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Foreign Fighters

Foreign Bodies: Transnational Activism, the Insurgency in the North Caucasus and “Beyond”

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This article examines foreign fighters and the insurgency in the North Caucasus. The first part of the article addresses conceptual issues concerning the ways that foreign fighters are analysed, posing this more widely in terms of transnational activism. Here I examine the importance of kin and relatedness. I develop this argument in the second part of the article, which examines pan-Islamism and transnational activism in the post-Soviet period. The third section draws attention to the different groups of foreign fighters, as part of a wider activist movement in the North Caucasus. Here I show that a complex group of transnational activists from the Greater Middle East, North Africa, parts of Europe, and Central Asia participated in the conflicts in the North Caucasus. Finally, the article turns to examine volunteers from the North Caucasus who travelled to fight in Syria, concluding with some considerations about the reintegration of returnees and former activists.

Keywords foreign fighter, insurgency, kinship, North Caucasus, social movements, transnational activism

Introduction

In late March 2012, the Russian authorities announced the capture of an important member of the Ansar mujahedeen in a counter-terror operation in the North Caucasus.¹ Less than a month later, rebel groups confirmed that Abu Khalid, a long-serving member of the Ansar mujahedeen in Southern Russia, had become one of the few foreign volunteers captured alive.² Reportedly of Libyan origin and in his late forties, he was a veteran of the regional insurgency who, at the time of his capture, had been serving as a Qadi or judge in the hierarchy of the Imarat Kavkaz (IK). Another member of the Ansar mujahedeen in the North Caucasus, known by the *nom de guerre* Abdullah al-Turki, made a series of video statements in support of the regional jihad before his death in May 2011. He was reportedly a Turkish citizen in his mid-thirties. As a veteran fighter, Abdullah had assumed the mantle of Emir of

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the Ansar mujahedeen on the death of Muhannad. The videos, interspersed with photos and Arabic prayers, included an appeal to Muslims from Turkey to support the insurgency in the North Caucasus. The two examples illustrate not only that transnational activists in the North Caucasus came from a range of very different backgrounds but also that volunteering to participate in foreign insurgencies is a multifaceted phenomenon—with many activists playing a range of roles.

The analysis which follows seeks to shed light on the character of transnational activism—and foreign fighters—in the North Caucasus, and latterly in Syria, providing detailed empirical analysis of the different groups of volunteers, and of the roles played by different transnational activists, using a case study approach and drawing on a dataset created by the author.³ Equally, the article offers a contribution to the conceptualisation of transnational activism by highlighting some anomalies in the use of the term “foreign fighter,” who may be neither (exclusively) fighters nor indeed “foreign,” except in the narrow sense of nationality and citizenship. Here the article draws on the ideas of “fictive kinship” and “relatedness.” Finally, this article also offers support to the thesis that “foreign fighters” are not tied to specific branches of Islamic discourse. The analysis here builds on work by the author and others analysing the conflict dynamics which have framed militancy and activism in the North Caucasus.⁴

Analysing Activism: Foreign Fighters and Fictive Kin

The overwhelming body of work on foreign fighters and contemporary activist movements has focused on recruitment or mobilisation and occasionally the converse, disengagement from militant movements more generally.⁵ The impact of foreign fighters on local conflict dynamics has drawn some attention.⁶ Yet, apart from some works in social movement theory that did address broader issues related to transnationalism,⁷ conceptual issues have received relatively little attention.⁸ A more refined analytical and scholarly body of work on “foreign fighters” has emerged in recent years. However, despite the fact that the term foreign fighter is now widely used outside the academic community, such commentaries make little reference to the richness of scholarly debate.

What is of interest here is the contested definitional parameters of foreign fighters that can be traced across three phases of academic work. Consideration of the different frames of reference and forms of activism informed much of the first cluster of literature. A 2005 in-depth study of the growth of Al Qaeda looked at the mobilisation of “transnationalist jihadis.”⁹ Others writing for “think tanks” also began to assess the enduring influence of the “Afghan Arabs” and “foreign fighters.”¹⁰ Academic analysis in this phase of work focused on “non-indigenous, non-territorialized combatants,” highlighting that volunteers were neither local nor from the indigenous communities neighbouring a conflict zone, while also examining how activists undertake transnational travel to participate in hostilities, if they are to be considered “foreign fighters.”¹¹ The effect of this case study approach and definition was also to draw attention to those who were not primarily, or not only, combatants, a point raised in a second piece on foreign fighters by the same authors.¹² This definition and approach would thus point towards locating analysis of foreign fighters within the wider body of work on transnational activism.

Around the same time, a slightly different definition of foreign fighters was offered in the comparative work of David Malet, another of the first cluster of academics. For Malet, foreign fighters are “noncitizens of conflict states who join insurgencies during civil conflict.”¹³ This provides a useful definition which goes

some way to set general parameters, using citizenship to inform case selection and identify which data can be used in large-N comparative analysis. Yet, interestingly, Malet himself notes that the label “transnational insurgent” is more “meaningfully descriptive,” although the term “foreign fighter” is now more commonly used.¹⁴ This serves to illustrate the ubiquity of the term “foreign fighter,” while also highlighting nuances and differences between early definitions.

Equally important was a second cluster of work which explored conceptual issues, mobilisation, and the impact of foreign fighters on conflict.¹⁵ Partly prompted by the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, the aim was to enrich analysis using large-N comparative studies of “foreign fighters.”¹⁶ Thomas Hegghammer, who was at the forefront of the second batch of work, sought to establish foreign fighters as a distinctive category of “actor.” He also highlighted that foreign fighters in Afghanistan, and in the post-Soviet period, represent a “violent offshoot of a qualitatively new subcurrent of Islamism—popular pan-Islamism.”¹⁷ Illustrating how foreign fighters sit within broader social movements, this argument echoed themes raised in the first cluster of work. At the same time, however, for Hegghammer, building on Malet’s earlier definition, foreign fighters have four characteristics: they lack affiliation to an official military; they are unpaid; they do not share the citizenship of factions involved in conflicts, nor do they have kin or diaspora connections to fighting groups.¹⁸ Taking a comparative perspective on mobilisation, his work differed from other case study approaches which examine the “life-cycle” and impact of foreign fighters.¹⁹

A third cluster of work, mixing and building on the two earlier phases, has emerged in recent years and includes scholarly research as well as reports by think tanks and journalists focusing on the country of origin of foreign fighters engaged in contemporary conflicts, notably Iraq and Syria.²⁰ One branch of this evolving body of work has largely focused on conventional comparative studies, sometimes drawing on social media accounts of activists and basic biographies of volunteer combatants.

By no means exhaustive, this account does highlight key works and key themes shaping the contours of contemporary research into foreign fighters. There are clearly many overlaps between these three clusters of work, particularly where researchers seek to identify historical/comparative patterns and in modifications of the label or category itself. One aspect that remains somewhat neglected, however, is the role of foreign volunteers, a point touched upon in passing in earlier work by this author, and revisited in the following section of this article.²¹ This stems from an overarching assumption that volunteerism leads directly to combat, whereas many participants may initially play a role as activists.

Another largely neglected feature of the debates about foreign fighters is the role of kin. Hegghammer even explicitly rules out kin or diaspora connections to fighting groups from his definition of foreign fighters. By contrast, Cerwyn Moore and Paul Tumelty, in the first cluster of academic work on foreign fighters, drew attention to the way in which “religion, kinship, and/or ideology” led to mobilization.²² This aspect may be fruitfully explored by reference to the way that contemporary anthropological work has challenged the modern, Western notion of kinship through elaborating the concept of “fictive kin.” This account of “fictive kin” speaks of relatedness in terms of different bases of a shared sense of solidarity—connectedness, bonds—which are adaptive and which change over time.²³ Commonly understood as differentiated from traditional “blood” ties, blood and fictive kin may now be

seen as more of a continuum. Importantly, fictive kin does not mean fictional. Rather, it draws attention to the ways in which kinship ties are made or formed. This sheds light on the ways in which “relatedness,” instead of blood ties alone, informs kin. The case study of “foreign” fighters offered here indicates different ways in which “bonding” and a sense of “relatedness” played an important role in activism, informing the decision to travel to conflict zones.

