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# A Comparative Analysis of the Data on Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq: Who Went and Why?

Lorne L. Dawson

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## Abstract

This report offers a concise, comprehensive, and critical overview of the empirical findings available on the background and possible motivations of the young Western men and women who became jihadist foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq. The findings were gathered from thirty-four reports and academic articles published between 2014 and 2019. The analysis addresses the data on demographic factors, economic and social marginalisation, past criminality, mental health issues, and the role of ideology and religion. The report summarises the findings, delineates the methodological limitations, and identifies some of the interpretive biases present in much the research.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> First presented at the annual meeting of the European Consortium for Political Research in 2019, the research is part of a larger project generously supported by a grant from the Community Resilience Fund of Public Safety Canada (#8000-18875).

## Executive Summary

The comparative analysis of thirty-four studies of Western foreign fighters, based on empirical data of some type, indicates the following:

- The vast majority of Western foreign fighters were young men from Muslim immigrant families. The approximate average age of the fighters was 26 years, a bit higher than expected.
- About 18 percent of those who left were women and they were overall much younger, with an approximate average age of 21 years.
- The majority were single, but a sizable number, at least a third, were married and some had children.
- It is unclear how many were converts to Islam, since the numbers available from the few studies reporting data are widely variant. The data does support the working assumption in the field that converts were disproportionately inclined to radicalise and leave to fight. Conservatively, about 15 percent of the foreign fighters are converts and it appears the women travellers are markedly more likely to be converts.
- It is clear that most of the fighters were citizens of the countries in which they were living before leaving, something in the order of 80 percent. However, contrary to some expectations, the discrepancies in the data from country to country (e.g., Sweden and Italy) suggest that we cannot use this as an indicator of the relative integration of these young men and women.
- In Europe, the majority of the fighters came from the lower socioeconomic ranks of society, and as some observers have commented, they had “low prospects.” They had lower levels of educational attainment and experienced higher levels of unemployment. The data, however, is inadequate and variable, and it does not seem to apply to foreign fighters coming from North America and to a lesser extent the United Kingdom. Moreover, in almost every country for which there is data, a sizable portion of the fighters does not conform to this “low prospects” model of the typical Western foreign fighter. In fact, the best current data on the relationship of unemployment and the outflow of foreign fighters, from two large quantitative studies, is conflicting. These studies also reinforce the view that the issue is one of relative deprivation and not actual poverty. In most cases where there is significant data on levels of education and employment it remains difficult to discern the causal relationship with radicalisation. In some cases, these factors may be antecedents of radicalisation, and in others consequences, and the data does not allow us to make a differentiation. The strong emphasis placed on low prospects in the interpretation of the motivations of European foreign fighters lacks sufficient specificity. Other key factors, shared by most foreign fighters, seem to play an instrumental role in differentiating leavers from non-leavers.

- The evidence supports the nexus hypothesised between crime and terrorism to some extent, but the data available is limited and rather opaque. It is unclear to what extent, and in what ways, there is a continuum between involvement in criminality and terrorism.
- The data on the relative mental health of the Western foreign fighters is highly inconsistent and inadequate. To date, however, and contrary to some expectations, studies seem to support the existing consensus on the relative “normality” of most terrorists, including foreign fighters.
- Much of the existing work on the significance of ideology, and in particular religion, as a motivation for becoming a foreign fighter is inconclusive. The majority view seems to be that socioeconomic factors are more important, but there are serious problems with the theoretical assumptions, methods, and data of the few studies that actually argue that the role of religion is minimal. Other studies, drawing on primary data of a more substantial kind, point to the primacy of “religiosity” (i.e., sincere religious commitment) in motivating many, if not most, Western foreign fighters. The samples used in these studies, however, are small and not necessarily representative, and the qualitative data is more suggestive than definitive.

Consequently, while significant progress has been made in clarifying who left to join Jihadist groups in Syria and Iraq and why, the data available is still inconclusive in important ways. More systematic, methodologically exacting, and enterprising comparative research is required.

## Introduction

Most of the studies available on the Western foreign fighters<sup>2</sup> who travelled to Syria and Iraq are descriptive and/or policy-oriented in nature. Only a small subset of this literature involves empirical research. This report focuses on English language studies of Western foreign fighters that offer data and claim some insight into the motivations of the fighters. Specifically, the report offers a comparative and critical analysis of the findings of thirty-four such studies published between 2014 and 2019 (see Table 1). The studies generated new data on the backgrounds and possible motives of the young men, and to lesser extent women, who left Western Europe, the United Kingdom (UK), the United States (US), and Canada to support various jihadists groups, but most notably the Islamic State.

The findings are important, but the quality of much of the data is variable and many of the studies draw conclusions that are too sweeping or firm. Often the studies reveal more about what we still do not know, than what we know, and the problem of specificity looms large. Many of the correlations detected are methodologically weak and encompass a range of individuals well in excess of the few who heeded the siren call of jihadism. In line with the foci of discussion in most of the studies, I have sorted the findings into five categories for comparison:

1. demographic data
2. economic and social marginalisation
3. criminality
4. mental health issues
5. ideology and religion

After presenting basic data on the samples of foreign fighters, most studies enter into the overarching debate on the nature and balance of so-called “push” and “pull” factors in determining why individuals become foreign fighters. The push factors most commonly discussed are forms of economic and social marginalisation, mental health issues, and the criminal backgrounds of the fighters. The most common pull factors are the jihadist ideology and the role of social networks (both online and offline). I have not reviewed the findings on social networks, since they overwhelmingly support the existing consensus on the instrumental role of such networks in mobilising Western foreign fighters.

In line with expectations, the findings indicate that overall most Western foreign fighters were young, single, men from Muslim immigrant families. About 18 percent were younger

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<sup>2</sup> I use this well-known term to cover everyone who travelled to Syria or Iraq to join a jihadist group, or attempted to do so, whether they were fighters per se or served these groups in some other capacity.



women. A disproportionate number were converts to Islam, but how many is unclear. About 80 percent were citizens of the countries they left to go fight. A majority in Europe, and significantly less so in North America, and probably the UK, came from the lower socio-economic ranks of society. The data available on the relevant indicators, however, are too limited, and many fighters did not come from underprivileged backgrounds. Similarly, there is evidence to support a loose reading of the crime-terror nexus, but the data are limited and rather opaque. A majority of fighters have no known criminal record. With the limited evidence available, the fighters are overall psychologically “normal”. While the role of ideology, and more particularly religiosity, in motivating the fighters remains a contested and inadequately conceptualised factor, it appears to be important for many fighters.

The study begins with a discussion of the methodology and the types of studies and data analysed. It then delineates three interpretive options either explicitly or implicitly present in most of the studies examined, followed by summary analyses of the findings for the five types of data listed above. In the conclusion, the findings are summarised, more fulsomely than above, and a judgement is passed on the state of our knowledge of who left to fight and why.

## Methodology and Types of Studies and Data

This analysis does not involve a formal meta-analysis of the research literature on foreign fighters. Rather it emerged from my own comprehensive, but inevitably incomplete, research on Western foreign fighters. The focus is exclusively on English language papers on those who travelled (or tried to travel) from Western nations to Syria and Iraq to affiliate with jihadists groups engaged in the conflict. I examined studies published between 2014 and 2019. In reading the voluminous literature, I differentiated and collected studies that were substantially empirical in nature, and focused on identifying who had left for Syria and Iraq and why. The studies examined are ones that base their conclusions on qualitative and quantitative data they collected, more than the views of various kinds of experts, commentators, and governments. As delineated below, the resultant set of studies is disparate in nature, ranging from case studies with small sample sizes to quantitative analyses with very large sample sizes. While some studies may be missing, the set of studies examined is representative, I think, of the research undertaken on this topic.

Overall, the studies display a sound, if sometimes truncated, understanding of the complicated process of radicalisation. Meaning the authors are aware of the need to take a multifactorial approach, and recognise that no two individuals radicalise in exactly the same way.

Dutch and Swedish foreign fighters receive more extensive coverage than other nationalities.<sup>3</sup> Overall, though, the data covers fighters from Italy, Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden, Norway, the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, and in a few instances, other non-European nations. Adequate discussion, with one partial exception,<sup>4</sup> of the large contingent of foreign fighters from the UK is noticeably missing, as is analysis of the even larger number from France.

Three of the studies examined are not strictly limited to data on foreign fighters. Fifty-one percent of the data reported in the study by Vidino and Hughes, for example, is for jihadists who either travelled or attempted to travel abroad, and the Norwegian Police study encompasses a range of jihadists, from those who “frequented extreme Islamist environments” to those “involved in terrorist planning” or “travel to Syria.”<sup>5</sup> In both cases, no distinctions are made in reporting the data, but the overall data is pertinent to understanding the foreign fighters, so the studies are included. The Vidino and Hughes study, moreover, is one of only three reporting data on American foreign fighters.<sup>6</sup>

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3 Dann Weggemans, Edwin Bakker and Peter Grol, “Who Are They and Why Do They Go? The Radicalisation and Preparatory Processes of Dutch Jihadist Foreign Fighters,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 8, No.4 (2014); Edwin Bakker, and Peter Grol, “Motives and Considerations of Potential Foreign Fighters from the Netherlands,” International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague, Policy Brief (July 2015). Available at: <https://icct.nl/publication/motives-and-considerations-of-potential-foreign-fighters-from-the-netherlands/>; Anton Weenink, “Behavioral Problems and Disorders among Radicals in Police Files,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9, No. 2 (2015); Marco Nilsson, “Foreign Fighters and the Radicalization of Local Jihad: Interview Evidence from Swedish Jihadists,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 38, 2015, pp. 343-358; Edwin Bakker and Roel de Bont, “Belgian and Dutch Jihadist Foreign Fighters (2012-2015): Characteristics, Motivations, and Roles in the War in Syria and Iraq,” *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 27, No. 5 (2016), pp. 837-857; Reiner Bergema and Marion van San, “Waves of the Black Banner: An Exploratory Study on the Dutch Jihadist Foreign Fighter Continent in Syria and Iraq,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 42, No. 7 (2019), pp. 636-661 [originally published online in 2017]; Linus Gustafsson and Magnus Ranstorp, “Swedish Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq: An Analysis of Open-Source Intelligence and Statistical Data,” *Center for Asymmetric Threat Studies, Swedish Defence University*, (2017). Available at: <https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1110355/FULLTEXT01.pdf>; Amir Rostami, Joakim Sturup, Hernan Mondani, Pia Thevselius, Jerzy Sarnecki, and Chistofer Edling, “The Swedish Mujahideen: An Exploratory Study of 41 Swedish Foreign Fighters Deceased in Iraq and Syria,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 43, No. 5, pp. 382-395 (advance online version 2018); Anton Weenink, “Adversity, Criminality, and Mental Health Problems in Jihadis in Dutch Police Files,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 13, No. 5 (2019), pp. 130-142.

4 Reem Ahmed and Daniela Pisiou, “Foreign Fighters: An Overview of Existing Research and a Comparative Study of British and German Foreign Fighters,” *Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy at the University of Hamburg, Hamburg, Germany* (2014). Available at: <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/ZEUS-WP-8-Foreign-fighters-Foreign-fighters-%3A-An-of-Ahmed-Pisiou/8e04f0be7559a36fb78b90e6ee0459173b354b36>.

5 Lorenzo Vidino and Seamus Hughes, “ISIS in America: From Retweets to Raqqa,” *Program on Extremism, George Washington University* (2015). Available at: <https://extremism.gwu.edu/isis-america>; Norwegian Police Security Service, “What background do individuals who frequent extreme Islamist environments in Norway have prior to their radicalisations?” *Norwegian Police Security Service* (12 September 2016), p. 3; Kacper Rekawek, Viktor Szocs, Martina Babikova, and Enya Hamel, “European Jihad: Future of the Past? From Criminals to Terrorists and Back,” *GLOBSEC* (2019). Available at: <https://www.globsec.org/publications/european-jihad-future-of-the-past-from-criminals-to-terrorists-and-back-final-report/>.

6 Along with Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens, Seamus Hughes, and Bennett Clifford, “The Travellers: American Jihadist in Syria and Iraq,” *Program on Extremism, George Washington University* (February 2018). Available at: <https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191f/TravelersAmericanJihadistsinSyriaandIraq.pdf>; Herbert Tinsley and Michael Jensen, “Overview: Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United

Certain long-standing methodological problems in terrorism studies are present in these studies. There are sampling issues with all of the studies, both quantitative and qualitative. In most cases, the sample size is too small and it is non-random. The sampling is on the dependent variable, and there are no control groups or only some relevant baseline data. Consequently, it remains unclear how reliable or valid the findings are, and the problem worsens when one turns to sub-categories of variables, because the sample sizes involved are even smaller and somewhat arbitrary.

Overall, about 48 percent of the studies are primarily quantitative analyses. Most are relying on open source materials, and a few had access to restricted data supplied by the police or government. About 26 percent of the studies are case studies, developed from open source materials. Another 26 percent or so are qualitative studies based on various types of interviews, but only four studies use interviews with fighters and only one study is with active foreign fighters in the zone of conflict.<sup>7</sup> Another study involves interviews with a very small number of returnees,<sup>8</sup> and another largely with captured foreign fighters.<sup>9</sup> The data in hand, then, is of mixed kinds and merits, and there is a pronounced need to sort the wheat from the chaff.

## Interpretive Options

Two distinctions, intertwined with three interpretive options, influence much of the discussion of Western foreign fighters in the thirty-four studies.

The first distinction is between North American and European foreign fighters. The findings for these fighters appear to diverge. Vidino and Hughes provide an overview of the seventy-one individuals charged with various ISIS-related offences in the United States between March 2014 and September 2015. Fifty-one percent of these individuals either travelled or attempted to travel abroad to engage in terrorism. Commenting on the characteristics of the sample, Vidino and Hughes report: “[t]he profiles of individuals involved in ISIS-related activities in the U.S. differ widely in race, age, social class, education, and family background.

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States – Foreign Fighters,” *START* (University of Maryland, 2016). Available at: <https://www.start.umd.edu/publication/overview-profiles-individual-radicalization-united-states-foreign-fighters-pirus-ff>.

