Dutch Jihadists

An exploratory study on the changing motivations of Dutch jihadists leaving for Syria and Iraq

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AIVD	Dutch General Intelligence and Security Agency
AQI	Al-Qaeda in Iraq
CSIS	The Center for Strategic and International Studies
EU	European Union
FSA	Free Syrian Army
HCSS	the Hague Centre for Strategic Studies
HTS	Hayat Tahrir al-Sham
IB	International Brigades
ICSR	The International Centre for the Study of Radicalization and Political Violence
ICU	Islamic Courts Union
IS	Islamic State
ISI	Islamic State in Iraq
ISIL	Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant
ISIS	Islamic State of Syria and Iraq
JaN	Jabhat al-Nusra
JWT	Jamaat al-Tawid Wal-Jihad
KDP	Kurdish Democratic Party
NCTV	National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism
PUK	Patriotic Union of Kurdistan
UN	United Nations
US	United States

Abstract

Since the end of 2012, Dutch nationals have been traced to travel to Syria and Iraq to join ISIS. This study aims to explore the highs and lows in the departing numbers per quarter, starting in 2011 with the outbreak of the Syrian civil war and ending in the second quarter of 2017. To explain the fluctuations in these numbers, this thesis looks at the interplay between the motivations of these foreign fighters and the conflicts' developments in Syria and Iraq. Motivations to foreign fight can be approached from different levels and angles, all influencing the decision to foreign fight in different manners, which is also reflected in the theories of Malet, Bjørgo and Venhaus on foreign fighters. This, together with a discussion of foreign fighter involvement in previous conflicts and the motivations of foreign fighters in general to join ISIS will be highlighted in the second part. In the third part, the conflict developments and the motivations of Dutch foreign fighters joining ISIS are highlighted. In the analysis of this thesis, the different components will be combined in order to determine the changes in motivations and their effect on the departing number of foreign fighters. This analysis showed, that there is a pattern in the motivations of Dutch foreign fighters and the developments within the conflicts. In the beginning of the conflict, humanitarian reasons are the main driver behind mobilization. This shifts into personal and ideological reasons after the establishment of the Caliphate and during the end of the analysed period, the use of violence is the main motivation to join. The interplay between conflict developments and motivations comes forward in the periods were high numbers of foreign fighters leave, however this interplay is found to a lesser extent with regard to the low numbers in departure.

1 – Introduction and methodology

1.1 Introduction

Foreign fighters are not a new phenomenon. Multiple conflicts during history have had a certain appeal to people to leave their countries and to join a fight in a foreign country.[1] Examples from history are the Spanish Civil War (1936 – 1939), Afghanistan (1979), Bosnia (1992), Chechnya (1994), Afghanistan (2001), Iraq (2003) and Somalia (2006).[2] Since the 1980s up until the foreign fighter participation in the conflict in Syria and Iraq starting in 2011, the estimated number of people engaged in foreign fighting is between 10.000 and 30.000.[3]

Although foreign fighters were present in older wars, the influx of foreign fighters into Syria and Iraq raised the attention of both the media and the academic world.[4] What distinguishes these foreign fighters from foreigners in other conflicts are the numbers and the diversity in nationalities. The conflict in Syria and Iraq convinced over 42.000 foreigners to join the fight, originating from over 120 different countries. Of these 42.000 people, at least 5.000 were European.[5] Although the majority originates from Arab countries, this involvement of European foreign fighters in a Muslim country is higher than all the previous modern jihadi conflicts together and the mobilization never went quicker.[6] Estimations have been made that by the end of 2013, 11.000 foreign fighters with 74 different nationalities were present. In May 2014, this number increased to 12.000 foreigners with 81 different nationalities, of which approximately 2.500 were Western. In February 2015, this number has risen to 20.730.[7] A year

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[1] Elena Pokalova, "Driving Factors behind Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (2018), accessed February 25, 2018, https://www-tandfonline-com.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl:2443/doi/pdf/10.1080/1057610X.2018.1427842?needAccess=true.

[2] Maria Galperin Donnelly, Thomas M. Sanderson and Zack Fellman "Foreign Fighters in History," *Center for Strategic & International Studies* (April 1, 2017), accessed March 13, 2018, http://foreignfighters.csis.org/history_foreign_fighter_project.pdf.

[3] Thomas Hegghammer, "The rise of Muslim Foreign Fighting: Islam and the Globalization of Jihad," *International Security* 35, no.3 (Winter 2010/2011): 53.

[4] Randy Borum and Robert Fein, "The Psychology of Foreign Fighters," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 40, no.3 (2017): 248.

[5] Marije Meines et al., "Responses to Returnees," *RAN Manual* (July 2017), accessed February 26, 2018, https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/ran_br_a4_m10_en.pdf.

[6] Daniel Byman and Jeremy Shapiro, "Be Afraid. Be A Little Afraid: The threat of Terrorism from Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq," *Policy Paper* no. 34 (November 2014): 9. ; Borum and Fein, "The Psychology," 257.

[7] Edwin Bakker and Mark Singleton, "Foreign Fighters in the Syria and Iraq Conflict: Statistics and Characteristics of a Rapidly Growing Phenomenon," in *Foreign Fighters under International Law and Beyond*, ed. Andrea de Guttry, Francesca Capone, Christophe Paulussen (Springer, 2016): 15.

later, this number increased to at least 36.500 fighters.[8] Multiple parties fighting in the conflict recruit foreign fighters and due to the secrecy of the topic it is often not possible to determine to which organizations foreign fighters attached themselves to.[9] In the beginning of the conflict it is expected that most foreign fighters joined Jabhat al-Nusra (JaN) and after the expansion of the Islamic State of Syria and Iraq (ISIS) into Syria in April 2013, it is estimated that at least 80% of the foreign fighters present in Syria and Iraq attached themselves to ISIS.[10]

1.1.2. Dutch foreign fighters

The quick increase in Dutch foreign fighters travelling to Syria and Iraq can be illustrated with numbers of the National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism (NCTV) and the Dutch General Intelligence and Security Agency (AIVD).[11] In June 2013, the NCTV estimated the number to be between 50 and 100.[12] By October 2014, this number increased to 160.[13] At the beginning of 2015, 190 Dutch people were estimated to be in Syria and Iraq. The number increased again, and in July 2016 this number was estimated to be 260.[14] By March 2018, the official numbers of the AIVD show that circa 300 Dutch nationals have travelled to the conflict zone, including the people who have returned or died.[15] This thesis will focus on ISIS as the organization Dutch foreign fighters join, as, according to the NCTV, the majority of them joined ISIS.[16]

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[8] Matthew Levitt, "The Rise of ISIL: Counterterrorism Lectures 2015," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy* (2016), accessed March 14, 2018, http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/PolicyFocus148_CT7.pdf.

[9] Meirav Mishali-Ram, "Foreign Fighters and Transnational Jihad in Syria," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 41, no.3 (2018): 169.

[10] Alex P. Schmid and Judith Tinnes, "Foreign (Terrorist) Fighters with IS: A European Perspective," *ICCT Research Paper* (December 2015), accessed March 14, 2018, https://www.icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/ICCT-Schmid-Foreign-Terrorist-Fighters-with-IS-A-European-Perspective-December2015.pdf. : Fawaz Gerges, *A History of ISIS* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2016): 191.

[11] Other numbers beside the ones from the authorities might be higher.

[12] *NCTV*, "Samenvatting Dreigingsbeeld Terrorisme Nederland 33, juni 2013," (July 2013), accessed March 14, 2018, https://www.nctv.nl/binaries/dtn-33-v2_tcm31-30138.pdf.

[13] *NCTV*, "Samenvatting Dreigingsbeeld Terrorisme Nederland 37, oktober 2014," (November 2014), accessed March 14, 2018, https://www.nctv.nl/binaries/bijlage-1-samenvatting-dtn-37_tcm31-32592.pdf.

[14] *NCTV,* "Samenvatting Dreigingsbeeld Terrorisme Nederland 38, maart 2015," (April 2015), accessed March 14, 2018, https://www.nctv.nl/binaries/tk-bijlage-samentvatting-dreigingsbeeld-terrorisme-nederland-38_tcm31-32597.pdf. ; *NCTV*, "Dreigingsbeeld Terrorisme Nederland 42, juli 2016" (July 2016), accessed March 14, 2018, https://www.nctv.nl/binaries/DTN42_samenvatting_opgemaakt_def_tcm31-79507.pdf.

[15] *AIVD*, "Uitreizigers, terugkeerders en thuisblijvers," *Algemene Inlichtingen- en Veiligheidsdienst* (website), accessed March 14, 2018, https://www.aivd.nl/onderwerpen/terrorisme/dreiging/uitreizigers-terugkeerders-en-thuisblijvers.

[16] NCTV, "Samenvatting Dreigingsbeeld Terrorisme Nederland 44, April 2017," (April 2017) , accessed May 20, 2018, https://www.nctv.nl/binaries/DTN44%20Samenvatting%206%20april%202017_tcm31-254139.pdf.

The moment of departure of the Dutch foreign fighters have been identified by Bergema and van San, in their article 'Waves of the Black Banner: An Exploratory Study on the Dutch Jihadist Foreign Fighter Contingent in Syria and Iraq'. Bergema and van San provided a timeline representing the waves of departure of Dutch jihadist foreign fighters.[17] This timeline can also be found in the Dutch Jihadist Foreign Fighter monitor of The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies (HCSS) and is represented in figure 1.[18]
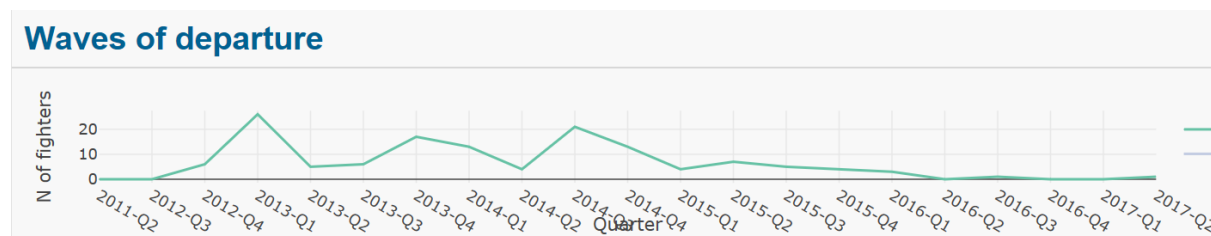

Waves of departure

Figure 1 – Waves of Dutch foreign fighters to Syria and Iraq (N=136)[19]

In this figure, several highs and lows can be identified. For example, whereas in the first quarter of 2013 26 people managed to leave, in the second quarter only five departures were traced. In the fourth quarter of 2013 there was another peak, 17 departures, decreasing in the second quarter of 2014 to four departures, increasing again to 21 in the third quarter of 2014. This thesis will explore these fluctuations in the numbers of departure. The total number of foreign fighters whose departures are visualized in figure 1 is 136. This differs from the total number of Dutch foreign fighters who left for Syria and Iraq by the second quarter of 2017, which is 280.[20] Not every moment of departure could be traced, leading to 136 departures which can be analysed with certainty.[21]

The large foreign fighter participation has often been attributed to ISIS' propaganda, focussing on giving the conflict a worldwide appeal and attracting foreigners into its organization.[22] It is questionable to what extent this is the case for Dutch foreign fighters. The role of social media in recruiting foreign fighters seems to play a bigger role only since 2014

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[17] Reinier Bergema, and Marion van San, "Waves of the Black Banner: An Exploratory Study on the Dutch Jihadist Foreign Fighter Contingent in Syria and Iraq," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (2017): 15.

[18] "Jihadist Foreign Fighters Monitor (JihFFMON)", *The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies* (website), accessed March 14, 2018, https://dwh.hcss.nl/apps/ftf_monitor/.

[19] Ibid.

[20] *NCTV,* "Dreigingsbeeld Terrorisme Nederland, juni 2017 45," (June 2017), accessed April 29, 2018, https://www.nctv.nl/binaries/DTN45%20Samenvatting_tcm31-267359.pdf.

[21] Bergema and van San, "Waves of the Black Banner," 14.

[22] Alberto M. Fernandez, "Here to Stay and Growing: Combating ISIS propaganda networks," (October 2015), accessed April 26, 2018, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/IS-Propaganda_Web_English_v2-1.pdf.

and key propaganda items focussing on attracting foreigners were only published after the majority of Dutch jihadis already left.[23] Therefore, other explanations should be sought in order to get a more comprehensive understanding of these waves of departure. In an attempt to contribute to this comprehensive view, this thesis will look at the motivations of Dutch foreign fighters travelling to Syria and Iraq from 2011 until mid-2017. Possible changes within these motivations and the interplay with the developments in the conflict, which may be reflected in these changing motivations, will be analysed.[24] The analyses of Dutch foreign fighters will start in the fourth quarter of 2012, when the first departures took place. However, we start our general analysis in 2011 because of the start of the Syrian conflict and increasing tensions in Iraq, forming the basis for the influxes of foreign fighters.[25] Especially the conflict in Syria has been a catalyst: it provided radicalized individuals with a jihadi theatre which was due to its geographical location easy to reach.[26]

By trying to provide an explanation on why certain moments were attractive for large numbers of Dutch foreign fighters to mobilize and leave for the fight, whereas other moments did not, this thesis hopes to discover a pattern on when the conflict was attractive for Dutch foreign fighters to join and which motivations they had to join at these specific moments.

1.1.3. Problem statement

The decision to join a terrorist organization like ISIS is context-dependent. The circumstances one finds itself in, the means that are placed at a would-be foreign fighter's disposal and a trigger-event within the conflict are all shaping the decision to join.[27] In multiple academic articles, the role of ISIS' extensive propaganda efforts are highlighted as a substantial influential factor in the high numbers foreign fighter recruits.[28] In 2013, the originally Iraqi-focussed propaganda broadened its focus to Syria and tried to appeal a wider, non-Arab speaking public.[29] In the spring of 2014, this shift became clear when ISIS started to publish German and

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[23] Samantha Mahood and Halim Rane, "Islamist Narratives in ISIS Recruitment Propaganda," *The Journal of International Communication* 23, no.1, (2017), accessed April 29, 2018, https://www-tandfonline-com.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl:2443/doi/pdf/10.1080/13216597.2016.1263231?needAccess=true. ; "Jihadist Foreign Fighters Monitor (JihFFMON)," (website). ;' AIVD, *Transformatie van het jihadisme in Nederland: Zwermdynamiek en nieuwe slagkracht* (Den Haag: AIVD, 2014): 47.

[24] Donnelly, Sanderson and Zack Fellman, "Foreign Fighters in History."

[25] Gerges, *A History,* 1 – 2.

[26] AIVD, *Transformatie van het jihadisme,* 47 – 51.

[27] Martha Crenshaw, "The Causes of Terrorism," *Comparative Politics* 13, no.4 (July 1981): 385.

[28] Christina Schori Liang, "Cyber Jihad: Understanding and Countering Islamic State Propaganda," *GCSP Policy paper 2015* 2, (February 2015): 4. ; Fernandez, "Here to Stay." ; Mahood and Rane, "Islamist Narratives."

[29] Fernandez, "Here to Stay."

English-language propaganda, with a focus on changing hearts of men and recruit people in order to reach their goal: the establishment of an Islamic state.[30] Key propaganda items focussing on a wider public became widely available in the summer of 2014, with the first edition of Dabiq, ISIS' magazine published in English, published in July 2014. Its successor, Rumiyah, was first published in December 2016.[31] Videos with central roles for foreign fighters, like *Flames of War*, *The End of Sykes-Picot* and *Eid Greetings from the Land of Khilafah* were published between July and September 2014.[32] The gruesome, though widely known, movies of beheadings of journalists, aid-workers and the burning of a Jordanian pilot were published in or after August 2014, starting with the beheading video of James Foley in that month.[33]

With these propaganda developments it is questionable to what extent the academic focus on propaganda as an important tool for recruitment can be considered as an explanation for the Dutch waves of departure. If we compare the peaks in figure 1 with the discussed propaganda developments, it can be seen that two of the three main peaks, in total 77 individuals, have already left before the widely available propaganda in English started to shift its focus on attracting foreigners. Although it cannot be stated that no propaganda piece published before 2014 influenced Dutch foreign fighters, other explanations have to be sought in order to provide a more comprehensive explanation about the fluctuations in this figure. In an attempt to contribute to the exploration of the Dutch foreign fighter waves, this thesis approaches the topic broadly by providing a chronological overview of the motivations, possible changes and the conflict developments. By exploring this phenomenon from a chronological perspective, patterns might be discovered why the decision to foreign fight was attractive in a specific period.

1.1.4. Research question
This thesis aims to explain why at certain moments in the conflict people decided to leave, whereas at other moments they did not decide to go (yet). In order to do so and to discover if these peaks can be explained due to different motivations triggered by developments within the

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[30] Fernandez, "Here to Stay."
[31] "Jihadist Foreign Fighters Monitor (JihFFMON)," (website). ; Alaister Reed and Haroro J. Ingram, "Exploring the Role of Instructional Material in AQAP's *Inspire* and ISIS' *Rumiyah*," *Europol* (April 2017), accessed April 29, 2018, https://icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/reeda_ingramh_instructionalmaterial.pdf.
[32] Mahood and Rane, "Islamist Narratives."
[33] Ibid.

conflict, this thesis tries to answer the question *'To what extent can the highs and lows in the numbers of Dutch foreign fighters leaving for Syria and Iraq between 2011 and mid-2017 be explained by the interplay between the conflicts' developments and the different motivations for engaging in foreign fighting?'* By exploring why people leave at a certain point in time, this thesis hopes to offer an additional piece in the complex puzzle of foreign fighting.[34]

1.1.5. Relevance

In recent years the amount of literature on foreign fighters and terrorism increased.[35] Many of these works focussed on discussing the concept of foreign fighters, specific aspects of foreign fighting, the radicalization process and individual backgrounds.[36] The research on the characteristics and backgrounds of these people shows that there is no such thing as a 'one size fits all' with regard to foreign fighters. Different people, with different backgrounds and characteristics, can radicalize and become a foreign fighter.[37] That there is not one type of foreign fighter may be reflected in figure 1, which shows that certain moments in time were attractive to foreign fighters to join the conflict, while at other moments getting involved was less attractive. The explanation of propaganda as the cause of these fluctuations does not cover the Dutch case, as key propaganda items were published after the majority of the traced Dutch foreign fighters had left. Therefore, this phenomenon asks for a broader approach to explore these fluctuations. This thesis will look at the interplay between the motivations of these foreign fighters and the conflicts' developments to provide such an approach. The motivation of people to join a foreign conflict is likely to be reflected by what happens in the conflict.[38] For example, one can be attracted to the conflict because it offers an opportunity to fight against injustice, whereas others see the fight as a way to gain a sense of belonging.[39]

As figure 1 shows, the numbers of departure has significantly decreased since the end of 2014. Since then, societal attention and a large part of the academic debate has shifted to the

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[34] Mishali-Ram, "Foreign Fighters." 171. ; Pokalova, "Driving Factors."