Kinship linked to the Jordanian-Chechen Diaspora in the Middle East and the Kazakh-based Chechen community in Central Asia shaped activism. However, a more general sense of “relatedness” shaped the decision by many from communities in Turkey to travel and participate in combat in the North Caucasus in support of imagined brethren. Obviously geographical proximity and extant networks provided important channels facilitating the movement of volunteers from Turkey. But the wider community in the region held sympathy for peoples of North Caucasian origin. In more recent years, a sense of pan-Turkic activism also informed the decision by some to participate in combat in the North Caucasus, fusing the regional insurgency with a larger militant movement spanning parts of Europe, Russia, and Central Asia. Hence too an indirect sense of relatedness was infused with a pan-Islamic sentiment that itself evoked a kin imaginary made active in shared combat, and activism and volunteerism more generally. Over time, it is the merger between “real” and “fictive” kin that produces new forms of relatedness which have salience.²⁴ In this way a rejection of blood, biological, and classical bonds to family, ethnicity, or nation creates space for new forms of connectedness to emerge.²⁵ Many foreign fighters explicitly reject nationality and ethnicity, affiliating instead with “fictive kin.” Engaging in activism offers a measure of authenticity as new forms of kinship emerge, which are then reinforced over time. According to Janet Carsten, this reading of kinship is susceptible “to continuous transformations and adaptations” which resonate politically and symbolically.²⁶

It could be argued that foreign fighters are perceived as “foreign” by those they are fighting against. In many cases, volunteer combatants are also perceived as foreign by those they are fighting alongside. However, many may view themselves in a different way, invoking a sense of “relatedness” or kin connection to local fighting groups, which evolves over time. This is most obvious with diaspora communities but also in the more general frames of reference used by activists. Although a portion of those who travelled to the North Caucasus had “kinship” ties, at least in part, others travelled as a result of a shared sense of community, fighting in support of the *Umma*. Mobilisation was informed by a shared sense of identity, “fictive kinship,” through pan-Islamist discourse which in many ways calls into question the notion of “foreign,” as implied by nationality or citizenship.²⁷ Locating foreign fighters as transnational activists and placing them in a wider body of work on social movement theory, opens up this vein of analysis of relatedness.²⁸ That many volunteers do not view themselves as “foreign” is due, at least in part, to themes raised by Abdallah Azzam in the Afghan jihad of the 1980s and other post-Soviet conflicts.

Afghanistan and Azzam: The Emergence of Pan-Islamic Transnational Activism

In the early 1980s, a newfound sense of Islamic identification emerged in parts of the Middle East. It is significant that this growing religious sensibility occurred against the backdrop of the war in Afghanistan. It is true that when the Soviet Red Army

invaded Afghanistan in 1979, galvanising local resistance to foreign occupation, the war did not initially lead to widespread mobilisation of volunteers from the Middle East. Yet, it did spark a surge of interest in Islamic activism. At the forefront of this ideological shift in Islamic activist discourse was the “Imam of Jihad,” Abdallah Azzam. Azzam would become the “most important individual behind the mobilisation of Arab volunteers for Afghanistan,”²⁹ establishing a sense of solidarity among activists as part of a wider Muslim community.³⁰ Although only one among a number of theological figures advancing a reading of jihad as an individual obligation, it was Azzam’s vision—fusing a doctrinal rationale with an organisational infrastructure—that inspired and enabled foreign fighters to travel to Afghanistan in the latter part of the 1980s.³¹ A pan-Islamic discourse and the series of “guest houses” in Pakistan became a template for Islamic foreign fighters.³² (Ironically, in a way, this mirrored the approach taken by the Comintern to support Left-Wing groups in the Spanish Civil War in the 1930s.)

In the late 1980s, a pamphlet by Abdallah Azzam told the life of a martyr from Jordan. Celebrated as a warrior in the epitaph, the volunteer’s Chechen ancestral background was noted: he had family connections to those who had taken up arms against Russia in the 19th century under the leadership of Imam Shamil, a Sufi leader of the Murid movement.³³ Another Jordanian-Chechen, who would later assume the name Shaykh Fathi al-Shishani, also became integrated into the ranks of the mujahedeen in Afghanistan. Although not a fighter, due to health problems, Shaykh Fathi’s links to foreign support networks provided support for the mujahedeen group led by Abu Sayyaf. Many of the “Afghan Arabs,” as they would later become known, travelled to “defend a Muslim community, which in their opinion was occupied by an infidel, atheist power.”³⁴ The powerful symbolic role played by figures from Islamic history, including figures from the North Caucasus, continues to influence activist networks, notably in Syria.

Azzam celebrated a notion of broad and inclusive form of pan-Islamic activism—and a view of “jihad” which was “congruent with the prescriptions of the Shari’a—that became influential in mobilising further support.³⁵ In producing a sense of solidarity, re-imaging activism as part of a wider Muslim community, Azzam tied activism, at least in part, to a metaphorical sense of “fictive kin.” This may be seen in his address to the *Umma* at large and more specifically in the brotherhood of shared activism, and his martyr pamphlets.³⁶ Importantly, as Hegghammer notes, the reading of pan-Islamism advanced by Azzam was but one version of broad discourse of Islamic activism, while his own experience and individual role as an ideological figurehead was also important.³⁷ Nonetheless, Azzam’s legacy framed the activism of a group of Jordanian-Chechen and Saudi volunteers who had visited Afghanistan in the late 1980s, but who then went on to use the template to mobilise foreign fighters in other conflict zones.³⁸

From Afghanistan to the North Caucasus

Following the withdrawal of the Red Army from Afghanistan, and the collapse of the Soviet Union, many of the Saudi volunteers travelled elsewhere as activists to support what they viewed as embattled Muslim communities.³⁹ Three Ansar mujahedeen groups had fought an anti-Russian jihad in Afghanistan in the late 1980s, with Ibn Khattab leading one of them. In the early part of the 1990s, they supported the United Tajik Opposition (UTO), a coalition of Islamist groups, opposed to the

Russian-based Tajik authorities. A small, close group of veteran fighters, led by Ibn Khattab, were invited to Dagestan in 1995. The “embattled communities” in the North Caucasus were based not just in Chechnya, but also in Dagestan and other parts of the region.

Building on his experience in Afghanistan and Tajikistan, Khattab recognised the importance of ensuring local support for external groups such as the Ansar Mujahedeen.⁴⁰ Even in times of crisis, in order for jihad to be legitimate and feasible, the local community must first invite foreign volunteers for assistance, as he emphasised on his initial arrival in Dagestan in 1995 at the invitation of the Jordanian-Chechen and veteran of Afghanistan, Shaykh Fathi.⁴¹

Abstaining from participation in local politics, Khattab presented one aspect of his activism as a version of *da'wa*, or the preaching of Islam as part of a community effort to support Islam.⁴² He thus located his actions within an important theme of Saudi activism, following an authentic “Prophetic tradition.”⁴³ Khattab reiterated the importance of undertaking action, in keeping with the creed of contemporary jihadi discourse, and the need for inclusive Muslim solidarity.⁴⁴ Although only a small group of local Chechen and Dagestani groups directed attacks against Sufi norms, frequently supported by some foreign ideologues, Khattab avoided confrontation with Sufis. His vision of jihad echoed the pan-Islamic activism advocated by Abdallah Azzam, and this provided the ideological architecture for the Ansar Arab mujahedeen in the North Caucasus.⁴⁵

At this time a local version of Islamic activism, shaped by aspects of Salafiyya thought, was emerging in the North Caucasus. Local ideologues in Dagestan and Chechnya advanced a “purist” reading of Islam, which fed into anti-federal militancy in the region. Although differences existed between local theologians and religious leaders,⁴⁶ a patronage network, donations and charitable grants, enabled this group of Islamists to fuse local purist and external pan-Islamist agendas, giving the Shari'a Guard, and the local militia and foreign volunteers linked to Khattab's *jama'at* (*al-Jama'at al ul-Islamiyya*), as well as local parties such as *Islamskaya Natsiya* (Islamic Nation), a measure of independence and financial and ideological influence.⁴⁷

