

RATIONALES OF FOREIGN FIGHTERS IN THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR

by  
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RATIONALES OF FOREIGN FIGHTERS IN THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **RATIONALES OF FOREIGN FIGHTERS IN THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR**

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Masters of Arts Thesis, July 2017

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Keywords: Mujahedeen, Martyrdom, Syria, Religion, Participant Observation, Interviews.

In this study, I investigated why Muslims participate in jihad as foreign jihadist fighters, whose numbers have been increasing rapidly during the Syrian civil war. The main concern of this research is to examine the underlying motivations and reasons of these mujahedeen during their decision process to participate and maintain the jihad. In accordance with the existing studies that tend to explain radicalization through discrimination of the Muslim societies and ideology, Islamic religious doctrines such as the brotherhood of all Muslims, the obligation to help other Muslims who are suffering and the perception that Muslims around the world are being persecuted by infidel Western countries are major causes of the radicalization process. In addition to these, the narratives and personal experiences on the jihad field such as ‘miracles’, brotherhood and friendship among the mujahedeen are other determining factors. Another conclusion of this research is that, in contrast to the conventional thinking and existing studies, the mujahedeen do not join the jihad only because of their purpose of becoming a martyr or defeating the enemy. According to the findings of this study, acquired during the group meetings and interviews, these fighters are not focused on the results but rather on the path which they follow in order for them to obtain the approval of God. Despite the fact that becoming a martyr and defeating the enemy are the ultimate goals, the mujahedeen do not consider themselves unsuccessful if both the scenarios do not become a reality. Instead, having a genuine faith on God and performing meritorious action during the jihad are enough to be called successful regardless of the result. To complete this research, I conducted participatory observation with a jihadist group and conducted interviews with active fighters and their first degree relatives.

## Özet

### YABANCI SAVAŞÇILARIN SURIYE İÇ SAVAŞINDAKİ MOTİVASYONLARI

Ayhan Sarı

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Anahtar Sözcükler: Mücahit, Şehitlik, Suriye, Din, Araştırmacı Katılımcı, Görüşme.

Bu çalışmada, son yıllarda Suriye iç savaşı ile sayıları önemli derecede artan yabancı savaşçılar ve Müslümanların neden bu savaşçılardan biri olmayı seçtiklerini araştırdım. Araştırmanın temel konusu, bu mücahitlerin hangi gerekçeler ve motivasyonlarla cihada katılmaya ve bir kere katıldıktan sonra nasıl ve neden cihat eylemini sürdürmeye karar verdikleri üzerinedir. Araştırmama göre, Müslümanlara baskı ve ideolojinin önemine vurgu yapan çalışmalara paralel olarak, Müslümanlar kardeştir, Müslümanların yardıma muhtaç ve zulüm altındaki diğer Müslüman kardeşlerine yardım etmeleri farzdır gibi İslam dinine özgü akide örnekleri radikalleşmenin önemli sebeplerini teşkil etmekte. Bunlara ek olarak, cihat esnasında karşılaşılan mucizeler ile ilgili anlatılar ve cihat bölgelerindeki mücahitler arasındaki olumlu yönde ilişkiler bir mücahit için cihada katılma ve bu eylemi tekrarlama açısından diğer belirleyici faktörler arasında yer almaktadır. Çalışmanın bir diğer önemli çıkarımı da, cihada katılan insanların, bu konuyla alakalı diğer çalışmaların iddia ettiğinin aksine, ne salt ölme, yani şehit olma güdüsüyle, ne de düşmanı yenme amacıyla cihada katılmadıkları üzerinedir. Toplantılar ve görüşmeler sonucunda edindiğim verilere göre, mücahitlerin tamamı sonuca değil, amaca giden süreçte inançlarının gerektiği gibi hareket ederek sevap ve Allah'ın rızasını kazanmaya odaklanmaktadır. Şehit olmak veya düşmanı yenmek asıl hedefken, iki senaryonun da gerçekleşmediği durumda dahi kendilerini başarısız kabul etmemektedirler. Tam tersine, samimi bir Allah inancı ile yapılan cihadın sonucundan bağımsız bir şekilde başarılı bir amel olarak kabul edildiği görülmektedir. Bu çalışmayı gerçekleştirmek amacıyla, cihatçı gruplarla bağlantısı olan bir grup, araştırmacı katılımcı tekniğiyle (participant observation) incelenmiş ve aktif cihatçılar ve birinci derece akrabalarıyla görüşmeler yapılmıştır.

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*Because, gentlemen, as far as I know, you have taken your whole inventory of human profits from an average of statistical figures and scientific-economic formulas. Because profit for you is prosperity, wealth, freedom, peace, and so on and so forth; so that a man who, for example, openly and knowingly went against this whole inventory would, in your opinion - well, and also in mine, of course - be an obscurantist or a complete madman, right?*

*Dostoyevsky – Notes from Underground*

## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction:**

Why do some Muslims participate in conflicts, whereas others not? What is the reason behind putting their lives in danger or committing suicide attacks? In this research, I investigated the possible motivations of foreign jihadist fighters for participating in rebel groups and putting their own lives at stake. By doing so, I strived to explain how an individual radicalizes and why someone participates in a conflict as a foreign jihadist fighter. The issue of jihad came into prominence after the war in Afghanistan between Russia and Afghan mujahedeen. Many Muslims from different parts of the world participated in the conflict on the side of the mujahedeen. Other important places for the foreign jihadist fighters were Bosnia and Chechnya. Currently, the major attraction centre for the foreign jihadist fighters is Syria (Springer, Regens, & Edgar, 2009). Thousands of people travel to Syria from different countries and participate in the conflict on the side of different rebellion groups with a growing number (Jones, 2013; Lister, 2015; Lister, 2014). The characteristics of the participants vary. Among them are young and old people, well and poor educated. Moreover, their financial status is also differing. The aim of this research is to demonstrate how is it possible to aggregate these people under one roof and fight for a common goal? What is their main motivation to participate in the conflict?



In this research I examined the root cause of the participation of the individuals as fighters in Syrian Civil War. Why do these people leave their homes and fight for the “others” behalf? What are their profiles? To shed light on this inquiry, I investigated the foreign jihadist fighters, in other words mujahedeen, who participated in Syrian conflict, by using micro level of analysis to have a better understanding of the causal mechanism of the participation process and the conflict<sup>1</sup>. To this end, to grasp their rationale of attending the Syrian Civil War, I made a participant observation of a group which is comprised of the actual fighters and supporters of the Syrian jihad and conducted semi-structured interviews with people who fight on the side of the rebel groups in Syria.

## **1.1 Motivations of the Individuals by Becoming a Foreign Jihadist Fighters**

According to my observation and interviews, the main motivation of the fighters is their religion. The religious doctrine of the Islam, especially the jihad literature, which is shaped by Quran verses, hadiths and early Islamic scholars, is the core factor of the creation of pro jihad motivation. What they understand from religion and how their beliefs are shaped are the core reasons to participate the conflict as a mujahedeen. Muslim brotherhood, references to the verses from the Quran, injustice and the oppression that the Muslims face are other significant causes. One of the interesting part of my research was that the jihad has been considered completely as a manly action and the suffering people are always women and children.

Male jihadists consider themselves as the protector of the Muslim women and children. One of the underlying reasons for this notion is that fighting is a duty of healthy Muslim males and it is only *fard ayn* for them. Women do not have any obligation and responsibilities in this regard. In addition to the absence of any assignment to the women in terms of jihad in the Quran, the life of the Prophet Mohammed and his praxis also indicates that the jihad is not a duty for the women. When a Muslim community go to war, they do not need the help of the women, but instead, they have to left some soldiers back to protect women and children who left behind.

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<sup>1</sup> See for a general discussion on the concept of jihad: Krogt (2010), Heck (2004), Esposito (2002), Cook (2015).

My observation in group meetings and interviews indicate that the fighters do not make an issue of the fact that women do not participate the jihad. For them, it is obvious that women do not have to fight. Married mujahedeens praise their wife and talk positively about them if a wife, who left behind by a mujahedeen, shows patience and encourage her husband for jihad. Additionally, it is also welcome if a woman helps jihad financially or marries with a mujahedeen. Except these, the status of the Muslim women is not an issue. The root cause of this inequality between Muslim women and men could be the religious doctrine or a characteristic of the Turkish society. The scope of this research is not sufficient for a detailed investigation on this issue, but it would be fruitful to make a separate research on the gender inequality in the jihad.

Besides the brotherhood, the process, a mujahedeens' behaviours and attitudes during the war, are other important parts for the participation process, in addition to the results or the end of the conflict. Contrary to what is conventionally assumed about jihadists, I have found that whether they die and become a martyr or have the absolute victory does not matter according to their beliefs. They merely focus on behaving as a Muslim during the whole process. Their desire is defeating the enemy or become a genuine martyr but behaving correctly as the God demands is superior than these desires.

The characteristics of the people with whom I met and conducted interviews were different. Most of them had their primary education. There were also single and married ones. Many of married people had also children. Some of them had regular jobs in their homeland and financially were not in a poor position, while others were financially in a poor condition both in their homeland and also in Syria. In short, there was not any anomaly in terms of their profile, that I observed or could grasp during my observations and interviews. As a conclusion, I can state that it was not possible for me to draw a picture about a fixed profile of the mujahedeen and the supporters of Syrian jihad in terms of material features. However, it could be fairly said that the Islam as a religion, Quran as a holy book and the verses derived from it about jihad, such as the need of help others Muslim brothers who are in misery, are the major common characteristic of the fighters. Moreover, the notion of injustice treatment that the Muslim people have experienced, which is stemmed from non-Muslim countries such as Russia and US according to mujahedeens, is the other main reason to participate in the jihad.

Next, almost all the mujahedeen have a story about the jihad, which includes miracles that they experienced during the battles. Thanks to it, their beliefs in jihad and in the fact that they do the right thing grow stronger. Lastly, all the people that I met during my field research, group meetings or interviews, the relationship between mujahedeen on the battle field is one of the most talked issue. No matter whom I have interviewed, they always mentioned the strong bonds and brotherhood between the mujahedeen. Because of this friendship on the field, they are encouraged to stay in jihad and feel as if they were in their home. This is also the reason why they turn back to jihad if they leave and go their home country.

## **1.2 The Rationalist Approach**

The literature on the jihadist and foreign fighters strives to explain the issue by asking questions such as who fights and why they fight. There are two major clusters of answers to these questions. The first is the so called rationalist approach, which focuses on the material benefits of such a behavior. One of the pioneers of such claim is Robert Pape who argues that there is a rational aim behind the irrational seeming action of suicide attacks. He argues that suicide attacks and joining fundamentalist rebel groups is not a pure irrational behavior. According to his view, the suicide bombing strategically pays and helps the rebel groups to achieve political goals (Pape, 2003; Pape 2005).

In contrast to the first-wave explanations, this article shows that suicide terrorism follows a strategic logic. Even if many suicide attackers are irrational or fanatical, the leadership groups that recruit and direct them are not. Viewed from the perspective of the terrorist organization, suicide attacks are designed to achieve specific political purposes: to coerce a target government to change policy, to mobilize additional recruits and financial support, or both (Pape, 2003).

By explaining the suicide attacks with specific political goals, Pape dispels the difference between religious and secular rebel organizations. In that sense, the explanation that religious fanatics commit suicide attacks because the person who carries that action will be awarded with the paradise in the afterlife becomes invalid. If it could be the only reason, secular organizations, such as Tamil Tigers would not perform the same sorts of attacks because they do not have any expectation from the after life. Thus, to understand the underlying reasons behind the irrational action such as suicide attacks, it is not accurate to focus only the religion.

Humpreys and Weinstein also focus on the rationalist explanation to find an answer to the inquiry of who fights. They argue that the underlying reason behind the participation lies on the economic and social status of the individual. Poverty, lack of access to education and political alienation are the three reasons to participate in civil war. If the participant person is financially in a poor condition and if he or she is in lack of education then it is more likely for him or her to join the conflict. Moreover, they make a cost and benefit analysis of what they will get if they join the fight and what they will lose to make a decision. If they participate, they can feel themselves more safe from the attacks of fighting groups and will not face the social pressure of the community in which they live in. (Humpreys & Weinstein, 2008).