[35] Bergema and van San, "Waves of the Black Banner," 2.

[36] Alex P. Schmid, "Radicalisation, De-Radicalisation, Counter-Radicalisation: A Conceptual Discussion and Literature Review," *ICCT Research Paper* (March 2013): 2 – 55. ; Edwin Bakker, "Jihadi Terrorists in Europe - their characteristics and the circumstances in which they joined the jihad: an exploratory study," *Netherlands Institute of International Relations Clingendael* (December 2006): 1 – 54. ; David Malet, "Foreign Fighter Mobilization and Persistence in a Global Context," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 27, no.3 (May 2015): 454 – 468.

[37] Bakker, "Jihadi Terrorists in Europe," 53.

[38] Donnelly, Sanderson and Zack Fellman "Foreign Fighters in History."

[39] Tore Bjørgo, "Dreams and Disillusionment: Engagement in and disengagement from militant extremist groups," *Crime, Law and Social Change* 55, no.4 (2011): 4 – 9.

returnees and the dangers they may pose to the domestic security.[40] The identification and recognition of different groups with different motivations, departing at different points in time, may contribute to the knowledge on how to deal with returnees, but can also help in providing a more tailored preventive strategy for future radicals.[41] It would serve practitioners and policymakers to battle the ideas of these radicals and offer a valuable counternarrative and de-radicalization approach.[42] Furthermore, once a thorough insight in the motivations of foreign fighters is gained, resources to form this counternarrative can be deployed more efficiently.[43]

1.1.6. Reading guide

To explore the waves of Dutch foreign fighters, this thesis will look at the main contributions to the current knowledge of foreign fighters in chapter 2. This will include an overview of academic theories about foreign fighter motivations and the explanation of four conflicts were foreign fighters were involved in and what their motivations have been. Additionally, this chapter will include a review of the current knowledge and explanations about the general flows of foreign fighters to Syria and Iraq. Due to the available resources and the great number of academic contributions, it will not be possible for this thesis to analyse all the academic work about foreign fighters joining ISIS, but the main contributions will be analysed. At the end of this chapter, an overview of the most discussed motivations will be given, which will later on be used in the analysis of the Dutch foreign fighter waves. The third chapter will address the Dutch foreign fighter phenomenon and the conflicts' developments. The available information about Dutch foreign fighters will be placed in chronological order, in order to explore what has driven them to join at specific points in time. In chapter 4, the results of both chapter 2 and chapter 3 will be coupled in order to discover if there is a pattern within the motivations of Dutch foreign fighters and their moments of departure. Chapter 5 will contain a conclusion derived from the analysis, a discussion and suggestions for further research.

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[40] Mishali-Ram, "Foreign Fighters," 172.
[41] Bjørgo, "Dreams and Disillusionment," 4.
[42] Charlie Winter, "Apocalypse later: a longitudinal study of the Islamic State brand," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 35, no.1 (2018): 118.
[43] The Soufan Group, "An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq," (December 2015), accessed May 1, 2018, http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/TSG_ForeignFightersUpdate3.pdf.

1.2. Methodology

1.2.1. Data collection

In order to explain the fluctuations in the numbers of Dutch foreign fighters travelling to Syria and Iraq, this thesis will make use of a qualitative longitudinal case study. The unit of analysis are the Dutch foreign fighters who left for Syria and Iraq. The data which will be used with regard to the numbers of foreign fighters derives from the HCSS and their Jihadist Foreign Fighter Monitor.[44] This monitor visualizes the different backgrounds of Dutch and Swiss foreign fighters, which can be broken-down in different variables like gender, level of education, family status and age.[45] This monitor also visualizes the Swiss and Dutch waves of departure. This timeline starts in 2011, when the conflict escalated, and ends mid-2017, which will be the timeframe of the longitudinal case study. The research conducted will be exploratory, as there is yet little scientific knowledge about a pattern in motivations, resulting in waves of departure.

This thesis has chosen to focus on one country: the Netherlands. This choice has been made because of the language-skills of the author. This research will require knowledge about the domestic language, as national reports and publications about the foreign fighter phenomenon will provide the necessary information about the motivations of foreign fighters within this thesis.

For the aim of the second chapter current academic work will be analysed in order to explore the topic and provide a clear image of different motivations one can have in making its decision to join a foreign conflict, and what can be of influence in these motivations. These contributions will be analysed in a chronological order. The exact timeframe these analysed contributions cover is not always stated within the works. The month of publication will therefore be considered as the end period. Regarding the third chapter, sources will be more diverse, which fits exploratory research. As there is not much known about these motivations, different sources like academic contributions, reports and news articles will be used in order to gather as much data as possible. This requires flexibility towards the used data and open-mindedness from the author about where this data could be found.[46] Academic works will be analysed in order to provide an overview of the conflict Dutch jihadis joined. Furthermore,

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[44] "Jihadist Foreign Fighters Monitor (JihFFMON)," (website).
[45] "Jihadist Foreign Fighters Monitor (JihFFMON)," (website).
[46] Robert A. Stebbins, *Exploratory Research in the Social Sciences*, (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2001), http://methods.sagepub.com.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl:2048/Book/exploratory-research-in-the-social-sciences/n4.xml.

academic works discussing the Dutch foreign fighters leaving to join the conflict in Syria and Iraq will be used as well. These works will be analysed in a chronological order, as the aim of this chapter is to provide an overview of the drivers to decide to join ISIS. These academic sources, which may include general overviews as well as case-studies of individuals, will be complemented by reports of the AIVD and the threat assessments of terrorism in the Netherlands of the NCTV. These documents can provide overviews of snapshots in time and the then current situation of foreign fighters, resulting in a more comprehensive understanding of the context at that time. News articles will be used to complement the information about the motivations.

1.2.2. Research methods

The research to be conducted in this thesis will be a longitudinal case study. This design enables researching the rationale of Dutch foreign fighters, as it allows a *why* perspective. It therefor helps to explore why these Dutch citizens left at a certain point in time and if, and what, has changed within this context from 2011 to mid-2017.[47] By investigating and interpreting possible changes over time, different motivations and appeals of the conflict can be revealed.[48]

A case study design investigates a contemporary phenomenon in its context and recognizes that a clear line between the unit of analysis and its context cannot always be drawn.[49] By placing the case of the waves of departure of the Dutch foreign fighter in a longitudinal research, the influence of the context, in this case outside factors influencing the motivations of Dutch foreign fighters, are recognized and therefore the motivations are not seen as fixed data. Furthermore, by conducting case study inquiry within a specific context, it can still be recognized that there may be other factors of influence. With the case of foreign fighters, there are indeed many other factors involved in one's decision to leave for Syria or Iraq. The goal of this thesis however, is to provide an exploratory piece to the complex puzzle of foreign fighting. To capture the researched topic as extensive as possible, triangulation of methods and thereby using existing academic knowledge, theoretical propositions, reports, and other articles will be of assistance in the guidance of data collection.[50]

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[47] Janet Holland, Rachel Thomson, and Sheila Henderson, *Qualitative Longitudinal Research: A Discussion Paper,* (London: London South Bank University, 2006), accessed March 17, 2018, https://www.lsbu.ac.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0019/9370/qualitative-longitudinal-research-families-working-paper.pdf.

[48] Ibid.

[49] Robert K. Yin, *Case Study Research: Design and Methods* (New York: Sage Publications, 1994): 13. ; Holland, Thomson, and Henderson, *Qualitative Longitudinal Research*.

[50] Yin, *Case Study Research.*

To conduct this longitudinal case study, qualitative methods are used to in-depth explore Dutch foreign fighters and to explain the different waves and their possible relation with different motivations. By conducting these methods, this thesis and its results limits itself to the case of Dutch foreign fighters leaving for Syria or Iraq. Drawing generalizable conclusions and discovering causal relationships within the general foreign fighter phenomenon will not be possible, nor is this the aim of this thesis. This qualitative case study contains a document analysis and a literature review of academic articles. This literature review will contain the most important academic works in this field of research. Document analysis involves skimming, reading and interpreting, and requires the examination and interpretation of the document in order to gain an understanding and an elicit meaning of the context.[51] Subject of this document analysis will be the used reports and non-academic articles.

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[51] Glenn A. Bowen, "A Document Analysis as a Qualitative Research Method," *Qualitative Research Journal* 9, no.2 (2009), accessed March 20, 2018, https://search-informit-com-au.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl:2443/fullText;dn=252446162410248;res=IELHSS.

2 - Theoretical framework

The foreign fighter phenomenon is an often researched topic in academics, however there is no universally accepted definition of its concept and different studies use different definitions.[52] For the aim of this thesis, the concept will be defined as *"A non-citizen of a state experiencing civil conflict who arrives from an external state to join an insurgency"*.[53] This definition allows an exploratory overview and analysis of motivations of Dutch foreign fighters, as it does not impose any restrictions on motivations a foreign fighter must have, nor does it impose any characteristics a foreign fighter should have in order to be categorized as a foreign fighter. Furthermore, this definition leaves room to look at different activities which support an insurgency, and therefore does not focus on conducting physical military activities only.

Factors of influence in the decision to join a foreign conflict are intertwining and can be researched at different levels and from different angles.[54] These different factors of influence come forward in the analysis of the foreign fighter phenomenon in past conflicts, and in the global foreign fighter flows to Syria and Iraq, which will be discussed in this chapter.

2.1. Levels and angles of research

The foreign fighter phenomenon is complex: multiple factors can be involved in different combinations and quantities per person. There is no such a thing as 'one size fits all' if we study and explain the foreign fighter phenomenon. This is reflected in research done to foreign fighters. The topic can be researched from different levels and different sides. Levels of analysis can be the micro-, meso-, and macrolevel, and factors influencing one's decision to foreign fight are divided into push and pull factors, or preconditions and precipitants.[55]

2.1.1 The micro-, meso-, and macro level

Studying foreign fighters from a microlevel means studying the level of the individual. Research at this level contains studying personal and internal factors which can be of influence

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[52] Kristin M. Bakke, "Copying and Learning from Outsiders? Assessing Diffusion from Transnational Insurgents in the Chechen Wars," *APSA 2010 Annual Meeting Paper,* (2010): 3. ; Frank J. Cilluffo, Jeffrey B. Cozzens, and Magnus Ranstorp, "Foreign Fighters: Trends, Trajectories & Conflict Zones," *Homeland Security Policy Institute* (October 2010), accessed March 14, 2018, http://fhs.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:380558/FULLTEXT01.pdf. ; Hegghammer, "The rise of Muslim Foreign Fighting," 57 – 58.
[53] David Malet, "Foreign Fighter Mobilization," 459.
[54] Schmid, "Radicalisation," 5.
[55] Rosita Dzhekova et al., *Understanding Radicalisation: Review of Literature* (Sofia: Center for the Study of Democracy, 2016): 66. ; Crenshaw, "The Causes of Terrorism," 381. ; Schmid, "Radicalisation," 4 – 5.

within radicalization and a person's decision to participate in a foreign conflict.[56] The focus of research at this level is person-centred.[57] Influential factors at this level can be identity problems, discrimination, personal uncertainty, relative deprivation, and a feeling of stigmatisation and rejection leading to the feeling of insignificance.[58] Research on this level asks for data sets and case studies. In order to make any generalizable conclusions and compare results, data sets are needed, which is due to the secrecy and the often inability to interview foreign fighters, problematic.[59] Examples of researches which did have a large N and focussed on personal and social characteristics, are the studies of Bakker and Sageman. In their researches, they both analysed the characteristics of a large number of jihadi terrorists, respectively 242 and 172.[60] Due to the earlier described problems for researchers to gather a significant amount of data, these studies have been quite extraordinary.

The meso-level of research takes the wider radical environment into account, serving as the missing link between the radical individual and the radical group joined. This can eventually lead the formation of, or participation in, terrorist organizations.[61] Conducting research on the meso-level contains studying the radical milieu and whole radicalised communities.[62] Thus, within this level, radicalization is researched in conjunction with the wider social environment of the one being radicalized. If one finds itself in a group and is already experiencing the feeling of injustice which is also identified in this group, it can be perceived that their group is treated worse than other groups, and these others are dehumanized by the group. Within this group, social influence is of importance, as human beings are vulnerable to the influence of others who are close to them.[63] If one wishes to understand the impact of how broader structural changes in the economy and society on a group are filtered through someone's perception and to understand an individual's expression in a social group or organisation which may result in actual action, this level of analysis is the suitable choice.[64]

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[56] Bertjan Doosje et al., "Terrorism, radicalization and de-radicalization," *Current Opinion in Psychology* 11 (2016), accessed May 3, 2018, https://ac-els-cdn-com.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl:2443/S2352250X16300811/1-s2.0-S2352250X16300811-main.pdf?_tid=21dfe01c-8373-4603-9cd7-b31244b76d6e&acdnat=1525331774_619f19e3737b76cec65b8fcdd41307b0.

[57] Schmid, "Radicalisation," 4.

[58] Schmid, "Radicalisation," 4. ; Doosje et al., "Terrorism."

[59] Schmid, "Radicalisation," 55.

[60] Bakker, "Jihadi Terrorists in Europe," 52. ; Marc Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004): VII.

[61] Schmid, "Radicalisation," 5.

[62] Ibid.

[63] Doosje et al., "Terrorism."

[64] Dzhekova et al., *Understanding Radicalisation*, 67.

Lastly, there is the macro-level on which one can conduct an analysis. Research on this level includes the role of society and government abroad and at home, the radicalization of party politics and public opinion, the lacking socio-economic opportunities for sectors of society which may lead to the radicalization of the ones suffering from it, and minority-majority relationships. Studying the topic from the macro-level thus includes researching the influence of larger societal factors on radicalization.[65]

2.1.2. Push and pull factors, preconditions and precipitants

Issues playing a role in the process of radicalization and in one's decision to join a foreign conflict can also be divided into push and pull factors. These push and pull factors can play a role on all the three discussed levels of analysis.[66] Push and pull factors do not make a distinction between the individual, the group, or the societal stage, but between the characteristics of the societal environment pushing individuals on the path of radicalization (push-factors) and what attracts them to a particular organization or conflict (pull-factors).[67]

Push factors to involve oneself in terrorist organizations or participation in violent extremism are negative political, cultural and social experiences one is faced with in its environment. Examples of push factors can be unemployment, discrimination, and economical and political marginalization.[68] Push factors are emphasized as the 'root causes' of radicalization.[69] Push factors are country specific, as they are formed by societal and economic conditions. They give foreign fighters reasons to leave the home country.[70] Because these root causes are mainly created in the national society, national governments will be best equipped to deal with push-factors of radicalization and countering their nationals in order to prevent them from travelling to conflict zones.[71]

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[65] Doosje et al., "Terrorism."
[66] Schmid, "Radicalisation," 5.
[67] Stephan Starr, "A Fight for the Spoils: The Future Role of Syria's Armed Groups," *CTC Sentinel* 5, no.8 (August 2012), accessed May 3, 2018, https://ctc.usma.edu/app/uploads/2012/08/CTCSentinel-Vol5Iss84.pdf. ; Guilain Denoeux and Lynn Carter, "Guide to the Drivers of Violent Extremism," *United States Agency for International Development* (February 2009), accessed May 3, 2015, https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/Pnadt978.pdf.
[68] Ibid.
[69] Denoeux and Carter, "Guide to the Drivers of Violent Extremism."
[70] Daan Weggemans et al., "Bestemming Syrië: Een exploratieve studie naar de leefsituatie van Nederlandse 'uitreizigers' in Syrië," (January 2016): 21.
[71] Hamed el-Said and Richard Barrett, "Enhancing the Understanding of the Foreign Terrorist Fighters Phenomenon in Syria," *UN Counter-Terrorism Centre* (July 2017), accessed May 3, 2018, http://www.un.org/en/counterterrorism/assets/img/Report_Final_20170727.pdf.

Pull factors attracting individuals to join a specific group and a specific conflict can be the ideology of the group and what they offer as a solution to improve the current situation one finds itself vulnerable or incomplete in. Besides ideology, the sense of belonging and strong bonds of brotherhood, reputation building, and fame and/or glory can pull an individual into radical networks and foreign conflicts.[72] In addition, the empathy which a would-be foreign fighter feels towards a specific group in the conflict which is suffering from violence and aggression is a pull-factor for many youngsters, especially as this is resonated in their personal experiences.[73] Friends and social networks can also play a role in pulling an individual into foreign fighting, this may lead up to three out of four people joining an Islamist terror organization due to their social environment.[74]

A distinction between different factors has also been made by Crenshaw. Crenshaw distinguishes between preconditions and precipitants. Preconditions are long-run causes for engagement in terrorism. These underlying factors need a trigger to persuade someone to become involved in terrorism. Precipitants are these triggers and are dependent on the context which makes them inconstant and unpredictable.[75] These precipitants are transnational and go beyond the environment the person engaging in terrorism finds itself in.[76]

In order to answer the research question, the aim is to keep an as open view as possible towards Dutch foreign fighters. However, as this thesis tries to explain the motivations why people have left at a certain moment, it is likely that pull factors and precipitants have played a prominent role. Pull factors may trigger the individual to indeed leave, as push factors are already present for a longer time, as they form the root causes. Precipitants are also triggering the pre-conditions and are therefore likely to play a decisive role in why and when one leaves. These factors can take place on the micro-, meso-, and on the macro-level.

2.2. Theories on foreign fighter motivations

Academic works have provided theories regarding the motivations of foreign fighters, which can be used as guidelines to research the current foreign fighter waves and their motivations. The discussed theories are all dividing foreign fighters into different categories, on the basis of different goals pursued in the conflicts they joined.

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[72] Starr, "A Fight for the Spoils."
[73] El-Said and Barrett, "Enhancing the Understanding."
[74] Ibid.
[75] Crenshaw, "The Causes of Terrorism," 381.
[76] Ibid.

One such a theory has been established by Malet. His theory is based on the role ethnicity plays in the conflict and the shared ethnic identity of the foreign fighter and its fighting comrades. This theory tests the influence of social identity and the framing of the threat of the conflict.[77] Foreign fighters are, according to Malet, to be divided into four typologies. Type 1 are the Diasporians, who join conflicts to advance common nationalists goals. Type 2 are Liberationalists, who join to defend anti-colonial forces to reach their shared ideological goals. Type 3 are the Encroachers, who fight in conflicts on the side of secessionist rebels to expand their political control to a neighbouring territory. Lastly, type 4 are the True Believers, who fight on the side of ideological rebels to contain institutions of transnational identity.

