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INSIGHTS FROM THE BELGIAN CASE

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What Drives Europeans to Syria, and to Islamic State?

Insights from the Belgian Case

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March 2016

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The first edition of this Egmont Paper was released exactly one year ago. Its aim was to explore the wider context that could help explain the decision of thousands of mostly young European volunteers to journey to a faraway war theatre in the Levant.

This Egmont Paper is a thoroughly revised, updated and expanded version. Several new features have been introduced. It proposes, firstly, a more systematic attempt at understanding why people with different social backgrounds feel attracted by Islamic State (IS). Two categories of Syria travellers (a more general term than ‘foreign fighters’) can be identified. The first group comprises pre-existing kinship and friendship gangs. For them, joining IS is merely a shift to another form of deviant behaviour, next to membership of street gangs, rioting, drug trafficking and juvenile delinquency. But it adds a thrilling, larger-than-life dimension to their way of life – transforming them from delinquents without a future into *mujahedeen* with a cause.

Whereas most individuals of the first group are known to the police, this is not necessarily the case for the second group. Before suddenly deciding to leave for Syria, the youngsters in this group showed no sign of deviant behaviour and nothing seemed to distinguish them from their peers. But frequently they refer to the absence of a future, to personal difficulties they faced in their everyday life, to feelings of exclusion and an absence of belonging, as if they didn’t have a stake in society. They are often solitary, isolated adolescents, frequently at odds with family and friends, in search of belonging and a cause to embrace. At a certain point, the accumulation of such estrangements resulted in anger.

The relative share of both groups may differ according to national backgrounds. But, however different in background and motivations, they share common characteristics. Together these constitute the subculture on which IS’ power of attraction thrives. ‘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. Europol has also begun to acknowledge the declining role of religion in the foreign fighters issue. Religion has systematically decreased as a driver of terrorism as the waves of foreign fighters succeed one another.

This is the second new feature of this updated Egmont Paper. On closer examination, the current foreign fighters movement represents the fourth wave of jihadi terrorism, as originally conceived by Marc Sageman in 2008. The first wave fought

against the Soviets in Afghanistan and became the companions-in-arms of Osama bin Laden. The second wave were often elite expatriates from the Middle East who went to the West to attend universities. Motivated by the suffering of Muslims in Bosnia, Chechnya, Kashmir and the Philippines, they volunteered to fight in those hotspots. But by 2004-2005, the first two waves of truly global jihadi travellers had reached their limits.

The American invasion of Iraq in 2003 breathed new life into the decaying jihadi terrorist scene. A new wave of radicals emerged, angered by this invasion. This wave was labelled 'home-grown'. They entered the jihadi scene through local kinship and friendship bonds, and were often connected to the global context via the internet. By 2008-2010, the third wave had also run its course.

The start of the civil war in Syria in 2012 and the emergence of powerful jihadi groups in the Levant – in particular IS – once again reinvigorated the waning jihadi movement. It gave rise to a new, fourth wave of militants and wannabe foreign fighters. The fourth wave resembles its immediate predecessor by the local dynamics of their respective networks. Nowadays they too are formed among friends and family who have known each other for years. Distinct from the third wave is the opportunity to link up with one another on the battlefield, as part of a conquering terrorist and insurgent organisation – IS. As a result, technical expertise can again be acquired and skills transferred, in particular training with assault weapons.

Just like the preceding waves, the fourth wave of foreign fighters will ultimately end, mostly for the same reasons as its predecessors. But the time needed to reach this point depends also on the measures we collectively take in reacting to the phenomenon. A final new section in this update deals with these measures. Five policy recommendations are suggested that might effectively contribute to countering the current wave of foreign fighters – and protect a new generation from following suit.

Firstly, reframe the debate. Unless we understand how the motivations of the fourth wave of foreign fighters essentially derive from a 'no future' subculture and not simply from a narrative, prevention will fail. Secondly, focus on tailor-made approaches. One-size-fits-all overall deradicalisation initiatives will be of marginal use. Thirdly, separate the discussion on Islam in Europe from deradicalisation initiatives. The discussion on a 'European Islam' is a discussion worth holding for its own merits, on its own terms, and with Muslims in the lead. It should not be pushed within the deradicalisation framework. Not only will this not work as envisaged, it will also harden positions, corrode an already fragile social fabric, and thus backfire. Fourthly, don't get terrorised by terrorists. Following the July 2005 bombings in London, mayor Ken Livingstone reacted in simple and inclusive terms. Inclusiveness is a tough thing to come by in today's frenzied debates. Finally, invest in intelligence (for a proper long-term perspective) and encourage short-term operational information sharing.

Looking for explanations for vicious behaviour doesn't imply justifying it. The sole responsibility for the violence perpetrated by foreign fighters are the foreign fighters themselves. Each and every person is ultimately accountable for his or her actions. But understanding the context is crucial if one is to devise adequate measures and prevent yet another generation from becoming receptive to the siren songs of extremist political violence.

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March 2016

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INTRODUCTION

'A bizarre phenomenon,' *Der Spiegel* concluded, after trying to figure out why young people left Germany to become foreign fighters in Syria. The magazine painted a portrait of two thirty-somethings with similar backgrounds and the same hobby – martial arts. One became director of a martial arts school in Hamburg, the other became a terrorist poster boy in Syria.²

'Bizarre' wasn't exactly the word former US Special Operations commander in the Middle East, Major General Michael K. Nagata, used in a confidential memo in 2014. But still, he too admitted to being puzzled by IS' appeal: 'We do not understand the movement, and until we do, we are not going to defeat it. ... We have not defeated the idea. We do not even understand the idea.'³

According to Americans estimates in the summer of 2015, IS (also known as ISIS, ISIL and its Arabic acronym Daesh) in Syria and Iraq currently boasts about 28,000 foreign fighters, who hail from 100 countries around the globe.⁴ The share of foreign fighters within IS is said to represent at least 40%.⁵ Fighters from Middle Eastern countries make up the largest contingent, but Europeans are well represented too. Europol estimates the number of European nationals that have trained as foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq at between 5,000 and 7,000.⁶

The first European to depart for Syria was probably a 28-year-old Frenchman who joined the Free Syrian Army in March 2012. A month before, the Syrian city of Homs had been shelled by the Syrian army. The Baba Amr district was the scene of widespread fighting between al-Assad's army and poorly organised rebel forces, with hundreds of civilian deaths as a result. The Syrian civil war had begun.

Other Europeans soon followed suit. In the summer of that year, the first Belgians arrived in Syria. Sean Pidgeon was the first to be killed, at 23 years old. He was born into a Belgian-Congolese family from Laeken, a municipality of north-west Brussels, and converted to Islam at age 14. He had left for Syria four months earlier. By March 2013, foreign fighters had become front-page news in Belgium (and the rest of

² 'Why young Germans are answering call to holy war', in *Der Spiegel*, 28 November 2014. One exemplar, Denis Cruspert, who once called himself Deso Dogg (and later Abu Talha al-Almani), was reportedly killed in a US air strike in Syria, mid-October 2015.

³ Quoted in *New York Times*, 29 December 2014.

⁴ www.justice.gov/opa/speech/assistant-attorney-general-john-p-carlin-delivers-remarks-international-institute-justice.

⁵ Peter Neumann, Director of the UK Centre for the Study of Radicalisation (ICSR), quoted in Alex Schmid, *Foreign (terrorist) fighter estimates: conceptual and data issues*. The Hague, ICCT, Policy brief, October 2015, p. 2.

⁶ Europol's director Rob Wainwright quoted by AFP, 15 December 2015 (available at: <http://neurope.eu/wires/the-latest-europol-estimates-5000-7000-european-foreign-fighters-trained-in-syria-or-iraq>).

Europe), after public statements by Eurojust president Michèle Coninx. An estimated 70 Belgian youngsters were then said to be in Syria. Almost all were members of Sharia4Belgium, a neo-radical Islamist group created in early 2010 and particularly active in Antwerp.⁷

The topic led to a media frenzy. Fear of attacks by returnees was a constant theme. That led to hyperboles reminiscent of the immediate post-9/11 atmosphere. The theme thus also reached the political agenda. In April 2013, the Belgian Interior Minister Joelle Milquet hurriedly proposed a series of preventive and repressive measures. In a parallel effort, mayors from cities that had seen tens of their youngsters leave for Syria, such as Antwerp and Vilvorde, launched their own deradicalisation quest.

Terrorist incidents reached a crescendo following the shooting by Mehdi Nemmouche in the Jewish Museum in Brussels in May 2014. This was the first attack in Europe linked to Syria. The *Charlie Hebdo* attacks in January 2015 and the subsequent police raid on a terrorist cell in Verviers (near Liège) that was on the verge of perpetrating an attack on police premises (probably in the Brussels municipality of Molenbeek, where they grew up) were the start of a year-long series of IS-linked terrorist attacks and threats. In the mind of many, IS had by now replaced al-Qaeda as the premium hydra-headed terrorist foe, surpassing the latter in scope and reach. Trying to come to grips with the issue of youngsters leaving Belgium to join IS, all levels of government in Belgium, from local to regional to national, hastily started to devise deradicalisation programmes – but often without a great deal of coordination and without evaluating what worked and what didn't.

A series of deadly attacks in Paris in November 2015 and the identification of a French-Belgian network linked to IS led to an international media campaign depicting Brussels as a jihadi capital and a key staging ground for terrorist activities. A flurry of arrests and house searches in November and December 2015 in several Belgian cities, both in the north and the south of the country, as well as in Brussels, capped a busy year for Belgian (and European) counterterrorism. Most of those arrested had some link to Syria, thus emphasizing the threat emanating from Europeans – and Belgians – leaving for Syria and possibly returning.

⁷ *De Standaard* (Belgian Dutch-language newspaper), 11 March 2013.

The Belgian numbers⁸

According to the most reliable public estimates, the number of Belgian combatants in Syria and Iraq totals some 470 individuals as of January 2016. Flanders and Brussels each account for some 45% of the departures, the rest coming from the Walloon region.

Included in these figures are the 60 or so individuals who attempted to voyage to Syria, but never made it. Almost a third (some 130) have now returned, of which a third has been arrested and sent to jail. More than 80 have presumably been killed. About 190 are thus still active in Syria or Iraq at the time of writing. Some of them have been on the battlefield for over three years now. Of those whose affiliation could be established with a degree of certainty, approximately 70% joined IS.

The departures from Belgium proceeded in phases. The first stage (between April 2012 and July 2013) concerned a limited number of municipalities, especially from Antwerp and Brussels, as well as Vilvorde. The second stage (August 2013 to July 2014) saw an overall reduction in the number of departures (with the exception of Brussels), but the geographical scope started to widen, as more municipalities were affected. Finally, from the summer of 2014 onwards, the number of departures further decreased, while some new locations came up (Ghent in the north and Liège in the south of the country). Overall, the monthly average of new departures has thus gradually dropped from its peak of some 15 per month (in 2012-2013) to an average of five per month in the year 2015.

The average age range of foreign fighters from Belgium is typically 20-24. Almost all have Belgian nationality. For reasons explained below, Belgian-Moroccans are significantly overrepresented among the Belgian Syria travellers, accounting for up to four-fifths. In Belgium, converts are reported to represent less than 10%.

Their educational level is below that of the average population. Syria travellers with college degrees exist, but they constitute a small minority, as far as Belgium is concerned. Most were known to police and intelligence before their departure.

⁸ Interior Minister Jan Jambon to MP Koen Metsu (House of Representatives), *Bulletin des Questions et Réponses*, House of Representatives, 11 January 2016, pp. 177-179. See also *De Standaard*, 20 January 2016 and *La Libre Belgique* (Belgian French-language newspaper), 22 January 2016. Additional sources: Jaak Raes (head of the Belgian State Security Service), in *Het Laatste Nieuws* (Belgian Dutch-language newspaper), 15 May 2015; Interior Minister Jan Jambon in *De Tijd* (Belgian Dutch-language newspaper), 17 June 2015, and on *De Zevende Dag* (Sunday television news program), 28 June 2015.