...Participation in a military faction does depend on an individual's relative social and economic position, the costs and benefits of joining, and the social pressures that emanate from friends and community members. While these arguments are often presented as rival, multiple logics of participation do coexist within the same conflict.

### **1.3 Non-Rationalist Arguments**

The second type of explanation focuses on the issues such as ideology and beliefs. This type of explanation examines the relation between the current material circumstances and the ideology or beliefs of the people. Oppression, injustice, humiliation, lack of different options rather than living under the poor conditions interact with the ideology and beliefs and conduce rebellion (Hage, 2004). Assaf Moghadam defends this argument and claims that one of the major reasons why Palestinians rebel against Israel and commit suicide attacks is the injustice and humiliation that they face. These poor circumstances are shaped by their ideology and religious beliefs such as the benefits of martyrdom and salafi ideology. They are not psychopaths and irrational. (Moghadam, 2008/2009; Jones, 2008). They have their own reasons such as desire for revenge and after life benefits.

It seems painfully obvious that many Palestinian suicide bombers believe that the benefits of becoming a martyr outweigh the costs. Becoming a martyr, many believe, is the fulfillment of a religious command. It provides an escape from the humiliation felt by most Palestinians. It provides the suicide bomber and his family with a multitude of tangible and intangible benefits, and offers

an afterlife in paradise that is preferred to the reality of everyday life under Israeli occupation (Moghadam, 2011).

Nasra Hassan is one of the scholars who pay attention to the effect of humiliation and the role of martyrdom as the only way to break the oppression. He argues that the suicide bombers are not uneducated, economically in poor condition or simple minded as many think. Their beliefs, verses from Quran and parts of hadiths are the major motivator for their actions (Hassan, 2001). In addition to that humiliation, the fact that this injustice comes from Western countries is another triggering factor of the jihad (Torok, 2013). Roxanne L. Euben examines both the material and ideological aspect of the issue. She criticizes the western rationalist approach which simplifies jihad as an outlier to rational action and displays the participant of the jihad as fanatics. She argues that:

Jihad is neither simply a blind and bloody-minded scramble for temporal power nor solely a door through which to pass into the hereafter. Rather, it's a form of political action in which, to use Hannah Arendt's language, the pursuit of immortality is inextricably to a profoundly this-worldly endeavour, the founding or recreation of a just community on earth (Euben, 2002, p.8-9).

She investigates the texts of two prominent Muslim thinkers, Sayyid Qutb and Abu Al Ala Mawdudi, to understand the Sunni understanding of Jihad. According to this view, jihad is a necessary part of a Muslim not only because of their struggle against West, but also an internal, existentially affair of a Muslim. Therefore, jihad is intrinsically legitimate in the eyes of mujahedeen (Euben, 2002, p. 26). Namely, religion plays a significant role for the motivation of the fighters. Thomas Hegghammer assesses that Islamic Law is the main source of the jihadist fighters. These laws require the unity of Muslims and helping Muslim sisters and brothers who are in need.

The rationale is that all able Muslim men worldwide join the fighting because Islamic law requires it. The responsibility for the defence of Muslim territory is shared by all Muslims and not limited to the residents of the contested area. Two types of arguments support the call for solidary action. The first emphasizes the unity of the Muslim nation. Victims are systematically referred to as "our brothers/sisters/mothers/children" as if they were blood relations of the prospective recruits. The second argument invokes Islamic law, declaring fighting an individual religious duty (*fard ayn*) for all Muslims (Hegghammer, 2010/2011).

Venhaus in his research examines certain mainstream rational assumptions such as the fact that they fight because they get economic benefits or they fight because they are psychopaths. He argues that these explanations are not pertinent and that the fighters have four distinct motivations. First one is the revenge seekers. Revenge seekers see themselves as the victims of the Western policies. Western countries are the main reason behind the sufferings of the Muslims worldwide. By participating in a jihadist group they expect to take revenge on Western countries. The second one is the status seeker. These types of groups are more common in diasporas. They feel themselves unrecognized by the new community in which they live<sup>2</sup>.

One young Moroccan proclaimed, “I was like a slave in France. I could work in the kitchen but was not welcome in the dining room. When I left my neighbourhood, people avoided me on the street as if I were unclean.” Young men in these situations believe that they have value and abilities and a worth to the world that their position in society doesn’t reflect. More than 25 percent of the fighters in the sample were seeking either to improve their status in the community or to demonstrate their prominence to the world (Venhaus, 2010, p. 9).

The third motivation is the identity seeker. They simply look for a group to which they can belong. By belonging to a group, the identity seeker can gain his role, his friends and his interaction with the community. The fourth one is the thrill seeker. This type of people looks for an adventure and proving themselves. The thrill seekers are most likely from the middle and upper class families. (Venhaus, 2010, p. 8-12). Additionally, according to Venhaus dataset, the fighters may be antisocial but are not psychopaths and the economic factors are not significant for the recruitment process. However, the religious indoctrination of the youth people is an important factor for attending to jihadist group (Venhaus, 2010).

In the literature, we can grasp a variety of explanations. The major ones are the following: first, the rationalist/positivist explanation which focuses on material and political/strategic gains and second, the reflectivist approach which argues that ideology and beliefs are determining factors for jihadist fighters to fight. In my research, I tested these assumptions by participating in the meetings of groups which support the Syrian Jihad and include mujahedeen. Moreover, I conducted interviews with foreign jihadist

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<sup>2</sup> See also: Sageman (2008)

fighters who fight in Syria or a first degree relative of a mujahedeen. I strived to capture a robust causal mechanism of the motivation of the foreign jihadist fighters by doing micro level of analysis of the participation process in the rebel groups and how the fighters decide to stay in the jihad.

## **1.4 The Syrian Civil War**

The Syrian civil war was triggered by a graffito, which states ‘people want the fall of the regime’ in the Syrian city Daraa in 2011. The painters of the graffiti were young boys. They were arrested by the regime forces and did not return to their families. The members of the families went to the government palace and ask for their sons. The governor responded to the parents of these boys with the following, “go back to your wife and make new babies, forget the old ones, if you can not, send your wife to us, we will do the job for you.” After this response, the parents uncap their traditional headwear, which is a sign of the beginning of a war in the local customs. This incident light the fuse of the Syrian civil war (Şen, 2016).

With the onset of the civil war in Syria, various rebel groups emerged to fight against the government. The number of such groups are quite a few. There are more than 1000 rebel groups and over 100.000 fighters (Torok, 2013). With the exceptions of Jabhat al Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham, other groups are not the concern of this research. Al Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham are important for this research specifically because almost all of the foreign jihadist fighters and the supporters of the jihad that I contacted during my investigation were a part of these groups.

Jabhat al Nusra is established officially in 2012 (Lister, 2016, p. 59) and were a unit of the well known jihadist organization Al Qaeda until the split in July 2016.

Having been established by a prominent ISIS commander in 2011, Jabhat al- Nusra has since emerged as an independent al-Qaeda affiliate based in Syria and currently commanding approximately 6,000 fighters. Since its public emergence in January 2012, the group has evolved considerably. While its first six months of operations in Syria saw it act as a stereotypical terrorist organisation, killing dozens of civilians in spectacular urban bomb attacks and raiding largely civilian targets deemed supportive of the government, by August 2012 it had transformed into a professional insurgent group coordinating with nationalist FSA units (Lister, 2014, 97-98).

The other rebel group, which is a concern of this research, Ahrar al-Sham is established in 2011. It is the biggest insurgent group in Syria with more than 15.000 fighters and strong organizational capacities (Lister, 2016, p. 107).

...Ahrar al-Sham, a Syrian Salafist organisation formed in ‘the second quarter of 2011 by a core of six Syrians— Hassan Abboud (Abu Abdullah al-Hamawi), Abu Talha al-Ghab, Talal al- Ahmed Tammam, Khaled Abu Anas, Abu Saleh Tahhan and Khubayb al-Shami—that, from the time of its formation perceived itself as not just an armed resistance faction, but rather as an Islamic movement with a concern for social, religious, political, humanitarian and military affairs. It was, however, a quick developer, thanks to its earlier-mentioned funding relationships in Qatar and Kuwait. While clearly founded on conservative Salafist credentials—and containing a number of senior commanders with previous experience in Iraq and in al-Qaeda—it presented itself as a Syrian organisation concerned only with Syrian objectives (Lister, 2016, p. 77).

Ahrar al-Sham and Al Nusra are the leading organizations because of their relative successful assaults to the regime forces and local services where they prevail. They are using Salafist ideology which is based on verses from Quran, hadiths, several Islamic scholars from the early period of Islamic history, and also the works of modern imams-sheiks to recruit new members and legitimize their actions. Osama bin Laden, Ayman al Zawahiri are most popular figures among the members and leaders of these organizations. These both groups main goal is establishing an Islamic state which is ruled by the Sharia in Syria after defeating the current regime (Jones, 2013, p.54-56).

## **1.5 Methods of the Study**

To carry out this research, I contacted a charity organization, whose name will be kept secret for reason of confidentiality, and demanded their help to realize these interviews and participation in group meetings. In addition to that, I used snowballing sampling to find other participants. I found an interviewee through to a Syrian citizen that I met in Istanbul. Initially, I attended regular meetings, which were about the religious talks of a group. Among this group were people who supported the Syrian Jihad ideologically, financially and fight on the side of these jihadi groups. Before beginning to conduct interviews, I had attended the meetings of the first group approximately over twenty times during a one-and-a-half-year time period. At the beginning, I did not take any notes during or after the meetings. Having got use to the group and obtained their permission, I began to take notes.



In these notes and observations that I made are significant information about the motivation of the jihadist fighters, how they explain the jihad and how they legitimize their actions with the help of the religious discourse. In these meetings, I tried to grasp their language, attitude towards the Syrian Civil War and their main discourse. Additionally, I supported my observations and field notes with the interviews that I made with the fighters and supporters of the jihad. In these circumstances, I attended these meetings and listened to different speakers and the question-answer part. After a while, with the help of the initial inviter, I asked some of the fighters for an interview and explained my identity and purpose. Then I conducted interviews with people who regularly to the Syria and fight on the side of rebel groups such as Al-Nusra Front and Ahr-ur Şam and returned to Turkey. Not all the fighters that I met during these meetings agreed to do an interview with me, yet I obtained the permission to use their talks in my research which they made during the meetings. Moreover, some of these fighters did not only fight in Syria but also in Afghanistan and Chechnya. Besides that, I established another contact through a Syrian person and did interviews with Syrian people who fights alongside rebel groups or are the relatives of a fighter. In total, I interviewed with five people. Their identities will be kept confidential. I gave the entire interview records in the appendix and use the parts that are relevant to the topic of the study.

During the group meetings that I participated, I was mostly a passive listener because the Syrian War and the jihad were current issues and the topic of the meetings was usually the conflict. Therefore, I did not need to ask or direct the conversation to the jihad. However, I occasionally asked some question about the political issues such as how they plan to handle to fight against two big powers (US and Russia), one regional power (Iran) and Bashar Esad. In such cases they tried to answer my questions but make me feel that that my question was unnecessary. After nearly one year, and several meetings that I attended, I asked the person who invited me to the meetings about my desire to conduct interviews with some of the mujahedeen. I could arrange three interviews with people who were part of the fight, two people who visited Syria and supported the jihad financially and one relative of a mujahedeen who lost his life during the battles in Syria. Eventually, the person who arranged these interviews planned to introduce me to other mujahedeen who were in major positions in the Syrian Jihad, but unfortunately they denied my request to do interview with them because of the security reasons. To bring a

remedy to that problem, I sought to find other persons outside of the first group. Thus, I contacted the Syrian person that I knew before and conducted interview with a father whose son fight alongside of the Islamic rebel group Ahr-ur Sam.

