Foreign fighters are individuals who are recruited to travel to a conflict zone or who choose to do so on their own in order to train and/or fight with a particular group. The motivation for this travel may be political, ideological or religious. Travelling abroad to take part in a conflict for such motivations is not a new phenomenon. However, this trend has become an increasing concern in the last decade as individuals from Europe and North America have sought to train and fight with Al Qaeda and its affiliates in places such as Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia and Yemen.

Who are they?

There is no specific profile of a foreign fighter. Many of the well known examples thus far have been men ranging in age from 18 to 35. Individuals believed to have travelled to Afghanistan and Pakistan and spent time in terrorist training camps include “Shoe-bomber” Richard Reid, who received a life sentence in the United States for attempting to detonate explosives in his shoes on a flight from Paris to Miami in 2001, and members of the cell that conducted suicide attacks on the transit system in London, UK on July 7, 2005. A small number of women have also been involved in this phenomenon. Murrielle Degauque, a Belgian convert to Islam, conducted a suicide bombing in Baghdad in 2005 after travelling to Iraq to fight against American-led forces.

Historically, recruiters and “talent spotters” facilitated travel overseas through networks which helped aspiring fighters gain access to groups in places like Bosnia, Chechnya and Afghanistan. However, modern technology has allowed aspiring foreign fighters to make these types of connections online in a virtual environment and has given people access to volumes of propaganda which has inspired them to travel on their own.
Where do they go?

Pakistan

Since 9/11 Pakistan has hosted training camps run by AQ, particularly in the tribal areas. A number of convicted US terrorists are reported to have received training in these camps, where they were directed to carry out plots on behalf of AQ. One of these individuals, Bryant Neal Vinas, admitted that he received terrorist training in these camps, conspired to kill US soldiers and provided information to plan attacks in the United States. Mohammed Sidique Khan, the leader of the cell that conducted the 7/7 bombings on the London transit system, also reportedly spent time at an AQ training camp in Pakistan.

Yemen

Another popular venue for foreign fighters is Yemen, home to AQ in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). AQAP has conducted two unsuccessful but high-profile attacks on passenger and cargo planes and published the extremist online magazine Inspire. US-born extremist cleric Anwar al-Awlaki was a member of AQAP up until his death in September 2011.

Somalia

Somalia is home to Al Shabaab, a proscribed terrorist group in several countries. Al Shabaab aims to create a Taliban-like Islamic state within East Africa and has pledged its allegiance to AQ. Al Shabaab runs training camps for foreign fighters throughout Southern Somalia and has been an attractive venue for violent extremists because the weak border controls in the region make it one of the easier groups to join. Shirwa Ahmed is the first known American suicide-bomber who died while conducting an attack on behalf of Al Shabaab in Bosasso, Puntland in 2008. Since that time, individuals from North America, Australia and Europe are reported to have travelled to Somalia to join this group.

Why do they go?

Foreign fighters are generally motivated by a belief that a conflict is morally or religiously justified. Individuals who aspire to join Al Qaeda (AQ) and its affiliates often adhere to a simple pervasive worldview that the West is engaged in perpetual war with Islam and that “true Muslims” have a divine obligation to engage in violence to counter this threat. This belief is referred to as the Single Narrative.

For foreign fighters who adhere to the Single Narrative, this belief can be reinforced by propaganda which glorifies AQ’s global war against the West. This propaganda, which is easily accessible on the internet, can include videos encouraging violence against non-Muslims, as well as scenes of suicide bombers or alleged mistreatment of Muslims in conflict zones. Some of the best known violent extremist propaganda is the videos and lectures of radical US-born cleric Anwar al-Awlaki, killed in Yemen in 2011.

Foreign fighters are sometimes motivated to travel to a particular conflict zone because of ethnic connections to that place. Some of the individuals who departed from Minneapolis, Minnesota in late 2007 are believed to have travelled to Somalia, in part because they felt the need to defend their country of birth from an Ethiopian incursion. When foreign fighters aspire to join violent extremist groups within their country of birth, such aspirations may be based more on an idealized version of their homeland, than the complicated reality of the circumstances driving the conflict. Finally, some individuals who aspire to become foreign fighters do so because of the perceived status and fulfillment that comes with this role.

Why Should Law Enforcement be concerned about Foreign Fighters?

Individuals who become foreign fighters present several risks to domestic security. As noted in the examples of the 7/7 bombers and shoe-bomber Richard Reid, people who receive training or combat experience with violent extremist groups overseas could return to their countries of origin with skills that allow them to carry out domestic attacks. Such individuals could also use skills acquired abroad to recruit and radicalize others in their home countries. Foreign fighters, particularly those from North America, Europe and Australia, also bring Western knowledge and skills with them when they join groups abroad which may give added advantage to these organizations when looking to recruit or carry out large-scale attacks.