

# Western Foreign Fighters:

## *The Threat to Homeland and International Security* by Phil Gursky

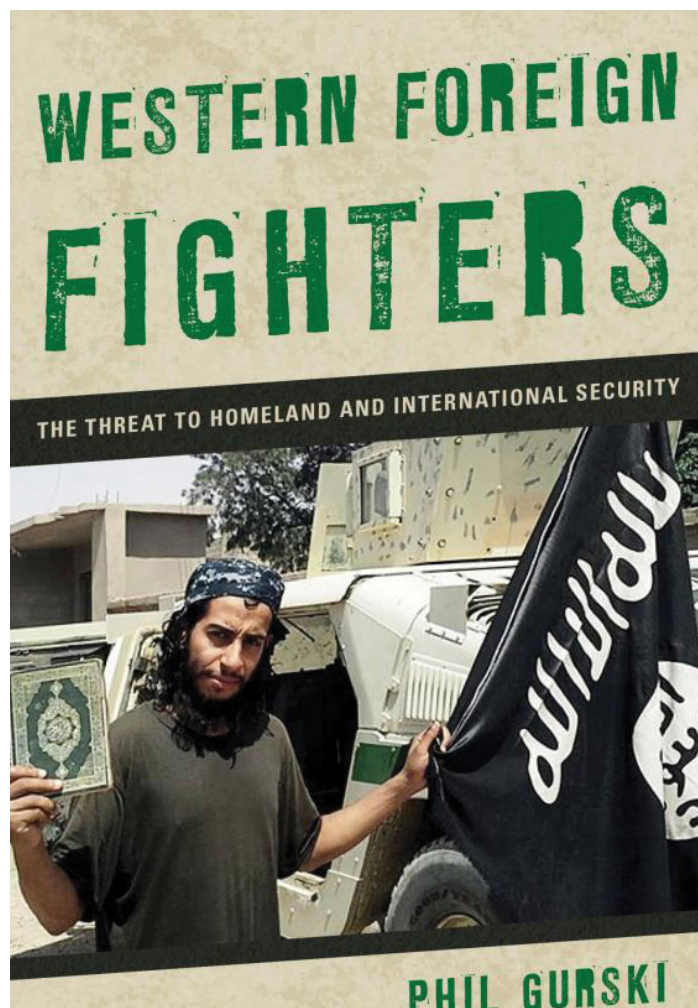
A Book Review by Housseem Ben Lazreg

Islamic State (IS) has demonstrated unprecedented capabilities in attracting foreign fighters, particularly from Western countries. Between 2011 and 2015, Western foreign fighters coming from North America, Europe, and Australia traveled to Iraq and Syria in order to join IS and the Al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat Al-Nusra. As IS has been significantly weakened, authorities in many western countries are increasingly worried that returning fighters will come back to their home countries radicalized, battle hardened, and eager to commit terrorist attacks. This concern is clearly manifested in Phil Gursky's book cover which features a striking image of a Belgian returnee from Syria, Abdelhamid Abaaoud, who has been named by security officials as one of the architects of the attacks in Paris in 2015.

In *Western Foreign Fighters: The Threat to Homeland and International Security*, Phil Gursky, a former analyst at the Canadian Security Intelligence Service, elaborates on the phenomenon of 'Western Foreign Fighters.' This book aims at addressing two fundamental issues: "why people leave their homeland to join terrorist groups?" and "do they pose a threat upon their prospective return?"<sup>1</sup> To answer those questions, Gurski relies not only on a detailed analysis of the excerpts and statements by the fighters recently engaged in violent extremism at home and overseas, but also on accounts that delineate historical parallels and differences with previous conflicts sharing similar dynamics.

Gurski divides his analysis into eight substantive chapters, an appendix, a glossary and a suggested reading list, using accessible, non-academic prose. He conducts the majority of his historical analysis in chapter three. His discussion of western volunteers—mainly Canadians and Americans—and their involvement in previous conflicts such as the Spanish Civil War and the Boers Wars provides informative and engaging insights, mostly for a general readership.<sup>2</sup> It also sets the stage for shedding light on why Westerners join terrorist groups like IS, and what threat they pose to homeland/international security. Obviously, these issues will be of most inter-

est to intelligence officers, policy makers, scholars, and practitioners.



In this book, there are two major assumptions that Gurski managed to challenge. The first one is linked to the nature of the fighters and their motivations to join terrorist groups abroad. He underscores the ordinariness of these fighters as commoners who "came from all walks of life" and rejects the idea that those who join IS "have been brainwashed."<sup>3</sup> The second one is that those who leave IS and return to their home countries are raging terrorists, eager to blow things up and kill people. Gursky presents a nuanced account by arguing that although some recent returnees carried out attacks, such as the Paris and the Brussels bombings, historical-



**Paris, France.** Remembrance service at the Place de la République to mourn the victims of the Paris Attacks (Mstyslav Chernov / CC BY-SA 4.0)

ly, only ten percent of returning foreign fighters (from 1990-2010) committed terrorist attacks in their home countries.<sup>4</sup>

The fifth chapter includes a tentative discussion of the increasing participation of women with IS as a phenomenon not common in earlier jihads. Although one tends to agree with Gurski that the trend in the number of women seeking to engage with IS will continue to rise and needs further analysis, he fails to account for the complex set of cultural, social, religious, and political factors that push these women to travel and join IS.

In the seventh chapter, Gurski skillfully discusses what governments and societies can do to tackle the issue of wannabe foreign fighters. He delineates numerous measures to be taken before fighters leave, while they are abroad, and once they return. Many of the tactics suggested by Gurski, including investigation and monitoring individuals, passport seizure, and arrests, are very practical. Yet, Gurski reveals that travel bans can trigger counter effects with some who do not succeed in leaving to join IS turning back to carry out terrorist attacks in their homelands.<sup>5</sup> However, the discussion of ‘antiradicalization’ and ‘deradicalization’ for returnees is highly valuable as it highlights that while these programs can be very fruitful, it will take time to determine and assess “their true success rates.”<sup>6</sup>

To summarize, *Western Foreign Fighters: The Threat to Homeland and International Security* will appeal to anyone trying to fathom why people join terrorist groups, and the threat—if any—that they represent upon their return. Nevertheless, this book is not without its missteps. Gursky’s argument about why foreign fighters join IS is marked by religious centrism. It does not account for the connection between Western military interventionism in the Muslim world and the rise of reactionary armed militia groups, nor the intertwined (regional and transnational) political, historical, ideological, economic, and sectarian developments in the MENA region. Moreover, Gursky fails to acknowledge that there has to be a comprehensive approach that incorporates education, policing, community outreach, health care, culture, and human rights. Nonetheless, *Western Foreign Fighters: The Threat to Homeland and International Security* is an important book that offers an outstanding contribution to those in the academic and policy making arenas.

<sup>1</sup> Phil Gursky. *Western Foreign Fighters: The Threat to Homeland and International Security* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield), 2017, 4.

<sup>2</sup> Gursky, 35-36.

<sup>3</sup> Gursky, 68, 71.

<sup>4</sup> Gursky, 105.

<sup>5</sup> Gursky, 120.

<sup>6</sup> Gursky, 125-129.

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