During the interview, I asked questions to the participant about their age, income, marital status, the number of their children and their occupation in Turkey. As I mentioned above, the characteristics of the mujahedeen were different. I do not conclude with this merely from my interviews but also from the meetings that I participated in. People who denied to do interview had also different characteristics in terms of their age, income, marital status and so on. In the second part of the interview, I used a semi-structured interview form and asked following questions from time to time during the interview: Why did you choose to participate in the Syrian conflict? What or who did affect your decision to participate? What is your aim by participating in the conflict; what are you expecting to acquire? What are your observations on the ground and what incidents have affected you the most? Do you find fighting in Syria as risky; if yes, why are you taking these risks, for what purpose? If you and your side succeed, do you plan to settle in Syria; if yes, would you go to another country for another Jihad? These were my general questions to the people whom I interviewed.

I did not select the targeted group and interviewees from a list which includes different options. The selection of the group was with coincidence. For the interviews, I used snowballing method. I did not search for a particular type of people or a group<sup>3</sup>. It was difficult to contact such groups and people and therefore I did not have the chance to select among different groups or participants. However, the people that I have encountered were not from the same faction. The group meetings were open to all willing people. The organizers of the meetings did not demand any permission to participate but they did not also announce the meetings publicly. Yet, they asked already people who already participating to bring their acquaintance with. It was a regular meeting for talking about religious issues, not determined for recruiting new members for jihad. The talks

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<sup>3</sup> See for the methodical framework of this research: Leech, B., & Goldstein (2002), Gerring (2004) Geddes (1990), Nachmias and Nachmias (2008), King, Keohane and Verba (1994), George & Bennett (2005)

about jihad and the participation of the jihadist fighters to the meetings were the result of the natural process. For this reason, the characteristics of the participants were mixed.

Diverse characteristics of participants were also valid for the people that I interviewed. The youngest participant was 16 and the oldest one was 47. The half of the participants were single and the other half were married. More than half of the participant had regular jobs while the others did not. Some of the fighters had support from their families and had also mujahedeen in their family while other families were against the participation of their relatives to the jihad and their presence in Syria. For example, one of the individuals I interviewed has two sons. One of them participated in Syrian jihad and the other one immigrated to Germany. The same differentiation was also current in the issue of education. Among the participants, there were people who had traditional madrasah education and also the ones with secular education from primary school to the bachelor's level. In short, neither people whom I met in group meetings nor the participants in interviews did have a common feature in terms of demographic characteristics, which we can take as the possible reason for their participation to jihad.

In the second part of this research, I describe my observations about the group meetings. What are the main issues discussed, how does the speaker handle the jihad and what kind of sources does he use? What are the responses of the audience and what sort of question do they have? Last of all, what is the profile of the speakers and the audience who support the Syrian Jihad and what is their main discourse? Then, in the third part of my research, I discuss the interviews that I conducted with the mujahedeen and their relatives. In this part, I did not give all the records but the parts that are related with this study. In the last part, I examined my data and how it fits to the existing literature on jihadist fighters. Which sorts of arguments are a better fit for and what could be done better in future research to grasp the motivation of the jihadist fighters more accurately and how to generalize this study for a broader explanation?

## **Chapter 2**

### **Group Meetings**

The reason why I participated in those group meetings was to understand the different perceptions and worldviews of people who live together in the same country and moreover in the same city. Turkey, and especially Istanbul is a convenient place to grasp such differences. As a highly polarized country, many citizens do not have even the smallest clue about what others take as their worldview. Secularization of Turkey or in contrast, the Islamization of Turkey is another hot debated issue. For example, when I was a bachelor's student at the Yildiz Technical University in Istanbul, we discussed the Islamization of Turkey during the governance of Erdogan, and how he was being influenced by the Islamic agenda.

At the same day, I also attended a meeting where the participants were conservative upper-middle class people. They had a completely different agenda. They accused the current government of not having sufficient Islamic agenda and it was not possible to pray behind an Imam who was paid by the government. The government was not ruling with the rule of God, in other words with Sharia, and therefore it was not convenient to pray behind a government paid imam at Friday prayer. At the end of the day, I returned to my home as someone who was completely confused. After, I realized that none of these people, regardless of which side they were a part of, had any idea what the others were thinking. Because of this lack of information, they always accused the other part of being either a traitor or a fanatic. Neither the secular people were a traitor nor the conservative people bloodthirsty fanatics. All of them were normal people like any of us. The problem was the absence of mutual understanding and basic empathy.

The motivation to start an examination on the issue of jihad stems from my own background. After I met with some foreign jihadist fighters and supporters of the Syrian Jihad by coincidence, the most striking point for me was that they did not seem to be abnormal fanatics who behead people as a daily routine. Some of them were young and good looking people, some of them were in modern suits and fashioned hair style, some of them genuinely looked like radicals with long beards and hair unless you spoke with them and realize that they were also human, capable of joking and laughing. In short, I was someone, who was striving to enter a room which was in full darkness and expect for “zombies” behind the door, because he was simply told that behind the door are the living zombies. To be inspired by many scientists who think that only the bloodthirsty radicals are behind the jihad, I started to examine these radicals and asked them if they really were “zombies” and if yes, why they have chosen to be a “zombie”, what was their reason? Thus my research began.

## **2.1 Participation to the Group Talks**

To examine why an individual radicalizes and becomes a foreign jihadist fighter, I used my contacts and continued to attend the regular meetings of a particular group. It was not difficult to participate in those meetings because it was open to anyone who was acquainted with one of the current members of the group. One of my friends from high school was the relative to a member of that group. This relative of my friend was a significant person who had long stemming ties to the group. With his invitation I attended the house meetings several times. My initial observation began in those early meetings. I realized that they were supporters of the Syrian Jihad and some of them were active foreign jihadist fighters. During these initial meetings, I was a Bachelor’s student. After I started my Master’s degree, I decided to delve deeper into this issue and began attending the meetings again. Since the end of 2015, I have regularly participated in the meetings. I did not take regular field notes at the beginning, but noted some valuable points such as related Quran verses and hadiths. Because of this reason, I do not have the exact number of my attendance to these meetings but it should be around fifty meetings.

In September 2016, I contacted the person who was the relative of my friend and explained to him my intention to conduct research on the foreign jihadist issue. He stated

that he could help me and shared my demand with the unofficial leader of the group. Unfortunately, the head of the group did not like this idea and recommended that we stop this research because of security reasons. He did not try to stop my participation in the group meetings nor mistreat me during them, but he also did not help in any way. This is one of the reasons why I could not interview more mujahedeens than I did. After a while, the number of participants to the meetings increased<sup>4</sup>. They started to contact with other groups and conduct joint meetings with leaders of other groups.

With the help of the relative of my friend, I shared my intention and research plan with another group leader too. The second leader was willing to help my research at the beginning and introduced me to two active fighters for an interview<sup>5</sup>. I conducted these interviews, but unfortunately, he stopped cooperating with me and told me kindly that he could help arrange further meetings. The reason behind this withdrawal was the concern of his group in Syria which was a part of Jabhat al Nusra. Both of the leaders that I have met were also mujahedeens and they had their own hierarchy in Syria. If their head, amir, gives a command to them, they have to obey it. Therefore, they stopped helping me to find other foreign fighters to interview.

In short, the first leader was reluctant to help me, and the second one was willing at the beginning to help, and he did, but lately stopped cooperating. After they denied my demand to interview more mujahedeens, I asked them if I could use my observations obtained during the group meetings. Surprisingly, they accepted my second demand and gave me several pieces of advice about confidentiality, so that I do not reveal their identity. Thanks to this, I could realize my participant observation. Despite the fact that I could not increase the number of my interviews, I could hear and be in the same room with dozens of foreign fighters, in other words mujahedeens, due to the group meetings. Therefore, these observations are invaluable to having a better understanding and insight of the issue of foreign fighters.

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<sup>4</sup> I participated in these group meetings with the purpose of conducting a research between 20.09.2016 and 23.05.2017

<sup>5</sup> The interviews were conducted between 08.04.2017 and 13.05.2017.

## 2.2 Origins of the Jihad

Before starting to my observation on the group meetings, it is substantial to address the concept of the jihad. Jihad means, struggling with nefs<sup>6</sup> and with the enemies of the Islam (Özel, 1993). The fact that the jihad has two meanings is always an issue among the Islamic communities and leading imams (Heck, 2004). Advocators, who are against the armed conflicts focus on the part ‘struggle with nefs’ and argue that fighting against an enemy is secondary compared to the part, struggle with nefs. Moreover, they also criticize jihadist organizations such as Al Qaeda. Esposito is one of the defender of this argument and he claims that jihadist organizations such as Al Qaeda is harming the Islam which is in essence a peaceful religion. (Esposito, 2002).

In contrast, pro-jihad communities and imams argue that it must be given an equal weight to the both parts of the definition, struggling with nefs and fighting against the enemy. Advocators of this argument cites from Quran, hadiths and also from Islamic scholars such as Ibn Taymiyya (Heck 2004). At Tawbah 41 is the most common used Quran verse in this sense, “Go forth, whether light or heavy, and strive with your wealth and your lives in the cause of Allah. That is better for you, if you only knew.” The famous hadiths of the Prophet Mohammed, “know that Paradise is under the shades of swords<sup>7</sup>” is another source for them to support their argument.

In my research, group meetings and interviews, all participant were aware of this both sided definition of the jihad, but they were in favour for the part, fighting against an enemy. Supporter of the jihad and mujahedeen admit that they have to permanently struggle against their nefs, but it does not prevent them to join the jihad and defend the Muslim community who are in need. Fighting against the enemy is a part of the struggling against the nefs indeed, because, nefs tell them to live a prosperous and safety life and do not put themselves in any danger. By participating the jihad, a mujahedeen can prove that his life has been dedicated to God and thus beat his own nefs which tell the opposite, dedicate your life for yourself. Surah at Tawbah 111, which states that “indeed, Allah has

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<sup>6</sup> Nefs is the desiring part of the human soul. In the Islamic religious doctrine, nefs is one of the two main enemy of human, along with the devil.

<sup>7</sup> See sunnah.com for detailed information on the hadiths book ‘Sahih al Bukhari.’

purchased from the believers their lives and their properties [in exchange] for that they will have paradise” is a substantial reference point in this regard.

### **2.3 The Identity of the Group**

The group that I observed through my participation in their regular religious meetings was basically a salafi<sup>8</sup> group. They focused on Quranic verses, the hadiths, the life of sahabi<sup>9</sup> and their style of living and early Islamic scholars of the ninth and tenth centuries. The leader, or in other words, the imam of the group was not an official one. He did not declare himself as imam too. He had no diploma from a school or madrasah. However, they had an older imam who they asked questions and demanded help if it was necessary. This elderly imam is also not officially educated in a university, but had a madrasah background. In general, despite the lack of an official madrasah diploma, the madrasah tradition and its code had a huge effect on their general religious thinking. I could say that the only common characteristics of these people were that they admired the madrasah tradition and they had relations with madrasah educated people in different levels. In addition to that, they were also aware of the importance of the secular education and encouraged the young people in their community to obtain a diploma from secular schools, in other words universities.

The majority of the group was comprised of artisans and small business men. Among them were also poor people who needed the help of other group members and also upper middle class people who were economically in a good position. It was a mixture in terms of financial status. The group that I met was basically people who migrated from the southern part of Turkey. They were not from the same village, city or from the same family. However, I rarely met with someone who was from either the western part of Turkey or the northern part. While I do not have representative data on the origins of participants, my observations and notes suggest that the majority of the supporters of jihad in Syria come from the Kurdish region of Turkey.

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<sup>8</sup> See for further information on Salafism: Meijer (2009), Lauziere (2015)

<sup>9</sup> A companion of the prophet Mohammed.



## 2.4 Content of the Group Talks

The topics of the meetings differentiated from time to time. But the jihad issue was handled basically with a similar approach. Quranic verses are the major point of reference. Hadiths come after the Quranic verses to support them and demonstrate how the prophet Mohammed interpreted the importance of jihad. The most commonly used Quranic verse is the Surah at-Tawbah 41: “Go forth, whether light or heavy, and strive with your wealth and your lives in the cause of Allah. That is better for you, if you only knew.” The term “strive” is replaced in the Turkish version with ‘jihad’. It means, go to jihad with your lives and wealth in the cause of Allah. This is one of the main verses from the Quran that I heard being recited whenever the topic of jihad was brought up. The process of supporting jihad becomes very clear after reading verses such as this. Imams’ speeches are very straightforward, they read the verses, and hadiths of the prophet Mohammed, give examples from the lives of sahabis, and early Islamic scholars’ notions regarding jihad. Thus, it becomes almost impossible for a participant to oppose these notions. There are two options that one can choose, to support the jihad with one’s life, in other words by being an active fighter, or to give financial aid.

