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Claremont McKenna College

War Tourism: A New Brand of Foreign Fighters

Submitted to

Professor Bou Nassif

By Scott Mowat
For Senior Thesis
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Abstract:

Private citizens engaging in foreign conflicts have garnered increasing media and scholarly attention in the past couple of decades. Conflicts around the world have drawn the attention of private citizens seeking to actively participate for many reasons. However, most academic analysis of foreign fighters or volunteers has focused explicitly on Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTFs) or individuals joining extremist or terrorist groups. No comprehensive study has focused on the motivations and reasoning of war tourists or foreign fighters joining non-terrorist organizations. This thesis explores the under-analyzed cross-section of foreign fighters participating in war zones, mainly focusing on fighters joining organizations not designated as Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs). It will explore the linkage between dark tourism and war tourism as well as evaluate two case studies of the Ukrainian-Russian conflict and the Syrian Civil War. It will also assess the ethical implications of war tourists and their ability to access conflict or war zones as a form of vacation or personal exploration. Finally, it will examine the difficulties in the repatriation process. Ultimately, this thesis finds that while war tourists may overlap with general foreign fighters, they have distinct motivations that can lead to an increased likelihood of becoming career foreign fighters.

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Chapter 1: Differences between Foreign Terrorist Fighters and War Tourists

Large-scale foreign fighter recruitment is a relatively new phenomenon that occurred in the past two decades. From 1990 to 2010, only approximately 700 foreign fighters were joining terrorist organizations in Afghanistan, Bosnia, Iraq, and Chechnya.¹ A sharp increase was recorded from 2011 to 2014, as ISIS had gathered over “40,000 foreign fighters to its ranks from over 130 countries.”² ISIS stood at the perfect apex between new technological advances that allowed for better propaganda and communication tools, the capability to use them, and a favorable reputation for inspiring potential recruits. This massive influx of foreign fighters prompted significant interest in the motivations and recruitment techniques of ISIS and other FTOs. The majority of academic research and media coverage has focused on how and why western citizens join extremist groups and participate in foreign conflicts. A large portion of foreign fighters for ISIS is made up of the surrounding region from the Middle East and North Africa and were 26 years old. There is a myriad of motivational reasons for foreign fighters to join ISIS. FTFs indicated a previous history of substance abuse and the shame they felt by the abuse as a sinful experience. ISIS recruiters would offer conversions and the religious discipline to remove potential recruits from temptation and push recruits into leading “a new life defined by honor and purity” within ISIS.³ Western and non-western individuals

¹Byman, Daniel. “Be Afraid. Be A Little Afraid: The Threat of Terrorism from Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq.” Last modified January 12, 2015.

²Speckhard, Anne, and Molly D. Ellenberg. “ISIS in Their Own Words: Recruitment History, Motivations for Joining, Travel, Experiences in ISIS, and Disillusionment over Time – Analysis of 220 In-Depth Interviews of ISIS Returnees, Defectors and Prisoners.” *Journal of Strategic Security* 13, no. 1 (2020): 82–127.

³Speckhard, Anne, and Molly D. Ellenberg. “ISIS in Their Own Words: Recruitment History, Motivations for Joining, Travel, Experiences in ISIS, and Disillusionment over Time – Analysis of 220 In-Depth

all grappled with unemployment and criminality as previous behavior pushed them to join ISIS. Prior trauma also and discriminatory practices were also important factors. ISIS invented the modern form of online recruitment techniques adequately coupled with the early success stories to create such large recruitment numbers. ISIS recruitments would utilize love bombing techniques online social media interaction to encourage potential recruits. Recruits responded heavily to please help the Syrian population for help created by ISIS or other organizations. In addition, the hijrah, an “obligatory Islamic migration to live under shariah law and the caliphate” was emphasized upon potential recruits, making traveling to a country under shariah law a requirement to be a good Muslim.⁴ ISIS relies heavily on ideological recruitment techniques, focusing on becoming a good Muslim and helping the Syrian Islamic community. Furthermore, ISIS offers a clean slate for individuals struggling with discrimination, unemployment, underemployment, and substance abuse. Understanding the techniques used by ISIS and the motivations of foreign fighters participating in FTOs is necessary to research; however, the current scope of literature does not encompass the entirety of foreign fighters or volunteers and their motivations.

Interviews of ISIS Returnees, Defectors and Prisoners.” *Journal of Strategic Security* 13, no. 1 (2020): 82–127.

⁴Speckhard, Anne, and Molly D. Ellenberg. “ISIS in Their Own Words: Recruitment History, Motivations for Joining, Travel, Experiences in ISIS, and Disillusionment over Time – Analysis of 220 In-Depth Interviews of ISIS Returnees, Defectors and Prisoners.” *Journal of Strategic Security* 13, no. 1 (2020): 82–127.

