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## HOW THE FOREIGN FIGHTERS WILL SUSTAIN THE ISLAMIC STATE

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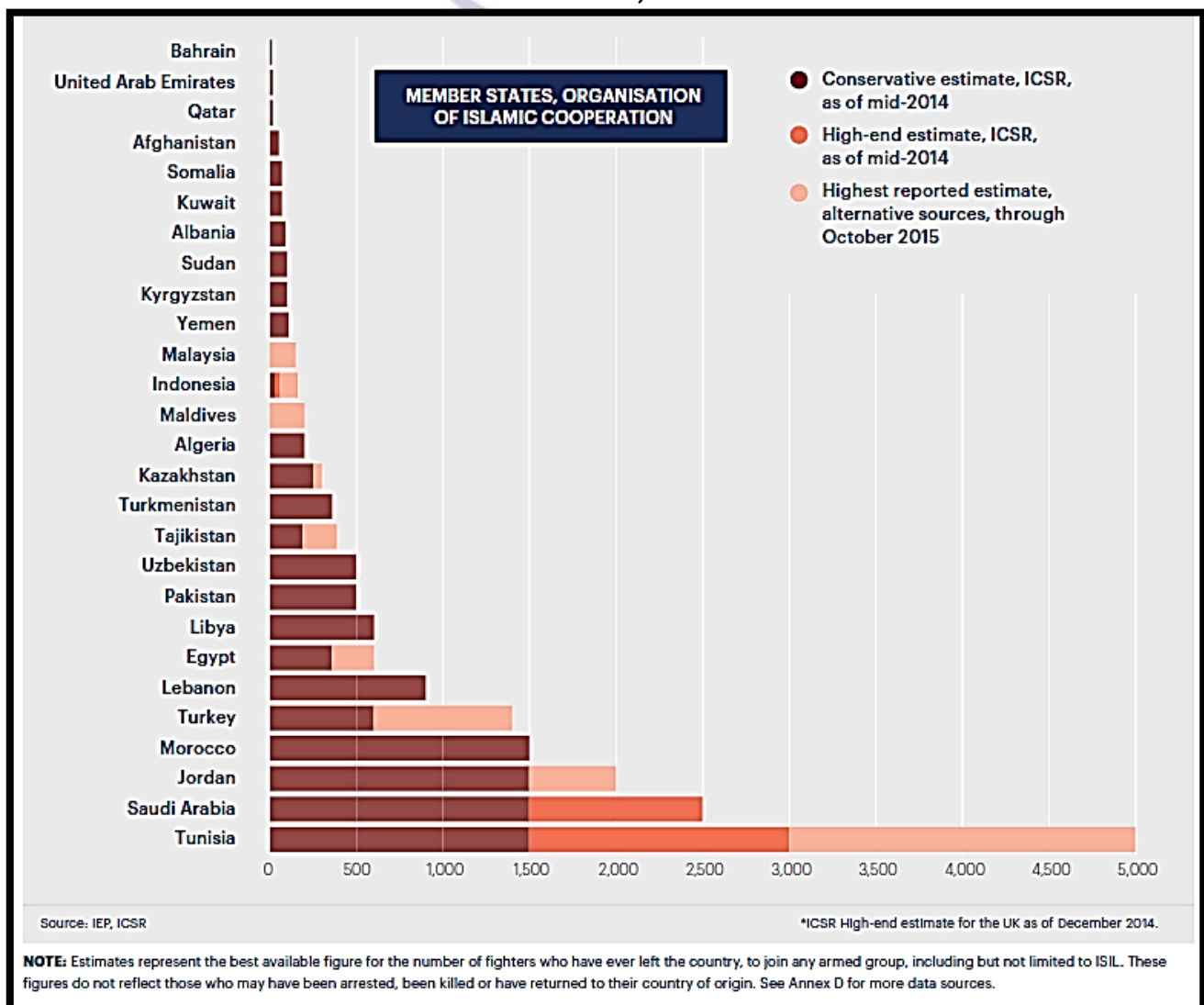
The presence of foreign fighters fighting for a cause in a conflict area is not a new phenomenon. It has been a salient feature of armed conflict in the Muslim world since the 1980s. Thomas Hegghammer, who is one of the foremost scholars of Islamist militancy, says that as many as 20,000 foreign fighters were believed to have travelled to Afghanistan during the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan.<sup>1</sup> Since the 1980s, approximately 10,000 to 30,000 such fighters have inserted themselves into conflicts from Bosnia in the West to the Philippines in the East.<sup>2</sup> The presence of foreign fighters has changed the way these conflicts have progressed. For example, in the case of Afghanistan, they were instrumental in forging the anti-Soviet resistance movement, and in Iraq post-2003, the presence of the foreign fighters led to fomentation of the secular divide. The flow of fighters into Iraq and Syria since 2011 is believed to be the largest influx that the world has seen in the past fifty years. The current estimates range from 25,000 to 30,000 fighters from roughly 100 countries. There has been a great deal of debate regarding the number of foreign fighters that have travelled to and that are currently in Iraq and Syria. Various sources (discussed subsequently) give various estimates depending on whether the numbers are considering only active fighters, or are taking into account those who have returned home, or were killed in action.

