# Talking to Foreign Fighters: Insights into the Motivations for Hijrah to Syria and Iraq

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**Abstract**

Little of the discussion of foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq is informed by primary data derived from talking with the foreign fighters. This article reports some initial findings from interviews with twenty foreign fighters in Syria. The findings are compared with three other recent studies of European foreign fighters, and aspiring fighters, based on some primary data. While those studies emphasize the role of low social and economic prospects in motivating the choice to go, this study found little evidence of such factors, and alternatively argues more attention should be given to existential concerns and the role of religiosity. Consideration is also given to the methodological challenges posed by using of terrorists' accounts of their motivations.

 

## Introduction

The conflict in Syria and Iraq has inspired an unprecedented surge of foreign fighters, drawn from the Arab and Western worlds, to oppose the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, and, for many, replace it with an Islamic State. This phenomenon has become a dominant security concern and considerable effort is being made to track and understand what is happening, and stop the migration of new fighters. Most of these fighters have come from countries in the Middle East (e.g., Tunisia, Jordan, Saudi Arabia), but a surprisingly large number have also come from Europe, the United Kingdom (UK), Canada, Australia, and the United States (i.e., something in the order of 25,000−30,000 overall and probably 4,000−5,000 from the West).[1] Large numbers have come from France, Germany and the UK in particular, and disproportionately (relative to their populations) from Belgium, the Netherlands, Denmark, and Sweden.[2] By late 2015 many more were coming from Russia and Central Asia as well.

Why is this happening? Much has been written, but little which is informed by primary data, by the voices of the fighters themselves. This article presents some initial findings from one of the few studies seeking primary data through interviews with fighters in Syria and Iraq, the families, friends and associates of foreign fighters, and other online supporters of jihadism, including several individuals who want to be foreign fighters.[3]

From mid-2014 to the time of writing, dialogues were initiated with more than eighty individuals. This resulted in twenty-five interviews with foreign fighters, forty interviews with the family members and friends of foreign fighters, focus groups with ten additional mothers of foreign fighters, and five interviews with other online supporters of jihadism and aspiring foreign fighters. These interviews were largely face-to-face, but those with fighters in Syria and Iraq

took the form of extended interactions on social media and text messaging applications, such as KIK messenger and Telegram.[4] The young people travelling to fight in Syria and Iraq today come from a generation which is accustomed to communicating with their friends, family, and others through social media. They maintained online profiles on a wide range of social media platforms and when they arrived in the war zone many of them simply kept these accounts alive and stayed connected. It appears the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), and other jihadist groups in Syria, soon became aware of this fact and decided to capitalize on it. Everyone has adapted to this new state of affairs so quickly that we tend to forget how novel it is, and hence the originality of exploiting these new channels of communication for research. For this article, we do not examine interview data from family and friends, and limit the analysis to interviews with twenty foreign fighters. The interviews focus on the backgrounds of the foreign fighters, their process of radicalization, and their experiences and perceptions. For legal and ethical reasons, no information was collected on operational aspects of their activities with ISIS, Jabhat al-Nusra (now, Jabhat Fatah al-Sham), Ahrar al-Sham, and other smaller jihadi and rebel groups.

These initial findings are set in the interpretive context provided by three other recent studies of foreign fighters that are likewise based on some primary data or at least provide some of the most detailed information on specific fighters and aspiring fighters.[5] These studies conclude that those leaving appear to be mainly marginalized individuals with limited economic and social prospects, who are experiencing various kinds of frustration in their lives.[6] One study goes so far as to argue that foreign fighters are drawn from a "no future subculture" amongst emerging adults in Europe and elsewhere.[7] Proponents of this view downplay the significance of religion as a motivational factor, favoring instead a more exclusive focus on social, economic,

 

and psychological "push" factors. The findings reported here converge with those of these other studies in terms of how people radicalize and become foreign fighters. However, they tend to diverge with regard to why they go. In the twenty interviews analyzed no one indicated, directly or indirectly, that forms of socio-economic marginalization played a significant role in their motivation to become a foreign fighter. Moreover, the interactions with these individuals were so heavily mediated by religious discourse it seems implausible to suggest that religiosity (i.e., a sincere religious commitment, no matter how ill-informed or unorthodox) is not a primary motivator for their actions. Religion provides the dominant frame these foreign fighters use to interpret almost every aspect of their lives, and this reality should be given due interpretive weight.

In making these arguments much depends on how the accounts provided by the terrorists are interpreted. In the first two studies used to contextualize our findings the mode of presentation is largely descriptive or phenomenological. We have sought to be similarly descriptive in the initial presentation of our findings. Nevertheless, the accounts these foreign fighters provide of their behavior and motivations are inherently problematic, because there are plausible reasons to suspect they may be systematically distorted, in both conscious and unconscious ways.[8] But as is the case with all the studies examined here, we think it is important to hear and record the voices of the foreign fighters, no matter what suspicions we may have of what they say. Their statements should play a significant role in the analysis of their motivations.

In saying this, we are taking into consideration an additional theoretical concern, one which is analytically distinct from the problematic nature of terrorist accounts, but intertwined with it. Studies of radicalization in general, and jihadist foreign fighters in particular, are

 

frequently punctuated with passages assigning a casual role to the pursuit of greater purpose, meaning, identity and belonging in explaining why some individuals radicalize to violence or become foreign fighters. In their excellent analysis of the profile of seventy-one individuals recently charged with various ISIS-related offences in the United States, for example, Lorenzo Vidino and Seamus Hughes quite typically state: "a search for belonging, meaning, and/or identity appears to be a crucial motivator for many Americans (and other Westerners) who embrace ISIS's ideology."[9] Equally typically, they say little more. No further explanation of what this statement means is provided. In most instances it appears that these statements are acting as place holders, pointing to relevant work yet to be done. But generic statements about a quest for a greater sense of purpose may be serving another function as well. In many instances they are being introduced to compensate for the insufficient specificity of the other causal claims being made about why some people engage in radicalization leading to violence. Various social and economic factors, for example, are sometimes hypothesized as being relevant to the rise of terrorism. This is true of the studies examined here. But the impact of these factors invariably far exceeds the few individuals who decide to engage in terrorism. In other words, the push factors identified are not specific enough to differentiate who is likely to radicalize towards violence or leave to fight elsewhere. This limitation is commonly known, but not always fully acknowledged. In this context, rather generic references to a need for greater meaning and purpose often are used to fill the explanatory gap created by this lack of specificity. Considering the repeated affirmations of the positive benefits of being jihadists in the interviews we have undertaken, we argue that more attention and significance should be given to investigating this search for greater meaning as a motivation for their *hijrah* (religiously justified migration) to

 

Syria and Iraq. We need to move beyond general acknowledgements of the role this quest plays and dedicate more attention to understanding the "pull" factors involved in radicalization — to the influence of ideology/religion and deeper existential issues in their decision to become foreign fighters.