This thesis will explore how war tourists can encompass and differ from foreign fighters by their motivations and intentions for participating. The Term “war tourism” is defined as non-state sponsored citizens traveling to actively engage in foreign conflict or civil conflict. The definition of "state sponsorship" is dependent on the travel guidelines, and material support is given by the domestic country of the citizen traveling to a foreign conflict. This definition would exclude traditional forms of state-sponsored foreign volunteers like the Russian-backed Donetsk People’s Militia or Lugansk People’s Militia operating in Ukraine. State sponsorship would not include British citizens traveling to Syria under the counter-terrorism and border security act 2019, which banned travel to or remaining in Syria.⁵ It will also not have war tourists who are participating in domestic conflict. Another crucial component that distinguishes war tourists from foreign terrorist fighters is the ability to disengage from the conflict and return home or to another country. Once identified, foreign terrorist fighters typically have their passport revoked and their international travel heavily restricted. War tourists have the unique ability to continue traveling and returning home after participating in a foreign conflict. Engagement in foreign conflict or unrest can take many forms, and war tourists do not have to be armed to be considered war tourists. War tourists may just live with combatant units, participate in riots, or engage in active conflict zones. Ultimately, this paper concludes war tourists are more motivated by the idea of adventure, thrill-seeking, and personal fulfillment than ideological appeals. Furthermore, their background is highly

⁵Participation, Expert. “Counter-Terrorism and Border Security Act 2019.” Text. Accessed April 26, 2022. <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2019/3/section/4>.

variable but likely to include a higher level of education, income, and less substance abuse than ISIS foreign fighters.

Since the majority of the previous literature has focused purely on western citizens joining officially designated FTOs, there is no reliable study conducted on the numbers of war tourists participating in foreign conflicts under moderate organizations not meant as an FTO. As war tourist motivations and backgrounds may significantly differ from foreign fighters joining FTOs, it is essential to analyze these individuals rather than reusing previous literature on ISIS foreign recruits for better policy input. War tourists will present their own unique ethical and repatriation issues compared to traditional foreign fighters.

Chapter 2: The relationship between Dark Tourism and War Tourism

Dark tourism, or thanatourism, is a form of tourism that focuses on sites of dark or macabre events, ranging from war memorials, mass graves to prisons. The term Dark Tourism was first coined by John Lennon and Malcolm Foley in an academic paper exploring the commodification and fascination surrounding the death site of U.S. President John F. Kennedy. Lennon and Foley explored the implications of how media plays an influential role in the consumption and depiction of “real and commodified

death and disaster sites.”⁶ Sites of death or conflict continue to serve as critical commercial developments and attractions for dark tourists.⁷ Individuals interested in dark tourism “may have been motivated to undertake a visit by a desire to experience the reality behind the media images and/or by a personal association with inhumanity.”⁸ Dark tourism is not a new phenomenon; historical sites of conflict or death have always drawn visitors. The first battle of Bull Run in the United States Civil War had local civilians with “sandwiches and opera glasses” next to the battlefield, taking the battle as a tourist attraction. Furthermore, “the site of the first battle in the American Civil war; Manassas, was sold as a potential tourist site the following day,” immediately commemorating death.⁹ The Crimean War in 1854 and the Battle of Waterloo also sparked local civilians to travel to observe and tour the sites during the battle. Several historical battlefields within Vietnam have also been turned into dark tourist attractions. Within the Cu Chi tunnels, tourists are encouraged to buy ammo and shoot at targets.¹⁰ “Dark or Tragic tourism... is an intrinsic part of the postmodern world” and is an effective form of tourism. Travel guides have specifically popped up since the early 1990s focusing on traveling to countries for dark tourist sites rather than traditional forms of tourism. One of

⁶Foley, Malcom. “JFK and Dark Tourism: A Fascination with Assassination: International Journal of Heritage Studies: Vol 2, No 4.” Last modified April 18, 1996.

⁷Foley, Malcom. “JFK and Dark Tourism: A Fascination with Assassination: International Journal of Heritage Studies: Vol 2, No 4.” Last modified April 18, 1996.

⁸Foley, Malcom. “JFK and Dark Tourism: A Fascination with Assassination: International Journal of Heritage Studies: Vol 2, No 4.” Last modified April 18, 1996.

⁹Nix, Elizabeth. “The Worst Picnic in History Was Interrupted by a War.” *HISTORY*. Last modified August 30, 2018.