These numbers indicate an order of magnitude, but no absolute certainty due to the inherent difficulty of validating such numbers in war zones. Moreover, caution should be taken when comparing numbers from different countries, since definitions of what constitutes a foreign fighter and counting methods differ, even among EU Member States. Nevertheless, Belgians are well represented in the ranks of IS. This is often viewed as an indication that Belgium is being confronted with a significant radicalisation challenge. When taking office in October 2014, the incoming Belgian government stated in its coalition agreement: 'The preservation of the democratic system and the safety of our citizens are for the government an absolute priority. Today, it is under pressure from a growing threat of radicalisation and terrorism.' But is it? Is radicalisation indeed at the root of today's foreign fighters phenomenon, as is claimed?

THE ORIGINS OF A CONTESTED CONCEPT

More than a decade of research into radicalisation has resulted in a torrent of in-depth studies, profiles and models aimed at conceptualizing the process by which an individual turns into a terrorist. But when the scale of Europeans traveling to Syria was disclosed in early 2013, many were nevertheless taken by surprise, even in countries like the Netherlands or the United Kingdom, which had taken a substantial lead in the field of radicalisation studies. By mid-2014, the Dutch intelligence service AIVD consequently reported that the existing tools focusing upon profiles and indicators had proven to be of only limited use.⁹ This observation should come as no surprise. From its inception, the very notion of ‘radicalisation’ was an oversimplification of an extremely complex phenomenon, but also a source of ambiguity and confusion.

Even today, radicalisation remains ill-defined, complex and controversial.

The concept of radicalisation in relation to terrorism has no longstanding scientific pedigree. It is a political construct that originated within European police and intelligence circles shortly after the 9/11 attacks and appeared for the first time in EU counterterrorism in May 2004. It was mentioned in an internal EU document listing possible root causes, or underlying factors, that were considered conducive to the recruitment of vulnerable individuals by foreign extremists. The attacks in Madrid two months before and in London in July 2005 pushed the concept to centre stage in EU counterterrorism thinking and policies. Untangling the process through which a person turned from their ‘normal’ status into a terrorist became the core of radicalisation studies and the holy grail of European (and later, worldwide) counterterrorism efforts.

But ‘radicalisation’ soon evolved into a catch-all concept, framed almost exclusively in religious terms, and in this way opened wide the opportunity for pundits to equate Islam with terrorism. Many different expressions of an individual’s ideas and behaviour were being labelled as signs of radicalisation, and these ranged from the increased presence of girls and women wearing the hijab, men dressed in Salafi trousers, orthodox preachers, and the terrorists themselves. Putting these disparate signs together into a box labelled ‘indicators of radicalisation’ emptied the word of all explanatory meaning, turning it into a container concept.

Because of its apparent simplicity, but also its ambiguity, it became entwined with the public disenchantment over immigration that had developed since the 1980s, and with the unease over Islam and Muslims boosted by the 9/11 attacks. Radicali-

⁹ *The Transformation of Jihadism in the Netherlands. Swarm dynamics and new strength.* The Hague, AIVD (General Intelligence and Security Service), September 2014, p. 52.

sation made it possible to speak about these issues in a way that seemingly differed from the anti-Islam rhetoric of right-wing pundits and movements. As a consequence, radicalisation came to be seen as a unique contemporary process that was linked almost exclusively to Muslim-related phenomena.

In 2004, the head of Scotland Yard's counter-terrorism command, Peter Clarke, was probably among the first officials to warn the media against labelling today's main terrorist threat as 'Islamic', since this was both offensive and misleading.¹⁰ But this is exactly what happened. The concept was all the more tantalizing because of the preexistent popular idiom: 'radical Islam'¹¹ and the ubiquity of the 'clash of civilization' paradigm since 9/11.

Nevertheless, the myriad of radicalisation studies produced since 2004 has yielded useful results. Radicalisation is first and foremost a socialisation process in which group dynamics (kinship and friendship) are more important than ideology. These studies have provided us with a more detailed understanding of the stages in this process. Socialisation into extremism and, eventually, into terrorism, happens gradually and requires a more or less prolonged group process. Feelings of frustration and inequity first have to be interiorised and then lead to a mental separation from society (which is held responsible for those feelings). Individuals then reach out to others who share the same feelings, and create an 'in-group'. Within such a group, personal feelings get politicised ('what are we going to do about it?'). Groupthink gradually solidifies into an unquestioned belief system and attitude, with alternative pathways gradually being pushed aside. In this process, ideology helps to dehumanise the outside-group and transforms innocents (who bear no responsibility for the original feelings of frustration and inequity) into guilty accomplices. In this process of gathering extremism, 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.

This process is neither clear-cut nor predictable, but messy and full of twists. Interventions aimed at deradicalising an individual (shifting his mind-set) or even disengagement (relinquishing violence) are not obvious nor easy, since they often leave a crucial aspect out of the equation: the context. As Mark Sedgwick reminds us, 'the concept of radicalisation emphasizes the individual and, to some extent, the ideology and the group, and significantly de-emphasizes the wider circumstances' and the context in which it arises.¹² Post-2004 radicalisation studies tried to understand *how*

¹⁰ Quoted in *The Guardian*, 29 July 2005.

¹¹ Fareed Zakaria, 'The End Of The End Of History', in *Newsweek*, 24 September 2001. See also: Christopher Allen, 'Justifying Islamophobia: A Post-9/11 Consideration of the European Union and British Contexts', in *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences*, 2004, 21:3, pp. 1-25.

¹² Mark Sedgwick, 'The Concept of Radicalization as a Source of Confusion', in *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 2010, 22: 4, pp. 480-481.

individuals got involved in terrorism. Hence, the emphasis on the individual was detrimental to the 'why-terrorism-occurs approach' advocated in terrorism research since the 1970s. According to the latter approach, the causes of terrorism lie in a conducive or 'instigating' environment that permits its emergence and that provides motivation and direction for groups and individuals to use violence.¹³

After 9/11 however, context, preconditions and root causes took a back seat. The 'how' has become clearer, but the 'why' individuals and groups had (again) become vulnerable to an extremist narrative went opaque. The complex interaction between context, individual, and group processes was reduced to a question of narrative, with (a 'Salafist' reading of) Islam being singled as the sole culprit – or root cause.

¹³ Martha Crenshaw, 'The Causes of Terrorism', in *Comparative Politics*, 1981, 13:4, pp. 379-399.

(NOT) A NEW PHENOMENON

When defined as socialisation, ‘radicalisation’ is nothing new. Such processes led to political violence and terrorism in the distant past too. Nor is it novel for Belgians (and Europeans) to volunteer for foreign theatres of war. During the Spanish Civil War, some 1,600 Belgian volunteers joined the International Brigades. Many more joined the Waffen-SS and went to the Russian Front during the Second World War. These are examples of bygone times.

From the 1980s onwards, a new generation of Europeans again started to join foreign battlefields. The war against the Red Army in Afghanistan, the civil war in Bosnia and the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 attracted an unknown number of volunteers from Belgium. The assassins that killed Commander Massoud in Afghanistan on the eve of 9/11 originated from Belgium. Ever since then, clandestine cells in Belgium have facilitated the journey of volunteers to the Afghanistan-Pakistan border area. The invasion of Iraq in 2003 marked a new uptick. The first Western female suicide bomber in Iraq was 38-year-old Muriel Degauque, a Belgian convert from Charleroi, who was killed in a suicide attack in November 2005.¹⁴

In 2008, a clandestine network centred around Malika al-Aroud was dismantled in Belgium. It had been channelling fighters to the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. By then, the local jihadist scene was waning. It ‘consisted of a number of small networks, which were relatively isolated and invisible.’¹⁵ The number of candidates attempting to leave for foreign theatres was limited. Nevertheless, in Belgium and elsewhere, chatter about leaving persisted, especially among youngsters, ‘but only a handful ever put that wish into practice. And many of those attempts failed, due either to their own ineptitude or to intervention by the AIVD, the Dutch judicial authorities or their counterparts abroad. There was certainly no mass exodus to theatres of jihad.’¹⁶

Four years later, the gridlock in the jihadist scene in Belgium (and elsewhere) came to an abrupt end. Syria became a new magnet for foreign fighters, as Iraq had been after 2003. And a new generation of activist groups linked the desire to leave with the new theatre.

How to compare today’s European foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq with the jihadis of past decades? Several characteristics seem to set them apart.

¹⁴ Chris De Stoop, a Belgian investigative journalist, has painstakingly reconstructed her journey in his *Vrede zij met u, zuster* (*Peace Be with You, Sister* – Amsterdam, De Bezige Bij, 2010). It remains one of the best available accounts of a ‘radicalisation process’. A French translation followed in 2013, *La guerre sainte de Muriel* (Wavre, Editions Mols). Unfortunately, no English-language translation is available.

¹⁵ *The Transformation of Jihadism in the Netherlands*, p. 5.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

The first difference is related to their age. The Syria fighters from Belgium are on average many years younger than their predecessors. The youngest Belgian who left for Syria was only 13, and 15- to 18-year-olds are common throughout in Europe. After 2001, the average age of European jihadi terrorists had been 27.7 years and the typical age range 25-35.¹⁷ Nowadays, even if 30+ year-olds still make up a third of the total number of Belgian foreign fighters, their average age is more likely to be close to 20, and the age range of the foreign fighters from Belgium seems to be typically 20-24. On-going Dutch research also acknowledges 23.3 as the average age of the segment of foreign fighters from Belgium whose birth date and moment of travel could be determined with certainty (64 individuals).¹⁸ Cheikh Bassam Ayachi, the 68-year-old Syrian-born head of a controversial Islamic Centre (Centre Islamique Belge, CIB) in the Brussels municipality of Molenbeek, was probably the oldest to travel to Syria, in December 2013.

The suddenness of their decision to leave for Syria is also a striking characteristic for most of the youngsters (except for the first Belgian group in the summer and autumn of 2012, comprising the core of Sharia4Belgium). Group dynamics play a crucial role, since these youngsters meet and influence one another at school, in public parks, sports clubs, or in the streets. But this is no longer linked to the more or less protracted process of political radicalisation that was typical of the processes studied in the past decade.

Information on foreigners joining the ranks of IS suggests that recruitment can take place very quickly, without necessarily requiring a long radicalisation process. Age plays a role: younger people are found to be more impressionable and radicalise quicker than older candidates.¹⁹

Their acquaintance with religious thought is undoubtedly more shallow and superficial than their predecessors', as is their acquaintance with international politics. Geopolitics is less important to them than it once was to their predecessors, who felt motivated by the struggle against the superpowers. Injustice was often a starting point with their predecessors' journey towards extremism and terrorism. This has now largely been overshadowed by personal estrangement and motives as the primary engines of their journey. Alain Grignard, Superintendent at the anti-terrorist division of the Belgian Federal Judicial Police (Brussels), identifies the difference with their predecessors as follows:

¹⁷ Edwin Bakker, 'Characteristics of jihadi terrorists in Europe (2001-2009)', in: Rik Coolsaet (ed.), *Jihadi Terrorism and the Radicalisation Challenge. European and American Experiences*. Farnham, Ashgate, 2011, p. 141; Richard Barrett, *Foreign Fighters in Syria*. New York, Soufan Group, June 2014.

¹⁸ My thanks goes to Roel de Bont and Arjen Brink (Leiden University), who made this information available before their own research results were published. It is part of a larger research project, 'Characteristics of Jihadist Travelers to Syria in the Netherlands and Belgium'.

¹⁹ *Changes in modus operandi of Islamic State terrorist attacks. Review held by experts from Member States and Europol on 29 November and 1 December 2015*. The Hague, Europol, 18 January 2016. Available at: www.europol.europa.eu/content/ectc

Previously we were mostly dealing with ‘radical Islamists’— individuals radicalized toward violence by an extremist interpretation of Islam— but now we’re increasingly dealing with what are best described as ‘Islamized radicals’.²⁰

Once in Syria and Iraq, they are very self-centred and cultivate the image they want to display. Their yearning to place themselves at the centre of events (with numerous selfies and social media posts on trivia like kohl make-up for boys and other teenage themes) and their desire for attention reflect a degree of narcissism that was largely absent among their older predecessors. Abdelhamid Abaaoud, the presumed ring-leader of the 2015 succession of terrorist plots and attacks in France and Belgium, dubbed himself a ‘terrorist tourist’ in a movie on his mobile phone, illustrated with a series of selfies. ‘Being a radical is fun,’ according to a Belgian wannabe foreign fighter, who had been in Syria for a couple of weeks.²¹ In this respect too, they do not display the characteristics of religious fundamentalists, but of the very contemporary selfie-generation of which they are part.²²

Finally, the scale of the departures distinguishes the current foreign fighter phenomenon from its predecessors, straining the capabilities of police and intelligence. The Dutch AIVD compared it to a ‘swarm’: highly decentralised, with numerous individual and largely autonomous elements that collectively, however, maintain a cohesion and direction: ‘In the absence of a strong hierarchy and leadership structure, the main driving force within the movement is horizontal influence by friends, relatives, neighbours and other like-minded individuals, in both the online and the offline world.’ These characteristics prompted the AIVD to compare it with other contemporary mass social phenomena, which ‘through online hype, are able to trigger a rapid mobilisation with an eventual offline impact’.²³

²⁰ Paul Cruickshank, ‘A view from the CT foxhole: An interview with Alain Grignard, Brussels Federal Police’, in *CTC Sentinel*, 21 August 2015. Available at: www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/a-view-from-the-ct-foxhole-an-interview-with-alain-grignard-brussels-federal-police.