7 Lorne L. Dawson and Amarnath Amarasingam, “Talking to Foreign Fighters: Insights into the Motivations for Hijrah to Syria and Iraq,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 40, No. 3 (2017), pp. 191-210.

8 Nilsson, “Foreign Fighters and the Radicalization of Local Jihad.”

9 Hamed el-Said and Richard Barrett, “Enhancing the Understanding of the Foreign Terrorist Fighters Phenomenon in Syria,” *United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism* (July 2017). Available at: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/321184351\\_Enhancing\\_the\\_understanding\\_for\\_the\\_foreign\\_fighters\\_phenomenon\\_in\\_syria](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/321184351_Enhancing_the_understanding_for_the_foreign_fighters_phenomenon_in_syria).

Their motivations are equally diverse and defy analysis.”<sup>10</sup> Some policymakers and academics, they note, favour using social structural factors to explain what is happening, while others “stress personal factors such as the shock of a life-changing event.”<sup>11</sup> “Individuals with such diverse backgrounds,” however, “are unlikely to be motivated by the same factors.” In the end, they state, “most experts agree that radicalization is a highly complex and individualized process, often shaped by a poorly understood interaction of structural and personal factors.”<sup>12</sup>

This conclusion applies to most of the European foreign fighters as well. Nevertheless, the European studies tend to stress socioeconomic push factors. Many show that the fighters have come disproportionately from the margins of society. They are portrayed as persons with “low prospects.”<sup>13</sup>

The second distinction is between two waves or cohorts of foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq. Vidino and Hughes<sup>14</sup> were amongst the first to postulate that during the course of the Syrian civil war there was a shift in people’s motivations for becoming foreign fighters.<sup>15</sup> In the early stages of the conflict (2011-2014), they observe an underlying sense of sympathy and compassion appeared to play an important role in initially motivating young Americans to become interested and invested in the Syrian conflict. But “[b]y the time ISIS formally declared its caliphate in June 2014, the motivations of recruits appeared to revolve more around fulfilling perceived religious obligations, such as performing hijrah ... and the opportunity to participate in the creation of a utopian Islamic society.”<sup>16</sup> This distinction between cohorts of fighters is widely accepted. With rise of the Islamic State, humanitarian motivations waned and ideological ones waxed.

The Belgian scholar Rik Coolsaet distinguishes between “two groups of Europeans traveling to Syria” as well. However, he frames matters differently. The first group, he argues, “cannot be distinguished from and often actually consists of the troubled youth that populate street gangs. For them the Islamic State is just the newest and most appealing ‘super gang’.”<sup>17</sup> “For this group,” he surmises, “the outbreak of the civil war in Syria and the emergence of IS as the primary jihadi group merely offered a new and supplementary channel for deviant be-

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10 Vidino and Hughes, “ISIS in America: From Retweets to Raqqa,” p. ix.

11 Ibid., p. 15.

12 Ibid., p. 15.

13 Bakker and Grol, “Motives and Considerations of Potential Foreign Fighters from the Netherlands”; Rik Coolsaet, “Facing the Fourth Foreign Fighter Wave: What Drives Europeans to Syria, and to Islamic State? Insights from the Belgian Case,” *Egmont – The Royal Institute for International Relations* (March 2016). Available at: <https://www.egmontinstitute.be/facing-the-fourth-foreign-fighters-wave/>.

14 Vidono and Hughes, “ISIS in America: From Retweets to Raqqa.”

15 Also Peter R. Neumann, *Radicalized: New Jihadists and the Threat to the West*. (London: I.B. Tauris, 2016), pp. 88-89.

16 Vidino and Hughes, “ISIS in America: From Retweets to Raqqa,” p. 15.

17 Coolsaet, “Facing the Fourth Foreign Fighter Wave” pp. 21-22.

havior, next to membership in street gangs, rioting, drug trafficking, and delinquency.”<sup>18</sup> The second group, he states, “is more fuzzy and is composed of individuals with widely varying personal, age-related motivations.”<sup>19</sup> Referring to this second more amorphous group, Coolsaet comments:

They often mention earlier personal difficulties (of various kinds), that left them feeling stifled and discontented. Frequently, they express feelings of exclusion and absence of belonging, as if they didn't have a stake in society. One gets the impression of solitary, isolated adolescents, frequently at odds with family ... and friends, in search of belonging. The succession of such estrangements result at a certain age in anger.<sup>20</sup>

Accordingly, and in contrast with Vidino and Hughes, Coolsaet argues two things: first, “the driving force behind [the] decision to go to the Levant” is “a specific, age-related set of personal motives” and second, “religion has systematically decreased as a driver of violence as the waves of foreign fighters unfolded.”<sup>21</sup> This second interpretive option reflects the influence of the French sociologist of Islam Oliver Roy. Roy speculates that contemporary European jihadism is rooted in a “‘no future’ youth subculture,” and not religion per se, and he argues we are witnessing “the Islamization of radicalism” more than “the radicalization of Islam.” Today’s “terrorists are not the expression of a radicalization of the Muslim population, but rather reflect a generational revolt that affects a very precise category of youth.”<sup>22</sup>

Others suggest a third interpretive option.<sup>23</sup> The proponents of this stance are inclined neither to simply state that Western foreign fighters are too diverse to profile, nor accept that they consist primarily of marginalized youth with low prospects. Rather, they argue, the religiosity expressed so fervently by most of the fighters plays a substantive and significant role in motivating these foreign fighters, and it is the distinguishing feature of the second cohort of fighters in particular.

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18 Ibid., p. 23.

19 Ibid., p. 21.

20 Ibid., p. 24.

21 Ibid., p. 20.

22 Olivier Roy, “Le djihadisme est une révolte générationnelle et nihiliste,” [Jihadism is a generational and nihilist revolt] *Le Monde*, (24 November 2015), cited in Coolsaet, “Facing the Fourth Foreign Fighter Wave” p. 26.

23 For example, Alex Schmid and Judith Tinnes, “Foreign (Terrorist) Fighters with IS: A European Perspective,” *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism - The Hague (ICCT)*, Research Paper (December, 2015). Available at: <https://icct.nl/publication/foreign-terrorist-fighters-with-is-a-european-perspective/>; Dawson and Amarasingam, “Talking to Foreign Fighters”; Amarnath Amarasingam and Lorne L. Dawson, “‘I Left to be Closer to Allah’: Learning about Foreign Fighters from Family and Friends,” *London: Institute for Strategic Dialogue* (2018). Available at: [http://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Families\\_Report.pdf](http://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Families_Report.pdf).

Schmid and Tinnes state that “the specific motivations behind individual departures may vary, ranging from genuine, though often naïve, altruism to egotistical narcissism ... However, the role of religion should not be underestimated.”<sup>24</sup> Dawson and Amarasingam state more emphatically: “It is apparent that the lives of [the foreign fighters] are saturated with a Salafi-jihadist religio-political discourse. Consequently, their religiosity, it can be argued, is pivotal to understanding their motivations, no matter how murky our attempts, as outsiders, to grasp these motivations.”<sup>25</sup> Interpretations, then, tend to suggest that the motives of Western foreign fighters are either too diverse to analyse, largely a response to socio-economic marginalisation, or primarily reflect their new religiosity.

## Analysis of Findings

### Demographic Data

The demographic data reported here is limited to those basic categories for which some information exists across multiple studies.

#### *Age and Gender*

The ages reported in the studies are very consistent. Both the men and the women are young, and the women tend to be younger. Twelve studies provide mean ages for men, and the average of the averages is 25.9 years. This age is in line with those previously reported by Sagemen for the international membership of al-Qaeda, 25.7 years, and by Bakker for home-grown European jihadi terrorists, at 27.3.<sup>26</sup> Bakker and de Bont note an average age of 23.5 for their sample of 370 Belgian and Dutch foreign fighters, which is much younger,<sup>27</sup> but the average age at time of departure of the Italian foreign fighters is 30.<sup>28</sup> In all cases, researchers stress, the age range of jihadist terrorists is broad. It is not always clear, however, whether the age cited reflects the age when the individuals left to join the jihad, were

24 Schmid and Tinnes, “Foreign (Terrorist) Fighters with IS” p. 34.

25 Dawson and Amarasingam, “Talking to Foreign Fighters” p. 206.

26 Marc Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Edwin Bakker, “Jihadi Terrorists in Europe: Their Characteristics and the Circumstances in which They Joined the Jihad,” *The Hague: The Netherlands Institute of International Relations, Clingendael* (2006). Available at: [https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Edwin\\_Bakker4/publication/278157534\\_Jihadi\\_Terrorists\\_in\\_Europe\\_their\\_Characteristics\\_and\\_the\\_Circumstances\\_in\\_which\\_they\\_Joined\\_the\\_Jihad\\_an\\_Exploratory\\_Study/links/557c639908ae26eada8c9d88/Jihadi-Terrorists-in-Europe-their-Characteristics-and-the-Circumstances-in-which-they-Joined-the-Jihad-an-Exploratory-Study.pdf](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Edwin_Bakker4/publication/278157534_Jihadi_Terrorists_in_Europe_their_Characteristics_and_the_Circumstances_in_which_they_Joined_the_Jihad_an_Exploratory_Study/links/557c639908ae26eada8c9d88/Jihadi-Terrorists-in-Europe-their-Characteristics-and-the-Circumstances-in-which-they-Joined-the-Jihad-an-Exploratory-Study.pdf).

27 Bakker and de Bont, “Belgian and Dutch Jihadist Foreign Fighters (2012-2015).”

28 Francesco Marone and Lorenzo Vidino, “Destination Jihad: Italy’s Foreign Fighters,” *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism - The Hague (ICCT)*, Research Report (March, 2019), p. 11. Available at: <https://icct.nl/publication/destination-jihad-italys-foreign-fighters/>; see also: Alessandro Boncio, “Italian Foreign Terrorist Fighters: A Quantitative Analysis of Radicalization Risk Factors,” in Alessandro Niglia, Amer Al Sabaileh, and Amani Hammad, eds., *Countering Terrorism, Preventing Radicalization, and Protecting Cultural Heritage* (Amsterdam: IOS Press, 2017), p. 47.

arrested, or convicted, or merely contacted for interviews, and the relationship of this date to the time at which they first radicalised remains unknown.

Many of the studies observe that female recruits tend to be notably younger,<sup>29</sup> but only three studies cite mean ages, two of 21, and one of 23.6.<sup>30</sup> Twelve studies report the percentage of their sample that is male, with the lowest being 69 percent and the highest 94 percent.<sup>31</sup> Since the overall average is 82.7 percent, then about 18 percent of the foreign fighters are female. This figure is not definitive, but in line with the 15-17 percent reported for women from Western Europe in Cook and Vale's comprehensive study of women affiliated with the Islamic State.<sup>32</sup>

### *Marital Status*

Only a handful of the studies report any information on the marital status of the foreign fighters. Dawson and Amarasingam report that most of their sample of twenty fighters were single, several were married and a few had children.<sup>33</sup> El-Said and Barrett state that twenty-seven of their forty-three interviewees were single, fifteen married, and one divorced – but their sample includes individuals from four Muslim majority countries as well as three European Union countries.<sup>34</sup> Bergema and van San could obtain marital information on only seventy-eight of the 217 members of their sample, where fifty-eight were married and forty had children.<sup>35</sup> The reliance on open sources means the reasons for such data being reported in the first place are idiosyncratic. Rostami et al., and Marone and Vidino, working with more reliable government data, report respectively that ten of the forty-one Swedish fighters studied were married, and 60.8 percent of the foreign fighters from Italy were unmarried.<sup>36</sup> Consequently, we can say little more about this characteristic of Western foreign fighters than not all of them are single, and biographical availability (i.e., relative freedom from social obligations), then, may only partially account for their willingness to travel and fight.

29 For example, Marion van San, "Lost Souls Searching for Answers? Belgian and Dutch Converts Joining the Islamic State," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9, No. 5 (2015), pp. 47-56.

30 Anton Weenink, "Behavioral Problems and Disorders among Radicals in Police Files," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9, No.2 (2015), pp. 17-33; Sean C. Reynolds and Mohammed M. Hafez, "Social Network Analysis of German Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 31, No. 4 (2019), pp. 661-686 [originally published online in 2017]; Weenink, "Adversity, Criminality, and Mental Health Problems in Jihadis in Dutch Police Files," respectively.

31 Weenink, "Adversity, Criminality, and Mental Health Problems in Jihadis in Dutch Police Files"; Marone and Vidino, "Destination Jihad: Italy's Foreign Fighters"; Rekawek et al., "European Jihad: Future of the Past? From Criminals to Terrorists and Back."

32 Joana Cook and Gina Vale, "From Daesh to 'Diaspora' II: The Challenges Posed by Women and Minors after the Fall of the Caliphate," *CTC Sentinel* (July 2019).

33 Dawson and Amarasingam, "Talking to Foreign Fighters."

34 El-Said and Barrett, "Enhancing the Understanding of the Foreign Terrorist Fighters Phenomenon in Syria."

35 Bergema and van San, "Waves of the Black Banner."

36 Rostami et al., "Enhancing the Understanding of the Foreign Terrorist Fighters Phenomenon in Syria" and Marone and Vidino, "Destination Jihad: Italy's Foreign Fighters."

## Converts

Many have conjectured that converts are overrepresented in jihadist groups,<sup>37</sup> but only nine of the thirty-four studies examined provide data on the number of converts in their samples. Converted to percentages the figures range from as high as 40 percent to as low as 6 percent.<sup>38</sup> So while the data sources are variant, somewhat unreliable, and non-comparable (in any strict sense), the results support the supposition that converts are more susceptible to becoming foreign fighters (given the low figures for conversion to Islam in each of the countries studied). From the limited data it also appears women foreign fighters are more likely to be converts (e.g., Weenink reports a figure of 29 percent for the ninety-eight women in his sample of 319 Dutch foreign fighters<sup>39</sup>).