¹⁰Gillen, Jamie. “It Begins with the Bombs: Operationalizing Violence at a Vietnamese Dark Tourism Site.” *Cultural Geographies* 25, no. 4 (2018): 519–536.

the most prolific travel guides is the *Atlas of Dark Destinations: Explore the world of dark tourism* by Peter Hohenhaus details over 300 destinations for those seeking “a travel experience with true meaning.”¹¹ War tourists take dark tourism one step forward, traveling to and engaging with active sites of death or conflict. Understanding why “death and acts of mass killing are a major deterrent for the development of certain destinations, and yet such acts can become the primary purpose of visitation in others, is integral to understanding the different motivations that war tourists experience participating in a foreign conflict.”¹²

War tourism is a more restricted form of Dark Tourism that emphasizes active conflicts and engagement. Dark Tourism has established the general precedent that tourists look but do not actively participate in the sites of conflict. War tourism violates that precedent and pushes tourists to live in and engage in the ongoing battle. Andrew Drury, a United Kingdom citizen and father of two, has traveled to active battlefields in Iraq, Chechnya, Syria, and Somalia. During his stay in Syria, Andrew Drury lived with Kurdish troops fighting against ISIS. Drury describes how his trips have to balance risk versus his appetite for adrenaline. War Zone Tours is a tourism organization that focuses on escorting individuals to countries embroiled in conflict. Of the tourist organizations that provide tours to countries in conflict, War Zone Tours is one of the most prolific actors. This organization has organized tourist groups to “Hezbollah dominated areas in

¹¹Hohenhaus, Peter "Atlas of Dark Destinations: Explore the world of dark tourism," October 26, 2021

¹²Foley, Malcom. “JFK and Dark Tourism: A Fascination with Assassination: International Journal of Heritage Studies: Vol 2, No 4.” Last modified April 18, 1996.

Beirut, conflict-ridden areas of Africa,” and parts of Syria.¹³ Rick Sweeney, War Zone Tours’ founder, remarks that most of their customers have “made their money and now have the means to do something adventurous that they never had the chance to do in their working lives.” Sweeney is also careful to avoid labeling his companies as promoting war tourism, and labels “genuine war-zone tourists” as “ individuals who will normally go into conflict areas alone.”¹⁴ While Sweeney’s definition of war tourists may not participate in his company's tours, the type of individuals that actively seek out his tours gives insight into the more severe forms of war tourists. There seems to be a heavy emphasis on breaking normalcy, finding meaning, and achieving adventure and adrenaline highs. War tourists may include similar motivations to war reporters who often report “the excitement of being there when things happen, to feel the rush and thrills of taking part in history”¹⁵ This high is similar to how war reporters can “derive a ‘thrill and adrenaline rush in covering the conflict.”¹⁶ Ultimately the motivations for Dark tourism underpin a war tourist desire for meaning and thrills.

¹³“War Tourism: When Battle Zones Become Holiday Destinations.” *TravelVersed*, October 23, 2015.

¹⁴Jacobs, Emma. “On the Frontline of War-Zone Tourism.” *Financial Times*, October 31, 2013.]

¹⁵Fonneløp Maikki "Motivation Explained A study of War Reporters" Norwegian University of Life Sciences, 2015

¹⁶Jacobs, Emma. “On the Frontline of War-Zone Tourism.” *Financial Times*, October 31, 2013.

Chapter 3: War Tourism In Practice

Syrian Conflict (2011-2022):

The Arab Spring in 2011 sent a wave of protests and uprisings throughout the Middle East. President Bashar Al-Assad was facing large-scale pro-democracy demonstrations. Protests in Syria also focused on the rampant corruption within the government and high unemployment rate.¹⁷ President Bashar Al-Assad initially responded harshly against the protests, but the order broke down with a portion of the Syrian army refusing to fire on the protestors. These army officers eventually created the Free Syrian Army in opposition to President Basrah Al-Assad's forces. Since the initial schism in 2011, the Syrian civil war has become increasingly complex with multiple internal and external actors. During their civil war, ISIS was able to grab large swaths of land within Syria, bushing back against the Syrian government and the pro-democracy factions. ISIS eventually peaked in its foreign fighter recruitment in 2014, with large numbers of recruits joining them from all over the world. ISIS foreign fighters were typically recruited through external pressures focusing on their religion, sense of community, and employment.

The Syrian Democratic Forces had several thousand foreign fighters from Sunnis and several hundred fighters from western countries.

