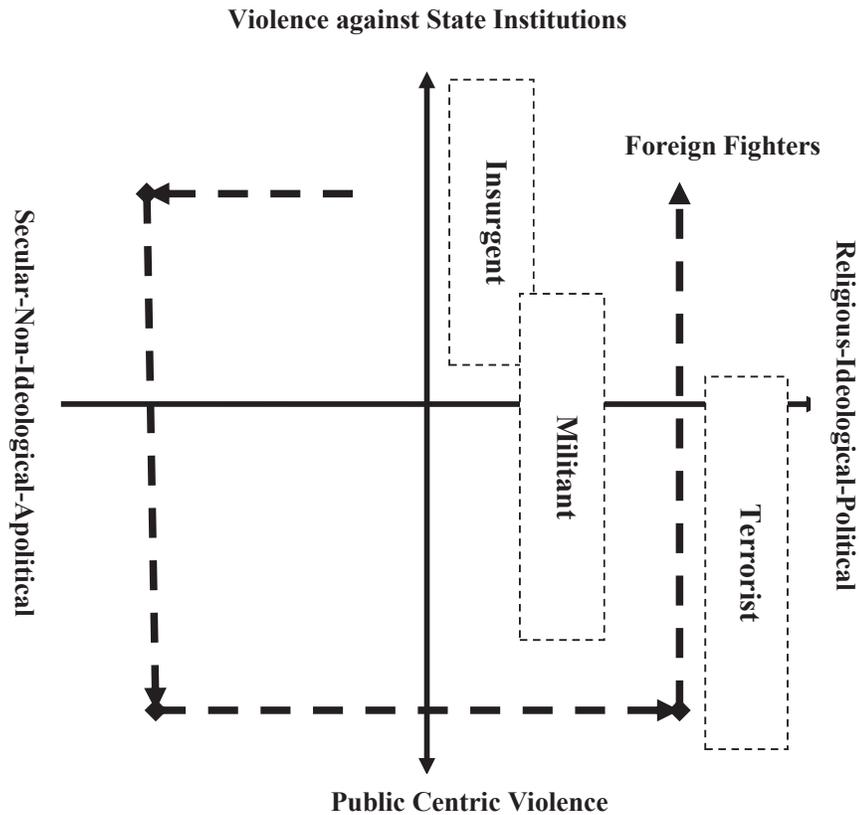


Figure: 01

The domain of the foreign fighters therefore rests on all four quadrants. Hence, we have different shades of foreign fighters including one who may not have active experience of battlefield but is surely susceptible to radical views. Such category of foreign fighters is most often used as the battleground fodder or is utilized for technical expertise if they have a skill or a set of skills at their disposal.

Research Questions

There is a lot of literature available on foreign fighters especially in post

ISIS emergence period and though distinction has been made on sectarian basis but their mode of travel outside the countries of their origin remains an enigma. Moreover, the motivation mechanism of these fighters has never been discussed in structural format which might help us in comprehending different tiers of recruitment, training and travel routes. Furthermore, to what extent do these fighters able to alter the course of a conflict?

The answers to these questions provide the basis of a theoretical framework for action against these individuals on policy making level.

Methodology

A qualitative technique has been adopted as the principal methodology to carry out the research on the topic. A sample of relevant and experienced officers has been selected who have actively been dealing with this phenomenon for a considerable period of time. These officers provide the theoretical details on basis of their practical experiences during the course of their service across Pakistan².

Literature Review

The available material on foreign fighters is related to western countries and their inherent insecurity syndrome which has become an indispensable part

² These officers belong to different service groups including Police Service of Pakistan (PSP), Inland Revenue Service (IRS), Frontier Constabulary (FC), Counter Terrorism Departments (CTDs) and Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) respectively. Majority of these officers are field officials and have spent a considerable period in dealing with various issues ranging from human smuggling to illegal migrants and border crossers in the country. Some of these officers have had exposure of interaction with international bodies monitoring such activities. An effort has been made to dovetail the narration of these officials with the existing literature in order to debate the oft quoted numbers of foreign fighters and their mode of recruitment and travel. Different theoretical models have also been discussed of their recruitment bordering on direct or indirect cyber and physical means respectively.

of their collective strategic thinking. For example, Elena Pakalova (2019) states that Islamist foreign fighters pose two types of challenges for the western countries. First, they are a threat to homeland security and many have already demonstrated their ideological affiliation with Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) by being involved in home-based attacks. Second, these fighter returnees have also started sharing their battleground experiences and spreading extremism to expand their existing networks and co-opt new recruits for future operations³. The experience sharing is not defined in structural format and the process type adopted to convince their audience to follow their path of glorified accomplishments.

Interestingly, the documentary evidence of involvement of battlefield returnees in incidents of terrorism is available in Pakistan. For example, several accounts exist where suspects or those reportedly involved in an incident of terror had had previous battleground experience. The elements involved in GHQ attack in 2009 were all experienced militants⁴. Similarly, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and its affiliates took part in attacks on naval bases in Karachi⁵. However, Kecper Rekawek (2016) discusses the threat which foreign fighters pose to a wide number of countries and mode of policy differential to deal with such challenging environment. He also elaborates that many countries have contributed significant numbers of these fighters to conflict zones without experiencing any home-based terrorism incident. He therefore cautions all the countries whose citizens have taken part in various conflict zones including Iraq and Syria against

³ Elena Pakalova, “*Returning Islamist Foreign Fighters: Threats and Challenges to the West*”, (Palgrave Macmillan: 2019), 5-10.