## Citizenship and Origins

It is widely thought that the vast majority of Western foreign fighters are from immigrant families, mainly from the 1.5 and 2.0 generations,<sup>40</sup> and are citizens of the countries they have left. The data in the studies generally supports this conclusion, though it is surprisingly imprecise. Ahmed and Pisiou say, for example, “virtually all the foreign fighters in our sample (97% vs 90%) are citizens of the respective countries” (i.e., UK and Germany). Helmuth says more vaguely that most of the 677 German nationals that left for Syria or Iraq “were considered German in the sense that they were either born in Germany, or spent significant time growing up in Germany (having moved to Germany before age 14).”<sup>41</sup> Gustafsson and

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37 Van San, “Lost Souls Searching for Answers? Belgian and Dutch Converts Joining the Islamic State”; Sam Mullins, “Re-examining the Involvement of Converts in Islamist Terrorism: A Comparison of the U.S. and U.K.,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9, No. 6 (2015), pp. 72-84; Bart Schuurman, Peter Grol and Scott Flower, “Converts and Islamist Terrorism: An Introduction,” *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague (ICCT)*, Policy Brief (June 2016). Available at: <https://icct.nl/publication/understanding-dutch-converts-to-islam-on-turbulent-trajectories-and-non-involvement-in-jihadist-movements/>; Adam Deen, “Why are converts to Islam specifically vulnerable to becoming extremists?” *The Independent* (2017). Available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/westminster-london-terror-attack-terrorist-khalid-masood-convert-muslim-islam-extremism-a7647626.html>.

38 Vidino and Hughes, “ISIS in America: From Retweets to Raqqa”, 40 percent; Bakker and de Bont, “Belgian and Dutch Jihadist Foreign Fighters (2012-2015): Characteristics, Motivations, and Roles in the War in Syria and Iraq”, 6 percent; Dorle Hellmuth, “Of Alienation, Association, and Adventure: Why German Fighters Join ISIL,” *Journal of Deradicalization* (Spring, 2016), pp. 24-50, 20 percent; Boncio, “Italian Foreign Terrorist Fighters,” 18.2 percent; Bergema and van San, “Waves of the Black Banner,” 12.9 percent; Dawson and Amarasingam, “Talking to Foreign Fighters,” 25 percent; Reynolds and Hafez, “Social Network Analysis of German Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 31, No. 4 (2019), pp. 661-686, 23 percent; Marone and Vidino, “Destination Jihad: Italy’s Foreign Fighters,” 11.2 percent; and Weenink, “Adversity, Criminality, and Mental Health Problems in Jihadis in Dutch Police Files,” 15 percent.

39 Weenink, “Adversity, Criminality, and Mental Health Problems in Jihadis in Dutch Police Files,” p. 133.

40 The term *1.5 generation* designates those born elsewhere but largely raised in the country to which they have emigrated.

41 Ahmed and Pisiou, “Foreign Fighters: An Overview of Existing Research and a Comparative Study of British and German Foreign Fighters”; Helmuth, “Of Alienation, Association, and Adventure: Why German Fighters Join ISIL,” p. 26. Vidino and Hughes, “ISIS in America: From Retweets to Raqqa,” report that fifty-eight of their sample of seventy-one Americans were U.S. citizens, and six were permanent residents.



Ranstorp report that 75 percent of their large sample were Swedish citizens, but only 34 percent were born in Sweden.<sup>42</sup> Rostami et al. similarly state that thirty-eight of their sample of forty-one Swedish foreign fighters had Swedish personal identification numbers.<sup>43</sup>

Contrastingly, Reynolds and Hafez (2019) note that only 62 percent of their sample of ninety-nine German foreign fighters had German citizenship, yet relative to the 45 percent level for most immigrants in Germany, this is high.<sup>44</sup> Marone and Vidino found that only 19.2 percent of the Italian foreign fighters were citizens (another 11.2 percent have an Italian passport and 8 percent have dual citizenship).<sup>45</sup> The Italian figure is low, and could be even lower since the government figures include anyone “with ties to Italy.”

Sometimes the relatively consistent and high levels of residency and citizenship are considered indicators of the integration of these individuals.<sup>46</sup> In this regard, the contrast in citizenship figures for Sweden (75 percent), Germany (62 percent) and Italy (19.2 percent) is instructive. The linkage, however, is weak, since proportionately Sweden has the highest number of foreign fighters and Italy the lowest. Contrary to other evidence,<sup>47</sup> then, the findings suggest that “degree of integration” may not be a significant factor in determining who goes to fight.<sup>48</sup>

## Economic and Social Marginalisation

As many of the studies comment, scholars have been debating the relative significance of socioeconomic “push” factors in recruitment to jihadism for decades.<sup>49</sup> Initially many assumed that poverty played a role in motivating terrorism, until several studies cast signif-

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Weenink, “Behavioral Problems and Disorders among Radicals in Police Files,” says 95 percent of his sample were Dutch citizens, but 77 percent had a second nationality (with 56 percent being Moroccan). Bakker and de Bont, “Belgian and Dutch Jihadist Foreign Fighters (2012-2015),” just say “most” of their Belgian and Dutch foreign fighters were Belgian or Dutch citizens or residents, but 54 percent of them or their parents were born elsewhere (and primarily Morocco again). The Norwegian Police, “What background do individuals who frequent extreme Islamist environments in Norway have prior to their radicalisations?” report that 88 percent “have a different ethnic background than Norwegian or a mixed ethnic background,” p. 6.

42 Gustafsson and Ranstorp, “Swedish Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq.”

43 Rostami et al., “The Swedish Mujahideen.”

44 Reynolds and Hafez, “Social Network Analysis of German Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq.”

45 Marone and Vidino, “Destination Jihad: Italy’s Foreign Fighters.”

46 For example, Hellmuth, “Of Alienation, Association, and Adventure”; Gustafsson and Ranstorp, “Swedish Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq.”

47 For example, Efraim Benmelech and Esteban F. Klor, “What Explains the Flow of Foreign Fighters to ISIS?” *National Bureau of Economic Research, Working Paper 22190*, (April 2018). [published in *Terrorism and Political Violence* in 2018].

48 Of course, the figures for each country reflect complicated differences in patterns of immigration and historical policies of immigration. Therefore, we need to supplement the simple citizenship figures with more meaningful consideration of related contextual issues, such as the identity struggles of many young Muslim immigrants.

49 For example, Gustafsson and Ranstorp, “Swedish Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq,” p. 66.

icant doubt on that assumption.<sup>50</sup> Then for some years, it was widely assumed that economic factors were a poor predictor of radicalisation and terrorism. The research in hand, however, was inconsistent, and some scholars began to question that view.<sup>51</sup> The empirical studies of Western foreign fighters emerged in the midst of this shift in perspectives, and on balance, these studies suggest that forms of social and economic marginalisation have influenced the mobilisation of foreign fighters, at least in Europe. Coolsaet's<sup>52</sup> interpretation of the situation, broadly based on Roy's ideas, is favourably cited in many of the thirty-four studies. There seems to be considerable support amongst these researchers for the notion that contemporary jihadism is more a manifestation of a rebellious youth movement among the second generation of Muslim immigrants, brought on by their experience of low social and economic prospects, than an outgrowth of religious extremism per se. The findings undergirding this "low prospects" interpretation, however, are fragmentary, often statistically weak, and methodologically problematic.

Twenty-two of the thirty-four studies make some empirical contribution to this debate, but only a few substantially. This is in the form of findings on the educational, employment, and occupational history of Western foreign fighters. Most of these twenty-two studies support the "low prospects" point of view, but some provide contrary evidence, and most suffer from significant methodological limitations. The studies with any substantial findings fall roughly into three groupings:

1. four early small sample size case studies that largely support the low prospects view;
2. thirteen mainly later and larger sample size quantitative studies that seem to support his perspective (but seven rather weakly); and
3. five studies, two with large samples, and three with unique qualitative data, that run contrary to this interpretation.

### *Small Sample Case Studies Supporting the "Low Prospects" Theory*

Two qualitative case studies of a handful of Dutch foreign fighters (five cases) and potential fighters (six cases), called "leavers" and "non-leavers" respectively, found that most of the individuals came from lower or lower middle-class backgrounds and attained modest levels

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50 For example, Marc Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Alan B. Krueger, *What Makes a Terrorist? Economics and the Roots of Terrorism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007).

51 Darcy M.E. Noricks, "The Root Causes of Terrorism," in Paul K. Davis and Kim Cragin, eds., *Social Science for Counterterrorism: Putting the Pieces Together* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2009); James A. Piazza, "Poverty, Minority Economic Discrimination, and Domestic Terrorism," *Journal of Peace Research* 48, No. 3 (2011); Thomas Hegghammer, "Revisiting the Poverty-Terrorism Link in European Jihadism," paper presented to the Society for Terrorism Research, Leiden, 8 November, 2016. Available at: <https://hegghammer.files.wordpress.com/2019/08/hegghammer-poverty.pdf>.

52 Coolsaet, "Facing the Fourth Foreign Fighter Wave."

of education. They were raised in, what are called, “relatively bad neighbourhoods”<sup>53</sup> and “exposed to crime and drug abuse (in their immediate circle).”<sup>54</sup> The leavers are said to have experienced “strong frustrations ... in the years before they left about their own societal position ... or that of their ethnic group,” as well as “feelings of apathy and lack of meaningfulness in their lives.”<sup>55</sup> While the non-leavers are simply said to have had “limited chances on the labour market and of a social career.”<sup>56</sup> The leavers also are thought to have experienced personal losses and disappointments, such as loss of a loved one or experiencing difficulties at school or work and trouble with authorities.<sup>57</sup> Nothing similar is reported for the non-leavers. Only four of the six non-leavers, however, were interviewed and the rest of the information is derived from open sources and interviews with persons “who had been in the direct environment” of the leavers and non-leavers.<sup>58</sup>

In a study of seventeen converts to Islam who left to fight in Syria, van San found that most had “low or medium levels of education and originat[ed] from lower- or lower-middle-class socio-economic backgrounds.”<sup>59</sup> In the majority of the eight cases she examines, however, there is no strong evidence of a motivational link between economic marginalisation per se and joining the Islamic State. Lindekilde, Bertelsen and Stohl present somewhat similar findings from their study of twenty-two Danish foreign fighters. The data are framed, however, by a specific theory of “life psychology,” and only three case studies are presented, so it is difficult to compare their findings with other results.<sup>60</sup>

### *Large Sample Quantitative Studies Supporting the “Low Prospects” Theory*

A handful of larger quantitative studies further support the low prospects interpretive option. In many instances, however, the claims are rather vague and limited. Examining police files on 140 Dutch foreign fighters, Weenink, for example, states that most “either did not finish high school or vocational training, or became unemployed afterwards.”<sup>61</sup> When employed, he states, it was mainly in “irregular jobs,” and some experienced homelessness. He provides no numbers, however, and there may be a chicken-and-egg problem. Did dropping out of school and being unemployed precipitate radicalisation, or did incipient radicalisation lead these individuals to leave school and forgo regular employment? This simple question is relevant to most of the large sample studies, and to answer it requires much fuller and time sensitive data (i.e., life course data). Several other studies similarly report that levels

53 Weggemans et al., “Who Are They and Why Do They Go?” p. 101.

54 Bakker and Grol, “Motives and Considerations of Potential Foreign Fighters from the Netherlands,” p. 13.

55 Weggemans et al., “Who Are They and Why Do They Go?” pp. 107-108.

56 Bakker and Grol, “Motives and Considerations of Potential Foreign Fighters from the Netherlands,” p. 13.

57 Weggemans et al., “Who Are They and Why Do They Go?” p. 108.

58 Ibid., p. 101.

59 Van San, “Lost Souls Searching for Answers? Belgian and Dutch Converts Joining the Islamic State,” p. 49.

60 Lasse Lindekilde, Preben Bertelsen, and Michael Stohl, “Who Goes, Why, and With What Effects: The Problem of Foreign Fighters from Europe,” *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 27, No. 5 (2016), pp. 858-977.

61 Weenink, “Behavioral Problems and Disorders among Radicals in Police Files,” p. 23.

of educational attainment were generally low, as was the occupational status of most foreign fighters, combined with higher than normal levels of unemployment. The data utilised, however, is often very incomplete.<sup>62</sup> Bergema and van San, for example, offer findings on the class background, education, and occupations of the 217 Dutch foreign fighters in their sample. Overall, they conclude, “the majority ... came from the lower levels of society, lacking (tertiary) school or vocational qualifications, and are oftentimes unemployed or stuck in unskilled labour.”<sup>63</sup> Yet, they admit, assessing the socioeconomic status of the fighters involves some “crude judgement,”<sup>64</sup> and the small size of the data samples available limits the generality of these findings. The youthfulness of the sample, plus the high percentage of students in many cases, poses problems as well, and no baseline information is presented for comparable other youth, immigrant or otherwise. From this data alone, it is difficult to draw any conclusions about whether these fighters were actually reacting to their low prospects. How many of these young people, for example, would have finished their education if they had not radicalised and left for Syria?

Marone and Vidino report on 125 Italian foreign fighters, and Gustafsson and Ranstorp examination of the existing studies and data on European jihadists, provide stronger support for the “low prospects” interpretive option.<sup>65</sup> Gustafsson and Ranstorp, for example, come to the following conclusion:

... European jihadists are usually socio-economic underperformers with low education, high unemployment, high criminal conviction rates and other negative indicators. The hypothetical mechanisms at work were social mobility closure, horizontal inequality, opportunity costs and neighbourhood effects that need to be tested further.<sup>66</sup>

They are careful, though, to note anomalous findings as well, such as the considerable number of Danish foreign fighters seemingly from middle class backgrounds and the comparatively low levels of criminal activity for Italian and Spanish foreign fighters.

Their most significant contribution to the discussion is the finding that 71 percent of their sample of 267 Swedish foreign fighters had been residents of what the Swedes call “ex-

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62 Bakker and de Bont, “Belgian and Dutch Jihadist Foreign Fighters (2012-2015)”;

Norwegian Police, “What background do individuals who frequent extreme Islamist environments in Norway have prior to their radicalisations?”; Bonico, “Italian Foreign Terrorist Fighters”; Reynolds and Hafez, “Social Network Analysis of German Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq.”