¹⁷ "Why is there a war in Syria?" BBC, February 2019

A large number of actors in the Syrian conflict allowed foreign fighters a plethora of organizations to choose from. While most foreign fighters were deliberately recruited for ISIS, other war tourists tended to pick amongst the various groups of the Syrian Democratic Forces. The majority of western war tourists joining pro-democracy forces worked with the YPG or the Kurdish People's Protection Units. The YPG was one of the major organizations of the Syrian Democratic forces. Three college students decided to utilize their spring break trip to fly into Turkey and hopefully travel into Aleppo; during their time, they interacted with Syrian rebel groups and learned how to assemble and fire an AK.¹⁸ Ultimately, the college students found themselves at an Al-Bab Syrian rebel training camp. The three American college students tried to make their way towards Aleppo from the training camp, as "all [they] really wanted to do—all [they] had *paid* to do—was go shooting on the frontlines of battle-torn Aleppo."¹⁹ The assumptions made by this group highlight how war tourists can view the active conflicts as a tourist attraction "to experience what it would be like in a war" without any real consequences.²⁰ A different college-age duo approached the situation with a better attitude. As dedicated Marxists, they wanted to learn about marxism in reality, and they began immersing themselves in the culture and learning to combine their ideological goals with the facts on the ground. After training with their YPG unit for a month, they eventually saw some action and stayed with the YPG for another two years. These two groups highlight the

¹⁸Taub, Ben. "War Tourists Flock to Syria's Front Lines." The Daily Beast, November 2, 2013, sec. world.

¹⁹Taub, Ben. "War Tourists Flock to Syria's Front Lines." The Daily Beast, November 2, 2013, sec. world.

²⁰Taub, Ben. "War Tourists Flock to Syria's Front Lines." The Daily Beast, November 2, 2013, sec. world.

wide variation of war tourists can receive. While both groups were untrained, the different motivations for engagement affected what they were able to get out of it.

Combat experienced foreign volunteers had a different experience introducing themselves and working with the SDF. Of the few hundred foreign volunteers that stay long term working with the SDF, the majority are ex-military or have received some military training before arriving in Syria. Howard, a former U.S. infantryman divides the western volunteers into three groups: “the starry-eyed dreamers,” the “people running from their past,” and the “people that are legitimately crazy.”²¹ Howard’s perspective of war tourists' reasons for operating in Syria replicates the motivational theories seen before in other war tourists. Howard identifies a component of war tourists who are ideologically minded, fighting for their political values in a foreign country. Ideologically motivated fighters are a blend of generic foreign fighters and war tourists. They tend to have a more grounded reason for fighting, and usually complete longer duration stays in the host country than people just seeking thrills. The third group characterized by Howard could easily fit the bill of the war tourists seeking to play soldier for a week or two. Adrenaline addicts seeking to go to Aleppo for a week trip to shoot at people and be shot at would certainly seem crazy to the average person.

Given the chaotic nature of the war, war tourists would often slip in and out of Syria for quick stints without working with any particular group. Most foreign terrorist

²¹Taub, Ben. “War Tourists Flock to Syria’s Front Lines.” The Daily Beast, November 2, 2013, sec. world.

fighters move entirely to the country they are fighting in, shifting their lives after committing to an organization. War tourists have the unique ability to leave after participating in a conflict and consistently have a place to fall back on or recuperate. Reporters on the Turkish-Syrian border would remark on war tourists who would consistently sneak into Syria “several times a week just to do a bit of shooting” in Aleppo or other hot spots.²² Other foreign fighter categorizations do not have the luxury to leave and reenter the conflict whenever they would like.

The Ukrainian-Russia Conflict (2014-2020):

The initial 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea was a relatively small change in the landscape of foreign fighters. Pro-Russian separatists forces were bolstered by Russian volunteers during the initial years of the invasion, allowing Russia to wage a proxy war by backing local militias with their men and equipment. A Russian private security organization with heavy ties to the state offered salaries to on-duty soldiers and citizens who volunteered for service and allowed them to take their service weapons.²³ Furthermore, Russian state television blasted encouraging messages for soldiers and citizens to volunteer in Ukraine.²⁴ Ultimately the 14,000 Russian volunteers in the Pro-Russian separatist forces would not qualify as war tourists with the Russian state

²²Taub, Ben. “War Tourists Flock to Syria’s Front Lines.” The Daily Beast, November 2, 2013, sec. world.

²³Rupert, James. “DIRECT TRANSLATION: A Retired Russian Army Officer Sends Paid ‘Volunteers’ to Fight in Ukraine - Atlantic Council.” Last modified December 24, 2014.