Bjørgo divides foreign fighters in three different categories, based on four dimensions. The dimensions are (non)ideological, leader/follower, socially well adapted/marginalized, and sensation-seeking/non-sensation-seeking.[78] The first category is the ideological activist, which can be leaders motivated by ideology and political issues, veterans who are role models, and protégés of the leader. These often charismatic people are motivated by a strong sense of justice and are responding to the suffering of others.[79] Second are drifters and fellow travellers, consisting out of converts, and seekers of friendship and protection. These individuals are searching for a strong identity which the membership of a militant group can provide them with. Ideology is less important to this group.[80] The last category consists out of socially frustrated youth, which often experienced a form of discrimination or other kind of unfair competition with other groups. Another factor creating this frustration are the often criminal and marginalized backgrounds of these youngsters. Their backgrounds are characterized by negative social experiences, careers and criminal records. These frustrated youngsters have diffuse feelings of anger, and see violence and jihadism as a form of personal salvation.[81] Thus, this theory distinguishes between different groups of people: ideologically motivated, drifted or in search of an identity, and frustrated youth.

The theory of Venhaus, the four seekers theory, is based on interviews with and personal histories of more than 2.000 foreign fighters who joined al-Qaeda. Based on the results,

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[77] David Malet, *Foreign Fighters: Transnational Identity in Civic Conflicts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), chapter 2, accessed May 7, 2018, http://www.oxfordscholarship.com/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199939459.001.0001/acprof-9780199939459-chapter-3.
[78] Bjørgo, "Dreams and Disillusionment," 3.
[79] Ibid, 4-5.
[80] Ibid, 6.
[81] Ibid, 8 – 9.

Venhaus concluded that foreign fighters are seeking and looking for conflicts to join, rather than that they have been actively recruited.[82] He distinguishes between four different 'seekers': the revenge, status, identity, and thrill seeker.[83] The revenge seeker perceives him/herself as a victim of society and blames external forces for their unhappiness and unsuccessfulness. The fighters stated that their anger was turned against the West for its attacks on Muslims, although the underlying reason for this anger may have a different cause which the revenge seeker is unaware of.[84] The status seeker suffered from unrealized expectations of success and recognition. In the view of the status seeker, s/he is not appreciated and understood, resulting in frustration due to unrealized expectations. The narrative of heroic martyrs and glorious operatives by jihadi groups offer the status seeker in his/her view the surest route to status and success.[85] The identity seeker is in search of membership in a defined organization. The identity seeker joining a jihadi organization is in need of structure, rules and belonging. This sense of belonging defines the person itself, its role, its friends, and its interaction with society. A jihadi group can offer this best-possible alternative by posing strict obedience to their state of mind, and most jihadi-groups control their members in the way they feel, think, and behave.[86] The thrill seeker has a very distinct motivation. S/he is bored and unchallenged at home and therefore searching for energy and drive. The thrill seeker is attracted by the conflict as it offers in his/her eyes glory, adventure and spectacular violence.[87]

2.3. Foreign fighters in past conflicts

To explore the topic, examples of conflicts were foreign fighters have joined will be given. Foreign fighters have been present in multiple conflicts during history, all with their own attraction and effects. Here, the foreign fighter involvement in the Spanish civil war (1936 – 1939), the Soviet-Afghan war (1979 – 1989), the Bosnian war (1992 – 1995) and the Somali war (2006 – 2009) will be shortly discussed. First, the Spanish civil war will be highlighted, as this was the first war where the term foreign fighters was used and it drew an appreciable

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[82] John Venhaus, "Why Youth Join Al-Qaeda," *United States Institute of Peace* 236 (May 2010), accessed May 7, 2018, 1.
[83] Ibid, 2.
[84] Ibid, 8 – 9.
[85] Venhaus, "Why Youth Join Al-Qaeda," 9 – 10.
[86] Ibid, 10 – 11.
[87] Ibid, 11.

number of foreigners into its conflict.[88] Thereafter, the Soviet-Afghan war, the Bosnian war and the Somali war will be discussed, all being conflicts with jihadi involvement. The conflict in Afghanistan was the first conflict which triggered jihadi involvement, after which many conflicts followed.[89] In addition to the war in Afghanistan, the Bosnian and Somali conflicts will be discussed, as they all three cover different timeframes (1980's, 1990's, 2000's), and these conflict all managed to draw considerable numbers of Western foreign fighters into their conflicts.[90] Therefore, a short analyses of these conflicts may result in an historical overview of foreign fighter motivations.

2.3.1 *The Spanish civil war*

The first much discussed conflict involving an appreciable number of foreign fighters, was the Spanish civil war which started in 1936.[91] This war attracted an estimated number between the 35.000 and 50.000 foreigners into its conflict, although there were probably not more than 18.000 foreigners present at the same time in the conflict.[92] Most of these foreigners joined the International Brigade (IB) and fought on the side of the republicans in their fight against the then Spanish dictator general Francisco Franco.[93] The IB was originally established by the Comintern, already implying that the IB had communist goals.[94] This does not mean that every volunteer truly believed in the communist system.[95] Part of the volunteers were not necessarily communist, but found the IB the best party in order to fight global fascism and saw the fight against Franco's fascist regime as the ultimate starting point to eliminate fascism. Furthermore, some saw the civil war in Spain as an opportunity to obtain social justice for the poor and minorities, who were believed to be the next victims of fascism.[96] Also citizens from regimes

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[88] David Malet, "Why Foreign Fighters? Historical Perspectives and Solutions," *Orbis* 54, no.1 (Winter 2010): 102. ; Malet, "Foreign Fighter Mobilization," 456.

[89] Cilluffo, Cozzens, and Ranstorp, "Foreign Fighters."

[90] Isabelle Duyvesteyn and Bram Peeters, "Fickle Foreign Fighters? A Cross-Case Analysis of Seven Muslim Foreign Fighter Mobilisations (1980 – 2015)," *ICCT Research Paper* (October 2015), accessed May 1, 2018, https://www.icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/ICCT-Duyvesteyn-Peeters-Fickle-Foreign-Fighters-October2015.pdf.

[91] Malet, "Why Foreign Fighters?," 102.

[92] Ibid.

[93] Dan Richardson, "Foreign Fighters in Spanish Militias: The Spanish Civil War 1936 – 1939," *Military Affairs* 40, no.1 (February 1976), accessed May 1, 2018, http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/1986842.pdf?refreqid=excelsior:f8457c74bb6968520d99d81e3693a8b8. ; Bakke, "Copying and Learning from Outsiders?"

[94] Richard Baxell, "Myths of the International Brigades," *Bulletin of Spanish Studies* 91, no.1-2 (January 2014) accessed May 2, 2018, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/14753820.2013.868647?needAccess=true.

[95] Ibid.

[96] Ibid.

where there was no space for socialist policies, such as labour unions, joined the war. The inability to set-up such unions at home because of the economic upheavals in the 1930s, led people to accept that the use of violence was the only way to achieve political change.[97]

2.3.2 The Soviet-Afghan war

The conflict in Afghanistan, starting after the Soviet invasion in 1979, was the first conflict to trigger the idea of jihad as an individual obligation, and it drew an estimated number of 20.000 foreigners into its conflict.[98] Foreigners from different countries, of which the majority were Arab countries, joined the *Mujahideen*, meaning the ones engaging in jihad, who were fighting the Soviet invasion and local Communist parties.[99] Many of the Arab foreign fighters in the Afghan conflict were known as the so-called 'Gucci-soldiers', who saw the fight in Afghanistan as a break of their life, where after they went back to school or work again.[100] For others the terminology and rhetoric of the motivations to join the fight in Afghanistan were mainly Islam-focused: Islamic principles must be upheld and the *Ummah*, the worldwide Muslim community, must be protected from the enemy.[101] The wide-scale nationalities and motivations of foreign fighters in Afghanistan caused internal friction. What kept these foreign fighters together was their shared desire to remove the Soviet forces out of Afghanistan and to create an Islamist government, however the conditions a government had to fulfil in order to be an Islamist government varied between sub-groups of foreign fighters on the side of the *Mujahideen*.[102] Another motive was the invasion of a foreign, non-Muslim power in the country.[103]

2.3.3. Bosnian war

The war in Bosnia offered jihadis who fought in Afghanistan and could not, or did not want to, return home a valuable alternative to continue their battle.[104] The influx of foreign fighters

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[97] Malet, "Why Foreign Fighters?," 102.

[98] Roy van Zuijdewijn and Bakker, "Returning Western foreign fighters," 2. ; Cilluffo, Cozzens, and Ranstorp, "Foreign Fighters." ; Amber Atteridge, "Foreign Fighters Post Conflict: Assessing the Impact of Arab Afghans and Syrian-Iraqi Foreign Fighters on Global Security," *International Institute for Counter-Terrorism* (Spring 2016), accessed May 1, 2018, https://www.ict.org.il/UserFiles/ICT-Foreign-Fighters-Post-Conflict-May-16.pdf.

[99] Also often translated into "warriors of God". *Oxford Islamic Studies Online, s.v. "Mujahid,"* accessed May 25, 2018, www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t125/e1593. ; Atteridge, "Foreign Fighters Post Conflict."

[100] Roy van Zuijdewijn and Bakker, "Returning Western foreign fighters," 2.

[101] Atteridge, "Foreign Fighters Post Conflict."

[102] Ibid.

[103] Byman and Shapiro, "Be Afraid," 12.

[104] Malet, "Foreign Fighter Mobilization," 465 – 466.

legitimized itself due to attacks on the Bosnian Muslims by the Serbs and Croats.[105] In the Bosnian case, the influx started after widespread media reports of abuse and atrocities against the Bosnian Muslim population in the civil war.[106] It is estimated that as many as 5.000 foreigners have joined the Bosnian war.[107] It is depicted that the first group of these foreign fighters left their countries because of their motivation to fight for the oppressed.[108] The second group, consisting mainly out of ex-Afghan foreign fighters, did not share this humanitarian motivation, but were motivated by hateful religious and political ideologies.[109] Bosnia offered this group a valuable solution: they could not return home because they faced punishment and therefore the 'new holy war' against an 'infidel regime' in Bosnia offered a perfect solution.[110]

2.3.4. Somali war

In 1991 the Somali government collapsed and Somalia faced a civil war, a humanitarian intervention led by the United States (US), and again the withdrawal of the mission.[111] This tumultuous period led Arab veterans to forge relations with Somali Islamists. After 9/11 and the US attempt to prevent Afghanistan from becoming Al-Qaeda's bases, it was feared that Somalia would offer Al-Qaeda the perfect environment to regroup itself.[112] Al-Shabaab came into existence as the military wing of the Sharia court movement, which was united in the Islamic Courts Union. Bin Laden called for the support of Muslims for this movement.[113] The foreign fighters in Somalia can be divided into three groups: the near abroad Somali diaspora (mostly Somalis from Kenya and Ethiopia), the far abroad Somali diaspora (mostly Somalis from Western countries) and foreign fighters who did not have any ethnic ties with Somalia.[114] The strong Somali diaspora led to a quick first wave of foreign fighters, after Ethiopia invaded Somalia in order to get rid of the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) in 2006. This wave was motivated

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[105] Jennifer Mustapha, "The Mujahideen in Bosnia: the foreign fighter as cosmopolitan citizen and/or terrorist," *Citizenship Studies* 17, no.6-7 (October 2013), accessed May 1, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/13621025.2012.751718?needAccess=true.
[106] Ibid.
[107] Roy van Zuijdewijn and Bakker, "Returning Western foreign fighters," 4.
[108] Ibid.
[109] Ibid, 5.
[110] Duyvesteyn and Peeters, "Fickle Foreign Fighters?"
[111] Ibid.
[112] Ibid.
[113] Ibid.
[114] Barak Mendelsohn, "Foreign Fighters – Recent Trends," Elsevier (Spring 2011): 192.

by traditional nationalistic motivations.[115] This is reflected in the number of foreign fighters who went back to their home countries once Ethiopia withdrew itself from Somalia.[116] The Ethiopian intervention and perceived interference of Western forces in the Somali conflict have been triggers for an increase in the foreign fighting activity.[117] Non-Somalis joining the conflict were coming from previous battlefields, such as Afghanistan, who saw Somalia as the extension of their holy war.[118]

2.4. Foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq

The conflict in Syria and Iraq has drawn a historical amount of Western foreigners into its conflict.[119] It has been estimated that 42.000 fighters from 120 different nationalities have travelled to either Syria or Iraq in order to join the conflicts in these war-torn countries. In both conflicts, there are different parties fighting, ranging from secular forces to governmental armies to jihadists organizations. ISIS is the main attractor of foreign fighters within these conflicts, as it has been estimated that 80% of the total amount of foreign fighters decided to fight on the side of ISIS.[120]

2.4.1 ISIS and the general foreign fighter flows

The conflict, ISIS, and its appeal to foreign fighters gained much attention since 2011. However, the roots of the conflict are older. Chapter 3 will elaborate more on this, but some parts will be highlighted here in order to explore the general foreign fighter phenomenon in Syria and Iraq. The roots of the conflict in Iraq are the Sunni-Shi'a division and the perceived Sunni discrimination in the country. On the Syrian side, the conflict started in line with the Arab spring uprisings and a call of a small group of citizens to end the security state and the absence of freedom. Furthermore they asked for policies to tackle the shortage of job opportunities, as these were drivers for corruption.[121] After these in first instance peaceful protests escalated into the Syrian civil war, ISIS sent in operatives in Syria who established JaN in 2012 and decided

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[115] Roy van Zuijdewijn and Bakker, "Returning Western foreign fighters," 7. ; David Shinn, "Al Shabaab's Foreign Threat to Somalia," *Elsevier* (Spring 2011): 212. ; Seth G Jones, Andrew Liepman, and Nathan Chandler, *Counterterrorism and Counterinsurgency in Somalia* (Santa Monica: RAND Cooperation, 2016), accessed May 7, 2018, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR1500/RR1539/RAND_RR1539.pdf.

[116] Roy van Zuijdewijn and Bakker, "Returning Western foreign fighters," 8. ; Shinn, "Al Shabaab's Foreign Threat," 212.

[117] Cilluffo, Cozzens, and Ranstorp, "Foreign Fighters".

[118] Jones, Liepman and Chandler, *Counterterrorism and Counterinsurgency.*

[119] Byman and Shapiro, "Be Afraid," 9.

[120] Schmid and Tinnes, "Foreign (Terrorist) Fighters."

[121] John MacHugo, *Syria: from the Great War to civil war*, (London: Saqi Books, 2014): 221.

to join the conflict itself in April 2013.[122] Before ISIS became operative in Syria, it was active in Iraq. First it was known as Jamaat al-Tawid Wal-Jihad (JWT), thereafter as Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), and before transforming into ISIS it called itself the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI).[123] Although ISIS has been active in Iraq under different names it was only since 2011 that predominant flows of foreign fighters started to travel to Syria and Iraq.[124]

The conflict in Syria and Iraq has been able to attract foreign fighters from many different parts of the world, which makes it distinct from other conflicts involving (jihadi) foreign fighters. Whereas in previous conflicts, the greater part of the foreign fighters came from Muslim countries and only a small part from Western countries, in the case of Syria and Iraq, the number is more divided. As explored in the introduction of this thesis, the number of foreign fighters present in the conflict soon increased. After the start of the mobilization by foreign fighters late 2011 until December 2013, at least 8.500 foreigners managed to travel to the conflict zone. The biggest part consisted out of Europeans and Arabs, approximately 80%. The remaining 20% originated from Southeast Asia, the non-Arab part of Africa (thus excluding the Maghreb consisting out of Libya, Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia) and North America.[125] Estimations at the end of 2015 by the Soufan Group show that still, the majority of the foreign fighters came from the Middle-Eastern region, however the numbers are not as diverse as they have been before. By now, most of the foreign fighters came from the Middle East, followed by nationals from countries from the Maghreb, the EU and former Soviet Union states.[126] In the report of the Soufan Group published in October 2017, these numbers changed. This report shows that most foreign fighters present in the conflict come from former Soviet states, followed by nationals from Middle-Eastern countries, EU member states, and the Maghreb.[127]

The peak in the number of foreign fighters present in the conflict was in 2015 and started to decrease from February 2016 onwards.[128] The decreasing amount of territory ISIS possessed and the growing difficulties to travel to Syria and Iraq went hand in hand with this decreasing

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[122] MacHugo, *Syria*, 228. ; Gerges, *A History,* 175.

[123] Christine Fuller, *The Rise of ISIS: Background and Perspective from the UK and U.S.* (New York: Nova Publishers, 2015): 8 – 9.

[124] Mishali-Ram, "Foreign Fighters 169. ; Pokalova, "Driving Factors."

[125] "The Maghreb," *Center for Strategic and International Studies* (website), accessed June 4, 2018, https://www.csis.org/programs/middle-east-program/regions/maghreb. ; Donnelly, Sanderson and Zack Fellman "Foreign Fighters in History."

[126] The Soufan Group, "An Updated Assessment".

[127] Richard Barret, "Beyond the Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Returnees," *The Soufan Group* (October 2017), accessed May 2, 2018, http://thesoufancenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Beyond-the-Caliphate-Foreign-Fighters-and-the-Threat-of-Returnees-TSC-Report-October-2017-v3.pdf.

[128] Donnelly, Sanderson and Zack Fellman "Foreign Fighters in History."

number of foreign fighters travelling to the conflict zone.[129] ISIS recognized that they were weakening, and therefore they called upon potential recruits to plot attacks in their home countries mid-2016.[130]

2.4.2 Motivations

During the analyses of past conflicts involving foreign fighters, it is explored that motivations can differ between groups and their moment of departure, and between conflicts. Now this thesis will look at what has so far been written about the drivers for foreigners to get engaged in the Syrian and Iraqi conflicts. The reports of different research institutions will be coupled to each other, in order to discover changes over time. Not every report mentions a clear timeframe in which they have explored motivations, therefore the reports published by the same research institutions will be coupled to each other in order to discover differences in their main motivations. Together with the other researches they will be put together in order to discover changes over time.

The International Centre for the Study of Radicalization and Political Violence (ICSR) have published three reports in which they analysed the motivations of foreign fighters. In their first report, in April 2013, it is stated that not everyone who has joined ISIS had done so because of a jihadist worldview. The horrific pictures of the conflict and the stories about atrocities against the Syrian population by the government of Bashar al-Assad (here after Assad), and the lack of action by the international community has been the most cited reason of foreigners to join the conflict since its beginning in 2011 until the report was published in April 2013.[131] The adoption of the jihadist doctrine happened in most of the cases once the foreign fighter lived in ISIS' territory and came into contact with battle-hardened fighters.[132] In December 2013, another report was published by the ICSR. By that time, the foreign fighter participation in the conflict has steeply risen.[133] The ICSR explains this rise as most likely being the result of the increase of outside Shia forces within the conflict. Since its previous report, it explains, the sectarianism in the conflict increased due to the participation of the Lebanese Hezbollah, Iranian governmental forces and other Shia militias, fighting on the side of Assad. The feeling that the

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[129] Donnelly, Sanderson and Zack Fellman "Foreign Fighters in History."

[130] Donnelly, Sanderson and Zack Fellman "Foreign Fighters in History."

