Western Volunteer Fighters fighting Daesh – Background and possible Implications

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In late October 2014, news came to the light of day that small numbers of Europeans and Americans are traveling to Iraq and Syria to join Kurdish forces fighting Daesh. Soon thereafter, Social Media picked up on the matter as well and together these media introduced the general public to organisations like the Lions of Rojava – an YPG battalion fighting for the Kurds in al-Hasakah – or the Assyrian Christian Militia Dwekh Nawsha.

Much has been written about islamist foreign fighters traveling to the Middle East to fight for militant organisations like Daesh, al-Nusrah Front or other similar extremist groups. Depending on different numbers taken into account, the total amount is estimated from 27.000 up to 31.000 individuals. Therefore it comes as no surprise that the small numbers (in the hundreds) of westerners joining the Kurdish and Assyrian forces or militias, are not in the focus of analysts and researchers. Except for some media articles, barely no attention is given to these individuals, who found it necessary to put themselves at risk in order to join the struggle against the extremist organisations in Iraq and Syria.

Therefore, the aim of this paper is to take a closer look at the background and the motives of these individuals, the recruitment and vetting process as well as their travel routes to the region. Another focus will be their role in the fight against Daesh and other extremist organisations. The legal and political ramifications are of concern as well, taking the western cliché of the “mercenary” into account, with all its social and political implications.

With that in mind, it is worth taking a look at several aspects in regard to the Western Volunteer Fighters [WVF], when it comes to the reasons and implications of this development.

Motivation/Background

The social and professional background of the WVF is as diverse as the countries they originate from. With few exceptions, there is one important and common constant though for most of them: a past military service in their countries’ respective military services as well as law enforcement institutions. Other than that, they represent a mix of each country’s society: the WVF are men and women, married or single, with and without children, therefore people who have something to lose. The countries of origin are Australia, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Israel, the Netherlands, Spain, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, as well as the United States of America. Some of them are children of migrants, who started a new life in western countries, but still have close relations to their native states. Then again, there are plenty of indigenous Europeans and Americans joining the WVF as well, who are prominently displayed in the media as a result.

The motivation for most of them keeps being a perceived inability of the international community to react to the spiral of violence in the Middle East. Especially the flight of the Yezidi people as well as their enslavement by Daesh was the critical impulse for most of the WVF to take action by themselves. Especially the ex-military and law enforcement personnel [mil/leo] described a sense of responsibility to once more participate in a fight that is perceived as one of “good versus evil”.

Reasons for the return of the ex mil/leo men to the military life can also be found in the millennia old phenomenon of failed reintegration of former soldiers to the civilian and social life. So it comes as no surprise if (1) a return to the old military life with its brotherhood, (2) the possibility to apply the years of training once more or (3) even finish “the work left undone” in previous assignments, are cited as reasons to join the various groups fighting Daesh.

Of course there are also people with national, religious, ethnic and family ties to the region that come into play as reasons. Thus people with a (e.g. Kurdish) background can also be found among the WVF as well as some with Syrian/Christian descent. There are even reports of German bikers with Kurdish roots but also bikers from the Netherlands, who are among the volunteers.

Recruitment

Since there are several groups in the region that recruit WVF, the process of recruitment, vetting and transport is happening in various ways. The first contact is mainly established through Social Media, where one can find profiles of Kurdish Peshmerga, Christian militias as well as western private military companies [PMC]. Quantitatively, the main recruitment is happening through the Lions of Rojava, which according to the BBC are deploying around a hundred WVF. The second largest group of WVF can be found with the KRG’s Peshmerga in Iraq.