It might be argued that this is particularly the case with religious terrorism, given the explicit introduction of a transcendental source of meaning and purpose. But, ironically, many scholars of terrorism display a deep skepticism about the veracity of the religious claims of these terrorists, adding another complication to the investigation and interpretation of this possible motivation for terrorism.[10] This complication will be scrutinized briefly in the conclusion as well.

**Comparative Analysis of Findings from Recent Studies of Foreign Fighters**

Numerous reports have appeared in the last few years on aspects of the foreign fighter issue. But these reports rely overwhelmingly on open sources and are largely descriptive in nature. Three recent reports are more substantive and original, and two incorporate new primary data. These reports also aim to provide a better understanding of the possible motivations of foreign fighters and wannabe foreign fighters. As such they provide the most immediate and logical comparative context for analyzing our findings. In order of their publication, these studies are: Daan 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 (4) 2014; Edwin Bakker and Peter Grol, "Motives and Considerations of Potential Foreign Fighters from the Netherlands," International Centre for Counter Terrorism (ICCT) Policy Brief, July 2015; and Rik Coolsaet, "Facing the Fourth Foreign Fighter Wave:

 

What Drives Europeans to Syria, and to Islamic State? Insights from the Belgian Case," Egmont—Royal Institute for International Relations, March 2016.

*Dutch Foreign Fighters: "Low Prospects" and the Search for "Purpose"*

The two studies by the Dutch researchers report on early and important efforts to develop detailed case studies of individuals. In the first study, Weggemans, Bakker, and Grol develop the biographies of five Dutch jihadist foreign fighters based on interviews "with eighteen persons who had been in the direct environment of the five [individuals] during their radicalization phase and during the time they were preparing their travel to Syria".[11] This material is presented in the form of two composite life stories. The key observations derived from this exercise were also shared with a focus group of twenty-five "frontline professionals and policymakers" dealing with radicalization and the foreign fighter issue. Their reactions are folded into the analysis offered, but given the small sample of foreign fighters under consideration the discussion remains very descriptive and the authors are leery of making generalizations. The second study by Bakker and Grol is based on semi-structured interviews with twenty people who were in close proximity to six individuals who at some point had entertained travelling to fight in Syria. Interviews were also conducted with four of the six potential leavers. Both of these studies relied on relevant information available in the mass media as well.

The results from these two similar studies are not presented in a uniform manner, but a critical synthesis of their conclusions reveals the following findings of note. The leavers and the non-leavers came predominantly from Islamic immigrant families, but some also came from ethnically Dutch families. The explicit age of everyone is not mentioned in each case covered by the studies, but it is clear they are mainly individuals in their early twenties. As a whole, both

 

sets of individuals come from lower or lower middle class backgrounds and they attained modest levels of education. They have also been raised, it is said, in "relatively bad neighbourhoods".[12] More specifically it is stated that the non-leavers have been "exposed to crime and drug abuse (in their immediate circle)".[13] With regard to the leavers it was noted that they have likely experienced "strong frustrations… in the years before they left about their own societal position … or that of their ethnic groups".[14] Going further, it is stated: "Among our research subjects we found feelings of apathy and lack of meaningfulness in their lives in the period before they left for Syria".[15] While for the non-leavers it is simply stated that most of them had "limited chances on the labour market and of a social career." In addition, it is noted that most of them "have few friends and/or limited contact with their families. Some of them can be classified as loners or lonely".[16] The study of leavers further notes that some of them had experienced personal losses and significant disappointments in their lives prior to radicalizing "such as loss of a loved one or experiencing difficulties at school or work and trouble with authorities".[17] No similar finding is reported in the case of the non-leavers.

Both studies suggest that prior to leaving for Syria or planning to do so most of the individuals became increasingly isolated from their past social networks, developed bonds with new networks involving those who shared and helped to reinforce their radical views, and they came, at least somewhat, under the influence of "charismatic persons" or "inspiring figures".[18] Similarly, it is noted that the leavers "showed an increased interest in religion in the period before they left for Syria".[19] The study of potential leavers makes no similar observation, but notes that several persons cited religious reasons as part of their motivations for thinking about going to Syria, referencing the "new beginning" associated with the establishment of the

 

caliphate by ISIS and the personal religious duty to emigrate to Syria and "help out Muslims in need".[20] Others, it is noted, were more concerned about helping relatives in Syria and moved by admiration for those battling against the Assad regime.

Finally, both reports allude to these youth seeking to participate in the Syrian conflict because it "seemed to provide them with a sense of purpose and fulfil their need to belong"[21], though the discussion of this point is rather muted and indirect.

In summary, a somewhat common impression is left about the motivations for joining the jihad, one which conforms with wider popular perceptions: most of the foreign fighters and aspiring foreign fighters are young people who have limited prospects, are relatively unhappy with what is happening in their lives, are looking for some greater meaning and sense of belonging, and are heavily influenced by the small groups they come into contact with as a result of their seeking some relief from their condition. This set of observations is helpful,[22] and it fits, in many respects, with the classic relative deprivation explanation of the motivations for becoming a radical or extremist.[23] In this instance we are dealing with people who are actually deprived to some degree, but it is really their perception of their situation that matters most. They perceive that they, and the groups they identify with, are more deprived than they should be, and that something should be done about it. There is also a sense that there should be more to life, in terms of meaning and purpose. This account points to an expanded sense of the social, psychological, and even moral forms of relative deprivation that people may experience, in addition to the more conventional economic and political forms of deprivation.[24] But we are dealing with an impression that is not framed with the precision needed to explore these theoretical possibilities.