During my one-and-a-half-year participation to these group meetings, I never heard any critics to the Syrian Jihad. In the early periods of my participation, I asked a question which was about the political perspective of the jihad. I asked the imam “do you think that you can beat Russia, the US, Iran and the Esad regime by declaring jihad against them?” He did not like my question, and considered it as a trick question. He passed off the question by saying that “you are not understanding the jihad properly, to understand what I mean by jihad and why it is necessary, you need to read these five books” and showed me a book series about the jihad, which was basically a classical jihad book with Salafist ideology.

The language of the people in this group is also remarkable. They have their own terminology. At the beginning I had difficulties understanding them because they use several Arabic words to communicate with each other. For example, members of this group call each other “ahi” which means brother in Arabic. They also constantly use religious words such as “Subhanallah” which means all praise to the God and also the word “inshallah” which means if the God wills. If a person dies in the jihad, he will not

be called a martyr, because it is not sure if he was really fighting for the approval of God or for his own reputation. Therefore, if a group member talks about a dead mujahedeen, he uses the phrase “inshallah he is a martyr”. Because of this reason, it is unofficially forbidden for mujahedeen to talk about his battles in jihad. Supporters of jihad in this group do not welcome mujahedeen who talk about their fights and achievements in jihad. If an individual talks about his actions in the battle field, what he has accomplished, how many enemies he has killed or how great was the damage he caused, it can harm his jihad deed according to the general principles of jihad. The fighters think that they should do whatever they do only for the approval of God during the jihad and they do not need to talk about it with other people because God sees everything. Therefore, I could not garner any insight into the battles from the living persons. If a mujahedeen is dead, only then can his friends talk about his accomplishments and bravery.

## **2.5 Narratives about the Current Foreign Jihadist Fighters**

The narratives of the dead mujahedeens are one of the substantial parts of the talks on jihad after the verses from the Quran and hadiths. For example, the imam of the group recounted a story about a fifteen-year-old boy, who was striving to make a suicide attack<sup>10</sup>. This boy went to the entrance of a headquarter and was captured by the enemy before pulling the pin. The enemy put him in a cell after taking the bomb from his body. After a while, the bomb exploded by itself and destroyed the whole headquarter except for the boy and the wall behind him. Stories about the bodies of dead mujahedeens are also often repeatedly told. Group members share stories of mujahedeens among themselves who were laughing after their death. They do not only tell but also show pictures of these soldiers. Once, they brought a handkerchief of a mujahedeen which was stained with the blood of the soldier. According to them, the handkerchief was fragrant. It was a sign for them that this mujahedeen was a martyr and went to heaven. Moreover, all these miracles and signs such as the laughing face of the dead person or fragrant bloods prove that the Syrian Jihad and the mujahedeens were right and their path was the accurate

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<sup>10</sup> They do not use the word suicide attack when they talk about this issue, instead they use the Arabic term “*istişhad eylemi*” which means conducting a deed by sacrificing his own life.

way<sup>11</sup> to go to heaven. In short, it helps the supporter and inviter of the Syrian Jihad to demonstrate that their deed is legitimate and approved by the God.

I think these narratives affect the audience the most after Quranic verses and hadiths. With that proof, they are being convinced that the jihad is a duty that all Muslim must engage in and Syria is the right place to perform it out. In addition to that, the narratives about the brotherhood in jihad is also very common. All the people who were in Syria for jihad, talk about the atmosphere in the jihad field and tell that there is nothing to fear and it is very comfortable because of the help and friendship that they receive by other brothers, despite the lack of sufficient material sources. Arguably, the narratives about the brotherhood and the happiness that the mujahedeens experience in the jihad helps relax other people who are thinking about participating in the jihad and remove all their doubts.

## **2.6 Legitimization of the Suicide Attacks**

The issue of suicide attacks and other sorts of assaults which causes civilian damage were among the hot debated topics in the meetings. Leaders and speakers of the meetings were aware of the difficulties of explaining and legitimizing of civilian casualties, which were caused by the jihadist rebel groups. To resolve the problem, the speech giver used two explanations, which one of them rely on the Islamic history and the other one to current affairs. The first one is so called “*istiṣhad eylemi*.” A mujahedeen organizes an attack by sacrificing himself to give the enemy a great damage. According to the pro-jihad imams, this sorts of attacks occurred during the time of the Prophet Mohammed in many cases. Several members of the sahaba used this practice to take an advantage during the battle or break a siege. It was almost certain that the exerciser of this attack would die, nevertheless they executed this action. Imams also talk about incidents where a sahaba let himself throw with the help of a catapult to break a siege. Moreover, there is another famous narrative which is about the battle of Uhud. At some point during the battle of Uhud, Islamic forces were losing the war, the Prophet Mohammed were under the siege in a hole, he have been injured by the enemy forces and faced a dead threat. He

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<sup>11</sup> The “straight path” is the English version of the Arabic term, “*sirat-i müstakim*”. Muslims should follow this way, which is the way of God and will lead to the heaven. This word is also repeated in the surah al-Fatihah which is the most repeated sure in the ritual worship of the Muslims.

demanded the help of other sahabes to break the siege and survive. Dozens of sahabes followed his command and attacked the enemy despite the high probability of being killed. Almost all of these sahabes died and was called as martyrs by the Prophet personally. All these stories demonstrate that “*istiṣhad eylemi*” can not be considered as a suicide which is a major sin in Islam, in contrast it is a way to become a martyr and earn the paradise.

Second explanation to legitimize suicide and other sorts of attacks which also conduce civil casualties is about the need and inevitability of those assaults. First of all, because of the type of these attacks, using a bomb vehicle for instance, most of the time, it is impossible to prevent civil casualties. Civilian casualties are not preferred and the planners of such attacks state that they are sorry for the collateral damage. However, there is also some sorts of attacks which the civilian casualties are preferred. I came across this view during the Aleppo Siege. There were many news and reports that the rebel groups which are under the siege in Aleppo are carrying mortar fire out not only to military forces but also to civilians. Someone asked this case and about its trueness. The leader of the group confirmed those attacks and started to explain its reason. According to him, the rebel groups and civilians in Aleppo were under heavy shell which is carried by the Regime’s and Russian forces. When rebel groups responded these attacks by firing mortars to the regime controlled territories and conduced civil casualties, the intensity of shelling of the enemy were decreasing. Thus, the logic of this whole process becomes simplified to, we attack other civilians to protect our own civilians.

The comprehension of democracy by the jihadist are related with the issue of civil casualties. According to their view, in a democracy, every single citizen is responsible for the politics of their government. For example, all US citizens are responsible for the invasion of the Iraq, whether they voted for the current government or not does not matter. In addition to that, according to foreign jihadist fighters, the citizens of a democratic country have capabilities to prevent their states to invade other countries or change the course of their politics. In short, jihadist have a powerful and responsible Western citizen in their notion and therefore it is legitimate if an attack causes collateral damage to these people. The narrative that ‘hundreds of Muslims are suffering because of the infidel democratic Western countries’ assaults and the citizens of these countries ignore these loses’ are very strong reasons to justify the killings of civilians. I could observe such

notions very often during my participation in group meetings, but the most obvious one was from an interview with Cabir, that I will address in detail in the next chapter:

I and other mujahedeen struggle to raise our anger against people and states who are responsible for the oppression of Muslims all around the world. We want that they also experience the pain that we live. We are not people who loves fighting or happy to kill someone. I personally still fear to see blood and I'm not a war machine. However, as sheikh Osama<sup>12</sup> said, if we had channels to deliver our demands to US, we would not bother us to send those planes.

To summarize, the jihadist has their own understanding of democracy, which makes every single citizen responsible for the whole decision process of their government. Next, Muslims are suffering because of this democratic states and the citizens of these states are responsible because they ignore constantly the loses of the Muslims and do not prevent their government to attack Muslim people. Last of all, Muslims do not have any channel to negotiate with these offensive states and their citizens, therefore, they organize attacks which damage both the states and the citizens to revenge and to raise their voice. Through this way of thinking, civilian casualties, which is arrived from jihadist assaults, becomes legitimate.

## **2.7 “Part-Time” Mujahedeens**

Another interesting issue is that most of the mujahedeens consider their participation to the Syrian Jihad as a round trip. Almost all the people that have I met were participating in the jihad in certain time periods and then returned to their homeland. It seemed to me as though they perceived their going to the Syrian Jihad as a break which is a thing that must be done. One of the imams was regularly participating in the jihad in short periods of time such as one or two months and then returning back to his homeland for a short while to conduct religious meetings. The other imam was much more interesting compared to the first one. He was currently in Turkey to open a new business. He was an experienced mujahedeen who had been participating in the Syrian jihad since a couple of years. He has planned to go back to Syria after he settling his business in Turkey. Another person, who was among the leaders of the group was a teacher at a public school. He did not only go to Syria for jihad during the holidays, but also sent his son too

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<sup>12</sup> He means Osama bin Laden.

in different time periods. Another sign that these people do not consider the jihad as something where death is inevitable, is the high number of young people who marry after they participate in jihad. Some of these young people marry in Syria with a Syrian woman but the high number of them marry in Turkey with a Turkish woman. The last donation was collected for two young mujahedeens who wanted to marry in Turkey. These two guys planned to marry as soon as possible and go to Syria after the marriage.

All these examples and cases demonstrate that people who participate in the jihad do not consider it as the last stop of their life. They are heavily affected by the verse, “And it is not [possible] for one to die except by permission of Allah at a decree determined. And whoever desires the reward of this world - We will give him thereof; and whoever desires the reward of the Hereafter - We will give him thereof. And we will reward the grateful.”<sup>13</sup> It means that when the time for one’s death comes, it comes regardless of where they are or what they do. This is why they are comfortable in participating in the jihad and while running their daily lives at the same time. Without understanding that inner process of a person, it is not possible to understand their reason to participate in the jihad.

## **2.8 The Value Rationality of Max Weber**

In this research, I used the term rationality in a similar way to Max Weber’s usage of the term, so as to ultimately grasp the motivation of the mujahedeens and have a robust understanding of the internal process regarding one’s participation in and continuation of jihad. Weber’s conceptualization of rationality is important in that sense:

An act is rational insofar (a) it is oriented to a clearly formulated unambiguous goal, or to a set of values which are clearly formulated and logically consistent; (b) the means chosen are, according to the best available knowledge, adapted to the realization of the goal (Weber, 1947, p. 16).

What I have done in this study was in accordance with this approach to rationality. To understand the mujahedeen, I focused on their goals, how they legitimized their action and what sorts of knowledge they use for it. If we strive to understand their action with our own understanding of rationality, for example, an action or decision is rational if it

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<sup>13</sup> Quran, Ali Imran 145.

materially pays off, it is difficult to understand an individual's decision to participate the jihad. Jihad is rational if we approach to this issue from a mujahedeen's perspective. During the whole study, I stuck to these codes and did not strive to make them say what I wanted to hear. Instead, I tried to hear and record them in their own environment and with their own language. It was sometimes difficult to follow their notions and listen without making any judgment. However, it was useful in terms of having a better picture of their worldview and how they saw all these issues from their own perspective.

The rationality type of Weber that I benefited from in this research, 'value rationality' is critical to making sense of the foreign fighters' radicalization process and their decision to become a foreign jihadist fighter in the first place:

Against 19<sup>th</sup>-century French anthropology, Weber argued that man did not acquire his "rationality" with the Enlightenment and that individuals in all previous epochs were not incapable of rational action. On the contrary, even everyday actions of "primitive" man could be subjectively means-end rational, as, for example, when specific religious rituals were performed with the aim of receiving favours from a god. In Weber's eyes, this pure exchange relationship as it existed in sacrifice and prayer was identical in form to the modern businessman's calculation of the most efficient means to acquire profit. Likewise, the fact that the values in premodern societies diverged widely from modern values did not, for Weber, call into question the basic capacity of man to orient his actions rationally on the basis of values (Kalberg, 1980).