During this period, Dagestani, Chechen, and Afghan Arab ideologues gave sermons and disseminated their ideas through pamphlets, advancing their vision of jihad as a pan-Islamist struggle.⁴⁸ According to the Chechen Islamist Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev, the North Caucasus was occupied Muslim land: hence jihad was articulated in terms of a regional pan-Islamism which aimed to unify Chechnya and Dagestan and lead to the establishment of Islamic Caliphate.⁴⁹ Members of the *Umma* were obliged to undertake action to “protect Muslim peoples and land, in defence of the principles and conditions of Islam and faith in Allah.”⁵⁰ The Islamist rhetoric drew together a wide range of young volunteers from ethnic and sub-ethnic groups (Dargin, Lak), facilitating the formation of a regional political and military movement.⁵¹ In April 1998, Movladi Udugov, Shamil Basaev, and supporters such as Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev convened a Congress of Peoples of Dagestan and Ichkeria, with the aim of unifying the mountain peoples.⁵² In the inter-war years, this local puritanical agenda had fused regional groups with the external networks linked to Ibn Khattab.⁵³ Whereas the Dagestani groups in the Kadar zone and the Jordanian-Chechens promoted the Shari'a Courts and Shari'a Law as a way to govern, Khattab's pan-Islamist agenda focused on supporting embattled and beleaguered Islamic communities as part of a wider revivalist movement. Different

doctrinal and ethnically orientated threads ran through these communities, with Islam providing a unifying or bridging narrative.⁵⁴

There is no doubt that a pan-Islamist account of jihad—informed by the work of Abdallah Azzam—played a role in the conflicts in the North Caucasus, and provided an important motivation for some foreign fighters, including the Arab mujahedeen. It is important to note, however, that pre-existing narratives of Salafiyya Islam—or what was labelled locally as “pure Islam”—existed in the North Caucasus, as did a vision of pan-Caucasian regional armed resistance, which co-existed with nationalist and secular motives for activism. Deep-rooted kin affiliations linked members of the Middle Eastern Chechen Diaspora communities with local Islamist communities, while fictive kin also acted as a bridgehead, melding pan-Islamist and local anti-Russian groups. In these ways, different accounts of activism co-existed during the period from the first largely nationalist war (1994–1996) through the course of the inter-war period and second war from 1999, until the Russian authorities declared an end to the conflict in 2009.

However, during this period the narrative frames used to support the insurgency also adapted. Although the conflict focused on Chechnya, it was also regional and anti-federal for many affiliates of the Chechen-led groups. In the period from 2002–2006, the North Caucasus witnessed a surge in low-level violence, linked to what had become a regional insurgency. Then, in 2007, insurgent leaders, notably the Kabardin leader Anzor Astemirov, laid the framework for the formalisation of the Imarat Kavkaz (IK). Looking now at the IK, one finds embedded within it a multiplicity of different factions, each with different aims, experience and expertise, agendas and capabilities. Its overarching appeal to Islam as a binding force has led many commentators to link the IK directly with other jihadist organisations, but this neglects its local and regional character. The IK is a loosely connected set of local *jama'ats* which, together, form a regional network. The IK acts as a hub, in and of itself, directing attacks against the federal authorities in Russia while providing a regional platform for the various local *jama'ats*. One element of the insurgency has been the IK's capacity to morph and change so as draw in new generations of aspiring militants from a host of backgrounds, using non-relational, relational, and brokerage pathways as part of the scale-shift to a regional social movement.⁵⁵ Another, often obscured, aspect of the IK is the appeal of pan-Islamist sentiments, including the work of Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, in sustaining a *regional* network.⁵⁶

Foreign Activism and the Insurgency in the North Caucasus

During the first 15 months of the second conflict (1999–2009), the Arab mujahedeen website reported the deaths of dozens of volunteers. Considerable numbers were killed in the defence of Grozny and the subsequent withdrawal from the encircled city. The dead included Turkish volunteers as well as a handful of Jordanian-Chechens, and a number of others from Kuwait, Yemen, and Gulf State Emirates. The “martyr epitaphs” referred to volunteers from the Arabian peninsula and Arabia, situating the activism of the Khattab group within a broader pan-Islamic movement and the Prophetic sentiments of Arab activists. According to Madawi al-Rasheed, militant Saudi activism was “dependent on the notion of an Islamic *umma*, encompassing different races, nationalities and cultural groups.”⁵⁷ This Saudi community viewed the Arabian peninsula, with its “perceived common

political and cultural heritage,” as the vanguard of an “imagined community” that existed between the “modern nation state and the larger international community such as the *umma*.”⁵⁸ In effect then, these Arabian volunteers viewed themselves as part of an imagined community, as fictive kin within the *umma*. The adoption of specific *noms de guerre*—identifying tribal, town, or Islamic heritage rather than their nationality or ethnicity—illustrates the attempt to construct a form of relatedness associated with fictive kin.⁵⁹ Similar sentiments are expressed through the names used by Turkish and North African volunteers and activists who participated in the conflicts in the North Caucasus, again emphasising an attempt to produce “fictive kinship.”

Many refugees from the Chechen conflict had sought refuge in the Pankisi Gorge just across the border in Georgia; its encampment of Internally Displaced Peoples (IDPs) provided cover for clandestine networks supporting the *boyeviki* and enabling the movement of munitions and manpower. By late 1999, a small group of Arab volunteers, including Saudi and Jordanian representatives of charitable organisations, had arrived in the Gorge. Members of this group such as the young Khaled Yusuf Mohammad (who would later become known under the *nom de guerre* Muhannad), acted as preachers, seeking to proselytise and support the work of charitable organisations in their endeavours to build new mosques in the region. The much larger IDP encampments in Ingushetia also served as recruitment grounds, or places for shelter, for *boyeviki* who had left the front lines in Chechnya.

Meanwhile, an inner circle of younger volunteers and a slightly older group of Arab fighters and members of the Chechen Diaspora community remained in the region, supporting the Arab Mujahedeen. Abu Hafs al-Urdani, who had ties to Khattab, was a key member of the Ansar mujahedeen, having arrived in the region in 1995.⁶⁰ He enjoyed support as a volunteer fighter, given the kinship ties between the Chechen Diaspora community in Jordan and their North Caucasian brethren. Indeed Jordanian-Chechens played an important role in the foreign fighter movement in the region, following their spiritual figurehead, Shaykh Fathi al-Shishani.⁶¹ A loose grouping made up of Abu Omar al-Sayf, the Saudi spiritual aide to Ibn Khattab, Abu Walid al-Ghamidi, Khattab’s newly anointed deputy, Abu Hafs al-Urdani, and Abu Qutbah continued to lead the Arab mujahedeen under the overall command of Amir Ibn Khattab. Other groups of foreign fighters included Turkish volunteers, at the time led by commander Bilal, who retained a measure of independence, and members of the Chechen Diaspora community. These foreign volunteers were based across the Caucasus, often offering support through clandestine networks.

Each of the leaders of the foreign fighters was surrounded by a coterie of close aides and religious advisors. For example, Khattab was supported by his first deputy, the Egyptian Abu Bakr Aqeedah, until his death in Buinaksk, Dagestan, in December 1997. Although the movement headed by Khattab was multi-ethnic, a number of his inner circle including his second deputy, Hakim al-Medani, were Saudi. It was not their shared nationality or ethnicity, as such, that was important but, rather, the fact that many had travelled and fought with him in Tajikistan during 1993–94. While appealing to a broad sense of Islamic solidarity, the recruitment of Saudi activists for the fighting in North Caucasus was explicitly “grounded in real [past] experiences, networks, friendships, and family and kin circles.”⁶² Reports indicate that similar local networks were important in the recruitment and activism of others from Kuwait, Yemen, Egypt, Turkey, and Jordan, with the

latter two groups drawing extensively on connections in the diaspora communities to facilitate mobilisation.⁶³

The Saudi Abu Omar al-Sayf acted as a religious advisor both to Khattab and his successor, Abu Walid al-Ghamidi. By the time of Abu Walid’s tenure many key members of Khattab’s Arab mujahedeen had been killed, although a handful of veterans including the Saudi, Abu Qutaybah, remained in the region. Following the death of Abu Walid in April 2004, Abu Omar al-Sayf attempted to assert more theological control over the movement, especially given the changing geopolitical scene following 9/11 and the U.S. invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq.⁶⁴ However it was Abu Qutaybah, a logistics expert, who appears to have acted as interim leader of the foreign mujahedeen, playing a prominent role in the movement until Abu Hafs al-Urdani took direct leadership of the Ansar fighters.⁶⁵ Qutaybah was killed in July 2004, and Abu Omar al-Sayf in 2005, essentially ending the involvement of the Khattab network in the region. The death of the “movement entrepreneurs” (ideologues; financiers; recruiters; trainers; military leaders) curtailed the incentive for activism, and by late 2005 the geo-political moment had shifted to Iraq.