²⁴Morgan, Martin. “Russian TV Lauds ‘volunteers’ Fighting in Ukraine.” BBC News, September 5, 2014, sec. Europe.

funding their volunteerism.²⁵ Ukrainian forces received around 4,000 foreign volunteers between 2014-2019, ranging from 50 nations and different states.²⁶ Foreign volunteer units were quickly organized in defense of Ukraine, including: The Aidar Battalion, Azov Battalion, Dzhokhar Dudayev Battalion, Sheik Mansur Battalion , and Tactical Group “Belarus.” Other Ukrainian volunteer battalions took on foreign volunteers, such as the Hospitallers Medical Battalion. A large portion of foreign volunteers participating in the conflict had ideological goals in mind, viewing the conflict as a fight between the left and right-wing of the political spectrum. Foreign fighters remarked that “the war in eastern Ukraine [is] one of the front lines in a global war between competing ideologies.”²⁷ Pro-Ukrainian volunteers emphasized preventing Russian expansion into Europe, preserving European sovereignty and democratic values. Pro-Russian forces saw this conflict preventing further US Global imperialism and NATO expansion.

While ideological convictions played an important role in the decision of foreign fighters to participate in the opening salvos of the Ukrainian conflict, nearly all of them were there because they wanted to fight. A group of three war tourists tossed a coin to decide if they would travel to Syria or Ukraine to fight. A former U.S. serviceman remarked that he had missed the feeling of being wary and “it must be an addiction.”²⁸

George, a war tourist from the U.S., stated that: “‘regular’ life is just not as fun....but if

²⁵Karlin, Anatoly. “Census of Foreign Fighters in the Ukraine, by Anatoly Karlin - The Unz Review.” Last modified October 7, 2019.

²⁶Karlin, Anatoly. “Census of Foreign Fighters in the Ukraine, by Anatoly Karlin - The Unz Review.” Last modified October 7, 2019.

²⁷Meger, Sara. “War Junkies: Why Foreign Fighters Are Flocking to Ukraine.” ABC News, May 3, 2019.

²⁸Meger, Sara. “War Junkies: Why Foreign Fighters Are Flocking to Ukraine.” ABC News, May 3, 2019.

you tell me ‘Hey, five minutes from now you can be knee deep in the bush in Africa fighting the civil war’ I’d sign up.”²⁹ After a few months of minimal combat in Ukraine, George and his friend “left to fight for a warlord in South Sudan”³⁰ for a more exciting adventure. Some war tourists had no idea why they came to Ukraine besides finding a little bit of meaning in their life. During the initial few years of the Ukrainian conflict, the home country of war, tourists had little bearing on which side they would pick. Individuals essentially decided based on where they could get the most action and considered politics as a second.

The Ukrainian-Russia Conflict (2022-Present)

Since the February 2022 invasion of Ukraine by Russia, foreign fighters have been flocking to both sides of the conflict. Within months of the beginning of the conflict, Ukrainian Brigadier General Kyrylo Budanov estimated that 20,000 foreign volunteers had joined the Ukrainian side of the conflict, significantly shifting the demographics of the foreign fighter population.³¹ Within days of the commencement of Russia’s military operation, Facebook groups and WhatsApp groups titled “Have Gun, Will Travel” had been created to organize potential foreign volunteers for the Ukrainian forces.³² While foreign volunteers can not win a foreign conflict by themselves, the increased manpower and support is a large boon for the Ukrainian military situation. However, the massive

²⁹Meger, Sara. “War Junkies: Why Foreign Fighters Are Flocking to Ukraine.” ABC News, May 3, 2019.

³⁰Meger, Sara. “War Junkies: Why Foreign Fighters Are Flocking to Ukraine.” ABC News, May 3, 2019.

³¹Blatchford, Andy. “Band of Others: Ukraine’s Legions of Foreign Soldiers Are on the Frontline - POLITICO.” Last modified March 24, 2022..

³²Marshall, Andrew R. c. “For Foreign Fighters, Ukraine Offers Purpose, Camaraderie and a Cause.” Reuters, March 8, 2022, sec. Europe.

influx of foreign fighters has made it more difficult for the Ukrainian government to sort out which volunteers have combat experience, gear, medical training, etc. More importantly, the massive influx of the fun volunteers arriving indicates that most foreign volunteers are untrained individuals who want to help out. While these may be well-intentioned war tourists, they are ultimately war tourists with little applicable skills chasing an adrenaline high. A Ukrainian Commander remarked that “he questions the intentions of every volunteer who wants to join,” he doesn’t “want bloodthirsty guys who want to come and just shoot somebody.”³³

Career War Tourists:

As the number of war tourists continues to grow, an increasing portion of individuals have decided to make a career in foreign fighting or turn war tourism into a consistent hobby. A significant amount of war tourists participating in the conflict in Ukraine had already traveled and fought in Syria. A lot of these war tourists have made a career or regular vacation out of volunteering to fight in foreign conflicts. Career foreign fighters can be divided into two categories: ideologically driven and adventure seekers.