The Global Terrorism Index for the year 2015, prepared by the Institute of Economics and Peace (IEP) was able to identify 67 countries from which recruits came, totalling to 27,371 individuals, including 350 women and girls. IEP identified an additional 21 known countries from which individuals are believed to have travelled, but estimates on the number of fighters were unavailable. The report also mentions conservative as well as exaggerated estimates obtained from the International Centre for the Study of Radicalism (ICSR), whose data was published in December 2014, based on estimates totalled in mid-2014.



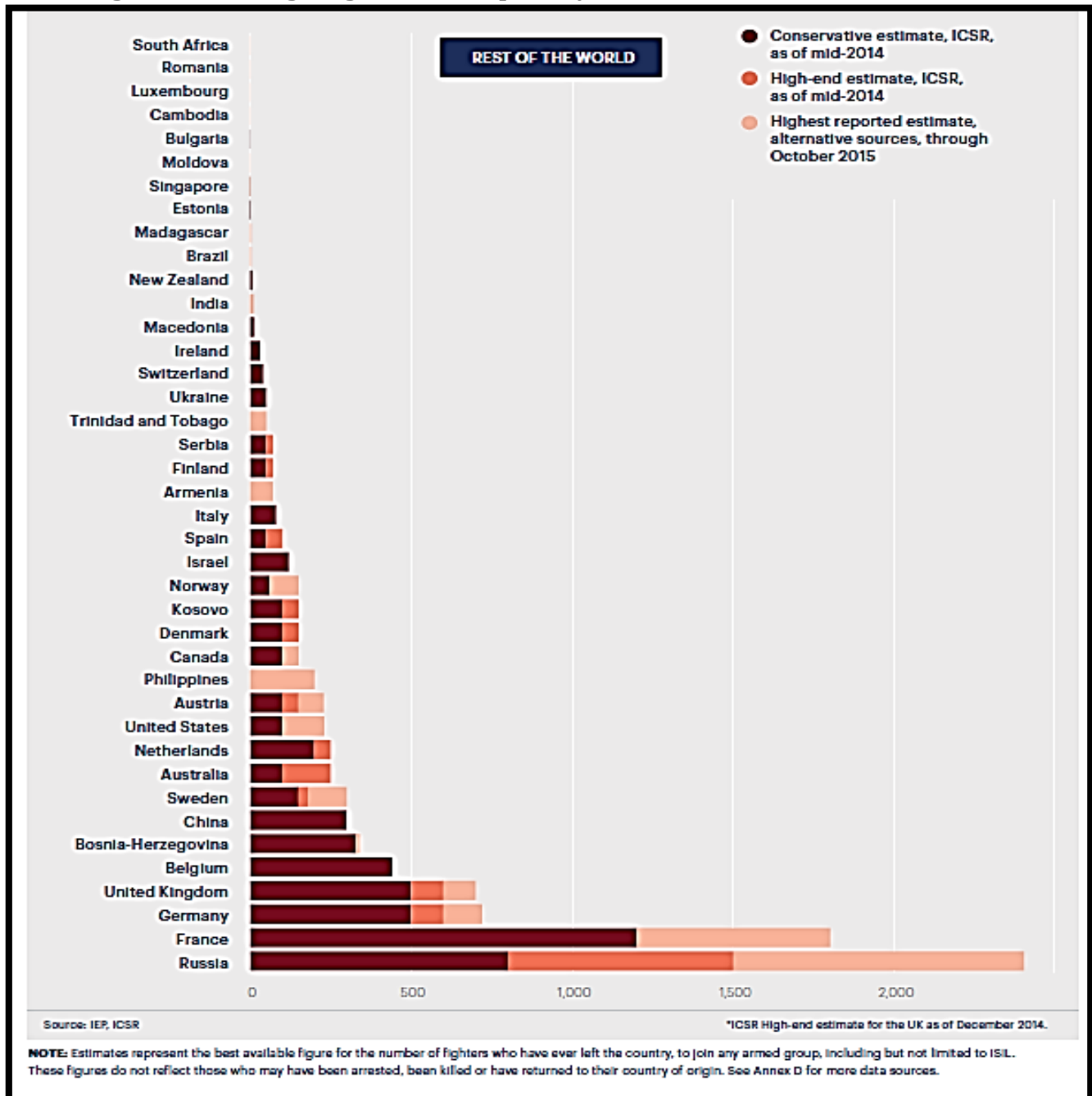
As per the IEP report, approximately 65 per cent of known fighters in Iraq and Syria come from countries which are members of the Organisation for Islamic Cooperation (OIC). The report further elaborates that Tunisia has contributed the largest number of nationals who have joined groups in Iraq and Syria with a high-end estimate of 5,000 people. An estimated 500 Tunisian foreign fighters have returned home, while between, 5,000 to 6,000 additional individuals have reportedly had their movements restricted in order to prevent them from leaving the country. Saudi Arabia is the source of the second most foreign fighters with an estimated 2,500 people. Of the countries which are not members of the OIC, Russia and France have the most foreign fighters. Figure 1.0 represents the number of foreign fighter in Iraq and Syria from the Organisation of Islamic Countries, while figure 2.0 represents the number of foreign fighters in Iraq and Syria from the rest of the world.