63 Bergema and van San, “Waves of the Black Banner,” pp. 20-21.

64 *Ibid.*, p. 10.

65 Marone and Vidino, “Destination Jihad: Italy’s Foreign Fighters”; Gustafsson and Ranstorp, “Swedish Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq.”

66 Gustafsson and Ranstorp, “Swedish Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq: An Analysis of Open-Source Intelligence and Statistical Data,” pp. 68-69.

posed areas.” These are “socially deprived areas hit by high criminality and low socio-economic status.”<sup>67</sup> They describe several of the most relevant of these exposed areas, and examples of the foreign fighters that came from them.

Taking a more innovative tact, Verwimp developed a measure of the gap in labour market and school outcomes between non-EU immigrants and natives in European countries, using data derived from Eurostat, European Union Labour Force Surveys, the OECD, and the Programme for International Student Assessment.<sup>68</sup> He compared these findings with a calculation of the number of foreign fighters from each European state, per million inhabitants, and concluded that there is a correlation between the size of the gap and the number of foreign fighters. The larger the gap, the higher the per capita number of foreign fighters. The findings are significant, but the methodology is complex and has yet to be replicated. Moreover, such a study raises classic issues about the real micro implications of rather broad macro findings.

There are indications, however, of some significant divergences in the data as well. Ahmed and Pisoiu, for example, present mixed findings for their sample of thirty-four British and twenty German foreign fighters. The majority of the German fighters were working class, but the majority of the British fighters were middle class (with data available for forty-one individuals). Likewise, educationally, one-third of the UK sample “were university educated or about to attend university ... and 93% had at least attended school until 16.” For the German sample, “17% attended a Gymnasium, 25% attended a Hauptschule, and 17% attended a Realschule ... only one fighter attended university.” Occupationally, the data follows suite, with UK fighters being primarily students and then white-collar workers, and German ones being blue-collar workers, then students or persons with no occupation.<sup>69</sup> In other words, there is a discrepancy between the results for the British and German fighters, and the British sample does not seem to conform to the low prospects theory.

Another study that points to the low socio-economic standing of the foreign fighters is El-Said and Barrett’s study for the United Nations. It is problematic, however, in significant ways. El-Said and Barrett interviewed forty-three returned and captured foreign fighters, and attempted foreign fighters, from three European Union (EU) countries and four Middle Eastern or North African countries.<sup>70</sup> These interviews led them to conclude: “... that many [foreign terrorist fighters] serving as foot soldiers lack opportunity, are disadvantaged economically, lack education and have poor labour prospects, even when they come from

67 Ibid., pp. 84-85.

68 Philip Verwimp, “Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq and the Socio-Economic Environment They Faced at Home: A Comparison of European Countries,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 10, No. 6 (2016), pp. 68-81.

69 Ahmed and Pisoiu, “Foreign Fighters,” pp. 11-12.

70 El-Said and Barrett, “Enhancing the Understanding of the Foreign Terrorist Fighters Phenomenon in Syria.”

Western societies.”<sup>71</sup> The actual socioeconomic data reported, however, is sparse.<sup>72</sup> They speculate nevertheless that it is lack of economic opportunity, a kind of relative deprivation, that matters most in prompting radicalisation,<sup>73</sup> and assert that “[r]eligious belief ... played a minimal role in the motivation” of these fighters.<sup>74</sup> The authors provide no direct evidence, in the form of quotations from their interviews, for either assertion. Moreover, they fail to differentiate between the results for the fighters from the three EU countries and those from the four Muslim-majority countries.<sup>75</sup> Consequently, it is difficult to say how relevant this data is for determining the motivations of Western foreign fighters per se. The majority of the interviewees (thirty-one) also travelled before the declaration of the Islamic State Caliphate in 2014, and given what we know about the differences in the two cohorts, this may have skewed the results as well.<sup>76</sup>

Lastly, and most recently, Weenink returned to his police data on Dutch foreign fighters and tried to tackle this issue more definitively with a larger sample of 319 individuals. He discusses five factors from a commonly used psychological tool to assess the risk of re-offending of violent criminals, the HCR20-v3 (Historical Clinical Risk Assessment), to determine whether the fighters came disproportionately from backgrounds of socio-economic marginalisation.<sup>77</sup> From his sample, he can provide only limited data for the first three of these factors: the fighters came disproportionately from single-parent families, had higher than national levels of homelessness, and many did not appear to have undertaken much in the way of higher education. This supports the findings of two earlier Dutch studies, he notes, of terrorist suspects in general, and jihadists and jihadist sympathisers. These studies found that only 62 percent and 63 percent of their respective samples completed secondary education, and the levels of unemployment were very high in their samples.<sup>78</sup> He augments this picture of economic underperformance with data from Soudijn’s study of the financial situation of Dutch foreign fighters.<sup>79</sup> Using banking transaction records for 131 successful fighters

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>72</sup> Sixteen percent of the sample had a university education and 73 percent high school (2017: 28). The interviewees had experienced relatively high levels of unemployment (33 percent) and most of the 67 percent employed individuals had menial or low paying jobs (2017: 29). The researchers have specific job titles, however, for only twenty-nine members of their sample (2017: 30).

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., pp. 31-32.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>75</sup> In fact, the three EU countries are not identified.

<sup>76</sup> The majority of the interviews also happened in prisons, in the presence of security officials (twenty-six). The remaining ones (seventeen) happened in either official premises or public places arranged by security officials (p. 11). This situation may well have skewed the findings.

<sup>77</sup> Weenink, “Adversity, Criminality, and Mental Health Problems in Jihadis in Dutch Police Files.”

<sup>78</sup> Fabienne Thijs, Elaine Rodermond, and Frank Weerman, *Verdachten van terrorisme in beeld: achtergrondkenmerken, ‘triggers’ en eerdere politiecontacten*. [Suspects of terrorism in the picture: Background characteristics, ‘triggers’ and previous police contacts] (Apeldoorn: Politie & Wetenschap en Amsterdam: NSCR, 2018); Vanja Ljujic, Jan Willem Prooijen, and Frank Weerman, “Beyond the Crime-Terror Nexus: Socio-Economic Status, Violent Crime and Terrorism,” *Journal of Criminological Research, Policy and Practice* 3, No. 3 (2017).

<sup>79</sup> Melvin R. J. Soudijn, “The Hand that Feeds the Salafist: an Exploration of the Financial Independence of 131 Dutch Jihadi Travellers,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 13, No. 2 (2019).

in the year before their departure, Soudijn concludes that only 5 percent were “financially independent” (able to provide for themselves without government assistance or significant debt). In conclusion, Weenink states, “with few exceptions, when subjects worked, it was irregular jobs and at lower wages than average of the labor market.”<sup>80</sup>

In summary, we have substantial number of studies with similar findings indicating that European foreign fighters come disproportionately from the lower socioeconomic ranks of society. The education levels are lower and the levels of unemployment higher than what would appear to be the norm in most of the countries. However, in most cases, the findings involve small fractions of the overall samples, and the data comes from either open sources or police data, so there is no clear way of knowing if the findings are valid and reliable. In each case, there are sizable numbers of fighters who run contrary to this trend, and we need to explain their radicalisation as well. To say that the situation points to the diversity of the fighters and pathways to radicalisation is less than satisfactory. In many cases, it is not clear what the findings mean. Is the failure to complete a level of education, for example, a causal indicator of radicalisation or an effect of radicalisation? In some cases, it may be the former and others the latter, or both.<sup>81</sup>

### *Contrary Findings to the “Low Prospects” Theory*

Five of the thirty-four studies examined produced results that are contrary to the “low prospects” interpretation of the motivations of Western foreign fighters. In a study that has attracted considerable attention, Benmelecha and Klor<sup>82</sup> compare data on the numbers, and on the origins, of foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq with data on the social, political, and economic conditions of the countries from which they came. Using measures of political freedom, social fragmentation, economic development, inequality, and unemployment, they discovered there is little correlation between poor economic conditions and the recruitment of foreign fighters. Contrary to expectation, they conclude:

... the number of ISIS foreign fighters is positively correlated with a country’s GDP per capita and its Human Development Index (HDI). In fact, many foreign fighters originate from countries with high levels of economic development, low income inequality, and highly developed political institutions.<sup>83</sup>

<sup>80</sup> Weenink, “Adversity, Criminality, and Mental Health Problems in Jihadis in Dutch Police Files,” p. 135.

<sup>81</sup> Overall, I think researchers assume that the fighters were frustrated with their economic lot in life, or lack of upward mobility, and this was a primary motivator for their radicalisation. But how do we know that to be the case? There is no direct evidence in these studies. In certain key ways, we need to remember, these men and women differ from their peers. What in fact were their priorities? Were they worried about this aspect of their lives? Was this a primary source of their anger? We do not know, since we still lack the appropriate primary data.

<sup>82</sup> Benmelech and Klor, “What Explains the Flow of Foreign Fighters to ISIS?”

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

In fact, they go on to stress, “... controlling for other socioeconomic variables, income inequality is associated with fewer – not more – ISIS foreign fighters.”<sup>84</sup> What then accounts for the disproportionate flow of foreign fighters from Western European countries? The answer lies with two other positive correlations they detected: the size of a country’s Muslim population and the degree of its linguistic and cultural homogeneity.<sup>85</sup> Highly homogeneous countries, with larger Muslim minorities, produce more fighters. They postulate that this is because Muslim immigrants experience more difficulties assimilating to these societies and this leaves more individuals open to radicalisation.<sup>86</sup> The perceived lack of acceptance, the social isolation, matters most, and ISIS creatively exploits this with its ideology and propaganda.<sup>87</sup>

For the most part, Marone reports that the four Italian foreign fighters he examined came from fairly stable and ordinary working class families. “None,” he says, “suffered conditions of poverty or social exclusion.”<sup>88</sup> The two youngest fighters attended high school, and the two older ones were both in university programs.

In their social media dialogues with fighters in Syria and Iraq Dawson and Amarasingam found little evidence of economic or social deprivation or even discontent.<sup>89</sup> The twenty fighters they interviewed said they came from quite comfortable circumstances and had few serious complaints about the way they were treated in the countries they came from (e.g., with regard to discrimination). Alternatively, they stressed their more personal moral and religious concerns about life in the West and their quest, since adolescence, for more meaning and certainty in their lives.<sup>90</sup> They conclude:

... three interrelated features stood out in the accounts collected: (1) the prominence of religious discourse and considerations, and solidarity with their fellow Muslims; (2) the focus on moral and not economic limitations in condemning their past lives and explaining their turn to extremism; and (3) the personal nature of the journey—it tends to be understood more as a quest of self-fulfillment than a political activity.<sup>91</sup>

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84 Ibid., p. 11.

85 Ibid., p. 2.

86 Ibid., p. 3.

87 Ibid., p. 11.

88 Marone, Francesco. “Italy’s Jihadists in the Syrian Civil War.” International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague (ICCT), Research Paper (August, 2016), <https://icct.nl/publication/italys-jihadists-in-the-syrian-civil-war/>.

89 Dawson and Amarasingam, “Talking to Foreign Fighters.”

90 Ibid., pp. 199-200.

91 Ibid., p. 202.



The primary data from the terrorists indicates, they argue, placing more emphasis on the existential crises of these youth, and the consequent appeal of the jihadist ideology, than socioeconomic discontent, in explaining their radicalisation.<sup>92</sup>

Summarising the results of their study of twenty-seven men and three women who left for Syria, based on interviews with forty-three parents, siblings, and friends, Amarasingam and Dawson conclude:

... contrary to popular suspicions and many of the more publicised cases of foreign fighters, most of them are young men and women who are not “troubled kids” or “delinquents.” They appear to come from fairly middle-class, stable and conventional homes. Some are struggling with school, or to find girlfriends, but in no way that differentiates them from tens of thousands of their peers.<sup>93</sup>

Twenty-six of these thirty fighters were either high school graduates, or had some college or university education, and three had university degrees. Most did not appear to come from dysfunctional or neglectful families, or poor or stressful economic circumstances.

Finally, in a study that is reminiscent of Benmelech and Klor, Pokalova analyses the conditions giving rise to the differential outflows of foreign fighters, using an even wider array of measures and datasets, as well as an original dataset of information on 33,815 foreign fighters.<sup>94</sup> She tests eight hypotheses dealing with levels of authoritarianism, economic conditions, the size of the youth populations, the proportion of Muslims, levels of emigration, involvement in armed conflicts, levels of internet penetration, and the presence of terrorists networks. She also differentiates between Muslim-majority and minority countries. One result is directly relevant here:

From the economic perspective ... the data reveal that the outflow of foreign fighters is correlated with variables that impact personal well-being such as HDI [(United Nations Human Development Index)] and unemployment. More foreign fighters come from countries with higher levels of HDI and higher levels of unemployment. However, unemployment seems to disproportionately

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92 Ibid., p. 207; Dawson and Amarasingam’s sample, however, is small and probably subject to some self-selection bias. It is the only sample we have, though, of the thoughts of Western foreign fighters while they were engaged in combat, and not before or afterward.

93 Amarasingam and Dawson, “‘I Left to be Closer to Allah’: Learning about Foreign Fighters from Family and Friends,” p. 22.

94 Elena Pokalova, “Driving Factors behind Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 42, No. 9 (2019), pp. 798-818.

affect majority non-Muslim countries ...<sup>95</sup>

On the one hand, this finding is in line with those of Krueger and Benmelech and Klor,<sup>96</sup> in suggesting countries with higher levels of economic development actually produce more foreign fighters. On the other hand, it appears to contradict them, and nominally support the low prospects view. It suggests a link between unemployment and high rates of foreign fighters, especially in non-Muslim nations. Benmelech and Klor also found “a positive correlation between unemployment and ISIS foreign fighters.” Contradicting Pokalova’s findings, however, they claim their “robustness tests” show that “this correlation is driven entirely by Muslim countries.”<sup>97</sup> The anomalous findings are hard to explain, and further analysis is needed.