[131] Aaron Zelin, "ICSR Insight: European Foreign Fighters in Syria," *ICSR* (April 2013), accessed May 5, 2018, http://icsr.info/2013/04/icsr-insight-european-foreign-fighters-in-syria-2/.

[132] Ibid.

[133] Aaron Zelin, "ICSR Insight: Up to 11,000 foreign fighters in Syria; steep rise among Western Europeans," *ICSR* (December 2013), accessed May 5, 2018, icsr.info/2013/12/icsr-insight-11000-foreign-fighters-syria-steep-rise-among-western-europeans/.

Sunni population has to unite and stand-up against this Shia advance is an explanation for the rise in foreign fighting participation.[134] The report published in September 2015 contains the reasons of 58 ISIS defectors why they initially joined the group. These reasons can be clustered into three different narratives. First are the atrocities of the Assad government towards its population, and the belonging narrative that the Sunnis were facing a genocide. The second narrative is about ideology and faith, and the need for every Muslim to help and support the established Islamic state. Third are the personal and material causes which have had a strong appeal on foreigners to join the conflict. The attraction of brotherhood, adventure and living a luxurious life, convinced them to leave their home countries.[135]

Stern and Berger also stress the importance of the last discussed narrative. According to them, internal motivations, the needs of the individual itself, are sought when someone decides to join a terror organization.[136] According to them, the focus of fighters within ISIS was initially to fight the Assad regime, this may have changed over time in the desire to establish and defend the Caliphate, regardless of what the Syrian people wanted.[137]

The Soufan Group has established several reports about foreign fighters in which their motivations come forward as well. Its June 2014 report explains that people joining ISIS are seeking a greater sense of meaning and purpose in their lives. In ISIS they have found an opportunity in doing so, by taking part in a battle of which they believe already goes 1400 years back and the ability to die as a martyr. Another motivation according to this report is the structure and clarity in the way of life under *Sharia* law, the Islamic law, in ISIS conquered territories, whereas others see participation in the conflict as an opportunity to escape their regular lives and to seek adventure.[138] In 2015, the research group shows that motivations of people to travel to Syria and Iraq are still mainly of a personal nature. They are searching for belonging, adventure, purpose and friendship.[139] Specifically Western foreign fighters seem to be searching for a new identity which is not determined by their past, but will be based on their

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[134] Zelin, "ICSR Insight: Up to 11,000 foreign fighters in Syria."

[135] Peter Neumann, "Victims, Perpetrators, Assets: The Narratives of Islamic State Defectors," *ISCR* (2015), accessed May 5, 2018, http://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/ICSR-Report-Victims-Perpertrators-Assets-The-Narratives-of-Islamic-State-Defectors.pdf.

[136] Jessica Stern and J.M. Berger, "ISIS and the Foreign-Fighter Phenomenon," *the Atlantic*, March 8, 2015, accessed May 5, 2018, https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/03/isis-and-the-foreign-fighter-problem/387166/.

[137] Ibid.

[138] Richard Barrett, "Foreign Fighters in Syria," *the Soufan Group* (June 2014), accessed May 5, 2018, http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/TSG-Foreign-Fighters-in-Syria.pdf. ; *Oxford Islamic Studies Online*, s.v. "Sharia," accessed May 25, 2018, http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t125/e2168.

[139] The Soufan Group, "An Updated Assessment".

contribution to the Caliphate.[140] In 2015 ISIS controlled most territory in its period of existence. Thereafter, its territory started to shrink. According to the report published in 2017, the foreign fighters who decided to join after 2015 were triggered by violence, which by then became fundamental for the survival of the Caliphate.[141]

The Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) agrees with the explanation of the first wave of foreign fighters going to Syria and Iraq, as becomes clear in their report 'Foreign Fighters in History', published in April 2017. This report states that Assad's human right violations, the Shia security forces in Iraq and the presence of Shia militias in both Syria and Iraq turned out to be an effective recruitment tool. The humanitarian idea of protecting their brothers and sisters in Syria and Iraq, triggered by media reporting on the conflict, pulled them into the conflict since 2011.[142] Furthermore, the report stresses the differences between motivations of foreign fighters and motivations of national fighters. According to the CSIS, foreign fighters stronger feel the need to defend other Sunnis or join the conflict for other identity-centric drivers, for disillusionment with the Western society, or the desire to build an Islamic state.[143]

Besides these reports, there are also multiple academic contributions about foreign fighters' motivations. Research based on social media activity of foreign fighters going to Syria or Iraq, by Borum and Fein, shows four motivational themes under which most of this researched social media activity can be divided. The first is the belief of 'the larger struggle', which means that foreign fighters believe that the fight in Syria and Iraq and the establishment of the Caliphate is part of the struggle the Sunnis face against both the Shia population and the West. Second is the belief that the conflict in Syria is a defensive struggle of the *Ummah* against Assad and his apostate and corrupt regime. Third is the anger towards the atrocities by the Assad regime and perception of the lack of action by the West to respond to this tragedy. The fourth motivational theme is adventure tourism.[144]

Research by Byman and Shapiro stresses that the motivations at the start of the conflict were mainly based on the brutality of the Assad regime.[145] Others going to Syria had different motivations. A few shared the commitment to a global jihad from the beginning of the conflict

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[140] The Soufan Group, "An Updated Assessment".
[141] Neumann, "Victims, Perpetrators, Assets." ; Barrett, "Beyond the Caliphate."
[142] Donnelly, Sanderson and Zack Fellman "Foreign Fighters in History."
[143] Ibid.
[144] Borum and Fein, "The Psychology of Foreign Fighters," 246.
[145] Byman and Shapiro, "Be Afraid," 12.

and they wanted to protect the *Ummah* for which they saw Syria as the basis to establish a global Caliphate. Others were driven by the desire to live in an Islamic society. Another large part of the foreign fighters were driven by their search for thrill and adventure or by the status one gained when joining the fight.[146]

GENERAL MOTIVATIONS

Figure 2 – Timeline general motivations

Chapter summary

In the discussed past conflicts with foreign fighter involvement, we saw different motivations to join: from protecting the world against fascism to nationalistic motivations, and from humanitarian reasons to the idea of the holy war. With regard to the discussed literature on the foreign fighter phenomenon in Syria and Iraq, multiple motivations came forward. Different reports about foreign fighters and their motivations at different periods in time give an indication of possible changes in motivations. Humanitarian reasons seems to have triggered the first foreign fighters joining the conflicts. After the sectarian tensions in the conflicts increased, this seems to have played a larger role in the motivation to participate in these conflicts. At the beginning of 2014, personal reasons are mentioned to have motivated foreigners to join ISIS: fighters were searching for meaning, purpose, structure, clarity and adventure. After the establishment of the Caliphate, reasons seems to have shifted to ideological motivations, as the most important motivation was to establish, defend, and extend the Caliphate rather than help the Syrian population, and to live in an Islamic state. Personal motivations still seems to count, as foreign fighters were in search of belonging, friendship and adventure. After 2015, it is likely that foreign fighters have joined the conflict due to violent motivations, as this became fundamental for the survival of the Caliphate.

These motivations are partly in line with the discussed theories on foreign fighting. With regard to the theory of Malet, it is likely that most of ISIS' foreign fighters are True Believers, as they want to establish a transnational, Sunni, identity. However, this may only be true for fighters who joined the conflict later, as the literature review shows that most fighters of the

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[146]Byman and Shapiro, "Be Afraid," 12.

first wave travelled to the conflict out of humanitarian reasons, who may be considered as Liberationalists, as they wanted to help the Syrians to get rid of their government. These humanitarian reasons are recognized in Bjørgo's theory, under the ideological fighters who want to protect others and who search for justice. The drifters in his theory, just as the seekers in Venhaus' theory, are searching something within a conflict, which is the case with foreign fighters joining ISIS as well, as they may be motivated by personal needs and a desire to establish and live in the Caliphate.

3 - Dutch foreign fighters and the Syrian and Iraqi conflicts

Now the general foreign fighter phenomenon and their flows to Syria and Iraq have been explored in the previous chapter, this thesis will now focus on its case study: Dutch foreign fighters going to Syria and Iraq. In order to give a comprehensive overview of their departures and what has driven these people to leave at certain points in time, this chapter will explore the case in a chronological order, in which figure 1 will be the directory. In this graph, we see that the first traced departures were in the fourth quarter of 2012, and the last one in the second quarter of 2017. Therefore, the overview will start in 2012. In order to explore possible explanations for the fluctuations in the graph, this chapter will first examine the main causes of and the main developments in the conflicts in both Syria and Iraq, and ISIS' role in these conflicts.

3.1. The conflict and its developments

The conflicts in Syria and Iraq are both separate conflicts with separate causes. ISIS exploited both conflicts in the neighbouring countries Syria and Iraq.[147] This terror organization saw an opportunity to break the borders between the two countries and thereby conquering territory over both national territories which eventually led to the establishment of one Caliphate in two different countries.[148] Because ISIS was able to exploit both separate conflicts, the causes and developments of both conflicts will first shortly be addressed, where after ISIS' role in turning these individual conflicts cross-border will be explained.

3.1.1. The Iraqi conflict

The causes of the Iraqi conflict and how ISIS profited from this conflict, go back to the US invasion in March 2003 and the sectarian division of the country. In March 2003, the US invaded Iraq because of the assumption that Saddam Hussein, the then Iraqi president, was harbouring weapons of mass destruction.[149] After the US toppled the Hussein regime, the interim government started with the de-Ba'athification of the public sector in order to exclude

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[147] Gerges, *A History*: 1 – 2.

[148] Ahmed S. Hashim, "The Islamic State: From al-Qaeda Affiliate to Caliphate," *Middle East Policy* 11, no.4 (2014), 79.

[149] Brett Edwards and Mattia Cacciatori, "The Politics of International Chemical Weapon Justice: The case of Syria, 2011 – 2017," *Contemporary Security Policy* 39, no.2 (2018), accessed April 13, 2018, https://www-tandfonline-com.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl:2443/doi/pdf/10.1080/13523260.2017.1410614?needAccess=true.

former members of the Ba'ath party from the new Iraqi government.[150] The Ba'ath-party under Hussein's rule existed of both Sunni and Shia, however Sunni Iraqis filled up the highest ranks in political, military and security sectors.[151] This de-Ba'athification therefore hit the Sunnis the hardest and led to the removal of Sunnis from jobs, such as soldiers, doctors, civil servants and professors. In total, the de-Ba'athification costed tens of thousands Iraqi Sunnis their jobs.[152] Besides this increasing unemployment within the Sunni society, the removal of high-ranked military and security officers left a void in these apparatuses.[153]

In April 2006 the first permanent government after the fall of Hussein was established, led by the new prime minister Nouri al-Maliki.[154] Maliki is Shia, and in favour of the de-Ba'athification. He went through with minimizing the Sunni power in public life.[155] When the US forces left Iraq in 2011, the Maliki government promised the Americans to arrange a power-sharing deal in order to bring the Sunnis back into public life. Despite this promise, Maliki centred the power towards his own and provided orders to quell Sunni uprisings and to eliminate Sunni politicians. Furthermore, he fired thousands of Sunni soldiers from the governmental army, leaving them with no work.[156] Tensions increased in Sunni-dominated areas at the end of 2011 due to arrest warrants on prominent Sunnis. The grievances within the Sunni population sparked protests at the end of 2012. These peaceful demonstrations were violently repressed by governmental forces, such as in Hawija (April 2013) and Ramadi (December 2013).[157] When government forces demolished a peaceful sit-in camp by Sunnis in Ramadi and thereby killed ten protestors, Sunnis were pushed to find new means in order to defend themselves and fight for their rights, which gave various Sunni insurgent groups reason for military action.[158]

ISIS cooperated since the beginning of its power-expansion in 2011 with other Sunni-

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[150] James P. Pfiffner, "US Blunders in Iraq: De-Baathification and Disbanding the Army," *Intelligence and National Security* 25, no.1 (March 2010), accessed May 10, 2018, https://www-tandfonline-com.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl:2443/doi/pdf/10.1080/02684521003588120?needAccess=true.

[151] Miranda Sissons and Abdulrazzaq Al-Saiedi, "A Bitter Legacy: Lessons of De-Baathification in Iraq," *International Center for Transitional Justice* (March 2010), accessed May 10, 2018, http://ictj.org/sites/default/files/ICTJ-Report-Iraq-De-Baathification-2013-ENG.pdf.

[152] Gerges, *A History,* 109 – 110.

[153] Diane L. Maye, *Switching Sides: Political Power, Alignment, and Alliances in Post-Saddam Iraq* (Ann Arbor: ProQuest, 2015): 56 – 57.

[154] Ibid, 57 – 58.

[155] Sissons and Al-Saiedi, "A Bitter Legacy."

[156] Maye, *Switching Sides*, 56 – 57.

[157] Bertelsmann Stiftung, *BTI 2016 – Iraq Country Report* (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2016): 4 – 5, accessed May 10, 2018, https://www.bti-project.org/fileadmin/files/BTI/Downloads/Reports/2016/pdf/BTI_2016_Iraq.pdf.

[158] Ibid.

militias and tribes and soon proliferated itself as the leader within this Sunni-insurgency.[159] Especially in the Sunni-dominated Anbar province ISIS had been able to take over control of villages and cities within this province by 2014.[160] Other main parties fighting in the Iraqi conflict are governmental and Kurdish forces. The Iraqi governmental forces are mainly Shia. They are backed by Shia militias and Iran, and the Lebanese Hezbollah joined the conflict at the beginning of 2013.[161] The Kurds form 20% of the Iraqi population and are an autonomous entity in the north of Iraq, having its own militaries.[162] In the battle against ISIS, the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) are involved.[163]

3.1.2. The Syrian conflict

After the death of his father Hafiz al-Assad in June 2000, Bashar al-Assad became the president of Syria. At first the Syrian population seemed to be happy with this new president, his young age, and the fact that he lived and studied in London.[164] He did fulfil the expectations of the Syrian population in the first few months of his presidency: Assad showed tolerance towards critics of the regime. This tolerance did not last long, because senior members of the regime feared a loss of control, resulting in a return to the regime's previous policies of heavy-handedness against its critics.[165] Although the stable impression the Syrian regime gave regarding its political and economic stability, after 10 years of Assad's rule the population found itself in a severe social and economic crisis.[166]

The first demonstrations against Assad were the result of the imprisonment and suspected torture of teenagers who painted revolutionary slogans on a wall.[167] These initially local demonstrations were violently repressed, causing nation-wide protests demanding the resignation of Assad. They demanded the end of the security state, the end of the absence of

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[159] Patrick Cockburn, *The Rise of Islamic State: ISIS and the new Sunni Revolution* (New York: Verso Books, 2015), accessed May 8, 2018, http://kropfpolisci.com/isis.cockburn.pdf.

[160] Fuller, *The Rise of ISIS*, 88 – 103.

[161] Ibid, 71. ; Marisa Sullivan, "Hezbollah in Syria," *Middle East Security Report* 19, (2014), accessed June 5, 2018, http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Hezbollah_Sullivan_FINAL.pdf.

[162] Maye, *Switching Sides*, 15 – 132.

[163] Fuller, *The Rise of ISIS,* 7.

[164] Eyal Zisser, "Syria – from the six day war to the Syrian civil war," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 44, no.4 (September 2017), accessed April 8, 2018, https://www-tandfonline-com.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl:2443/doi/pdf/10.1080/13530194.2017.1360011?needAccess=true.

[165] Ibid.

[166] Alexander de Juan and André Bank, "The Ba'athist blackout? Selective goods provision and political violence in the Syrian civil war," *Journal of Peace Research* 52, no.1 (2015): 94. ; Zisser, "Syria".

[167] Elizabeth Ferris, *The Consequences of Chaos*, (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2016): 14.

freedom, more jobs and more opportunities.[168] In an attempt to repress the demonstrations, the Syrian regime, again, used brutal means such as imprisonment and torture. In March 2011, these demonstrations escalated into a civil war and by June 2011, 500 Syrians had been killed.[169] The growing popularity of the uprising and the rise of violent measures to take down this uprising escalated into a civil war in which different rebel groups, sectarian militias, and the government battled for the occupation of Syrian territory.[170]

Rebel forces soon possessed territories within Syria, but the regime fought back. Already in 2012 it became clear that the parties believed that they could militarily prevail over the other, and were therefore not willing to take any compromises.[171] There are multiple fighting forces in the Syrian civil war, of which the main forces will shortly be addressed. First is the government of Assad, backed by pro-government militias, Russia, Iran and other Shia militias, mainly from Afghanistan, Iraq and Pakistan.[172] Also here, Hezbollah joined the conflict at the beginning of 2013.[173] On the side of the nationalist rebel forces is the Free Syrian Army (FSA), which emerged after the first violent actions of the government against the first protestors. The loose control the FSA has over its forces resulted in a fragmentation of the group.[174] There are also nationalist jihadi forces, such as Jaish al-Islam and Ahrar al-Islam. By now, most of these jihadi forces merged into the Islamic Front.[175] Furthermore, Jabhat Fatah al-Sham, formerly known as the al-Qaeda affiliate JaN, started the conflict with transnational ambitions. In 2016, Jabhat Fatah al-Sham, broke with al-Qaeda to stress its national ambitions for the Syrian state, making itself more attractive for cooperation with other anti-governmental forces.[176] In January 2017, this seemed to work, as it rebranded itself again in Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), and formed together with other jihadi groups one of the most effective and capable rebel groups.[177] The transnational jihad group who kept its transnational views is ISIS, who established its

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[168] Zisser, "Syria" ; Lin Noueihed, and Alex Warren, *The Battle for the Arab Spring: Revolution, Counter-Revolution and the Making of a New Era*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012): 232.

[169] Ferris, *The Consequences,* 14. ; Transformatie jihadisme, 47.

[170] Nouehid, and Warren, *The Battle for the Arab Spring*, 230.

[171] Heiko Wimmen and Muriel Assenburg, "Civil War in Syria: external actors and interests as drivers of conflict," *German Institute for International and Security Affairs* 43 (December 2012): 1.

[172] Zachary Laub, "Who's Who in Syria's Civil War," *Council on Foreign Relations* (April 2017), accessed April 9, 2018, https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/whos-who-syrias-civil-war. ; Weggemans et al., "Bestemming Syrië," 13.

[173] Sullivan, "Hezbollah in Syria."

[174] Ferris, *The Consequences,* 17. ; Weggemans et al., "Bestemming Syrië,"13.

[175] Laun, "Who's Who". ; Weggemans et al., "Bestemming Syrië," 19. ; Gert van Langendonck, "Wie is wie op het Syrische slagveld?," *NRC*, February 15, 2016, accessed May 22, 2018, https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2016/02/15/wie-is-wie-op-het-syrische-slagveld-1590152-a844890.