After the first contact, a vetting process takes place in an effort to recruit only personnel with a mil/leo background. With the growing interest of civilians in fighting Daesh this selective steps are becoming.
more and more necessary, since requests come in by the hundreds and only a small percentage of possible WVF have the appropriate training.7

Once on the actual journey to Iraq and Syria, it gets easier than one would suspect. WVF reported to travel directly to Turkey or Iraq by plane, from where they are directed to the specific military sites of the Kurds or other non-Kurdish militias.4 The post deployment route home is as important as the journey to Iraq and Syria itself. Again this is being accomplished by car in the countries themselves and from main airports like Erbil by plane to the respective home countries.5

Over the months simple but effective recruiting structures have been established, like the FRAME program by the Kurds, but also points of contact by private military companies, like the Sons of Liberty International, a non-profit organisation dedicated to the training of various ethnic and religious groups in Syria.10 The longevity of such PMC related recruiting processes is questionable though. A group called “Veterans against ISIS” is no longer active on the internet. Examples of other recruitment entities or PMCs operating in the area would include the American Mesopotamian Organisation or the IVFOR (International Volunteer Force).11

The reality on site

While there are several militias and armed groups on site, which are deploying WVF - again - the most prominent are the Lions of Rojava (the contingent of the YPG), the KRG’s Peshmerga, as well as the Assyrian Christian Militia Dwekh Nawsha in Iraq. These groups attract various personnel and are therefore making different use of the WVF.

Judging from the partial accounts of returnees, all of these groups only use a limited number of WVF in actual combat missions, while primarily deploying them for security details or PR purposes to boost the morale of their own troops. As a result, several WVF have returned from Iraq and Syria disillusioned because of the conditions on the ground, their limited chances of an actual combat contribution or the simple fact that they expected different command structures and expertise from the armed groups.

Especially the YPG is being depicted as an unexperienced militia using old fashioned tactics, which were seen as not suitable by some of the WVF with mil/leo background. Particularly, the lack of adequate supply lines and the restrictions in personal movement led to explicit criticism. Reports of confiscated passports with the reason of controlling the volunteers as well as the fear of enemy propaganda in case of capture also came to light in the media. At the same time, reasons for the disillusion are not always rooted with locals and their infrastructure or the lack of training. Problems can also be found among the volunteers themselves as even the applied vetting methods cannot prevent the presence of untrained volunteers, adventurers or so called “freaks”. Another aspect is that of political pressure. After being recognised by American Special Forces soldiers, some WVF were forced to return to their respective native countries.12

As a matter of fact reports of US pressure not to use US citizens were mentioned in the NY Times, with the result that WVF are only used for training purposes. The Kurdish Peshmerga of the KRG in Iraq even officially deny a deployment of WVF in combat operations.13

Nevertheless, it is safe to say that the WVF play an important role in the motivation of the Kurdish and Assyrian groups. At the same time the conservative press in the United States depict the WVF as fighters for freedom, creating analogies to the Spanish Civil War in doing so.14

The Kurdish point of view

The Kurds themselves view the WVF ambivalent. On the one hand, they appreciate the support and are using the volunteers as a boost for morale for their own troops. On the other hand, the issues with unexperienced adventurers and hundreds of applications, forced the various groups to establish a certain vetting process as well as the basic understanding that material help and official training efforts would be far more appreciated than the actual coming of WVF. Of all the manifold reasons, there is the apprehension of the WVF’s becoming targets, which results in a very limited use of them.15 At the same time there is a certain lack of understanding, why private citizens would risk their lives to help in the fight against Daesh.

The apprehension of international repercussions in case of lethal fatalities among the WVF are significant and are even aggravated by the huge bounties placed on the heads of the volunteers by Daesh. Therefore, the Peshmerga and other armed groups are strongly interested in the safety of the WVF, especially since criminal groups tried to infiltrate them in order to kidnap the westerners. Insofar it looks like the volunteers are also producing security issues instead of solving them.16

As a result the above mentioned vetting process was started by the Peshmerga as well as the policy by the Assyrian militias to reject volunteers that do not have a permission by their governments to join them.17

The paradigm shift of the mercenary perception

Interestingly, one can observe a paradigm shift when it comes to the perception of these WVF. In past conflicts, private citizens volunteering for combat or security roles in foreign armies or armed groups were deemed as mercenaries and portrayed as such in a pejorative way. In this context it has to be understood that a historic, legal and moral definition of the term “mercenary” is a topic of its own and has not been resolved satisfactorily in decades of the respective discourse.18