Certainly, there is reason to suspect that the low prospects theory does not apply anywhere near as uniformly to the foreign fighters from the United Kingdom, the United States, and perhaps Canada and Australia. Commenting on the situation, Meleagrou-Hitchens et al. state:

... some studies find that a substantial number of individual jihadist travellers from a specific country had financial problems, were unemployed, or living on social welfare. However, when applied to the American context, these trends appear to be less illustrative. The sample of American IS supporters cut across economic boundaries, and American Muslims as a population tend to experience greater levels of economic success and integration than their counterparts in other Western countries.<sup>98</sup>

The first two in-depth case studies presented in Meleagrou-Hitchens et al. illustrate the greater diversity of backgrounds. Abdullah Ramo Pazara was a Bosnian immigrant who left to fight in Syria after experiencing a rocky divorce and repeated business failures. Ahmad Abousamra came from a well-off family, was a successful student, and fluent in Arabic and English. He went to two good universities and earned a degree in computer science (while he was radicalising).

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95 Ibid., p. 13.

96 Krueger, *What Makes a Terrorist? Economics and the Roots of Terrorism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007); Benmelech and Klor, “What Explains the Flow of Foreign Fighters to ISIS?”

97 Benmelech and Klor, “What Explains the Flow of Foreign Fighters to ISIS?”, p. 8.

98 Meleagrou-Hitchens et al., “The Travellers: American Jihadist in Syria and Iraq,” p. 6.

## Criminality

In referring to the crime-terrorism nexus, Basra and Neumann<sup>99</sup> do not have in mind only the older alliances of convenience between criminal and terrorist organisations, such as the protection of heroin production in Afghanistan by the Taliban, but rather the convergence of criminal and terrorist “social networks, environments, or milieus.” They are interested in how “criminal and terrorist groups have come to recruit from the same pool of people, creating (often unintended) synergies and overlaps that have consequences for how individuals radicalise and operate.”<sup>100</sup> Mounting evidence of the prevalence of criminal backgrounds amongst European jihadists drew their attention to the nexus, and some of the studies discussed in this analysis display an awareness of this issue.

Of the thirty-four studies, thirteen discuss data related to the criminal backgrounds of Western foreign fighters. Only ten studies, however, present original data and much of it is limited. Nonetheless, the studies suggest that proportionately the foreign fighters have higher levels of prior criminality. At least eight other studies, though, presenting original qualitative data and case studies, fail to note any particular criminal proclivity or involvement in criminal networks. The remainder of the studies simply do not address the issue, or they only mention some data from other sources in passing. Before summarising this literature, let us first consider two of the more general reports on European foreign fighters that reflect the tone of the discussion.

Schmid and Tinnes and Coolsaet note that there is some evidence that a disproportionately large number of European foreign fighters have a criminal record prior to departing for Syria and Iraq.<sup>101</sup> In each case, their discussions leave the impression that most of the foreign fighters were “angry young losers, drug users and petty criminals ... known in their community for their troublemaking.”<sup>102</sup> While the turn to jihad is “a new and supplementary channel for deviant behaviour, next to membership in gangs, rioting, drug trafficking, and delinquency.”<sup>103</sup> On closer inspection, however, the evidence cited in support of these claims is thin. Schmid and Tinnes cite two sources: Ahmed and Pisoiu’s study (see below), and a news article summarising eleven pages leaked from a government study of German foreign fighters.<sup>104</sup>

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99 Rajan Basra and Peter R. Neumann, “Criminal Pasts, Terrorists Futures: European Jihadists and the New Crime-Terror Nexus,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 10, No. 6 (2016), pp. 25-40.

100 Ibid., p. 26.

101 Schmid and Tinnes, “Foreign (Terrorist) Fighters with IS,” pp. 35-36; Coolsaet, “Facing the Fourth Foreign Fighter Wave,” pp. 22-23.

102 Schmid and Tinnes, “Foreign (Terrorist) Fighters with IS,” p. 36.

103 Coolsaet, “Facing the Fourth Foreign Fighter Wave,” p. 23.

104 Bfv, “Analysis of the background and process of radicalization among persons who left Germany to travel to Syria and Iraq based on Islamist motivations,” *Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (Bfv), the Federal Criminal Office (BKA), and the Hessen Information and Competence Center against Extremism (HKE)* (2016). Summary available at:

<https://www.bka.de/SharedDocs/Downloads/EN/Publications/Other/>

Coolsaet relies on a series of media reports and opinion pieces, including an interview with Alain Grignard, a senior member of the counter-terrorism unit of the Brussels Federal Police.

What, for example, do Ahmed and Pisiou say? With information on fifty of fifty-four foreign fighters, they state that “roughly a quarter of the total sample”<sup>105</sup> of British and German fighters had a criminal record, though not necessarily a conviction (35 percent of the Germans and 17 percent for the British). Some of these records, however, involve terrorism-related offences. It seems the authors do not realise the significance of this fact, since they make no further comment. Moreover, there is no information on the nature of the criminal records or activities. Regrettably, these kinds of limitations are endemic to discussions of the issue.

A number of other studies of various samples of European foreign fighters report that somewhat elevated figures. One of the best known is by Weenink.<sup>106</sup> His findings stem from systematic searches of the database of the Dutch National Police. Looking for evidence of what he calls “problem behaviour,” he secured limited information on sixty-six (47 percent) of the 140 foreign fighters in his sample. The information comes from a database of adult subjects suspected of a criminal offence (which may involve multiple crimes), and not prosecutions or convictions. There were 380 reports in the database for these sixty-six foreign fighters, which leads Weenink to conclude: “male travellers are twice as often involved in crime than other young men,” since the “overall registration level in the [database] is 23% for ... men younger than 22.”<sup>107</sup> The logic of this claim, however, is unclear. We would need to know how many of the offences, on average at least, each of the sixty-six individuals were suspected of committing. Perhaps a small sub-sample of this group is responsible for a disproportionate number of the suspected crimes.

Weenink acknowledges that the “percentage comes close to that of the group in the Netherlands that is criminally most active, that of young men of Moroccan descent,” and he notes that those of Moroccan descent are overrepresented in his sample of Dutch foreign fighters (56 percent). However, he insists, “this [fact] cannot completely explain the high crime level in the sample.”<sup>108</sup> That may be true, but it certainly muddies the waters when we are seeking to gauge its causal relevance, especially considering the distinct possibility that Moroccan youth may be subject to some discriminatory policing.

He goes on to note that 26 percent of the women foreign fighters were also found in this database, compared to an overall rate of 5 percent for women under the age of twenty-two.

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AnalysisOfTheBackgroundAndProcessOfRadicalization.html.

105 Ahmed and Pisiou, “Foreign Fighters: An Overview of Existing Research and a Comparative Study of British and German Foreign Fighters,” p. 12.

106 Weenink, “Behavioral Problems and Disorders among Radicals in Police Files.”

107 Ibid., p. 23.

108 Ibid., p. 23.

This, he suggests, means the women foreign fighters are even more criminal than their male counterparts. He provides no information, however, on the nature of the crimes; on how the suspicions are registered; on whether the crimes of these women differ significantly from those for the men. How many of the crimes, for both the men and the women, could have been the result of their radicalisation? We do not know. Finally, his data also indicates that 74 percent of the women who radicalised had no known criminal background, which also is consequential.

The data is similar in other studies,<sup>109</sup> yet no one comments on the significance of the fact that the majority of fighters have no criminal history. Why do so many foreign fighters come from stable families, solid working class, middle class, or even upper class families? Why are there so many foreign fighters with good school records and no previous criminality? Surely, this is the more perplexing question.

The single strongest source of evidence of high crime rates for foreign fighters is a report by the Norwegian Police. This study examines 137 individuals, under the age of forty, who “attracted the attention of” the national police because they “frequented extremist Islamist environments,” were “involved in terrorist planning,” or “travelled to Syria.”<sup>110</sup> Many of these persons “were involved in criminal activities prior to their radicalisation.” Sixty-eight percent of the men “have been suspected of, charged with or sentenced for criminal acts,” and 31 percent of the women. “The majority of the men are registered with relatively many offences” and those “who are registered with few offences have been involved in crime of a serious nature.” Forty-six percent of the men (and 12 percent of the women) also “have been suspected of, charged with or convicted of violence,” and 42 percent of the men (6 percent of the women) were “involved in a drug-related crime.”<sup>111</sup> The authors note, however, that studies elsewhere have pointed to a greater diversity of individuals “who are being recruited to extreme Islamism.” Consequently, they acknowledge, this “raises the question of whether this is the full Norwegian picture, or whether radicalisation also occurs in more resourceful environments, of which we are unaware.”<sup>112</sup> Reliance on police records, in other words, may skew the data.

Rostami, Sturup, Modani, Thevselius, Sarnecki, and Edling examined the network relationships of forty-one deceased Swedish foreign fighters.<sup>113</sup> They were able to secure informa-

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109 Norwegian Police, “What background do individuals who frequent extreme Islamist environments in Norway have prior to their radicalisations?”; Boncio, “Italian Foreign Terrorist Fighters,” p. 48; Reynolds and Hafez, “Social Network Analysis of German Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq”; Marone and Vidino, “Social Network Analysis of German Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq.”

110 Norwegian Police, “What background do individuals who frequent extreme Islamist environments in Norway have prior to their radicalisations?”, p. 3.

111 *Ibid.*, pp. 8-9.

112 *Ibid.*, p. 12.

113 Rostami et al., “The Swedish Mujahideen.”

tion on the criminal history of thirty-eight of these fighters and discovered that twenty-six were suspected of at least one crime. The mean number of crimes was 9.5, and the mean age of the first offence was 17.8 years. Examining the linkages of the fighters, they discovered, surprisingly, “no universal tendency for individuals with a criminal history to cluster together, or vice versa,” and that there was very little co-offending, either amongst the fighters with a criminal past or between them and other criminals.<sup>114</sup> Network analyses also revealed, however, “the foreign fighters are considerably more active in crime compared to their [non-jihadi] co-offenders ... with considerably higher mean numbers of suspects in almost all categories of crime, including violent crime.” This data inclined them to conclude, “criminally highly active individuals are at greater risk of becoming foreign fighters.”<sup>115</sup> They note, however, that one-third of the foreign fighters “had no known criminal history at all,” pointing to “a bimodal distribution with regard to previous criminality and the propensity to become foreign fighters.”<sup>116</sup>

The most recent contribution to this discussion comes from Weenink again,<sup>117</sup> with a sample of 319 Dutch foreign fighters. Using an alternative source of information, a nationwide police registration system, he reports that the proportion of fighters with at least one criminal antecedent is 64 percent. Recognising the problems with relying on this singular figure, he notes that “[c]riminal histories may be diverse, but generally 147 individuals had one antecedent, while 30 individuals (9%) had 10 or more antecedents.”<sup>118</sup> Forty percent of the fighters had been involved in violent crime, “mainly ... domestic violence, street and bar fights, and threats.” They were not involved in organised crime, but not all of it was petty crime either. Overall, he says, “travellers appear to be disorganized and unskilled in their crime endeavors.”<sup>119</sup>

The data available for North American foreign fighters, and even those in the UK, is limited and the situation may diverge from that in Europe. Neither Simcox and Dyer, nor Vidino and Hughes, report any data about prior criminality in their comprehensive analyses of perpetrators of jihadist related offences in the United States.<sup>120</sup> In a similar study of Islamist terrorist offences in the UK between 1998 and 2015, Stuart states, “[t]hirty-eight per cent of [Islamist-related offences] were committed by individuals with previous criminal convictions (26%) or a history of police contact, including prior investigations, arrests and charges that did not result in a conviction or control order/TPIM (12%).”<sup>121</sup> Wilner, addressing data on 95

114 Ibid., pp. 11-12.

115 Ibid., pp. 12-13.

116 Ibid., p. 13.

117 Weenink, “Adversity, Criminality, and Mental Health Problems in Jihadis in Dutch Police Files.”

118 Ibid., p. 135.

119 Ibid., p. 136.

120 Robin Simcox and Emily Dyer, *Al-Qaeda in the United States: A Complete Analysis of Terrorism Offences*. (London: Henry Jackson Society, 2013); Vidino and Hughes, “ISIS in America: From Retweets to Raqqa.”

121 Hannah Stuart, *Islamist Terrorism: Analysis of Offences and Attacks in the UK (1998-2015)*. (London:

Canadians “with a nexus to Canada who have, or are suspected of having, radicalized, mobilized, and/or participated in Islamist terrorist activity between 2006 and 2017”<sup>122</sup>, notes, “the vast majority ... did not have a criminal background prior to their radicalization or mobilization to violence. Only 11 percent are reported to have criminal charges laid against them prior to involvement in political violence (for theft, vandalism, drug possession, or domestic abuse, for instance).”<sup>123</sup>

On balance then the crime-terrorism nexus seems to be real, in the sense that jihadist foreign fighters come disproportionately from those with a prior criminal record. The evidence for the linkage, however, is limited, fragmentary, and a bit opaque. Is there a continuum of motivations for the criminal and terrorist activities, as Coolsaet and others imply, or is the turn to jihadism indicative of an urge to overcome the criminality? This difference matters in considering the motivations for becoming a foreign fighter. Furthermore, some of the criminal activity reported may be the result of radicalisation rather than a precursor. It is not clear how the two phenomena are related, and to the best of our knowledge, the majority of foreign fighters simply have not been engaged in criminal activity, which is significant as well. Are we to assume that the criminality of these individuals simply has not been detected, or following the lead of Nesser<sup>124</sup> and others, recognise that different types of people are recruited to jihadism for alternative reasons?

## Mental Health Issues

Out of the thirty-four studies, only five present any data on the number of Western foreign fighters with psychological disorders, and the figures presented are discrepant.<sup>125</sup> Most of the other studies do not address the issue or they simply found no evidence of such disorders in the cases they examined.

In their general analyses of European foreign fighter issue, Schmid and Tinnes and Coolsaet create the impression that many of these fighters are either disturbed or suffering from

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Henry Jackson Society, 2017).

122 Alex Wilner, *Canadian Terrorists by the Numbers: An Assessment of Canadians Joining and Supporting Terrorist Groups*. (Ottawa: MacDonald-Laurier Institute, 2019), p. 21.