 

*Belgian Foreign Fighters: "Youth Subculture of 'No Future'"*

If cast in terms of a simple dichotomy of the push and pull factors accounting for recruitment to social movements, the two Dutch studies primarily emphasize the push factors. In Rik Coolsaet's recent study of foreign fighters from Belgium, this emphasis is even more explicit. Coolsaet chastises radicalization studies after the Madrid and London homegrown terrorism bombings for being too preoccupied with tracing how individuals became terrorists at the expense of the emphasis in pre-9/11 terrorism research on the "wider circumstances and context" in which terrorism arises.[25] Insufficient attention has been given to the role of "a conducive or instigating environment".[26] He also argues that radicalization is "a more or less prolonged group process" of "socialisation into extremism." Much depends on understanding the group dynamics fostering strong loyalty to an in-group and estrangement from an out-group that is dehumanized.[27]

The latter point is sound, but in delineating his views Coolsaet may be setting an overly strong dichotomy between social processes and ideology. "Radicalisation is first and foremost," he asserts, "a socialization process in which group dynamics (kinship and friendship) are more important than ideology." In the process "of gathering extremism," he concludes, "for most of the individuals involved, it is not the narrative (i.e., the ideology) that eventually lures them into terrorism. There is moreover no path dependency between the acquisition of radical ideas and the actual turn to violence."[28] The research does indicate that merely holding radical beliefs is a poor indicator of the potential to actually engage in violent actions.[29] But an examination of the research literature also indicates,[30] as do our interviews with foreign fighters, that nothing would happen without the framing work done by ideology. Put simply, radical action depends on seeing

 

the world in new ways. Consequently, the Salafi-jihadist religiosity of these foreign fighters, their ideology, is paramount in interpreting their actions. Indeed, the individuals they choose to be friends with and the groups they consider to be authentic are colored by their religious outlook. Others are dismissed as sellouts and apostates. In other words, the religious ideology plays a central and constitutive role in their identity and their sense of purpose in life, and the very socialization processes by which they are radicalized. In the end, as Hafez and Mullins state: "It is not clear how one can disaggregate ideology from radical networks."[31]

Drawing on the influential views of the French sociologist and scholar of Islam Oliver Roy,[32] Coolsaet argues two things: (1) we need to look to "a specific, age-related set of personal motives" as "the driving force behind [the] decision to go to the Levant," and (2) "religion has systematically decreased as a driver of violence as the waves of foreign fighters unfolded".[33] Most specifically, he subscribes to Roy's notion that contemporary jihadism is rooted in a "'no future' youth subculture" and not religiosity per se. In Roy's view we are not witnessing "the radicalization of Islam" so much as "the Islamization of radicalism." 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."[34]

Coolsaet argues that "two groups of Europeans traveling to Syria can be distinguished." The first group 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".[35] As Coolsaet concludes: "For this group, 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 behavior, next to membership in street gangs, rioting, drug trafficking, and

delinquency".[36] The second group "is more fuzzy and is composed of individuals with widely varying personal, age-related motivations".[37] Referring to this 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.[38]

It is worth noting that Coolsaet does not present any direct evidence or primary data for this view. The limited citations are to a few brief autobiographic and biographic comments published in the news media, magazines, and academic journals. Elsewhere he warns against "the risk of excessive generalization" when relying on "statements by combatants." Quite rightly he observes that these "declarations might amount to nothing more than a discourse developed to make sense of and to justify their own behavior, rather than a truthful attempt to gauge the often complex motivations behind their decisions to voyage to a distant war zone".[39] But Coolsaet's cautionary comments apply to the sources of information he relies on as well: retrospective biographic and autobiographic statements made to journalists or academics. The problem is not limited to statements made by actual combatants.

Decades of research with the accounts provided by religious converts, for example, demonstrate that ex-members of religious cults and sects may seek to cast their actions as stemming from social and psychological forces beyond their control, and not their decisions per

se. This interpretation of their past actions allows them to avoid taking full responsibility for their actions in the face of familial and social condemnation of the groups they joined.[40] This situation is somewhat the obverse of the one postulated by Coolsaet. He suggests foreign fighters might be inclined to exaggerate the extent to which their radicalization was a conscious choice, or under their control, while ex-members of cults are incentivized to downplay their own volition in converting to a stigmatized group. In each case caution must be used in interpreting the data, but such primary data still warrants being given considerable significance in investigating what is happening and why (as Coolsaet's study otherwise demonstrates).

Similar concerns can be raised about the accounts undergirding all the studies discussed in this article. When researchers are dealing with highly controversial subjects, care must be taken in interpreting the significance of comments made by interviewees. When researchers appear to accept some statements as evidentiary, and to doubt others, a rationale must be provided. This interpretive issue is not addressed in the two studies of Dutch fighters and aspiring fighters, and Coolsaet's comments on this point are very limited. In these contexts, we can never be certain about the reliability of the claims made. But, for that very reason, a level methodological playing field must be maintained in the treatment of all the accounts used.

In the end Coolsaet unites the two groups of young European foreign fighters under one interpretation: "Going to Syria is an escape from a life seemingly without prospects".[41] This conclusion sounds similar to the ones reached by Weggemans, Bakker, and Grol, [42] and it is broadly in line with the reference to marginalized immigrant youth in much of the literature on radicalization in Europe.[43] The problem is, the description probably applies to a much wider swath of youth in Europe than the tiny handful who entertain becoming foreign fighters, let alone

engaging in terrorism. Thus the specificity problem looms large. None of the three studies, however, comments on this obvious limitation.

*The New Sample of Foreign Fighters: "The Promise of More"*

The comments below stem from the detailed analysis of twenty interviews with men fighting with ISIS, Jabhat al-Nusra (now, Jabhat Fatah al-Sham), Ahrar al-Sham as well as other jihadi and rebel groups active in Syria. The sample is small, but notably larger and more direct in nature than that accessed in the Dutch and Belgian studies. Still, caution must be exercised in making any generalizations, as will be discussed further below. Furthermore, as noted, we are keeping the analysis very descriptive or phenomenological in nature at this time.

Some of the most basic data derived from this initial sample of foreign fighters is as follows. All the interviewees were jihadists and all have done some fighting, though many were doing media work or simple guard duty when we communicated with them. With the exception of one man who seems to be at least middle aged or older, and two men who would not state their age, our fighters were in their twenties, with ages arranging from 22 to 28. Six are Canadians, three are American, and three are from the UK, and four from Europe. The others are from unspecified places in Africa (2), the Middle East (1), and India (1). Several were from mixed backgrounds, in terms of their ethnicity and nationality, and have lived some of their lives in the West and/or the home countries of at least one of their immigrant parents. The vast majority of the fighters we interacted with are from Muslim families, but there are five converts in this initial sample. Most of the sample are single, but several are married and a few have children; several refused to answer questions about their families. Curiously the majority of this initial sample are opposed to ISIS or *dawla* (the State). This may be an artefact of our sampling.

 

Several are members of Jabhat al-Nusra, though they often had been affiliated for a time with other groups or with ISIS. Many of the fighters who were not with ISIS were critical of the theological and the violent excesses of ISIS. In particular, ISIS was condemned for the promotion of *fitna,* or unnecessary conflict between Muslims. Several participants also indicated they objected to some of the ways in which ISIS was imposing *sharia* law.