Despite the dwindling influence of foreign fighters during 2005, a small group of volunteers continued to operate in the region under the command of Abu Hafs al-Urdani. By this stage, the movement had become more regional in character with a handful of foreign fighters, including Muhannad, supported by the Jordanian Abu Yasir, and Abdullah al-Turki, becoming integrated into the Chechen-led *jama’ats* in Vedeno. During 2005 and 2006 many of the local veteran leaders were also killed by the federal authorities, curtailing the actions of insurgency. Thereafter, the movement increasingly took on a more regional anti-federal hue.

Turning to the roles played by “foreign fighters,” current research suggests that the label covers activists who assumed medical, financial, theological, and technical roles supporting the movements. For many, their role as combatants was secondary. Others who were more directly involved in military operations also held roles as trainers, weapons and logistical experts, and leaders, rather than being exclusively combatants. This illustrates not only conceptual anomalies of the category “foreign fighter,” but also that the motivation for activism may vary greatly, even where volunteers are involved in conflicts as combatants. Although the biographical

Table 1. Leadership of foreign fighters in the North Caucasus

<i>Nom de guerre</i>	Nationality	Prior military experience	Primary area of operations	Tenure
Ibn Khattab	Saudi	Yes	Chechnya and Dagestan	Feb 95 – May 02
Abu Walid al-Ghamidi	Saudi	Yes	Chechnya	May 02 – April 04
Abu Hafs al-Urdani	Jordanian	No	Chechnya and Dagestan	April 04 – Dec 06
Muhannad	Unconfirmed	Unconfirmed	Chechnya	Dec 06 – April 2011
Abdullah al-Turki	Turkish	Unconfirmed	Chechnya and Dagestan	April 2011 – May 2011

Table 2. Foreign fighters in the North Caucasus, 1995–2012

Region of origin	Number	Prior military experience	Primary role (Fighter)	Primary role (Financier; linguist; ideologue; trainer; military leader)
Middle East	66	15	35	23
Turkey	50	3 ⁶⁶	24	5
North Africa	23	Unknown	11	4
Europe	20	Unknown	Unknown	2
Unknown	5	Unknown	5	0

material is incomplete, it highlights the importance of prior military experience, the functional role of language in some activist movements, and the ways in which foreign fighters portray themselves, shedding light on “particular forms of diffusion.”⁶⁷

I have studied biographical information from open source material, collating general details regarding the role of foreign fighters in the North Caucasus so as to produce a dataset. Martyr biographies, trial proceedings and official statements, human rights reports, as well as newspaper and newswire reports, amongst other sources, were used to triangulate data.⁶⁸ The dataset which I have compiled draws on biographical material from 164 activists who have participated in conflicts in the North Caucasus from 1992 through to 2013. A considerable portion of material concerns individuals who have been killed, although it also includes a small number of activists and foreign volunteers who admitted involvement in hostilities in the North Caucasus, and who have since been arrested and imprisoned. The dataset contains details about Middle Eastern volunteers from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Yemen, Jordan, and other parts of the region as well as biographical information regarding a number of North African volunteers from Egypt, Algeria, Libya, and Morocco. Another batch of information covers Turkish foreign fighters and there is further material on a small number of other activists from Europe. It is important to acknowledge, however, that the dataset is far from a complete overview of foreign fighters or transnational activism. It lacks information on large groups of volunteers from the region, notably from Azerbaijan, and outside the region, including volunteers from Central Asia. Despite movement between different groups, I largely avoid the inclusion of data about foreign fighters who were not directly aligned to the International Islamic Peacekeeping Battalion (IIPB), Ibn Khattab, the Basayev network, or the Imarat Kavkaz.⁶⁹ For all its omissions, the findings are useful nonetheless.

The data certainly illustrate that transnational activism is a much more complex phenomenon than the term “foreign fighter” indicates.⁷⁰ A small group of Saudi volunteers led the foreign fighter movement, with Jordanian and Turkish volunteers also playing important, but slightly different roles. Both Shamil Basaev and Khattab sought to regulate the flow of foreign fighters, recognising how an influx of unskilled volunteers could undermine the movement.⁷¹ The Saudi volunteers worked alongside multi-ethnic foreign fighters from the Middle East (Jordan, Kuwait, and Yemen), Turkey, North Africa (Algeria and Egypt), and Europe. The

data indicates that “prior military experience” in the form either of training within an army, be it professionally or as a conscript, or actual fighting as a volunteer in another conflict is crucial when considering “capability” and leadership. Two former fighters and close aides of Khattab—Khalid al-Subayt and Salih al-Awfi—returned to Saudi Arabia after the end of the first war.⁷² They helped to raise funds and support the training facility at Serzhen-Yurt, during the inter-war years. In this way former combatants, some whom might have been injured, often assumed roles as “trainers,” “recruiters,” and logistical aides. The dataset highlights that foreign volunteers participated in a transnational social movement which was multi-ethnic, regionally based, and included many activists from a similar generation. More generally, the data also serves to illustrate that qualitative case study research on “foreign fighters,” even when informed by particular methods such as Social Network Analysis (SNA), can be enhanced by drawing on transnational activism and social movement theory. In particular it draws attention to the “active” processes involved in movements, on “dynamic mechanisms and processes of contention like framing, coalition forming, diffusion, and brokerage” as well as “scale shift.”⁷³

The data also indicates that many foreign fighters had different roles in what was a transnational activist movement. This is not uncommon, especially when comparing activism in the North Caucasus with other case studies.⁷⁴ In the case of the NC, many activists held dual roles. Some were fighters for the most part, while this was a secondary role for others. Some were primarily trainers, weapons experts, or military planners. Others provided ideological/theological, financial, media, or medical advice, while serving as combatants in a secondary role. Some were IT specialists and had technical expertise; others held roles as linguists and translators. Some held positions as leaders, commanding small militia groups as part of a broader activist movement. Importantly then, activist movements include different factions, sometimes based on ethnicity and kinship ties, with language often playing a functional role. In the North Caucasus, command of Arabic gave some activists, notably religious advisors, a measure of authority and influence within the foreign fighter movement. This meant that certain groups—namely the Jordanian-Chechens—had significant roles, bridging local and external activism and giving them some influence in Chechen culture. Others—such as the Turkish volunteers—while incorporated into units led by the Arab mujahedeen and Ruslan Gelayev, amongst others, also retained a degree of operational independence, due to their prior military experience and familiarity with their North Caucasian brethren. Some had independence, or assumed leadership roles, due to long service in the conflicts, with a handful arriving prior to Khattab in 1995.

Local recruits included hundreds of Dagestanis and Chechens, with dozens of others from the likes of the Nogai community visiting the training facility at Serzhen-Yurt. Dozens of Central Asian and Arab volunteers also passed through the training programme during 1998 and the early part of 1999. Many of the Arab fighters had arrived in the inter-war years, sometimes marrying into the highland communities in Chechnya and Dagestan. While this lent them some local support, assistance from the outside world waned. By late 2000, the cause of the Arab mujahedeen in Chechnya was seen as folly by many donors and supporters from the Middle East. Hundreds of foreign volunteers had been killed in federal operations during the course of the conflict, both in 1999 in Dagestan and in Chechnya thereafter. Many were Turks and Jordanian Chechens, some of whom shared loose

kinship ties with the *boyeviki*, although dozens of other Saudi and, to a lesser degree, Kuwaiti, as well as North African and European volunteers, had been killed in clashes. Many surviving jihadi fighters left the North Caucasus.

Following the end of large-scale hostilities during 2002, foreign fighters continued to play important roles as financiers, logistical experts, and in some cases leaders involved in combat operations. However their numbers dwindled, especially after the death of key veterans during 2004–2006. The remaining foreign volunteers were largely from a younger generation of activists, and although they held key roles in the hierarchy of the insurgency, none had the profile of the earlier Arab fighters. Turkish volunteers continued to play a role, while those that remained were integrated into the infrastructure of the Imarat Kavkaz, after its inception in October 2007. Throughout 2009–2012, they were active in internal ideological disputes, which essentially splintered the Chechen-led character of the regional insurgency. By 2012, the role of foreign fighters had tapered off to such a degree, that no recognisable leader of the foreign volunteers now exists.