By participating in group meetings and conducting interviews, I strived to understand a jihadist fighter's conditions and worldview, from whence their reasoning stemmed and what sorts of other legitimation processes facilitated the justification of their position. I do not claim that this type of value rationality is the only accurate type of rationality, but emphasize that these people have a different way of thinking and rationality than a rationalist approach would argue to be the case.

## **2.9 Discussion**

In this chapter, I examined/explored the concept of jihad itself and the motivations for it according to active foreign jihadist fighters, or mujahedeens. As I mentioned earlier in the introduction, the radicalization process and why an individual becomes a foreign jihadist fighter is a two stage process. The first stage is the establishment of a Muslim

identity and the legitimization of the jihad as a deed. My observation of the group meetings indicates that the first motivation for an individual in becoming a foreign jihadist fighter stems initially from religious sources. These findings support non-rationalist approaches which argue that ideology, beliefs and emotions are major causes behind the radicalization of individuals. By referencing religious sources, potential jihadists create their own “value rationality” and justify their actions.

In opposition to the rational explanation, which focuses on the material benefits of rebelling or committing suicide attacks, material benefits or strategic gains are not always necessary for an individual to describe his actions as rational. My findings from the group meetings that I attended demonstrate that expected after life benefits of an action, such as participating in the jihad, could be sufficient for a person to describe the action as rational. In the next chapter, I go on to investigate the second stage, along with the first one that I studied in this chapter, which concerns the question of how a potential mujahedeen decides to realize his desire to become a mujahedeen and what sorts of incidents influence him in this decision process.



## **Chapter 3**

### **Interviews<sup>14</sup>**

In this chapter, I will examine how a potential mujahedeen uses his religious identity and religious sources to legitimize his decision to become a foreign jihadist fighter. In addition to that, I will also investigate what sorts of incidents come to affect the radicalization process. To find an answer to the inquiry, I conducted five interviews with mujahedeens and their relatives. I will not use the real information about the mujahedeen and their relatives due to confidentiality. To that end, I have given them pseudonyms. All the interviews that I have conducted took place in Turkey and in three different cities. The representativeness of the selected persons is not high but it is also not restricted to a particular group. They were from three different parties. Actually, I planned to conduct interviews with more than five people but it was difficult to convince people because of the recent developments in Syria, especially after the loss of Aleppo by rebel groups.

The ages of the participants ranged between 17 and 56. Their level of education also varied. Some of them have only completed high school and have not attended any traditional madrasah education, while others have gone through both secular and traditional education. Three of the foreign jihadist fighters were married and two of them were single. Three of them have fixed jobs in Turkey while others were busy with jihad and their education. Only one of the issued mujahedeen was dead. Umeyr, died during a battle in near Aleppo. The income level of the fighters was also different from each other.

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<sup>14</sup> See appendix for the complete records of the interviews.

There was no person who was wealthy, but also no one who was poor. In short, regarding the profile of the interviewees, there is no common characteristic which I could identify. One of the interviewees was a good example to demonstrate the randomness of being mujahedeen. Ömer was a Syrian person who currently lived in Turkey. He is in his fifties, and runs a small grocery. The reason why I interviewed him was that one of his sons fights in Syria on the side of the rebel group (recently with Ahrar el-Sham) since the beginning of the Syrian uprising and another one has travelled to Syria as mujahedeen.

### **3.1 Becoming a Foreign Jihadist Fighter**

The initial drive of the interviews was to inquire into the participation process. How did an individual choose to attend the jihad? The response of the interviewees was quite similar to this question. All the interviewees began explaining their reasoning by using religious doctrines of Islam. Verses from the Quran was the first reference that they made. Isa's answer to the question of why he chose to participate in the jihad is a good example. He is 45 years old and married. He has 5 children and works in his own company. He went through secular education and has a high school diploma. He stated that he was a national athlete in combat sports and later a trainer:

After I increased my knowledge on Islam, I realized that our duty in this world was not merely eating, drinking and then dying. The essence of life was the worship of God. One of the requirements of this worship is helping other Muslims, who are our brothers according to Quran<sup>15</sup>, who are in need and who are under the oppression of non-Muslim forces.

The surah al-Hujurat 49:10<sup>16</sup> is the main verse which indicates clearly that all Muslims are brother. Thanks to this verse, potential mujahedeens establish an emotional connection with other Muslims. At the first stage, they recognize their identity (they are Muslims and all Muslims are brothers) and next, they learn what to do, or what their duties are as a Muslim. Another interviewee, Cabir is 20 years old and is a madrasah student. He also finished high school and was trying to be enrolled in a university. He participated in jihad when he was 15 years old. Couple of years later, he was heavily injured because of a missile attack by the US and stayed in come for two weeks. He

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<sup>15</sup> He refers to the verse from the surah al-Hujurat 49:10: "The believers are but brothers, so make settlement between your brothers. And fear Allah that you may receive mercy."

<sup>16</sup> For the English translation of Quran, I used the website [www.quran.com](http://www.quran.com)

survived but lost one eye and the other has only 30 percent of a healthy eye's capacity. Moreover, he had difficulties to speak and was constantly losing cerebrospinal fluid. His response to the same question, of how he decided to participate in the jihad, highlights a key part of the picture:

The most obvious reason why I participated in jihad is that jihad is *fard ayn* according to Quran and Sharia. Moreover, surely all Muslims are brother<sup>17</sup>. Religious brotherhood is superior than the blood brothers. If only one Syrian woman have been raped, I would be ashamed not only from my religion but also myself. Another important thing to participate in the jihad is the benefits that we expect from God, high rewards of jihad and martyrdom.

In addition to the verses which state that all Muslim's are brothers and it is *fard ayn* to help other Muslims who are in need, the specific verses about jihad explain how to do it. My interview with Ahmed is a good example to have a knowledge about the religious sources of the jihad. Ahmet was one of the people that I met during my participation in group meetings. He was in his mid forties, married and father of 5 children. He had his education through secular schools and was currently a religion teacher in a public school. He was one of the heads of the group that I observed and a "part-time" mujahedeen. When I asked Ahmet about the sources of jihad, he arrayed several verses and hadiths to demonstrate the legitimacy of the jihad:

It is very simple, Quran, hadiths, life of the Sahaba and 1400 years of Islamic tradition. There are many verses in Quran which indicates the importance of jihad. An-Nisa 75, 76 and 84 is quite obvious on this issue<sup>18</sup>. After reading those verses, there is no doubt about the necessity of the jihad. In addition to that, there are many hadiths which highlights the jihad in

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<sup>17</sup> He refers also to Al-Hujurat 10: "The believers are but brothers, so make settlement between your brothers. And fear Allah that you may receive mercy."

<sup>18</sup> An-Nisa 75, 76 and 85:

And what is [the matter] with you that you fight not in the cause of Allah and [for] the oppressed among men, women, and children who say, "Our Lord, take us out of this city of oppressive people and appoint for us from Yourself a protector and appoint for us from Yourself a helper?(75).

Those who believe fight in the cause of Allah, and those who disbelieve fight in the cause of Taghut. So fight against the allies of Satan. Indeed, the plot of Satan has ever been weak (76).

So fight, [O Muhammad], in the cause of Allah; you are not held responsible except for yourself. And encourage the believers [to join you] that perhaps Allah will restrain the [military] might of those who disbelieve. And Allah is greater in might and stronger in [exemplary] punishment (85).

accordance to verses from Quran. One of the famous one of such hadiths is, “fight with those polytheists with your wealth, hands, lives and words.”<sup>19</sup> Hadiths do not support the jihad in a positive way, but it also warns Muslim who do not participate in it when it is necessary. For instance, “those who do not participate in the jihad, or do not equip a fighter, or be a good successor for the fighter’s family, Allah will punish him with a apocalypse before the doomsday.”<sup>20</sup>

### **3.2 “Humiliation of Muslims” and “Brotherhood” Between Mujahedeens**

Another reason to joining the jihad besides religious doctrine is the feeling that Muslims are treated unjustly other non-Muslim countries such as the US and Russia. In accordance with the surah al-Hujurat and at Tawbah, it is a duty for a proper Muslim to help other brothers who are treated unjustly. Cabir’s statement that “if only one Syrian woman have been raped, I would be ashamed” is an example of such feelings and understanding. The reason why Umeyr decided to participate in the Syrian jihad at the first stage was similar with Cabir. Umeyr was 21 years old when he first participated to jihad and travelled to Syria. He participated in the Syrian Jihad until his dead in 2016. He was married with a Syrian woman and have a child. I personally met with him in 2015. He was in Turkey because of fund raising for the Syrian Jihad. To realize the interview about his life, I contacted with a first degree relative of him, whose name is Bilal. Umeyr was also affected by the several videos and pictures that show Muslim women and children in misery.

There was an issue which emerged thanks to the additional comments of the interviewees. When I asked them about their experience in jihad, all of them mentioned about the brotherhood and friendship that they encountered on the battle field. During my interview with Cabir, he wanted to add some comment and talked about this issue:

If I may, I would like to add something. One of the main reasons why I want to return to jihad and want a part of it is the brotherhood that I experienced during the jihad. From the first minute on, when you meet with your brothers, you start to think that if it will necessary, I could sacrifice my own life. For example, during our night watch, my partner protected me with his body all the time during the shelling of war planes, so the shrapnel did not hurt me. There was another brother who had fought for six years before coming to

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<sup>19</sup> Source: Ebu Davud 2504; Ahmed bin Hanbel, Mūsned 3/1245

<sup>20</sup> Source: Ibni Mace 2762; Ebu Davud 2503; Darimi 5/244

Syria. He could easily be a commander but refused to be one and served as a normal mujahedeen to our brothers, prepared breakfast and dug trenches. He was the person that I loved most in this world beside my family. When I was injured and stayed in coma, I saw him in my dream almost every day. In short, he and other brothers were one of the main reasons for me to return the jihad.

### **3.3 Recruitment of the Foreign Jihadist Fighters**

After deciding to participate in the jihad and to be a part of it, next issue is naturally how to realize it. Only one of the five people was a citizen of Syria. Other four people have Turkish nationality. Thus Turkish nationals needed to find a way to Syria. The results of my interviews indicate that there is an absence of a central recruitment agency for the rebel groups who are existent in Syria. The participation to the jihad and finding one's way to Syria is realized only by personal connection and with the help of acquaintances. Neither throughout my participation to group meetings nor in the interviews, did I recognize any authorized agency by the central administration of the rebel groups which was specifically assigned to make recruitments. "Freelance Jihad" as was used in the book 'Islamic Radicalism and Global Jihad' explains fairly what it is meant regarding the recruitment of mujahedeens that I observed throughout this research:

Groups that are genuinely pursuing "freelance" jihad emerge from preexisting relationships that draw on personal bonds. In essence, they embody the buddy approach to radicalization, in which friendship and kinship are key features. They are self-supporting in terms of getting funding and supplies, and they have no real need to reach out to anyone outside their group (Springer, Regens, & Edgar, 2009, p. 165).

Similar to this explanation, if a person decides to join the jihad, they ask for advice from an acquaintance. They deliver this demand to another person until they find someone who can help the willing person to realize his wish. The intermediary does not contact any central office of a particular rebel group who is responsible for the recruitment. He only transfers the wish of the willing person to the small unit which he will be joining when he arrives in Syria. What remains is finding a secure way to travel to Syria.

### **3.4 Cost and Benefits of Becoming a Foreign Jihadist Fighter**

In the second part of the interviews, I focused on the material, earthly aspect of the issue. The main concern of this part was the investigation of the assertion that 'fighters choose to fight alongside the rebellion groups because of the material benefits of such

action, or because of their poor financial conditions' (Humpreys & Weinstein, 2008). According to the interviewees, there are no material benefits of joining the jihad. In contrast, in most cases, they pay their own expenses. Isa's response to my question about the worldly benefits is interesting to read:

In a place where the dead prevails, it is not logical to consider worldly things or make calculations. Chechenia or Syria are not locations which you can expect earthly benefits. You have to face continuous and unexpected threats from the enemy the whole time and death is always nearby. If you do not think that you sell out your life to the God<sup>21</sup>, it is impossible to live in these conditions.