123 Ibid., p. 23.

124 Petter Nesser, “Joining Jihadi Terrorist Cells in Europe: Exploring Motivational Aspects of Recruitment and Radicalization,” in Magnus Ranstorp, ed., *Understanding Violent Radicalization: Terrorist and Jihadist Movements in Europe* (London: Routledge, 2010).

125 Weenink, “Behavioral Problems and Disorders among Radicals in Police Files”; Bakker and de Bont, “Belgian and Dutch Jihadist Foreign Fighters (2012-2015): Characteristics, Motivations, and Roles in the War in Syria and Iraq”; Norwegian Police, “What background do individuals who frequent extreme Islamist environments in Norway have prior to their radicalisations?”; Marone and Vidino, “Destination Jihad: Italy’s Foreign Fighters”; Weenink, “Adversity, Criminality, and Mental Health Problems in Jihadis in Dutch Police Files.”

poor mental health, without citing supporting data.<sup>126</sup> Schmid and Tinnes opine that some of the recruits “might be troubled souls haunted by mental health problems, depressed and suicidal, who want to die – but gloriously. Yet others are attracted by the opportunity of acting out aggressive, sexual and/or criminal macho impulses with a weapon in hand.”<sup>127</sup> In support of this claim, they cite an obscure study by Jahangir Arasli, in which he states that many foreign fighters “have psychopathic and/or sociopathic inclinations and have a propensity to violence even before the travelled to Syria.”<sup>128</sup> The data from other studies, however, suggests that this negative characterisation is misleading for most Western foreign fighters. It certainly runs counter to the best evidence available on whether terrorists suffer from psychological disorders.<sup>129</sup>

Less specifically, Coolsaet drives home his message that most of the Belgian foreign fighters are lost and alienated young people who have struggled with a lot of personal difficulties and given up on the prospect of having a meaningful future in Europe.<sup>130</sup> He ascribes to them a sort of general psychological malaise, and he says some of them were wrapped-up in the violent sub-culture of gangsta rap, “animated by Rambo-style violence” or “undeniably psychopaths.” In his view, many of these disturbed individuals were looking to escape to a more thrilling life in war-torn Syria.<sup>131</sup> His sources, once again, are news articles and comments made by counter-terrorism officials, as reported in the news.

The most commonly cited source of information on the mental health of the foreign fighters is Weenink’s article “Behavioral Problems and Disorders among Radicals in Police Files.”<sup>132</sup> Calling into question the consensus on the “normality” of most terrorists,<sup>133</sup> Weenink searched the files of the Dutch National Police “for information indicating that these jihadists have been diagnosed with a disorder or disability (conduct disorder, personality disorder, mental illness, cognitive disability), as well as for signs of problem behaviour.”<sup>134</sup> In the end, he reports that 6 percent of his sample of 140 Dutch fighters had been diagnosed with a

126 Schmid and Tinnes, “Foreign (Terrorist) Fighters with IS,” and Coolsaet, “Facing the Fourth Foreign Fighter Wave”

127 Schmid and Tinnes, “Foreign (Terrorist) Fighters with IS,” p. 36.

128 Jahangir Arasli E., Archipelago SYRAQ. *Jihadist Foreign Fighters from A to Z. 200 Essential Facts You Need to Know about Jihadist Expeditionary Warfare in the Middle East* (Baku: Teknur, 2015); quoted in Schmid and Tinnes, “Foreign (Terrorist) Fighters with IS,” p. 36.

129 For example, Andrew Silke, “Cheshire-cat Logic: The Recurring Theme of Terrorist Abnormality in Psychological Research,” *Psychology, Crime and Law* 5, No. 1 (1998); Jeff Victoroff, “The Mind of the Terrorist: A Review and Critique of Psychological Approaches,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 49, No. 1 (2005); Paul Gill, John Horgan and Paige Deckert, “Bombing Alone: Tracing the Motivations and Antecedent Behaviors of Lone-Actor Terrorists,” *Journal of Forensic Sciences* 59, No. 2 (2014); Emily Corner and Paul Gill, “Is There a Nexus Between Terrorist Involvement and Mental Health in the Age of the Islamic State?” *CTC Sentinel* 10, No. 1 (2017).

130 Coolsaet, “Facing the Fourth Foreign Fighter Wave” pp. 21-37.

131 *Ibid.*, p. 36.

132 Weenink, “Behavioral Problems and Disorders among Radicals in Police Files.”

133 For example, Silke, “Cheshire-cat Logic”; Victoroff, “The Mind of the Terrorist.”

134 Weenink, “Behavioral Problems and Disorders among Radicals in Police Files,” p. 19.



mental health problem, and 46 percent of the sample had a history of “problem behaviour,” with 14 percent falling into his category of “serious problem behaviour.”<sup>135</sup> These findings lead him to call for renewed and serious attention to the nexus between mental health issues and the process of radicalisation.<sup>136</sup>

His conception of “problem behaviour,” however, is very broad and its utility as an indicator of psychological disorder is questionable. “We consider backgrounds to be more problematic,” he says, “if a subject’s relations with family and friends are unstable, if he or she did not finish school, is unable to find employment, is homeless, etc.”<sup>137</sup> He defines cases of serious problem behaviour as entailing “persistent serious criminality” and/or “mental impairment, disorder, and illness,” but in the absence of “a diagnosis.”<sup>138</sup> The source of his information are notations made by police officers in the subject’s files. The notations are diverse and cursory, and made by individuals without appropriate professional qualifications. Therefore, the reliability and validity of the data are open to serious question.

Bakker and de Bont,<sup>139</sup> using an unspecified but purposefully “narrower definition” of psychological problems than Weenink, conclude that only 2 percent of their sample of 370 Dutch and Belgian foreign fighters had some sort of psychological disorder before traveling, and this includes “feeble-mindedness, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, schizophrenia, and claustrophobia.”<sup>140</sup> Given the breadth of these criteria, this figure is extraordinarily low.

The Norwegian Police report on foreign fighters repeatedly suggest the fighters likely have higher levels of psychological problems. It admits, however, that the recorded data indicates that the “distribution of mental problems [is] no more prominent among the individuals in the study (21%) than what would be expected in a control group drawn from a comparable segment of the general population.”<sup>141</sup>

After noting the complexity of the nexus of mental health disorders and militancy, Marone and Vidino report that among the 125 Italian fighters they examined “only one individual appears to have had a known history of psychological disorders at the moment of departure.”<sup>142</sup>

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135 Ibid., pp. 19-21 and pp. 24-25.

136 Ibid., pp. 24, 28.

137 Ibid., pp. 19.

138 Ibid., p. 21.

139 Bakker and de Bont, “Behavioral Problems and Disorders among Radicals in Police Files.”

140 Ibid., p. 844.

141 Norwegian Police, “What background do individuals who frequent extreme Islamist environments in Norway have prior to their radicalisations?” p. 8.

142 Marone and Vidino, “Destination Jihad: Italy’s Foreign Fighters,” p. 23.

Relying on the notations made by police officers once again, Weenink reports the following in his second study of 319 fighters:

In 230 subjects (72%), no mental health problems are reported, in 48 cases (15%) there was some indication for mental health problems, and in 41 cases (13%) they were clearly present. Out of the 89 individuals with reported mental health problems 56 had received some form of professional treatment (34 in the group where mental health problems are clearly present, and 22 in the group with some indication of mental health problems).<sup>143</sup>

The overall 28 percent rate for these fighters differs little, he admits, from the European base rate of 27 percent (as provided by the World Health Organization).<sup>144</sup> Nevertheless, he proceeds to breakdown the nature of the disorders reported – again by the police and without the help of mental health professionals – in ways he thinks indicate that “mental health problems are likely overrepresented among travellers.”<sup>145</sup> His reasoning is interesting and is open to question, but it is too complex to report here.

Contrary to expectations, then, given the comments of Schmid and Tinnes, and Coolsaet, the data on the mental health issues of Western foreign fighters is inadequate,<sup>146</sup> and there are insufficient grounds for jettisoning the existing consensus on the “normality” of most terrorists, including Western jihadist foreign fighters.<sup>147</sup> We need more and better data, especially from clinical interviews with aspiring, convicted, and returning jihadists.

## Role of Ideology and Religion

Few aspects of the debate over the motivations of Western foreign fighters is as contentious as the discussion of the relative significance of ideology and religion.<sup>148</sup> In most studies of

<sup>143</sup> Weenink, “Adversity, Criminality, and Mental Health Problems in Jihadis in Dutch Police Files.” p. 136.

<sup>144</sup> He notes, however, that a report by the National Institute for Public Health and the Environment puts the Dutch rate at 22 percent.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 136.

<sup>146</sup> Van San’s examination of the lives of eight converts to Islam in Belgium and the Netherlands who became foreign fighters illustrates this well. The four young women she discusses all came from troubled backgrounds, struggling with problems related to the divorce of their parents, addiction, domestic violence, and sexual abuse. None of the four men had similar issues, other than one having multiple failed marriages. In fact, she makes a point of noting that two of the male converts came from “harmonious” families. In their cases, the actual conversions, and the much later turn to extremism, does not appear to be rooted in any mental health issues (van San, “Lost Souls Searching for Answers? Belgian and Dutch Converts Joining the Islamic State”).

<sup>147</sup> Corner and Gill, “Is There a Nexus Between Terrorist Involvement and Mental Health in the Age of the Islamic State?”

<sup>148</sup> For example, Mark Juergensmeyer, “Religion as a Cause of Terrorism,” in Louise Richardson. Ed., *The Roots of Terrorism*. (New York: Routledge, 2005); Anne Aly and Jason-Leigh Striegler, “Examining the Role of Religion in Radicalization to Violent Islamist Extremism,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* Vol. 35 No.

foreign fighters, the issue is resolved implicitly by simply stressing the role played by other factors, either social psychological or socioeconomic.<sup>149</sup> Nevertheless, two of the thirty-four studies addressed here clearly argue that the role of religion in motivating the foreign fighters is minimal.<sup>150</sup> Five other studies appear to support this approach, but with varying degrees of ambiguity.<sup>151</sup> Alternatively, four studies point to the primary role of religious motivations,<sup>152</sup> and two others provide some ambiguous support for this view.<sup>153</sup>

Quite characteristically, Bergema and van San state “... the majority of jihadist fighters in [our] sample had an (folk) Islamic upbringing. Yet most did not actively practice Islam throughout their lives and showed a significant increase in religious devotion in the months prior to their departure.”<sup>154</sup> This seemingly neutral, descriptive statement is open to two conflicting interpretations, depending on where the conceptual emphasis falls in interpreting the findings. Many researchers think this situation is indicative of the relative insignificance of religion as a motivation for becoming a foreign fighter, because “real” religion assumedly involves a life-long practice. Religion is understood to be part of the general fabric of life, and is largely seen a positive force in the world – characterised by charity, self-sacrifice, and peacefulness. The late and intense religiosity of the nascent foreign fighters, with its violent proclivities, is seen as an aberration. It is not indicative of true religiosity. Rather it involves the manipulation of religious ideas and emotions to serve other ends – largely political and egoistic.

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12 (2012); Jeffrey M. Bale, “Denying the Link between Islamist Ideology and Jihadist Terrorism: ‘Political Correctness’ and the Understanding of Counterterrorism,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* Vol. 7 No. 5 (2013); James Khalil, “Radical Beliefs and Violent Actions Are Not Synonymous: How to Place the Key Disjuncture Between Attitudes and Behaviors at the Heart of Our Research into Political Violence,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* Vol. 37 (2014); Graeme Wood, “What ISIS Really Wants,” *The Atlantic* (March 2015). Available at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/03/what-isis-really-wants/384980/>; Marc Sageman, *Misunderstanding Terrorism*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017); Lorne L. Dawson, “Discounting Religion in the Explanation of Homegrown Terrorism: A Critique,” in James R. Lewis, ed., *Cambridge Companion to Religion and Terrorism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Lorne L. Dawson, “Debating the Role of Religion in the Motivation of Religious Terrorism,” *Nordic Journal of Religion and Society* Vol. 31 No. 2 (2018); Larsen Jeppe Fuglsang, “The Role of Religion in Islamist Radicalisation Processes,” *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, first online publication 05 May, 2020.

149 For example, Weggemans et al., “Who Are They and Why Do They Go?”; Bakker and Grol, “Motives and Considerations of Potential Foreign Fighters from the Netherlands”; Gustafsson and Ranstorp, “Swedish Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq.”

150 Coolsaet, “Facing the Fourth Foreign Fighter Wave”; El-Said and Barrett, “Enhancing the Understanding of the Foreign Terrorist Fighters Phenomenon in Syria.”

151 Linkekilde et al., “Who Goes, Why, and With What Effects: The Problem of Foreign Fighters from Europe”; Hellmuth, “Of Alienation, Association, and Adventure”; Bakker and de Bont, “Belgian and Dutch Jihadist Foreign Fighters (2012-2015)”; Gustafsson and Ranstorp, “Swedish Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq”; and Bergema and van San, “Waves of the Black Banner.”

152 Nilsson, “Foreign Fighters and the Radicalization of Local Jihad.”; Marone, “Italy’s Jihadists in the Syrian Civil War”; Dawson and Amarasingam, “Talking to Foreign Fighters.”; Amarasingam and Dawson, “‘I Left to be Closer to Allah’: Learning about Foreign Fighters from Family and Friends.”

153 Schmid and Tinnes, “Foreign (Terrorist) Fighters with IS”; Meleagrou-Hitchens et al., “The Travellers: American Jihadist in Syria and Iraq.”

154 Bergema and van San, “Waves of the Black Banner.” p. 21.

This interpretive approach involves implicitly calling on a modern Western conception of religious normalcy to make sense of the motivations of Western jihadist terrorist and foreign fighters. Religion, from this point of view, is largely a private matter and apolitical. This is the dominant understanding in the secular societies of the West. The sudden turn of the jihadists to a more intense and demanding religiosity marks their rejection of this model – as they clearly and repeatedly declare. Recognising this situation, some commentators alternatively argue that the commonly observed sharp increase in religiosity before departing is one of the most important clues to the motivations of most of the foreign fighters. In principle, and empirically, there is nothing about the newness or relative brevity of this upsurge in religiosity that weighs against its authenticity or its evidentiary value. On the contrary, the relationship between this behaviour and the departure for Syria and Iraq is more direct than that posited for other variables. Religiosity alone is not explanatorily adequate, any more than socioeconomic push factors. Both explanations lack the requisite specificity. The reiterated religious declarations of the foreign fighters point, however, as several researchers insist, to the primacy of religiosity in a complex and comprehensive account of the motivations of many of the Western jihadist foreign fighters.