[176] Mohamed-Ali Adraoui, "Jabhat Al-Nusra in the Syrian Conflict," *Oxford Research Group* (website), accessed April 10, 2018, https://sustainablesecurity.org/2017/12/20/jabhat-al-nusra-in-the-syrian-conflict/.

[177] "Chapter Seven: Middle East and North Africa," *The Military Balance* (2018): 316.

transnational Caliphate in 2014 with Raqqa as its capital, covering parts of Syria and Iraq with the ambition of uniting more national territories into its Caliphate.[178]

The conflict soon turned very bloody and the regime tried to repress the civil war with massive violence. Since early 2011 Syria has seen multiple very deadly events, with a lot of civilian fatalities.[179] However, international help for the Syrian population stayed out.[180] When in July 2012 Assad threatened for the first time with the use of chemical weapons in the case it faced an 'external aggression', he triggered the red-line policy of the US, meaning that if chemical weapons were to be used, this would result in a threat, recourse to, or use of force by the US government.[181] By the end of June 2013, the United Nations (UN) had received multiple allegations of the use of chemical weapons by the Syrian government.[182] In order to investigate these attacks, UN agents travelled to Syria in August 2013. However, on August 21 a new attack involving chemical weapons was reported to the UN. In Eastern-Ghouta, at the north-east of Damascus which is partly under the control of the forces of Assad, 1.429 people were killed as the result of an attack with chemical weapons, of which 426 fatalities were children.[183] This attack changed the stance of the international community towards the conflict, especially the countries supporting the rebel forces. However, hard, military, intervention stayed out, as the Syrian government agreed with a Russian proposal to bring Assad's chemical weapons under international supervision and elimination.[184] The results of the attack, deaths, wounded, and people still suffering from the chemical gasses, were filmed by the Syrian people and published by international media and on social media platforms.[185] The availability of these images showed the world the Syrian civil war and what the Assad government was capable of.[186]

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[178] Laun, "Who's Who".

[179] United States Department of State, "Syria 2012 Human Rights Report," (2012), accessed April 10, 2018, https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/204595.pdf.

[180] Gabriele Lombardo, "The responsibility to protect and the lack of intervention in Syria between the protection of human rights and geopolitical strategies," *The International Journal of Human Rights* 19, no.8 (2015), 1192.

[181] Daryl Kimball, "Timeline of Syrian Chemical Weapons Activity, 2012-2018," *Arms Control Association* (website), April 2018, accessed April 12, 2018, https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/Timeline-of-Syrian-Chemical-Weapons-Activity. ; Carsten Stahn, "Syria and the Semantics of Intervention, Aggression and Punishment," *Journal of International Criminal Justice* 11 (2013): 958.

[182] Edwards and Cacciatori, "The Politics".

[183] Jillian Blake and Aqsa Mahmud, "A Legal Red Line: Syria and the use of Chemical Weapons in Civil Conflict," *UCLA Law Review Discourse* 244 (2013): 249. ; Ferris, *The consequences,* 94. ; Pita and Domingo, "The Use of Chemical Weapons."

[184] Heidarali Teimouri, "Protecting while not being responsible: the case of Syria and responsibility to protect," *The International Journal of Human Rights* 19, no.8 (2015): 1285. ; NCTV, "Samenvatting Dreigingsbeeld Terrorisme Nederland, oktober 2013," (November 2013), accessed May 16, 2018, https://www.nctv.nl/binaries/dtn34-tk-brief-nl_tcm31-32587.pdf.

[185] Edwards and Cacciatori, "The Politics."

[186] Ibid.

3.1.3. The Islamic State of Syria and Iraq (ISIS)

As explained before, ISIS has its roots in JWT, then transformed into AQI, where after it called itself ISI. Different names and abbreviations are used to refer to ISIS, like the Islamic State (IS), the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) or Daesh.[187] Originally, JWT was established by the Jordanian Abu Musab al-Zarqawi.[188] In June 2006, Zarqawi was killed by a US bombing. After the death of Zarqawi, the leadership of the then ISI was taken over by Abu Omar al-Baghdadi.[189] In April 2010 the top leadership of ISI, including its leader Abu Omar al-Baghdadi, was killed in a joint Iraqi-US raid. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi took over the leadership after this raid, and he restructured the group and strengthened its military capabilities.[190]

Soon after the escalating protests at the end of 2013 in Iraq, ISI had been able to exploit the sectarian tensions and thereby using its relations with tribal groups to take over control of Fallujah and Ramadi.[191] In June 2014, ISIS by that time, gained strategic military victories in Iraq. The battle of Mosul caught the world's attention.[192] At June 6, ISIS started its offense in the Iraqi city Mosul. This city, which is predominantly Sunni, fell in only 4 days in the hands of ISIS.[193] What has been essential in the quick victory was the aversion the local population had towards the governmental forces.[194] Trust in the government faded, and the clashes between Sunni and Shia were at this time so rooted, that the Sunni population did not trust the Shia-dominated army for their protection against ISIS.[195] Immediately after the gained victory in Mosul, ISIS went on to take the home town of Saddam Hussein, Tikrit.[196] The takeover of Mosul provided ISIS with much territory under ISIS' control across the Iraqi-Syrian border.[197]

ISIS aimed to profit from the chaos in Syria resulting from the civil war as well. In 2012, Baghdadi decided to send some operatives into Syria to explore opportunities on the Syrian battleground. These operatives ended up establishing JaN.[198] ISI provided JaN with army officers, arms, and money.[199] When in April 2013 Baghdadi declared the merger of ISI and JaN

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[187] Gerges, *A History,* 1.
[188] Hashim, "The Islamic State," 73.
[189] Gerges, *A History*, 91 – 94.
[190] Hashim, "The Islamic State," 73.
[191] Fuller, *The Rise of ISIS,* 29 – 88.
[192] Ibid, 51.
[193] Cockburn, *The Rise of Islamic State.'*
[194] Ibid.
[195] Ibid.
[196] Fuller, *The Rise of ISIS,* 89.
[197] Ibid, 19.
[198] Gerges, *A History,* 175.
[199] Ibid.

into ISIS during an audio statement, the leader of JaN, Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani denied this.[200] The denial of al-Jawlani to merge with ISIS, resulted in the expansion of Baghdadi to Syria with his own men, supported by many JaN defectors who decided to fight on the side of Baghdadi after its split with JaN.[201] With ISIS and its anti-Shia zealotry joining the conflict, the sectarian influence in the conflict increased, resulting in increasing tensions between Sunnis and Shias.[202] Soon ISIS was able to infiltrate and conquer territory formerly held by JaN and other forces. Already in May 2013, ISIS gained control over Raqqa, where after ISIS turned eastwards in order conquer more territory, and by the summer of 2014, ISIS had been able to conquer 95% of the Deir al-Zour province.[203]

After the earlier mentioned taking over of Mosul in June 2014, ISIS proclaimed to have established a Caliphate by June 29, 2014 with Baghdadi as its Caliph, covering territories in both Syria and Iraq.[204] Together with the proclamation of the Caliphate, ISIS called upon Muslims from all over the world to *Hijra* (migration to the Caliphate) in order to build up, strengthen and defend the newly established Islamic state.[205] At the beginning of 2015, ISIS controlled a surface comparable to the size of Great Britain, with millions of Syrians, Iraqis, and foreigners living under its control.[206] However, since early 2015, ISIS started to lose territory over both Syria and Iraq. With regard to Iraq, Tikrit was one of the first ISIS' controlled cities to fall in the hands of the Iraqi government early 2015.[207] In November 2015 ISIS lost more ground in Iraq, with the territories held in the Sinjar being seized by Kurdish forces.[208] In October 2015, ISIS lost the city of Ramadi to Iraqi governmental forces, which it only possessed since May that year.[209] This continued in 2016, when in June Iraqi forces recaptured Fallujah.[210] In 2016 ISIS had lost 65% of its territory once held in Iraq.[211] Iraqi forces started with the recapturing of the city of Mosul in October 2016.[212] It was only on June 29, 2017, that the Iraqi

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[200] Hashim, "The Islamic State," 77.
[201] Gerges, *A History,* 191.
[202] AIVD, *Transformatie van het jihadisme*, 44.
[203] Gerges, *A History,* 191 − 193.
[204] Hashim, "The Islamic State," 79.
[205] Weggemans et al., "Bestemming Syrië," 17.
[206] Eric Robinson et al., *When the Islamic State Comes to Town: The economic impact of Islamic State governance in Iraq and Syria*, (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2017): 1.
[207] Ibid, 163.
[208] Cameron Glenn, "Timeline: The Rise, Spread and Fall of the Islamic State," *Wilson Center* (July 2016), accessed May 8, 2018, https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/timeline-the-rise-spread-and-fall-the-islamic-state.
[209] Laub, "The Islamic State."
[210] Glenn, "Timeline."
[211] Glenn, "Timeline." ; Laub, "The Islamic State."
[212] "The battle for Mosul," *Strategic Comments* 23, no.4 (2017), accessed May 8, 2018, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/13567888.2017.1331651?needAccess=true.

forces succeeded in the recapturing of Mosul.[213] The losses ISIS faced in Iraq did not stop ISIS from committing attacks on Iraqi soil during 2016, causing many deaths.[214]

In Syria, ISIS lost Kobane in January 2015.[215] In 2015 ISIS also lost various territories along the Syrian-Turkish border, however it also gained a victory: the city of Palmyra in May 2015.[216] Due to defeat of ISIS in the battle of Manbij, near the Turkish-Syrian border in August 2016, the last town connecting the Caliphate and the Turkish border was lost.[217] In October 2016, ISIS lost Dabiq, the city which was claimed to be the stage of the apocalyptic battle and the final victory for the Caliphate, suffering an ideological backlash.[218] Mid-2017, the battle for Raqqah started in order to free the global capital of the Caliphate from ISIS.[219]

Mid-2017, it has been estimated by the global coalition fighting against ISIS, that in Iraq It has lost 73% of the territory it controlled since August 2014. In Syria this percentage has been estimated to be 65.[220]
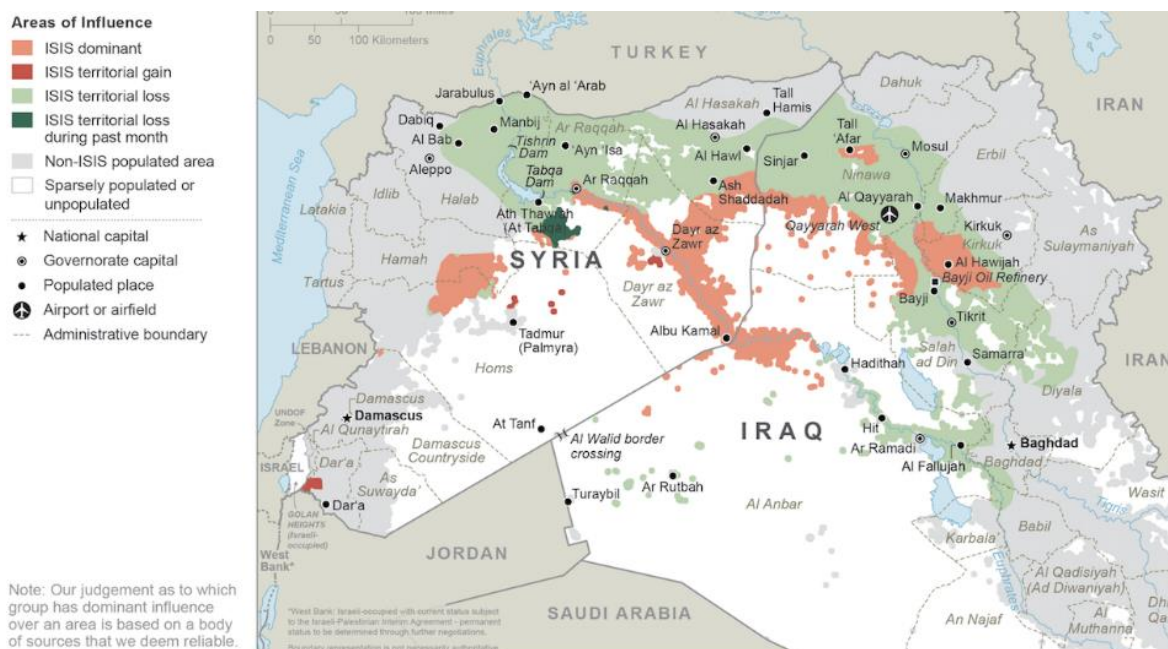

Figure 3 – ISIS' Areas of Influence, August 2014 – July 2017 [221]

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[213] Glenn, "Timeline."

[214] Ibid.

[215] Charles S. Lister, *The Syrian Jihad: Al-Qaida, The Islamic State and the Evolution of an Insurgency*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015): 325.

[216] Lister, *The Syrian Jihad,* 348 – 397.

[217] NCTV, "Dreigingsbeeld Terrorisme Nederland 43, November 2016," (November 2016), accessed May 22, 2018, https://www.nctv.nl/binaries/DTN43_samenvatting_opgemaakt%20def_tcm31-214349.pdf. ; Damien Gayle, "US-backed fighters take town in Manbij from Isis," *the Guardian*, August 6, 2016, accessed May 22, 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/aug/06/us-backed-syrian-fighters-take-town-of-manbij-from-isis.

[218] Glenn, "Timeline."

[219] Robinson et al., *When the Islamic State Comes to Town*, 101.

[220] "Daesh Areas of Influence – July 2017 Update," *Global Coalition* (website), accessed May 8, 2018, http://theglobalcoalition.org/en/daesh-areas-of-influence-july-2017-update/.

[221] "Daesh Areas of Influence," (website).

The coalition against ISIS

Despite the red-line policy posed by the US in the case the Assad government would use chemical weapons, it was only in 2014 that the international community started to act: not against Assad, but against ISIS. The first physical actions against ISIS were in Iraq. On August 8, 2014, the US launched its first airstrikes on Iraqi soil. The US was joined by France on September 19, and by the UK on September 30. Other Western and Middle Eastern countries followed, under the lead of the US. The decision to participate in the conflict by the US was made due to the threat ISIS posed to the Kurdish capital Erbil in Iraq, in August 2014. In September 2014 the US and some of its coalition members started to conduct airstrikes on ISIS targets on Syrian soil as well, as a consequence of the beheadings of two American citizens.[222] In September 2015, Russia started to conduct airstrikes on ISIS targets in Syria as well.[223]

CONFLICT DEVELOPMENTS
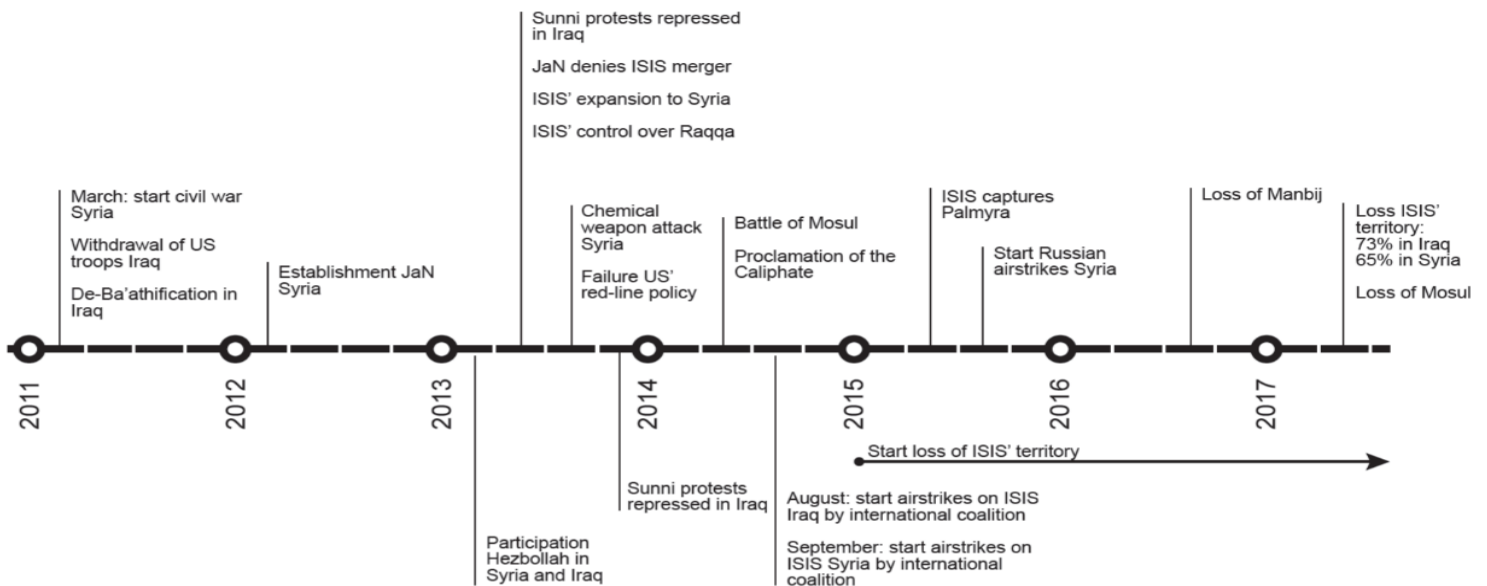
Figure 4 – Timeline conflict developments

3.2. The Dutch foreign fighter in chronological order

According to the data of the NCTV, until June 2017 approximately 280 Dutch people left for Syria and Iraq. Of these 280 people, 45 have died and 50 have returned. It is thought, that of these 280 people, 190 have jihadist intentions.[224] The number of Dutch jihadis which will be used to analyse the waves of departure is 136, as this is the number of Dutch foreign fighters

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[222] Cockburn, *The Rise of Islamic State*. ; Gerges, *A History*, 47.
[223] Glenn, "Timeline."
[224] *NCTV,* "Dreigingsbeeld Terrorisme Nederland 45."

whose moment of departure could be traced.[225] The conflict in Syria escalated in 2011 in the outbreak of the civil war, creating the environment were ISIS profited from. Therefore this is the starting date of our analysis as since then, it can be expected that foreign fighters left for either Syria or Iraq. Already in June 2012, the Dutch authorities saw the rise in power and opportunities for jihadist groups in the Syrian conflict, however still to a limited extent. The jihadi groups active in both countries and the opportunities the conflicts provided for them to evolve themselves as powerful players within the conflicts, provided a stage for would-be Dutch foreign fighters.[226] This part of the research will start from the fourth quarter of 2012, as this is the point in time from whereon leaving foreign fighters have been traced.[227] This chapter will give a chronological overview of motivations and the context of their moment of departure in which Dutch foreign fighters left. In order to give an as comprehensive overview as possible, this will be described from year to year. Per year, a division will be made between the four quarters in which the numbers of departure are divided.

