

# 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-Nusra 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.<sup>1</sup> 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 WVFs are men and women, married or single, with and without children, therefore people who have something to loose. 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 WVFs 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.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup>

### 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.<sup>5</sup> The second largest group of WVF can be found with the KRG's Peshmerga in Iraq.<sup>6</sup>

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