More thematically, certain findings from this sample stand out which help to locate these fighters relative to the findings from the Dutch and Belgian studies.[44]

Both the converts and most of the Muslim youth in this sample say they either underwent their conversion or became much more religious, engaging in intensive study and practice of their faith, in their teenage years, with ages ranging from 14 to 18 years. Only one person says he became much more religious at a somewhat later point, after dropping out of his first year in university. In one way or another almost everyone dwelled on the significance of this youthful turn to religion in explaining their process of becoming foreign fighters. This aspect of their story usually emerged quite spontaneously and without much prompting. For example, an American convert fighting with ISIS explained:

> I shahada [converted] at 15.
>
> Where I lived there was no mosque or even no Muslims.
>
> All my brother interaction was online.
>
> I immediately practiced to the best of my abilities.

The conversion was prompted by the hypocrisy he saw around him, in his Protestant Christian world, and his confusion over all the different versions of the Bible and Christianity. He says:

> Where I'm from people are religious in public

 

> But at home use some vulgar [language] drink alcohol.
>
> Things like that.
>
> Was never confident with Christianity.
>
> Things never seemed to fit together.

As a Jabhat al-Nusra fighter from the U.K with a Muslim background told us:

> I was taught about the importance of Islam and Arabic which helped me through my life.
>
> During my life I always loved dawah [proselytizing] and telling people about Islam and it increased my faith. Living in the West harmed my religion as I was exposed to attractions of sins and life so naturally I went astray during my early teens

For this participant, when the promises of a "Western way of life" didn't produce happiness, he looked back on his own upbringing, and the traditions he grew up with. As he noted, "I got depressed and my life crashed." When asked why, he somewhat enigmatically said, "For chasing life and life running away."

In some instances, it is clear that even the initial turn to religion is fused with a partial process of radicalization. Speaking of his early childhood, for example, another British fighter with Jabhat al-Nusra, who was born Muslim, said:

> The zeal for jihad always struck me when I would sit in my room and read Qur'an with English translation. I would wonder how jihad was fought today. At the outbreak of 2011 war in Syria, the thinking of going began and brothers from town who had gone were an inspiration.

 

Another Muslim, originally from India and now fighting with Jabhat al-Nusra, said he first thought about jihad during the second Intifada, when he must have been quite young:

> Wanted to go to Palestine … All friends would talk about it…
>
> But was just talk …
>
> Someone referred me to milestones by sayyid qutb when i was in my teens
>
> …
>
> Read it …
>
> Studied more about jihad by al qaeda … Seemed legit …
>
> Wanted to join some group long ago … Didn't find any way …
>
> Allah brought us a mercy from himself in the form of Syrian civil war.
>
> [ellipses were in the original message]

Several of the interviewees are the only children in their families, and only one mentions a sibling radicalizing and also becoming a foreign fighter. Several state that their brothers and sisters were actively opposed to their decision. Most of their parents regret that they chose to go to Syria, and are unsympathetic to jihadism. But there was only one instance of a significant clash between a father and son that may have factored into the person's radicalization. Most still respect and care about their parents, while disparaging them as "coconuts" (i.e., brown on the outside and white on the inside).

About half the sample reports at least going to university and a third mentioned graduating with specific degrees. Many of these individuals only fully radicalized after they had finished their degrees. Several indicated that they enjoyed their studies, but most indicated that

 

they were discontent while in school because they felt the need for something more in their lives. One of the British fighters with Jabhat al-Nusra quoted above commented:

> Before this jihad, I like the idea of shahada. The idea of no accountability in the grave and on the day of judgment, but I wasn't ready to leave the confines of my life in UK. In 2011, it was announced that a local brother was Shaheed [martyr] in Syria – that's when it started. I started thinking and asking to myself – 'you know what, if he can do it, why can't I? He's in Jannah now while you are sitting here living a mundane life of simply university, work, making money'.

In other words, it was not so much that they had no life prospects, but rather that they were needed elsewhere, in the face of the injustices happening to Sunni Muslims in Syria. The ultimate goal is to reach heaven, and many of these fighters see a commitment to jihad and martyrdom, as opposed to worldly success, as what they were truly meant to do with their lives.

None of the sample indicated coming from familial situations of poverty or marginality. On the contrary, many said they had fairly happy and privileged, or at least comfortable, childhoods. In general, there was almost no discussion of the economic situation of their families. Several participants made a point of stating that something about the West didn't "fit" with their religiosity and that they started to feel increasingly out of place. Quite typically a Western convert stated things very succinctly:

> Family was average middle class.
>
> Nice neighborhood.
>
> Good friends.

 

Another fighter when asked about several aspects of his life in the UK stated:

> Life was good, I was happy with my friends
>
> and living a nice easy relaxing life
>
> but wanted jihad to give back to Allah,
>
> to prove myself to Allah that I can fight in his way.
>
> All my relationships allhamdulilaah wer (sic) good. no racism

When pressed to explain if he felt he had to escape a bad situation where he lived, one fighter took issue with media portrayals of why some people become foreign fighters:

> Firstly these people who say muslims who join are bored or looking for
>
> adventure are propagandists. Its kind of orientalism. They want to portray
>
> the guys who go to jihad like the same people who in the west go on
>
> killing rampages for no reason or because they are bored or psychos.
>
> Many muhajireen I know came with their wives and children. Some were
>
> about to get married …
>
> Some divorced their wives … Some left parents whom they loved
>
> the most … All this is strange …
>
> This is all for the sake of Allah.
>
> [ellipses in the original message]

Another fighter makes relevant comments when asked why aspiring foreign fighters seem to leave for Syria in clusters:

> We move in groups because
>
> your venturing into the unknown

 

> after having lived a life
>
> of ease, luxury and knowing
>
> your environment.

Reports of the religiousness of the parents vary widely, but about half of the group received some formal religious education as a child (i.e., Quranic studies and Islamic schooling). For a few the religious education in childhood was intensive and prolonged; this was true for fighters who grew up in Africa, the Middle East, and some cases in the West too.

Overall the findings conform with many of the conclusions reached in the research literature on the process of radicalization to violence.[45] The process started in early adolescence, it involved a small group of friends, and the internet and social media played a fairly prominent role. Several fighters specifically commented on the importance of the online lectures of Anwar al-Awlaki. One Western fighter stated:

> Our deen [way of life] is what Qur'an and Sunnah said along with our prominent scholars – Bukhari, Muslim, Ibn Taymiyyah and others. Alhamdullilah I was exposed to the right path. Jihad came naturally if you are true with your teachings. I really admired and still admire [Anwar al-Awlaki]. He was so good, strong argument and that's the reason he was killed. He was so influential, particularly to the young.