Ideologically driven career foreign fighters often spend long durations of time in a conflict and consistently fight for similar ideological organizations in different conflicts. Damien Rodriguez believes that it is his “passion to volunteer for different militaries,

³³Blatchford, Andy. “Band of Others: Ukraine’s Legions of Foreign Soldiers Are on the Frontline - POLITICO.” Last modified March 24, 2022.

militias, and help defend their land.”³⁴ This passion can lead to a career as a war tourist, leading them to multiple foreign conflicts. John Harding, a former British serviceman, spent two years fighting with the YPG before moving on to fight in Ukraine.³⁵ He viewed that A RESOLVE Research Report followed 50 career foreign fighters who continue to move from one conflict to conflict without returning to their home countries. Some ideologically motivated career foreign fighters view other foreign conflicts as a training ground and place to hone their craft for their one true fight. For example, Chechen fighters in Syria told researchers that they were there to train, “and as soon as Kadirov...or Putin die, we will go back” to fight their true ideological conflict.³⁶

Other career war tourists turn their visits into a consistent hobby or vacation from civilian life. Wali, a former Canadian military sniper, has decided to volunteer in Ukraine after volunteering in Kurdistan as a way to redevelop a sense of camaraderie and brotherhood.³⁷ Career foreign fighters continue to return to foreign conflicts to maintain a sense of camaraderie that is hard-pressed to find elsewhere while enjoying the thrill of adventure.³⁸ The GlobSec think tank stated that war tourists can “[seem] indifferent about which side they actually fought on.... they just want to take themselves to war, get this

³⁴“PBS NewsHour | Why This American Is on the Frontlines of Ukraine’s Long War | Season 2019 | PBS.” Last modified August 29, 2019.

³⁵Vardy, Emma. “The Briton Fighting ‘Other People’s Wars.’” BBC News, April 29, 2018, sec. UK.

³⁶Mironova, Vera. *From Freedom Fighters to Jihadists: Human Resources of Non State Armed Groups. Causes and Consequences of Terrorism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2019.

³⁷Llana, Sara. “In Ukraine’s Call to Arms, Foreign Fighters Hear Cry for Justice.” *Christian Science Monitor*, March 22, 2022.

³⁸Daymon, Chelsea, Jeanine de Roy van Zuijdewijn, and & David Malet. “Career Foreign Fighters: Expertise Transmission Across Insurgencies” (April 13, 2020).

rush of adrenaline.”³⁹ Andrew Drury, a British citizen, has made war tourism into a personal hobby, traveling every chance he can to foreign conflicts for an adrenaline rush.

These two types of career foreign fighters are unique subsections of war tourism and foreign fighters in general and epitomize the motivations and reasoning behind war tourism. War tourists have the luxury of viewing war as an adrenaline high or ideological fight. Ultimately, the ability to view war tourism as an adrenaline high, vacation, or career emphasizes war tourism's moral and ethical issues.

Chapter 5: Ethical Issues of War Tourism:

War tourists ultimately lack a fundamental or binding commitment to any cause because of their ability to exit the conflict much easier than local citizens or combatants. The essential difference that defines the relationship between war tourists and combatants from the host nation is the choice to be there. Citizens of a country in conflict often have little choice in their ability to engage in the conflict and are forced to take up arms out of necessity. This commitment issue emphasizes the exploitative nature of war tourism for personal self-satisfaction and undergirds any good motivation they may have. War tourism perpetuates a system similar to Neo-colonial tourism, which requires a “significantly unbalanced or even objectifying”⁴⁰ connection between the tourist and the

³⁹ Hume, Tim “Far-Right Extremists Have Been Using Ukraine’s War as a Train Ground. They’re Returning Home” (Vice News), July 31, 2019

⁴⁰ Cywinski, Pawel “Tourist Neo-Colonialism as an Indication of the Future of Islands. The Example of Borobudur” (Regional Studies on Development), 2015

country. Hanna Bohman, a former Canadian servicewoman fighting in Syria, encouraged Kurdish women to pick up and leave Syria. The Kurdish woman explained that ““This is our land; we can’t run away from this.””⁴¹ This interaction demonstrates a fundamental and permanent disconnect between war tourists and the local figures war tourists are fighting or working with. While war tourists may ultimately have good intentions, their presence and impermanence trivialize the conflict and prevent them from long-term engagement. Within Syria, The YPG had several foreign volunteers seeking adventure leave their units after learning the more left-leaning political stance the YPG takes. There is a high turnover rate for foreign volunteers who do not believe they see enough action. The high turnover rates of foreign volunteers emphasize how these individuals are there as war tourists and to have an adventure rather than as full-fledged and committed combatants.

