

Something worth dying for?

Andy Blunden, April 2015

Perhaps the most challenging thing about the foreign fighters – those people who disappear from their suburban homes and reappear on Facebook in Syria or Iraq carrying a grenade launcher or wearing a suicide jacket – is that they evidently have something they think is worth dying for. Probably most of us would lay down our lives for our immediate family. Beyond that, Anzac Day parades and endless military posturing by political leaders notwithstanding, it is difficult to imagine most people in this country genuinely willing to put their life on the line for Democracy, Australia, Socialism, the Liberal Party, Jesus or anything else. Not that people wouldn't fight like hell to hang on to what they have, but willing to put their life on the line for an *idea*?

A society which cannot give its young people an idea worth dying for is what is really shocking. What a shame it is the lengths foreign fighters go to to find something worth sacrificing their life for. The suicide bomber may be misguided, but *unless there's something worth dying for how can there be something worth living for?*

I will briefly review the rise of foreign fighters through the lens of *collaborative projects*, a unit of analysis which is particularly useful for understanding this phenomenon. Collaborative projects, or 'projects' for short, are entities which people join rather than launch themselves, in the overwhelming majority of cases. A project differs from a group. A group is a collection of people united by some attribute such as ethnicity or beliefs, but a project is an aggregate of actions directed towards the collaborative realization of an ideal. All those entities which motivate actions which do not satisfy a person's immediate needs are projects.

A *foreign fighter* is someone who participates in an insurgency but has neither citizenship nor kinship links in the war zone and has travelled from afar as a private citizen to fight as an unpaid volunteer. Foreign fighters are quite distinct from *terrorists* who carry out violent acts outside of any war zone and those who travel overseas to attend a terrorist training camp. Foreign fighters are engaged in conventional warfare.

Before you can become a foreign fighter, someone has to be waging an insurgency that you can join. I will deal with the 'demand side' of foreign fighting first, where I rely on the work of Thomas Hegghammer (2011), before turning to the 'supply side' where I rely on a variety of sources.

Islamism and the duty of the individual Muslim

The Muslim Brotherhood was launched at a meeting on the Suez Canal construction site in 1928 with the aim of ridding Egypt of foreign influence and exploitation and instituting a life-style and government in line with Muslim principles. Their project was not directed against the West as such however, but rather against their own corrupt government. The Islamist project at this point, and still largely today, was a domestic project aimed at bringing their own country to an Islamic way of life.

The Brotherhood supported Nasser's secular nationalist revolution in Egypt in 1952, but they were suppressed in 1954 after being implicated in an assassination attempt on Nasser. This was followed in 1958 by their suppression in Syria and Iraq. Those Brothers who escaped prison went into exile to be followed by thousands of imprisoned Brothers released by Anwar Sadat in 1971. These well educated and highly motivated

leaders were now stateless and without hope of participation in the political life of the their homeland.

Meanwhile the Wahhabi aristocracy in Saudi Arabia were amassing great wealth from their oil revenue and set about building a nation-state on the Arabian Peninsula, and the flood of capital following the Oil Embargo in 1973 created unprecedented opportunities. The Saudis made the creation of an education system a priority and set up a university district in the Hijaz region on the Red Sea coast. All the positions in these universities were filled by exiled Muslim Brothers, who also took up positions in a range of International Islamic Organisations whose missions were purely philanthropic. The Wahhabis did not interfere in the Brothers' activity and every year the Hajj brought Muslims from all over the world to nearby Mecca. With their positions in the charities and the universities, the former Muslim Brothers found themselves at the centre of a well-funded international Muslim network.

The Muslim Brotherhood's project had emerged as a social movement aiming to restore *their own* societies to a religious life. This largely peaceful project had been thwarted by secular nationalist movements which had come to power in their homeland, leaving them no prospect of fulfilling their project as they had initially envisioned it. At the same time they were presented with an opportunity to agitate for their religious ideals on the *international* stage through education and philanthropy. When a project is thwarted, the subject is faced with the necessity of reframing their conception of the object, and re-orienting to a new system of activity which *sublates* the former object in a new project. (See Vasilyuk 1984). Just like an adventurer who is crippled in an accident goes on to become a Paralympic athlete.

An important arm of this philanthropic work was providing relief for refugees, initially Palestinian refugees expelled from their homeland by Zionism, and then Afghan refugees fleeing the 1979 Soviet invasion. This included a major refuge located at Peshawar, near the Afghan border in Pakistan. The international Muslim organizations saturated Muslim communities all over the world with well-produced images of women and children bearing the scars of war and desperately in need of aid.