So it is even more interesting that in this particular case the volunteers are mainly historically compared to those fighting on
the side of the (socialist) International Brigades against the widely fascist conside-
red forces of General Franco in the Spanish Civil War. One can only assume that
through the use of this specific historic comparison an attempt is being made for
enhancing the legitimacy of this particu-
lar engagement between (righteous) forces that are deemed fighting a struggle
against an evil enemy. In this regard
the Spanish Civil War, with its enormous
international involvement and its roman-
ticized fight against the evil of fascism, are being used to paint a vivid picture of the
WVF, while branding their efforts as a good
fight.

At the same time old clichés of morally
ambiguous mercenary types are being
used i.e. by Russia controlled media to outline possible hypocrisies by “western”
countries when it comes to the involve-
ment of private citizens in foreign conflicts – be it in Syria or Ukraine. In this regard
strong metaphors like the one of the Wild
Geese [a reference to the numerous Irish
soldiers that served throughout the cen-
turies in Europe but in this context more
likely a hint to the infamous mercenary
movie with Roger Moore and others] as
well as “wet [bloody] work” are being used
to put the WVF in a negative light.

Contrary to the other “western” perception, the Australian critical reception also tends
more to the picture of the mercenary and the point of view that the main interest
of the WVF is in getting media attention. The roots of this negative portrait can be
found in the Australian society and legislation that clearly forbids a service in
non-state armed groups.

So the question of legitimacy is an impor-
tant one in this regard and not lost even
on the Kurdish groups - like the YPG -
which are trying to back up their claim for
legitimacy with regards to international
recognition by using WVF. This is necessary
insofar, since the YPG is closely connected
to the PKK, which is regarded as a terrorist
organisation by most western countries.

Legal dimensions

When speaking about such a specific topic
like WVF, legal considerations come into
play as well. Joining foreign armed orga-
nisations and groups is a sensitive subject
that is treated differently throughout
western societies. The broad spectrum is
reaching from general acceptance (as long
as no support for terrorist organisations
is involved) to a very simple prohibition
of any contribution to an external armed
service, which is not officially recognized
by the respective government.

Besides the obvious issue of the military
role of private citizens, the aspect and inter-
national classification of the various armed
groups is relevant too. While the Christian/ Assyrian militias and the Iraqi Peshmerga
seem to incorporate lesser legal problems,
the YPG with its close connection to the
PKK (which is a designated terrorist orga-
nisation) is considered a grey area that is
producing a lot of uncertainty and specula-
tion in regard of legal prosecution. For now
the US as well as the British government
do not interfere with their private citizen’s
choice of joining the above mentioned
groups. There is a clear distinction being
acknowledged by officials between these
WVF and foreign fighters joining Daesh and
other terrorist groups. Although they tend
to literally look the other way, they also do
not encourage their citizens to do so. At
the same time, there is diplomatic pressure
on the regional governments not to use US
citizens in combat roles, as was previously
mentioned. Nevertheless, both US and UK
citizens have a long history of engagement
in privatized security, especially in the
Middle East region, which has to be consi-
dered in this regard.

A different approach is being used by the
Canadian authorities, which – while not
prohibiting their citizens to do so – are
explicitly trying to discourage an effort to
join the fight against Daesh. The reason
behind it, is the lacking capacity to help
Canadian WVF in case of an emergency.
The Dutch government also refrains from
legal prosecutions as long as no hostile act
against the Netherlands is being under-
taken or a terror organisation is being
supported (i.e. the PKK).

However, not all nations are equally toler-
ant when it comes to WVF. Switzerland for
example clearly forbids a foreign military
service without governmental approval.
Since Swiss citizen are de-facto reservists,
the law is being enforced very strictly
accordingly, which recently led to the
prosecution of a WVF (who was consulting
with a Christian militia).

Another example for a very prohibitive
government is Australia, which clearly
forbids a participation in foreign military
activities if it is not a legitimate and recog-
nized government force. Therefore, the law
especially applies in this case, since neither
the Christian Militias nor the Kurds are rec-
ognized to operate in an official capacity
for Iraq or Syria.