An additional ethical concern of war tourism is the strain it places on the resources of the hosting organization country. YPG units in Syria hosting untrained western foreign fighters often found them babysitting them for a few weeks, preventing them from running off into dangerous or exposed areas and being killed. These war tourists would ultimately return home after their desire to participate in a battle went unrealized. Untrained foreign fighters can force the host country to care for them, demanding precious resources and time. Frequently, war tourists leave a country if they are not getting enough action or can not immediately rush off to fight despite local units

⁴¹Lamonthe, Dan. “American Civilians Who Fought in Syrian Kurdish Units against ISIS Watch a Dream Unravel - The Washington Post.” Last modified October 18, 2020.

trying to preserve their lives. With no guarantee that these foreign volunteers will stick around, hosting countries or units may be reluctant to spend precious time training or equipping war tourists. Ukraine has started to turn foreign volunteers away, citing their inability to train every war tourist that wants to fight.⁴² Ultimately, war tourists are granted an inherently heavily self-favored relationship with the ability to participate in conflicts, cultures, or movements and then abandon them when necessary.

War Tourists and Foreign Fighters can also increase collateral damage to the country. A study conducted by the Journal of Peace Research found that foreign fighters are “more likely to use violence against civilians, and markedly more when they do not share close ethnic or kinship ties with the local populations.”⁴³ Without solid ties to the local populations, Foreign fighters are more likely to approve of over-aggressive force and cause civilian casualties. Foreign fighters can simply be a liability for the troops they are serving with and the civilians in their area of operations. Furthermore, the lack of formal command structure, the ability to leave at any point, and looser oversight than regular military units give foreign fighters a degree of latitude that is not afforded to an ordinary soldier.

A potential solution to the non-committal nature of war tourists is standardizing terms of service and providing clear expectations. Foreign Fighters should consider

⁴² Sherman, Robert "Some volunteering to fight in Ukraine being turned away", April 1st, 2022

⁴³Daymon, Chelsea, Jeanine de Roy van Zuijdewijn, and & David Malet. “Career Foreign Fighters: Expertise Transmission Across Insurgencies” (April 13, 2020).

offering one month to one year of service when working with a regular army faction. In turn, factions from the host country should consider requiring a specific timeline and commitment from war tourists before incorporating them into their organization. This could help alleviate some of the ethical and practical concerns about war tourists' ability to leave at any time and help manage expectations for the professional army. Ukraine is currently hesitant to accept all foreign volunteers, unsure of how long individuals will stick around and actually fight. Requiring specific commitments from war tourists will allow the Ukrainian government the ability to evaluate if it was worthwhile to take in more foreign volunteers.

Chapter 6: Repatriation of War Tourists

The current repatriation and rehabilitation system for foreign terrorist fighters lack the capacity and robustness to properly repatriate fighters associated with Foreign Terrorist Organizations. Over 43,000 foreigners are being held indefinitely in a prison camp within Syria with no court case scheduled. The majority of the detainees are children and lack access to adequate healthcare.⁴⁴ Western nations have largely ignored their duty to repatriate FTFs, with France poignantly outsourcing the conviction and subsequent death penalty of their citizens to Iraq.⁴⁵ Countries have also continued to issue travel bans or cancel passports to lessen their ability to reclaim their FTFs and leave the detainees in the form of purgatory. International law favors states repatriation of citizens,

⁴⁴“Thousands of Foreigners Unlawfully Held in NE Syria | Human Rights Watch.” Last modified March 23, 2021.

⁴⁵Mironova, Vera. “The Challenge of Foreign Fighters: Repatriating and Prosecuting ISIS Detainees.” Middle East Institute. Last modified January 27, 2021.

and states are required to investigate war crimes after the cessation of hostilities.⁴⁶

Furthermore, leaving FTFs to be detained forever in Syria may actually “risk creating conditions for a new generation of extremism in this population.”⁴⁷ 5,000-6,000 Kurdish and Syrian Forces have had to sweep through detention camps holding ISIS prisoners to root out newly formed ISIS cells.⁴⁸ As suspected FTFs are forced to be held in detention with no trial or investigation, the detention camps will continue to breed and inspire additional extremism.

