

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Joining the fight: the Italian foreign fighters contingent of the Kurdish People's Protection Units

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Abstract

Since the emergence of the Islamic State (ISIS) as one of the leading insurgent forces in Syria and Iraq in the 2010s, the academic literature has increasingly focused on the phenomenon of foreign fighters. Most studies have analyzed transnational insurgents joining the ISIS; however, research on *non-jihadi* foreign fighters remains underdeveloped. The article sheds much-needed light on the factors motivating non-jihadi fighters to join conflicts abroad. Specifically, it presents the findings of an in-depth analysis of the factors leading Italian nationals to join the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG/YPJ)¹ after 2011, their military contribution on the battlefield, and their reasons for returning to Italy. The contributions of the paper are twofold. First, it enriches our general understanding of the motivations of non-jihadi foreign fighters through detailed qualitative analysis, including first-hand accounts and an analysis of fighters' biographies. Second, it offers a more complete picture of the specific factors informing the Italian experience of transnational non-jihadi fighters in recent years. The qualitative data highlight the role of non-material factors in triggering the armed mobilization of foreign fighters. The findings indicate that the Italian foreign fighters contingent within the YPG/YPJ and the SDF has been highly committed, made up mostly of young males with no military experience, and had little to no impact on the battlefield.

Key words: Civil wars; foreign fighters; Syria; Syrian Democratic Forces; terrorism; YPG/YPJ

Introduction

Since the end of the Second World War, the number of foreign fighters joining civil wars abroad has grown steadily (Malet, 2013: 201). In recent years, transnational combatants have joined prominent conflicts in Iraq, Syria, and most recently, Ukraine. According to Barrett (2017), in 2017, more than 30,000 volunteers joined the Islamic State (ISIS) in Syria and Iraq. Of this total, the majority – 15,340 fighters – hailed from Western Europe, the former Soviet Union, and the Balkans, with 13,510 from the Middle East and Northern Africa (|MENA), 1568 from South and Southeast Asia, and 444 from North America. Moreover, an estimated 17,000 fighters have joined the ongoing conflict in Ukraine (Marone, 2022). The prevalence of foreign fighters has attracted the interest of scholars (Coticchia, 2016), with a particular focus on understanding individuals' motivation to join insurgencies abroad (Hegghammer, 2010, 2013; Pokalova, 2019) and the security implications of fighters' return home (Hegghammer, 2016; Malet and Hayes, 2020).

¹The People's Protection Units (Yekineyên Parastina Gel or YPG in Kurdish) are closely linked to the Women's Protection Units (Yekineyên Parastina Jin, YPJ), which enlist women fighters only, and the convention is to treat the two as a whole (i.e., YPG/YPJ).

Despite the general interest in transnational insurgent mobilization, research on non-jihadi foreign fighters has been relatively scarce (Corradi, 2022). According to Koch, ‘we do not know exactly how many of these extremists have joined the fighting or where they are exactly, and fully understanding the extent of this phenomenon and its potential threats requires additional research on national and international scales’ (2019: 684). What drives foreign fighters to join non-jihadi rebel groups? What military contribution do they make on the battlefield? And what drives their return to home countries?

In the present article, I seek to answer these questions by investigating foreign fighters’ motivations for joining conflicts abroad, for returning home, and their military contribution on the battleground. In doing so, I have drawn on the existing literature theorizing the drivers of armed mobilization in internal armed conflict (Cederman and Vogt, 2017) and the scholarship on foreign fighters (Pokalova, 2019). I adopt a widely accepted definition of foreign fighters as ‘noncitizens of conflict states who join insurgencies during civil conflicts’ (Malet, 2013: 9). Existing research on civil wars highlights the various material and non-material factors triggering an individual’s decision to join an insurgency, such as the debate on the role of greed and grievances (Gurr, 1970; Collier and Hoeffler, 2004; Regan and Norton, 2005; Cederman *et al.*, 2013) and the impact of emotions (i.e., indignation) and non-material drivers, such as ideology (Costalli and Ruggeri, 2015). Alongside these aspects, the scholarship on foreign fighters emphasizes factors in a given conflict that ‘pull’ or ‘push’ foreign fighters in.

The existing literature on transnational fighters within the YPG/YPJ remains scant, focusing mostly on US fighters, with large-*n* quantitative analysis of data collected through social networks and media. The present study seeks to enrich our understanding by offering in-depth qualitative data drawn from a coherent sample of Italian non-jihadi fighters.² Moreover, it contributes to our knowledge of the drivers of mobilization by shedding much-needed light on the role of non-material factors driving individuals to join insurgencies. The data were collected in 2020 and 2021 through interviews with former Italian combatants who joined the Kurdish YPG/YPJ in Syria after 2012.

The relevance in focusing on Italian foreign fighters is threefold. First, the number of Italians leaving to join foreign conflicts has been much lower than in comparable countries. Second, Italian transnational insurgents have participated in a variety of different conflicts overseas, including Ukraine and Syria. Third, Italians enlisted in various rebel groups in the Syrian conflict, including the Kurdish YPG/YPJ, ISIS, and al-Nusra (Marone and Vidino, 2019; Marone, 2022). The precise number of Italians who have joined the YPG/YPJ is unknown but is estimated to be around 25 fighters. I collected and triangulated data on a total of 13 combatants via in-depth, semi-structured interviews and published sources, such as biographies.

The remainder of the article proceeds as follows. The following section sketches the current scholarly debates on local and foreign mobilization in internal armed conflicts. Afterward, I outline the most salient factors driving Italians to fight in foreign wars abroad. In the last section, I present the analysis of fighters’ motivations for joining and returning to Italy as well as their military contribution on the battlefield.

Reasons to fight: motivations to mobilize in civil wars

Why do individuals join armed civil conflict abroad? Academic contention on the drivers of mobilization rests on two axes – the so-called ‘greed versus grievance’ debate (Regan and Norton, 2005; Cederman *et al.*, 2013; Cederman and Vogt, 2017). On the one hand, the Collier-Hoeffler Model emphasizes the role of ‘greed’; individuals are primarily motivated by potential rewards, joining conflicts when they perceive payoffs from enlisting exceed the risks (Collier and Hoeffler, 2004). In contrast, grievance and the related horizontal inequalities theory

²Interview transcripts are available on request. The interviews were conducted in Italian and anonymized.