Around the same time, pressure from the federal authorities in Chechnya and Ingushetia forced many fighters to seek refuge beyond the borders of Russia, as normalisation and amnesties weakened the regional insurgency. Meanwhile, the death and capture of veteran leaders and key people in the hierarchy of the movement, including Amir Astemirov, Supyan Abdullayev, Amir Magas and a number of Dagestani leaders, further weakened the IK. In Chechnya, the death of the Gakayev brothers and the destruction of their group, along with the death of the foreign fighters affiliated to the Vedeno *jama'ats*, temporarily weakened the capacity of the militant movement in the highlands. Then, in the months building up to the Sochi Winter Olympics it became clear that the insurgency had suffered another major setback. After the Games, militant groups announced that the veteran Chechen leader, Doku Umarov, had been killed in September 2013. The former Qadi and Dagestani religious advisor, Aliashkab Kebekov, eventually assumed the role of leader of the IK, as Umarov's successor.

By this time in early 2014, the number of foreign fighters in the North Caucasus had considerably diminished. Other jihadi theatres were easier to get to and offered more opportunities for young volunteers from the Middle East, Central Asia, North Africa, and Europe. These had long existed in Iraq and, by 2013, Syria was opening up. The presence of Chechen foreign fighters in other conflicts has long been a matter of speculation, while Chechnya itself, and its veterans, occupied an important position in jihadi culture. Although based on limited and often anecdotal evidence, the presence of North Caucasian volunteers in other jihadi theatres such as Afghanistan had become widely accepted in popular studies of militancy. The conflict in Syria would re-ignite this debate, given the involvement of many North Caucasian volunteers.

Activism Beyond the North Caucasus

The conflict in Syria has received considerable coverage of “foreign fighters,” who often maintain an online presence through social media. While reports understandably focus on the role of European, and more specifically British, foreign fighters in Syria, the conflict has also seen participation by significant numbers of activists from North Africa, the Middle East, and, to a lesser degree, from the former Soviet Union. Among these Russian-speaking transnational activists and foreign

fighters, news reports indicate that a number of different factions, including those from the North Caucasus, have played a role in the conflict.

The label “*al-Shishani*,” the Arabic term for “Chechen,” is often adopted by fighters from the region. A badge of honour, with the conflict in Chechnya viewed as one of the most challenging theatres in jihadi culture, it also acts as a convenient shorthand and label of origin which many volunteers from the Caucasus use, thus avoiding the need to explain ethnic and sub-ethnic categories. By the same token, the label *al-Shishani* masks a complex picture involving different factions of Russian-speaking foreign fighters, many of whom have not travelled directly from Chechnya or who are not actually Chechen. This is not to deny that dozens of Chechens have fought in Syria over the course of conflict. Rather, it indicates the multi-ethnic nature of this component of the foreign fighter movement in Syria. Indeed, fighters from the Caucasus cannot be properly understood without some grasp of the conflicts in the North Caucasus.

The most well known members of the Chechen community currently fighting in Syria travelled there from the Pankisi Gorge. Some were relatively young and inexperienced volunteers; a small handful had more direct ties to Chechen *bojeviki* and *bandformirovaniya* formations. Duisi, once a hub for the Chechen mujahedeen during the second Russo-Chechen war (1999–2009), is one of a number of villages of the Kist peoples, a sub-ethnic Chechen community numbering less than 15,000. They speak a dialect of the Nakh language, which is shared with others from Chechnya and Ingushetia. Pankisi is a place of refuge for these different communities and a transit point for people moving between the North and South Caucasus. Others from the Caucasus, including dozens of Azeris, Kabardin, Balkar, and Dagestani volunteers, have made their way to Syria. Once there, they linked up with local groups fighting against Assad.

Following the subjugation of the North Caucasus by Russian forces in 1860, over a hundred thousand peoples were deported or emigrated to Turkey. This group became part of a wider generation of North Caucasian Diaspora who settled in parts of Turkey, in Jordan and, to a lesser extent, in Iraq over the following fifty years. In Syria itself, there were already some Chechen communities in Latakia. Indeed, long-standing links between groups from the North Caucasus and Syria between 2000 and 2005 are illustrated by the fact that Aliashkab Kebekov, the newly appointed head of the IK, reportedly received religious instruction from local groups in Damascus. Other North Caucasian communities existed in Damascus and in towns on the border between Turkey and Syria. There is also a small Chechen community in Deir ez-Zor, in the eastern part of Syria.

Chechen communities can also be found across the former Soviet Union, notably in parts of Kazakhstan, having been forcibly deported under Stalin in the 1940s. Small itinerant communities, essentially part of a second group of emigrants, can also be found across the former Soviet Union. The two conflicts of the 1990s also created a more recent, third diaspora community, that includes tens of thousands of Chechens residing in Austria and Poland, as well as other small communities in Central and Northern Europe.⁷⁵ A small section of this diaspora has chosen to fight in Syria, and given a recent spate of arrests, it also appears that Germany and Austria, as well as Bosnia, have been important transit points for members of the Chechen Diaspora *en route* to Syria.⁷⁶

There are a number of different, but linked, reasons why Russian-speaking activists appeared in Syria and managed to quickly form combat *jama'ats* (groups)

Table 3. Leaders of Chechen or Russian-speaking *jama'ats* in Syria

<i>Nom de guerre</i>	Ethnicity	<i>Jama'at</i>	Prior military experience	Arrival/tenure	Killed
Abu Omar al-Shishani	Chechen/ Georgian/ Russian parentage from Pankisi	Umar Shishani's <i>Jama'at</i>	Georgian Army, 2008	2012	
Salahuddin al-Shishani	Kist Chechen from Pankisi (unconfirmed)	Jaish al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar	Regional insurgency, 2010 (exact details unknown)	2013	
Sayfullakh al-Shishani	Kist Chechen from Pankisi	Sayfullakh Shishani's <i>Jama'at</i>	Chechnya (exact details unknown)	2012	February 2014
Muslim Abu Walid al-Shishani	Kist Chechen from Pankisi	Junud as-Sham	Regional insurgency, 2002	2012	

or assume leadership roles in factions involved in the conflict. First, a number of veterans were based nearby, in Turkey. Following a series of assassinations in Turkey targeting associates of the IK, some were particularly anxious to leave. Pressure on other Chechen communities in the Middle East, notably in Egypt, may also have encouraged volunteers from the diaspora community to travel to Syria. Secondly, Chechen sources indicate that an influential group of Chechen advisors and financiers—with longstanding ties to the insurgency and links in Turkey—played an important role organising some Russian-speaking foreign fighter groups in Syria. This group, including Isa Umarov, had links to the Middle East and also had connections to groups in Syria, enabling the recruitment and mobilisation of volunteers. They provided a logistical channel and financial support through which volunteers could travel into Syria. However, it also appears that during the first years of the Syrian Civil War many volunteers from the Caucasus, Russia, and the Chechen Diaspora community acted independently, travelling in small groups using their own contacts.⁷⁷ Thirdly, the extensive North Caucasian community in Azerbaijan and Turkey, as well as the Jordanian-Chechen community, played a role in mobilising activists. These connections remain important, particularly in familiarising activists from the North Caucasus with other ideological frames of activism.

It is also worth mentioning the “Lopota Incident” in late August 2012, which may have driven activists to Syria. With armed attacks in Dagestan increasing during 2012 as local *jama'ats* intensified their activities, the tension with the Russian authorities, still running high in the wake of the 2008 war over Ossetia, were exacerbated. On August 30, reports emerged that a gunfight had occurred in the Lopota Gorge, a remote region of Georgia bordering Dagestan, in which a number of local Kist men, as well as at least three members of the Georgian armed forces,

were killed. What exactly happened remains unclear but at least some of the group were affiliated to one of the Dagestani *jama'ats* and the Russian forces had relocated significant numbers of troops to Dagestan, partly to quell the insurgency, and partly with a long-term strategy to isolate the local *jama'ats* ahead of the Sochi Olympic Games. The incident may have acted as a catalyst, forcing many local affiliates of the regional insurgency to seek safehaven elsewhere, with some relocating to Turkey and eventually Syria.

Nevertheless, the ideological frame and the logistical networks enabled multi-ethnic groups including dozens of volunteers from the North Caucasus to establish themselves quickly in Northern Syria. At the same time, the different groups in Syria led by Russian-speaking fighters also reflect much of the factionalism that has shaped the ongoing insurgency in the North Caucasus over the past fifteen years.