Until the mid-1980s there was no military component to these activities. The key individual in bringing about the change was the Abdallah Azzam, a stateless Palestinian preacher who had been displaced from Palestine and later from Jordan, and taken in and given employment by the Brothers who arrived in Peshawar in 1986. Azzam was particularly well connected as a result of his time in the Hijaz, but he was also a substantial Muslim scholar.

Under Islamic law as it was understood throughout the twentieth century, it would be a sin for an individual Muslim to go and fight in a war in another country. While Islam did entail an obligation upon Muslims to come to the aid of fellow Muslims under attack from a non-Muslim country, it was a *collective* obligation, placed upon Muslim communities as a whole. Before an individual could leave the country to participate in a war he would have to gain the permission of his parents, his creditors and the political authority in his own country. Not only was there no obligation on an *individual* Muslim to go and fight in another country, it was forbidden, and to encourage such actions was a direct affront to the authority of a Muslim community over its own members.

In the past, individuals volunteering in foreign wars has been a very rare phenomenon. The nearest equivalents are: the members of the Comintern who went to Spain to fight Franco in the 1930s, and the Jews who were organized by the Jewish Agency to defend

the Zionist occupation in 1948. In both these cases there was a deeply felt identification with a transnational quasi-state entity which mobilized for war.

Under conditions, in the 1980s, when Muslims were suffering severely under attack from non-Muslims – the massacres by the Phalange in Lebanon, the Israeli incursions and the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, plus the genocide of Muslims in Bosnia in the early '90s – a young Muslim would have had the tacit approval of their own community to go and fight alongside fellow-Muslims, but national governments were *not* consenting to such actions, despite the fact that even in the West the Muslims were widely seen as the innocent victims in these conflicts. So the representation of Muslims as victims of aggression by Muslim media was broadly reinforced by the mainstream non-Muslim media.

Nation states had never done much for Abdallah Azzam, and nor did the ancient scriptures have anything to say about nation-states, which were an invention of modern times. Azzam was a scholar and there was considerable weight in his argument that individual Muslims had not only a right, but a *duty* to come to the aid of fellow Muslims under attack from non-Muslims and that they were under no obligation to seek permission of the political authority in their home country.

Islam is a religion embedded in the religious structures of Muslim communities and there is nothing in the religion which speaks of rights or duties of the individual which transcend the authority of local religious leaders. The appeal to the *individual conscience* over the heads of the religious and political authorities governing the individual was a truly postmodern innovation in Islamic doctrine. But under the conditions of destruction of Muslim states and genocide at the hands of non-Muslim states and the rule of often-corrupt secular-nationalist regimes in the Muslim world, Azzam's doctrine had a strong appeal.

So the foreign fighter movement grew out of a philanthropic religious movement. Propaganda depicting the plight of Muslim refugees and victims of war which had mobilized Muslims across the world to come to the (nonviolent) aid of fellow Muslims naturally led on to the mobilization of Egyptian and Syrian Muslim revolutionaries to Peshawar to meet up with the Afghani mujadiheen and go on to fight alongside them. Foreign fighters initially mobilized in the Afghan War continued as the military leadership of a social movement able to intervene in insurgencies in any Muslim land.

Who is fighting?

Muslim revolutionaries in predominantly Muslim regions are focused on overthrowing governments in their own territory not on travelling to foreign theatres of war. However, the exile of many of these revolutionaries before their insurgencies became permanent conflicts, provided dedicated fighters for the first wave of foreign fighters. Muslim revolutionaries have never previously invited foreign fighters to join them, but they arrived and were put to suitable work, usually as suicide bombers (70% of suicide bombers are foreign fighters), particularly ruthless fighters (foreigners are free from reprisals against their family, and do not have the same inhibitions that local fighters do), or in menial tasks. As foreigners they are completely dependent on whatever group they have joined.

Terrorists, such as Al Qaïda are a different ideological current. Their attacks are directed against governments and populations in countries where Muslims are in a minority, where there is no prospect of achieving the Muslim regime which Muslim

revolutionaries and foreign fighters aim for. Al Qaida arose out of foreign fighters who had come to Afghanistan to fight the Soviets, but when that battle was over, reoriented from domestic politics to attacking the Western powers. The switch to global terrorism also meant a change in tactics, involving secret conspiracies and individual attacks on civilian populations. The questionable rationale for international terrorism is for the states being targeted to withdraw from the treasured lands in question, as was the case with the IRA bombings in Britain.

Muslim revolutionaries and their foreign volunteers have an Islamic state as their objective. Even when terror is used as a tactic, it has a rational objective – to deter collaboration with an occupying power such as in Iraq, or, like the terrorism of the Zionist Irgun in Palestine, to achieve ethnic cleansing.