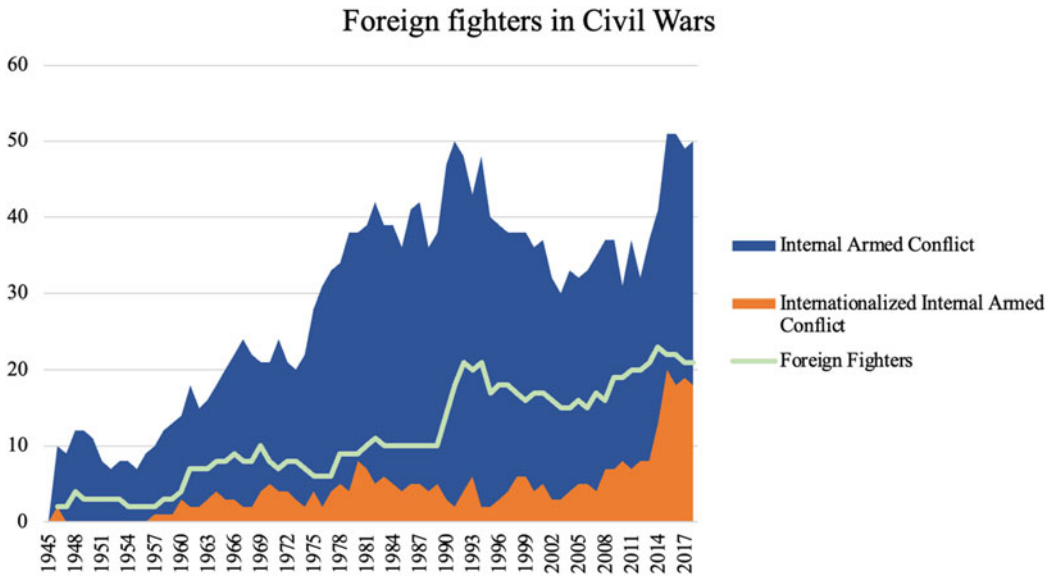


Figure 1. Foreign fighters' participation in civil conflict since 1945 (Gleditsch *et al.*, 2002; Malet, 2007; Pettersson *et al.*, 2021).

foregrounds identity-related factors such as ethnicity, religion, and ideology, arguing that these better explain why individuals join civil wars (Gurr, 1970; Cederman *et al.*, 2013). A third approach centers on the opportunities available for individuals to participate in armed conflict (Fearon and Laitin, 2003). Bridging these axes of debate to some extent, Weinstein (2007) has argued that rebel groups offer individuals two types of rewards: social endowments and economic endowments. The former concerns non-material rewards and the latter material ones.

In a recent contribution, Costalli and Ruggeri claim that non-material factors are crucial in determining armed mobilization. The authors argue that 'indignation is a powerful trigger of armed mobilization because it impinges on the links between individuals and the people around them, relying on a shared conception of what is right and what is wrong' (Costalli and Ruggeri, 2015: 120). Moreover, identifying 'the links between individuals and their community' (Costalli and Ruggeri, 2015: 128) with a broader meaning, indignation (on behalf of others) can serve as a motivating factor for foreigners not directly affected by a conflict. Moreover, they foreground the role of radical ideologies in triggering individual armed mobilization 'because of the specific content of their doctrines' (Costalli and Ruggeri, 2015: 120).

Debating the causes of terrorism, Crenshaw (1981) differentiated between background conditions (preconditions) and trigger factors (precipitants). She defines the latter as factors 'that set the stage for terrorism over the long run' and further divides them into two categories: enabling factors and permissive factors. Further, she defines precipitants as 'events that immediately precede the occurrence of terrorism' (1981: 381). This nomenclature allows for an analytical distinction between the 'opportunities for terrorism to happen, and situations that directly inspire and motivate terrorist campaigns' (1981: 381).

These approaches to individual mobilization in armed conflict focus primarily on local mobilization in civil wars, and thus overlook foreigners joining the fight. However, as shown in Figure 1, foreign fighters are hardly a new phenomenon, and their presence in civil conflicts is growing.

Several studies have investigated why individuals participate in civil conflicts abroad. Foreign citizens may be primed to join civil conflicts abroad if their own country is authoritarian

Table 1. Comparative ages of jihadi and non-jihadi foreign fighters

Country	Average age	Minimum age	Maximum age	References
Sweden (jihadi)	26	<19	>45	Gustaffson and Ranstorp (2017)
Netherlands (jihadi)	23.2	13	67	Bakker and de Bont (2016)
Belgium (jihadi)	23.8			
Germany (jihadi)	26	15-18	>50	Reynolds and Hafez (2017)
Italy (jihadi)	30	16	52	Marone and Vidino (2019)
United States (jihadi)	25.33	—*	—*	Fritz and Young (2017)
United States (non-jihadi)	32.57	—*	—*	
Transnational (non-jihadi)	32.44	14	67	Tuck et al. (2016)

*No data are available.

(Krueger, 2006; Hewitt and Kelley-Moore, 2009), in better economic shape (Hewitt and Kelley-Moore, 2009; Mousseau, 2011; Dawson *et al.*, 2016), or has a particularly young (Caruso and Gavrilova, 2012), or Muslim population, given the persistent conflicts in the Muslim world (Hegghammer, 2010, 2016; Malet, 2013; Mishali-Ram, 2018; Dell’Isola, 2022). Finally, some studies have found that foreign fighters hail disproportionately from countries that have already experienced a civil conflict in the past (Vidino, 2006; Pokalova, 2019).

Other studies have focused more on qualitative aspects. Analyzing foreign jihadi fighters, Olivier Roy refers to the ‘Islamization of radicalism’, which assumes that foreign fighters ‘are radicals because they choose to be, because only radicalism appeals to them’ (Roy, 2017: 42). Given the limited knowledge of Islam among foreign combatants joining ISIS (Byman, 2013), Roy contends its attraction for younger cohorts is akin to that provided by far-left and far-right groups in Europe in the 1970s and the 1980s. Indeed, as Table 1 summarizes, most foreign jihadist fighters are young (Bakker and De Bont, 2016; Fritz and Young, 2017; Gustaffson and Ranstorp, 2017; Reynolds and Hafez, 2017; Marone and Vidino, 2019). Given that most are second-generation migrants, they exhibit limited integration into European societies, and their grievances include poor economic prospects, a sense that the future is bleak, and general disillusion with life (Neumann, 2016). Moreover, radicalization correlates with criminality; most recruits have spent some time in prison (Neumann, 2010; De Kerchove *et al.*, 2015). Bakker and De Bont (2016) have found that 60% of the Belgian and Dutch jihadi foreign fighters had individual grievances, while many suffered economic deprivation and had a criminal past. Marone and Vidino (2019) found that 79.2% of Italian jihadi foreign fighters were unemployed or blue-collar workers, while 44% had spent time in prison or had criminal records. Similarly, Reynolds and Hafez (2017) observed that the unemployment rate among German jihadi foreign fighters is significantly higher than the national average and, notably, that of immigrant cohorts in the country.

Neumann’s (2016) finding that most foreign fighters return home disillusioned or traumatized is also noteworthy, given that most have jihadi experience. He argues that such returnees constitute a significant security risk to Western societies. In contrast, Malet and Hayes (2020) argue that the current threat is limited, given that returnees have not engaged extensively in domestic terrorism so far. However, as the authors note, this may be due to the high incarceration rates of recent returnees, with the prospect of future problems when detainees are eventually released from prison.

While most foreign fighters in Syria have joined jihadist groups, many have joined non-jihadi outfits, albeit on a smaller scale. Still, as Tuck *et al.* (2016) note, the data on ISIS foreign recruits are much more robust, and we lack hard numbers on those joining other groups.