²¹ *De Morgen*, 12 October 2015.

²² ‘The Me Me Me Generation’, in *Time*, 22 May 2013.

²³ *The Transformation of Jihadism in the Netherlands*, op.cit., p. 24.

THE FOURTH WAVE OF JIHADI TERRORISM

Based upon these characteristics, the current foreign fighter generation can be considered a new wave in the history of jihadi terrorism. In his 2008 *Leaderless Jihad*, the American scholar and former CIA case officer Marc Sageman identified three successive waves starting in the 1980s.²⁴ The first wave fought against the Soviets in Afghanistan and became the comrades-in-arms of Osama bin Laden. They were very much motivated by religious zeal. Surprisingly as it may sound, they often came from a higher socio-economic status (upper and middle class). The second wave were often elite expatriates from the Middle East who went to the West to attend universities. They joined al-Qaeda's training camps in Afghanistan in the 1990s. Typically, they had a middle class background. Motivated by the suffering of Muslims in Bosnia, Chechnya, Kashmir, and the Philippines, they volunteered to fight in those hotspots. On average, they were 30 years old when they took up arms.

The 'glory days' of al-Qaeda are situated between 1996 and 2001. By 2004-2005, the first two waves of truly global jihadi travellers had reached their limits, due to the killing and arrest of most of their members, the destruction of the training camps in Afghanistan, but also to the growing awareness that, ultimately, most victims of jihadi terrorism were Muslims. Global opinion polls showed the declining legitimacy of jihadi terrorism, even if attacks by jihadi groups persisted.

But the American invasion of Iraq in 2003 breathed new life in the decaying jihadi terrorist scene. A new wave of radicals emerged, angered by this invasion. This third wave were labelled 'home-grown'. Such bottom-up groups were also present in the second wave, but they now became the dominant model. Since they couldn't physically link up with the remnants of al-Qaeda or other jihadi organisations, they formed bottom-up, fluid networks, that were self-financed and self-trained: 'a leaderless Jihad', Sageman dubbed this wave. They entered the jihadi scene through kinship and friendship bonds, and were often connected to the global context via the internet, but were not able to physically link up with al-Qaeda training camps in Afghanistan. Their motivations ranged from outrage about Iraq to thrill seeking and a quest for a sense of significance and belonging in their lives.

In Europe, these radicals were often the children of migrants. They tended to have middle to lower social class roots. Only very few had a religious background. Their

²⁴ Marc Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad. Terror networks in the twenty-first century*. Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008, pp. 48-50, 140 and *passim*. Olivier Roy uses a slightly different yardstick to identify successive waves. He merges Sageman's second and third waves into one and emphasis the similarities between this group and the current foreign fighters wave. See Olivier Roy, 'Le djihadisme est une révolte générationnelle et nihiliste', in *Le Monde*, 24 November 2015 (translated into English by *Foreign Policy*, 7 January 2016).

average age was about 20, according to Sageman. But the Dutch scholar Edwin Bakker's investigations (covering the 2001-2009 period) resulted in a higher average age of 27.7 for the European wannabes.²⁵ Bakker confirmed Sageman's assessment of the lower social class origins of the individuals in this wave and the high level of unskilled or semi-skilled workers among them. At least a third of them, so Bakker asserts, have a criminal record.

Boosted originally by the Iraqi invasion and fed by anti-Western sentiments, the third wave of jihadi terrorism had run its course by 2008-2010, as related by the AIVD.²⁶ Left to its own devices, without access to technical expertise, the fading of the memories about the original anger caused by the Iraq war, as well as vigorous law enforcement and intelligence efforts dismantled most of the clandestine groups.

The start of the civil war in Syria in 2012 and the emergence of potent jihadi groups in the Levant, in particular IS, once again reinvigorated the waning jihadi movement. It gave rise to a new, fourth wave of militants and wannabe foreign fighters. This wave combines features of the past three waves with the aforementioned novel characteristics, making it a distinct wave.

This fourth wave resembles its immediate predecessor by the local dynamics of its networks. Nowadays too, they are formed among friends and family who have known each other for years. This environment influences and shapes members' behaviour and ideas. But, as mentioned above, these are on average even younger than before and this translates into a specific, age-related set of personal motives. As a result, the driving force behind their decision to go to the Levant is even less influenced by religion or ideology, and even more by personal motivations and motives.

Religion has systematically decreased as a driver of violence as the waves of foreign fighters unfolded. As of late, Europol has also recognised this development and therefore suggested dropping the term 'radicalisation' altogether:

In view of this shift away from the religious component in the radicalisation of, especially, young recruits, it may be more accurate to speak of a 'violent extremist social trend' rather than using the term 'radicalisation'.²⁷

As will be explained below, 'no future' probably encapsulates best the subculture in which the motives of the fourth wave of foreign fighters are rooted.

The opportunity to link up with one another on the battlefield as part of a conquering terrorist and insurgent organisation, IS, is also distinct to the third wave. In this, it

²⁵ Bakker, op.cit. An outstanding review of both Sageman's and Bakker's studies is provided by Simon Cottee, who was probably the first to suggest the concept of 'subculture' as a way of grasping the foreign fighters phenomenon. In 'Jihadism as a subcultural response to social strain: extending Marc Sageman's "bunch of guys" thesis', in *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 2011, 23:5, 730-751.

²⁶ See notes 15 and 16.

²⁷ See note 19.

resembles the second wave. As a result, technical expertise can again be acquired and skills transferred, in particular training with assault weapons. New networks of personal inter-linkages will be established. The result was to be seen in the numerous plots of 2015, that hint at an increasing interaction between grassroots and top-down dynamics.

Mosaic of personal motives

What do we know about the motives and motivations of the fourth wave of (potential) foreign fighters originating from Belgium and Europe? Nowadays, the authorities have at their disposal a wealth of raw data from different sources, even if these are not always systematically compiled into analyses due to lack of time. Its volume exceeds by far the available information on the earlier generations of foreign fighters. A small part of this information surfaces during terrorism trials. In the (semi-)public domain, social media is an important source, since it has been very widely used by foreign fighters since 2012, including as a means of communication with the home country (until IS tried to stem this and shifted to encryption apps).²⁸

There are also the accounts of returnees who have been groping for answers about the motivations that pushed them to leave for Syria, as well as interviews with those still fighting there. Not all of these statements are equally straightforward or unambiguous. Often, returnees themselves are unable to offer a satisfactory explanation for their initial motives.²⁹ Statements by combatants should be treated with caution too. They might suffer from a mechanism similar to the well-known social desirability gap that hampers survey-based research. The interviewee's declarations might amount to nothing more than a discourse developed to make sense of and to justify their own behaviour, rather than a truthful attempt to gauge the often complex motivations behind their decision to voyage to a distant war zone.

Still, some tentative conclusions can be drawn from these sources. At the risk of excessive generalisation, but for the sake of clarity, two groups of Europeans travelling to Syria can be distinguished. A first distinct group is composed of individuals that might as well be (or are) part of 'street gangs'. The second group is more fuzzy and is composed of individuals with widely varying personal, age-related motivations.

IS super-gang

The first group is formed in the same way as their third wave predecessors in local kinship and friendship networks, but now to an even larger extent in connection with

²⁸ JTTM, Memri, 21 February 2015.

²⁹ A poignant example is recounted by Sophie Kasiki in her *Dans la Nuit de Daech* (In the Night of Daesh). In *The Guardian*, 9 January 2016.

drugs, petty crime and street violence. As a result, a noticeable number among them have a criminal record.³⁰ Alain Grignard described this group as:

‘to a significant degree, an extension of the ‘inner-city’ gang phenomenon. Young Muslim men with a history of social and criminal delinquency are joining up with the Islamic State as part of a sort of ‘super-gang’.³¹

This corresponds to the background of many of the perpetrators of terrorist attacks in Europe during the year 2015. ‘Gang of street thugs’ was an often heard depiction former friends and neighbours offered of the group of young terrorists that perpetrated the November 2015 Paris attacks. Street gang dynamics and the fourth wave of foreign fighters’ networks indeed offer a lot in common. Patterns of engagement, age range, groupthink (by which members end up embracing the opinions of the majority of the group), propensity for violence, and a feeling of having no stake in society are all very similar.

Because of their difficulty of fitting into a (perceived) hostile society, they look for alternative networks where they can blend in. Gang activities and the foreign fighters’ undertakings alike are carried out on the margins of the local environment, where they grew up. They create a parallel environment, based upon kinship and friendship bonds, that provide them with support, protection, and shelter in case of need.

According to the Danish sociologist Aydin Soei, author of *Vrede unge mænd (Angry Young Men*, about the development of vulnerable neighbourhoods in Denmark from the 1990s onwards), a 22-year-old gunman who killed two people in Copenhagen in February 2015, was:

‘an exemplar of a phenomenon of Europe’s urban neighbourhoods, not a product of the teachings of the Quran or their distortions by militant preachers. [...] This wasn’t an intellectual Islamist with a long beard. ... This was a loser man from the ghetto who is very, very angry at Danish society.’³²

Going to Syria is one of a number of possible outlets for their anger. ‘Anger with an Islamic dressing,’ the Dutch Middle East expert Paul Aarts opined.³³

The Brussels municipality of Molenbeek too offers a case in point. More than a decade and a half before it became a ‘global byword for jihadism’,³⁴ it was the scene of some widespread rioting (similar to the rioting in English or French suburbs). At the time, the aforementioned Belgian investigative journalist Chris De Stoop

³⁰ *La Libre* (Belgian French-language newspaper), 14 August 2015.

³¹ Paul Cruickshank, op.cit.

³² *New York Times*, 16 February 2015.

³³ *De Volkskrant* (Dutch newspaper), 26 November 2013.

³⁴ ‘A continent like Belgium’, in *The Economist*, 28 November 2015.

attempted to gauge the malaise in this borough.³⁵ He found a complex mosaic, composed of vibrant local community activities, pockets of genuine despair and accumulated frustrations, and cliques of troublemakers.

This rioting, according to a local social worker, was born out of desperation about lacking prospects in a neighbourhood characterized by poor job prospects, bad housing and deficient education. If we do not understand these root causes, we doom the future of these kids, according to one of the local inhabitants: ‘These riots indeed are very much a cry for help.’

The local police commissioner in turn recognised the increasing animosity between his police officers (‘many of them displaying a negative attitude towards young migrants’) and the local youth. Among them, he identified a rejectionist hard core, a relatively small group, but one that displayed a perplexing ‘capacity to hate’, that could be ‘exploited for other objectives’. Inequity also played a role in the anger, he sensed and Chris De Stoop noted. Well-paid European officials within walking distance with migrant families in decaying neighbourhoods cannot be but a recipe for increased tension. The same applies to well-to-do ‘native’ Belgians who were attracted to the municipality by its low rents, but whose arrival in turn boosted these rents to levels difficult to pay by poor families.

Twenty-five years on, this portrayal is still valid.³⁶ Molenbeek is neither the Bronx of the 1960s and 1970s, nor a no-go zone or a HLM-ghetto. But since 1991, the density of the population has significantly increased, while housing conditions and education have worsened. A third and fourth generation are now growing up, the grandchildren of the ‘guest workers’ who had arrived in Belgium in the early 1960s. But it still is a place where a lively local scene mingles with a wide variety of ‘street kids’, who react in diverse ways to what they experience as a lack of prospects. A number of them wallow in a self-image of a loser, exactly how the general public sees them. As in 1991, a core among them has withdrawn into parallel worlds of illegal economic activities and delinquency. They shelter in personal networks, where their rejection of society is reinforced by their peers or kin, resulting in a real rupture with society.