The decision to "go forth" to jihad was kept secret from most people, especially their parents. Some continued to deceive their parents even after arriving in Syria, saying they were working in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere. They commonly received assistance in preparing to go, and in actually travelling to Syria, from people already there or from other "brothers" in the

 

communities where they lived. This seemed to involve assistance from people they were not close with before deciding to go.

Several were inspired by the fact that others from their community had already left and many had become martyrs. They often were amongst the first individuals in their immediate groups to make *hijrah*, but in several cases they discuss how some others followed their lead. In most instances, once they were in Syria these friends found themselves dispersed in different groups or units of the same group, and their friendships were displaced by new bonds formed with other foreign fighters in Syria.

All, with some consistency, calmly reiterate their desire to achieve martyrdom, and celebrate the martyrdom of others. But they scrupulously asserted that their fate is in the hands of Allah. When asked why he had undertaken jihad, one person with the Islamic State typically said:

> We are motivated by our religion, by our Qur'an and Sunnah and we are not ashamed of that. We left the convenient world to establish khilafah on the path of Prophethood so I really don't see what is the issue with some hypocrites who cave down to the kuffar. We are not motivated by politics, wealth, the love of this world. We are willing to die as shuhada in the path of Allah and that is to establish shariah in the land of the khilafah. We have declared it clearly and loudly that Islam will dominate the world. We know this fact from the Sunnah and hadith of our Prophet, prayers be upon him.

When asked why he was in such a "rush" to attain Jannah (paradise) a British fighter said:

 

> The status of a Shaheed [martyr] is one of the highest known to attain. There is no death equivalent to the death of a matry (sic). The Prophet Muhammad pbuh tells us that this dunya is a prison for the believer and a paradise for the kaafir. I am anxious I want to know now if I've made to Jannah and avoided hellfire – jannah is the goal of practicing faith in dunya. Furthermore jihad is obligatory now as the muslim blood is being shed and the word of Allah or the religion of Allah has to be highest in land. I can't go thru punishment and questioning – im too scared of that – I have too many sins on the hands.

As indicated in the last quotation, most of the fighters interviewed provided justifications for being a foreign fighter that were largely moral and religious in character, more than explicitly political. Though 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. As one young man with Jabhat al-Nusra noted:

> [Islam] bans alcohol. Pornography. Over pricing. All these things. From adultery. And it has correct punishments. For instance, if someone rapes, they would be killed. Not get away after five years. And the Western regimes did a crusade on our faith and destroyed our empire. So now we are here to bring it back. We want to bring back the law of Allah, and destroy the evils of man their law. We want to defend the Muslims in their lands from the western armies and the governments that rule it. We don't

 

> call these governments Muslims because they have left islam when they decided to rule over it by [something] other than Islam.

Another fighter spoke more generally, as others did, about the Western "system" and its failings:

> We emigrated because we don't want to live in the system anymore. And the system is the western governments. Their democracy. They control what you think and say; what you care for. And they tell you what is good and bad, from the media that you read and watch to the things you learn at school from young because the school curriculum is from them. But we have our own way of life, which is called Islam. It is a complete way of life. It is a religion but also a governance. It has laws and ways in which you do everything from how you go to the toilet, drink water, and brush your teeth to how you worship Allah and how you run a business. It lets you see the world for what it is and keeps you away from harmful things in society.

The interactions we recorded are laced with comments about the need to be strict in observing the differences between true Muslims and others.

In contrast with the individuals discussed in the Dutch and Belgian studies, 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. The stress falls on engaging in actions mandated by

 

God, and ones that could easily demand they make the ultimate sacrifice. No one indicated, let alone explicitly stated, they were influenced by things that could readily be associated with "limited chances on the labour market and of a social career".[46] Admittedly, we did not initially ask a specific question about whether they were happy with their overall socio-economic situation before leaving for Syria. Instead we asked questions about their family background, which usually elicited information about their social economic status. But otherwise our questions about their process of radicalization were purposefully kept more open-ended, allowing the participants to set the terms of reference for describing what happened to them and why. "Lack of prospects," or some equivalent notion, however, has yet to emerge as a significant precursor to radicalization in the interviews we are doing, even though we are now being more directly attentive to this matter.

**Interpreting Terrorist Accounts**

Of course none of the interpretive differences sketched above are sharp and clear. The analyses offered in all of the recent studies, including this one, are largely descriptive. The statements made by the twenty foreign fighters are frequently brief, declarative, and perhaps too simplistic. In the end we do not question the sincerity of most of the claims made, and would argue that the sheer repetition of similar statements across the sample, in diverse conversational contexts, by individuals from different countries, and fighting with different groups, suggests some significance should be ascribed to what they are saying. But this view reflects our professional judgement based on listening to the overall nuance of the conversations with these individuals. The few quotations allowed by space limitations in this context fail to communicate an adequate sense of the overall flow of the discussions, which on the whole are quite relaxed and shift

 

quickly from comments on the most mundane aspects of life, past and present, to theological disputes, and declarative statements about the most serious life commitments.

But the methodological (i.e., interpretive) issues raised by dealing with such controversial accounts are complex and challenging, and in presenting our findings some understandable questions have been voiced about our approach. Several reasons have been stipulated for doubting the "evidentiary value" of the statements made by the fighters.[47] First, it has been noted that jihadi groups active in Syria and Iraq usually take phones away from new volunteers when they arrive, and only return them after the recruits have completed basic training and religious education. Second, they point out that the personal religious explanations offered for why they became foreign fighters align with the normative expectations of devote Muslims, and hence it is not surprising that they present their turn to terrorism as some kind of "an epiphany of God's will." Third, for both of these reasons, it is suggested, we should not expect the interviewees to discuss socio-economic factors because they have been trained to focus their attention elsewhere. In the end, it is argued that these social media interviews are evidence of the effective training program in dogma provided by jihadi groups, and maybe only that. The comment is indicative of a larger skepticism about the veracity of the claims made by terrorists, but especially religious terrorists.

We recognize the grounds for exercising caution in using the statements of jihadi fighters. People are inclined to remember, interpret, and present their past in ways that justify or reinforce their present commitments. This is doubly so when these current commitments are willfully at odds with pervasive norms of behavior prevalent in the societies in which they were born. Everyday life, history, the social sciences, and the law demonstrate that there is much potential

 

for inaccuracy and deception (including self-deception). But the situation is far more complicated than can be discussed adequately here,[48] and the question of whether the terrorists' responses merely reflect their religious training raises several interesting issues.