Against this background, we can distinguish two waves of foreign fighters joining non-jihadi groups in Syria. The first, at the outset of the conflict, saw foreigners with military experience joining anti-ISIS groups, mostly out of a desire to return to combat in some form. In Fritz and Young’s (2017) dataset of anti-ISIS foreign fighters from the United States, 82% had military experience, having served tours in Iraq and Afghanistan. As a result, their average age (32.57

years) was higher than the norm for foreign anti-ISIS fighters (Fritz and Young, 2017). Tuck *et al.* (2016) stressed that the average age of an international sample of non-jihadi foreign fighters was 32.44, higher than the average age of foreign jihadi fighters.

In his analysis of American anti-ISIS fighters, Patin (2015) reports a range of motivations, including a sense of Christian mission to help protect co-religionists under attack in Syria, the desire for adventure and to rediscover camaraderie and the experience of combat lost after their discharge from the military and, finally, dissatisfaction with US policies against global jihadism.³ While most American recruits joining Kurdish groups have been ex-military, there is evidence that some ideologically motivated individuals with no combat experience have volunteered.⁴

Larsson's (2021) recent qualitative study drawing on autobiographical material gleaned from Western volunteers returning from service in the YPG/YPJ is also highly relevant.⁵ Despite the small sample (he studied just eight individuals) and the possible biases in collecting data from autobiographical sources (self-reporting bias, selective recall, and editorialization, among others), Larsson analyzed biographies from both co-ethnic and non-co-ethnic individuals. Larsson ascertained that personal reasons and a common hostility against Western policy toward the Syrian conflict, rather than ideological and religious motivations, were the most relevant themes.

In contrast, the second wave of foreign recruits in Syria has been mainly driven by ideology, and recruits report limited or no military experience (Koch, 2019). The ideological spectrum of Western non-jihadi foreign fighters spans the left-right axis. Far-right individuals generally joined Christian militias, justifying their mobilization in terms of a mission to defend Europe and Christianity. In contrast, far-left individuals mainly joined the Kurdish YPG/YPJ, attracted by its solidaristic, democratic-socialist, and anti-fascist ideology (Koch, 2019).

Using exclusive data collected by the Italian Ministry of Interior that are unavailable for replication, Marone and Vidino (2019) offer a detailed overview of the transnational fighters connected with Italy who participated in the Syrian civil war alongside jihadist groups. In less structured research, Marone (2022) briefly investigated foreigners fighting in Ukraine, noting how even those joining the same group differed in terms of personal ideology.

To summarize, based on the existing literature, I should expect that Italian recruits in the YPG/YPJ bore individual grievances, economic deprivation, and criminal records (Bakker and De Bont, 2016; Gustaffson and Ranstorp, 2017; Reynolds and Hafez, 2017; Marone and Vidino, 2019), are older than foreign jihadi fighters (Tuck *et al.*, 2016; Fritz and Young, 2017) and joined the Kurds for military or ideological reasons (Koch, 2019).

In the fight: a sketch of Italians in the People's protection units

Altogether, around 25 Italians have joined the YPG/YPJ militias. I ascertained this number with data traced in the semi-structured interviews I conducted with returnees to Italy and other primary and secondary sources. For example, following the death of an Italian fighter in Syria in January 2019, 19 companions claiming to have fought alongside him in Rojava put their names into an online eulogy.⁶ In addition, some individuals had published memoirs that served

³On former US military joining fights abroad, see the documentary Leggett C (Producer) Tomada S (Director). (2018). *Hunting ISIS* [Video File]. History Channel.

⁴See <https://www.villagevoice.com/2016/06/07/a-hello-to-arms-a-new-generation-of-steely-gazed-anarcho-communists-head-off-to-syria/> and <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2017/04/brace-belden-pisspiggranddad-syria-isis.html>

⁵Reflecting on his own research into foreign fighters, Larsson notes that 'autobiographies can present the individual as he or she wants to be perceived, whereas other accounts of the same person, time period or incident (for example, a battle) could paint a different picture of that person. The gap between self (i.e. the ideal portrayal) and other (i.e. how a person is perceived by others) is also present in the eight autobiographies I have analyzed' (2021: 1761).

⁶For the complete reference and the signatories, see: <https://milanoimovimento.com/internazionale/mediooriente/com-battenti-italiani-e-delle-ypg-yjp-in-memoria-di-giovanni-hiwa-bosco>.

as a starting point for the snowball method I used to identify the broader sample. The sample analyzed in this study comprises 13 individuals. Among these, three have published memoirs (Franceschi, 2016, 2018; Locatelli and Marzocchi, 2018; Orsetti, 2020), and a further nine were interviewed personally between June–July 2020 and July–August 2021. Information regarding the last individual has been retrieved from online sources. Among the whole sample, two were killed in the Syrian war: Lorenzo Orsetti (nom de guerre Tekoşer Piling), who died during the Deir ez-Zor campaign, and Giovanni Francesco Asperti (nom de guerre Hiwa Bosco). Twelve of the surveyed fighters were male and one female, who fought with the Women’s Protection Units (YPJ).

The average age of the Italians who joined the YPG/YPJ is 31. The youngest on the day of departure was 23, whereas the oldest was 53, as shown in Figure 2. The relationship between military skills and age among the Italian foreign fighters is noteworthy. Compulsory military service was suspended in Italy in 2005, and individuals born after 1 January 1986, are no longer subject to conscription (Di Pietro, 2013). Accordingly, only four of the surveyed fighters were old enough to be eligible for conscription. That said, none of the participants reported having served in the Italian armed forces.

Most of them were educated entirely in Italy. Two dropped out after middle school, while four completed the full compulsory educational cycle. Moreover, three had completed bachelor’s degrees at university, and a further two had earned a PhD. Education data regarding two individuals are missing.

Regarding ideology, Italian recruits identify with anti-capitalist and left-wing views, such as communism and anarchism. These ideologies, along with far-right wing ideologies, have been the core of the 1960s–1990s domestic terrorism in Europe (Rapoport, 2004; Rasler and Thompson, 2009; Malkki, 2018). According to the memoirs (Franceschi, 2016, 2018; Locatelli and Marzocchi, 2018; Orsetti, 2020) and interviews, three self-identified explicitly as anarchists, and two as communists, while the other seven expressed more general leftist sentiments that were not particularly precise. Therefore, I used a general ‘left-wing’ category to code these individuals, sharing a general anti-capitalist vision of the world. However, the full sample of individuals belongs to the so-called extra-parliamentary left-wing groups. Often, they are squatters or part of social movements such as the *centri sociali*.⁷ As it appears, common participation in similar (or the same) social and political movements might be explanatory in joining the fight. As a result, prior knowledge of the Kurdish question was significant in some cases, and all had at least some background understanding.

The literature differentiates among push factors (i.e., socio-economic conditions) driving an individual’s decision to join a conflict, pull factors (i.e., factors drawing them in), and trigger factors, proximate considerations arising at the moment a decision is made to join a conflict (Bakker and De Bont, 2016), which Crenshaw (1981) calls *precipitant causes*. None of the interviewees reported push factors, while all agreed ideology was the main factor pulling them toward the Syrian conflict. Five individuals reported interest in the Kurdish political platform as a critical factor, and only one reported the siege in Kobani⁸ as important. Three of them declared that the suffering of Kurdish people, a group grievance, was among these factors, while only two stated international terrorism as one of the most important factors. One individual declared he was there for personal reasons and realized only later why he was really there. Data regarding one individual (Hiwa Bosco) are missing.