### *Studies that Minimise the Role of Religiosity*

As indicated, Coolsaet differentiates between two cohorts of Western foreign fighters. He thinks what they have in common is more important than their differences.

‘No future’ is the essence of the youth subculture that drives the majority of Syria travellers from the West. The explanation for their decision is found not in how they think, but in how they feel. Going to Syria is an escape from an everyday life seemingly without prospects. Vulnerability, frustration, perceptions of inequity, and a feeling that by traveling to Syria they have nothing to lose and everything to gain, are common traits among both groups. Religion is not of the essence. ...Religion has systematically decreased as a driver of terrorism as the waves of foreign fighters succeed one another.<sup>155</sup>

This reading of the situation has attracted the attention of others, and some support.<sup>156</sup> In the main, Coolsaet’s argument rests on media reports of the views of various European officials with roles in counter-terrorism, supplemented with statements from a few ISIS defectors. The grounds for the views expressed by the public officials he cites from Belgium, the Netherlands, and France are unknown.

<sup>155</sup> Coolsaet, “Facing the Fourth Foreign Fighter Wave,” p. 3.

<sup>156</sup> For example, Schmid and Tinnes, “Foreign (Terrorist) Fighters with IS,” – citing an earlier version of the paper; Bakker and de Bont, “Belgian and Dutch Jihadist Foreign Fighters (2012-2015)”; Gustafsson and Ranstorp, “Swedish Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq.”

Hamed el-Said and Richard Barrett's study also clearly declares the minimal relevance of religious motivations.

FTFs [Foreign Terrorist Fighters] leave their country of residence for different reasons. Push and pull factors intertwine in different ways according to the individual and the internal and external environment each one faces. While this survey suggests that economic factors have become more important ... Religious belief seems to have played a minimal role in the motivation of this FTF sample.

In the next paragraph, they add:

Unresolved conflicts that include inter-communal violence appear to be one of the strongest magnets for FTFs. A sense of identity with – and desire to help – co-religionists who are perceived as victimised and mistreated by other groups has developed into a sense of obligation to act in defence of one's group. ... For some, this sense of brotherhood was reinforced by a sense of religious obligation.<sup>157</sup>

The dissonance of these two statements passes without comment.

If the defence of “co-religionists” is one of the strongest reasons for becoming a foreign fighter, it is hard to understand how religion has little relevance. At a later juncture el-Said and Barrett repeat the point claiming that “almost 40 per cent of the sample stated that their motivations to go to Syria arose from an obligation to defend their fellow Sunnis,” and this “confirms that many Muslim youth ... perceive the conflict in Syria in community more than in religious terms.”<sup>158</sup>

Few sociologists of religion, or adherents of the major religious traditions, would accept drawing such a blithe distinction between religion and community. Religions are inherently communal and ethical endeavours.<sup>159</sup> They are preoccupied with providing solidarity and exercising social control. They provide integrated frameworks of personal, social, and human identity.<sup>160</sup> This is why these young Muslims feel “an obligation” to defend other Muslims. Why are el-Said and Barrett asserting that the concern for community, in some abstract sense, detached from its religious referent, is the real motive for becoming foreign fighters?

<sup>157</sup> El-Said and Barrett, “Enhancing the Understanding of the Foreign Terrorist Fighters Phenomenon in Syria,” p. 3.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid., p. 35.

<sup>159</sup> Lorne L. Dawson and Joel Thiessen, *The Sociology of Religion: A Canadian Perspective* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 60-62.

<sup>160</sup> Hans Mol, *Identity and the Sacred* (New York: Free Press, 1976).

Citing Sageman, the authors speak of the “moral outrage” of an “in-group” in the face of attacks from an “out-group”, and its role in facilitating their mobilisation to violence.<sup>161</sup> In this instance, however, the salient distinction between in-groups and out-groups is their shared religiosity, and not their ethnicity or political convictions. The social dynamics involved, distinguishing the saved from the damned, the pure from the impure, are intrinsic to the functioning of religion.<sup>162</sup>

Surveying the existing research reports on foreign fighters and the demographic and socioeconomic information available for their sample of forty-three fighters, el-Said and Barrett argue that “it is the lack of a more general opportunity for betterment” that most influences the decision to become a foreign fighter,<sup>163</sup> and not ideology. Combining a number of pertinent factors, they conclude:

In fact, only a small number of those interviewed seemed to have strong religious beliefs, and very few come from extremely religious family backgrounds. Interestingly, most of those who claimed an ideological motivation are religious novices, only starting to pray and go to the mosque after the 2011 Arab spring had taken off, a phase that they describe as the *sahwa* (awakening). Yet, the majority of FTFs in this sample felt a duty to go to Syria in order to defend what they perceived as their in-group.<sup>164</sup>

Such a statement prompts a number of questions. How was the lack of “strong religious beliefs” measured? The measurement of religiosity is a complicated and controversial matter in both the sociology and psychology of religion. Yet there is no information or specific data in the report, even though they used a standardised questionnaire. Why is it pertinent that few of the fighters came from extremely religious families? Is this a known measure of the strength of an individual’s religiosity? Most followers of new religious movements in the West also come from secular family backgrounds.<sup>165</sup> Does this mean that their conversions are *eo ipso* not genuine? Why is a religious awakening any less authentic and consequential because it is recent, especially when it is the variable with the most direct and strong correlation with leaving, and putting one’s life at risk? Satisfying underlying identity needs is rarely

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<sup>161</sup> El-Said and Barrett, “Enhancing the Understanding of the Foreign Terrorist Fighters Phenomenon in Syria,” pp. 35-36.

<sup>162</sup> Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. Trans. By Karen E. Fields. (New York: The Free Press, 1995 [1912]); Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*. Trans. By Ephraim Fischhoff. (Boston: Beacon, 1963 [1922]); Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966); Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Anchor, 1967).

<sup>163</sup> El-Said and Barrett, “Enhancing the Understanding of the Foreign Terrorist Fighters Phenomenon in Syria,” p. 31.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

<sup>165</sup> Lorne L. Dawson, *Comprehending Cults: The Sociology of New Religious Movements*. 2nd ed. (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 86-88.

seen as sufficient grounds for discounting the political grievances of terrorists, so why are the religious declarations of terrorists treated with greater scepticism?

Similar problems arise when el-Said and Barrett present further data about the role of ideology. “When asked about the role of ‘jihad’ in influencing their decision to travel to Syria,” they note, “only 15 (35%) of the sample stated that it was ‘extremely important,’ and one stated it was ‘very important.’”<sup>166</sup> In footnote 85, however, they note that only twenty-six of the forty-three individuals interviewed answered this question. Sixteen of twenty-six individuals, then, said it was very important (i.e., 61.5 percent of those who responded). In this context, the reference to 35 percent of the sample is misleading. More importantly, why did only twenty-six of forty-three individuals (60 percent of the sample) answer the question? El-Said and Barrett are silent on this point.

Their sample is small, it indiscriminately mixes data for Western and non-Western foreign fighters, and the response rate to key questions is low. All of this is troubling. In addition, how much credence can we put in the responses of imprisoned fighters? As Wood scathingly states in his critique of their study:

If you cop to an ideological motivation - “I went to Syria because Islam requires me to fight to defend and expand the caliphate” – you are more or less promising to be violent again. You may as well be begging your government to fit you for a monogrammed orange jumpsuit, and custom-fit manacles, because you will be eating prison food for a very long time.<sup>167</sup>

In general, the authors apply an unrealistic standard in their assessment of the religious knowledge of the captured foreign fighters, and hence their ideological motivation. “Very few seemed aware,” they observe, “of the conditions and stipulations of Jihad in Islam.”<sup>168</sup> Instead, as one fighter stated, they rely on an “intuitive” grasp of the concept. The authors treat this comment as evidence that the fighters did not really know why they had gone to Syria. Yet reliance on an intuitive or tacit grasp of religious knowledge is characteristic of lived religious traditions.<sup>169</sup> Lebovich comments:

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<sup>166</sup> El-Said and Barrett, “Enhancing the Understanding of the Foreign Terrorist Fighters Phenomenon in Syria,” p. 35.

<sup>167</sup> Graeme Wood, “What We Still Don’t Know About the Islamic State’s Foreign Fighters,” *The Atlantic* (August 19, 2017), p. 4. Available at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/08/isis-foreign-fighters/537279/>

<sup>168</sup> El-Said and Barrett, “Enhancing the Understanding of the Foreign Terrorist Fighters Phenomenon in Syria,” p. 35.

<sup>169</sup> Dawson, “Trying to Make Sense of Homegrown Terrorist Radicalization: The Case of the Toronto 18,” in Paul Bramadat and Lorne Dawson, eds., *Religious Radicalization and Securitization in Canada and Beyond* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), pp. 84-85; Meredith B. McGuire, *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

The relative weakness of someone's knowledge of Shariah does not necessarily say much about how religious they are or want to be. For one thing, a depth of knowledge of the Shariah is not particularly common for observant Muslims, and it is in many ways a construct of outsiders to think that it should be.<sup>170</sup>

Woods observes that a "U.S. Marine can be a patriot, and a fanatical one at that, and not be able to quote a single sentence of the Constitution,"<sup>171</sup> and as Dawson concludes, faulty theology is not a reliable indicator of degree of religiosity or the salience of religion in someone's life.<sup>172</sup>

The discussion of the motivational role of religion is somewhat more ambiguous in several studies that, overall, discount its significance. In their study of 370 Belgian and Dutch foreign fighters Bakker and de Bont simply summarise, and seemingly endorse, the low prospects reading of the push factors. They supplement this with highly general references to such personal needs as "a sense of belonging, fraternity and comradeship, respect, recognition, acceptance by a group, identity, adventure, heroism."<sup>173</sup> They also note that most of the fighters "showed signs of intensification of religious beliefs" prior to travelling,<sup>174</sup> and acknowledge that the rapid ascent of ISIS led many fighters to want to help establish the caliphate.<sup>175</sup> ISIS's apocalyptic vision held some appeal as well.<sup>176</sup> They stress, however, that it is difficult to assess the role of religion, of seeing jihad as a religious duty, in influencing the decision to leave.<sup>177</sup>

Gustafsson and Ranstorp concentrate on the socioeconomic factors that might be fostering radicalisation.<sup>178</sup> In one of the few instances where they address the role of ideology, they dismiss it as "a veneer to legitimize actions of foreign fighters."<sup>179</sup> Yet two anomalous passages stand out in their report.

First, in addressing the activities of Swedish foreign fighters in the conflict areas they provide two quotes from postings to Facebook forums by fighters – the only two direct quotes from fighters in the report. The second of these passages sings the praises of the Islamic

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170 Andrew Lebovich, "How 'religious' are ISIS fighters? The relationship between religious literacy and religious motivation," *Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World, Brookings Institute* (2016), p. 2. Available at: [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Andrew-Lebovich\\_FINAL-2.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Andrew-Lebovich_FINAL-2.pdf).

171 Wood, "What We Still Don't Know About the Islamic State's Foreign Fighters," p. 5.

172 Dawson, "Discounting Religion in the Explanation of Homegrown Terrorism: A Critique," pp. 39-40.

173 Bakker and de Bont, "Belgian and Dutch Jihadist Foreign Fighters (2012-2015)." p. 846.

174 *Ibid.*, p. 842.

175 *Ibid.*, p. 846.

176 *Ibid.*, p. 847.

177 *Ibid.*, p. 846.

178 Gustafsson and Ranstorp, "Swedish Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq."

179 *Ibid.*, p. 67.



State and condemns other Muslims for living a debased existence in the West.<sup>180</sup> The passage is fervently religious, and seems to provide insight into the motivations for fleeing Europe and embracing ISIS, but it passes without comment from the authors. Second, they later suggest that one of the reasons why Swedish foreign fighters may be coming disproportionately from the “exposed areas” of Sweden is the concentration of “people coming from Muslim-majority countries” and the “previous experiences with Salafism and violent extremism” in these areas.<sup>181</sup> In other words, they call attention to the presence of religio-cultural-ideological influences in the communities that may help to explain why only a relatively small number of the Muslims in the “exposed areas” actually decide to travel to Syria or Iraq. Ideology, then, keeps slipping back into the analysis, if only in response to the specificity problem.

### *Studies Attributing Greater Significance to Religiosity*

Four of the thirty-four studies point to the primary role of religious motivations in becoming a foreign fighter. All do so on the basis of qualitative research and case studies. Nilsson did interviews with eight jihadist foreign fighters from Sweden.<sup>182</sup> Four of the jihadists interviewed were involved in the conflicts in Afghanistan and Bosnia, while the other four fought in Syria. He traces the change in perspectives about jihadism between these two cohorts of fighters. In doing so, he repeatedly calls attention to the role of religious beliefs, practises, and commitments in the fighters’ conceptions of their actions.

The focus of the four earlier foreign fighters was on creating a local state where Muslims could “institutionalize the conservative Salafi way of life.”<sup>183</sup> They fought to secure the free public expression of their religiosity, and the politics of doing so was secondary. The later fighters in Syria were more ideological in their approach, advocating for the global fight against all “those who want democracy.” As Nilsson stresses, however, the underlying rationale for both groups was fighting all “who oppose hakimiyah – the rule of God.”<sup>184</sup> For both groups, recruitment was driven by a deep sympathy for the plight of other Muslims in the zones of conflict, but the resolve of recruits to the war in Syria was stiffened by “arguments about the global jihad being a religious duty.”<sup>185</sup>

In describing this shift in views, Nilsson makes several comments that highlight the fusion of religious and political sensibilities in the lives and worldviews of these fighters. There is “increasing dominance,” for example, “of the ideal of fighting to the end as a normal way of

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180 Ibid., p. 96.