First, the suggestion confronts us with a chicken-and-egg conundrum. Did these individuals end up in jihadi religious education programs because of their prior religiosity, or are their accounts of their past religiosity merely a manifestation of their religious training in Syria? How could we determine which is more the case? Perhaps both possibilities are true? In any event, we find it highly unlikely that most of the people who have traveled to Syria and Iraq to wage jihad, and found themselves being indoctrinated, did not get there, at least in part, because of their religious commitments. The commitments may have been theologically flawed and incomplete, but they were probably sincere and obviously consequential. Once in Syria, in other words, they received training in the particulars of Islamic Law (Shari'a), as espoused by the group they joined, but not in the fundamentals of the Salafi-jihadist ideology.

Second, those inclined to think that our approach to the foreign fighter accounts is too naïve are, presumably, not proposing either that we and others should stop collecting primary data from foreign fighters, or that all the information derived from individuals who have undergone some religious training is categorically non-evidentiary. Both possible responses would be methodologically unjustified, and substantively counter-productive.

Third, in doing this research we have taken to heart another equally strong methodological imperative, one classically stated by the sociologist Herbert Blumer:

> …if [a] scholar wishes to understand the action of people it is necessary for him to see their objects [i.e., physical, social, and conceptual] as they see them. Failure to see their objects

 

> as they see them, or a substitution of his meanings of the objects for their meanings, is the gravest kind of error that the social scientist can commit. It leads to the setting up of a fictitious world. Simply put, people act towards things on the basis of the meaning that these things have for them, not on the basis of the meaning that these things have for the outside scholar. Yet we are confronted left and right with studies of human group life and of the behavior of people in which the scholar has made no attempt to find out how the people see what they are acting toward.[49]

As many scholars of terrorism have lamented,[50] work in the field has succumbed too often to this error. In part this is because it is so difficult to acquire the relevant primary data. But the very scarcity of such data provides even more impetus to the pursuit of it, and to systematically factoring it into our analyses.

Fourth, in our case, it cannot be assumed that everyone we spoke with underwent some kind of thorough program of indoctrination. Nine individuals in our sample were members of ISIS at the time they were interviewed, and three had briefly formerly been with ISIS, but there is no similar formal or comprehensive programs of religious training for new members in many of the other jihadist groups. The situation is quite varied and fluid, as reflected in the following comment from a member of Jabhat al-Nusra (now, Jabhat Fatah al-Sham):

> We do sharia course
>
> The content differs from isis.
>
> Sharia courses mostly focuses on danger of isis
>
> … Some haven't gone through it. Some do it
>
> Straight away others after a while.

 

It really depends about the leader of the group and

location

Thus the relevance of the possible distorting effect of systematic indoctrination cannot be assumed, it must be investigated and assessed on a case by case basis.

Fifth and more generally, we would argue that it is difficult to determine what bias is present in the accounts we collected and fairly differentiate between trustworthy and untrustworthy statements – except in the case of the most egregious distortions of well-established facts. Certainly, we are disinclined to make such a determination merely because the foreign fighters have been exposed to some religious education. Half of our sample, for example, report having received some kind of formal religious education in their childhood, and sometimes the training was prolonged and intensive. Following the logic of the critics, this fact should perhaps give us even further reason to doubt the veracity of the accounts they provide of their actions, and this would be true even if we could have interviewed them before they left for Syria. Most of the individuals we interviewed also claimed to have undergone some kind of important religious awakening, one similar to a conversion experience. Clearly this additional infusion of religious teachings into their lives would provide additional cause for concern and skepticism. By this logic, however, almost everything that most jihadists could tell us about their own experience would be significantly discounted, no matter when we interviewed them as they progressed along the path to becoming a foreign fighter.

Sixth, the approach also implies that their accounts might somehow be more credible if they were secured before they became religious, since it is the religious indoctrination that is problematic. Yet what empirical grounds do we have for such an assumption? Why would pre-

 

religious, or perhaps post-religious, accounts of their behavior or reasoning be intrinsically less subject to distortion? We are not doubting the role of religion in influencing how they see things. On the contrary we think the interviews show this to be the case, but following Blumer we are interested in understanding how this is the case and recognizing that if this is how they interpret their past, and their reality overall, then we have no a priori grounds for dismissing its relevance. All too often in the study of religious terrorism the primary mechanism for excluding accounts as evidentiary is the presence of religion, and not empirical proof that the accounts in question are actually distorted in identifiable and significant ways.

Seventh, depending on one's perspective, there may be grounds for raising similar suspicions about the veracity of all kinds of firsthand accounts. Similar suspicions could be directed at the accounts provided by someone who has undergone intensive military or police training, or been inculcated into a deviant subculture (e.g., organized crime groups, drug culture, computer hacking). Yet social scientists commonly collect and use the accounts of such individuals. Are the interpretive issues at stake somehow more pressing and consequential in the case of those who have undergone some form of religious education or transformation of identity? Perhaps, but this is a matter to be substantively investigated and debated, and not decided on other grounds.

To reiterate, the interpretive approach taken by the critics more or less eliminates giving any credence to what the people being studied say, because of the religious language used, with the consequence of either ignoring their motivational claims altogether or prioritizing the views of outside observers. Neither option is appealing to us. In the initial stages of this work we prefer to prioritize how the subjects under study understand and define their situation, without

 

necessarily accepting their claims at face value. Clearly caution should be exercised in believing all they say, and efforts should be made to seek other kinds of information to assess the plausibility of their claims. In part this is why we have completed interviews with the family members and friends of foreign fighters, though so far it has not been possible to interview the actual families and friends of the twenty fighters discussed here. With more time and resources, it might be possible to secure a better match between the two sets of interviews. In the interim, we see little methodological or substantive value in assuming all jihadi fighters are being deceptive, or that they are somehow specifically less capable of discerning the social and psychological forces at play in their lives. More broadly, we resist the notion, which is implicit in the doubt cast on assertions of religious motivations, that religious motivational claims are somehow intrinsically less plausible than political, cultural, social, or even psychological ones.