At least 80% of foreign fighters come from Muslim states and often enjoy the active support of their home communities, and have not been the target of overt repression at home. This is not the case for Terrorists, who kill people in their own communities just as much as they kill foreigners. There is cross-over between the two movements, and the distinction has become somewhat blurred, but *in their origin* both individually and as movements, the foreign fighter is distinct from the terrorist.

American research based on the memoirs of American soldiers in World War Two and interviews with Americans who fought in Vietnam has found that the principal motivation governing the actions of rank-and-file American soldiers are (1) to survive the war themselves and (2) to look after their immediate comrades. Asked to characterise what “democracy” meant to them, soldiers responded “crap” and “a joke.” The same soldiers described the selfless bravery of their Vietnamese opponents “because they believed in something” and “knew what they were fighting for.” (Atran 2014). As a result, American military theorists have designed their strategy and tactics on the basis that soldiers act according to their rational interest as individuals, just as they are assumed to act in bourgeois economic theory. The only explanation then for enemies whose soldiers fight with selfless courage and willingly sacrifice their lives is that they are “brainwashed,” “indoctrinated” by messages received over the internet or by radical preachers at home. This military expertise was on show in the performance of the American-trained Iraqi Army, which fled on sight of their ISIS enemy, while the Kurdish, Shia and even Sunni militias defending their own land and families have proved stalwart against ISIS. I should add however that for some soldiers, generally elite career soldiers and not volunteer foreign fighters, there is a dedication to the warriors’ craft which, in combination with comradeship, can motivate extreme sacrifice. In such cases the motivation arises from what Alasdair MacIntyre (1981) called the “internal good” inherent in the soldiers’ profession. An established professional army ought to be able to count on its officer class; but if it is to have a rank and file which is prepared to put its life on the line, then something more than army pay and adventure is required.

This raises the question of the motivation of the foreign fighters and in what way they differ from the rank-and-file soldier of an imperialist army.

Who wants to be a foreign fighter?

The first thing to learn about the sociology of foreign fighters is that there are no demographic predictors for who will become a foreign fighter, not social class, education, religiosity, age nor even gender, except that foreign fighters usually

volunteer as part of a group of friends and/or follow friends from their home town into service and/or are recruited by friends who have returned home from a conflict zone. This is reflected in that fact that, for example, Portsmouth, Cardiff, Brighton and certain parts of London account for most of Britain's foreign fighters, and almost all of Norway's 60 recruits came from the *same street* (Neumann 2015). So the idea that people are persuaded to become foreign fighters through the social media is a myth. Overwhelmingly, people are convinced to become foreign fighters by people who were already personal friends before either became foreign fighters. What social media does is assist foreign fighters in maintaining contact with home while they are away, and this works both ways. Different demographic groups play different roles when they join up, but (within limits) all are equally likely to volunteer.

Counter-measures on social media promoting Democracy and exposing the supposed agents of Islamist indoctrination are a waste of time. But the "Shock and Awe" wreaked on Baghdad, a modern city in which people live in tower blocks just like in New York or London, Guantanamo Bay where prisoners are kept without recourse to any legal right, the criminal invasion of Iraq, the continued support for the Zionist occupation – these are all *objective facts*, and for anyone who identifies as brothers and sisters those Muslims suffering from these illegal, attacks on Muslim lands, messages promoting Democracy and criticising Muslim fighters are water off a duck's back. Foreign fighters have been documented whose only knowledge of the conflict they went to join was from the same mass media everyone else was receiving.

How is it that people go, willing to sacrifice their lives, to a conflict apparently so far from their everyday concerns? Scott Atran (2014) conducted face-to-face surveys in a community in Morocco which had provided many foreign fighters, and in Lebanon amongst Shia, Sunni and Christians. He tested subjects' attitudes including their willingness to sacrifice themselves in war and their attitude towards others who do so. His research has the merit that he spoke to people who might or might not become foreign fighters and who were acquainted with the practice at first hand.

Atran's hypothesis is that the coincidence of two factors make for the readiness to become a foreign fighter and/or approve of others in the community who do so. These two factors are (1) "identity fusion" with a larger group whose welfare may be threatened, and (2) holding a "sacred value."

A *sacred value* is something that motivates a person's actions but which transcends any material interest, such as King and Country or Socialism. A sacred value is something abstract and remote from the close personal ties which commonly motivate sacrifice of individual material interest. *Identity fusion* refers to a person whose identity is wholly subsumed by a collectivity, whether a nation or religious community or a family or group of close comrades. A subject's identity is fused with a group if the subject cannot see themselves apart from the relevant bonded identity group. The combination of these two factors is entailed when the group to which a person's identity is fused is united by a sacred value, when we-all are fighting for the same thing. In the event that there is a threat to the sacred value uniting the social group to which the person's identity is fused, then that person would be prepared to die defending the interests of that group, even if they are the last one standing.