⁴ Anwar Iqbal, “The military identifies militants as the new enemy”, Dawn, May 3, 2014.

⁵ Anne Stenersen, “*The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan’s Role in Attacks in Pakistan*”, Combating Terrorism Center, Volume 7, Issue 7, July 2014.

the retaliatory actions of the returnee fighters⁶. The model of deterrence to preempt an individual from initiating terror should have a framework with appreciable room of social modulation.

Interestingly, societies where tribalism persists or its spirit is imbued in the social norms and mores, conscription in such cultural set-ups becomes a social obligation. This has been observed when tribesmen assisted their Muslim brothers in different conflicts including Kashmir in 1948⁷. Phil Gurski (2017) raises an important point while discussing why westerners have volunteered to join as foreign fighters in conflict zones like Iraq and Syria. He draws a comparison between the mandatory military-service for the civilians and tries to find out the enticing factors for a person to join a military expedition and then compares it with the present day Islamic western fighters. He also proposes significant internal security mechanism to counter the returnees of the conflict zones⁸.

The successful actions of certain groups or networks within countries give significance to the members and/or individuals connected with these networks. These successes generate or regenerate demands of foreign fighters and vice versa⁹. The group benefit may not be synonymous to individual gains in terms of experience, expertise and enterprise. Jean-Francois Ratelle and Laurence Broers (2018, eds.) state how foreign fighters over a spectrum of large geography involving Caucasus, Central Asia, the

⁶ Kecper Rekawek (ed.), *Not Only Syria? The Phenomenon of Foreign Fighters in a Comparative Perspective*, (IOS Press: 2017), v.

⁷ Mohammad Ilyas Khan, *Partition 70 years on: When tribal warriors invaded Kashmir*, BBC News, October 22, 2017.

⁸ Phil Gurski, *Western Foreign Fighters: The Threat to Homeland and International Security*, (Rowman & Littlefield:2017)

⁹ Hassan Abdullah, "Foreign militants seeking 'safe passage'", Dawn, April 25, 2014.

Middle East and Ukraine move towards conflict zones under different motivating factors. The concept of networked insurgencies is unique as they help in propagating propaganda of insurgents due to weak security governance regimes of different countries which finally facilitate the militancy¹⁰. Similarly, Daniel Byman (2019) in his works tries to evaluate phenomenon of foreign fighters analytically. He then delves upon the motivation factors and in the end discusses different distinct phases including radicalization, decision making, travelling to foreign lands, returning home and thinking beyond the plot stage to deter them effectively¹¹.

In terms of foreign fighters' participation base, we have seen that co-sectarians have taken part in inland or outland military excursions to support their own co-sects¹². David Malet (2016) studied 331 conflicts across the globe and was able to find the phenomenon of foreign fighters in only 70 of such civil conflicts. These conflicts spread over a period 1816-2005 with majority ended in incumbent's victory as only 32 are ongoing and 24 resulted into stalemate. He has divided the foreign fighters into four categories namely co-ethnic in ethnic conflicts, non-co-ethnics in ethnic conflicts, co-ethnics in non-ethnic conflicts and non-co-ethnics in non-co-ethnic's conflicts. The last category has the highest numbers of foreign fighters' participation¹³.

¹⁰ Jean-Francois Ratelle, and Laurence Broers (eds.), "Networked Insurgencies and Foreign Fighters in Eurasia", (Taylor & Francis:2018)

¹¹ Daniel Byman, "Road Warriors: Foreign Fighters in the Armies of Jihad", (Oxford University Press: 2019), 2-8.

¹² Heather M. Robinson, Ben Connable, David E. Thaler and Ali G. Scotten "Sectarianism in the Middle East: Implications for the US", RAND Corporation, 2018.

¹³ David Malet, "Foreign Fighters: Transnational Identity in Civic Conflicts", (Oxford University Press: 2013), 40-58.

Online radicalization and extremism is an effective way to mobilize fighters for military expeditions. This phenomenon has gained currency worldwide and in Pakistan it may become one of the main challenges in coming years¹⁴. Ömer Behram Özdemir and Tuncay Kardaş (2014) have studied the phenomenon of European fighters on three different strands including identity claims, motives and means of radicalization. The authors highlight role of social media in mobilization and radicalization of such fighters. The estimates of Europeans participating in Syrian war are nearly 2500 as compared to 25000 – 31500 fighters from 80 countries participating in the event¹⁵.

Foreign Fighters (FFs) and the Rise of Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS)

The foreign fighters (FFs) have been creating ripples in European countries for last many years. The multi-cultural European polity with appreciable Muslim population is apprehensive of these individuals in a post Islamic State (IS) withdrawal from Syria and in the backdrop of the reported elimination of Abu Bakr Al Baghdadi, the IS leader. The true estimation of ISIS fighters is about 25,000 – 30,000 since the declaration of Al Baghdadi's Caliphate in a mosque at Mosul in 2014. The concept of Caliphate has romanticized many young men round the globe and acted as a magnet to attract youthful participation in the battle fronts on the plains in Iraq and Syria. Many cited that the indoctrination made by Al Maqdisi and Al Zarqawi has finally evolved in the shape of Islamic State in Iraq and Syria

¹⁴ Afeera Firdous, "On line extremism in Pakistan: A slow poison", South Asian Voices, December 11, 2017.