Other responses were similar in this way. Cabir told me that they did not obtain any regular wage in Jabhat al Nusra. At the beginning of his participation of jihad, which is approximately 2014, they would occasionally be rewarded. However, due to the poor financial situation of the rebel group in the recent years, they did not even get any small rewards. Omer's story with his son was in a similar line. His son was injured during a battle and needed to be taken by car to a Turkish hospital. He went from Istanbul to the Syrian border to pay the transfer cost of his son to a Turkish hospital. The responses of Ahmed and Umeyr also indicate that they did not have material benefits such as regular wages, in contrast, they strived to collect aids such as food and cash money to help the Syrian Jihad.

I also posed the question if they wanted to stay in Syria in case of a possible victory to the Turkish mujahedeens. To remember, some scholars argued that the assaults of rebel groups such as suicide attacks are made with a strategic consideration to prevail in a certain territory (Pape, 2003, Pape 2005). The Turkish citizens that I met during the group meetings or interviews did not support the claims of Pape and similarly thinking scholars. Most of them were living in their home country Turkey and visited Syria only for the purpose of jihad. Additionally, they did not have a future plan to settle in Syria after a possible victory. They consider the Syrian case as an opportunity to do their religious

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<sup>21</sup> He refers to the surah At-Tawbah 111: "Indeed, Allah has purchased from the believers their lives and their properties [in exchange] for that they will have Paradise. They fight in the cause of Allah, so they kill and are killed. [It is] a true promise [binding] upon Him in the Torah and the Gospel and the Qur'an. And who is truer to his covenant than Allah? So rejoice in your transaction which you have contracted. And it is that which is the great attainment."

duty, which is jihad. The name of the state or the coordinate of the territory does not matter in that sense. The examples of many mujahedeens, who were fighters in Chechenia, Afghanistan and finally in Syria, can be taken as evidence of this understanding. Cabir's response in our interview was fruitful to capturing that very sentiment:

Commanders of Islam are obliged to go to jihad once in a year. The purpose of jihad is not limited with Syria, but to help all brothers around the world who are in need. Even if only one woman is enslaved by the enemy, jihad is a *fard ayn* for all other Muslims. Therefore, even if we won the battle against Esad and established Islamic state, I would participate in jihad if it is necessary.

Last of all, at the end of my interviews, I questioned the participants about what they expected from jihad in terms of worldly and spiritual benefits. The responses that I got were different from the conventional assumptions. They were not participating in jihad only because of their desire to become a martyr (unearthly benefits) or to gain strategic advantage against their enemy (worldly benefits). It is true that their first purpose is to defeat the enemy and then to become a martyr during this process, but it is not the ultimate goal. They also do not consider themselves as losers if they do not achieve one or both of these goals. Isa, who fought both in Chechenia and Syria, was the first interviewee who made me aware of this fact by stating the follows:

According to Islam, victory is doing the right things, no matter what the conclusion is. Victory is something which is granted by Allah. He will not ask us about the conclusion, but our intention and faith and whether we acted according to his will or not. If some mujahedeen participate in jihad only because of the purpose to earn the acceptance of the God, then he is surely successful no matter what the earthly result is. If we get the acceptance of the God, it is the most valuable one, it means entry to heaven, and this is the absolute aim of a Muslim.

The interesting part of this comment is that a Muslim does not need to be a martyr or defeat the enemy to earn entry into heaven for the afterlife. What matters according to these participants is to be a proper Muslim just as God demands. These people do not join the jihad because their ultimate goal is to become a martyr or to defeat the enemy. They consider it as a great opportunity to gain *ecr*, God's reward for a good deed. If their jihad

proceeds three months and they do not become a martyr or defeat the enemy, it does not matter. They focus on what they gain in through this very opportunity

Consider that a small-weak second or third league soccer team plays against a worldwide known team such as Real Madrid. The likelihood that the small soccer team wins against Real Madrid is very slim, but not impossible. If the small soccer team does not win, but the players struggle with all they have, no one can blame them for their defeat because of the unequal balance of power between these teams. With respect to individual players, they surely desired to be the star of the game by being the player of the game no matter if they win or lose. However, they would not consider themselves as losers if they fight with all their capacities and show the best effort for their team.

The jihad has the same logic. The players of the small-weak soccer team are the mujahedeens. All the mujahedeen that I met were aware of the fact that they were weak against their enemy and the victory was not impossible but very difficult to achieve. They have knowledge about the great praise of being a martyr, but they were also satisfied with the *ecr* that they would receive by participating in the jihad and acting in accordance with God's rules. In that case, the major motivation for the mujahedeen was the obtaining of *ecr* during the time that they joined the jihad. The fact that the *ecr* of being martyr is much greater than digging trenches or leaving the jihad field without achieving a great victory is not a big concern for the mujahedeen. A genuine faith to God, helping other Muslim brothers because of the fact that they are Muslims and it is fard ayn, digging trenches, preparing breakfast, in short, gaining as much *ecr* as possible in a certain period of time is the real concern for them. Cabir's comments on this issue are notable in grasping this logic:

What is victory or not will be decided in God's opinion. If I killed all soldiers of Esad and did not do it with a clear faith, it would be a disaster for me because I did not do it for the approval of God. In contrast, if I had only small achievements but done it for the will of God, then I would consider myself as successful. Jihad is not only killing or to damage the enemy, but it is much more; helping your brothers, serving them, carrying water or digging trenches. Thus, we strived to be helpful in all this respects, and not only in causing harm to enemies.



### 3.5 Discussion

In this chapter, I focused both stages of the radicalization process and why an individual decides to become a foreign jihadist fighter. The first stage of the radicalization process is the establishment of the Muslim identity by referring religious sources. The second stage is the emergence of the notion, “I have to do something as a Muslim to help my Muslim brothers who are in misery and exposed to injustice treatment and oppression of the Western countries.” The first stage tells what a Muslim is, and what his duties are. The second stage uses the knowledge which is acquired in the first stage to practice it in the real life and thus the radicalization process finishes.

By posing questions to the interviewees such as, “why are you joining the jihad, do you receive any salary as a foreign jihadist fighter and what is your ultimate goal” I tested the current literature on the foreign jihadist fighters. According to my findings, the arguments of the rationalist approach, which focuses on the material benefits, are not valid. In contrast, the explanatory power of the non-rationalist approaches, which focuses on the religion, ideology, beliefs and emotions are quite high. As Weber stated in his concept of “value rationality”, the rationality of the foreign jihadist fighters does not stem from the material calculation, but instead, their expectation about the after life. Moreover, to obtain the after life benefits, they do not necessarily need to become a martyr or defeat the enemy. It is sufficient to gain *ecr* (deed) and the approval of God by only having a genuine faith during their participation in jihad. The consequences of their action as foreign jihadist fighter is not important for the success. This could be one of the reasons why the flow of the foreign jihadist fighters to Syria do not decrease after several defeats and territory lose of the jihadist rebel groups.

## Chapter 4

### Conclusion:

Having been inspired by Weber, the rationally chosen ends of the mujahedeen was the main attention point of this study. None of the subjects that I listened to during the group meetings or interviews, considered their actions irrational. They have their personal and subjective reasoning and logical explanation (value rationality) for their act of attending the jihad and being a mujahedeen. In general, I think drawing a border for rationality or determining what is rational or not in a certain context, is not the task of the researchers. If they still insist to start a study with a constant notion about rationality, it is inevitable to fall into a prejudice trap. The most difficult aspect of such a micro level analysis is to avoid such prejudice. I struggled to avoid this particular fallacy and focused on the comments of the participants and considered them as true. I could not test or verify everything what they told to me, but I strived to crosscheck their statements by other statements that they have made. For example, I did not doubt Cabir's statement that he was injured by a US bomb strike after seeing his injures. I could also observe that Ahmet was disappearing occasionally, especially during the holidays for couple of weeks. To be sure that he was travelling to Syria, I asked his friends where he may be, and could understand from their responses that he was participating in jihad. In short, I cannot verify that all statements that I recorded were %100 the truth per se, but I can say that there is also no proof for me to make me say that the statements are not genuine. Therefore, I consider my data, whether my observations in group meetings or interviews, as reliable.

The inquiry of this research was to grasp the motivations of the mujahedeen to participate in jihad. By conducting participatory observation and interviews, I tried to find an answer to the different questions that are part of this inquiry. I tested all the assumptions that I mentioned in the introduction, which focus on material benefits of such action or ideology, religion and emotions, by observing the participants in the group meetings and asking relevant questions to the interviewees. The results of this examination indicate that:

(a) The religious doctrine based on Islam, such as verses from Quran and hadiths and the life of the important Islamic figures play a substantial role in connecting an individual believer to the whole community. Quran verses such as, “all Muslims are brothers” are the most obvious example of this connection;

(b) After the construction of a Muslim identity, the religious doctrine plays its second role by structuring and building a resistance against the current humiliating situation of the Muslim communities around the whole world. This feeling is supported by the act of Western and other non-Muslim countries such as Russia. The picture becomes clearer for an individual: “I am a Muslim, all Muslims are my brothers, non-Muslim are suffering because of the infidels, it is a *fard ayn* for me to help my brothers and sacrifice myself if it is necessary.” The internal process of an individual becoming a jihadist is almost the same according to my observations and data.

(c) After constructing his own Muslim identity, and deciding to participate in the jihad, turning this into reality and becoming a mujahedeen is the next step. I could not identify any central administration of Jabhat Al Nusra or other rebel groups which are charged with the recruitment of new fighters. The major ways to join jihadist groups that I could identify during the research were participating to the local religious groups, establishing personal connections and receiving the support of the acquaintances.

(d) The profiles of the mujahedeen vary and it was not possible for me to construct a common profile for the participants. Their age, income level, marital and social status and education level were different.

(e) Individual experiences of a mujahedeen such as ‘miracles’ that they have encountered or brotherhood, friendship between the mujahedeen during their stay on the jihad fields, enables them to personally legitimize their decision to join the jihad and encourages them to continue to participate in it.

Last of all, (f) in contrast to the conventionally thinking, the purpose, or ultimate goal of a mujahedeen is not becoming a martyr or defeating the enemy. Achieving these both ends, defeating the enemy and becoming a martyr is the absolute gain and what all the mujahedeen dream of, but not the only condition for them to consider themselves successful. Above all, what would make for a successful jihad is the approval of God, not the victory nor the status of a martyr. These fighters think that they can have the approval of the God not only by being a martyr or defeating the enemy, but also by digging trenches, serving their other brothers, keeping watch and in addition to these, having a genuine faith in God. In short, they do not need to be a hero to achieve success in jihad. Because of this very reason, the number of the mujahedeen does not drop even after defeats and territory losses in several jihad locations such as Afghanistan and Syria.

The conclusion of this research is that the religious doctrine of Islam and the feeling that Muslims are being exposed to oppression and the unjust treatment of the Western countries are the main reasons for an individual to become a mujahedeen. The verses from Quran, hadiths of the Prophet Mohammed, stories of the major Islamic figures are the main sources which affect the decision of a person by starting and helping the radicalization process. In addition to that, news about the Muslims who are in misery, under oppression, videos and pictures of the dead or injured people and personal experiences or narratives from acquaintances are other reasons for the radicalization. The material benefits of becoming a mujahedeen, in terms of financial gain, are not observable, especially in the Syrian jihad. Almost all of the mujahedeen pay from their own budget to travel and stay in Syria, to obtain any wages is unthinkable in these conditions. Another type of material benefits, such as taking new territories to settle and building their own state to live in is also not observable in this context. None of the mujahedeen have a plan to stay in Syria in the future, after a possible victory against the enemy. Instead, they either want to return to their home country or plan to travel to another jihad location after they finish their task in Syria.

#### **4.1 Discussion**

The scope of this research was restricted in accordance with the material facilities. The number of the observed groups and interviewee can be extended and thus the representation level could be increased. In addition to that, the Salafist ideology and

traditional Islamic system of education, madrasah, are worth of further studies in order for researchers to grasp the reasons behind the radicalization process and the participation to jihad. I could not identify common characteristics of the mujahedeen, but the salafi ideology was considerably widespread and common among the interviewee and the effect of the madrasah could be perceived in different parts of the process. Therefore, it is possible that these two concepts could be crucial whether during the initial decision process to become a mujahedeen or during the way to travel to jihad territories. Lastly, another study which focuses on the people, who are approximately in the same conditions as people who decided to become a jihadist, but did not choose to become one, could be fruitful to understand the radicalization path from a different perspective and offer a constructive comparative approach to the issue.