Figure 3 details the backgrounds of the Italian volunteers joining the Kurds.

Regarding the return to Italy, Figure 4 shows the most common reasons cited by the recruits. Most decided to return because of their personal affections or mental or physical exhaustion from

⁷For more on the *centri sociali* readers may usefully consult Ruggiero (2000) and Mudu (2012).

⁸The siege in Kobani lasted from 15 September 2014 until 20 March 2015, and it is recognized as a turning point of IS military advance in Syria.

Age of YPG/YPJ Italian foreign fighters

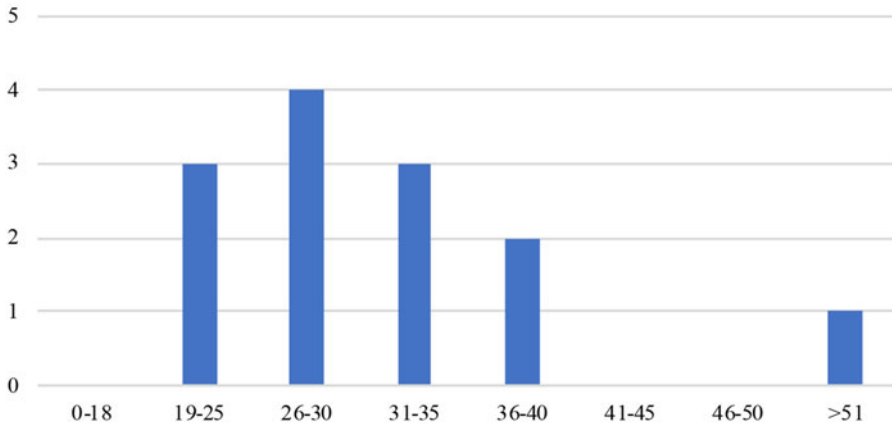


Figure 2. Age of Italian fighters joining the YPG/YPJ.

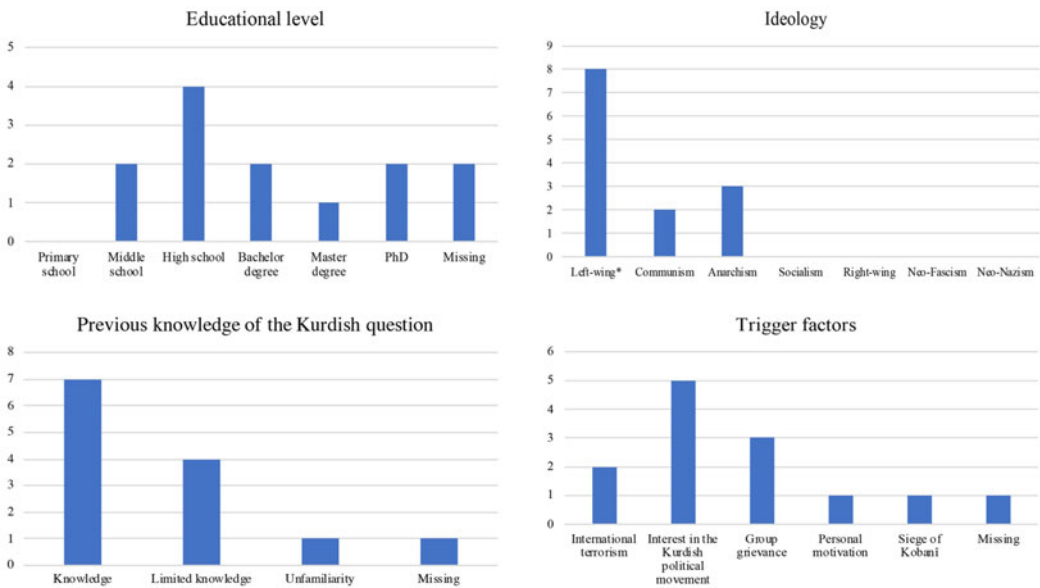


Figure 3. Personal background of the Italian foreign fighters with YPG/YPJ. *Means they do not identify themselves with anarchism or communism, but more generally with the extra-parliamentary radical left.

the conflict. One whom I categorized under ‘individual reasons’ decided to leave Syria after the liberation of Raqqa, only making the decision to leave once he had had ‘his dear wish’ fulfilled – namely, to see Raqqa liberated from ISIS. However, none declared disillusionment with what they had experienced, and many expressed ongoing support for the Kurdish cause through other means (e.g., organizing conferences, debates, publishing).

This preliminary survey offers a broad biographical sketch of the Italian contingent in the YPG/YPJ. They were primarily young men from the political left, with prior knowledge of the Kurdish question, and motivated mainly by ideology, a non-material factor. Below, I will provide

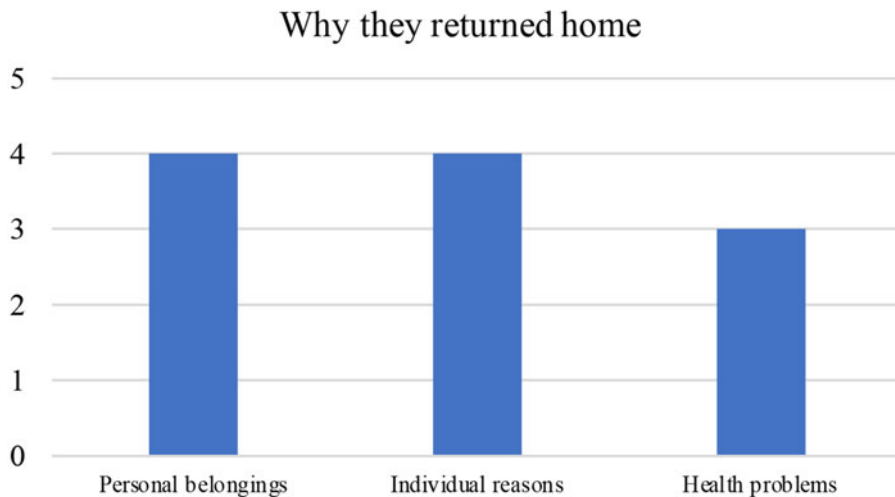


Figure 4. Reasons given for the decision to return.

more details about their experiences, analyzing their motivations to join the fight in Syria, their experiences, and their reasons for returning to Italy.

Experiencing the fight: evidence from the Italian contingent

As previously mentioned, the sample includes 13 individuals out of the 22 identified. Among the 13 individuals, I have conducted semi-structured interviews with nine former combatants. Karim Franceschi, nom de guerre ‘Marcello’ in the YPG, was the founder of and the commander of the Anti-fascist Internationalist Tabûr (AIT),⁹ also known as ‘YPG International’. After his tours in Syria, he published two memoirs, *‘Il combattente: Storia dell’italiano che ha difeso Kobane dall’Isis’* (*The Fighter: The Story of the Italian Who Defended Kobani from Isis*) in 2016 and *‘Non morirò stanotte: Un comandante, la sua squadra e la caduta dell’Isis’* (*I Will Not Die Tonight: A Commander, His Team, and the Fall of Isis*), published in 2018, in which he detailed why he signed up for the YPG and his experiences in Syria. He crossed over through Turkey during the siege of Kobani when foreign volunteers were still a rarity.