¹⁵ Ömer Behram Özdemir, Tuncay Kardaş," *The Making of European Foreign Fighters*", (SETA: 2014), 5-8.

(ISIS)¹⁶. The recent withdrawal of ISIS from war theatre in Syria may indicate a temporary defeat but the foreign fighters affiliated with the group are looking for either new conflict zones or returning to their countries of origin to strengthen themselves through instituting online radicalization silently to expand their networks in their native states¹⁷.

Why do the Numbers Matter?

Over a period of five years (2014-19), an estimated number of 25,000 – 32,000 ISIS fighters indicate that these individuals have been coming without any interruption from different countries across the globe¹⁸. Such countries fall in different regions including Europe, North America, Middle East, Asia and Asian Pacific regions. Many fighters are adept in bomb making, internet surfing, chemical explosives innovation, improvised explosive devices synthesis and online radicalization manipulation. Moreover, on their return to the countries of their origin these fighters may struggle to occupy some physical space which serves them in manipulating the existing social environment for various reasons. This may lead towards creating public chaos and disorder thus making it difficult for the state to initiate an action which may contain high kinetic component for any counter terrorism (CT) operation. Given the capacity of these countries in terms of

¹⁶ Abu Muhammad Al-Maqdisi is considered to be the spiritual leader of *Salfi-Jihadism* ideology. His followers include Abu Mus'ab Al-Zarqawi who was leader of Al Qaeda in Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and later on a guide to the formation of Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Initially, many followers toed the thinking of Al-Maqdisi before they parted ways and reverted to extreme theory of management of savagery to inflict maximal pain to their adversaries devoiding Al-Maqdisi to play any role among the members of violent Islamic groups. Abu Mus'ab Al-Zarqawi was killed in a drone strike in 2006.

¹⁷ Michael Moutot, "What happened to all foreign fighters of IS?", *Dawn*, December 17, 2017.

¹⁸ Richard Barrett, "*Beyond the Caliphate: Foreign fighters and the threat of returnees*", The Soufan Center, October 31, 2017, 12-15.

urban CT operations is quite weak, the natural corollary is that the fighters can have the potential to cause dissention among the polity of the country. The Interpol has been running a whole gamut of modules to deal with the potential catastrophe of a chemical attack by these elements on an individual or collective level in a European country with massive fallout in the neighboring regions as well. They are also cognizant of the fact that once such tactics prove successful with large scale casualties, ISIS may encourage and replicate such actions in active theatres of war¹⁹. Therefore, numbers of fighters do matter not only in dissemination of their narratives but also creating a human recruitment base among the population of a country.

Is there any Possible Action Plan against the Returnees?

Many western countries have devised de-radicalization mechanisms for the foreign fighters who have been intercepted through three main procedures. First, when these fighters are apprehended in other countries and subsequently handed over to their countries of origin. Second, the fighters who are caught from the battlefield or active war theatres and later on sent back to their own native lands after formalizing the process of registration. Third, these elements are detected in the home countries through effective surveillance and CT investigation on account of sophisticated technology and modern gadgetries. These fighters once captured on anyone of the above mechanism may need to be prosecuted on various counts and then undergo de-radicalization program in a correction facility or an independent unit. For this purpose, the de-radicalization should have all the components to

¹⁹ Ronald K. Noble, "Keeping science in the right hands: Policing the new biological frontier," Foreign Affairs, January 2020.

convince these individuals to shun their thinking pattern and return to their post militant life phase. It is a gigantic task and the results of many such programs indicate that as the opportunity arises, these fighters revert back to their old ways and refuse to respond to external conscientious reformation efforts.

There is also a level of contagiousness attached with these fighters when they are incarcerated in different prisons or correction facilities. Many of them may resort to preaching or indulge in dissemination of radical ideas among the inmates making it extremely difficult for the authorities to isolate such elements from the rest.

In order to evaluate the intensity of foreign fighters challenge for Pakistan it is important that we assess the numbers from various quarters²⁰ and then try to evaluate their impact on the existing social condition. Such impact has to examine the underlying reasons which encourage these individuals to participate in battlefronts in various war zones.

Classification of Foreign Fighters

Before we discuss the numbers of these foreign fighters, it is important that we classify different streams of fighters travelling from Pakistan and participating in an active war theatre to foreign lands. We have therefore categorized it into three groups namely (i) Shiite Fighters (ii) Sunni fighters

²⁰ The total numbers of these fighters are still unclear, nonetheless, we can make a prediction based on numbers of illegal migrants especially those who have been intercepted by Pakistani authorities and/or Iranian forces while making their way to Turkish border. Moreover, the available data with counter terrorism department (CTD) Punjab also provide us a range of probable numbers of foreign fighters leaving the country for conflict zones abroad. Keeping in view these factors, the approximate numbers of these fighters from Punjab fluctuate between 300<FF<500.

other than those affiliated with ISIS (iii) Sunni fighters attached with ISIS²¹.