Established in 2012, one of the most significant groups is known as Junud as-Sham. Largely comprised of fighters from the North Caucasus, the group is led by the Pankisi-born Kist-Chechen Muslim “Abu Walid” al-Shishani. His biographical material suggests that he is in his thirties, and that he is surrounded by a very small coterie of veterans from the conflicts in the North Caucasus, as well as a small group of trusted supporters. Although independent, Junud often fights alongside other factions, having been involved in a number of battles in the Aleppo governorate, where it is based. Even though he was a young man when the second conflict in Chechnya began, his background and connections in Pankisi, and his role as an aide to Chechen and Arab fighters between 2000 and 2003 have given Muslim al-Shishani some influence among the North Caucasian fighters in Syria. Statements released by Junud show that their account of jihad is in keeping with that of key leaders from Chechnya, emphasizing the need to avoid infighting between groups and the importance of doctrinal support for activism from learned religious scholars.⁷⁸ However, the group lacks munitions and financial support.

A second larger group known as Jaish al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar formed in March 2013 when three separate groups—Katibat al-Muhajireen, Jaish Muhammad, and Katibat al-Khattab—merged. It incorporated Azeri, Tatar, Dagestani, and Chechen activists, as well as other Russian speakers from the North Caucasus and across Russia. The group was led by Abu Omar al-Shishani, another Kisti Chechen from the Pankisi Gorge. Available biographical material indicates that he was born in the mid-1980s and served in the Georgian Army during the 2008 conflict with Russia, albeit not in a combat role. Abu Omar had support from Abu Yahya al-Azeri—the leader of the Azeri volunteers in Syria—which enabled him to call on some fighters with active combat experience, as part of Jaish.

In the early months after its inception, Jaish, much like Junud, played a “social role” in the Aleppo area, dealing with local disputes and distributing food and medicines. Jaish and Junud have also both issued appeals for support from benefactors in Europe, with Junud regularly publishing communiqués in German, English, and Russian. The group has benefited from an informal support network in Austria and Germany, shedding light on the role of the recent North Caucasian Diaspora community. Many North Caucasian emigrants, including younger men, held strong views about the local administration in Chechnya, while some older men could not return to their homeland, having been involved in the more recent conflict of the late 1990s.⁷⁹ These groups in Austria and Germany also maintained informal links to militant sympathisers from within local Turkish communities.⁸⁰ Another group of

Russian-speaking volunteers led by Sayfullakh al-Shishani, a third militia leader with links to the Pankisi Gorge, had more explicit links to Turkey, Sayfullakh having spent a considerable amount of time in Istanbul. The *jama'at* was part of Jaish, although it split in September 2013.⁸¹

A portion of the foreign fighters from North Africa who were originally linked to Jaish al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar, along with many of the volunteers from Europe, had become aligned to Abu Omar in Syria. At the same time, other small groups of fighters from Southern Russia tainted the reputation of the North Caucasian volunteers based in the Aleppo governorate. Their actions also led to disagreements with local groups and other foreign fighters. Abu Omar was finding it difficult to manage the mushrooming foreign fighter movement. In late 2013, he was reportedly pressured by a few influential Chechen religious advisors and other affiliates of Baghdadi to swear allegiance to the leadership of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). By this stage, the military successes of ISIL had generated momentum and were growing in power and influence in Syria and Iraq. This put ISIL in competition with the Al Qaeda (AQ) faction, Jabhat al-Nusra, for influence in jihadi circles.

In early 2014, the media wing of AQ issued an extended audio-visual communiqué from Ayman al-Zawahiri.⁸² The communiqué was partly designed to draw attention to al-Zawahiri, as a legitimate leader. This was especially pertinent given the bitter doctrinal debates between AQ and the hierarchy of ISIL, and the proclamation of Abu Bakr Baghdadi as head of the Islamic Caliphate. Much of the debate in militant circles focused on fealty, leadership, religious authority, and oaths of allegiance. However, the timing and part of the content also contained a secondary message, aimed at groups in Syria. Al-Zawahiri was keen to draw attention to his own experience in the North Caucasus, boldly embracing the importance of the Chechen victory against the Russian authorities in the 1990s. The video address used images of moderate and more militant Chechen leaders, as if to demonstrate al-Zawahiri's knowledge and understanding of the Chechen cause, and jihad in the North Caucasus.

The decision by Abu Omar al-Shishani to pledge allegiance to the Islamic State leader, Baghdadi, heralded the relative decline of Jabhat al-Nusra in some parts of Syria. In November 2013, Jaish al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar split, when Abu Omar pledged an oath to Abu Bakr Baghdadi. Hundreds of non-Syrian foreign fighters aligned themselves with ISIL, while a smaller faction of largely North Caucasian jihadists remained loyal to Jaish. Many of the North Caucasians had already pledged allegiance to Doku Umarov, the then leader of the Imarat Kavkaz. Following the split, Jaish retained the name of the group and announced a new leader, Salahuddin al-Shishani, who reportedly acted as a representative of the IK in Syria.

Jaish, Junud, and others continued to operate in areas where Jabhat al-Nusra retained influence. Each faction vied for influence, using social media to promote their respective accounts of jihad. Sayfullakh al-Shishani and his followers had a measure of independence before becoming more closely aligned with Jabhat al-Nusra. They positioned themselves alongside Junud and Jaish, leading to further bitter doctrinal recriminations between the North Caucasians in Syria. By this time, Abu Yayha—the leader of one Azeri faction and the former deputy of Abu Omar—had been killed, leaving a small inner circle of North Caucasians in ISIL. However, Abu Omar became increasingly prominent as a military leader, commanding support from a much wider base of foreign fighters operating under the aegis of ISIL.

Other smaller groups of Chechen or Russian-speaking volunteers continue to operate across Northern Syria, as part of the broader mosaic of factions and militia fighting against the Assad regime. The conflict has developed an overtly sectarian character, with groups and factions participating in joint operations on an ad hoc basis. One such operation was the assault on the prison complex in Aleppo in February 2014. The groups led by Salahuddin al-Shishani, Abu Muslim, and Sayfullakh were all involved in the attack, although it was under the overall command of the al-Nusra Front. The fact that Chechen groups used a suicide truck bomb attack carried out by a British citizen, Abdul Waheed Majid, generated media coverage in the Western news media. However, the assault eventually failed and also led to the death of Sayfullakh, a significant blow to one of the North Caucasian factions with links in Turkey, while the deaths of other North Caucasians appear to have weakened their presence in some foreign fighter units.

The actions of the Russian-speaking foreign fighters highlight how different generations of volunteers became involved in the plethora of militia in the Syrian civil war. However, if the actions of these groups are to be properly contextualised, their connections to the North Caucasus should serve as a point of departure.

Conclusion

This article has argued that the category “foreign fighter” is often used in a general and ubiquitous way, sometimes clouding the complicated nature of activism. The article has also sought to contribute to further debate, through the recognition of the life-cycle of “foreign fighters”—that is, mobilisation, activism, and disengagement. As has been argued here, early, loose definitions provide the more useful starting point for further analysis, emphasising how a combination of motives based on religion, kinship, and ideology informed the decision by some to undertake volunteerism and participate in foreign conflicts. In so doing, I have argued that contemporary work on “relatedness” and “fictive kin” can supplement research into transnational activism at the individual and local, organisational (or network), and ideological levels.

At the same time, I have argued that the label “foreign fighter” can be supplemented by a more thorough analysis of transnational activism. By demonstrating that many volunteers do not frame their activism as “foreign,” but instead participate in conflicts alongside “fictive kin,” I have argued that participation in external conflicts is a multifaceted and dynamic phenomenon. At the same time, the process of activism engenders the formation of new forms of “relatedness” and “fictive kin.” Similarly, I have argued that many activists may hold dual roles as volunteers and combatants, situating their actions not solely as combatants or fighters alone. This highlights how problematic the category of foreign fighter has become, but also the need to refer to transnational activism, more generally, when assessing foreign fighters as social networks operating in wider social movements. Evidently this has direct relevance for policies designed to deter participation in foreign conflicts, and wider relevance for different inter-disciplinary approaches to transnational activism.