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 behaviour, next to membership of street gangs, rioting, drug trafficking, and delinquency. Interestingly, but underreported and thus insufficiently studied and understood, is the parallelism between the age ranges (and the so-called ‘age-crime curve’) of the criminal careers of Syria travellers and of juvenile criminal

³⁵ Chris De Stoop, ‘Stad onder stroom’ [*City Under Tension*], in *Knack* (Belgian Dutch-language weekly), 22 May 1991. On the author, see note 14.

³⁶ Hans Vandecandelaere, *In Molenbeek*. Antwerp, EPO, 2015, in particular pp. 173-185; Ine Renson, ‘Wij vechten voor onze kinderen’, in *De Standaard*, 23 November 2015.

offenders.³⁷ Joining IS is for a pre-existing kinship and friendship network a shift to another form of deviant behaviour, but it adds and opens a thrilling, bigger-than-life dimension to their way of life – indeed transforming them from delinquents without a future into *mujahedeen* with a cause, at least as viewed by themselves.³⁸

IS beckoning on the horizon

Whereas most individuals of the first group are known to the police, this is not necessarily the case for the second group. Before suddenly deciding to leave for Syria, alone or with friends and kin, the youngsters in this group didn't show any sign of deviant behaviour and nothing seemed to distinguish them from their peers. But looking into the aforementioned stories, one cannot fail to notice how frequently (potential) foreign fighters (or, more broadly speaking, Syria travellers) refer to the absence of a future, and to personal difficulties they faced in their everyday life.

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 ('my parents do not understand me') and friends, in search of belonging. The succession of such estrangements then result at a certain point in anger.

Often these stories point to a desire to leave all this behind, to be 'someone', to be accepted, to do something 'useful'. In short, to find refuge in a more welcoming environment, where they wouldn't feel excluded, and where they would be able to finally take control of their life.

They want to look up to heroes – or to be one themselves. According to Nazir Afzal, the United Kingdom's leading Muslim prosecutor, hundreds of British teenagers are in danger of being radicalised by IS because they see the terrorists as 'pop idols':

The boys want to be like them and the girls want to be with them. ... That's what they used to say about the Beatles and more recently One Direction and Justin Bieber.³⁹

Some of them converted to Islam at a young age in order to find answers to questions other value systems seemed unable to provide, or to bring sense and rules to what they perceive as a seemingly meaningless life. The number of converts among the Syria travellers differs significantly according to their home countries. Whereas the

³⁷ Terrie E. Moffitt, 'Adolescence-limited and life-course-persistent antisocial behavior: A developmental taxonomy', in *Psychological Review*, 1993, 100:4, pp. 674-701. I would like to express my gratitude to my Ghent University colleague Lieven Pauwels for providing me with references on this topic.

³⁸ Scott Atran and Nafees Hamid, 'Paris: the war ISIS wants', in *New York Review of Books*, 16 November 2015.

³⁹ Quoted by *The Guardian*, 5 April 2015.

American contingent comprise approximately 40% of converts, according to a scholar on US (counter)terrorism, Lorenzo Vidino,⁴⁰ in Belgium only a tiny fraction belongs to this group. France seems to be somewhere in between, with 25% of converts, but increasing.⁴¹

The increasing number of girls and women travelling to Syria (sometimes with small children) is also an illustration of this second group. In some countries their number has increased more significantly than in others. In Belgium too, they have become more prominent during 2015, albeit less so than in other countries, notwithstanding the gruesome IS videos, the numerous accounts of cruelty, brutality and violence, and the rumours about disillusioned fighters being executed by their fellow-fighters in order to prevent them from going home. They are not incorporated into fighting units, but perform logistic and support roles (including in a Western all-female police brigade), or are confined to family life. Recently, complaints of rude behaviour of male fighters towards women have become public.⁴²

The foreign fighter phenomenon cannot be explained by mere socio-economic profiles. For some time, terrorism research has indicated that neither poverty nor socio-economic deprivation are direct root causes of terrorism. The pull of IS is not limited to deprived neighbourhoods or to low-income families. Examples of European foreign fighters originating from comfortable middle-class homes, with college degrees or decent job prospects, abound. But it is obvious that the environment in which one grows up has an impact on the way the future is experienced. In 1990, French president François Mitterrand aptly made this point:

Que peut espérer une être jeune qui naît dans un quartier sans âme, qui vit dans un immeuble laid, entouré d'autres laideurs, de murs gris dans un paysage gris pour une vie grise, avec tout autour une société qui préfère détourner le regard en n'intervient que lorsqu'il faut se fâcher, interdire?⁴³

Common characteristics

The relative share of both groups may differ according to national backgrounds. In the United States, the diversity of the current generation of foreign fighters is 'staggering', according to Vidino's 2015 study. The same also seems to apply to the United Kingdom. In Belgium the first group is comparatively overrepresented. But, however different in background and motivations, both groups share some common

⁴⁰ *ISIS in America. From retweets to Raqqa*. Washington, George Washington University, December 2015. See also: Eric Schmitt, 'ISIS followers in U.S. are diverse and young', in *New York Times*, 1 December 2015.

⁴¹ Olivier Roy, *op.cit.*

⁴² Quoted in *The Independent*, 20 April 2015.

⁴³ 'What can a young person hope for when born in neighbourhood without a soul, living in a dreadful building, surrounded by other dreadful things, grey walls in a grey landscape living a grey life, with all around a society that prefers to look away and only intervene when it wants to show it is angry, and wanting to prohibit?' François Mitterrand, quoted in *Le Monde*, 5 November 2005.

characteristics, that together constitute the subculture on which IS' force of attraction thrives. In 2008, Marc Sageman suggested the concept of 'jihadi cool'⁴⁴ to emphasise the force of attraction of jihadism to a wide range of young individuals. Some years later, 'pop-jihad as a lifestyle' was coined by the Dutch Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism.⁴⁵

Firstly, as Europol has now also concluded, religion is neither the key departure point nor the primary engine of the 'radicalisation' of members of either group. According to Marc Trévidic, a French judge specialised in anti-terrorism cases, jihadism has become a 'hype' (*'un phénomène de mode'*):

Ninety percent of those who leave, do it out of personal reasons: they are looking for a fight, or for adventure, or revenge, because they do not fit in society ... and only 10 percent out of religious beliefs. ... Religion is not the engine of this movement and that's precisely its strength.⁴⁶

French Islam scholar Olivier Roy partly shares this assessment: 'This is not the radicalization of Islam, but the Islamization of radicalism. ... [Today's] terrorists are not the expression of a radicalisation of the Muslim population, but rather reflect a generational revolt that affects a very precise category of youth.'⁴⁷

Most of them are not fundamentalists in the genuine sense of the word. Their acquaintance with Islam is mostly superficial and often the Qur'an and the hadîth are reduced to hollow slogans. They claim for themselves the right to interpret the Qur'an as they see fit – instead of studying it over decades, as Islamic scholars have been doing for centuries. In that sense, these European youngsters are the product of the modern, individualistic world. They develop and display a self-constructed discourse that is intended to give their conduct a semblance of justification and legitimation, at least in their own eyes. These mostly empty slogans are readily available on the internet, or are picked up within the kinship and friendship groups where their unease, frustration and discontent find an outlet. In August 2014, UK media reported the case of two British youngsters, both 22, who had left Birmingham for Syria. Before leaving, they had purchased *Islam for Dummies* and *The Koran for Dummies*.⁴⁸ That is not altogether different from what happened within radical left groups in the 1960s and 1970s. Members of these groups often eagerly skipped *Das Kapital* and confined themselves to the *Little Red Book* of Mao Zedong, or the then very popular series of small Chilean booklets, written by Marta Harnecker, which explained Marxism in simple terms.

⁴⁴ Marc Sageman, op.cit., pp. 159-160.

⁴⁵ *De Volkskrant*, 26 November 2013.

⁴⁶ *Le Télégramme* (regional French newspaper), 25 June 2015 (www.letelegramme.fr/bretagne/le-juge-trev-idic-la-religion-n-est-pas-le-moteur-du-jihad-27-06-2015-10682946.php).

⁴⁷ Olivier Roy, op.cit.

⁴⁸ *New Statesman*, 21 August 2014.

The lack of prospects, both real and perceived, is the second common characteristic. The Syrian-born Abu Ibrahim, who worked in IS' intelligence offices in Raqqa and Deir Ezzor before fleeing the group, noticed also that religion was not the main engine for most of the fighters he met, but desperation.⁴⁹ More than any other reason, 'no future' is the essence of the youth subculture that drives the majority of Syria travellers from the West. Going to Syria is an escape from a life seemingly without prospects.

As a consequence, they aspire to change the course of history by their actions. After a short journey to Syria, Reda H. told the police how Abdelhamid Abaaoud had tried to convince him to perpetrate an attack in his home country. According to Reda H., Abaaoud was convinced that 'in case many civilians were killed, France's foreign policy would change as a result.'⁵⁰ Being able to surf on the wings of history explains the force of attraction of the apocalyptic, end-times prophesies upheld by IS.

Thirdly, as Olivier Roy also argues, the subculture is also the result of an adolescents' revolt against their parents, their environment and against society and authorities. Up to a point, the very same mechanisms were at play during the protest movements of the 1960s and the 1970s, when parts of the younger generation also rebelled against society, to the bewilderment of their parents, who couldn't comprehend their youngsters' discontent. Their rebellion must have appeared as 'bizarre' to their parents and as difficult to comprehend as today's foreign fighter phenomenon, to use *Der Spiegel's* phrase. With hindsight, we now know that the 1960s-1970s sprang from the specific features of society at that time.

But society today significantly contrasts with society back then.

⁴⁹ Vera Mironova, Ahmet Mhidi and Sam Whitt, 'The jihadi who came in from the cold', in *Foreign Policy*, 10 August 2015.

⁵⁰ Quoted in *Le Monde*, 6 January 2016.

PUSH FACTORS: A CONDUCTIVE ENVIRONMENT, A YOUTH SUBCULTURE AND MANY PERSONAL MOTIVES

The most obvious transformation since the 1960s and 1970s is the considerably greater pressure society today puts upon young people. Individualisation and the lifting of traditional political, religious and ideological fault lines leave youngsters much earlier to their own devices and exposed to society than their peers back then. Adolescents' and young adults' need to belong and feel accepted has always been a crucial part of growing up. But, at a much earlier stage than in the past, today's young people have to make their own decisions in a society that offers incomparably more choices in all dimensions of life. Simply put, it's more demanding to be young today than it was back then. Society has become harsher, as experienced by Pupil Guidance Centres in Belgium, community teams of doctors, nurses, social workers, psychologists and pedagogues that work with schools: 'Increasingly, young people feel sidelined, or lose their grip on the situation. In kindergarten already, you hear: 'They can't cope with it.''⁵¹

'Teenage angst'⁵² is probably an apt label to describe how it feels to grow up in an environment that has become very complex, with few benchmarks and points of reference, as a result of the dynamics of globalisation and the post-industrial revolution. And on top of this, the future doesn't look bright: 'The generation coming of age in the 2010s faces high unemployment and precarious job situations, hampering their efforts to build a future and raising the risk of social unrest.'⁵³

Secondly, pessimism rules today. All European countries have been increasingly under the spell of pessimism, according to the *European Social Survey* and other surveys. According to Roger Liddle, former advisor to European Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso, 'we may be the first generation since the great advance of material progress which began with the industrial revolution that believes life will not be as good for our children and grandchildren as it has been for us.'⁵⁴ The economic and financial crisis has further eroded confidence in the future.

So in brief, not only is growing up more demanding for youngsters than it used to be, the current pessimistic outlook also stands in stark contrast to the optimistic *zeitgeist* of the 1960s and 1970s, when the horizon looked bright, activism thrived, and radical

⁵¹ *De Standaard*, 8 November 2014.

⁵² The Dutch novelist Abdelkader Benali used this label in a poignant reflection on the *Charlie Hebdo* attack: 'From Teenage Angst to Jihad. The Anger of Europe's Young Marginalized Muslims', in *New York Times*, 13 January 2015.

⁵³ *Global Risks 2014*. Geneva, World Economic Forum, 2014, p. 10.