Shiite Fighters

The sectarian turf in Pakistan was intensified in the fall of 1979 as Iran braced for the Islamic Revolution brought about by Ayatollah Khomeini. The incident was synchronized with invasion of USSR in Afghanistan thus sending ripples of nervousness in the power corridors of Pakistan. The country was literally sandwiched between the Shiite Islam on the one hand and rise of communist ideology on the other. As the Saudi Arabia and USA stepped into the Afghan cauldron, the sectarian landscape in Pakistan underwent a drastic change. The statistics indicate that number of sectarian incidents peaked during the period stretching from 1984 till the end of the last century. A sharp peak can also be observed in post 2001 phase as USA attacked Afghanistan to take out Taliban regime in the back drop of 9/11 attacks on American soil²².

The intensification of sectarian warfare was also coupled with rise of many sectarian organizations in the country. This has probably enhanced Shiite funding and assistance in Pakistan since they largely view it as a corollary of Shia-Sunni animosity in Af-Pak region. As a large number of foreign fighters started pouring in to join Afghan jihad, the Shiite faction saw it as a legitimate cause of concern and they began working on mobilization and raising of informal cadres of diehard militants to fight for their co-sects.

²¹ Though we have defined three streams of foreign fighters nonetheless in the research article the two Sunni groups are clubbed together while discussing mode of recruitment, training, escape routes and type of radicalization processes the individual fighters have to go through while travelling from the inland to a place in the foreign lands. The financial assistance package is also discussed in the same vein.

²² Khaled Ahmed, “*Sectarian War: Pakistan’s Sunni – Shia Violence and its Links to the Middle East*”, (OUP Pakistan: 2012), 5-16.

These fighters were deployed for multipurpose including protection of Shiite sites, securing places of worships, acting as *razakars* or volunteers for safety of shia processions and religious ceremonies, fighting for shia ideology in conflict zones especially in Iraq and Syria²³.

The initial reported incidents in early 2011-12 highlighted two distinct groups who were believed to include fighters recruited from shia majority areas in Pakistan to protect the shrines of Hazrat Zainab and other revered personalities buried in Iraq and Syria. These groups were called *Zainabyoun* and *Fatimeyoun*. In July 2013, a rocket attack near the shrine of Hazrat Zainab killed many pilgrims including Pakistanis along with the security guards deputed at the place. Initially the recruitment was carried out from Kuram Agency and Hangu regions whose Shiite are believed to be fiercest and strongest in terms of their resilience and physique²⁴. They were, at first, considered as part of an Afghan contingent but later on other areas were included in the list for Shiite fighters' contribution.

This enhanced Shiite recruitment base in the country is also the direct consequence of an alliance between *Wilaya Khurasan* affiliates and anti-Shiite forces in the local sectarian landscape of the country. Interestingly, third largest Shiite population resides in Pakistan followed by India and Iran respectively. The total Shiite population in the country ranges from 25 to 30 million along with sizable sectarian enclaves in Iraq and Yemen as well²⁵. In December 2016, an electronic poster appeared on social media in which

²³ Abdul Ghani Kakar, "Iran's Zainabiyoun brigade steps up recruiting in Pakistan", October 5, 2018,

https://pakistan.asia-news.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi_pf/features/2018/10/05/feature-02.

²⁴ Zubair Azam and Khurram Iqbal, "Shiite Mobilization and the Transformation of Sectarian Militancy in Pakistan", Middle East Institute, March 27, 2019

²⁵ World Shia Population, <http://shianumbers.com/shia-muslims-population.html>

Ayatollah Khamenei was greeting the *Zainabyoun* of Pakistan for their loyalties and services for the security and safety of Shiite cause in Iraq and Syria²⁶.

a. Motivation and Travelling Routes

The principal motivation is based on ideological, sectarian and religious factors. The vernacular language which explains and motivates the locals in their own tongue makes it extremely easy for a local moderator to entice a group of emotionally charged Shiite to travel to a far-flung area for further coaching and training. The available means of communication is social media, internet based selective websites or local seminaries and places of worship. In many instances, a house converted into religious place becomes an ideal location for such activity. Majority of these Shiite fighters are believed to have travelled in the garb of pilgrims in groups so that authorities have minimal suspicion on their being involved in any such activities. A number of infrequent routes exist which are reportedly been undertaken to cross the border and enter into Afghanistan or Iran en bloc. These routes exist on account of large porous border, small number of security forces and lack of effective monitoring mechanism at the international borders. Sometimes specific groups are involved in human smuggling having wide networking making it quite easier for them to take individuals across the border.

The smuggled fighters have been used in Iraq, Syria and Yemen to confront the onslaught of Saudi-backed bloc. These fighters have been equipped to

²⁶ Convey my greetings to the Zeynabyoun of Pakistan: Imam Khamenei, Khamenei.IR, <http://english.khamenei.ir/photo/4411/Convey-my-greetings-to-the-Zeynabiyoun-of-Pakistan-Imam-Khamenei>.

wage a sophisticated irregular warfare and are quite adept in extreme weather to survive²⁷. Moreover, advanced technology manipulation and use of local facilities to construct innovative explosive devices to inflict maximum damage to the adversaries have also been imparted to these fighters.