**Figure 1.0: Foreign Fighters in Iraq and Syria from Organisation of Islamic Cooperation Countries, 2015**



Source: Global Terrorism Index 2015, p. 46

Figure 2.0: Foreign Fighters in Iraq and Syria from the Rest of the World, 2015



Source: Global Terrorism Index 2015, p. 47

In December 2013, ICSR estimated that up to over two-thirds of the foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq are affiliated with either the Islamic State (IS) or al-Nusra.<sup>3</sup> However, a BBC reporter estimated that at least 60-70 percent of IS' fighters in Syria were Syrian, and noted that foreigners were disproportionately represented in IS leadership.<sup>4</sup> Either way, the large number of foreign fighters is intrinsic to the IS' plan to go global. The foreign cadres were crucial in expanding the network back into their own countries. This was reflected in the manner in which IS' network grew globally. By

November 10, 2014, the IS had successfully managed to obtain an oath of allegiance from groups in Libya, Algeria, Egypt, Yemen, and Saudi Arabia thereby, forming the first batch of its provinces or *wilayat* in those countries.<sup>5</sup>The numbers grew by November 2015, and IS claimed to manage 19 *wilayat* in Syria and Iraq—including two (al Furat and al Jazeera) that crossed the internationally recognized state boundaries— and 18 internationally, in Libya, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Yemen, Algeria, Egypt, the Afghanistan-Pakistan region, Nigeria, and the Russian North Caucasus.<sup>6</sup>

If one were to study the formation of these *wilayat*, one would find that the first batch of the countries (where the *wilayat* were created) were already in a state of social, political, and religious instability. Further, and more importantly they had already contributed a large number of fighters to the IS and had sections in their population that supported the IS cause. This could explain why it was comparatively easy for IS to foray into these countries.

Now that the IS is receiving a severe pounding in Iraq and Syria, these *wilayats* would become crucial for its survival. Even though Tunisia seems to be providing for the largest number of foreign fighters, Libya becomes more essential for the survival of IS. The IS recruitment propaganda for Libya, as translated by the Quilliam Foundation speaks of the strategic geographic location of Libya, as “looks upon the sea, the desert, mountains, and six states: Egypt, Sudan, Chad, Niger, Algeria and Tunisia”.<sup>7</sup> The vast coastline of Libya provides ample opportunities for IS to reach the state and also launch offensive against the European nations. Further, Libya acts as a stockpile of arms and weapons which was accumulated and left by the Gaddafi era. All these factors make Libya an ideal base for the IS to coordinate its actions. Libya also becomes a gateway in accessing Tunisia. Analyses by various think tanks such as The Soufan Group suggests that Islamic State utilises its positions in Libya, to manage the large contingent of Tunisian fighters to carry out attacks intended to undermine Tunisian stability.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, even if IS faces severe attrition in Iraq and Syria, it can still sustain itself by basing itself out of more strategic regions. While Iraq still remains crucial to the IS strategy, the group seems to be attempting to expand in order to survive even if it loses ground in Iraq. Has the leadership already escaped to the neighbouring regions is another question that one must seriously look into. However, in all these scenarios, it is through these foreign cadre, connecting the central leadership to the various parts of the world, that the IS can sustain itself.

***(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])***

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**Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Hegghammer, 'The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters: Islam and the Globalization of Jihad.' *International Security*, vol. 35, n3, 53–94. 2011 [http://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC\\_a\\_00023](http://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00023)

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Joseph A Carter, Shiraz Maher, and Peter Neumann, "#Greenbirds: Measuring Importance and Influence in Syrian Foreign Fighter Networks," *The International Centre for the Study of Radicalization and Political Violence*, December 2014. <http://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/ICSR-Report-Greenbirds-Measuring-Importance-and-Influence-in-Syrian-Foreign-Fighter-Networks.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "The Syrian Rebel Groups Pulling in Foreign Fighters," *BBC News*, December 24, 2013, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-25460397>

<sup>5</sup> Charles Lister, "Jihadi Rivalry: The Islamic State Challenges al-Qaeda", *Brookings Doha Center*, Analysis Paper, n.16, January 2016, p.16.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p.17.

<sup>7</sup> Charlie Winter, "Libya: The Strategic Gateway for the Islamic State," *Quilliam Foundation*, February 2015, p. 6, <http://www.quilliamfoundation.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/publications/free/libya-the-strategic-gateway-for-the-is.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> "TSG IntelBrief: The Islamic State's Tunisia Strategy," *The Soufan Group*, IntelBriefs, March 8, 2016, <http://soufangroup.com/tsg-intelbrief-the-islamic-states-tunisia-strategy/>