

A person is seen from behind, carrying a large black flag with white Arabic calligraphy on their shoulder. The background is a blurred outdoor setting. The overall image has a blue tint.

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“I LEFT TO BE CLOSER TO ALLAH”

Learning about Foreign Fighters from Family and Friends

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About this paper

This report calls on data from the largest collection of interviews with foreign fighters and those closest to them. It combines data from open-ended interviews with 43 parents, siblings, and friends of 30 men and women who travelled to Syria and Iraq. The findings and insights of this report examine two issues. Firstly, the report sheds light on the motivations of the thousands of foreign fighters who left their families, homes, and lives to fight for jihadist groups since the start of the Syrian civil war. Secondly, it provides insight into the difficulties which families of foreign fighters face when coming to terms with their loss. It examines common factors between foreign fighters, the process of radicalisation, and whether they had contact with their families once they made the hijrah (migration) to Syria.

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Executive Summary

Much has been written about the thousands of “foreign fighters” who engaged in hijrah (migration) to Syria and Iraq to fight for various jihadist groups since the outbreak of the Syrian civil war. Understandably, but regrettably, little of this work is based on primary data derived from interviews with the fighters or those closest to them, family members, friends and associates (e.g., teachers, imams, co-workers, sports teammates). This report is based on interviews with those closest to a sample of western foreign fighters, and joins a small number of recent studies that employ at least some primary data.¹ This set of interviews with family members, friends and associates is the single largest acquired so far, and our discussion of the findings is informed by inferences drawn from the single largest set of interviews with actual foreign fighters as well.² The report calls on data from open-ended interviews with 43 parents, siblings and friends of 30 men and women who travelled to Syria and Iraq. Most of the interviews were conducted face-to-face, audio

recorded, and lasted between one and four hours. The research is ongoing, and some interviews are still being undertaken, transcribed and thematically coded for analysis. Consequently, this report is offering a set of preliminary findings and insights. The focus of attention is twofold: what the data tells us about the young men and women who left to fight, and the plight of the families of these individuals. At this point, we have included five case studies to provide a more complete account of the situation, as experienced by the families of these foreign fighters. Some consideration is given to indications from the findings about how counter-radicalisation practitioners might improve existing efforts to intervene in the process of radicalising foreign fighters.

The sample of foreign fighters discussed in the interviews consists of:

- There were 27 men and 3 women.
- Most (21) are either first or second-generation immigrants, and nine of them were born in the country to parents who were born in the same country as well.
- Most (26) are either high school graduates or have some college or university education, and 3 have bachelor’s degrees.
- 50% have parents who are still married, 30% have parents who are either divorced or separated, and information is not available for the remaining 20%.
- Most do not appear to come from dysfunctional or neglectful families.
- Most do not appear to come from poor or stressful economic circumstances.
- More than half (57%) of the sample were born to Muslim families; 43% are converts to Islam.

Insights into the familial context of foreign fighters

Overall, the information and insights obtained from our interviews with those closest to the fighters conform to expectations. They create an impression reminiscent of the one provided by news reports and some other studies of jihadist radicalisation. It remains important, nonetheless, to augment the existing conceptions of

what is happening, which are fragmentary and quite general. More detailed accounts that add nuance to our grasp of the situation are necessary, helping to further humanise these individuals.

These are our most significant findings:

- Nearly three-quarters (73%) of the fighters maintained communication with their families and friends, with some regularity, but a few families never received a call from their children once they left.
- While many parents argued with their children when they first made contact, most soon strove to maintain more normal conversations, in the hope that communication would continue.
- All the parents noticed changes in their children's clothing, behaviour, attitudes and friends before they left, but saw these changes as largely positive at the time.
- In part this was because the turn to more religious, and then radical, worldviews coincided with the typical struggles of adolescence.
- While some of the young people had engaged in acts of rebellion against the wishes of their parents, most parents characterised them as essentially "good kids" – if often strong willed.
- Most of the young people had begun the process of religious transformation before they adopted more radical political views, though the two processes are closely intertwined.
- Often local experiences of marginalisation, mainly related to their religious identity, acted as triggers for radicalisation, or pushed those already radicalising to escalate the process.
- Close friends of the young men and women who departed for Syria and Iraq often saw the changes in behaviour and attitudes, and hence identity, more clearly than the parents.
- In many cases, media coverage of the Islamic State (ISIS) and the foreign fighter issue is what helped parents to realise something more was happening than they had initially suspected.
- In most cases, however, the young people left with little resistance from their families, since the parents had little real grasp of what was occurring.
- This is because most of the young people chose to keep their new identity, aspirations and plans secret – and were very successful in doing so – leaving parents and others with little opportunity to intervene.
- Family members and friends were largely at a loss in knowing what to do once they realised a young person in the family or a friend had gone abroad. Those closest to the western foreign fighters seem to be no better equipped, conceptually or practically,