On October 27, 2016 a two-storied building collapsed in Lahore under mysterious circumstances killing one and injuring six inmates. Later on it was discovered that the building caved in due to explosion and CTD recovered 11 grenades and some explosive material from the site. The inmates were Shiite and it was believed that the family was involved in supplying ammunition to either a group or individuals for transportation abroad²⁸. The important thing is that these Shiite were apparently businessmen involved in scrap transportation but were reportedly involved in providing explosive to different Shiite groups for a wide spectrum of reasons. The seemingly secretive way to hide real purpose and inability of Law Enforcement Agencies (LEAs) along with intelligence networks to detect it speaks volumes about the success of such small Shia groups.

b. Incentives and Packages

The fighters get training on foreign soil through experienced men who impart important techniques and exercises for survival in tough situation. Those who agree to join the group are given different packages which vary in terms of financial benefits as the intensity in war theatre increases. These packages include monthly stipends that runs in thousands of foreign

²⁷ Colin Clark and Philip Smyth, "The Implications of Iran's Expanding Shi'a Foreign Fighter Network," CTS Sentinel, Volume 10, Issue 10, November 27, 2017.

²⁸ Imran Gabol, "One killed, six injured in roof collapse after explosion," Dawn, October 27, 2016.

currency notes, a considerable number of layoff period after every quarter, free visits of shrines and sacred places in holy cities and provision of assistance to a fighters' family members or children in case someone loses vital organs or is incapacitated or even perished during the conflict.

In some of the cases, if a fighter survives multiple tasks he might be promoted and used as a recruiter and/or an assistant trainer for running training camps on foreign soil. Such a fighter turned trainer or recruiter has three advantages over the other fighters. First, he is an experienced person who knows how to deal with different tasks and targets. Second, he understands the local language and the ordeal through which a person has to go through while being transported from his hometown to a foreign land. He can judge well who can fare well under these circumstances. Third, he can explain the new recruits the art of survival in battlefield. Moreover, as he is promoted, he gets more incentives and financial assistance for his persistent motivation and contribution.

c. Numbers: Estimation and Assessment

The numbers of the Shiite fighters is still not exactly known. We can make a rough guess on the basis of annual pilgrim data and the deportation ratio of Shiite persons a certain assessment about number of foreign fighters travelling to and for the country can be made. A rough estimate cited in one of the newspapers indicated that 150 – 160 pilgrims went missing who were on a spiritual journey to foreign lands and did not return back in last few years²⁹. In 2015 a report published in Reuters cited that 53 pictures of Shiites posted on a twitter account who were reportedly perished while fighting in

²⁹ “Why are Pakistani Shiites ‘disappearing’?” Deutsche Welle (DW) News, July 9, 2019.

Syria and were believed to be from Pakistan³⁰.

Whereas a British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) report cited that nearly 1,000 - 1600 Pakistani Shiite were fighting alongside Asad regime in Syria. The report also quoted that within a span of two years (2016-18) nearly 140 Shiite pilgrims went missing and nearly 100 died in the war zones whose families were receiving financial assistance from foreign countries³¹.

Sunni Fighters

The fighters who participated in Afghan jihad came from Sunni sect with predominantly belonging to *Deobandi* school of thought. After the withdrawal of USSR from Afghanistan, the Taliban regime which swept through length and breadth of the country belonged to the same sectarian leanings. By the end of 1980, a wide range of these fighters, also known as *mujahideen*, belonging to a wide spectrum of nationalities and ethnic groups became part and parcel of Afghan War. These included Uzbeks, Hazaras (Shiites), Pashtuns, Tajiks, Turkmen, Baluch, Kyrgyz, Pamiri, Aimak, Nurustani, Arabs, Ughurs, Philipines and others. All of these fighters belonged to the same Sunni branch of Islam pegged strongly at the ideology of Saudi Arabia. As Taliban extended their stronghold in Afghanistan in the fall of 1994, they controlled the whole territory with few pockets of resistance by the end of 1996. As the Taliban regime established its stronghold the number of Sunni fighters kept on coming and joining them

³⁰ Asad Hashim and Laila Bassam, "Iran recruits Pakistani Shi'ites for combat in Syria", Reuters, December 10, 2015.

³¹ "The story of Pakistan's 'disappeared' Shias", British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) News, May 31, 2018. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-44280552>

from time to time for multiple purposes³².

As the 9/11 dawned on United States, it retaliated and the Taliban regime was dismantled within days and converted into classical insurgency format. The template of such irregular warfare was complex and based on human resource contributed by foreign fighters especially those from neighboring countries. Many foreign fighters returned to their home countries after the US attacked Afghanistan to dislodge the regime.