A person may have a strong personal belief, but so long as that that belief is *just personal*, and not an ideal shared by and constituting a community of others, it cannot motivate extreme sacrifice. Many of us who took up a cause in the 1960s/70s as part of

a mass movement would have been prepared to die for that cause, and many activists in the Civil Rights and Peace Movements in the U.S. *did* die for their cause. But *now* that that flood has subsided such a self-sacrifice would be meaningless. So a transcendent idea is not enough in itself. Further, a person may identify themselves as a member of a social group, such as employees of BHP, but not taking BHP as a sacred value, they are generally not going to die for the Company.

Atran showed that a person whose identity is fused with a group bonded by a sacred value will be prepared to die in defence of that sacred cause. Let us use the term “transcendent” to refer to values which motivate action while transcending material gain, but not necessarily life itself. Let us further recognise that identity fusion comes in degrees from slight to total. This opens the possibility of explaining the motivation for social action up to and including sacrifice of one’s life, but not limited to the scenario of ultimate sacrifice. This constitutes an alternative rationale for social action to the “rational actor” theory which has proved so inadequate in understanding social movements and for which self-sacrifice is a contradiction in terms. This unity of transcendent value and identity fusion is what I call a *collaborative project* (Blunden 2014).

All ideals within a community are constituted by collaborative projects, but the extent of identity fusion a person has with the project may be very slight or absolute, and the project may belong to the past, or may be the chief fact of current social life (as when the country is at war). Likewise, all identity groups are constituted by a transcendent ideal. Collaborative project is therefore a unit of analysis for social formations which captures the identity and motivational structure of the community. It not only describes a social formation as it is, but also the pattern of change at work in the community. Collaborative project is a powerful instrument of analysis, but it is also a crucial component of ethical life itself.

It is normal to be committed to collaborative projects and for at least one of those projects to be unified by a sacred value. Such a project I will call a *life-project* as it gives *meaning* to a person’s life. Psychological pathology arises through (1) the blockage or destruction of a life-project, (2) a clash between two life-projects, (3) a crisis arising from the failure of a life-project or (4) the lack of any life-project, which is normal for a child but pathological for an adult (See Vasilyuk 1984).

From this standpoint, a substantial proportion of Australians who count as psychologically normal are in that infantile condition of *lacking* a life-project, and from this standpoint, the actions of the foreign fighter may seem inexplicable if not insane. But if we accept that commitment to a life-project is psychologically normal and healthy, in itself, all that requires explanation is how a person comes to commit themselves to this particular life-project which receives such adverse representation in our mass media, and how that life-project might unfold when they arrive in the conflict zone and when they later return home, if indeed they ever do.

It should already be clear that any person who identifies themselves as a Muslim will have received an ample flow of information to demonstrate that Ummah, the Muslim world, is under attack and in danger. And you don’t have to be a Muslim to have seen the genocidal attacks in Palestine, Lebanon, Bosnia, Gaza, Mindanao, Rakhine, Uyghur and oppressive secular or sectarian governments in Egypt, Syria and Libya for example. But while many non-Muslims see the oppression and injustice which Muslim people have suffered over the past 60 years, it is generally only Muslims who *identify* with this

suffering, for whom these attacks are a direct challenge to their life-project. Foreign fighters are invariably motivated by *altruism* when they set off to travel to the conflict zone. The first foreign fighters to go to Syria were motivated to defend their Muslim brothers and sisters whose peaceful protest had been met with violence by the Assad regime. In time, this moved on to the construction of an Islamic State in Syria and Iraq, irrespective of the wishes of the people who live there. This is typical of the development of a project at first focused on a particular injustice, but becoming universal over time, possibly embracing utopian visions of how social justice can be permanently secured.

To be clear: it is not a question of the tenets of the Islamic religion. Neither the Palestinians (who invented suicide bombing in the 1970s) nor the Tamil Tigers (who until the final suppression in 2009, also prolific suicide bombers) were motivated by religious doctrine: their sacred value was the *land* of their ancestors. There is no element of religiosity inherent in commitment to a life-project.