Franceschi described himself as a highly committed individual, motivated by ideology:

I told the *Vanity Fair* journalist about my father, a partisan [in the Second World War]; the ‘Rojava Calling’ caravan, organized in October by the *centri sociali* to bring humanitarian aid to the people of Kobani; how important it was to protect democratic confederalism, that most precious of treasures, especially in such magnificent and hostile lands. I tried to make her understand the reasons for my presence. We should start from this idea, of which I am intimately convinced: the revolution is either accomplished, or it is not. And if you do not want to do it, if you are not ready to commit yourself concretely, accepting the risks, discussing it becomes just a waste of time. [...]. It is about making what I do coincide with who I am (Franceschi, 2016: 130–131).

Franceschi believed in the Kurdish ideals of democratic confederalism, as he underlined various times in the first book. He argued he was fighting ‘where they are trying to build a society

⁹A *tabûr* is a military unit, equivalent to a battalion.

based on principles such as direct democracy, gender equality, and sustainability – all ideals in which I believe too’ (Franceschi, 2016: 10). Still, Franceschi was new to the ideological developments in Rojava, noting, for example, that he had never read Öcalan’s writing (Franceschi, 2016: 57).

As underlined in his second book, Franceschi drew on a commitment to communist ideas (Franceschi, 2018: 67), revealed in his discussions, recounted in the book, with a YPJ fighter:

I told her about my militancy in *centri sociali*, about my first trip to Suruc with the Rojava Caravan, and how unbearable the idea of staying in Turkey watching Kobanî go up in flames seemed to me. I even told her about Autonomia Operaia [an Italian leftist movement from the 1970s] that I feel myself an heir of (Franceschi, 2016: 57).

After three months in Rojava, Franceschi returned to Italy. He gives no reason in the book to save his wish to prevent his Turkish tourist visa from expiring. Although one can read hints of disputes he had with the YPG, his stated reason was to avoid any possible legal problems of overstaying his Turkish visa. He underscored why he was ‘called’ to Kobanî by comparing himself to the proverbial ISIS fighter:

We are two human beings fighting for the same thing: Kobanî. We just do it for different reasons. I want to prevent an entire people from being massacred. He came to wipe them out. I help the Kurds to take back what belongs to them. He was here to conquer territory (Franceschi, 2016: 100)

He briefly returned to Syria after six months in Italy. He later made a third tour in Syria, founding the AIT with other foreign fighters inside the YPG.

In his second book, he wrote more regarding combat operations and the AIT, composed of international fighters (of whom a large share were Italians), but he also underlined the reasons why he left Syria. The first time, he was worried about his visa; the last time, he left more for his personal affections.

Claudio Locatelli, nom de guerre ‘Ulisse’, was a member of AIT, and he published a biography titled ‘*Nessuna resa. Storia del combattente italiano che ha liberato Raqqa dall’Isis*’ (‘No surrender’: *The History of the Italian Fighter Who Freed Raqqa From Isis*). His interest in the Kurdish question first came while visiting the Diyarbakir refugee camp, where he met displaced people from Kobanî and Yazidi people. In February 2017, Locatelli entered Iraq legally, intending to cross illegally into Syria and join the YPG, which he did on 1 March. As he wrote, ‘I have been convinced by the genocide of Yazidi in Sinjar; terrorist attacks in Europe – in Bataclan, Zaventem and the underground station at Maelbeek – the terrorist attacks at the Promenade des Anglais and in the Christmas market in Berlin. I had to leave. I had to do something’ (Locatelli and Marzocchi, 2018: 37). In a letter dated 7 April 2017, immediately following a terrorist attack in Westminster in London, Locatelli recounted

The heartbreaking pain that comes to us from the capital of the UK does not leave me indifferent. Like the dead in Paris, Brussels and Nice did not leave me indifferent. Like others, I shouted ‘Je Suis Paris’; I took the streets to say that terrorism does not scare us. [...] As a journalist, I am in Syria to report what is happening. And I joined the Rojava army in the fight against the Islamic State and everything it stands for. (Locatelli and Marzocchi, 2018: 71–72)

Despite formally joining the YPG as a freelance journalist, his real reason was to fight. Locatelli wrote a letter on the last day of his month-long compulsory training with the YPG, which indicated his intention to fight all along. He soon joined the AIT, adding to its Italian numbers,

explaining his reasons as follows: ‘I joined the Rojava army in the fight against the Islamic State and everything it stands for’ (Locatelli and Marzocchi, 2018: 72). Locatelli decided to return to Italy on the night of 19–20 September 2017, when the reconquest of Raqqa by the YPG was imminent. He had wished to remain to mark that symbolic event.

Lorenzo Orsetti, nom de guerre ‘Tekoşer Piling’, is one of the two Italian volunteers who have fallen fighting ISIS. According to the YPG website,¹⁰ he served in the TKP/ML-TİKKO International Unit, a military unit formed by the Turkish Türkiye Komünist Partisi/Marksist-Leninist. In his book, published posthumously, he hints at the reasons behind his decision to join the YPG and writes of daily life in Syria. On 12 December 2017, he wrote

I am not an insane or a military madman, nor a reckless person who is here randomly, looking for fame. I do not like wars, and I have never confused real life with video games or Hollywood movies [...]. I knew the risks I would face, and I remain conscious of them [...]. The ideals of the Kurdish revolution are the closest to my own I have ever encountered, and it is a pleasure for me to take part in this revolution (Orsetti, 2020: 40).

Orsetti decided to join the YPG due to his strong commitment to the cause. He defined himself as an anarchist (Orsetti, 2020: 158), and in an interview with the Italian journalist Fausto Biloslavo he recalled the key ideological reasons driving his departure:

It seemed like a more than a fair battle to fight. [...] I believe that for everyone, [ISIS] can represent a sort of absolute evil. They are stained with unspeakable things, and not just Daesh. [...] But apart from that, I was attracted by the Rojava revolution’s ideals, and the ideals carried forward by the peoples of Rojava (Orsetti, 2020: 158).

Joining Syria was the right thing to do, according to his ideals and in view of what ISIS was reportedly doing to civilians. He contrasted ISIS atrocities with what the YPG was attempting in Syria. To Orsetti, the war was not about being ideologically right- or left-wing but about defeating a common enemy of humanity (Orsetti, 2020: 155). He participated in various military campaigns in frontline battles in Afrin, Deir ez-Zor, Hajin, and Al-Baghuz Fawqani, where he was killed by IS militants.