According to estimation, nearly four times as many Sunni fighters are operating in different theatres of war than at the time of twin tower incident in 2001. Moreover, an independent study conducted in 2018 estimates nearly 230,000 Sunni fighters battling in 70 countries across the globe³³. Three findings are indicated in the study. First, the groups of these Sunni fighters are quite potent and have capability to inflict damage at hotspots. Second, the social media-based activities generate quite an appreciable avenue of funding and monetary assistance to these Sunni fighters. Third, the resilience of these fighters is such that they can withstand difficult environment for a long period of time as can be seen in Iraq and Syria³⁴.

a. Motivation and Travelling Routes

The porous Pak – Afghan border provides the easiest route of travel for an ordinary person from Pakistan to Afghanistan and vice versa. It was used by majority of the Sunni fighters during the peak of Afghan war. Moreover, the

³² N.Nojumi, "The Rise of Taliban in Afghanistan: Mass mobilization, Civil War and the Future of the Region", (Palgrave Macmillan US: 2016), 7-30.

³³ Eric Schmitt, "Number of Sunni militants have quadrupled since 9/11 terror attacks, US think-tank claims", The Independent, November 21, 2018.

³⁴ Ibid

Durand Line has divided many tribes and even villages and as a result the border crossing becomes a normal practice. Here the structure of motivation is based on psychological coaching and encouragement. Each person in the structural composition has a designation which is linked to an Islamic ideology. For example, individuals who guide and teach such fighters in the art of practical warfare skills are commonly known as '*ustaad*' and those responsible to instruct them to migrate to another land are termed as '*mohtamim hijra*' or supervisor of migration. Similarly, a set of individuals are given the mandate to extend security and safety of these fighters while migrating from a place within the country to a place located outside Pakistan.

Unlike Shiite fighters, the maximum benefit of these fighters is accrued by area supervisor who arranges for a number of such individuals and then sends them to *mohtamim hijra* for further transportation. There exist three important routes which have been commonly used by majority of these fighters. The first route meanders through Peshawar, Jamrood, Landi Kotal, Torkum and from there they enter into Afghanistan. The most frequent destination of these fighters is Nanghar and other adjoining Taliban controlled areas inside Afghanistan. In case of transnational Sunni organizations like Al Qaeda or Al Qaeda in Indian Sub-Continent (AQIS) the mode of transfer is very secretive and even their messages on different social media based chat rooms and applications are very difficult to decipher or decode. Moreover, the number of security providers to these fighters may also run into pluralistic structures. Each local area 'ameer' may be activated to supervise the safe transfer of these fighters to their destination. Sometimes when a very sensitive transportation is to be made then even

ameers of adjoining areas are not aware about any such movement. Whereas in case of local groups movement such as members of Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan the level of secrecy and security mechanism is of lower or moderate level.

The second route is frequently being used by ISIS affiliated Sunni fighters who intend to travel to Iraq and Syria to fight against the elements who are at loggerheads with ISIS. This route starts from any part of Punjab and snakes through different areas till it ends up at Dalbadeen in or near Quetta. From there it goes to Iranian border at Taftan and crosses over into Iran and reaches Mirjawah. It then leads to Shiraz, Urmia and then reaches the Turkish border and crosses into Dogo Bias which assists them in reaching at the Syrian border. Most of these fighters enter Turkey in garb of illegal migrants vying to reach Greece and from there to other European cities for better and brighter future. The city Dogo Bias also teems with Syrian refugees and it becomes quite easy for these fighters to mingle with them and enter Syria.

The third most popular route goes through Karachi. Once a set of fighter reaches at the port city they are transported to Jiwani or Gawadar, whichever is easier to access, and from there proceed to Bandar Abbas or Chahbahar then to Shiraz, Urmia and eventually crosses in Turkey at Dogo Bias and finally reach in Syria. Such fighters take both land and water routes to reach at their destination in Syria. The second and third routes are predominantly used by ISIS affiliated fighters. These routes were also used by the families

of these fighters as well at the height of Syrian crisis in 2015-17³⁵.

The chief motivation to these fighters ranges from family protection, religiosity connected with eternal reward and monetary assistance as well. Among these factors perhaps the religiosity feeling is the most important one since it provides an easy way out to the current difficulties such individuals experience physically and psychologically. We have seen how young men from well off or financially stable families have participated in acts of terrorism which have expanded the length and breadth of reach of *ameers* of these fighters who can manipulate their thinking patterns and convince them to take up arms for a higher purpose and cause. The incident of Safoora Goth has already highlighted how these elements operate in a highly polarized society to goad a mind suffering from psychological ailments and personal issues³⁶. All transnational terror organizations are very secretive and utilize social media selectively unlike ISIS who have emerged as the most potent users of social media. It appears that Al Qaeda and other such like organizations have been looked upon as fore-runners in the utilization of social media by other localized groups.

Among Taliban the local attachment is perhaps the most important reason

³⁵ The data of Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) indicates that an abnormally high numbers of illegal migrants use the second and third routes for human transportation and smuggling. All three routes including air, water and land have been utilized for human trafficking. There are 14 air routes available through which a person first travels to United Arab Emirates or Istanbul or Central Asian Republics (CARs) or South America and finally ends up in European Union (EU) territory (such as Italy) or United States of America. Similarly 1196 kilometers long Pak – Iran border provides ample spaces or points or routes to such travelers to enter into Iran and from there they are transported to the Turkish border. Once they are in Turkey they cross over into Greece and from there they can enter into EU countries other than Greece. Here *Izmir*, *Athens*, *Peloponnese*, *Limnos* and *Siirt* are the favorite destination cities of these illegal migrants wherefrom they move towards their destination of choice.