In order to highlight these themes, the article has drawn on a dataset of volunteers participating in the conflicts in the North Caucasus from 1992 through to 2013. This longitudinal, case study approach highlights how “kinship, ideology and religion” played a role for different groups involved in the conflict. The case study

illustrates that diaspora connections play an important role, in some forms of activism and some “framing” narratives. Assessing the life-cycle of foreign fighters also illustrates the importance of prior military experience, the role of leadership, and some of the ways in which roles change over time. These threads also ran through the section of the article which dealt with Russian-speaking volunteers in Syria. Volunteers fight for a range of reasons, but the combination of an extant network, an ideological framework, and a mixture of veterans and inexperienced activists provides a powerful combination which enables the mobilisation of different communities. In other words, a proclivity to participate in foreign conflicts may stem from co-existing motives. The inability of some groups to return home, or to reintegrate into local communities, also appears to have influenced the decision by some Russian-speaking volunteers to participate in the civil war in Syria.

The article has also made a contribution to wider discussions about ideological frames, diffusion, and leadership, drawing on the conflicts in the North Caucasus, and more recently Syria. The analysis herein illustrates how particular forms of pan-Islamism have shaped the conflicts in Chechnya during the 1990s, while also shedding light on the ways in which disputes, splintering, and factionalism occurred as external groups sought to influence local conflict dynamics. Finally, the scale-shift evident in the establishment of the Imarat Kavkaz (IK)—a regional movement—along with the different roles played by Saudi, Jordanian, and Turkish volunteers, highlights how case study research can enrich accounts of transnational activism.

Notes

1. Parts of this paper were originally presented at the International Studies Association (ISA) conference in early 2013, the CREES Annual Conference in July 2013, and RUSI in February and December 2014. In compiling the data and drafting the paper, the author has benefited from research assistance from Beverley Brown, Mark, Mai, Osama, Doa, Karena, Josie, Vickie, and Simon Copeland.

2. I refer to local indigenous fighters as *boyeviki* whereas militia units composed of local and foreign fighters are more readily labelled as *bandformirovaniya*. The general label Ansar mujahedeen is used to describe “foreign” volunteers, while Arab mujahedeen refers to those from Arabia. I address the links between different groups in my forthcoming monograph on the insurgency in the North Caucasus, and Russian-speaking fighters in Syria.

3. Qualitative research methods focusing on case studies, informed by transnational activism, draw attention to three inter-linked levels of analysis. Broadly speaking, this paper examines the micro (individual), meso (organisational), and macro (ideological). See also, Simon Teune, ed., *The Transnational Condition: Protest Dynamics in an Entangled Europe* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2010).

4. Cerwyn Moore and Paul Tumelty, “Foreign Fighters and the Case of Chechnya,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 31, no. 5 (2008): 412–433; Cerwyn Moore, “Suicide Bombing: Chechnya, the North Caucasus and Martyrdom,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 64, no. 9 (2012): 1780–1807; Aurélie Campana and Jean François-Ratelle, “A Political Sociology Approach to the Diffusion of Conflict from Chechnya to Dagestan and Ingushetia,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 37, no. 2 (2014): 115–134; Ekaterina Sokirianskaia, “Ideology and Conflict: Chechen Political Nationalism Prior to, and During, Ten Years of War,” in Moshe Gammer, ed., *Ethno-Nationalism, Islam and the State in the Caucasus: Post-Soviet Disorder* (London: Routledge, 2008), 102–138. See also, Cerwyn Moore, *Contemporary Violence: Postmodern War in Kosovo and Chechnya* (Manchester: MUP, 2010).

5. Tore Bjørgo and John Horgan, eds., *Leaving Terrorism Behind: Individual and Collective Disengagement* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009).

6. Kristin Bakke, “Copying and Learning from Outsiders? Assessing Diffusion from Transnational Insurgents in the Chechen Wars,” in Jeffrey Checkel, ed., *Transnational*

Dynamics of Civil War (Cambridge: CUP, 2013), 31–62. See also, Moore and Tumelty, “Foreign Fighters and the Case of Chechnya” (see note 4 above); Moore, “Suicide Bombing: Chechnya, the North Caucasus and Martyrdom” (see note 4 above).

7. Donatella Della Porta and Sidney Tarrow, eds., *Transnational Protest and Global Activism* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005).

8. See David Malet, *Foreign Fighters: Transnational Identity in Civil Conflicts* (Oxford: OUP, 2013).

9. Fawaz Gerges, *The Far Enemy: Why Jihad Went Global* (Cambridge: CUP, 2005), 12.

10. See Mohammed Hafez, “Jihad After Iraq: Lessons from the Arab Afghans Phenomenon,” *Combating Terrorism Centre (CTC)* 1, no. 4 (2008): 1–4; and Reuven Paz, “Arab Volunteers Killed in Iraq: An Analysis,” *e-PRISM* 3, no. 1 (March 2005): 1–7.

11. Moore and Tumelty, “Foreign Fighters and the Case of Chechnya” (see note 4 above), 412.

12. Cerwyn Moore and Paul Tumelty, “Assessing Unholy Alliances in the North Caucasus: From Communism and Nationalism to Islamism and Salafism,” revised and reprinted in S. White and C. Moore, eds., *Post-Soviet Politics, Vol. 4* (London: Sage, 2012), 105–129.

13. David Malet, *Foreign Fighters: Transnational Identity in Civil Conflicts* (Oxford: OUP, 2013), 9. The 2013 monograph was based on doctoral research completed in 2009, hence including Malet in the first cluster of writers working on foreign fighters.

14. *Ibid.*

15. A number of scholars including Magnus Ranstorp, Christopher Hewitt and Jessica Kelly-Moore, Anne Stenersen, Kristin Bakke, and Thomas Hegghammer contributed to this cluster of work. See Frank J. Cilluffo, Jeffrey B. Cozzens, and Magnus Ranstorp, *Foreign Fighters: Trends, Trajectories & Conflict Zones* (Homeland Security Policy Institute: George Washington University, 2010); Anne Stenersen, “Al Qaeda’s Foot Soldiers: A Study of the Biographies of Foreign Fighters Killed in Afghanistan and Pakistan Between 2002 and 2006,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 34, no. 3 (2011): 171–198; and Christopher Hewitt and Jessica Kelley-Moore, “Foreign Fighters in Iraq: A Cross-National Analysis of Jihadism,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 21, no. 2 (2009): 211–220.

16. See Clinton Watts, “Beyond Iraq and Afghanistan: What Foreign Fighter Data Reveals About the Future of Terrorism,” *Small Wars Journal*, <http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/journal/docs-temp/49-watts.pdf>.

17. Thomas Hegghammer, “The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters: Islam and the Globalization of Jihad,” *International Security* 35, no. 3 (2010/11): 56.

18. *Ibid.*, 57–58.

19. Kristin Bakke, “Help Wanted? The Mixed Record of Foreign Fighters in Domestic Insurgencies,” *International Security* 38, no. 4 (2014): 150–187.

20. See the doctoral work of Tim Holman (*Across the Green Mountain*) and Aaron Zelin (jihadology.net) and policy work of Will McCants and Clinton Watts. Amongst many others, see reports by the think tanks such as the Soufian Group.

21. Moore and Tumelty, “Assessing Unholy Alliances in the North Caucasus” (see note 12 above), 105–129.

22. Moore and Tumelty, “Foreign Fighters and the Case of Chechnya” (see note 4 above), 412.

23. For work on “relatedness,” see Janet Carsten, ed., *Cultures of Relatedness: New Approaches to the Study of Kinship* (Cambridge: CUP, 2000).

24. Janet Carsten, *After Kinship* (Cambridge: CUP, 2004), 144.

25. *Ibid.*, 154.

26. *Ibid.*, 154.

27. Jacob Landau, *The Politics of Pan-Islam: Ideology and Organization* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 5–6.

28. David Snow and Robert Benford, “Ideology, Frame Resonance, and Participant Mobilization,” *International Social Movement Research* 1 (1988): 197–217.

29. Thomas Hegghammer, *Jihad in Saudi Arabia: Violence and Pan-Islamism Since 1979* (Cambridge: CUP, 2010), 30.

30. Andrew McGregor, “‘Jihad and the Rifle Alone’: Abdullah Azzam and the Islamist Revolution,” *The Journal of Conflict Studies* 23, no. 2 (2003), <http://journals.hil.unb.ca/>

index.php/JCS/article/view/219/377, and Thomas Hegghammer, "Abdallah Azzam," in Gilles Kepel and Jean-Pierre Milelli, eds., *Al Qaeda in its Own Words* (London: Belknap Press, 2008), 81–143.

31. *Ibid.*, 81–143.