The following quotations come directly from the semi-structured interviews. I interviewed the first ex-fighter on 3 June 2020, which began the snowball technique I used to find new contacts. He arrived in Syria in 2016 and was one of the first confirmed Italian recruits in the YPG. He described himself as an intensely committed person who had been involved in militant extra-parliamentary politics during his youth and adult life, albeit with no military background:

When I was in high school, studying the Cuban revolution, I used to describe myself as a communist. It was around 1996, so it was not the best age to embrace an ideology such as communism. Nevertheless, due to my high school studies and my admiration for Che Guevara and Fidel Castro, I used to describe myself in that way (Anonymous interviewee #1).

Later, he continued, ‘I was inside the so-called *centri sociali*, outside party politics and I still considered myself a communist, interested in international politics and the Palestinian and the Kurdish questions, in particular after the arrival of Öcalan in Italy’ (Anonymous interviewee #1). He recalled how he later began to focus on Italian domestic struggles, such as the

¹⁰Our internationalist comrade was martyred in Baghouz’, *YPG International – People’s Defense Units*, accessed 17/09/2021; AFN, ‘TKP/ML-TİKKO announces martyrdom of Italian fighter in Baghouz’, *AFN News*, 18/03/2019, accessed 17/09/2021.

No Tav¹¹ and Onda Anomala¹² movements while keeping one eye on the Arab Spring. With the emergence of the Islamic State, his interest in international politics and the Kurdish question returned. In Syria, he discovered [t]hat the Kurds were the main opponents of the IS massacres [...]. I discovered in Kurdistan something incredible regarding ideological development. They were part of the communist legacy, and while they have moved on [...], their roots are in that [communist] legacy that I share (Anonymous interviewee #1).

The decision to join the YPG was triggered by ideology. He described the terrorist attacks in Europe as the main trigger but later qualified this:

Let's say that Bataclan [the 2015 terrorist attack in Paris] happened and the only way to fight the Islamic State was to enroll in the Syrian or Iraqi national army. I would never have taken that option. Honestly, it never would have crossed my mind to leave [Italy]. In my view, the important thing is not to merely oppose Islamic fundamentalism [on the battlefield]. It is essential to confront a political movement with something that can also defeat it on the ideological level. For me, it was crucial that there was there an alternative to capitalism that I could support [i.e., the YPG and PYD]. If I were not a communist [...], I would never have left for Syria (Anonymous interviewee #1).

He left the YPG after five months, during which he fought in the battle of Manbij, and he gave several reasons for his decision to leave. First, he noted how hard going to Syria had been on his family and personal affections. He did not lie to his family about where he was, 'since in case I would die, I did not want my family to discover I had lied' (Anonymous interviewee #1). In addition, 'at the end of the summer, I was psychologically exhausted. [...] I was also traumatized by those events [...]. War was totally alien to me, and I did not feel well during the war' (Anonymous interviewee #1). While reflecting on his decision to return to Italy, he stressed that his military contribution 'was extremely limited, something of which I am fully aware' (Anonymous interviewee #1).

I interviewed the second participant on 24 June 2020. He traveled to Syria three times, first as a civilian and the subsequent two times as a YPG fighter. He described himself as being ideologically committed. As a teenager, he left home,

Because this allowed me to join social campaigns, particularly the No Tav movement, while [in my home town] there were not any. [...] When I was eighteen, I moved into a squat, the 'Barocchio', and became closer to the squatting movement led by anarchists. Indeed, I define myself as an anarchist. I started reading revolutionary works, particularly those by Bakunin, Kropotkin, and Malatesta (Anonymous interviewee #2).

In 2014, he made his first trip to the Middle East, visiting Palestine, 'since it was my dream if we can call it a dream' (Anonymous interviewee #2). This was when ISIS sway in Syria was peaking, and he discovered what was happening there. He returned to Italy that same month with the idea of going to Turkey.

I wanted to go to Turkey, on the border, to understand what was happening there. Everybody was talking about Kobani, about what was happening there, and I really wanted to go. So, another person and I traveled together [...]. We stayed for 15 days, watching the

¹¹A movement against the construction of a high-speed railway in Piedmont.

¹²The movement among Italian university and high school students that emerged in the autumn of 2008.

war from a few kilometers away [...]. From that moment, I became closer to the Kurdish movement and to understanding the Kurdish revolution (Anonymous interviewee #2).

Until 2014, he had never heard about the Kurdish question. He learned quickly:

I kind of taught myself all about the Kurdish movement, about what it was, about Öcalan, because before Kobanî, I did not know anything regarding the Kurds. If Kobanî had not staunchly resisted and if what had happened there had not, maybe I would not have learned anything about the movement. The siege of Kobanî brought me closer to the Kurds (Anonymous interviewee #2).

Since his visa to travel to Iraq was set to expire in a month, he used this time to observe as a civilian. Later, he joined a Kurdish combat unit but struggled with the language, and his military contribution was minimal. He could not speak English, much less Kurdish, so after two months in the Kurdish unit, he returned to the training center for internationals. Finally, he joined the newly formed AIT, where he met some Italian fighters, but his contribution remained limited. He left Syria for two reasons. First, he was drained, worn out by daily life, bored by the lull in fighting, and taxed by the summer temperatures. Second, he had some legal problems to sort out in Italy.

The third individual was interviewed on 25 June 2020. In 2017, after obtaining his bachelor's degree, he decided to move to Syria. He recalled leaving 'with a basic ideological interest [in Rojava], and an ideological grounding that started with anarchism and proceeded to Leninism and Marxism' (Anonymous interviewee #3). However, he later specified that ideology was not the main trigger. Unlike other fighters, such as Franceschi and Orsetti, he had no militant political background. In 2015, while in Croatia, he met some Kurdish men. At that time, as he stressed in the interview, he was unaware of the Kurdish question, and he 'did not even know where it [Kurdistan] was' (Anonymous interviewee #3). After spending time and sharing experiences with the Kurdish group, he was moved. He noted in particular how

They played a song by [Turkish folk instrumentalist] Adem Tepe, which I still remember. I do not know how but that song overwhelmed me emotionally. [...] I kept asking myself, 'Why do I feel a deep sorrow for something intangible to me' [...] and I could not explain it to myself; there was no cognitive explanation for what I was feeling (Anonymous interviewee #3).

After this experience, he set out to learn more about the Kurdish question – 'to deepen the story' (Anonymous interviewee # 3), as he put it – and two years later, he made the decision to go and join the YPG in Syria. He participated in the military campaign in Deir ez-Zor in a sniper unit and the Afrin military campaign.

Despite his plan to stay much longer, he had to return to Italy due to health problems. It is important to note that he remained fully convinced of what he was doing, but external factors intervened, prompting him to return home. He was, in some sense, ideologically motivated, but the main trigger was more related to humanitarian reasons and even more so to an emotional awakening, as he recounted of his time with the Kurds in Croatia.

The fourth individual is the only female foreign fighter I was able to interview (on 6 July 2020). She joined the Women's Protection Unit (YPJ) and was the last participant I interviewed in the first wave (June–July 2020). During the interview, she stressed how ideology was a salient factor in her education, shaping her decisions and the very person she is:

I was raised with a particular set of political values [...]. I come from a politically educated family, and they conveyed these values to me. I would not classify them as 'comrades' [in the

Marxist sense], but they still passed on values that made me open to political questions (Anonymous interviewee #4).