**Concluding Remarks**

Are we confronting, in Roy's terms, the Islamization of radicalism rather than the radicalization of Islam? From the limited primary data examined here it would be difficult to tell. Much more information is needed, and most importantly far more extensive and comprehensive first-hand accounts from those who have radicalized. The contrast between our findings and those of the Dutch and Belgian studies may reflect differences in the social and economic conditions experienced by Muslim immigrants in different localities. As commonly argued, for example, the lot of North American Muslims is seemingly much better than in many European contexts, so there is less reason to postulate a generation-wide experience of demoralization in the face of "low prospects." But the sample sizes in studies with primary data are too small to draw any strong inferences. Moreover, our sample is not limited to people from North America,

 

Europe, or even the West, and the correlation between marginalization or lack of integration and radicalization is not as robust as is commonly assumed.[51] A recent survey of Muslims in Western Europe, for example, calls into question the correlation between radicalization, holding fundamentalist religious beliefs, and low socio-economic status. The researchers found "that on average, respondents from more prosperous families are more likely to practice Islam in a way closely associated with fundamentalism – they are more conservative regarding gender roles, seek the universal application of Islamic law, and embrace attitudes associated with a more politicized Islam. … Additionally, respondents espousing this belief set are more supportive of the use of violence to 'defend their faith'."[52]

As noted, most studies of radicalization, including those examined here, make an almost inevitable and conspicuous reference to the quest for greater purpose in life in trying to explain why anyone becomes a foreign fighter.[53] Yet the discussion of what this means is truncated and vague. When such statements are made, however, there is an implicit bias in the way matters are framed. It is implied that the lives of the individuals who become foreign fighters must have been lacking in meaning, and in some fairly straightforward way, before they turned to extremism. Consequently, the process of radicalizing is interpreted as being compensatory in some way. The compensation comes, it seems, from their commitment to an ideology and a new community of believers. But, it is sensible to ask, why would becoming more religious be a satisfying and convincing compensation for the lack of material prospects in life? A plausible answer might be formulated by calling on research from the sociology, psychology, and history of religion. But this kind of work has yet to be done in the context of terrorism studies, and there is insufficient primary data to discern if the compensatory assumption is plausible.

 

Our research, thus far at least, tips the interpretive bias to the relative importance of pull factors and possible compensation for other factors in their lives — to the promise of something more in life than material comfort and ordinary domesticity. In the social media interviews with jihadi foreign fighters there is persistently more, both in terms of what is said and the tone of the conversation, about the positive reasons for being a *mujahid*, than the material limitations of life before becoming one. Admittedly, the responses may reflect their state of mind at the time of our interviews, since they were fully engaged jihadists. Their perceptions of the past may be more clouded than normal by the psychological and social compulsions of their circumstances. They may be emulating the implicit conversion narrative promoted by the Salafi-jihadist worldview.[54] But, to some degree, their comments also might be providing more generalizable insights into how and why they radicalized.

This alternative interpretational orientation entails taking a more forthright approach to the intensely religious discourse of the foreign fighters; to the ways they use religious ideas to comprehensively frame their experiences. It is apparent that the lives of these men 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.[55]

Simon Cottee and Keith Hayward suggest "that terrorist activity may provide an outlet for basic existential desires that cannot find expression through legitimate channels".[56] The foreign fighters we are talking with say things that resonate with this idea. It is difficult, however, to pinpoint and study (from a social science perspective) the presence and influence of an existential aspect of extremism. In postulating motivations, it is easier to focus on the more

 

conspicuous things people may lack in their lives, and such factors lend themselves more readily to proposed remedies and policy recommendations. But the specificity problem looms large when one dwells on the more obvious and socio-economic push factors for radicalization. In the end, we are not suggesting researchers choose between socio-economic push and existential and ideological pull factors. On the contrary, we are simply arguing that it is more parsimonious and defensible to follow this lead in the primary data, and in the process acquire a better grasp of the operation of ideology in this decision.[57]

 

[1] Soufan Group, "Foreign Fighters: An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq," 2015. Available at: http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/TSG_ForeignFightersUpdate1.pdf; Alex Schmid and Judith Tinnes, "Foreign (Terrorist) Fighters with IS: A European Perspective." International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, The Hague, 2015. DOI: 10.19165/2015.1.08.

[2] Peter R. Neumann, "Foreign Fighters Total in Syria /Iraq Now Exceeds 20,000; Surpasses Afghanistan Conflict in the 1980s," International Centre for the study of Radicalization and Political Violence (ICSR), King's College London, 26 January, 2015. Available at: http://icsr.info/2015/01/foreign-fighter-total-syriairaq-now-exceeds-20000-surpasses-afghanistan-conlict-1980s/.

[3] This research was supported by a grant awarded by the Canada Safety and Security Program to The Canadian Network for Research on Terrorism, Security, and Society (www.tsas.ca). We wish to acknowledge how instrumental their support was to this research.

[4] Some of the limitations of using social media for the interviews are discussed elsewhere: Lorne L. Dawson, Amarnath Amarasingam, and Alexandra Bain, "Talking to Foreign Fighters: Socio-Economic Push versus Existential Pull Factors," TSAS Working Paper No. 16-14, July 2016, pp. 15-16, available at www.tsas.ca .

[5] If space permitted consideration also would be given to Lorenzo Vidino and Seamus Hughes,"ISIS in America: From Retweets to Raqqa Program on Extremism," Program on Extremism, George Washington University (December 2015).

[6] Daan 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 (4) 2014: 100-110; Edwin Bakker and Peter Grol, "Motives and Considerations of Potential Foreign Fighters from the Netherlands," International Centre for Counter Terrorism (ICCT) Policy Brief (July 2015).

[7] Rik Coolsaet, "Facing the Fourth Foreign Fighter Wave: What Drives Europeans to Syria, and to Islamic State? Insights from the Belgian Case," Egmont—Royal Institute for International Relations (March 2016).

[8] With regard to the problems that accounts pose in the study of terrorism, see John Horgan, *The Psychology of Terrorism*, 1st ed., New York: Routledge, 2005, pp. 87-90. More generally, however, there is a substantial, though sporadic literature, on this issue; see, for example, Marvin B. Scott and Stanford M. Lyman, "Accounts," *American Sociological* Review 33, 1968: 46-62; Charles Antaki, ed., *Analysing Everyday Explanation: A Case Book of Methods*, London: Sage, 1988; John McClure, *Explanations, Accounts, and Illusions: A Critical Analysis*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.

[9] Vidino and Hughes, 16.

[10] We have in mind such influential terrorism scholars as Marc Sageman, Andrew Silke, Clark McCauley, and others, as opposed to Scot Atran, Alessandro Orsini, and others (see Lorne L. Dawson, "Trying to Make Sense of Home-Grown 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. 64-91 and

 

Lorne L. Dawson, "Discounting Religion in the Explanation of Homegrown Terrorism: A Critique," in James R. Lewis, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Religious Terrorism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming.
[11] Weggemans et al, 101.
[12] Weggamans et al., 107.
[13] Bakker and Grol, 13.
[14] Weggemans et al., 107.
[15] Weggemans et al., 108.
[16] Bakker and Grol, 13.
[17] Weggemans et al,, 108.
[18] Weggemans et al., 108; Bakker and Grol, 13.
[19] Weggemans et al., 108.
[20] Bakker and Grol, 14.
[21] Weggemans et al., 108.
[22] This perspective is in line with the results of Edwin Bakker's earlier analysis in "Characteristics of Jihadi Terrorists in Europe (2001-2009)," in *Jihadi Terrorism and the Radicalisation Challenge: European and American Experiences*, edited by Rik Coolsaet, 131-144, Farnham UK: Ashgate.