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## APPENDIX

### Interview 1:

My first interview was with Isa<sup>22</sup>. He is 45 years old and married. He has 5 children and works in his own company. He finished secular education and has high school diploma. He stated that he was national athlete in combat sport and later a trainer. My questions to Isa and his answers are as follows:

- Ayhan: How did you decide initially to participate in jihad?

- Isa: I was not aware of Islam and had lived non-religious life until I became 19 years old. I did not know why I exist. Then, I started to think about this issue and learned Islam, Quran and the life of the Prophet Mohammed with the help of people that I well know. After I increased my knowledge on Islam, I realized that our duty in this world was not merely eating, drinking and then dying. The essence of life was the worship of God. One of the requirements of this worship is helping other Muslims, who are our brothers according to Quran<sup>23</sup>, who are in need and who are under the oppression of non-Muslim forces. At that time period, the Bosnian war begun, but unfortunately, I was not mentally ready for it. However, during the second Chechenia war, I felt that I need to do something to stop the injustice and my faith supported me in that sense. Thus, I left my dear wife and

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<sup>22</sup> Isa is his nickname. I did not use real names because of security reasons.

<sup>23</sup> He refers to the verse from the surah al-Hujurat 49:10: "The believers are but brothers, so make settlement between your brothers. And fear Allah that you may receive mercy."

two children at home and went to the jihad. What I was doing was similar to the action of the ant who tried to put out the fire of Abraham<sup>24</sup>.

- Ayhan: What was the greatest risk that you have to consider during your journey?

- Isa: One of the meanings of war is dead. If you go to war, you firstly take the risk to being killed. It does not matter if you do it for the approval of God or as a professional soldier. Being killed is always an option for all parts. I took this risk because of my worship to the God. I rely upon the verse “And it is not [possible] for one to die except by permission of Allah at a decree determined.”<sup>25</sup>” If my time would come in the jihad battle by defend the rights of oppressed Muslims, it would be a worthy death and much more valuable than dying in a car accident like a cat. It seems that my time has not come and I’m still living.

- Ayhan: Did you go to Jihad with a notion where there is no turning back or did you planned your return.

- Isa: I did neither plan to settle there nor return after a certain time period. I completely give myself to the hands of God and my destiny which is determined by God. I stayed two and a half years in my first journey.

- Ayhan: Did you have any worldly plan to achieve when you joined the jihad?

- Isa: In a place where the dead prevails, it is not logical to consider worldly thinks or make calculations. Chechenia or Syria are not locations which you can

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<sup>24</sup> This narrative is well known in Islamic World. “The pagan Nimrud throw the prophet Abraham into the fire because of his action against their idols. Meanwhile, one of the ant carried a drop of water to the fire. Other ants asked him what was he doing about. It is impossible to extinguish the fire with this single drop. The ant responded, and said, I know that I could not stop the fire with my tiny efforts, but God may know in which part of the struggle I was.” This and other similar narratives which focuses on the process and not the result of the action is widely used by the jihadist.

<sup>25</sup> Surah Al-i Imran 145.

expect earthly benefits. You have to face continuum and unexpected threats of the enemy whole time and dead is always nearby. If you do not think that you sell out your life to the God<sup>26</sup>, it is impossible to live in these conditions.

- Ayhan: What was the most interesting experience during your jihad?

- Isa: I have several incidents which can be counted interesting or unusual. To understand the interesting part of the incidents that I lived, you have to know the condition of Chechenia jihad. There were 450 thousand citizens and same number of Russian soldiers. The size of the country is also relatively small, especially if you consider the high number of soldiers. Once we were mobilizing from our current base for an assault. We were around twenty fighters and stopped for perform an ablution and pray. The structure of the location was flat and surrounded by the forest. After a while, Russian soldiers began to attack from the inside of the forest with all what they have. Despite the unequal battle positions and high number of Russian soldiers, we only had three wounded brothers. We learned a day after that the Russian were with 200 soldiers and 40 of them were dead. I see it as a miracle. It was impossible for us to survive such attack in this poor conditions. Nevertheless, none of us were dead and the enemy have 40 loses. If this was not the will of God, what else can be. We have lived through many cases such this, because the forces of the two sides were totally unequal. If you launch a simple rocket to them, they responded with a rocket, which only the motor of it is more than three meter.

- Ayhan: What could you say about your friends in the jihad?

- Isa: Our journey to Chechenia was really a long and difficult one. It took 37 days for me to enter the Chechenia. During this time period we constantly were the subject of Russian attacks. We have merely to eat and lost many of our friends.

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<sup>26</sup> He refers to the surah At-Tawbah 111: "Indeed, Allah has purchased from the believers their lives and their properties [in exchange] for that they will have Paradise. They fight in the cause of Allah, so they kill and are killed. [It is] a true promise [binding] upon Him in the Torah and the Gospel and the Qur'an. And who is truer to his covenant than Allah? So rejoice in your transaction which you have contracted. And it is that which is the great attainment."

For example, one of our friends was injured during a ambush. Another friends tried to rescue him from the ambush and died. A third one saw all this incident and strived to rescue both of them and died too. At the end all of them were dead. Besides that, the resources are very scarce in the jihad. Many of our brothers share their food and clothes with their friends despite the fact that their own resources are not sufficient for themselves. In short, they show the mercy of a mother to their brothers and you would not encounter such situation where everyone helps each other in the modern world. Actually this is the real struggle of a mujahedeen, the struggle of nafs<sup>27</sup>. This battle with nafs is much harder than fighting against the enemy. My brothers in jihad have proved that they successfully fought against their nafs with their behavior to their brothers and struggle against the enemy. There were people from Turkey, France, Germany and even from Japan who converted to Islam. There was a Saudi Arabian citizen who was a broker and very rich in his home country. There was a young boy in the age of 17 who has asthma. He lost all his medication during ambushes of Russia but have no problem when I stood with him one year. Moreover, The Amir of the Turks was a lawyer who graduated from Istanbul University.

- Ayhan: Did you have any determined objective during the jihad which you can consider yourself successfully after realizing it? For example, did you tell yourself that you will give harm Russia or Esad regime in specific areas?

- Isa: If you read the history or examine the Islam, you can easily conclude that there is no state, empire or earthly power which is impossible to overthrow. The most important thing here is not the balance of power, but your action is right and legitimate. Best example of this is the Afghan war. The balance of power between the mujahedeen and Russia was not equal. Despite these facts they succeed against Russia. Our initial purpose to participate in jihad was stopping

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<sup>27</sup> NAFS (a.), soul. Nafs, in early Arabic poetry meant the self or person, while soul means breath and wind. Beginning with the Qur'an, nafs also means soul, and soul means a special angel messenger and a special divine quality. Only in post-Qur'anic literature are nafs and soul equated and both applied to the human spirit, angels and Jinn. Since the two concepts of nafs and soul are so closely connected, both will be considered here. (<http://www.muslimphilosophy.com/ei2/nafs.htm>)

the Russian oppression against Chechen people. We thought that if we genuinely fight against Russia, we could at least throw them out of Chechenia. We failed and the reason why we fail was not Russian enormous military power, but that we, mujahedeen, made mistakes and were perhaps not genuine enough. Because Allah says in Quran, if we have faith and righteous deeds, we will prevail in this world as our ancestors have<sup>28</sup>. We never consider any earthly power stronger than the God.

- Ayhan: You fought almost three years in Chechenia and could not cause any great damage to the Russia or similarly in Syria. Is that not a failure?

- Isa: According to Islam, victory is doing the right things, no matter what the conclusion is. Victory is something which is granted by Allah. He will not ask us about the conclusion, but our intention and faith and if we act according to his will or not. If some mujahedeen participate in jihad only because of the purpose to earn the acceptance of the God, then he is surely successful no matter what the earthly result is. If we get the acceptance of the God, it is the most valuable one, it means entry to heaven, and this is the absolute aim of a Muslim.

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<sup>28</sup> He refers to the verse of Noah 55: “Allah has promised those who have believed among you and done righteous deeds that He will surely grant them succession [to authority] upon the earth just as He granted it to those before them and that He will surely establish for them [therein] their religion which He has preferred for them and that He will surely substitute for them, after their fear, security, [for] they worship Me, not associating anything with Me. But whoever disbelieves after that - then those are the defiantly disobedient.”

## Interview 2:

My next interview was with Cabir. He was 20 years old and was a madrasah student. He also finished high school and was trying to be enrolled in a university. He participated jihad when he was 15 years old. Couple of years later, he was heavily injured because of a missile attack of US and stayed two weeks in coma. He survived but lost one eye and the other one have only the 30 percent of a healthy eye's capacity. Moreover, he had difficulties to speak and was losing constantly cerebrospinal fluid.

- Ayhan: How did you decide to participate to Jihad?

- Cabir: Jihad is our family profession. We have grow with jihad. My father and uncle also participated in jihad. My uncle and the uncle of my best friend became martyr in Afghanistan inshallah. Tales of mujahedeen and the cruelty that the ummah of Islam is subject to have affected me at most.

- Ayhan: did you fear of something or think about any risky when you go to Syria?

- Cabir: My father told me that if you want to succeed in jihad and be a brave man, then you have to let all your earthly demands and life behind your back after crossing the border. I internalize this principle and therefore decided to take all the risk. Of course I have had many fears and problems at the beginning but thanks to our experienced brothers I could overcome it. Moreover, you realize during the skirmishes that the only power who can protect you is Allah and after you grasp it, it is much more easy than before.

- Ayhan: What was your basic notions about jihad?

- Cabir: The most obvious reason why I participated in jihad is that jihad is *fard ayn* according to Quran and Sharia. Moreover, surely all Muslims are brother<sup>29</sup>. Religious brotherhood is superior than the blood brothers. If only one Syrian woman has been raped, I would be ashamed not only from my religion but also myself. Another important think to participate in the jihad is the benefits that we expect from God, high rewards of jihad

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<sup>29</sup> He refers to Al-Hujurat 10: "The believers are but brothers, so make settlement between your brothers. And fear Allah that you may receive mercy."

and martyrdom. Lastly, why is always Muslims who suffers all around the world. If three people dies in Europe it matters for everyone, but if hundred dies in Mosul, no one cares.

- Ayhan: Did you have any plan to damage your enemies in Syria?

- Cabir: I was part of a sniper team and our head was one of the leading person in this field. We cause substantial damages to our enemies, thanks God.

- Ayhan: What did you impress at most during your jihad in Syria?

- Cabir: I had two brothers which I love, Talha and Yusuf. We were talking among ourselves during an attack and ask other one to be our witness for our martyrdom if we die during this battle. There were two different locations for our attack and the space between them was only five meter. We were at the back front and got an order that a camera must be given to the next front. First, they gave me the camera to carry it out, and it seem a very easy task. Out of sudden, brother Talha told me that he will serve this duty and took the camera from me. After he gone, a tank attacked the front and all of our brothers, including Talha lost their life and became martyr inshallah. Talha brother lost his two legs and many blood. After he died, he was smiling and one of our brothers said, "hey Talha, are you laughing because of the houris that you see in heaven." I swear of God, when our brothers talked like that, he opened his mouth and continued to laugh. I think it was the case where I was impressed at most.

- Ayhan: Well then. Did you get any salary or material benefits from your group?

- Cabir: No. When I first go to Syria, we heard that ISIS pays 300 dollars' salary but we did not consider ISIS convenient for jihad and therefore declined it. Our group do not pay any salaries but occasionally, they distributed a small amount of money, but it also stopped in recent years.

- Ayhan: When you went to Syrian jihad, the conflict was continuing and you came back and it is still going on. What did you achieve?

- Cabir: What is victory or not will be decided in God's opinion. If I killed all soldiers of Esad and did not do it with a clear faith, it would be a disaster for me because I did not do it for the approval of God. In contrast, if I had only small achievements but done it for the will of God, then I would consider myself as successful. Jihad is not only killing or to damage the enemy, but it is much more helping your brothers, serve them, carrying waters or digging trenches. Thus, we strived to be helpful in all this fields, not only giving damage to enemies.