After leaving her hometown to study in another city, she became involved in extra-parliamentary political campaigns, such as the above-mentioned No Tav movement; she was also part of a *centro sociale*. She first went to Syria in 2017 with the plan to stay a short while and chronicle events, but soon she elected to remain and enrolled in the YPJ and fought in the Afrin military campaign. As she described,

I went there [with other people] to write a chronicle, but not the usual journalistic dispatch one might read from ‘reporters’ but to describe what we were seeing through [a political lens] [...]. So, in this regard, we were picking up details, not like those a correspondent might; we were looking for different things, even organizing different meetings (Anonymous interviewee #4).

After one year, she decided to return home for two main reasons. First:

My [ideological-political] grounding is larger than just this peninsula [Italy], even though I was born and raised here [...]. Moreover, I was part of a political union, and my decision was primarily an individual decision [...]. I left Italy saying, ‘I am leaving for one month, more or less’, but I have a family, and they were not prepared at all. They reacted pretty well to my choice, but they were still unprepared. Finally, I do not believe that people living here [in Italy] deserve to live in this way. There is no revolutionary gene [among the Kurds, who have learned to fight], but people here [in Italy] have grown used to being submissive. For me, it is crucial to bring that experience [in Syria] to other people, as an example (Anonymous interviewee #4).

In the interview, she underlined how the Syrian experience aligned with her feminist approach to politics, particularly in describing the YPG’s program after the liberation of Raqqa and, indeed, the entire political process in Rojava.

The following individuals were interviewed in the second wave of data collection (July–August 2021). One observation was particularly noteworthy:

If you ask why I went there, well, I do not know why. I mean, I understood it later, when I came back. I went there for moral reasons; it is ethical to protect people. Living there, not only did they train me, but they also supported me with food and other daily needs. Because of this, I feel connected with the People’s Protection Units and the Women’s Protection Units [...] they have these names because they are of and for the people (Anonymous interviewee #5).

In recounting this, he gave no hint of explicit ideological or material motivations, despite having a leftist political background. Instead, he underscored the moral dimension as follows:

What is important to them [the Kurds] is not to think in positivistic terms, as in Marxism or capitalism, but to reflect on what is ethical. You cannot act based on your own narrow sense of right because someone else might find it wrong. You have to act based on what is ethical – that is, what is good for the whole society (Anonymous interviewee #5)

As a younger man, he was a militant despite, as he stressed, not being so involved. He had been part of political groups, but ideology did not figure in his reasons to go:

I had heard about Öcalan; I knew about him. But what mattered was ethics [...]. Initially, it was just my will to fight, to feel freedom. I kept telling myself that [the Kurdish revolution] was not like in Spain [during the 1936–1939 civil war]. But actually, it was just like Spain! (Anonymous interviewee #5).

Despite his ideological commitment and far-left background, ideology was not the driver. Instead, he was there because he felt the moral imperative.

He arrived in Syria in February 2015 and was the first Italian volunteer to reach the country. He returned at the end of August of the same year after he was wounded in Suluc, a small town close to the Turkish border. However, he did not have any military experience. As he said, 'I went there when I was 23 years old, I had limited theoretical knowledge, I mean I knew what a rifle looked like, but I knew nothing about other aspects [...]. Our impact in the YPG was extremely limited' (Anonymous interviewee #5).

I interviewed the sixth individual on 16 June 2021. He described himself as being highly committed to the Kurdish question. He became interested in politics at around 18 years old and participated in various unions and extra-parliamentary political movements. He has been active in squatting movements, as well as in *centri sociale*. He did not describe himself as a communist, socialist, or anarchist but as part of 'the larger radical movement which has as antifascism and anticapitalism as founding ideas' (Anonymous interviewee #6). Despite his political activism, he knew nothing about the Kurdish question. His interest was piqued in 2014 after a demonstration in Milan sponsored by the Kurdish diaspora to bring attention to ISIS atrocities and campaigns against the Kurds. After about a year of research into the issue and reading books and articles, he decided to move to Syria:

I joined [YPG] to give my personal contribution in a physical way, going to Rojava in Northern Syria, supporting the revolution, and doing anything that could be useful. [...] I said to myself, 'there are people from all over the world there [in Rojava] defending an oppressed population and fighting alongside an organization seeking revolution, bringing democratic principles to a region that has been destroyed and torn apart for several decades' [...]. For me, it was surprising that in the context of a civil war, there was this will from the Kurdish comrades (Anonymous interviewee #6).

He joined YPG in the autumn of 2017 with zero military experience: 'I learned everything I know after I got there and enrolled in the YPG' (Anonymous interviewee #6). Despite his lack of military experience, he joined a mixed Arab-international sniper *tabûr* operating alongside infantry units in the Deir ez-Zor region. He stayed in Syria for six months, returning to Italy in the spring of 2018. He left Rojava because he had personal plans in Europe and after the Turkish military campaigns in Afrin, there was nothing to do on the military side. After two years in Europe,

Some comrades I was really close to invited me to participate in a training project, and I accepted [...]. This time, I was not involved in military campaigns or combat; the focus was on political and military training. (Anonymous interviewee #6)

The seventh interview took place on 21 June 2021. This interviewee described political activism dating back to his teenage years: 'I have always been connected with territorial political struggles, in particular regarding environmental devastation [...] and I became aware of the Kurdish question when Öcalan was in Italy in 1998' (Anonymous interviewee #7). As part of a political union, he gained knowledge and interest in various international struggles, including Zapatism, Basque independence, Palestine, and the Kurds. He later decided to deepen his knowledge of the Kurdish issue by reading Öcalan's theoretical works. At the end of July 2017, he joined YPG:

The decision arose [...] after what happened in Kobanî, and I think many from my generation, and even younger, were motivated to go there and see what was happening with their own eyes. [...] I wanted to understand the political contradictions. This is because every revolutionary process has contradictions, and probably one of the strengths of revolutionary processes is how they manage those contradictions (Anonymous interviewee #7).

After a few weeks in the Makhmur refugee camp in Iraqi Kurdistan, he decided to relocate to Rojava, crossing the Syrian border and joining the YPG when the opportunity arose. After the standard political and military training, he joined a mixed Arab-Kurd *tabûr* on the outskirts of Raqqa at the end of the military operation that liberated the city. After spending 10 days in Raqqa, he moved to Deir ez-Zor in an Arab-Kurd *tabûr* that included four other foreign fighters. He had no previous military experience, and in this regard, he stressed that ‘Kurds or Arabs did not need a few hundred international volunteers to free Rojava or Syria; they could handle it easily by themselves’ (Anonymous interviewee #7). In total, he spent six months in Rojava, returning due to health problems. While in Italy, he wanted to return to Syria during the Turkish military operations in Serê Kaniyê but decided not to.