The flow of foreign fighters to conflict zones in the Muslim world began in the mid-1980s in response to calls by Abdallah Azzam and others. The foreign fighters in Afghanistan were known locally as “jihad tourists,” because they stayed only for a short time and their death rate was only 2-6%. By way of comparison, the death rate in Syria and Iraq is as high as 10%. It has only been since the US invasion of Iraq and the Arab Spring that foreign fighting has blossomed. 80% of foreign fighters are citizens of Muslim countries who sometimes have the tacit consent of their governments. The foreign fighters who pose the sharpest challenges are those 4,000 or so who have left their homes in Europe or other Western countries where the Muslims are immigrant communities, in defiance of law and social norms, to fight with ISIS or other Islamist forces. These type of fighters have proliferated in recent times as international travel and international phone calls have become very cheap and social media makes communication with friends and family at home seamless even from the battlefronts.

Governments have a responsibility to prevent their own citizens from travelling to cause havoc in other countries, but their main concern is not what their foreign fighters do overseas, but what they do when they come back.

There are several possible outcomes when someone becomes a foreign fighter: (1) They die in battle, and the death rate is high for foreign fighters these days, (2) They settle down in the country where they have gone to fight, (3) They become a career fighter, moving from one conflict to another. In all these cases the foreign fighter never returns home. Of the minority who do return home, they are usually already known to security authorities. Those returning from a holy war usually fall into one of three categories: (4) the dangerous, (5) the disturbed and (6) the disillusioned. The disillusioned constitute 90% of returnees, and go on to lead a normal life without further involvement in violence (Hegghammer 2011). Such people are the most likely to be successful in dissuading others from terrorist activity. Those who return traumatized by their experiences need help, not imprisonment. Less than 10% of returning foreign fighters want to bring the jihad home with them, but records show that they are no more effective than those without combat experience – terrorism demands a different skill set than conventional warfare – and have only ever engaged in terrorist acts together with others without foreign fighting experience. In other words, security officials would be better advised to *encourage* the return of foreign fighters, as they will either

inadvertently help the security officials locate terrorist plots or actively discourage them.

The one condition which is most likely to lead to foreign fighters becoming disillusioned with jihad and dissuading others from joining is the shattering of the myth of Ummah by the reality of *bitter sectarian warfare between Islamic factions*. Foreign fighters are as likely to find themselves fighting other Islamists as they are fighting repressive governments, and 50% of foreign fighters who die in battle, die at the hands of other jihadis. This fact should be drawn attention to in the mass media. Foreign fighters often discover that they are unwelcome when they arrive; not only are they assigned menial and suicidal tasks, but are often treated with particular hostility by the local people. Those coming from the West may lack the language and some may feel very vulnerable. These problems need to be highlighted.

The idea that foreign fighters are people who are *alienated* from the society in which they live is, not quite right. They are frequently well-educated, well-paid and well-respected professionals. Neumann (2015) says that foreign fighters are frequently people “who lacked a strong sense of meaning in their own lives in the West.” The most well-integrated person may find their life meaningless.

And we should not be surprised by the inhuman brutality of the actions foreign fighters engage in. Life-projects are what give meaning to our lives, and can therefore facilitate great acts of self-sacrifice and virtue. But they also facilitate acts of breath-taking bastardy. We have seen in recent years how the leaders of our Christian churches have thought it appropriate to move priests who abuse children on from parish to parish to avoid their being exposed. The Directors of James Hardie, whose asbestos has condemned tens of thousands to a slow and painful death from mesothelioma, thought it was OK to move the company off-shore to avoid paying compensation. Commitment to a life-project, be that a Church, a political career, a capitalist firm or the army, brings with it an entire ethos, moral code and a theory of the world which may be quite at odds with the loose ethos which pervades public life. That “loose ethos” (Heller 1988) cannot give meaning to life however well it supports a liberal, tolerant, multicultural bourgeois society. Our children are more likely to commit suicide if we raise them to be contented shoppers than if we raise them to be passionate idealists, and more likely to do something worthwhile with their lives. But it is always a risk. As Vygotsky (1926) said: “People with great passions, people who accomplish great deeds, people who possess strong feelings, even people with great minds and a strong personality, rarely come out of good little boys and girls.”

Conclusion

There are a number of viable responses to the rise of foreign fighters, not including withdrawing their passports after they have left, or imprisoning them on return. Foreign fighters should be assisted to return and find another, more productive project. On the international arena, the governments should take responsibility for preventing the kind of gross injustices which have inflamed the passions of foreign fighters. And in the domestic arena, we need political leaders who have a vision and a life-project which is worthy of a country where citizens no longer have to struggle daily for the bare necessities of physical existence, political leaders who have a genuine commitment to social justice, capable of inspiring others.

Political leaders need to stop stoking fear and selfishness, and instead of celebrating military adventures, celebrate the numerous altruistic projects which are open to young Australians who wish to give their lives to something worth living for.

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