⁵⁴ Roger Liddle, *Social Pessimism. The New Social Reality of Europe*. London, Policy Network, October 2008.

changes for the better appeared to be within reach. Where pessimism rules, ideals die, resignation is omnipresent, and the energy to strive for change fades away.

Belgium offers a case in point. Surveys reveal that pessimism is particularly ambient in the country. In 2012, 70% of the Belgian population responded that future prospects looked dim, which represented an increase of nearly 15% in six years. Southern European countries (and Ireland) then showed a still greater jump in the rate of pessimism.⁵⁵ According to the 2014 Gallup End of Year Survey, however, Belgium was by far the most pessimistic (with only Italy slightly more pessimistic). The survey showed that globally approximately half (53%) of those asked about 2015 thought it would be better than 2014 (which was up by 5% from last year). In Belgium, however, only a fifth (19%) were optimistic about the new year, whereas 40% thought it would be worse. This Belgian pessimism score is surprisingly high in comparison to the European average of 26%.⁵⁶

Youth representatives in Belgium consequently warn that many young people are depressed and feel hopeless. The enduring economic and labour market stagnation is certainly part of the explanation for why youngsters today have the impression that they are just fiddling around without decent job prospects.⁵⁷ The youth suicide rate (for 15-24 year-olds – broadly, the same age range as the foreign fighters) is much higher and has declined less in Belgium than in most other EU Member States. Dropping out of school also appears to be more prevalent in Belgium than in neighbouring countries. A recent OECD study confirms this Belgian particularity. A growing group of Belgian youngsters (15-29 year-olds) are neither in employment nor in education or training and have no diploma. This represents almost a fifth of all youngsters in Belgium. That is not only higher than the EU average, but also significantly higher than in neighbouring countries.⁵⁸

Thirdly, inequalities have been increasing in European societies over the past few decades. The 1991 reporting on Molenbeek⁵⁹ already observed that inequalities have a built-in capacity to potentially raise social tensions.

Socio-economic inequality is one of them. Unfortunately, Belgium once more offers a case in point. Jozef De Witte, former director of the Belgian Equal Opportunity Centre, was the first to establish a link between the number of Belgian foreign fighters and structural inequalities in their home country:

⁵⁵ Dirk Tirry e.a., *Tien jaar 'European Social Survey'*. KULeuven, Sociology Department, 2014, pp. 28-29.

⁵⁶ http://www.wingia.com/web/files/richeditor/filemanager/Belgium_Tables_V3_a.pdf. The 2015 Gallup Survey again confirmed the pervasive pessimism in Belgium. The country ranked third among the most pessimistic European countries behind Italy and Greece.

⁵⁷ *Brussel Deze Week* (local Brussels weekly), 13 November 2014.

⁵⁸ *Education at a glance 2015*. Paris, OECD, 2015, pp. 378 (table C5.2a).

⁵⁹ See note 35.

In Belgium, the gap between natives and immigrants (from outside the EU) in terms of employment and education is higher than anywhere else in Europe. Add to that, the statements made by Filip Dewinter [a leader of the main radical right party in Belgium] and others and you get barrels full of frustration looking for an outlet. How many people realize that half of our Moroccan community lives in poverty – compared to 15% of the Belgians without migration background. Yet, one cannot detect any sense of urgency among our decision-makers.⁶⁰

Other examples and numbers can be quoted, but the point is that in Belgium, citizens with a non-European family background are overrepresented in the lower rungs of most socio-economic categories (unemployment, housing, health, education). Compared to their peers, youngsters in this group are confronted with a number of real obstacles, in particular discrimination on the job and the real estate market, and educational deficiencies. As was already noted a decade ago, within migrant communities despair, discouragement, and even fear about their youngsters' chances of overcoming these situations in the foreseeable future, has been prevalent for some time now.⁶¹

With the economic and financial crisis starting in 2008, job prospects became even dimmer for individuals with few qualifications, who have to wait much longer before finding a job than their peers with diplomas. Again, non-Europeans in Belgium carry the heaviest burden: they are overrepresented in vulnerable and ill-paid temporary jobs. In 2015, the assessment by the Belgian Ministry of Social Security of the dramatic situation in the job market was beyond dispute: 'Regarding the socio-economic position of persons with a migrant background, Belgium is among the worst performing EU Member States.'⁶²

Educational segregation is considered one of the main culprits for this dramatic Belgian (but also French) situation, according to the OECD. A disproportionately large share of pupils with a migration background are shunted into 'concentration schools' (schools with a high percentage of non-native pupils) in cities like Brussels, where unemployment rates among non-Europeans are already sky-high.⁶³ Poverty rates among unqualified workers has dramatically increased between 2005 and 2014, while decreasing among the qualified, with a growing social divide between Belgians with or without qualifications as a result, according to the aforementioned assessment of the Belgian Ministry of Social Security.

⁶⁰ *De Morgen*, 30 September 2014.

⁶¹ Rik Coolsaet, *Between al-Andalus and a failing integration. Europe's pursuit of a long-term counterterrorism strategy in the post-al-Qaeda era*. Ghent/Brussels, Academia Press/Egmont, Egmont Paper 5, 2005, p. 11.

⁶² http://socialsecurity.belgium.be/sites/default/files/analysis-social-situation-and-protection-belgium-2015-synthesis-en_0.pdf.

⁶³ www.skolo.org/IMG/pdf/dossier_pisa_fr.pdf.

Socio-economic inequality is indeed intertwined with a rising socio-cultural inequality in Europe. A new fault line has developed between people who have enjoyed higher education and people without such qualifications. With a certain sense of cultural superiority, the former tend to look down at the latter. Both groups moreover tend to live in 'relatively separate worlds'. Urban segregation based upon wealth is increasingly a reality on the ground in Europe.⁶⁴

Fourthly, an additional factor of potential estrangement puts pressure on a very precise segment of youth in Europe, and in Belgium. Exactly 30 years ago, the French weekly *Figaro Magazine* featured the portrait of a veiled Marianne to illustrate the cover story: '*Serons-nous encore Français dans trente ans?*' ('Will we still be French 30 years from now?'). The children and grandchildren of the migrant workers that Belgian (and other European) authorities invited to come *en masse* in the 1960s to compensate for domestic labour shortages are still being confronted on a daily basis with their origins. They are still routinely labelled 'migrant communities' – notwithstanding the fact that these families have now been present on European soil for three or four generations, and that many of them have acquired Belgian (or other European) nationality.

After 9/11, it became standard practice to equate 'immigrant' with 'Muslim'. The significant diversity within diasporic communities from Muslim-majority countries was thus compressed into a single monolithic category labelled 'Muslim community', conflating ethnicity with religion.

This is part of the European variety of identity politics the world has been experiencing since the 1990s:

New today is the rise of identity politics. In vastly different contexts and in different ways – from indigenous people in Latin America to religious minorities in South Asia to ethnic minorities in the Balkans and Africa to immigrants in Western Europe – people are mobilizing anew around old grievances along ethnic, religious, racial and cultural lines, demanding that their identities be acknowledged, appreciated and accommodated by wider society. Suffering discrimination and marginalisation from social, economic and political opportunities, they are also demanding social justice. ... Why these movements today? They are not isolated. They are part of a historic process of social change, of struggles for cultural freedom, of new frontiers in the advance of human freedoms and democracy. They are propelled and shaped by the spread of democracy, which is giving movements more political space for protest, and the advance of globalisation, which is creating new networks of

⁶⁴ *Gescheiden werelden. Een verkenning van sociaal-economische tegenstellingen in Nederland [Worlds apart. A survey of socio-economic fault lines in the Netherlands]*. The Hague, The Netherlands Institute for Social Research, 2014, pp. 16, 203 and 228. See also: Tiit Tammaru, et.al., *Socio-economic segregation in European capital cities*. London, Routledge, 2016.

alliances and presenting new challenges. ... These struggles over cultural identity, if left unmanaged or managed poorly, can quickly become one of the greatest sources of instability within states and between them – and in so doing trigger conflict that takes development backwards. Identity politics that polarize people and groups are creating fault lines between ‘us’ and ‘them’.⁶⁵

For the children and grandchildren of the 1960s and 1970s migrants, one way of positioning themselves in times of enhanced identity politics has been to emphasise the religious affiliation that society constantly throws in their face.⁶⁶ As a result of this, some think of themselves as Muslims first rather than as citizens of their country.⁶⁷ ‘Proud to be a Muslim’ became the theme in lyrics and Facebook accounts. It is easy to compare this development with the 1960s ‘Black-is-beautiful’ movement in the United States. Around 2008, a ‘Cool Islam’ movement emerged, developing into a youth subculture with its own rap, designer clothes and magazines.⁶⁸ Those who could afford it started to look for opportunities to emigrate to more welcoming places, like Montreal or New York.⁶⁹ But many more don’t have the means to embark on such a journey.

It is extremely difficult to comprehend the impact four decades of political, media and social misgivings that one section of European citizenry has had to endure, whether or not they are highly qualified. The sense of inequity that results from this is a breeding ground for frustration and anger. ‘Before, I used to be really mad. Because I was not happy. Because it felt like I was stuck. I would end up as a third-rate film director shooting wedding parties for the rest of my life. I felt as if I was less than nothing. I think that all adolescents have to go through that phase. But perhaps, it depends. If you’re a super well-developed, gorgeous rich guy who is being watched by all the girls, then you might be less pissed at the world,’ the successful Belgian movie director Adil El Arbi once quipped.⁷⁰

Struggling with identity and self-image might have been demanding for youngsters since time immemorial, but society today is demanding, complex, and increasingly unequal. Belgium was once lauded for the way Islamic teaching was organised in the country and therefore considered as a model by Muslim communities in other EU Member States.⁷¹ But this hardly made Belgium a model for the integration of

⁶⁵ *Human Development Report 2004. Cultural Diversity in today’s diverse world.* Washington, UNDP, 2004, pp. 1-2.

⁶⁶ *Intolerance and Discrimination against Muslims in the EU. Developments since September 2001.* Helsinki, International Federation for Human Rights, March 2005, p. 12.

⁶⁷ *Muslims in Europe.* Pew Global Attitudes Project, 6 July 2006.

⁶⁸ Maruta Herding, *Inventing the Muslim Cool: Islamic Youth Culture in Western Europe.* Bielefeld, Transcript, 2013.

⁶⁹ Nadia Fadil, in *De Morgen* (Belgian Dutch-language newspaper), 15 April 2013.

⁷⁰ *De Standaard Weekblad*, 8 November 2014.

⁷¹ *Intolerance and discrimination against Muslims in the EU. Developments since September 11.* Vienna, International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights, March 2005, pp. 23 and 39-48.

newcomers. ‘Assimilation, for a Belgian with non-European roots, is a near-impossible task,’ Chika Unigwe wrote. Married to a Belgian and naturalised Belgian, the author of the novels *On Black Sisters Street* and *Night Dancer* was astonished to discover how non-natives are constantly being confronted with their ethnic (or religious) origins, even if they are born in the country.⁷²

(Great) grandchildren of migrants from the 1960s, born and raised in Belgium, are still being labelled by the ethnic origin of their grandparents. It should thus come as no surprise that the Eurobarometer survey identifies Belgium among the top five EU Member States where discrimination on the basis of ethnic origin is considered widespread (together with the Netherlands, Sweden, France and Denmark).⁷³

Compared to European averages, Belgium also has a poor track record in many socio-cultural and socio-economic categories. None of them taken in isolation explains the motives behind a departure to Syria. But these things add up. Perhaps this combination of (perceived) lack of prospects and a less than welcoming environment comes closest to identifying a significant, but often neglected, feature contributing to the ‘no future’ subculture that is the main driver of the comparatively high number of Belgian youngsters leaving for Syria.

This demanding social environment is especially strongly felt among Belgian-Moroccan families. These are indeed the most exposed and vulnerable to the complex mosaic of overlapping pressures in today’s society. Religion, once again, has nothing to do with this. While the Belgian-Turkish community (itself no monolith) possesses a network of self-organisations, the Belgian-Moroccan community is much more fragmented and individualised, thus offering less shelter. The latter is also more concentrated in the most disadvantaged city districts. Combining all these elements, the children (and grandchildren) of the Moroccan migrants of the 1960s and 1970s are more likely to face downward mobility than their Belgian-Turkish peers. Research has made it clear that feelings of exclusion are significantly more prevalent among the Belgian-Moroccan youngsters (the same is also the case in the Netherlands).⁷⁴ The disappointment of not being recognised and accepted as equal citizens is thus powerfully felt among Belgian-Moroccan youngsters, more so than among their peers with Turkish roots. The latter enjoy more opportunities for upward mobility within Belgian-Turkish networks.⁷⁵

⁷² Chika Unigwe, ‘The near-impossibility of assimilation in Belgium’, in *New York Times*, 25 November 2015.