I met the eighth individual on 29 June 2021. He is the oldest person I interviewed and one of the two with a PhD. During his university studies, he was part of extra-parliamentary anarchic unions, the squatter movement, and participated in the No Tav campaign. He became interested in the Kurdish question following the ISIS attacks in Rojava. In the summer of 2014, he hosted a radio show with other militants covering topics such as ISIS and the Syrian conflict. During this time, ‘between November and December, when ISIS attacked Kobanî, I went to Turkey with another militant to see and understand what was happening there’ (Anonymous interviewee #8). He later returned to Italy and established the ‘Rojava Calling’ caravan to bring humanitarian aid to the Kurds in Northern Syria. He traveled again to Turkey and spent a short time in Kobanî but did not join the YPG at that time. In 2016 he finally entered Syria and joined the YPG. His decision was triggered ‘during the first trip in Turkey, in the Bakur region, inside the refugee camps. After meeting people living there, seeing how they were living together, and their warmth, I asked myself if I could do something for them or help somehow’ (Anonymous interviewee #8). He decided to join the YPG despite having no military experience, noting that: ‘I could stand and hold a gun, and if they told me to shoot in that direction, I could do it more or less’ (Anonymous interviewee #8). He participated in several combat missions in Al-Bab, Al-Karamah, Tabqa, Al-Awi al-Katumyah, and finally in Raqqa. He moved between military units, including the AIT and mixed Arab-Kurd units. After one year in Syria, he decided to return to Italy:

My mind was tired; you can imagine living in an alien world. [...] Moreover, a friend of mine wanted to leave sooner, but I told him to wait for another friend. Unfortunately, he did not show up, so we decided to move. In addition, the battlelines in Raqqa were more or less in stalemate, and it was like a war of attrition. You could still die. People were dying, but there was no movement. It was surreal; nothing might happen for days, and suddenly, you could die [from a sniper shot] just standing up (Anonymous interviewee #8).

The ninth and last individual was interviewed on 31 August 2021. He described himself as a leftist:

I have always moved in leftist political circles. In my town, the Rifondazione Comunista¹³ had a branch office, and there was also a *centro sociale* [...]. I have never been deeply involved in the *centri sociali*. I always found them a bit snobbish; I mean, the ones in Rome. But then, I participated in the G8 protests in Genoa, Naples [and] when Jörg

¹³He refers to the Italian Communist Refoundation Party.

Haider [former Austrian conservative politician] was in Rome... So, I am a leftist, one of many (Anonymous interviewee #9).

Joining the fight in Rojava was a natural extension of his ideology: 'I was attracted by their ideological integrity and willingness to change; they subjected their socialist ideology to a rigorously honest critique; they were a Maoist organization, and now they are libertarian' (Anonymous interviewee #9). He later described himself as an anarcho-communist, stressing that the YPG/YPJ ideology was crucial for him since 'for a communist regime, I was not going to fight' (Anonymous interviewee #9). He was not triggered by anything that happened in Europe, such as the terrorist attacks in France or the United Kingdom, as he emphasized:

I do not want to seem brutal, but if the subway blows up, I just hope not to be there. I also hope you are not there, or your relatives. But it could happen. Terrorism is possible because when people fail to wake up to what is happening in other parts of the world [e.g., the Middle East], terrorists find an opening to plot their attacks. (Anonymous interviewee #9).

He joined YPG in September 2016 and participated as part of the AIT in combat missions in Tabqa, Raqqa, Al-Karamah, and Afrin. However, he felt useless on the battlefield due to his poor combat skills. He remained in Syria for one and a half year, with a three-month break in Italy. He left Syria in March 2018 and explained it as follows:

I wanted to see my mother and my girlfriend. I returned to Italy, knowing I would find my way back to Syria again. And I did. I returned for the same reasons I went in the first place, but life there was really hard. I was extremely tired. My relatives did not know where I was for a month and a half. When they discovered I was in Afrin, they worried (Anonymous interviewee #9).

All of the participants eventually left (or were killed), and none returned to Rojava after the Turkish military operations in Northern Syria began in 2018. Their time in Syria lasted from six months to a maximum of one year and a half, with an average stay of approximately ten months. The first joined the YPG in 2015, whereas the others joined between 2016 and 2017. As touched on, a few went to Syria multiple times.

Conclusion

The evidence gathered from in-depth interviews shows that Italian fighters shared a common leftist political background (Marxist and Anarchist) and a strong commitment to YPG/YPJ ideals. These results contrast Larsson's findings, who found that the biographies 'did not contain any information about ideological or religious motives for joining the struggle' (2021: 1769). Empirical evidence highlights the possible connection between previous political participation and armed mobilization abroad. Some of them resulted disappointed with domestic political movements and wanted to discover Kurdish political project by joining the fight. Further studies should test such connection systematically.

They also cited the same pull factor – an affinity with YPG/YPJ ideology – and most were triggered by non-material factors. The average age of the sample is higher than those who joined jihadist groups and similar to Marone and Vidino's findings (2019) regarding Italian jihadis, but lower than non-jihadi fighters from other countries.

The average length of stay was nine-and-a-half months, although some did multiple tours. They returned to Italy mostly for personal reasons or because they were worn out. Since none of them had any combat experience, their military contribution was minimal. However, unlike Neumann's (2016) sample, none reported feeling disillusioned or detached from their personal

experience in Syria. In this sense, they continued to support the PYD's political project¹⁴ through non-violent activities once they returned home.

Two aspects of the findings stand out. First, in contrast to the findings in earlier studies on foreign fighters in the YPG/YPJ, the Italian contingent had no military experience, and ideology and non-material factors played a crucial role in motivating them. The interview data support Costalli and Ruggeri's (2015) argument regarding the interaction between emotions, such as indignation and radical ideologies, in explaining individual mobilization. Since no one in the sample revealed economic or individual grievances, the findings confirm the triggering role of emotions and ideology in mobilizing locals and foreigners to join armed conflicts. Second, in light of Crenshaw's (1981) distinction between *preconditions* and *precipitants*, the interview data all point to the latter.

The analysis of the Italian foreign fighters contingent within the YPG/YPJ makes a twofold contribution. First, it provides a set of baseline qualitative insights into drivers and motivations, which can be used for further comparative research. Second, the difficulties in obtaining first-hand qualitative data from former jihadi foreign fighters, interviewing non-jihadi transnational combatants might shed a better light on the whole phenomenon. In this regard, further research should focus on transnational large-n comparative analysis using national first-hand data on foreign fighters. This might be useful to understand whether there is a general pattern regarding salient factors, such as age, gender, ideology, push, pull, and trigger factors. Moreover, I suggest further research regarding security measures adopted by a single country and the general security concerns regarding this phenomenon.

Further research should investigate whether the absence of disillusion is common among non-jihadi foreign fighters and the extent to which individuals' ideological commitment is linked to it. Comparative studies drawing on larger samples might help to shed light on any prospective links between commitment and disenchantment. Finally, non-jihadi foreign fighters are not limited to Syria and are in opposition to ISIS. For example, several individuals fought and are still enrolled in pro-Russian rebel groups in Eastern Ukraine, and further research should address non-jihadi transnational volunteers beyond the Syrian conflict.

Data. The replication dataset is available at <http://thedata.harvard.edu/dvn/dv/ipsr-risp>.

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¹⁴For references see Özçelik 2020; Van Wilgernburg 2020; Stewart 2021.

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