3.2.1. 2012

The first six traced departures took place in the fourth quarter of 2012. By this time, the conflict in Syria has escalated into a civil war, and images and videos about the human suffering in this conflict were spreading across the world.[228]

In October 2012, the awareness for the jihadist fighting parties within especially the Syrian conflict has risen, resulting in an increasing attention of Dutch jihadis for the conflict. This increased attention for the conflict increased the likelihood of an outflow of Dutch foreign fighters from the Netherlands, travelling to the conflict zone.[229] With the departure of six Dutch jihadis at the end of 2012, it became clear that Dutch jihadis did not want to commit attacks in the Netherlands per se, but that they rather wanted to join a jihadist conflict in a foreign country.[230] Although at the end of 2012 it was thought that the dimension and impact of jihadist groups within the Syrian conflict was only limited, these groups did have an appeal on Western,

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[225] Bergema and van San, "Waves of the Black banner, 14."

[226] NCTV, "Samenvatting Dreigingsbeeld Terrorisme Nederland 29, juni 2012," (June 2012), accessed May 14, 2018, https://www.nctv.nl/binaries/dtn-29-def_tcm31-30134.pdf.

[227] "Jihadist Foreign Fighters Monitor (JihFFMON)", (website).

[228] Jasper L. de Bie, Christianne J. de Poot and Joanne P. van der Leun, "Shifting Modus Operandi of Jihadist Foreign Fighters From the Netherlands Between 2000 and 2013: A Crime Script Analysis," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 27, no.3 (May 2015): 427 – 428.

[229] NCTV, "Samenvatting Dreigingsbeeld Terrorisme Nederland 30, september 2012," (October 2012), accessed May 14, 2018, https://www.nctv.nl/binaries/dtn-30-kamerbrief_tcm31-30135.pdf.

[230] NCTV, "Samenvatting Dreigingsbeeld Terrorisme Nederland 31, december 2012," (December 2012), accessed May 14, 2018, https://www.nctv.nl/binaries/samenvatting-dtn31-def_tcm31-30136.pdf.

and thus on Dutch, foreign fighters.[231]

Most of the traced people at the end of 2012 are expected to be connected to Dutch jihadist movements, like *Behind Bars* and *Straat Dawah.* These people knew each other from meetings or demonstrations held by these organizations and were radicalizing quickly in the months before their departure.[232] They felt already for a longer time the strong need to defend the Islam. The spread of images and videos of the atrocities committed against Syrians by the Assad regime, and the reluctance of the international community to act within this conflict, triggered the mobilization of Dutch jihadis in order to help their Syrian brothers and sisters.[233] In this stage of the war, Dutch foreign fighters stated to have left in order to fight against the Assad regime.[234] The visibility of the conflict through media exposure had a compelling impact on their motivations to act and to travel to Syria and Iraq.[235]

3.2.2. 2013

In the beginning of 2013, the first peak in the Dutch foreign fighter departures is visible. In the first quarter of 2013, 26 Dutch jihadis are traced to have left the Netherlands. In the second and third quarter, this number decreased to respectively 5 and 6. At the end of 2013, the number increased to 17 departures.[236] During 2013, ISIS started to develop its state-like structure.[237]

According to the NCTV, in the first quarter of 2013 there were signals that small groups are radicalizing, leading to an increase in the departures of Dutch foreign fighters. The destination country which keeps on attracting these foreign fighters is Syria, where the population keeps on suffering from the civil war, providing the perfect environment for jihadi-groups. The period from December 2012 until March 2013, saw an increase in foreign fighters leaving to join a foreign fight. Never before in the Dutch foreign fighter history did so many leave in such a short period.[238] Therefore, in February 2013 the authorities sounded the alarm

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[231] NCTV, "Samenvatting Dreigingsbeeld Terrorisme Nederland 31."

[232] Bergema and van San, "Waves of the Black Banner," 15.

[233] R.B. de Vries, "Achtergrond, aard en dreiging van de Nederlandse Syriëgang," *Militaire Spectator* (website), accessed May 14, 2018, http://www.militairespectator.nl/thema/artikel/achtergrond-aard-en-dreiging-van-de-nederlandse-syriëgang.

[234] Martijn de Koning et al., "Eilanden in een zee van ongeloof: het verzet van activistische da'wa-netwerken in België, Nederland en Duitsland," *IMES Report Series* (December 2014): 188.

[235] de Bie, de Poot and Joanne P. van der Leun, "Shifting Modus Operandi," 427 – 428.

[236] "Jihadist Foreign Fighters Monitor (JihFFMON)", (website).

[237] Daan Weggemans et al., "Bestemming Syrië," 36 - 72.

[238] NCTV, "Samenvatting Dreigingsbeeld Terrorisme Nederland 32, maart 2013," (March 2013), accessed May 16, 2018, https://www.nctv.nl/binaries/dtn32-kamerbrief-dtn32-nl-def_tcm31-30137.pdf.

bell, and publicly warned for the rapid growth of Dutch foreign fighters.[239] Within this period, there were hardly any public activities of Dutch radical Islamic groups, such as *Behind Bars* and *Sharia4Holland*. This has been brought into connection with a number of their members leaving in order to conduct jihad.[240] In this period a large part of the Dutch Muslims who became a foreign fighter was frustrated with its current position within the Dutch society. This frustration was fortified by the negligence of the Western society to act against the injustices against the Muslims in the Middle East. The question arose why Western countries did intervene in countries such as Afghanistan and Libya, but why the Syrian population seemed to be abandoned.[241] As a consequence of the widely available images of suffering Syrians, the sense that their Muslim brothers and sisters needed to be defended was strengthened and affecting radicalizing Muslims.[242] Besides injustice and frustration, there was another trigger: Dutch foreign fighters with a criminal past who gained stronger interests in the Islam and started to radicalize, wanted to cleanse their sins by following the, in their eyes, pure Islam. A friend of many Dutch foreign fighters who left in this period, all from Delft, died after he was attacked during a burglary he committed. His friends realized that if they continued their criminal paths, they would not go to heaven, but to hell.[243] To earn back their place in heaven, they wanted to fight in the jihad as a way of penance.[244] Furthermore, the search for purpose in their lives and the strive for thrill and adventure played a role in some decisions.[245]

By July 2013, the strife for a Caliphate in Syria becomes more obvious, which can make it a future base of operations for jihadi networks. However, the potential of these networks is not yet clear, as it is thought that most of the oppositional forces in Syria are fighting over

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[239] Edwin Bakker and Roel de Bont, "Belgian and Dutch Jihadist Foreign Fighters (2012-2015): Characteristics, Motivations, and Roles in the War in Syria and Iraq," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 27, no.5 (August 2016): 840.

[240] Bakker and de Bont, "Belgian and Dutch Jihadist Foreign Fighters," 848. ; NCTV, "Samenvatting Dreigingsbeeld Terrorisme Nederland, 32."

[241] Sheila Kamerman, Andreas Kouwenhoven, and Brian van der Bol, "Syriëgangers zijn vooral bekeerlingen," *NRC*, April 2013, accessed May 16, 2016, https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2013/04/25/syriegangers-zijn-vooral-bekeerlingen-12648058-a624203. ; Hassan Bahara, "Enkeltje Den Haag-Syrië," *De Groene Amsterdammer* no. 25 (June 2013), accessed May 16, 2018, https://www.groene.nl/artikel/enkeltje-den-haag-syrie.

[242] Kees Versteegh, "Van gewone Rotterdamse jongen tot jihadstrijder," *NRC*, March 29, 2017, accessed May 16, 2018, https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2017/03/29/verliefd-bekeerd-en-later-gelukkig-bij-is-7661518-a1552260. ; Edwin Bakker and Peter Grol, *Nederlandse Jihadisten: van naïeve idealisten tot geharde terroristen* (Amsterdam: Hollands Diep, 2017): 145.

[243] Andreas Kouwenhoven, "Het was niet het geloof dat ze dreef, maar afkeer De Paradijspoortjongeren zijn in het paradijs, hun doel," *NRC*, July 5, 2014, accessed May 16, 2018, https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2014/07/05/het-was-niet-het-geloof-dat-ze-dreef-maar-afkeer-1395774-a1132810.

[244] Kamerman, Kouwenhoven, and van der Bol, "Syriëgangers." ; NOS, "Delftse Mourad was 'kanonnenvlees'," *NOS*, March 20, 2013, accessed May 16, 2018, https://nos.nl/artikel/486832-delftse-mourad-was-kanonnenvlees.html.

[245] Bakker and Grol, *Nederlandse Jihadisten*, 145.

ideological and political issues, rather than establishing another state.[246] In June 2013, an article is published in *de Volkskrant* in which a group of Dutch foreign fighters currently present in Syria answers questions of a Dutch journalist. In this interview, the Dutch foreign fighters emphasize the reluctance of both the Western and the Arab world to help the Syrian population, and they state that it is the duty of every Muslim to come and help the abandoned Syrians:

> *"The Arab countries and the international community bailed and are watching the genocide on the Syrian population from the side lines, while Bashar gets support from many sides. In Syria, Muslims have learned who really supports them and who are stabbing them in the back and betray them. The so-called extremists and terrorists are the only ones stepping-up for the Syrian population, after the world stabbed Syria in the back."[247]*

In order to save the Syrian people and the *Ummah* in general, the jihadis believe that the *Sharia*, should be implemented.[248] In this interview, the rage against the Western society also comes forward, as they describe Western policies as selfish, sneaky and careless.[249] When the interview comes to their experiences on the battlefield, these fighting experiences are presented as heroic stories full of adrenaline and sometimes even the luck of killing others.

> *"There is a calm before the storm, and the adrenaline is running through your veins, and suddenly the moment of which you were waiting for awaits […] we keep ourselves quiet (because the enemy may not hear us) and when the go-ahead is given, the shooting starts."[250]*

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[246] NCTV, "Samenvatting Dreigingsbeeld Terrorisme Nederland 33."

[247] Original text: De Arabische landen en de internationale gemeenschap laten het afweten, en kijken toe hoe een genocide wordt gepleegd tegen het Syrische volk, terwijl Bashar steun krijgt van alle kanten. In Syrië hebben de Moslims als geen ander geleerd wie er werkelijk achter de Moslims staan en wie hen in de rug steken en verraden. De zogenaamde extremisten en terroristen zijn anders wel de enigen die op zijn gestaan voor het Syrische volk nadat de wereld Syrië in de rug heeft gestoken. Janny Groen, "Lees hier de onverkorte versie van het interview met de Nederlandse jihadstrijders," *de Volkskrant,* June 15, 2013, accessed May 16, 2018, https://www.volkskrant.nl/nieuws-achtergrond/lees-hier-de-onverkorte-versie-van-het-interview-met-de-nederlandse-jihadstrijders~b0fa13cc/.

[248] Ibid.

[249] Groen, "Lees hier."

[250] Original text: Er is een stilte voor de storm, de adrenaline raast door je lichaam, en daarop breekt plots het moment aan waar je vol spanning op wacht. […] We houden ons stil (want de vijand mag ons niet horen uiteraard) en wanneer het startsein wordt gegeven begint het hevige geknal. Groen, "Lees hier."

In August, the number of departures increased again in comparison to the previous months.[251] By now, the conflict has turned bloodier and harsher and the first Dutch jihadis have died as a consequence of the fighting, and some managed to return because they were disappointed with their lives in Syria and they found the battle not as exciting as they expected.[252] However this does not seem to deter Dutch foreign fighters leaving in this period. Besides, it seems that the Dutch jihadists already fighting in the conflict have a recruiting effect on their friends and family who are still in the Netherlands.[253]

In the last quarter of 2013, the departure of Dutch women increases. Although the increasing use of violence in the conflict, territories possessed by ISIS are experienced as a relatively safe place for women to live in and they still enjoy relative forms of freedom, like wearing make-up and leaving their houses in company of other women instead of men.[254] Furthermore, more 'mainstream' jihadis started to leave at the end of 2013, who did not have direct ties to Dutch jihadist networks like *Straat Dawah* and *Behind Bars*.[255]

3.2.3. 2014

2014 was an important year for ISIS, as at the end of June, ISIS proclaimed its self-established Caliphate, with Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as its Caliph.[256] Before this proclamation was made, 13 Dutch citizens travelled to either Syria or Iraq in the first quarter of 2014. This was followed by a low in the numbers of departure slightly before the proclamation, with 4 foreign fighters leaving in the second quarter of 2014. After this low in the second quarter, in the third quarter of 2014 this number increased to 21, followed by 13 in the last quarter of 2014.[257]

In the beginning of 2014, the anti-Western sentiment of the Dutch jihadist became fiercer and the use of violence increased.[258] In the beginning of 2014, the jihad in Syria and Iraq continued to attract more mainstream Dutch foreign fighters. Whereas the first wave taking place at the beginning of 2013 mainly consists out of hardened jihadis with membership in or relations with Dutch jihadi networks such as *Behind Bars* and *Straat Dawah*, this seems to be

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[251] NCTV, "Samenvatting Dreigingsbeeld Terrorisme Nederland 34, oktober 2013," (November 2013), accessed May 16, 2018, https://www.nctv.nl/binaries/dtn34-tk-brief-nl_tcm31-32587.pdf.

[252] Bakker and Grol, *Nederlandse Jihadisten*, 148.

[253] NCTV, "Samenvatting Dreigingsbeeld Terrorisme Nederland 34."

[254] NCTV, "Samenvatting Dreigingsbeeld Terrorisme Nederland 35, februari 2014," (February 2014), accessed May 16, 2018, https://www.nctv.nl/binaries/dtn-35-kamerbrief-nl-def_tcm31-31601.pdf. ; Weggemans et al., "Bestemming Syrië," 54.

[255] Bergema and van San, "Waves of the Black banner, 17."

[256] Hashim, "The Islamic State," 79.

[257] "Jihadist Foreign Fighters Monitor (JihFFMON)," (website).

[258] NCTV, "Samenvatting Dreigingsbeeld Terrorisme Nederland 35."

the case to a lesser extent at the beginning of 2014.[259] From the beginning of 2014, foreign fighters travel to Syria and Iraq with the knowledge that the use of brutal force will be awaiting them.[260] Humanitarian reasons therefore seem to have declined since 2014, as foreign fighters are likely to be familiar with the violent strategy of ISIS by now.[261] Furthermore, at the beginning of 2014, the lifestyle in ISIS-held territory changed and the control ISIS practiced over its territories and the people living in these areas became stricter. Women, for example, should by now be fully veiled, without make-up and are only allowed to be outside in the company of a man.[262] In the second quarter of 2014, the number of foreign fighters is relatively low and not much information can be found on these leaving individuals. However, according to the NCTV in June 2014, the increasing amount of territory held by ISIS, especially in Iraq, attracted these foreign fighters.[263] Furthermore, the goal of ISIS, the proclamation of a Caliphate with the *Sharia* law, is attracting Dutch citizens to already leave the Netherlands and live in this future Caliphate.[264]

After the proclamation of the Caliphate, the conflict became attractive to a more varied jihadi public. As explained, the people departing from 2014 onwards were most certainly aware of the use of extreme violence by ISIS and their way of conquering territory. To fight in this battle and the belonging use of force has been admired by would-be Dutch jihadists, causing a trigger to travel to the conflict zone.[265] This use of violence could be legitimized by the will to defend and extend the Caliphate, which some interpreted as their religious duty.[266] Others experienced their *Hijra* as a religious humanitarian need, as it is their duty as a Muslim to help other Muslims in need and to provide the Muslims with a safe state to live in.[267] Other foreign fighters might have done so not specifically for religious reasons, but just to help the Syrian people in need.[268] Leaving the Netherlands and settling in the Caliphate did at this point not only appeal to people willing to use violence, it also triggered people who wanted to start a new

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[259] Bergema and van San, "Waves of the Black banner," 17.

[260] AIVD, *Leven bij ISIS, de mythe ontrafeld* (January 2016): 3.

[261] Weggemans et al., "Bestemming Syrië," 52. ; AIVD, *Leven bij ISIS,* 3.

[262] Weggemans et al., "Bestemming Syrië," 54.

[263] NCTV, "Samenvatting Dreigingsbeeld Terrorisme Nederland 36, juni 2014," (June 2014), accessed May 17, 2018, https://www.nctv.nl/binaries/NL%20Brief_TK_DTN36%20def_tcm31-31607.pdf.

[264] AIVD, *Transformatie van het jihadisme*, 49 – 50.

[265] AIVD, *Leven bij ISIS,* 3.

[266] Edwin Bakker and Peter Grol, "Motives and Considerations of Potential Foreign Fighters from the Netherlands," *ICCT Policy Brief* (July 2015): 14. ; Weggemans et al., "Bestemming Syrië," 52. ; AIVD, *Jaarverslag 2014* (Den Haag: AIVD, 2015): 16.

[267] Bakker and Grol, "Motives and Considerations," 14. ; AIVD, *Jaarverslag 2014*, 16.

[268] Bakker and Grol, "Motives and Considerations," 14.

life in the Caliphate.[269] Apathy and a lack of meaningfulness were strong before departure. Participating in the conflict provided these people again with purpose and belonging.[270] At this point, Syria and Iraq were not only seen as battlefields, but to some the newly established Caliphate also meant the ability to finally live in a state where they felt home, could practice their religion the way they wanted, and where they could live the life they wanted to live.[271] However, for many Dutch fighters travelling to the Caliphate, participating in the jihad and admiration of the battle was still an appealing reason to leave the Netherlands and settle in the Caliphate.[272] Participation in the jihad and life as a *mujahid* is often seen as the fulfilment of the duty as a Muslim to fight against injustices in all their forms.[273] In the Netherlands, the awareness of the foreign fighter phenomenon was growing, leading to increasing attentiveness for would-be foreign fighters. This had in some cases an accelerating effect.[274] The Caliphate offered this people a safe haven, a utopia, where they could live the way they wanted, without being monitored and maybe even arrested because of their preferred way of live.[275]

At the end of 2014, the flow of foreign fighters to Syria and Iraq keeps on going, however to a lesser extent than the previous period. At the end of 2014, still 13 Dutch people has been traced to have left for Syria or Iraq.[276] At the end of 2014, 30 people returned and this number is stagnating from the end of 2014 onwards.[277] A possible explanation is disappointment with the level of adventure one experienced in Syria.[278] Furthermore, the willingness to fight seems to have risen for the ones travelling out by now. These people feel that taking up arms against 'the enemy' is the only way to cause social and political change for the *Ummah* in the world, as the turnout of other manners has disappointed.[279]

3.2.4. 2015

In 2015, the traced number of foreign fighters travelling to Syria and Iraq decreased, although Dutch foreign fighters continued to leave. In the first quarter of 2015 four people left, which increased in the second quarter, when seven people decided to leave. In the third quarter, five

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269 Bakker and Grol, "Motives and Considerations," 14.
270 Weggemans, Bakker and Grol, "Who Are They," 108.
271 Vries, de, "Achtergrond, aard en dreiging."
272 Weggemans et al., "Bestemming Syrië," 86. ; Bakker and Grol, "Motives and Considerations," 14.
273 Weggemans et al., "Bestemming Syrië," 82.
274 Bakker and Grol, *Nederlandse Jihadisten*, 192 – 193.
275 Ibid, 192.
276 "Jihadist Foreign Fighters Monitor (JihFFMON)," (website).
277 *NCTV*, "Samenvatting Dreigingsbeeld Terrorisme Nederland, 37."
278 AIVD, *Jaarverslag 2014*, 16.
279 NCTV, *Het mondiaal jihadisme: een fenomeenanalyse en een reflectie op radicalisering* (Den Haag: NCTV, november 2014): 10.