Pitfalls and implications

With this basic understanding of the situ-
ation in mind, wider political issues have
to be considered, since the implications
related to this topic are manifold to say the
least. On the one hand, an observer could
only see the superficial picture in this re-
gard: private citizens who feel responsible
to give the international community a
lead private citizen to take the initiative.
In addition to this – especially with the
participating social groups in mind – the
western states should consider optimizing
the existing systems of reintegrating their
ex-soldiers and veterans into the civil
society. These two examples are more
socio-political and long term orientated,
but there are far more pressing short and
midterm related problems as well.
Especially with the ongoing discussion that the “private sector” could fill the security gap, left by the withdrawal of the international troops in the Middle East, further research is desirable.

Although far lesser in numbers, the WVF do play a part in the ongoing struggle against Daesh on the ground. With westerners being involved in this development, it is important for the international community to deal with this specific topic legally, politically and socially, before it becomes of major concern with regard to the above mentioned implications.

Nevertheless, a moral classification of the WVF – be it as mercenaries or as volunteer fighters just like those of the Spanish civil war – is out of place in any way and not constructive in the debate.

Notes

* The term is meant purely non-judgmental to differentiate these persons from Islamists orientated foreign fighters.

3) Friends mourn Brit soldier who died fighting ISIS. 4 August 2015 (updated 11th August), Western Massnews.
4) Lucy Thackray, Australian western fighter die fighting ISIS. March 27, 2015, Time.com.
5) Western volunteers against ISIS, 16th March 2015, Mundu Hurriba.
8) John Hall, Meet the Peshmerga’s international Brigade: From IT workers to ex-soldiers, The men from the west teaming up with Kurdish forces to fight ISIS. 21st April 2015, DailyMail.co.uk. see also: Pamela Engil, Why US veterans are signing up with militias to fight ISIS. 12th March 2015, Business Insider. Dave Philipps, Thomas James Brennan, Unsettled at home, veterans volunteer to fight ISIS. 11th March 2015, The NY Times.
9) Lucy Thackray, Australian western fighter die fighting ISIS alongside Kurdish soldiers. 25th February 2015, DailyMail.co.uk.
11) Dave Philipps, Thomas James Brennan, Unsettled at home, veterans volunteer to fight ISIS. 17th March 2015, Telegraph.co.uk.
12) Western volunteers against ISIS, 16th March 2015, Mundu Hurriba.
13) Dave Philipps, Thomas James Brennan, Unsettled at home, veterans volunteer to fight ISIS. 17th March 2015, Telegraph.co.uk.
14) Federica Armellini, ISIS westerner fighting for Kurds disillusioned. 15th March 2015, Now.media.me.
15)amentary of the Geneva Convention, one must be inherently incompetent.
16) To give an example: to fall under the additional protocol I of the Geneva Convention, one must be inherently incompetent.
17) Isabel Coles, Westerners join Iraqi Christian militia to fight Islamic State. 12th March 2015, Telegraph.co.uk.
19) John Hall, Meet the Peshmerga’s international Brigade.
22) Lucy Thackray, Australian western fighter die fighting ISIS alongside Kurdish soldiers. 25th February 2015, DailyMail.co.uk.
23) Fazel Hawramy, Raya Jalabi, US civilians and veterans leave home for ISIS fight with help from social media.
24) Dave Philipps, Thomas James Brennan, Unsettled at home, veterans volunteer to fight ISIS. See also: Merissa Richards, ISIS. 17th March 2015, Telegraph.co.uk.
25) Canadians warned not to join militias fighting against ISIS, as interest grows among veterans. 11th December 2014, National Post.
26) Netherlands say OK for biker gangs to fight Islamic State. 14th October 2014, Yahoo News (AFP).
27) John Huggler, Swiss citizen arrested for fighting Islamic State. 12th March 2015, Telegraph.co.uk.
30) Patrick Keddie, The Westerners who fight against ISIS.