[23] Ted Robert Gurr, *Why Men Rebel*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970; Iain Walker and Heather J. Smith, eds., *Relative Deprivation: Specification, Development, and Integration*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

[24] Charles Y. Glock, "The Role of Deprivation in the Origin and Evolution of Religious Groups," in *Religion and Social Conflict*, edited by R. Lee and M. Marty, 24-36, New York: Oxford University Press, 1964.
[25] Coolsaet, 12-13.
[26] Coolsaet, 13.
[27] Coolsaet, 12.
[28] Coolsaet, 12.
[29] Jamie Bartlett and Carl Miller, "The Edge of Violence: Towards Telling the Difference Between Violent and Non-violent Radicalization." *Terrorism and Political Violence* 24 (1) 2012: 1-21; 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* 37 2014: 198-211; Clark R. McCauley and Sophia Moshalenko, "Toward a Profile of Lone Wolf Terrorists: What Moves an Individual from Radical Opinion to Radical Action," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 26 (1) 2014: 69-85.

[30] For example, Quintan Wiktorowicz, *Radical Islam Rising: Muslim Extremism in the West*. Lanham MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005; Scott Atran, *Talking to the Enemy: Religion, Brotherhood, and the (Un)Making of Terrorists*. New York: HarperCollins, 2010; Jonathan Leader Maynard, "Rethinking the Role of Ideology in Mass Atrocities," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 26 (5): 821-841.

 

[31] Mohammed Hafez and Creighton Mullins, "The Radicalization Puzzle: A Theoretical Synthesis of Empirical Approaches to Homegrown Extremism," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 38, 2015: 958-975, p. 966.
[32] Olivier Roy, "What is the driving force behind jihadist terrorism? A scientific perspective on the causes/circumstances of joining the scene." Speech delivered to BKA Autumn Conference (Bundeskriminalamt [German Federal Police]), 18-19 November 2015, Fiesole, Italy. Available at: www.bka.de/nn_256982/.../herbsttagung2015RoyAbstract.pdf
[33] Coolsaet, 20.
[34] Olivier Roy, "Al Qaeda in the West as a Youth Movement: The Power of a Narrative." Centre for European Policy Studies, Policy Brief 2008. Available at http://www.ceps.eu; Roy, 2015; cited in Coolsaet, 26.
[35] Coolsaet, 21-22.
[36] Coolsaet, 23.
[37] Coolsaet, 21.
[38] Coolsaet, 24.
[39] Coolsaet, 21.
[40] See Lorne L. Dawson, *Comprehending Cults: The Sociology of New Religious Movements*. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2nd ed., 2006.
[41] Coolsaet, 17.
[42] Coolsaet draws a connection to information on the Dutch foreign fighter contingent, noting the similarities, on page 36 of his report.
[43] See, for example, Basia Spalek, "Disconnection and Exclusion: Pathways to Radicalisation?" in *Islamic Political Radicalism: A European Perspective*, edited by Tahir Abbas, 192-206, Edinburg: University of Edinburgh Press, 2007; Jonathan Githens-Mazer, "Mobilization, Recruitment, Violence and the Street: Radical Violent takfiri Islamism in Early Twenty-First-Century Britain," in *The New Extremism in 21st Century Britain*, edited by Roger Eatwell and Matthew J. Goodwin, 47-66, London: Routledge, 2010; Jocelyne Cesari, "Muslims in Europe and the Risk of Radicalism," in *Jihadi Terrorism and the Radicalisation Challenge in Europe*, edited by Rik Coolsaet. 97-107, Aldershot, Hampshire: Ashgate, 2011.
[44] The quotations provided are in their original form, with all the typos, abbreviations, and other mistakes included. They display the typically truncated form of most social media exchanges. Given space limitations, it must be stressed that the quotations are merely illustrative.
[45] Hafez and Mullins 2015.
[46] Bakker and Grol, 13.
[47] We are referring to comments made when the data was presented at a conference and an anonymous reviewer of this article.
[48] See, for example, Horgan 2005, pp. 87-90 and Lorne L. Dawson, "Accounting for Accounts: How Should Sociologists Treat Conversion Stories?" *International Journal of Comparative Religion and Philosophy* 1 (2), 1995: 51-68, and more briefly Dawson, 2006, pp. 110-111.
[49] Herbert Blumer, *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1969, pp. 50-51.
[50] For example, John Horgan, "The Case for Firsthand Research," in Andrew Silke, ed., *Research on Terrorism: Trends, Achievements, and Failures*, London : Routledge, 2004, pp. 30-

56, and Andrew Silke, "Research On Terrorism: A Review of the Impact of 9/11 and the Global War on Terrorism," in Hsinchun Chen, Edna Reid, Joshua Sinai, and Andrew Silke, eds., *Terrorism Informatics: Knowledge Management and Data Mining for Homeland Security*, New York: Springer, 2008, pp. 27-50.

[51] Sadeq Rahimi and Raissa Graumans, "Reconsidering the Relationship between Integration and Radicalization." *Journal for Deradicalization* Winter15/16 No. 5 2015: 28-62.

[52] Natalie Delia Deckard and David Jacobson, "The Prosperous Hardliner: Affluence, Fundamentalism, and Radicalization in Western European Muslim Communities," *Social Compass* 62 (3), 2015: 412-433.

[53] See Weggemans et al., 108; Vidino and Hughes, 16.

[54] James A Beckford, "Accounting for Conversion," *British Journal of Sociology* 29, 1978: 249-262; Peter G. Stromberg, *Language and Self-Transformation: A Study of the Christian Conversion Narrative*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

[55] Orsini 2009.

[56] Simon Cottee and Keith Hayward, "Terrorist (E)motives: The Existential Attractions of Terrorism," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 34 (12) 2011: 963-986, see page 963; , Megan K. McBride, "The Logic of Terrorism: Existential Anxiety, the Search for Meaning, and Terrorist Ideologies," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 23 2011: 560-581.

[57] Martha Crenshaw, "The Subjective Reality of the Terrorists: Ideological and Psychological Factors in Terrorism," in *Current Perspectives on International Terrorism*, edited by Robert O. Slater and Michael Stohl, 12-46, London: Macmillan Press, 1988; Alesandro Orsini, *Anatomy of the Red Brigades: The Religious Mindset of Modern Terrorists.* Translated by Sarah J. Nodes. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009; Jonathan Leader Maynard, "Rethinking the Role of Ideology in Mass Atrocities," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 26 (5) 2014: 821-841.

 