The repatriation policy of war tourists is non-existent in the majority of states as the current system only focuses on individuals who joined a recognized Foreign Terrorist Organization. Under the current system, most NATO countries allow their citizens to be foreign fighters as long as they do not commit any war crimes, visit a restricted country, or join an FTO. This is an ineffective system that allows dangerous and well-trained individuals to participate in a foreign conflict as a war tourists and return to the majority of western countries with little to no additional screening or advice. This policy has allowed three Swedish men who connected through the neo-Nazi Azov Battalion to be able to return back to Sweden after training and fighting in Ukraine. Subsequently, they carried out two bombing attacks in Sweden. In another case, Five Australian War tourists

⁴⁶Widagdo, Setyo. “Repatriation as a Human Rights Approach to State Options in Dealing with Returning ISIS Foreign Terrorist Fighters - Setyo Widagdo, Kadek Wiwik Indrayanti, Anak Agung Ayu Nanda Saraswati, 2021.” Last modified July 28, 2021.

⁴⁷Henin, Nicolas. “We Must Try ISIS’ Terrorists—or Risk Creating New Ones.” United States Institute of Peace. Last modified March 11, 2021.

⁴⁸Sabbag, Dan. “Kurdish Forces Enter Detention Camp in Syria to Eliminate Isis Cells | Syria | The Guardian.” Last modified March 28, 2021.

who fought for far-right pro-Russian militants in Ukraine were allowed to return back to Australia with no investigation or prosecution.⁴⁹ Ensuring that war tourists returning to their home country are properly vetted is an essential part of national security and should be expanded to include all foreign fighters, not just FTFs. Governments should monitor war tourists and other forms of foreign fighters regardless of status as an FTO. In addition, the FTO list should not fully decide the ability of the state to investigate or prosecute returning war tourists. A greater degree of latitude should be given to designate FTOs, and far-right organizations such as the Azov Battalion should either be relabeled as an FTO or its members more thoroughly scrutinized as they return home.

States should also be wary of the traumatic events that war tourists may have engaged in. War tourists ultimately lack the specialized support system that veterans may access too. One war tourist reflected on how they felt after returning home from several months on the Ukrainian front:

“I didn’t have any emotion. I left all my feelings at home basically. But now that I’m back home, I feel like they’re catching up with me, these new feelings that I don’t know how to deal with. I’ve had a hard time understanding what happened. Because it doesn’t matter how strong you are. Your mind is not used to seeing violence like that.”⁵⁰

In order to ensure the proper rehabilitation of war tourists being returned home, states should undertake efforts to evaluate and provide resources for the mental health of war

⁴⁹Bucci, Nino. “Five Australians Free to Return after Fighting in Ukraine Far-Right ‘finishing School’ alongside Russian Nationalist Militia - ABC News.” Last modified April 22, 2019.

⁵⁰Abend, Lisa. “A Foreign Volunteer on Fighting Russian Troops in Ukraine | Time.” Last modified April 21, 2022.

tourists. Ultimately, ensuring the mental health of war tourists returning to their country of origin is necessary to properly re-integrate them back into the larger society.

Chapter 7: Concluding Remarks:

Distinguishing the different types of foreign fighters and their motivations is an important task to understand the flow of foreign fighters better and improve state policy on how to interact with these elements. As previously discussed, the majority of academic literature has focused on the foreign terrorist fighter and neglected the war tourist. War tourism is a new dimension of the foreign fighter, seen heavily in Ukraine. Over 20,000 foreign volunteers have joined the Ukrainian defense, with the majority of them being untrained civilians who want to help and have an adventure. As this paper showed, war tourism is highly connected to dark tourism and “a desire to experience the reality behind the media images”⁵¹ War tourists are often motivated by an ideological and personal desire to experience conflict firsthand. They can view conflict as a vacation or a way to break up the monotony of daily life. In addition, they want to be able to create or shape history, rather than visiting it after the fact. Case studies on the Ukrainian and Syrian Civil war highlighted the desire of war tourists to fight and adventure-seeking. War tourists are also uniquely characterized by their ability to leave a conflict whenever they would like. This ability, coupled with the lack of intrinsic ties to the conflict, creates

⁵¹ Foley, Malcom. “JFK and Dark Tourism: A Fascination with Assassination: International Journal of Heritage Studies: Vol 2, No 4.” Last modified April 18, 1996.

large ethical concerns about the dedication of war tourists and the exploitative nature of their visits. This largely unexplored brand of foreign fighters has very little policy guidance surrounding it, reflected in the inability of states to prosecute or investigate war tourists after returning home from conflicts if they did not join an FTO.

This thesis provided an overview of war tourists' motivations, practices, ethical and policy issues and distinguished them from general foreign fighters recruited to an FTO. With the significant increase of war tourists flowing into the Ukrainian conflict, studying this relatively new form of foreign fighters is even more critical. Countries are likely to see a significant uptick of war tourists or foreign fighters in the next few years. A more comprehensive study is necessary to determine their motivations, networks, and acquired skills. Furthermore, the patterns of career foreign fighters should be allowed to be researched to determine how they differ from other types of foreign fighters.

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