Dutch nationals left, followed by four of their compatriots at the end of 2015.[280] What was the case in 2014, also counts for 2015: the people who left were almost certainly aware of the level of violence used by ISIS.[281]

Within the jihadist movement, much attention is given to the sinful society, which does not have any sense of morality. This is being highlighted by the NCTV at the beginning of 2015. The would-be jihadist has a feeling of guilt towards its past. The jihad in Syria or Iraq offers them the solution to wash of their sins. It provides these individuals with a way to penance and to release themselves from the sense of guilt which will result in earning back a strong identity from which a new status can be derived.[282] At the beginning of 2015 still whole families decide to *Hijra* to the Caliphate. Due to the establishment of the Caliphate, new opportunities were provided for these families who felt restrained in their way of life and their interpretation and practice of religion.[283]

This trend in which foreign fighters wanted to escape their current way of life continued further into 2015. Especially converts seem to join the jihad as a way to escape their former lifestyle, to get their sins forgiven, or, in the case of women, because they fell in love.[284] The explanation hereof is, that these converts are in need of strict rules and purpose, which ISIS offers them. This is also the case in a departure taking place in May 2015, of a converted girl with a troubled past, travelling to Syria to live in the Caliphate in order to wash of her sins and thereby gets her ticket to paradise.[285]

The third quarter of 2015 saw mainly an increase in returning foreign fighters. The bigger part of these returnees was disappointed with their experiences in the Caliphate, which can have a deterring effect on would-be foreign fighters. At this point, it is expected that more Dutch foreign fighters wanted to return, however the Caliphate has strict rules if and when one can leave the Caliphate and it is expected that the ones willing to return are deterred by the punishment they can expect on their return.[286]

At the end of 2015, the downward trend in the number of leaving foreign fighters is

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[280] "Jihadist Foreign Fighters Monitor (JihFFMON)," (website).

[281] AIVD, *Leven bij ISIS*, 3.

[282] NCTV, "Samenvatting Dreigingsbeeld Terrorisme Nederland 38." ; Bergema and van San, "Waves of the Black Banner," 19.

[283] Bergema and van San, "Waves of the Black Banner," 19.

[284] Marion van San, "Lost Souls Searching for Answers? Belgian and Dutch Converts Joining the Islamic State," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9. No.5 (October 2015): 54.

[285] Ibid, 51-52.

[286] NCTV, "Samenvatting Dreigingsbeeld Terrorisme Nederland 40, november 2015," (November 2015), accessed May 19, 2018, https://www.nctv.nl/binaries/openbare-samenvatting-dtn40-9-november-2015_tcm31-32603.pdf.

being explained as a result of the knowledge which came into existence about the real life within the Caliphate. This life was by many been experienced less rosy than was being presented.[287] This is partly the case due to the ongoing bombardments on ISIS' territories by the international coalition. On the contrary, this is estimated to work in favour of ISIS as well, as it is expected that this can cause frustration against the Dutch society resulting in a travel to either Syria or Iraq to join ISIS.[288]

3.2.5.2016

Since the end of 2015, a significant decrease can be noticed in the numbers of departure. Whereas in the first quarter of 2016, the departure of three people has been traced, in the second quarter zero people left. One has been traced in the third quarter and again zero in the fourth quarter.[289] This decrease can also be noticed in the shift of attention of Dutch authorities, like the NCTV and the AIVD. The focus shifted to the threat posed by returned fighters, rather than leaving fighters.[290]

At the beginning of 2016, the use of violence by ISIS was still widely known. This also counts for families, to which the conflict became more attractive since the end of 2014. The use of children in violent acts such as executions were much discussed in the Dutch media.[291] Therefore, thrill-seeking and finding a way to express one's frustration caused by whatever reason are likely motivations to join ISIS in this period. It is often a conscious choice for violence, rather than a religious-inspired choice.[292]

In the second part of 2016 this trend continued. Dutch jihadis had a relatively superficial religious knowledge, but the violent sub-culture of the jihad is used as a way to oppose the authorities.[293] Furthermore, the low number of Dutch foreign fighters leaving for Syria or Iraq at the end of 2016, seems to go hand in hand with the loss of ISIS' territory. This made participation on this side of the conflict less appealing, as ISIS' territory was harder to reach, it faced military defeats and was on the losing side of the conflict.[294] Simultaneously, this implies

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[287] AIVD, *Jaarverslag 2015* (Den Haag: AIVD, 2016): 1.
[288] NCTV, "Samenvatting Dreigingsbeeld Terrorisme Nederland 41, maart 2016," (March 2016), accessed May 20, 2018, https://www.nctv.nl/binaries/samenvatting-dtn-41_tcm31-32602.pdf.
[289] "Jihadist Foreign Fighters Monitor (JihFFMON)," (website).
[290] Bergema and van San, "Waves of the Black Banner," 19.
[291] "Mannen, vrouwen en kinderen bij ISIS," *Algemene Inlichtingen en Veiligheidsdienst* (website) https://www.aivd.nl/onderwerpen/terrorisme/organisatie-van-jihadistisch-terrorisme/isis/mannen-vrouwen-en-kinderen-bij-isis.
[292] Romana Abels, "Syriëgangers steeds jonger en minder religieus," *Trouw*, April 1, 2016, accessed May 2018, https://www.trouw.nl/home/syriegangers-steeds-jonger-en-minder-religieus~a466c958/.
[293] NCTV, "Samenvatting Dreigingsbeeld Terrorisme Nederland 44."
[294] Abels, "Syriëgangers."

that the ones who have left in this period, have done so not because of the winner reputation of ISIS, nor to live in an Islamic state, but for other reasons, of which violence is likely.

3.2.6. 2017

The outflux of Dutch foreign fighters leaving for Syria and Iraq seems to have almost dried up in the first two quarters of 2017. In the first quarter of 2017 no leaving foreign fighter has been traced and in the second quarter only one Dutch person has been identified to have made this decision.[295]

The violent subculture of the jihad is at the beginning of 2017 a motivation to join national jihadist movements: religious motivations seems to be less important than the worship of violence.[296] However, this was not enough to turn the national with jihadi thoughts into a foreign fighter leaving for Syria or Iraq. The decision not to leave the Netherlands in exchange for Syria or Iraq seems to be the result of the toughness to reach ISIS' controlled territories due to its losses along the Syrian-Turkish border. This difficulty to reach ISIS' territory and their military losses make foreign fighting with ISIS less attractive.[297] People joining in this late stage in the conflict often have criminal backgrounds who join the jihad for prestige or heroic reasons.[298] Furthermore, since the beginning of 2017, messages of death Dutch jihadis in Syria and Iraq increased, leading up to a total of 45 in June 2017.[299] The increasing danger of life in Syria and Iraq might have a deterring effect on would-be foreign fighters.

DUTCH MOTIVATIONS
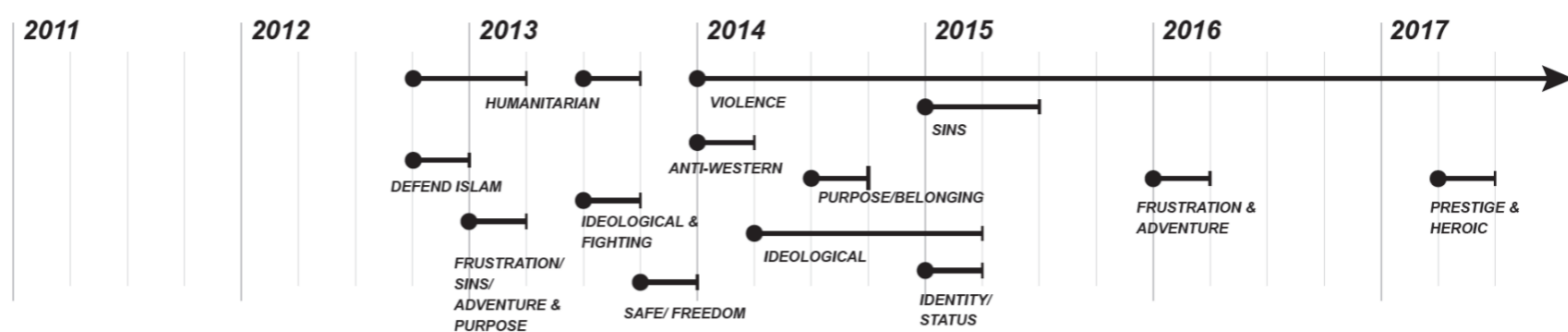
Figure 5 – Timeline Dutch motivations

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[295] "Jihadist Foreign Fighters Monitor (JihFFMON)," (website).

[296] NCTV, "Samenvatting Dreigingsbeeld Terrorisme Nederland 44.".

[297] Ibid.

[298] Peter Groenendijk and Cyril Rosman, "Dick Schoof: 'Jihadisten en onderwereld zijn nauw verweven'," *Het Parool,* January 28, 2017, accessed May 21, 2018, https://www.parool.nl/amsterdam/dick-schoof-jihadisten-en-onderwereld-zijn-nauw-verweven~a4454566/.

[299] *NCTV,* "Dreigingsbeeld Terrorisme Nederland 45."

Chapter summary

The conflicts in both Syria and Iraq are the result of peaceful demonstrations being violently repressed by both governments. In Iraq, the roots of these demonstrations lay in the de-Ba'athification of the Iraqi public sector, and the increasing Sunni and Shia tensions. The aggressive repression of protests of the Iraqi Sunni population as a result of the dissatisfaction with their current position within the society, was exploited by ISIS. ISIS, whose roots are in Iraq, used this anger and its relations to Iraqi tribal leaders to gain power within the Iraqi chaos. When the conflict in Syria escalated after the Assad government violently repressed the protests, ISIS send in some of its operatives to explore the possibilities for expansion to the Syrian conflict. These operatives formed JaN. JaN denied the announced merger with ISIS, after which ISIS decided to expand to Syria by itself, profiting from defecting JaN fighters.

By the end of June 2014, ISIS declared to have established a Caliphate with Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as its Caliph. ISIS called for *Hijra* to the new Islamic state. Soon after the establishment of the Caliphate, the international community started to take action against ISIS. As a result, ISIS started to lose territory and by mid-2017, ISIS lost 73% of its once possessed territory in Iraq, and 65% in Syria.

Since the fourth quarter of 2012, Dutch foreign fighters are traced to have travelled to Syria or Iraq. In the analyses of the current knowledge about these Dutch foreign fighters and their motivations, reports of the AIVD and the NCTV were analysed, complemented with news articles and academic works. Since the fourth quarter of 2012 until mid-2017 different motivations came forward. From humanitarian reasons, to the legitimized use of violence, and from cleansing one's sins to a search for purpose and meaning in life. In the following chapter, these motivations, together with the conflict developments and the knowledge derived from the literature of general motivations to join the conflict in Syria and Iraq will be connected to the traced numbers of leaving Dutch foreign fighters, provided by the HCSS.

4 – Analysis

The different motivations and developments examined in chapter 2 and 3, are now still separate outcomes. This chapter will connect these findings in order to come closer to an answer to the posed research question. The discovered motivations in chapter 2 will be used as a basis to discover possible patterns of motivations researched in chapter 3, which will be complemented by the explored conflict developments. These components will be coupled to the timeline provided by the HCSS, which is again displayed in figure 6. The different components will be discussed in a chronological order.
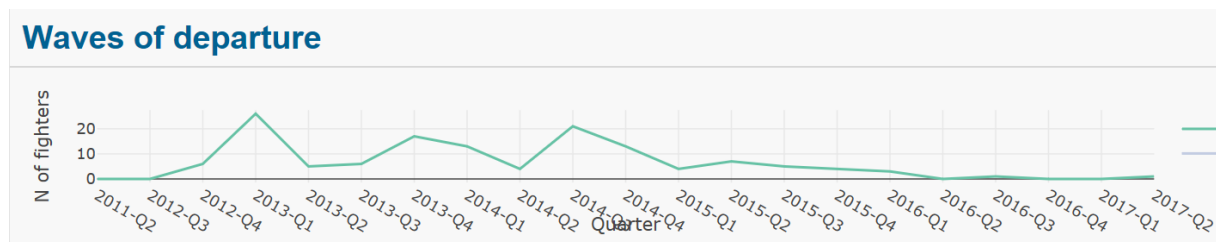

Figure 6 – Waves of Dutch foreign fighters to Syria and Iraq (N=136)[300]

4.1. Connecting the dots

In figure 2, we see the first departing foreign fighters in the fourth quarter of 2012. By now, the protests in Syria escalated into a civil war and the tensions within the Iraqi society are increasing, sparking protests of the Sunni population. Furthermore, ISIS has send operatives into Syria who established JaN. The Dutch fighters who have left were connected to the Dutch radical Islamic networks *Straat Dawah* and *Behind Bars*. They wanted to defend the Islam and the Syrian population against the atrocities committed by the Assad government. These persons were motivated on the meso and macro level: the influence of Dutch radical Islamic networks (meso) and the perception of the need to defend Islam and the Syrian society in general (macro). The atrocities and the widely available images can be considered as a precipitant, pulling these people into the conflict. This is in line with the motivations discussed in the literature about the general foreign fighter phenomenon in ISIS, as humanitarian reasons were in first instance the main driver to join the conflict.

The start of 2013 saw a quick increase in the participation of Dutch nationals in the conflict, of which many were still connected to networks like *Behind Bars* and *Straat Dawah*. The first quarter of 2013 saw the highest number in the departures of Dutch foreign fighters. Stated motivations in this period are the frustration of Dutch Muslims with the Dutch society, fortified by the reluctance of the international community to protect the Syrian community,

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[300] "Jihadist Foreign Fighters Monitor (JihFFMON)," (website).

whereas the international community did intervene in previous conflicts. Here, the interplay between push and pull factors, pre-conditions and precipitants and the meso- and macro-level is clear. The person is unsatisfied with the society s/he lives in and its position and that of Muslims in this society: a push-factor on the meso-level, forming a pre-condition for foreign fighting. This negative experience is fortified by the bloodshed spread by the Syrian government and the inaction of their government: a pull-factor on the macro-level, forming a precipitant. However, humanitarian motivations do not seem to fully cover this peak. Pull factors on the micro-level also took place. People saw the jihad as a way of cleansing their sins, sins committed in the past for example due to a criminal activities. The jihad in Syria and Iraq offered these people a way to penance and at the same time provided purpose and adventure. In order to explain the decrease in numbers in the second quarter of 2013, there cannot be relied on what has been published on Dutch foreign fighter motivations. Looking at what has been written on foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq in general, we see that humanitarian reasons are still forming grounds of departure. Furthermore, the conflict turned more sectarian in this period, as the Sunni protests in Iraq were violently being pounded. This is a macro-level cause rooted in the deeper Sunni-Shia conflict. ISIS spread in this second quarter to Syria, after JaN denied a merger with ISIS. Due to this direct participation of ISIS in the Syrian conflict the sectarian tensions increased and the bigger Sunni-Shia conflict was underlined. This might have played a role in joining the conflict in this period: being part of the bigger struggle between Sunnis and Shia's, which is now centred in Syria and Iraq. However this is not stated as being a motivation for Dutch foreign fighters. In the third quarter of 2013, the feeling increased that the West was abandoning the Syrians, resulting in a willingness to take humanitarian responsibility. This is likely to be the result of the chemical weapon attack in August 2013, and the failure of the US to fulfil its red-line policy: a precipitant triggering the mobilization of foreign fighters. Here, the inaction of the West together with the failure of the red-line policy are push-factors: people are unsatisfied with their own government. The chemical weapon attack is triggering the sense that the Syrians needed help, pulling foreign fighters into the conflict. Furthermore, the battle in Syria was perceived as an heroic fight. Besides, motivations turned more ideological, as the *Ummah* should be helped and the *Sharia* should be implemented in Syria and Iraq. Regarding the last quarter of 2013, information could be found on the motivations of women to go to the conflict zone. Back then, the conquered territories were a relatively safe place to live in and women enjoyed relative freedom, being a pull-factor. In general, sectarian motivations were an important driver to join the conflict, which is reflected in the violent repression of Sunni protests by the Iraqi government.

From 2014 onwards, there was a widely spread knowledge of the use of violence by ISIS. Therefore, this use of violence can be considered as a motivation pulling Dutch nationals into the conflict zone to join the jihad from 2014 onwards. Moreover, the anti-Western sentiment grew as a motivation in the first quarter of this year, being a push factor and a precondition for foreign fighting. This anti-Western sentiment can take place on the micro-, meso-, and macro-level, depending on the context this sentiment is experienced in. In the second quarter there is another gap in knowledge about the motivations of the ones left, but the number of departure in this period is small. Looking at what has been written about the reasons of foreign fighters in general, motivations started to get more personal: the search for meaning and purpose in life. The conflict offered foreign fighters an escape from ordinary life and ISIS offered structure and clarity, which some fighters were in need of. Thus, motivations at this point in time are mainly personal, taking place on the micro-level. The conflict is pulling these individuals, by offering them the micro-level fulfilments they are looking for. Meanwhile, ISIS is rapidly increasing its territories in the second quarter of 2014, resulting in the declaration of the Caliphate at the end of this quarter. Participation in the conflict, by now, provided the Dutch citizens with a renewed sense of purpose and belonging. The establishment of the Caliphate triggered a high number of Dutch foreign fighters to *Hijra* in the third quarter of 2014, forming a precipitant resulting in a pull-factor. This newly established Islamic state legitimized the use of violence from a religious perspective, increasing the admiration for the battle. Violence was allowed in order to fight against the injustices and to defend and extend the Caliphate. Besides the religious legitimization of violence, the ability to live in an Islamic state under the *Sharia* law has been a triggering factor as well. Both developments, with the proclamation of the Caliphate as a precipitant, pulled these people into the conflict. In this third quarter, the international community did decide to act. Not against the Assad government, but against ISIS. In August, the international coalition led by the US started airstrikes in Iraq and a month later in Syria. Due to these bombings on ISIS' territories, the life in the Caliphate became dangerous. In the last quarter of 2014 the appealing factor of the use of violence in the Caliphate drew Dutch fighters into its conflict. According to these fighters, this was the only way to cause social and political change in the world. The willingness to cause global change is a macro-level motivation.