- Ayhan: Do you plan to return to jihad after you are badly injured?

- Cabir: We did what we did for God's approval and the fact that I'm a disabled person is the will of God. Moreover, these wounds are a honour for me. I consulted with my commander and they offered me to lead a group in the Syrian jihad. However, we made further consultation and my commander decided that I should continue to my religious education in madrasah. I'm currently a madrasah student and go to jihad every summer. I and other mujahedeen struggle to raise our anger against people and states who are responsible to the oppression of Muslim all around the world. We want that they also experience the pain that we live. We are not people who loves fighting or happy to kill someone. I personally still fear to see blood and I'm not a war machine. However, as sheikh Osama<sup>30</sup> said, if we had channels to deliver our demands to US, we would not bother us to send those planes.

- Ayhan: Suppose that you won in Syria and established there an Islamic state, would you settle there? Moreover, what would you do if another jihad begins in a different part of the world?

- Cabir: Commanders of Islam are obliging to go to jihad once in a year. The purpose of jihad is not limited with Syria, but to help all brothers around the world who are in need. Even if only one women is enslaved by the enemy, jihad is a *fard ayn* for all other Muslims. Therefore, even if we won the battle against Esad and established Islamic state, I would participate in jihad if it is necessary.

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<sup>30</sup> He means Osama bin Laden.



- Ayhan: Thank you for your answers.

- Cabir: If I may, I would like to add something. One of the main reasons why I want to return to jihad and want a part of it is the brotherhood that I experienced during the jihad. From the first minute on, when you meet with your brothers, you start to think that if it will necessary, I could sacrifice my own life. For example, during our night watch, my partner protected me with his body all the time during the shelling of war planes, so the shrapnel did not hurt me. There was another brother who has fought six years before coming Syria. He could easily be a commander but refused to be one and served as a normal mujahedeen to our brothers, prepared breakfast or digged trenches. He was the person that I loved most in this world beside my family. When I was injured and stayed in coma, I saw him in my dream almost at every day. In short, he and other brothers were one of the main reason for me to return the jihad.

### **Interview 3:**

My third interview was with a Syrian who lives currently in Turkey. He was in his fifties, and runs a small grocery. The reason why I interviewed with him was that one of his son fights in Syrian on the side of the rebel group (recently with Ahrar el-Sham) since the beginning of the Syrian uprising. The interesting part was that another son of him immigrated Syria while his brother chooses to stay and fight.

Ayhan: I heard that one of your son is fighting on the side of rebel groups and the other one immigrated to Germany. What is the reason behind your son choice, who have stayed in Syria?

X: Thanks God, he is there for jihad since six years. He has been injured twice, and I told him several times its enough for you, its time to quit of this war, but he did not listen to me. After his second wound, I sent him money for the trip to Turkey. He was badly injured from his leg. I told him not to go back, but he did not listen to me (he reproach with a sad expression).

Ayhan: Does he have any material gain in Syria?

X: No. As I said before, he did not even had money to travel to Turkey when he was injured. I sent him the required amount. If the rebel groups were not good persons, or if they were criminals like burglar, they could not stand against Esad six years. It would be over already. They are able to continue their fight because of their good will and God helps. There are many people from different countries who help them and do not have any material objects. My son told me about a boy who came from France. He graduated recently from his university when he came to Syria. The experienced ones suggested him to take a role at the back field and serve in different purposes, but he declined it and wanted to absolutely fight in the front. In his first battle he has been shot by his head and died immediately (his eyes gets full with tears and this happened during the whole interview only once and not during talking about his son, but this French boy). Another indicator that the material benefits are at the back seat in Syrian jihad is the smoking ban. It is not allowed in these jihadist rebel groups to smoke because they see it as forbidden

by religion. If you want to see people who fights for money, you can search the other part of this battle.

Ayhan: What is the aim of this jihad?

X: Everyone in Syria have their own objective, Russia, US, Iran and others and that's why I think Syria will be divided among those power. The opposition could defeat Esad in couple of months if they only had war planes, but no one provides that. The rebel groups are aware of these circumstances and know that it is difficult to gain a victory. However, they also know and believe that the last worlds will be the Gods one. Only the God will decide who wins or lose. This is what we call putting oneself in the hands of Gods. The circumstances were also not in favor of our Prophet Mohammed when he fought in Badr. They were only three hundred people who fought against more than thousand enemies. At the hand they had the victory with the help of God<sup>31</sup>.

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<sup>31</sup> He refers to the verses from Ali – Imran 123, 124, 125: “And already had Allah given you victory at [the battle of] Badr while you were few in number. Then fear Allah; perhaps you will be grateful. [Remember] when you said to the believers, "Is it not sufficient for you that your Lord should reinforce you with three thousand angels sent down? Yes, if you remain patient and conscious of Allah and the enemy come upon you [attacking] in rage, your Lord will reinforce you with five thousand angels having marks [of distinction].”

#### **Interview 4:**

Ahmet was one of the people that I met during my participation in group meetings. He was in his mid forties, married and father of 5 children. He had his education through secular schools and was currently a religion teacher in a public school. He was one of the heads of the group that I observed and a “part-time” mujahedeen. I call him part-time mujahedeen because he only visited Syria in his holidays.

Ayhan: What is the meaning of the jihad for you?

Ahmet: Briefly, jihad is everything what you do in the cause of the Allah to obtain the approval of Allah. Jihad is not merely fighting in a war. Fighting a battle is only one part of it. If other Muslim brothers are in need and misery, then jihad is obligatory with its fighting part.

Ayhan: What are the sources of the jihad according you?

Ahmet: It is very simple, Quran, hadiths, life of the Sahaba and 1400 years of Islamic tradition. There are many verses in Quran which indicates the importance of jihad. An-Nisa 75, 76 and 84 is quite obvious on this issue<sup>32</sup>. After reading those verses, there is no doubt about the necessity of the jihad. In addition to that, there are many hadiths which highlights the jihad in accordance to verses from Quran. One of the famous one of such hadiths is, “fight with those polytheists with your wealth, hands, lives and words.”<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> An-Nisa 75, 76 and 85:

And what is [the matter] with you that you fight not in the cause of Allah and [for] the oppressed among men, women, and children who say, "Our Lord, take us out of this city of oppressive people and appoint for us from Yourself a protector and appoint for us from Yourself a helper?"(75).

Those who believe fight in the cause of Allah, and those who disbelieve fight in the cause of Taghut. So fight against the allies of Satan. Indeed, the plot of Satan has ever been weak (76).

So fight, [O Muhammad], in the cause of Allah; you are not held responsible except for yourself. And encourage the believers [to join you] that perhaps Allah will restrain the [military] might of those who disbelieve. And Allah is greater in might and stronger in [exemplary] punishment (85).

<sup>33</sup> Source: Ebu Davud 2504; Ahmed bin Hanbel, Müsned 3/1245

Hadiths do not support the jihad in a positive way, but it also warns Muslim who do not participate in it when it is necessary. For instance, “those who do not participate in the jihad, or do not equip a fighter, or be a good successor for the fighter’s family, Allah will punish him with a apocalypse before the doomsday.<sup>34</sup>” There are many other hadiths or examples from the life of the Sahaba and the history of Islam which make the doubts about the jihad disappear.

Ayhan: What is the main purpose and plan of joining the Syrian Jihad for a mujahedeen like you?

Ahmet: The real intention of a soldier knows only the Allah. The hearths of the people are close to us. Yet, a Muslim with a genuine faith is always in search of fulfilling its responsibilities against Allah. Thus, praying and participating in jihad are similar duties to gain the approval of Allah’s. Surely, a mujahedeen has purposes such as defeating the enemy and triumph, but the major goal of him is to following the codes which are determined by Allah. A Muslim strives to establish a system in this world where all the Muslims can peacefully live in. Where the justice exists, not the tyranny. Our Prophet states that, ‘if you do not wish for your Muslim brothers what you demand for yourself, you will not be a genuine Muslim<sup>35</sup>.’ Because of this, a Muslim must struggle for a world where not only his family and him/herself can live in prosperity, but also his/her Muslim brothers. Therefore, I can not live here in my homeland in welfare and be happy, while my Muslim brothers are in pain. This is the reason why we join the jihad and help mujahedeen, to share their suffering.

Ayhan: What are you thinking about the Syrian Jihad, what did you affect at most during your staying in there?

Ahmet: I travelled to Syria before the onset of the war several times because of educational purposes. I observed during those stays that the majority of the population were not happy with their current life. They could not even make small talks about politics and related issue. In addition to this personal experiences, I read many Islamic scholars

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<sup>34</sup> Source: Ibni Mace 2762; Ebu Davud 2503; Darimi 5/244

<sup>35</sup> Source: Buhari and Muslim

and politicians who wrote about the Syria and addressed the oppression and injustice in Syria. Thus, I always approved the rebels in Syria and wanted to support them.

Regarding to my experience in Syria, before joining the jihad, I was in Syria with a charity organization to distribute goods to people who live in tent cities near the Turkish border. Before starting to distribute aid packages, someone from us announced that the orphans and widows have priority and they should come to forefront. Subhanallah<sup>36</sup>! I never saw so many orphans and widows together. I thought that they all lost their mothers, fathers or husband and how painful that must be. I will never forget their expression. After a while I hugged a ten years old boy and caressed his hair. At the moment, I remembered the words of our Prophet, ‘those who are hard hearted should caress an orphans head’ and realized its trueness. Besides that, I could smell something amazing which stemmed from this orphan. I never smelled something that was equal to this scent. They were living in a tent city where over hundred thousand people live, where it was difficult to find drink water, let alone taking shower. How could this boy smell so beautiful in this circumstances? The answer of this question is one of the many reasons why we are helping the Syrian jihad.

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<sup>36</sup> Good grief! Good God!

### **Interview 5:**

Umeyr was 21 years old when he first participated to jihad and travelled to Syria. He stayed there until his death in 2016. He was married with a Syrian woman and have a child. I personally met with him in 2015. He was in Turkey because of fund raising for Syrian Jihad. To realize the interview about his life, I contacted with a close relative of him, whose name is Bilal.

Ayhan: What was Umeyr education level and job before becoming a mujahedeen?

Bilal: He was the single child of a classical Turkish family in the Anatolia. He finished high school and served as a soldier. After that, he started to work in a doner shop and become a doner chief in a short period of time. He was well paid and had no problem in his job or with his family.

Ayhan: Why did he wanted to become a mujahedeen? How did this process start?

Bilal: He was a sensitive guy to the news about the Syria and other Muslim countries such as Afghanistan. He followed websites and watched many videos and saw various pictures about the Muslims who are in misery and suffering. He sent such documents also to me. He was possessed by this news and told me that he can not stay in his warm bed while these people continue to suffering. Western countries, especially US and Russia were guilty for these incidents. He thought that they are committing these offenses because they were infidel and we were Muslims. He actually was not a hard religious guy in his early years when he was a teenager. He become radicalized while giving his attention to the documents in online and at the same time, reading different sources to become more knowledge on his religion Islam. He was specifically busy with books which were concerned with jihad.

Ayhan: After deciding to become a mujahedeen, what was his families response and how could he contact with Syrian jihadist?

Bilal: As I told before, he was the single child of his family and they were not willing to send him to Syria. But he preserved his position and demand to become a mujahedeen and did not give any choice to his family. After that, they accepted his desire. Then, he used online sources and local people to make a connection with Syrian jihadist.

Ayhan: What was his aim, what was he trying to achieve?

Bilal: His main concern was to being a genuine Muslim. He done all his effort to gain the approval of the God. He did neither talk about his fights and battles in Syria nor his position and duty. He was afraid to hypocrisy and corruption of his faith. In addition to that, he wanted be a martyr and have a high status in the heaven and also defeat the Syrian Regime and other infidel states to stop the pain of the Muslims who live in there. He wanted to stay in Syria after the end of the war, but he was always ready for another jihad in some where in the world. Unfortunately, he could not fulfil his desire, but fortunately, he become a martyr inshallah and will have a safe and secure place in the heaven with other great Muslims and Prophets.