⁷³ Eurobarometer 437, October 2015 (<http://ec.europa.eu/COMMFrontOffice/PublicOpinion/index.cfm/Survey/getSurveyDetail/instruments/SPECIAL/yearFrom/1973/yearTo/2015/surveyKy/2077>).

⁷⁴ Kris Vancluyse a.o., *Gekleurde steden. Autochtonen en allochtonen over samenleven [Coloured Cities]*. Brugge, Vandenbroele, 2009; Mieke Maliepaard and Mérove Gijsberts, *Moslim in Nederland 2012 [Muslims in the Netherlands]*. The Hague, The Netherlands Institute for Social Research, November 2012, p. 20.

⁷⁵ Corinne Torrekens and Ilke Adams, *Belgo-Marocains, Belgo-Turcs: (auto)portrait de nos concitoyens*. Brussels, King Baudouin Foundation, May 2015, pp. 166, 168, 178-179 and 212.

Hence it will come as no surprise that youngsters with Moroccan roots are overrepresented in the ranks of the foreign fighters from Belgium.

This fault line between society and part of the younger generation is barely acknowledged by mainstream politics, and is overshadowed by the reductionist debate on the compatibility of Islam with Western values. In the parliamentary debates in Belgium following the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks and the subsequent events in Verviers, the argument has been advanced that ‘society cannot be blamed for radicalisation’, or ‘the constitutional state guarantees equal rights for every one’. Unfortunately, this is not being perceived the same way by at least a number of youngsters. Some no longer believe in equal opportunities. Some do not have the impression that they are confronted with a multitude of choices in all dimensions of life, as mentioned above. Quite the contrary. They feel as if they have ‘no future’ as their horizon. They face an impasse and nobody seems to be able to get them out of it. ‘*Un sentiment d’abandon*’ (‘a feeling of abandonment’), was the prevailing emotion Latifa Ibn Ziaten, the mother of one of the soldiers killed by Mohammed Merah in 2012, had sensed when speaking at schools in the French *cités*.⁷⁶

From social environment to personal motives

Undoubtedly, this social environment is a difficult burden to carry for youngsters as a group, but it is even harder to cope with if one has the impression of not being able to enjoy the same opportunities as one’s peers. And it is still harder for those for whom this is not merely a feeling but a reality, because they live in difficult circumstances in urban neighbourhoods where prospects of decent work are hard to come by.

Research has over and over again indicated that mere socio-economic profiles prove insufficient as an explanation for terrorism. A number of European foreign fighters have college degrees. They do not all come from deprived neighbourhoods, nor did they all face a precarious socio-economic and professional situation. But in Belgium, a majority nevertheless does. Especially at the beginning, the bulk of the individuals going to Syria originated from a limited number of disadvantaged inner-city boroughs. No comprehensive analysis of the socio-economic background of Belgian foreign fighters has yet been produced, but the available information indicates that a majority of them were moreover facing personal difficulties (including strained family relations, psychosocial hardship, early encounters with policing and justice). Even Syria travellers who were born in families without financial strains but living in depressed city districts were thus immersed in the ambient ‘no future’ atmosphere, through the dynamics of local friendship networks.

⁷⁶ http://www.francetvinfo.fr/faits-divers/terrorisme/le-message-de-paix-de-latifa-ibn-ziaten_826641.html.

This background overlaps with the Dutch foreign fighter contingent. A study of 140 actual and potential Syria travellers, as compiled by the Counterterrorism and Extremism team in the Central Unit of the Dutch National Police, reveals a comparable environment. Many of them showed signs of previous problematic and/or deviant behaviour (including personality disorders), came from broken families and had experienced domestic violence. The educational level was below that of the average population (none had a completed higher education) and, if employed, they were mainly in irregular jobs. In brief, 'males with immigrant and socially vulnerable backgrounds dominate the sample'.⁷⁷

In the case of Belgium and the Netherlands, the predominantly lower class background of the fourth wave foreign fighters is thus similar to that of their third wave predecessors.

But IS' pull is broader, attracting members of inner-city gangs with a propensity for violence and deviant behaviour, as well as youngsters who simply no longer feel connected to society, the less well-off as well as the better-off. The perceived lack of prospects provides the conducive environment for the wide array of personal, age-related motivations through which a youngster may be tempted by an escape to Syria. Posts on social media refer to Tupac Shakur, icon of American gangsta rap, shot in 1996.⁷⁸ At least some of the Belgian (and European) foreign fighters identify with his life and his rap lyrics, which indeed seem to fit well into the world outlook of this group. The foreign fighter phenomenon is rooted in a specific youth subculture that has developed in reaction to an environment young people feel and perceive as complex, demanding, unjust. They feel as if they don't have a stake and a place in that society. The ambient pessimism leaves no place for any hope for improvement and the resignation of their parents to this state of affairs is for some of them a supplementary factor in their decision.

But complementary motives can also play a role, and sometimes a major one. At the outbreak of the civil war in Syria in particular, ideological extremism and anger at the indifference of the international community to the plight of the Syrian population have been motives for a number of them. More malicious motives have been at play too: some hope to evade prison sentences by fleeing to Syria. Others display a 'jihadi is cool' attitude, or are animated by Rambo-style violence. 'They've watched too many Rambo movies,' a Syrian activist in Kafr Nabl stated to the *New York Times*.⁷⁹ Some are undeniably psychopaths, while still others are adventure-seekers, looking for something more thrilling than everyday life in Belgium.

⁷⁷ Anton W. Weenink, 'Behavioral Problems and Disorders among Radicals in Police Files', in *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 2015, 9:2 (www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/416/html).

⁷⁸ Amil Khan, 'Al Qaeda's New Front: Jihadi Rap,' in *Politico*, 31 August 2014; *Der Spiegel*, op.cit. Kevin Powell gives a detailed account of the life and work of Tupac Shakur in 'Bury me like a G: The short life and violent death of Tupac Shakur', in *Rolling Stone*, 31 October 1996.

⁷⁹ *New York Times*, 4 December 2014.

The fourth wave of foreign fighters is thus not about radicalisation, as is often touted by authorities and the media. Neither is it rooted in a fundamentalist reading of the scriptures. It originates in a small subculture at the margins of society and of Muslim communities with whom they do not feel connected either. For most of them it is about personal motives, as Marc Trévidic wrote. It is tantamount to escaping from an unappealing everyday life and turning their back on a society to which they no longer feel connected.

Syria provides them with an opportunity.

PULL FACTORS: WHY SYRIA – AND WHY IS?

Much more than the 'old' al-Qaeda, IS has become the object of all kinds of fantasies for all kinds of people, from thrill-seekers to the mentally unstable, who all want to be part of IS because it offers them a once in a lifetime, instant opportunity to go from 'zero to hero' in their own eyes.

The gravitational pull of IS stems from its unique combination of facilitating factors.

Geography is one of them. Syria is easily accessible, especially for youngsters, in comparison to the earlier jihadi war zones. Hence it offers the opportunity that had been lacking for candidate foreign fighters since 2010. Rapidly, ISIS became a real magnet, attracting the bulk of foreign fighters. It was the direct successor to an earlier, also extremely brutal, terrorist movement in Iraq founded by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in response to the US invasion. Notwithstanding the name it adopted by late 2004 ('al-Qaeda in the Land of the Two Rivers', later rebranded as 'al-Qaeda in Iraq'), the relationship between al-Zarqawi's group and al-Qaeda itself often was tense, at times even antagonistic. Both organisations differed on tactics, strategy and personal ambitions.

On 29 June 2014, ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi announced the establishment of a caliphate. ISIS morphed into 'Islamic State' (IS) – or Daesh, its Arabic acronym.

The rapid ascent of IS made it the most successful of all current jihadist groups. The impression of irresistible expansion since January 2014 undeniably increased its appeal to potential volunteers. Its 24-hour online operation, but also the hyperboles used in the Western media and in political discourse emphasizing the existential threat that IS was said to represent to the West, reinforced among Western youths its appeal as a movement of winners. Winners attract winners.

But most importantly, it has a catalogue of solutions on offer for each of the personal motives the potential volunteers bring with them. IS seemingly offers a future, prospects and a feeling of finally being able to take control of their destiny. It suggests to them empowerment, belonging, warm camaraderie, respect, recognition, adventure, heroism and martyrdom.

Having turned his back on IS, Abu Ibrahim (who is mentioned above, and was associated with IS' intelligence offices) mentioned that the thing he enjoyed most in Daesh was the friendship between fighters. There were groups of Americans, French and Arabs, but they really cared about each other, and there was no discrimination, at least according to his account. But at the same time, he could not but notice how the group's fighters – especially the foreigners – dealt with local people as if they were the lowest possible class.⁸⁰

⁸⁰ Vera Mironova, et.al, op.cit.

IS projects a new Utopia of peace, harmony and universal brotherhood, a potent alternative to a life of drugs and petty crime, with simple and straightforward rules. Moral absolutes have always attracted adolescents and this is also exploited by IS – not only in words and discourse, but also by acts: destroying ancient monuments and relics strongly appeals to those who want a clear and absolute break with all things past, in order to create a brand-new world imagined as a recovered, righteous caliphate.⁸¹

IS furthermore offers material wealth: a salary and a villa with a pool.⁸² It offers, for those who join in, power over others, and even a license for viciousness⁸³ in the name of a higher goal.

Last but certainly not least, IS' solutions are all the more credible, since they are presented as within immediate reach, thanks to IS' seizure of large chunks of territory in Iraq and Syria. Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda was never in a position to offer this. Nowadays, al-Qaeda resembles a small elitist vanguard group, whereas IS has ambitions to become a broad, mass movement.

The strength of this pull factor is intimately linked to the maintenance of territorial and virtual progress, IS' aura of invincibility and the sense of inevitable victory within reach. For that reason, IS needs to use all means available to stay in the media spotlight and to remain at the centre of international and regional political discourse. To that end, it will pursue its brutal tactics, considering it the best propaganda for enticing new volunteers. IS will remain a magnet until its momentum has passed and its winner's image crumbles.

Time, however, works against IS. Its spread has been stymied in Syria and its military capabilities degraded by incessant bombings. Turkey is tightening its border with Syria. The organisation has been dislodged from the Iraqi cities of Ramadi, Baiji and Tikrit, and the operation to oust IS from Mosul will be launched in the first half of 2016. As was the case with al-Qaeda,⁸⁴ IS' legitimacy will undoubtedly decrease as a result of its brutal tactics, but also of the realisation that Muslims themselves are again the principal victims of IS' actions. A recent poll indicated that the Arab world as a whole is overwhelmingly opposed to IS, with 89% of respondents stating that they have negative views of the group, compared to only 7% of Arabs who view the extremist organisation positively.⁸⁵

⁸¹ Ian Morris, 'The struggle for soft power in the Middle East', in *Stratfor, Global Affairs*, 9 September 2015.

⁸² *New York Times*, 16 June 2015.

⁸³ C.J. Chivers, 'Behand the Black Flag: The Recruitment of an ISIS killer', in *New York Times*, 20 December 2015.

⁸⁴ *Islamic terrorism: common concern for Muslim and Western publics*. Washington, Pew, 14 July 2005 (<http://pewglobal.org/reports/pdf/248.pdf>). Ipsos-Stat conducted a survey in Jordan after the November 2005 Amman attacks. For results see: <http://www.alghad.jo/index.php?news=56817>

⁸⁵ *Arab Opinion Index 2015*, Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 21 December 2015 (<http://english.dohainstitute.org/content/cb12264b-1eca-402b-926a-5d068ac60011>).

LINKING PUSH AND PULL FACTORS: THE ROLE OF SHARIA4BELGIUM AND ALLIES

The comparatively high number of Syria travellers originating from Belgium is undoubtedly also the result of the presence of a number of small extremist groups that played the unique role of hyphen between push and pull factors in the early stages of the Syrian crisis. In Belgium, this refers in particular to Sharia4Belgium (S4B), Resto du Tawhid in Schaerbeek (where Sean Pidgeon volunteered), and the members of the old GICM cell (Groupe Islamique Combattant Marocain) in Maaseik, once they were released from prison. The leaders of these groups were themselves interlinked and on average older than the rest of the members of these groups.