ISIS starts to loose territory since the beginning of 2015, but still the existence of the Caliphate triggered Dutch nationals to live their lives within its borders. Besides, fighting for the existence of the Caliphate was experienced as a way to cleanse one's sins and to get a new identity of which a strong status can be derived. These opportunities provided by a life in the

Caliphate are pulling these individuals into the conflict by offering solutions to micro-level problems. Looking at the global motivations, the need to support, defend and extend the Caliphate motivated foreigners to join the conflict. The focus is less, as it was in the beginning, on the Syrian people and their protection. By now, the Caliphate is most important. Information about the second quarter of 2015 is scarce, although Dutch foreign fighters seem to have travelled to the conflict zone in this period to get rid of their sins. In the third quarter of 2015, information about Dutch foreign fighter motivations is again scarce, however the airstrikes conducted by the Russians since September 2015 increased the danger posed to the Caliphate. Comparing this to the general motivations, we see that there is indeed little information about the motivations in this timeframe, however it has been published that since the second quarter of 2014 the religious appeal of the Caliphate played an important role in the motivations, and since the end of 2013, personal and material motivations are drivers to join ISIS, instead of humanitarian reasons. These personal motivations like belonging, adventure and friendship continued to be drivers in the general flow of foreign fighters in the fourth quarter of 2015. Besides, the search for a new identity was especially important to Western foreign fighters. Regarding the Dutch foreign fighters, no information could be found.

In 2016 violence is generally being perceived as the major driver in the departure of foreign fighters and their involvement in the conflicts in Syria and Iraq. In the first quarter, the Dutch departures seemed to be the result of frustration with the Dutch society and a search for adventure. In the second quarter of 2016, no Dutch nationals have left. In the third quarter, ISIS lost its last connection with the Turkish border, due to the loss of Manbij. In this period, violence has been stated to be the motivation of the ones leaving in this period. In the fourth quarter, again no Dutch national left.

In 2017, only one departure has been traced. This person left in the second quarter. The motivation of this fighter seems to be prestige and heroic reasons, expected to be gained by participation in the conflict. The ability to gain this status in the conflict, pulled him/her into Syria and Iraq.

4.2. The highs and lows

Figure 2 shows us various highs and lows. During these highs, always a minimum of 7 people left. These highs can be found in the first and fourth quarter of 2013, in the third quarter of 2014 and a small peak in the second quarter of 2015. Respectively 26, 17, 21 and 7 people travelled to Syria and Iraq. Lows, numbers with a maximum of 5, are found in the second quarter of 2013, the second quarter of 2014, the first quarter of 2015, and since the third quarter of 2015.

During these lows, respectively 5, 4, 4 and after 2015 no more than 5 people left in a quarter.

In the exploration of the first high, humanitarian reasons played an important role in the high numbers of leaving Dutch foreign fighters. In addition, cleansing one's sins, and the search for purpose and adventure were triggers to leave at this point in time. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that this high consisted out of a large part of members of Dutch radical Islamic networks. Many of them knew each other already for a longer time before their departure. These mutual relations are likely to have played a role in this high number, considering the importance of one's social environment in the decision to join a foreign conflict. Regarding the exploration of the second peak, in the fourth quarter of 2013, the Dutch literature shows the appeal the conflict and ISIS as an organization had on women, as they could live relatively safe and free in ISIS' conquered territory. However only focussing on women may not fully cover this peak. If we look at the conflict, ISIS is conquering more territories and is exploiting sectarian tensions in Iraq, and due to its participation in Syria, the sectarian tensions in this conflict are increasing. However, sectarian tensions are overall not clearly mentioned by the Dutch in the reviewed literature. The chemical weapon attack at the end of August likely triggered people to leave shortly after this attack happened. Coupling a motivation to this explanation would be a humanitarian motivation, as still the international community did not act. The third high takes place in the third quarter of 2014, shortly after the proclamation of the Caliphate at the end of June. The Dutch nationals joining the conflict answered the call to *Hijra*, being appealed by the legitimized use of violence in order to defend and extend the Caliphate, and the admiration of the battle. The life in an Islamic state under the *Sharia* law motivated a broader public to migrate to Syria or Iraq and participation in the conflict provided a renewed sense of purpose and belonging. The last, though small, high is in the second quarter of 2015. Regarding this period, there is not much knowledge about both the motivations nor the conflict developments. However, cleansing one's sins plays a role in the motivations to travel to the Caliphate at this period in time. Because ISIS lost considerable amounts of territory after 2015, violence became fundamental for the Caliphate to survive. Therefore, violence is likely to be a motivation to join the conflict at this moment in time.

The second quarter of 2013 saw the first low in the numbers of Dutch foreign fighters leaving for Syria and Iraq. Knowledge about the motivations of the Dutch nationals regarding this specific period is hard to find. When taking a look at the conflict developments, we see that the sectarian tensions in the conflict have risen. The Iraqi government repressed Sunni demonstrations violently and ISIS joins the conflict in Syria after the denial of a merger by JaN. The low number in departure regarding this period may imply that the Dutch foreign fighters

have little sectarian motivations to join the fight. In the second quarter of 2014 the second low is explored. Also here, little knowledge can be derived from studying the literature on Dutch foreign fighters, however the prospect of the establishment of a Caliphate appealed Dutch citizens to already migrate to ISIS' possessed territories, which were quickly increasing. The third low is in the first quarter of 2015. The motivations of the ones who have left are to cleanse one's sins, to live in an Islamic state and to gain a new identity and status. From the beginning of 2015, ISIS starts to lose territory due to airstrikes on its strongholds by the international community, making life in the Caliphate more dangerous. This increasing danger and losses of territory may make the decision to join ISIS less appealing. Since the third quarter of 2015, there is a strong decrease in the numbers. Due to the losses of territory, joining ISIS became more difficult. Furthermore, the continuing airstrikes conducted by the international coalition including Russia and the military defeats ISIS is facing on the ground, increases the danger to live in ISIS' territory. Dutch nationals joining at this stage of the conflict are driven by the glorification of the use of violence, frustration with society, and the perception to be heroic when fighting in the battle.

4.3. Theoretical discussion

The first part of this chapter shows that the different levels on which one can be motivated to foreign fight are differing mainly between the micro- and the macro-level. The meso-level is present during the first peak at the end of 2012 and the beginning of 2013, when many members of radical Islamic networks left. Micro-level and macro-level causes are more present in one's final decision to join ISIS. Personal motivations, like cleansing of one's sins, the search for adventure, the use of violence, but also purpose and belonging are present over the cause of the conflict, but became more important as the conflict progressed and the focus shifted from helping the Syrian population to the defence and expansion of the Caliphate. Macro-level motivations were present vice-versa. In the beginning of the conflict, the atrocities of the Assad government against the Syrian population and the lack of intervention by the international community convinced would-be foreign fighters to help the Syrian population themselves. This was especially the case in the first and second peak. Also during the third peak, after the proclamation of the Caliphate, macro-level motivations can be discovered, however becoming more intertwined with micro-level motivations. The defence and expansion of the Caliphate can be considered as a macro-level cause as it is based on defending a whole society, namely the people living in this Caliphate. Moving to this Caliphate became appealing due to the micro-level solutions the Caliphate offered to problems or shortages one experienced in life. The

macro-level motivations seems to have triggered more people to leave at a certain time, whereas the micro-level motivations also motivated people to leave during periods when lesser people decided to leave. For example, during the first quarter of 2015 and since the third quarter of 2015, personal motivations like the use of violence and getting rid of sins are mentioned as motivations.

Dutch foreign fighters had different motivations on different levels. Looking at these motivations, pull-factors often were the final reason to join the conflict. Regarding the peaks in the numbers of departure, the atrocities committed by Assad pulled Dutch citizens into the conflict. Furthermore, the conflict offered a way to find purpose and belonging, to live in an Islamic state and to offer a way of penance, pulling individuals in high numbers into the conflict. Looking at the lows, these factors were still able to pull individuals, however to a lesser extent. A possible explanation of this lesser extent is the absence of a trigger event, which has been present in three of the four peaks. These factors have been the last reason to legitimize one's choice and are therefore of importance to the results of this thesis. However, it should be kept in mind that the process preceding this final decision has most often taken place in the Netherlands. If one wants to fully understand this phenomenon, it is of importance to keep push-factors in mind as well. For example, the motivation to join ISIS because one wants to live in an Islamic state in order to live and practice religion the way one desires, implies that one cannot do this in the Dutch society. One feels restricted, and starts to look for alternatives. This is also the case regarding the humanitarian motivations. The atrocities and resulting suffering pulls people into the conflict, however the disappointment in and the dissatisfaction with the inaction of their government pushed them towards this decision to get involved in the conflict.

Preconditions are, just like push-factors, hardly mentioned in the motivations in one's final decision to join the conflict. However, they are forming the basis, awaiting a trigger, a precipitant, to happen. These triggers resulting in mobilization were the spread of images of the suffering Syrian population in the last quarter of 2012 and the first quarter of 2013, the chemical weapon attack in the third quarter of 2013, and the proclamation of the Caliphate resulting in high mobilization numbers in the second quarter of 2014.

With regard to the theories on foreign fighting, we will consider the contributions of Malet, Bjørgo and Venhaus. Considering Malet and his four typologies of foreign fighters based on the level of ethnicity, the majority of Dutch foreign fighters can be considered as either a form of Liberationalists or True Believers. Regarding the role of Liberationalists, the Dutch nationals cannot be considered to fight against anti-colonial forces, but especially at the beginning when Dutch foreign fighters departed, they wanted to liberate the Syrian population

from the Assad government. Already at the beginning, this intertwined with the True Believers, as the protection of the transnational *Ummah* did play a role at this stage. Later on in the conflict, the establishment of a transnational Caliphate were the Sunni Islam was practised, took over the idea of the fight against Assad. The foreign fighters joining later in the conflict can be considered as mainly being True Believers.

The three different categories Bjørgo distinguishes are all present in the case of Dutch foreign fighters. The ideological activist is expected to be present especially in the first wave. His or her strong sense of justice resulting from ideological or political ideals are recognized at three points in the conflict. In the first two peaks, at the beginning and end of 2013, this sense of justice is turned against the Assad government in order to help the Syrians. Later on in the conflict, this ideology shifts towards the establishment and the defence of the Caliphate, especially in the third peak during the third quarter of 2014. The drifters and fellow travellers seemed to join the conflict after the ideological activists have joined and the opportunities the conflict offers them became clear. The search for belonging, friendship and identity is already mentioned in the first quarter of 2013, however ideological activist are likely to have dominated here. After the proclamation of the Caliphate in the second quarter of 2014, drifters and fellow travellers were more attracted to the conflict. A search for belonging and purpose is mainly present in the third quarter of 2014, and the search for a new identity in the first quarter of 2015. The third category, frustrated youth, finds a way to penance in the conflict. This motivation is already present in the first quarter of 2013, but also in the first half of 2015. Furthermore, the use of violence is a continuing mentioned motivation, which is getting more weight later on in the conflict. From 2014 onwards, people joining the conflict most certainly knew about the level of violence in the conflict. Since the second half of 2015, no other reasons than violence, of which prestige can be derived, are mentioned in the available literature. The admiration of the battle, together with the heroic fight, were during the peaks at the end of 2013 and the third quarter of 2014 motivations to join.

The theory of Venhaus divides foreign fighters into four different categories, all searching for something in a conflict. The revenge-seeker is seen in the first quarter of 2014, with the increase of the anti-Western sentiment as a motivation of joining the conflict. Although the anger may initially be caused by something else, it is turned against the Western society. Regarding status-seekers, becoming an hero is relatively early, the fourth quarter of 2013, mentioned as a motivation to leave. The rising motivation of seeking status is likely to went hand in hand with ISIS' successes in the battles. Especially early 2015, this comes forward as a motivation. People have joined at this point in time to search a new identity of which one can

derive a strong status. Remarkable is the mentioned motivation in the second quarter of 2017, the prestige and heroic reasons to join. By now ISIS has lost most of its territory and is still losing battles, which would suggest that the ones searching for status are not appealed to the conflict any longer. However, this has been the case at the end of the analysed period. The thrill seeker and its search for violence are expected to have been present in the conflict since 2014, when the used level of violence in the conflict became widely known, and seems to have risen ever since. With regard to the last seeker, the identity seeker, s/he can be identified after the establishment of the Caliphate, which offered a sense of belonging. This was present in the third quarter of 2014 and in the first quarter of 2015. This motivation at the start of 2015 is shared with the status-seeker, as status was derived from this newly found identity.

Chapter summary

Combining the different components researched in this thesis, we see that although conflict developments and their influences on the motivations of Dutch foreign fighters form the basis, sometimes insights from the research to the general foreign fighter phenomenon and their motivations in joining ISIS need to be borrowed in order to explain the fluctuations in the numbers of departing Dutch foreign fighters as extensive as possible. Motivations are varying from humanitarian reasons to the glorification of the use of violence, and from willing to live under the *Sharia* law, to earn a ticket to paradise. These variations are reflected in the theoretical approach towards this analysis. Although meso-level motivations are less mentioned, micro- and macro-level motivations are present throughout the analysed timeframe. Different kinds of pull-factors, taking place on both the micro- and the macro-level are present, resulting in extra triggers by precipitants such as the establishment of the Caliphate and the chemical weapon attack. The reflection on the theories shows how varied the foreign fighting component in ISIS is. Not one group with one goal is attracted to ISIS and its role in the broader conflict, but different groups consisting out of different people travelled to the conflict zones, in different quantities and at different moments in time.

5 - Conclusion and discussion

5.1. Answer to the research question

The posed research question aimed to explore to what extent the highs and lows in the numbers of Dutch foreign fighters leaving for Syria and Iraq between 2011 and mid-2017 can be explained by the interplay between the conflicts' developments and the different motivations for engaging in foreign fighting. Taking both the conflicts' developments and the different motivations into account, it can be concluded that at different moments in time, different motivations, sometimes triggered by the conflicts' developments, have been the reasons to join ISIS. In the first two peaks, the main motivation to join the conflict was based on humanitarian grounds, being influenced by images which visualized the suffering of the Syrian population and the chemical weapon attack. After ISIS conquered more territories and the establishment of the Caliphate became a reality, ideological and personal reasons predominated the motivations. The proclamation of the Caliphate triggered these ideological motivations of living in an Islamic state under the *Sharia* law. Furthermore, a solution to personal problems was thought to be found in the Caliphate. For example, one of the main personal motivations which came forward was the ability to cleanse of one's sins by practicing, in their eyes, the true Islam by participating in the Jihad. When the Caliphate started losing territory and travelling to the conflict zone became more dangerous and difficult, violence, frustration and adventure were the main motivations to travel to the conflict zone. These four peaks in the numbers show four different motivations which were most common: humanitarian reasons dominated in the first two peaks, ideological and personal reasons in the third peak, and the use of violence in the last peak. Important to mention is that these motivations do not necessarily only come forward in the timeframe they are dominant in. For example, violence has been present as a motivation since 2014, however became the dominant motivation since mid-2015. This is also the case for personal motivations, which play a dominant role in the third peak, put were present in the first 2 peaks as well.

The low numbers are harder to explain, because there are larger gaps in the available information on Dutch foreign fighters. To explore these gaps there needed to be relied more on interpreting and analysing the conflict developments and general foreign fighter flows. Regarding the first low, the sectarian tensions in the conflict increased. This did not appeal a high number of Dutch nationals, implying that sectarian motivations are not highly present in the Dutch case. During the second low, ISIS is about to declare the Caliphate. People may have waited before the Caliphate was really established, waiting for the call to *Hijra*. The third low

contains personal motivations, implying that these motivations became less important as the conflict went on. The fourth low is described as being the result of difficulties to reach ISIS' territories, the increasing danger in the Caliphate and the diminishing territories, which may to the ones travelling to the conflict be a motivation. Regarding the lows, a pattern in motivations is harder to discover, and the insights derived from the interplay between the developments within the conflict and the motivations is less clear than is the case regarding the highs.

Especially regarding the exploration of the high numbers of departure, the discovered pattern in the main motivations corresponds with the precipitants resulting from the conflict developments, forming a pull-factor. These trigger-events corresponded to the motivation of the majority of the leaving foreign fighters during these peaks. However these main motivations are not covering the whole departing group in a specific peak. Other motivations have been mentioned in these timeframes, implying that these foreign fighters are less influenced by developments within the conflict, and their trigger to mobilize is due to other factors. Therefore, generalizing whole waves of departure is not enough to cover the motivations. Regarding the lows, the interplay between conflict developments and motivations is harder to explain. This difficulty of establishing a pattern may be because not much happened in the conflict, resulting in lesser people joining. However it may also be the result of certain conflict developments being of little interest to Dutch foreign fighters. For example, the low number of departures after the increasing sectarianism in both conflicts may imply that Dutch foreign fighters are less motivated by sectarianism.

5.2. Limitations and suggestions

The reliance on different sources of literature, such as academic works, reports and news articles, was due to the exploratory character of this thesis the best way to provide an extensive as possible overview of the Dutch foreign fighter phenomenon. By triangulating these sources, it is expected that the phenomenon is explored as extensive as possible. Due to this triangulation, biases in the literature, for example the perspectives of news articles, are hoped to be avoided as much as possible. However, as comes forward in the analysis, there are gaps in the knowledge that has been used in this thesis. These gaps have been tried to be filled with knowledge derived from the general foreign fighter phenomenon in Syria and Iraq, however, this is a limitation to the results of this research, as the picture of the Dutch motivations is not complete. Furthermore, precisely linking the conflict developments to the knowledge of the Dutch foreign fighter motivations is difficult. Assessing the direct impact of developments asks for more information about the motivations, as exactly determining when a certain

development, for example the chemical weapon attack in August 2013, stops motivating Dutch foreign fighters is difficult. It is also unclear when a certain development starts having an impact, as travelling to the conflict zone requires preparations which may be time consuming. Thus, although these developments may be a trigger, it is yet uncertain in which timeframe they are exactly triggering departures. In this research, the used timeframes were quite large, namely quarters, resulting in a lesser need to precisely assess when conflict developments were of influence, but research which comes more precise should keep this in mind. Furthermore, some sources used in this research did contain primary sources or interviews with families of foreign fighters. This thesis assumed that these primary sources were honest in their answers to the asked questions. However, the level of honesty should be assessed critically. Consequences resulting from certain statements, by either the Dutch authorities or ISIS may have a deterring effect to be completely transparent.

The explanation of the highs and lows is mainly based on micro- and macro- levels of pull-factors and precipitants, which may be attributed to the perspective of this thesis. This research hopes to be a stepping stone on which further research with other perspectives, for example the meso-level or push-factors, can build on in order to get a more complete picture of the motivations of Dutch foreign fighters. In order to offer a more complete picture, it would be interesting to couple the outcomes of this research to developments in the Netherlands which might influence foreign fighters, like policies, public opinion and actions on the international stage. Furthermore, there is a need for more primary sources. The increasing numbers of returnees form a great source of intelligence to build towards this more complete perspective. Also here, one has to be careful to what extent these returnees will be transparent and to what extent they can and will be completely honest. Furthermore, these returnees, which were shortly mentioned in this thesis, are a useful source to conduct this research the other way around, namely when conflict developments are triggering foreign fighters to return to their home country.

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