³⁶ “IS recruiting trained professionals from Pakistan”, Dawn, March 2, 2016.

for a person to become part and parcel of the force. Many secondary fighters join the main Taliban force on account of external intervention to dislodge the clandestine networks of insurgents operating at district and village level³⁷. Among the principal intrinsic factors for IS fighters include spiritual cause and purity of purpose, whereas extrinsic motivational factors range from financial benefit to security and safety of their family members at home or in conflict zones³⁸.

b. Training and Incentives

There exists both structural and non-structured recruitment and training of ISIS fighters. The structured recruitment includes schooling, enlistment and indoctrination. The training sessions encompass weapon handling, aiming and shooting practices, strength and endurance exercises, tactics on engagement in the battlefield, specialization of tasks and conducting starvation practice. An evaluator is constantly monitoring the progress of each trainee and those he thinks are not up to the mark are directed to undergo the process again³⁹.

Many other groups experience un-structured training sessions which are carried on need basis as and when an imminent requirement arises due to battlefield demand.

³⁷ David Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerilla: Fighting small wars in the midst of a big one*, (Oxford University Press: 2011). 23-30.

³⁸ Jacqueline Howard, "What motivates ISIS fighters -- and those who fight against them", CNN, September 4, 2017.

³⁹ Asaad Almohammad, *ISIS Child Soldiers in Syria: The Structural and Predatory Recruitment, Enlistment, Pre-Training Indoctrination, Training, and Deployment*, International Center for Counter Terrorism (The Hague), 20 – 17.

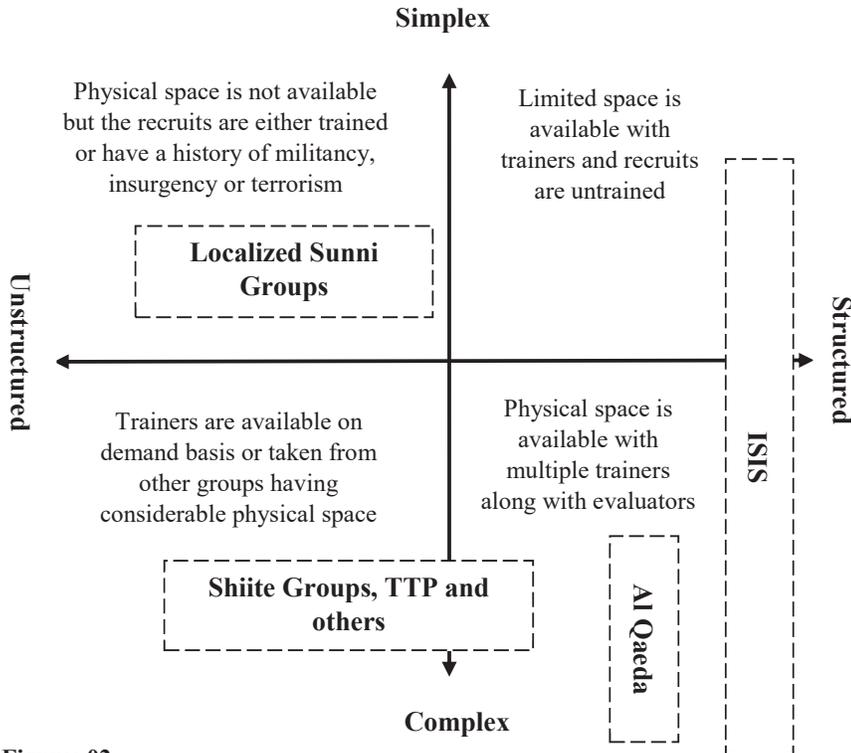


Figure: 02

The graph indicates how fighters belonging to different groups go through a range of training matrix which involves simplex and complex training mechanisms pivoting on structural and non-structural phases. The groups having physical spaces at their disposal engage in structural training courses whereas those devoid of any such luxuries perform simplex training modules and depend upon the expertise, resilience, endurance and knowledge of the recruit instead of following a complex mechanism⁴⁰.

⁴⁰ Four groups have been discussed here on account of their training mode and type and then try to distinguish them from one another. These four groups include *Islamic State in Iraq & Syria* (ISIS), Al Qaeda and its transnational affiliates, localized primary groups like *Tehreek e Taliban Pakistan* (TTP) along with different Shia factions. The last category of such grouping is secondary and tertiary localized organizations. Here a simplex structure

The graph also points structured – un-structured training along x-axis and simple – complex coaching along y – axis respectively. The organizations such as Shiite groups and Al-Qaeda have complex and structural training programs so that accuracy and impact of their operations are guaranteed. Whereas in case of ISIS fighters, the organization employs both complex and simplex training structures depending on the mode and type of ISIS franchise or *Wilaya*. In case of localized groups such as TTP, they attract local recruits who get localized training either on availability of trainers obtained from other affiliated groups or on availability of physical space.

c. Numbers, Assessment and Examination

The exact numbers can only be assessed on basis of the data from Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) who annually document number of individuals intercepted while trying to enter into neighboring countries. The data indicates that number of such persons increase during 2015-17 indicating thereby that during the period a high level of fighters might have tried to cross the border and tried to enter into Afghanistan or Syria through different routes.