The crucial role played by such groups in the current foreign fighters phenomenon becomes clear when examining the places of origin of the individuals who left for Syria in the first phase of departures. Most came from urban neighbourhoods where these groups had been most active, such as Antwerp, Vilvorde and the Brussels municipalities of Schaerbeek, Laeken, and Molenbeek. Moreover, peer pressure played a decisive role in this first phase. One had no choice but to join in, going to Syria being considered ‘hot’.

When sentencing Sharia4Belgium figurehead Fouad Belkacem in February 2012, the Antwerp court emphasised how the discourse of Belkacem had become ‘increasingly provocative and violent’ since the creation of the organisation in early 2010. Some of the core group travelled to the Middle East (Lebanon) as early as 2010 for ideological and physical training, according to the verdict in the subsequent February 2015 Sharia4Belgium trial. This indicates a deliberate strategy by the groups’ leaders – years before the start of the civil war in Syria – to use *groupthink* to mould the minds of those involved towards participation in violent action, either in Belgium or elsewhere. S4B played into the diverse personal expectations of its supporters in the same way IS would so successfully do some years later. Its highly publicised activist mode – exactly the opposite *modus operandi* to the clandestine operations of the older jihadi cells – helped to cultivate a group identity, so that participants felt as if they finally belonged to a welcoming in-group. The highlighting within the group of the ‘humiliation’ and ‘oppression of Muslims worldwide’ solidified the us-versus-them outlook. The increasing emphasis on violence and street disorder satisfied those who were seeking some form of activism. Preparation for martyrdom reflected the need for heroism and respect for others. Belkacem was a hero for his followers, ‘some sort of pop star’.⁸⁶

⁸⁶ Kris Luyckx, counsel for Jejoen Bontinck (a repentant Syria fighter) in *De Standaard*, 30 August 2014.

Anjem Choudary, the British leader of Sharia4UK, was one of the sources of inspiration for the leadership of S4B, whom he manipulated and guided into their deliberate strategy. They, in turn, tried to stimulate like-minded groups elsewhere, but had only minimal success. These and other transnational bonds nevertheless reinforced the group's identity and the feeling of being part of a broad and global movement.⁸⁷

Yet, the facilitating role of S4B and allies should not be overestimated, nor should the impact of social media on their role as 'recruitment multipliers' be overstated. They could only have this impact because the environment conducive for their success was present. Without this facilitative breeding ground, the S4B discourse would have fallen on deaf ears. As in the past, the narrative – the extremists' ideology – is by itself not the key to their success. Today too, context is essential for understanding the current foreign fighters phenomenon in Europe or elsewhere.⁸⁸ Even at the time of writing, Belgians are still leaving for Syria (albeit in smaller numbers than before), often teenagers and tweens, girls as well as boys, sometimes entire families, or mothers with small children, even though organisations such as Sharia4Belgium themselves have ceased to exist. Their role was taken over by peer recruitment and by small, fluid networks of friends and kin, sometimes set up by individuals who do not wish to leave themselves, but still want to have the feeling of being part of a heroic battle. This 'bandwagoning' effect makes it particularly difficult for intelligence services to detect new departures.⁸⁹

⁸⁷ Martijn de Koning e.a., *Eilanden in een zee van ongeloof. Het verzet van activistische da'wa-netwerken in België, Nederland en Duitsland*. Nijmegen, Radboud University, 16 December 2014, pp. 116.

⁸⁸ For Tajikistan, see: Karoun Demirjian, 'New Russian migration laws boosts Islamic State recruitment in Tajikistan', in *The Guardian*, 14 July 2015. For Tunisia, see: Serene Assir, 'Forlorn Tunisia youth ripe for radicalization', in *The Daily Star* (Lebanon), 3 July 2015.

⁸⁹ Jaak Raes, o.c.

GAUGING THE THREAT

Attacks by returnees have been a constant concern for authorities ever since the scale of the fourth foreign fighters wave became public. Trying to gauge the danger and interpret the strategic rationale of IS' attacks outside the core territory of Syria and Iraq 'is daunting'.⁹⁰ Reliable information is scarce and IS' decision-making procedures hard to decipher. It is thus difficult to ascertain to what degree upper IS echelons are involved in directing foreign attacks.

Clearly, not all returning foreign fighters are ticking time bombs. Not all return harbouring ideas about attacking their home countries. In November 2015, the Dutch intelligence services concluded that most returning foreign fighters in the Netherlands did not pose a violent threat.⁹¹ In Belgium, only one third of the returnees are arrested and sent to jail. But all countries nevertheless worry about the potential threat these returnees might represent. The sheer number of returnees to monitor overstretches the human and technical capabilities of police and intelligence services. The threat these returnees represent ranges from post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms to actual ambitions of attacking their home countries. 'Frustrated travellers', who are prevented from reaching Syria, are considered a potential risk too.

The succession of terrorist plots and actual attacks in 2015 raised the question within intelligence circles as to whether IS had changed its strategy. While it was assumed that it was originally preoccupied with building its caliphate, some have suggested that foreign attacks became a new front in reaction to the US-led coalition intervention in September 2014. In early 2016, Europol suggested that IS had developed 'an external action command trained for special forces style attacks in the international environment'.⁹²

Solid evidence of the existence of such a dedicated structure is hard to come by. Moreover, closer examination of plots in the West since 2014 seems to indicate that attacking the West (and foreign countries in general) has been part IS' range of activities at least since the declaration of the caliphate in June 2014. The organisation seems to have always espoused foreign attacks whenever the opportunity presented itself, as was the case with Mehdi Nemmouche. In Syria, he probably liaised with other Belgian-French foreign fighters in order to plan his shooting at the Jewish Museum.

⁹⁰ Shiraz Maher, 'Death to the grayzone', in *New Statesman*, 20-26 November 2015.

⁹¹ https://english.nctv.nl/currenttopics/press_releases/2015/threat-level-for-the-netherlands-remains-substantial-real-and-complex-threat.aspx.

⁹² See note 19.

What has changed, however, in the course of 2015 is the increasing professionalization of foreign attacks and the expanding interaction between grassroots groups and operatives in Syria and Iraq. Clearly, the successive attacks in 2015 show a 'lessons learned' pattern by which each new plot attempted to correct the failings and the weaknesses of earlier ones. Planners are increasingly sensitive to the prerequisites of operational security. The financial means involved (for armament, logistics and travel) also seem to indicate at least some support in Syria. Even if local networks are partly financed by criminal activities, the succession of plots required an amount of money that possibly was not derived solely from local activities. Communication, coordination and shelter provided for returnees during the 2015 plots also seem to hint at some degree of structured planning.

But the actual organisation of the attacks probably resides with local operatives. This explains why armed assaults have now become the preferred mode of action. These are easier to conduct without external assistance than complex bombing plots.⁹³ Assault weapons have become the weapons of choice and localised urban shootings might be for some time the new *modus operandi*. Mohammed Merah was the first to introduce this type of operation in 2012. The failed Verviers plot and the Paris attacks were indeed of the same type.

Due to the opportunity offered by a real training field in Syria and Iraq, experiences and techniques can now be transferred onto a new generation of wannabe terrorists. Moreover, as was the case earlier with Afghanistan, networks of personal inter-linkages are again being established. The longer individuals stay in the Levant, the greater the risk that violence becomes trivialised for them, hardening their mental setup to the point of envisaging suicide attacks and strengthening their determination to attack their home country.

Some of the Belgian foreign fighters have now been in the battlefield of the Levant for over three years. They are not all operating together on the battlefield. Like other foreign fighters, they have mostly been organised in linguistically delineated battalions, or *katibas*. Most French-speaking Belgians and French fighters in turn have been integrated into the *katiba al-Battar*, one of the strongest vanguard battalions of IS.⁹⁴ Originally a Libyan-dominated fighting group, it has been spotted in some of the heaviest battles in Syria and in Iraq acting as the IS' equivalent of the Foreign Legion. But the French foreign fighters within this *katiba* do not always seem to be held in high regard. They are accused of behaving as if they were still in their *cit  *.⁹⁵ Nevertheless, this *katiba* seems to have been the matrix from which many of the attacks against France and Belgium sprang.⁹⁶ As was the case in Afghanistan, even

⁹³ 'From Failed Bombings to Armed Jihadist Assaults', in *Stratfor, Security Weekly*, 22 May 2010.

⁹⁴ Michael Weiss, 'Confessions of an ISIS spy', in *The Daily Beast*, 18 November 2015.

⁹⁵ *Le Monde*, 6 January 2016.

⁹⁶ Elise Vincent, 'Les liens de sang entre djihadistes fran  ais et belges', in *Le Monde*, 23 December 2015.

after IS in the Levant has been defeated, these networks will continue for some time, before they too will eventually wane.

Terrorism must be kept in proper perspective. However serious a security risk they present, returning Western foreign fighters do not represent for their home countries the same existential threat as they and their peers do for the people and the countries of the Levant, where they do indeed threaten the foundation of states and governments. One day, IS' appeal will have reached its pinnacle and the hype surrounding the organisation will evaporate, as the result of the very same forces that put an end to the earlier waves of foreign fighters: enhanced law enforcement, annihilation of the staging ground in the Levant, disgust caused by IS' atrocities, the apprehension that, this time too, other Muslims are the organisations' principal victims, and, specific to the fourth wave of IS-inspired foreign fighters, disenchantment with living conditions in the caliphate and the realisation that its apocalyptic predictions fail to materialise.⁹⁷

But until that happens, Europe will have to get used to the 'new normal' of local attacks, plots, false alarms and disruption. This security risk needs to be matched by good intelligence and law enforcement, the twin pillars of classical European counterterrorism. The major difference the current situation represents is the sheer volume of potential perpetrators, overwhelming security and intelligence mechanisms and leading to calls for far-reaching legislative and constitutional changes. But Baltasar Garzón, Spain's most prominent counterterrorism magistrate, remains adamant: '[After 2005], we didn't act differently as when we acted against ETA. We used the existing legal arsenal. ... The sole answer to terror is the legislation and the law.'⁹⁸

The major threat we face might well be one of our own making. Terrorism is all about the psychological and political impact attacks seek to provoke. Knee-jerk reactions overinflate the threat and misjudge the origins of the fourth foreign fighters wave, thus risking an unravelling of the social fabric of our society, which is precisely the goal jihadi groups have been pursuing all along.

⁹⁷ 'Time is working against the Islamic State', in *Stratfor, Security Weekly*, 5 November 2015.

⁹⁸ Baltasar Garzón and Dolores Delgado, quoted in *De Standaard Weekblad*, 2 January 2016.

LOOKING BEYOND RADICALISATION – POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Eliminating the push factors that motivate European youngsters to depart for the Syrian-Iraqi war theatre cannot possibly be addressed by Muslim communities alone. Not only is Islam not the primary driver of their behaviour, their networks moreover operate at the margins of local community life, Muslim organisations and mosques, with whom they have almost no interaction. Nor can the push factors be neutralised solely by local authorities, however crucial their role might be in attempting to reconnect (potential) Syria travellers with society.

‘Can you deradicalise a Muslim?’ a respected Belgian newspaper once wondered, undoubtedly not realizing how belittling such a headline was to Belgian citizens of Muslim faith. It expresses a widely held view in Europe, and in Belgium too, that Islam, and in particular a Salafist reading of it, is the key problem and that the solution is to ‘instil radical Muslims with more appropriate thoughts.’⁹⁹ This has been the angle chosen by the UK government of David Cameron: ‘The root cause of this threat to our security is quite clear. It is a poisonous ideology of Islamist extremism that’s condemned by all faiths and faith leaders.’¹⁰⁰ Other governments have followed suit. After the January 2015 attacks in Paris, Cameron’s French colleague Manuel Valls also endorsed this approach: ‘We have an enemy, and we have to identify it as such, it’s radical Islam and one of its elements, Salafism’.¹⁰¹ In the Netherlands too, a vigorous public debate is on-going on the relations between Salafism and jihadism, the former being called the conveyor belt to the latter. The Belgian prime minister Charles Michel also opined that the culprit is ‘a fanatical ideology that want to impose its obscurantist vision through extreme violence.’¹⁰²

In media and official discourse – but also in deradicalisation programmes – radicalisation is often still narrowed down to the notion of a radical narrative that an individual catches as if it was a flu, and which then inexorably pushes him or her to its seemingly logical end, terrorism. This is a caricature of what a radicalisation process really represents. It is also a way of putting all the blame on the individual and his family and at the same time neglecting the role society plays. From its inception, the concept of ‘radicalisation’ itself was already an oversimplification of an extremely complex phenomenon at the intersection of individual pathways and a societal context. In as far as the past can serve as a guide, efforts aimed at

⁹⁹ *De Standaard*, 24 October 2014 and 9 January 2015.

