

Foreign Fighters in Syria: Mapping Alliances



Elements affiliated with the New Syrian Army at a checkpoint in Homs (Getty)

The issue of foreign fighters in Syria stands as one of the most pressing challenges facing the new Syrian government following the fall of the Assad regime. The country now hosts thousands of fighters who entered from dozens of countries over the course of the war, participating in combat on various sides.

This file intertwines security, legal, and humanitarian concerns regarding how to handle these fighters in the post-conflict period whether by prosecuting those implicated in crimes, repatriating those who can return to their countries of origin, or integrating those who have settled in Syria into the broader society.

The issue has drawn significant international attention due to fears of a resurgence of extremism and its transnational spread, making it one of the most sensitive issues in the post-war phase.

These fighters do not form a single bloc; rather, they come from diverse ideological and political backgrounds. Their cases intersect with Syria's relations with the international community and their respective home countries, giving the issue far-reaching implications.

Not One Category, Nor One Side

Foreign fighters in Syria fall into four broad categories, based on who they fought alongside and the conditions of their presence:

Category One: Fighters who joined opposition factions against Assad, remained in Syria after the opposition's victory, and were initially driven by sympathy and support for the Syrian people. Numbering in the thousands, these fighters hail from Central Asia, Arab countries, Turkey, the Balkans, and Europe. The new government is reportedly considering offering them residency or even citizenship in recognition of their role in toppling the previous regime.

This move, however, has sparked internal and international debate, despite official assurances that these fighters pose no external threat and can be successfully integrated into Syrian society.

Before the regime's fall, there were instances of conflict between groups like Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham and factions composed of foreign fighters, such as the Turkistan Islamic Party or French fighters under the leadership of the French-Senegalese Omar Omsen.

These tensions recently flared up again for various reasons but were eventually resolved through a deal brokered between the General Security Service and the French fighters, with mediation from both Syrian and foreign figures.

Category Two: Foreign fighters who sided with the former regime, often as part of

Iranian-backed militias like Liwa Fatemiyoun and the Popular Mobilization Forces. These fighters came from Iran, Afghanistan, Iraq, and other countries.

Some may have remained in Syria or integrated into local communities following the regime change, possibly without the knowledge of the new authorities. Most of these fighters were involved in crimes against Syrian civilians, and their presence must be investigated particularly those affiliated with Iraqi militias, Arab Nationalist militias, and certain Arab, Palestinian, and Iraqi elements that fought alongside Assad's forces.

Category Three: Fighters affiliated with ISIS, many of whom are now detained in prisons run by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) under coalition oversight. This group represents the gravest international concern due to their transnational terrorist ties. They number in the thousands and come from over a hundred countries.

Their brutal legacy and extremist networks pose legal and security challenges both in Syria and in their countries of origin, many of which refuse to repatriate them, opting instead for local trials or long-term detention.

Many remain in detention centers and camps inside Syria, creating not just a national but a global dilemma in how to manage them especially with stateless children among them, born to unidentified parents or to fighters who disappeared.

Category Four: Foreigners who fought alongside the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), some of whom came from Europe and Turkey to join the fight or pursue other interests. The SDF's leadership structure itself includes many non-Syrians, particularly senior figures from the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).

Addressing this group will require regional and international consensus, especially in light of Turkey's recent disarmament campaign targeting such elements.

These fighters may face obstacles to returning home or being reintegrated in Syria, depending on the nature of any political settlement between the Syrian government and the SDF. The future of foreign fighters within the SDF ranks will hinge on the terms of that agreement.

The Need for Legal Frameworks

Most countries of origin are reluctant to repatriate their nationals who fought in Syria, particularly those affiliated with ISIS. This hesitance is largely due to concerns over security risks, such as the fighters' battlefield experience and potential to form new terrorist cells. Additionally, prosecuting them at home is legally complex due to the lack of admissible evidence for crimes committed

abroad.

France, Switzerland, and several other European countries prefer local trials in Syria or Iraq. These states have asked the Syrian government to hold fighters accountable for their actions while ensuring they are not allowed to assume positions of power within the new Syrian administration or military.

European governments also call for enhanced cooperation in evidence collection and intelligence sharing to prevent future security threats, alongside the creation of new legal frameworks to effectively prosecute returnees. There is also growing focus on clear legal mechanisms for repatriating children and families of fighters, with safeguards to protect their rights and security screenings before reintegration.

Lessons from International Precedents

Several international precedents offer lessons for Syria—chief among them the cases of Bosnia, Afghanistan, and Chechnya.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina (1992–1995), thousands of foreign fighters (known as the Bosnian mujahideen) joined to support Bosniak Muslims against Serb and Croat forces. While some were later granted citizenship and integrated into society, the experiment had limited success. Many retained strong ideological views and failed to assimilate, resulting in future legal and security issues.

In Afghanistan and Chechnya, the mass influx of foreign fighters led to the rise of global jihadist movements. After returning to their countries of origin, many contributed to the spread of international terrorism.

These experiences prompted governments to tighten repatriation laws and introduce strict conditions for reintegration. Syria must heed these lessons when designing sustainable and effective policies.

How Should Syria Handle Foreign Fighters?

Syria must develop a comprehensive legal framework that balances security needs, human rights, and international consensus. Drawing from global experiences, the following principles could guide Syrian policy:

Citizenship: Granting citizenship to foreign fighters who supported the revolution, under clear conditions such as marriage to Syrian nationals and clean criminal records with restrictions on holding sensitive military or security positions, at least during the transitional phase.

Negotiated Settlements: For those unwilling to integrate, Syria should coordinate with international organizations to facilitate safe and legal deportation to their countries of origin or resettlement in third countries far from conflict zones.

Prosecutions: Fighters implicated in crimes against civilians or crimes against humanity must be prosecuted under Syrian law, potentially with international oversight. No fighter should be handed over to their home country without a clear legal process and assurances against political retaliation.

Rehabilitation and Reintegration: The government should establish formal rehabilitation programs combining psychological support, vocational training, and social reintegration, with strong safeguards to prevent recidivism.

International Cooperation: Close collaboration with foreign governments is crucial for information sharing, legal alignment, and ensuring transparency in handling fighters' cases.

Special Legislation: Syria must develop legal instruments tailored to cases involving stateless or undocumented individuals, allowing for individualized decisions on integration or deportation.

Avoiding Past Mistakes: Laws must prevent the emergence of new transnational militant groups, placing all such entities under strict state oversight.

Fadel Abdul Ghany, Director of the Syrian Network for Human Rights, told Noon Post that this issue is “extremely complex” and involves “multiple stakeholders.” He emphasizes distinguishing between fighters invited by governments and those affiliated with foreign armed groups.

Abdul Ghany advocates integrating those who fought alongside Syrians into society, without granting them leadership roles, and treating them as individuals subject to national laws.

He also suggests working with UN agencies and drawing on international experiences to develop psychological and social rehabilitation standards, including therapeutic programs, education, vocational training, and addressing the root causes of extremism.

Integration standards should include alignment with local values and laws, transforming the fighter into a law-abiding citizen within a cohesive social environment, backed by educational and community support to prevent backsliding into extremism.

Periodic evaluation using specialized tools and continuous legal and security oversight should also be part of the integration process.

Ultimately, the issue of foreign fighters in Syria remains a deeply tangled dilemma. It demands prudent policies that blend justice, security, and reintegration and a commitment to learning from international precedents in legislation and policy.

The international community, too, must help develop a clear legal framework that guarantees fair treatment while protecting both national and global security.

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