32. Joas Wagemakers, *A Quietist Jihadi: The Ideology and Influence of Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi* (Cambridge: CUP, 2012), 14–15.

33. Moshe Gammer, *Muslim Resistance to the Tsar: Shamil and the Conquest of Chechnia and Daghestan* (London: Hurst, 2005).

34. Gerges, *The Far Enemy* (see note 9 above), 81.

35. Wagemakers, *A Quietist Jihadi* (see note 32 above), 57.

36. Hegghammer, "Abdallah Azzam" (see note 31 above), 81–143.

37. See Hegghammer, "The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters" (see note 17 above) and his survey of forms of pan-Islam in Hegghammer, *Jihad in Saudi Arabia* (see note 29 above).

38. In his book, Joas Wagemakers cites a 2004 Saudi survey of Afghan veterans or sympathisers of militant groups which placed Azzam as the most influential non-Saudi scholar, while Donald Holbrook notes that Azzam continues to be one of the most "prominent and celebrated authors" on English language Islamic media repository. For the former, see *A Quietist Jihadi*, 137 (note 32 above) and for the latter, see Donald Holbrook, *The Al-Qaeda Doctrine* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 216.

39. Madawi al-Rasheed, "The Local and the Global in Saudi Salafi-Jihadi Discourse," in Roel Meijer, ed., *Global Salafism: Islam's New Religious Movement* (London: Hurst, 2009), 307–308.

40. Ibn Khattab, *The Experience of Arab Ansar in Chechnya, Afghanistan and Tajikistan* (Unknown).

41. *Ibid.*

42. *Ibid.*

43. al-Rasheed, "The Local and the Global in Saudi Salafi-Jihadi Discourse" (see note 39 above), 314.

44. *Al-Hayat*, May 4, 2002.

45. In addition to ideological commonalities with Azzam, as a leader and advocate of jihad, Khattab was also acutely image-conscious. He frequently used the media to support his account of jihad, paving the way for a particular form of "jihadi aesthetics" to emerge in the late 1990s. In part, this echoed the earlier work of Azzam, but it also differed in his effective use of different media formats.

46. For instance, the Dagestani Salafiyya religious leader, Akhmed-Kadi Akhtayev, was a moderate, promoting dialogue with the official authorities. Another Dagestani religious figure, Bagautdin Kebedov, was more confrontational, especially when turning to local Sufi communities, whereas the Chechen leaders, like Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev and Movladi Udugov, openly chastised the federal authorities, calling for unification of Chechnya and Dagestan, and the imposition of Shari'a Law.

47. A host of other political and religious groups, and local militia operated in Chechnya and Dagestan in the period from 1996–1999. For example, Arbi Barayev led a paramilitary group called the al-Jihad-Fisi-Sabililah, known as the Special Purpose Islamic Regiment or *Islamskij Polk Osobogo Nazna Cenija*. Salman Raduyev led another paramilitary group called the "Lone Wolf Unit" which he re-named the "Army of General Dudayev" during the inter-war years.

48. Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev, *The True Face of Islam* (n.p.: Baku, 2003), 26.

49. Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev, *Jihad and the Problems of the Contemporary World* (Baku, 2000), 36.

50. Yandarbiyev, *The True Face of Islam* (see note 48 above), 26.

51. Язькова, А., «Потеряет ли Россия южные рубежи», Известия, 22 января: А. Yaz'kova, "Poteryaet li Rossiya rubezhi" [Will Russia Lose the Southern Borders?], *Izvestiya*, January 22, 1998.

52. Барахова, А., «Шамиль Басаев Объединит Чечню и Дагестан», Коммерсант, 28 Апрелья: А. Barakhova, "Shamil Basayev ob'edinit Chechniyu i Daghestan" [Shamil Basayev will Unite Chechnya and Daghestan], *Kommersant*, April 28, 1998, 3.

53. Yandarbiyev, *The True Face of Islam* (see note 48 above), 26.

54. David Snow, Burke Rochford, Jr., Steven Worden, and Robert Benford, "Frame Alignment Processes, Micromobilization, and Movement Participation," *American Sociological Review* 51, no. 4 (1986): 467–469.

55. Sidney Tarrow and Doug McAdam, “Scale Shift in Transnational Contention,” in Donatella Della Porta and Sidney Tarrow, eds., *Transnational Protest and Global Activism* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 124–147.

56. Wagemakers, *A Quietist Jihadi* (see note 32 above).

57. al-Rasheed, *The Experience of Arab Ansar in Chechnya, Afghanistan and Tajikistan* (see note 40 above), 313–314.

58. *Ibid.*, 315.

59. For example, Hakim al-Medani from Medina or Musab al-Tabuki from Tabuk and Abu Walid al-Ghamidi from the Ghamidi tribe. The use of *noms de guerre* by Turkish and North African volunteers also has particular significance, although that is beyond the scope of this paper. See also al-Rasheed, *The Experience of Arab Ansar* (see note 40 above), 311.

60. *Al Sharq Al Awsat*, November 27, 2006.

61. *Al Sharq Al Awsat*, April 27, 2003.

62. al-Rasheed, *The Experience of Arab Ansar* (see note 40 above), 303.

63. See, for example, *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, December 12, 2002.

64. *Al Sharq Al Awsat*, December 3, 2005.

65. *Al Hayat*, November 28, 2006.

66. According to biographical material, three had reportedly fought in the Balkans. The Turkish military system involves conscription. It is likely that a higher proportion had some basic military training.

67. Della Porta and Tarrow, *Transnational Protest and Global Activism* (see note 7 above).

68. Mary Beth Altier, John Horgan, and Christian Thoroughgood, “In Their Own Words? Methodological Considerations in the Analysis of Terrorist Autobiographies,” *Journal of Strategic Security* 5, no. 4 (2012): 85–98.

69. The author does retain much of this additional data.

70. I have touched on this point in earlier publications, notably in Cerwyn Moore & Paul Tumelty, “Assessing Unholy Alliances in the North Caucasus” (see note 12 above).

71. Saturday, July 1, 2000, “Exclusive Interview with Commander of Mujahideen Forces in Chechnya,” Shamil Basayev, originally posted on www.qoqaz.com.

72. See *Al Sharq Al Awsat*, May 13, 2004 and *Al Wasat*, “Saudi Arabia: Al Awfi Separated to Establish ‘Al Tawhid Youth,’” August 22, 2005. Both went on to play crucial roles in the establishment of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), as the jihadist movement changed after 9/11 following the invasion of Afghanistan, the death of Khattab, and the invasion of Iraq.

73. Della Porta and Tarrow, *Transnational Protest and Global Activism* (see note 7 above).

74. See, for example, activism in the Spanish Civil War.

75. See the 2014 Migration and Integration Report for Austria, http://www.bmeia.gv.at/fileadmin/user_upload/Zentrale/Integration/Integrationsbericht_2014/migration_integration_2014-web.pdf.

76. Christian Ultsch and Jutta Sommerbauer, “60 Men from Austria in the Syrian Jihad,” *Die Presse*, April 24, 2013, <http://diepresse.com/home/politik/aussenpolitik/1393736/60-Maenner-aus-Oesterreich-im-syrischen-Jihad>.

77. “Asylum in Austria as a Basis for Jihadists in Syria,” April 26, 2013, <http://www.unzensuriert.at/content/0012563-Asyl-sterreich-als-Basis-f-r-Syrien-Dschihadisten>.

78. A number of lengthy *communiqués*, surveyed by the author, have been released by Junud and Jaish. These often shed light on the continuing tensions, disputes, and differences—especially regarding *fitna*—between North Caucasian groups operating in Syria.

79. Martin Staudinger and Robert Treichler, *Profil*, June 14, 2014, <http://www.profil.at/ausland/grazer-iman-d-verhaftung-terrorvorwurfe-375967>.

80. See, *Weiner Zeitung*, August 22, 2014, http://www.wienerzeitung.at/nachrichten/oesterreich/politik/653802_Oesterreich-Weitere-Dschihadisten-in-Haft.html.

81. The group became known as Sayfullakh al Shishani’s *Jama’at* after his death in February 2014. Between September 2013 and the rebranding in February 2014, the group had various names, the last of which was Jaish al-Khilafah al-Islamiyah.

82. For more on Zawahiri and AQ statements, see Donald Holbrook, *The Al Qaeda Doctrine: The Framing and Evolution of the Leadership’s Public Discourse* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).