The Challenge of Returnees

The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) guidelines on foreign fighters are a set of codal formalities which each member state may adhere to and take proportionate action where a member country deems it essential and necessary. These guiding principles are based on the UNSC Resolution 2178 (2014) which endorses rising threat of Foreign Fighters in post ISIS

involves limited or no availability of space along with unimpressive trainers at the disposal of the group. Whereas, a complex format involves readily availability of physical space along with specialized trainers according to their expertise and the training is conducted in a highly secret and clandestine way.

formation period. These guidelines can be divided into three categories including detection and prevention of travel of foreign fighters through or from a member country. Second, strengthening border control measures of a country along with dissemination of advance information to a destination country (if such a travel is by air) as it provides ample reaction time to that country to take action against such an individual. Moreover, regularly share and update intelligence collation with other regional countries. Third, criminalizing and prosecuting the returnees and devise and share successful strategies with other regional countries⁴¹.

In order to evaluate the returnee challenge we have devised a model based on four variables (4Ps) prosecuting, pursuing, penalizing, and parenting. For convenience we have divided these returnees into four categories including those who successfully return and are detected in Pakistan, those who return unnoticed and are not detected, those who are apprehended in the conflict zones and later on returned to Pakistan and those who are intercepted during the course of their quest to join fighting in a theatre of war and are deported in garb of illegal migrants. Each set of fighters has different remedial measures and planning for their physical reintegration and psychological restructuring into the society.

a. Prosecuting

Those who have returned and held up by local Law Enforcement Agencies (LEAs) should be subjected to prosecution under the local law. If there is a possibility that these fighters can be tried under

⁴¹ “Security Councils Guiding Principles on Foreign Terrorist Fighters: A practical tool for Member States to stem the flow of foreign terrorist fighters”, *United Nations Security Council Counter Terrorism Committee*, (United Nations: 2019), 1-3.

International Law then we can hand them over as prisoners of war for imposition of penalty of participating in an international conflict in another country. It is an important step since the act of prosecuting such individuals will certainly deter other people to join rank and file of ISIS or any other groups encouraging youth to become fighters for different purposes.

b. Pursuing

Those who have returned and not detected should be traced out without any further loss of time. Since undetected Foreign Fighters have the ability to develop their own narratives of battlefield experiences so as to reach out and seek attention of the audience in cyber or physical space. Once they gain a high-level attention, they can start conversation with their audiences. Such predominantly unidirectional discourses push these individuals into social excommunication and incarcerate them psychologically and mentally. Such isolation makes the receptive minds to radicalize and make them susceptible to follow the instructions of the returnees. Sometimes these fighters directly approach a person on basis of their observation as they feel that the particular individual or a group of individuals may have the similar penchant or thinking pattern as their own. Such an acquaintance may lead these individuals to isolation and finally they are exposed to verbal instructions and discussions.

Under such situation intelligence-based actions and operations need to be conducted to take out such fighters and penalize them with impunity. Whereas those who voluntarily give up their identity and reveal it to the local authority should be dealt with a degree of

leniency and humaneness.

c. Penalizing

Once a foreign fighter is nabbed at home or abroad and is prosecuted and sentenced, he or she should have an in-prison de-radicalization program and initially such a person should be isolated from other inmates. Once it has been observed by the visiting psychologists that he has normalized mentally and psychologically the individual may be allowed a limited access to other inmates under intense monitoring. We have seen how contagiousness of radicalization spreads like virus among the members of overcrowded prisons. As a result of it, Counter Terrorism Department (CTD) Sindh, in 2017, launched a de-radicalization program in prison targeting 300 terrorists incarcerated therein. This initiative not only helped prepared a psychological profile of these fighters but also earmarked psychiatrists of Karachi University and other educational institutions to read them mentally and document them properly⁴².

Those who show good behavior and their mannerism is amenable to social benchmarks may be set free on parole.

d. Parenting

Once such fighters are freed from the prisons or any incarceration, he or she may be placed at a suitable position so that he or she can live his or her live peacefully and without feeling any social stigma attached to him or her on account of the past history. In case a social

⁴² Imtiaz Ali, "CTD plans to de-radicalize around 300 militants held in Sindh's prisons", *Dawn*, January 2, 2017.

positioning cannot be provided to such a fighter, we may provide monthly stipend so that he can sustain himself or herself along with the family members⁴³. Such parenting may assist the erstwhile fighter to regain psychological balance and become a productive citizen of the country.

Conclusion

The foreign fighter phenomenon has many shades and layers. Underneath each shade and every layer there lie two distinct motivational characteristics that borders on financial assistance and personal religiosity. The sectarian and social divides are the two prime motivating factors that have pushed many individuals to undergo training and participate in conflict zones for a larger strategic purpose. A country like Pakistan ill affords to participate in a conflict or take sides in any issue having sectarian undercurrents as it will surely alienate a large segment of sectarian population living in the geographical boundary of the country. Moreover, strengthening of institutions and improving intelligence collection for pre-emptive action-based detection against such individuals or groups are important steps in the right direction.

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⁴³ Mohammad Azeem, "The softer approach", Dawn, March 25, 2013.