¹⁰⁰ Quoted in *The Guardian*, 29 August 2014.

¹⁰¹ Manuel Valls before the National Assembly, 18 November 2018. Quoted in *Le Monde*, 25 November 2015.

¹⁰² Charles Michel quoted in *Le Monde*, 1 February 2016.

addressing the extremist ideology – the narrative – have seldom proven to be successful.¹⁰³

An alternative explanation puts the blame exclusively on society, unable and unwilling to accept newcomers and address structural discrimination. The foreign fighter phenomenon is supposed to signal the failure of integration policies. This, too, is a reductionist statement of convenience. It not only reduces the individuals involved to mere puppets with no free will, it also turns a blind eye to the numerous success stories of migrants and their kin, successfully integrating into their new home country. It also overestimates the size of the subgroup in question. The jihadi scene in Belgium, as in the rest of Europe, is small and isolated, both in quantitative (numbers) as in qualitative (influence) terms.

Europol recently suggested dropping the term ‘radicalisation’ altogether, and replacing it with ‘violent extremist social trend’.¹⁰⁴ Today’s foreign fighters phenomenon is indeed not the result of the radicalisation process as it is usually understood (and succinctly described above). The fourth wave of foreign fighters is essentially an alternative pathway for deviant behaviour or, for some, a journey to Utopia, rooted in a ‘no future’ subculture. Vulnerability, frustration, perceptions of inequity and a feeling that by travelling to Syria they have nothing to lose and everything to gain, are common traits among those involved. For most of them it is thus akin to street gangs, drug trafficking, (juvenile) delinquency, with a larger-than-life dimension added in. But the route that they choose is one that not only leads them to extremism and terrorist violence, but also engenders a fierce backlash in their home country by enhancing the animosity against Islam, Muslims and migrants – which is precisely part of the environment they fled from in the first place.

Following the protests in Baltimore in April 2015, Barack Obama drew a surprising parallel that can be easily applied to the current foreign fighters phenomenon. After meeting youngsters in the Bronx, he referred to ‘a sense of unfairness and powerlessness’:

We see ourselves in these young men. I grew up without a dad. I grew up lost sometimes and adrift, not having a sense of a clear path. The only difference between me and a lot of other young men in this neighborhood and all across the country is that I grew up in an environment that was a little more forgiving. And at some critical points, I had some people who cared enough about me to give me a second chance, or a third chance, or give me a little guidance when I needed it, or to open up a door that might otherwise been closed. I was lucky.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³ Tore Bjørgo and John Horgan, *Leaving Terrorism Behind*. New York/London, Routledge, 2009, p. 4.

¹⁰⁴ See note 19.

¹⁰⁵ *Remarks by the President at Launch of the My Brother’s Keeper Alliance*. New York, West Bronx, 4 mei 2015. (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/05/04/remarks-president-launch-my-brothers-keeper-alliance>).

In the wake of the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks, the French novelist Erik Orsenna designated in the same vein '*le terreau de désespérance*' [the breeding ground of hopelessness] as the real culprit. This description closely fits Latifa Ibn Ziaten's 'feeling of abandonment'. In her book *Mort pour la France* (2013), she passionately argues with youngsters, including those living in the Izards district of Toulouse where Mohammed Merah grew up: reconcile with the country where you were born and raised. But at the same time, Marianne too is in need of some soul searching in order to overcome her own demons and to take care of all her children – without exception.

Is there a light at the end of the tunnel? Following the series of tragedies in 2014 and 2015, authorities decided upon highly visible, far-reaching repressive measures. These are the easiest part of the answer. Some of the measures were merely meant as window-dressing. Others might turn out to be irrelevant or, worse, counterproductive. But at the same time there seems to be an increased consensus, at least within the Belgian polity, that repression alone will never be adequate by itself, and that prevention is equally crucial.

'Prevention', however, comes in many different forms and colours. Understood as the strategy to counter the push factors behind the youngsters' rush into Syria, it is a complex endeavour that will need time, resources, patience and forward-thinking. Results will never be straightforward. Compared to repressive measures, preventive efforts will always be more circumspect and difficult to gauge. Moreover, prevention lends itself less to political grandstanding. Even more important is realising that government action can only be part of the solution, perhaps even only a small part. In the realm of security, authorities play an irreplaceable role. In prevention, however, responsibility is much more widely shared and the involvement of many is needed.

Fortunately, today authorities, Muslim communities and local organisations feel pressed to address the issue head-on. Their quest for explanations and remedies to resist the lure of IS has visibly become more persistent, judging by the rapidly increasing number of meetings (both public and informal), workshops, in-house discussion groups and self-help groups for affected parents.

Stopping youngsters from leaving in the first place is the essence of effective prevention. Each departure represents a human tragedy. From a place where only the law of the strongest prevails, no one returns unharmed, and certainly not a teenager or a young person in his or her twenties, who is at odds with himself or herself, and with society. Neither polity nor academia has fully come to grips with the fault line in society that gave birth to the subculture in which this fourth wave of foreign fighters thrive.

The real issue is to find a way to make them understand that they have a future and thus a stake in society. No deradicalisation nor disengagement program will bear

fruit if it fails to recognise the importance of addressing the context that permitted the emergence of the current foreign fighters wave and that provides motivation and direction for groups and individuals to use violence.¹⁰⁶

To this end, the efforts of many are needed: government, civil society, media and citizens. If this is not addressed, once IS' momentum has passed and its winners' image crumbled, other hot spots will arise and again attract youngsters into similar journeys. Only when hope in the future is offered will the breeding ground dry up and youngsters cease to be drawn 'to a country they do not know, in a culture they are not familiar with, and where a language is spoken that they do not understand.'¹⁰⁷

Policy recommendations

Just like the previous three waves of foreign fighters since the 1980s, the fourth wave of foreign fighters will ultimately end. But the time needed to reach this point also depends on the measures we collectively take in reacting to the phenomenon. What might effectively contribute to countering the fourth wave of foreign fighters – and protect a new generation from following suit?

Firstly, **reframe the debate**. The explanation for the behaviour of (candidate) foreign fighters 'is found not in how they think, but rather in how they feel.'¹⁰⁸ Religion is not of the essence. Personal motives are, in a complex interplay between individual pathways and context. Unless we understand how these motivations derive from a 'no future' subculture and not simply from a narrative, prevention will fail. Efforts should thus be concentrated on first-line prevention directed at identifying individuals, and youngsters in particular, that seem to be stuck or stranded. Existing prevention mechanisms and agencies are best equipped to deal with this. Enhancing their expertise in this novel form of deviant behaviour will result in better long-term results than creating a separate fully fledged 'deradicalisation' policy domain.

Secondly, focus on **tailor-made approaches**. One-size-fits-all overall deradicalisation initiatives, e.g., counter-narrative spots on television, will be of marginal use. Person-to-person interaction has the best chance of succeeding, if three conditions can be met:

- Since personal pathways are diverse, a personalised approach is required, whereby the person involved is seen as an individual, not as a member of a (hostile) group.
- The person must be receptive to discussion. Hence the importance of identifying mentors or coaches and channels that can gain the person's trust.

¹⁰⁶ See note 13.

¹⁰⁷ Ben Hamidou, who plays the role of ideological leader of a group of men leaving for Syria, in *Djihad*, a successful play in Brussels theaters in 2014. In *Brussel Nieuws*, 12 December 2014 (<http://www.brusselnieuws.be/nl/cultuur/toneelstuk-djihad-neeemt-radicalisme-op-de-korrel>).

¹⁰⁸ Marc Sageman, 'The next generation of terror', in *Foreign Policy*, March-April 2008, p. 40.

- Perspective must be offered. Reconnecting him or her to the (local) society is the goal. The aim should not be to attempt to change radical thinking, nor to lecture them. Otherwise, we risk seeing a ‘deradicalised’ returnee simply revert to his previous life of deviant behaviour, such as drug-trafficking or his former street gang.

Thirdly, **separate the discussion on Islam in Europe from deradicalisation initiatives.** The discussion of a ‘European Islam’ is a discussion worth holding for its own merits, on its own terms, and with Muslims in the lead. It should not be pushed within the deradicalisation framework. Not only will this not work as envisaged, it will also harden positions, corrode an already fragile social fabric, and thus backfire. Whoever wants to participate in this discussion should moreover try to comprehend how Muslim families and communities today feel devastated, in shock and lost in the current polarised climate.¹⁰⁹ This climate enhances an already prevalent feeling that, whatever effort they might undertake, they will never be accepted as full members of Western societies.

Fourthly, **don’t get terrorised by terrorists.** Following the July 2005 bombings in London, the London mayor Ken Livingstone reacted in simple and inclusive terms:

I’d like to thank Londoners for the calm way in which they have responded to this cowardly attack ... I want to say one thing specifically to the world today. This was not a terrorist attack against the mighty and the powerful. It was not aimed at Presidents or Prime Ministers. It was aimed at ordinary, working-class Londoners, black and white, Muslim and Christian, Hindu and Jew, young and old. It was an indiscriminate attempt to slaughter, irrespective of any considerations for age, for class, for religion, or whatever. That isn’t an ideology, it isn’t even a perverted faith – it is just an indiscriminate attempt at mass murder and we know what the objective is. They seek to divide Londoners. They seek to turn Londoners against each other. ... Londoners will not be divided by this cowardly attack. They will stand together in solidarity alongside those who have been injured and those who have been bereaved and that is why I’m proud to be the mayor of that city.¹¹⁰

Inclusiveness is a tough thing to come by in today’s frenzied debates, at least in Europe. In the United States, however, President Obama does not shy away from publicly acknowledging the growing concerns, fears, and feelings among Muslim Americans of being considered second-class citizens.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹ Birsan en Fatma Taspinar, quoted in *De Standaard Weekblad*, 19 December 2015.

¹¹⁰ Quoted in *Financial Times*, 7 July 2005.

¹¹¹ Remarks by the President at Islamic Society, Baltimore, 3 February 2016. Available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2016/02/03/remarks-president-islamic-society-baltimore>.

Finally, invest in **intelligence** (for a proper long-term perspective) and pursue short-term **operational information sharing**. Good intelligence and good policing has always been the first line of defence against terrorism in Europe. Most perpetrators of recent terrorist attacks were known to police and intelligence. No elaborate network of deradicalisation officials looking for signs of radicalisation was needed for this. This by itself illustrates the circumscribed nature of the kinship and friendship networks behind the fourth foreign fighters wave. In order to put this reality in proper perspective, a comparison with Northern Irish terrorism might be instructive. Andrew Parker, head of the British MI5, made this comment on the latter:

We ... detect and disrupt the vast majority of their attempts. But occasionally we are all stung with the tragedy of wanton murder, as we saw most recently with the shooting of David Black last November. Rejecting the political process in Northern Ireland, these ragged remnants of a bygone age are in a cul-de-sac of pointless violence and crime with little community support. We will continue to work with the police to put these thugs and killers in front of the Courts.¹¹²

If the religious frame of reference had not gained the traction it did, this could just as well apply to the fourth wave of foreign fighters. They indeed enjoy as little community support as the terrorists referred to by Andrew Parker in the case of Northern Ireland.¹¹³ Acting upon this precedent when reacting to jihadi plots and threats would enhance resilience, give them a place in our thinking and in our everyday life, thus depriving their perpetrators of their capacity to further tear apart the social fabric of societies by enhancing fear of migrants and Islam.

¹¹² Address by the Director General of the Security Service, Andrew Parker, to the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), Whitehall, 8 October 2013. Available at: www.mi5.gov.uk/home/about-us/who-we-are/staff-and-management/director-general/speeches-by-the-director-general/director-generals-speech-at-rusi-2013.html.

¹¹³ <http://english.dohainstitute.org/content/cb12264b-1eca-402b-926a-5d068ac60011>.