181 Ibid., p. 105.

182 Nilsson, “Foreign Fighters and the Radicalization of Local Jihad.”

183 Ibid., p. 348.

184 Ibid., p. 348.

185 Ibid., p. 350-351.

life rather than seeing jihad as a time-limited experience for a local purpose.”<sup>186</sup> Accordingly, he notes, a new emphasis is placed on “the principle of *al walaa wal baraa* – friendship with Muslims and enmity toward unbelievers,” as well as the obligation to undertake *hijrah* – to migrate to a Muslim land.<sup>187</sup> The focus is on creating a more meaningful human existence and not just the defeat of a specific enemy.<sup>188</sup>

A heightened concern with *niyah*, right intent when fighting, and a grander religio-political objective (i.e., a globally triumphant caliphate), is reflected in the increasing use of the principle of *takfir* to justify killing fellow Muslims.<sup>189</sup> As Nilsson comments, “Jihadists do not only engage in fighting but also have time to discuss religious matters – especially those important for the legitimacy of their activities.”<sup>190</sup> Does this mean they are merely using religion as a post hoc justification for political objectives? Nonbelievers, as the jihadists well know, have little interest in, or respect for, such religious justifications. The intended audience, beyond the jihadists themselves, is the *ummah* (global Muslim community). The political action is part of a larger religious exercise to reform the faith of the *ummah*, and as such, it is an intrinsically religious activity, and not just political.

Marone provides some more indirect evidence of the primacy of religion in his case study of four Italian foreign fighters – two young men and two young women. He struggles to find the right interpretive option to make sense of his cases, because the data available falls short of allowing any clear interpretations. It is clear, however, that none of the cases fit a stock version of the “low prospects” approach. “None suffered conditions of poverty, social exclusion, low educational attainment, family problems, criminality, or mental illness,”<sup>191</sup> and none “experienced a sudden crisis that led to loss or ‘unfreezing’ of social attachments and everyday commitments.”<sup>192</sup> They all underwent quite dramatic and publically proclaimed conversion experiences (including those from Muslim families), however, which transformed their lives, and eventually led to their radicalisation. The strength of their religious convictions shines through the narratives of each of their pathways to jihadism. One of the women even converted her whole family to a strict form of Islam.

Dawson and Amarasingam<sup>193</sup> note that the twenty fighters in their sample were quite well educated overall and often described their backgrounds as “comfortable.” In discussing why they undertook *hijrah*, none mentioned reacting to experiences of economic or social marginalisation. Alternatively,

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186 *Ibid.*, p. 351.

187 *Ibid.*, p. 352.

188 *Ibid.*, p. 353.

189 *Ibid.*, p. 353-354.

190 *Ibid.*, p. 353.

191 Marone, “Italy’s Jihadists in the Syrian Civil War,” pp. 20-21.

192 *Ibid.*, p. 27.

193 Dawson and Amarasingam, “Talking to Foreign Fighters.”

most of the fighters interviewed provided justifications for being a foreign fighter that were largely moral and religious in character, more than explicitly political, although there is little real separation between these things in the minds of these individuals. The interviewees fairly consistently indicated that leaving to fight was as much about rejecting the immoral nature of life in the West than anything else.<sup>194</sup>

In social media dialogues, often over many months, the fighters discussed everything from the most mundane aspects of their lives to theology, and the conversations were saturated with Salafi-jihadist religio-political discourse. The fighters, the authors comment, recurrently focused on the positive benefits of being a mujahid, rather than the limitations of their life before becoming one. “Consequently,” they conclude, “their religiosity ... is pivotal to understanding their motivations, no matter how murky our attempts, as outsiders, to grasp these motivations.”<sup>195</sup>

The role of religiosity is more muted in a second study by these researchers,<sup>196</sup> drawing on insights into the lives of thirty additional foreign fighters from interviews with their family members and friends. Nevertheless, religious ideology plays a significant role in their conception of why these individuals chose to become jihadists. This choice is the result of a coalescence of several identifiable factors, starting with an emerging adult identity crisis and ending with the fusion of their personal identity with a new group identity and cause. This social psychological process is facilitated by believing in a (religious) ideology and participating in a fantasy (literally) of world change.<sup>197</sup>

## Conclusion

On balance, what have we learned about the backgrounds and motivations of the Western foreign fighters who travelled to Syria and Iraq? The results of this comparative analysis largely confirm views specialists have been expressing for some time. It is important, all the same, to provide a more comprehensive delineation, while documenting some of the strengths and limitations of the data.

- The vast majority of Western foreign fighters were young men from Muslim immigrant families. The approximate average age of the fighters was 26 years, a bit higher than expected.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid., p. 201.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid., p. 206..

<sup>196</sup> Amarasingam and Dawson, “I Left to be Closer to Allah’.”

<sup>197</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

- About 18 percent of those who left were women and they were overall much younger, with an approximate average age of 21 years.
- The majority were single, but a sizable number, at least a third, were married and some had children.
- It is unclear how many were converts to Islam, since the numbers available from the few studies reporting data are widely variant. The data does support the working assumption in the field that converts were disproportionately inclined to radicalise and leave to fight. Conservatively, about 15 percent of the foreign fighters are converts and it appears the women travellers are markedly more likely to be converts.
- It is clear that most of the fighters were citizens of the countries in which they were living before leaving, something in the order of 80 percent. However, contrary to some expectations, the discrepancies in the data from country to country (e.g., Sweden and Italy) suggest that we cannot use this as an indicator of the relative integration of these young men and women.
- In Europe, the majority of the fighters came from the lower socioeconomic ranks of society, and as some observers have commented, they had “low prospects.” They had lower levels of educational attainment and experienced higher levels of unemployment. The data, however, is inadequate and variable, and it does not seem to apply to foreign fighters coming from North America and to a lesser extent the United Kingdom. Moreover, in almost every country for which there is data, a sizable portion of the fighters does not conform to this “low prospects” model of the typical Western foreign fighter. In fact, the best current data on the relationship of unemployment and the outflow of foreign fighters, from two large quantitative studies, is conflicting. These studies also reinforce the view that the issue is one of relative deprivation and not actual poverty. In most cases where there is significant data on levels of education and employment it remains difficult to discern the causal relationship with radicalisation. In some cases, these factors may be antecedents of radicalisation, and in others consequences, and the data does not allow us to make a differentiation. The strong emphasis placed on low prospects in the interpretation of the motivations of European foreign fighters lacks sufficient specificity. Other key factors, shared by most foreign fighters, seem to play an instrumental role in differentiating leavers from non-leavers.
- The evidence supports the nexus hypothesised between crime and terrorism to some extent, but the data available is limited and rather opaque. It is unclear to what extent, and in what ways, there is a continuum between involvement in criminality and terrorism.
- The data on the relative mental health of the Western foreign fighters is highly inconsistent and inadequate. To date, however, and contrary to some expectations, studies seem to support the existing consensus on the relative “normality” of most terrorists, including foreign fighters.

- Much of the existing work on the significance of ideology, and in particular religion, as a motivation for becoming a foreign fighter is inconclusive. The majority view seems to be that socioeconomic factors are more important, but there are serious problems with the theoretical assumptions, methods, and data of the few studies that actually argue that the role of religion is minimal. Other studies, drawing on primary data of a more substantial kind, point to the primacy of “religiosity” (i.e., sincere religious commitment) in motivating many, if not most, Western foreign fighters. The samples used in these studies, however, are small and not necessarily representative, and the qualitative data is more suggestive than definitive.

With these findings, we are moving from informed hunches to firmer conclusions. As is equally clear, however, the precise role of socio-economic marginalisation, past criminality, and religiosity in precipitating the radicalisation of jihadists remains problematic in significant ways. In the end, while acknowledging the formidable hurdles standing in the way of acquiring this data, the cumulative results are rather disappointing. This judgement is admittedly subjective, and it calls to mind the classic conundrum: Is the glass half full or half empty? Nonetheless, it is regrettable that we do not have access to more coordinated research, across national lines, designed to produce larger, more methodologically sound, comparable, and incisive sets of data. To make headway on many of the most important issues, we particularly need more primary data - from interviews with ex-, returning, and emerging jihadists - to refine the insights and bolster the conclusions.

## Appendix 1

### Empirical Studies Examined (by year of publication)

Author(s)	Title	First Published	Sample Size	Primary Type of Data
Ahmed, Reem & Daniela PISOIU	Foreign Fighters: An Overview of Existing Research and a Comparative Study of British & German Foreign Fighters	2014	54	Quantitative (open sources)
Weggemans, Daan, Edwin Bakker & Peter Grol	Who Are They and Why Do they Go? The Radicalisation and Preparatory Processes of Dutch Jihadist Foreign Fighters	2014	5	Qualitative Case Studies (interviews with associates)
Bakker, Edwin & Peter Grol	Motives and Considerations of Potential Foreign Fighters from the Netherlands	2015	6	Qualitative (interviews with associates & some potential foreign fighters)
Duyvesteyn, Isabelle & Bram Peeters	Fickle Foreign Fighters? A Cross-Case Analysis of Seven Muslim Foreign Fighter Mobilisations (1980-2015)	2015	NA	Quantitative (open sources)
Nilsson, Marco	Foreign Fighters and the Radicalization of Local jihad: Interview Evidence from Swedish Jihadists	2015	8	Qualitative (interviews)
Schmid, Alex & Judith Tinnes	Foreign (Terrorist) Fighters with IS: A European Perspective	2015	NA	Overview & analysis of existing research
The Soufan Group	Foreign Fighters: An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq	2015	NA	Quantitative (open sources)
van San, Marion	Lost Souls Searching for Answers? Belgian and Dutch Converts Joining the Islamic State	2015	17	Qualitative (ethnographic study of family backgrounds)

Vidino, Lorenzo & Seamus Hughes	ISIS in America: From Retweets to Raqqa	2015	71	Quantitative (open sources)
Weenink, Anton W.	Behavioral Problems and Disorders among Radicals in Police Files	2015	140	Quantitative (police files)
Bakker, Edwin & Roel de Bont	Belgian and Dutch Jihadist Foreign Fighters (2012-2015): Characteristics, Motivations, and Roles in the War in Syria and Iraq	2016	370	Quantitative (open sources)
Benmelech, Efraim & Esteban F. Klor	What Explains the Flow of Foreign Fighters to ISIS?	2016	NA	Quantitative (open sources)
Coolsaet, Rik	Facing the Fourth Foreign Fighter Wave: What Drives Europeans to Syria, and to Islamic State? Insights from the Belgian Case	2016	NA	Overview & analysis of existing research
Hellmuth, Dorle	Of Alienation, Association, and Adventure: Why German Fighters Join ISIL	2016	677	Quantitative (open sources)
Lindekilde, Lasse, Preben Bertelsen, & Michael Stohl	Who Goes, Why, and With What Effects: The Problem of Foreign Fighters from Europe	2016	22	Qualitative (open sources & some interviews)
Marone, Francesco	Italy's Jihadists in the Syrian Civil War	2016	4	Qualitative Case Studies (open sources)
Norwegian Police Security Service	"What background do individuals who frequent extreme Islamist environments in Norway have prior to their radicalisations?"	2016	137	Quantitative (open sources & police data)
Verwimp, Philip	Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq and the Socio-Economic Environment They Faced at Home: A Comparison of European Countries	2016	NA	Quantitative (open sources)
Barrett, Richard (The Soufan Center)	Beyond the Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Returnees	2017	NA	Quantitative (open sources)

Boncio, Alessandro	Italian Foreign Terrorist Fighters: A Quantitative Analysis of Radicalization Risk Factors	2017	55	Quantitative (open source)
Bergema, Reiner & Marion van San	Waves of the Black Banner: An Exploratory Study on the Dutch Jihadist Foreign Fighter Continent in Syria and Iraq	2017	217	Quantitative (open source)
Dawson, Lorne L. & Amarnath Amarasingam	Talking to Foreign Fighters: Insights into the Motivations for <i>Hijrah</i> to Syria and Iraq	2017	20	Qualitative (online interviews)
el-Said, Hamed & Richard Barrett	Enhancing the Understanding of the Foreign Terrorist Fighters Phenomenon in Syria	2017	43	Quantitative (questionnaire)
Gustafsson, Linus & Magnus Ranstorp	Swedish Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq: An Analysis of Open-Source Intelligence and Statistical Data	2017	267	Quantitative (open sources & gov't data)
Reynolds, Sean C. & Mohammed M. Hafez	Social Network Analysis of German Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq	2017	99	Quantitative (open sources)
Stuart, Hannah	Islamist Terrorism: Analysis of Offences and Attacks in the UK (1998-2015)	2017	NA	Quantitative (open sources)
Amarasingam, Amarnath & Lorne L. Dawson	'I Left to be Closer to Allah': Learning about Foreign Fighters from Family and Friends	2018	30	Qualitative (interviews with associates)
Meleagrou-Hitchens, Alexander, Seamus Hughes, & Bennett Clifford	The Travellers: American Jihadist in Syria and Iraq	2018	64	Quantitative (open sources)
Pokalova, Elena	Driving Factors behind Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq	2018	33,815	Quantitative (open sources)
Rostami, Amir, Joakim Sturup, Hernan Mondani, Pia Thevselius, Jerzy Sarnecki, & Chistofer Edling	The Swedish <i>Mujahideen</i> : An Exploratory Study of 41 Swedish Foreign Fighters Deceased in Iraq and Syria	2018	41	Quantitative (open sources & gov't data)



Cook, Joana & Gina Vale	From Daesh to 'Diaspora' II: The Challenges Posed by Women and Minors after the Fall of the Caliphate	2019	44,279-52,808	Quantitative (open sources)
Marone, Francesco & Lorenzo Vidino	Destination Jihad: Italy's Foreign Fighters	2019	125	Quantitative (gov't data)
Weenink, Anton W.	Adversity, Criminality, and Mental Health Problems in Jihadis in Dutch Police Files	2019	319	Quantitative (police data)
Wilner, Alex	Canadian Terrorists by the Numbers: An Assessment of Canadians Joining and Supporting Terrorist Groups	2019	95	Quantitative (open sources)

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## About the Author

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