than others to recognise the link between the outward changes they were witnessing and the serious transformation of identity occurring in those who chose to leave.

Combining the insights gained from these interviews with those acquired from interviews with foreign fighters, and the overall research literature on western foreign fighters, we speculate that the choice to become a foreign fighter is commonly the result of a coalescence of several identifiable factors. We are dealing with individuals:

- who are experiencing an acute emerging adult identity struggle,
- with a moralistic problem-solving mindset,
- that is conditioned by an inordinate quest for significance (to make a difference in this world),
- that is resolved by believing in a (religious) ideology and participating in a fantasy (literally) of world change,
- that is consolidated by the psychological impact of intense small group dynamics, and perhaps the influence of charismatic leaders,
- resulting in a fusion of their personal identity with a new group identity and cause.

This conclusion reflects, and in turn influences, a social ecology model of the process of jihadist radicalisation, which we have been developing for some time. This report provides a brief sketch of this model. The choice to become a foreign fighter is the result of a perfect storm of diverse factors, operating in somewhat different ways and to different degrees in each case. Unpredictable contingencies also influence the process. In modelling what is happening, we can bring more analytical order to the situation than is commonly believed. It is clearly inordinately difficult, however, to predict if someone is planning to become a foreign fighter. This is particularly the case when people are only aware of some of the pertinent factors in the radicalisation process. In these circumstances it is logical to assume, as most parents do, that their children are merely passing through a phase in their lives, figuring out who they are and their purpose, and that this process will have a conventional outcome. Greater awareness of a wider array of factors should increase the likelihood of detecting when something more significant is happening.

Policy recommendations for countering radicalisation

1. Encourage authorities to be more emotionally and psychologically supportive when first contacted by families about the possibility that their child has become a foreign fighter

The parents of foreign fighters are often worried about the social and economic consequences of being "the parents of a terrorist". They are very reluctant to tell their story to the authorities or anyone else for fear that it will result in the arrest of their child, they will be fired from their jobs, stigmatised in their communities, and their other children will be bullied at school or prevented from obtaining employment. Community organisations and leaders, as well as the police investigating these cases, need to provide a greater measure of sympathetic support for the parents and other family members going through this process.

2. Do more to educate families about radicalisation leading to violence

There should be more public education about the process of radicalisation leading to violence for families of potential foreign fighters, and more resources given to this. It is recognised that families are likely to be the first to detect something is happening to their child, yet the parents we interviewed, while being responsible and caring, had little sense of what they could do in the situation. A significant opportunity is being missed to detect radicalising youth sooner.

3. Provide more extensive social support to families of foreign fighters

All the parents we interviewed had interacted with law enforcement agents, but usually found this interaction problematic. Law enforcement agents should seek to be more supportive when speaking to parents of foreign fighters, and develop better partnerships with staff in community organisations, religious leaders and social workers who could help the families cope with the child's departure. The parents need help dealing with many questions they have about why their children have left. In the absence of such help, as described in one of the cases below, the parents may take matters into their own hands, placing themselves in danger and at risk of being exploited by others. Many parents end up struggling with problems with drugs, alcohol, depression and excessive grief in response to the departure, and possible death, of their children.

4. Work more closely with the families when they make public that their children have left the country; attempt to intervene in and perhaps reverse the process of radicalisation

These moments of contact between parents and their children provide important opportunities to plant seeds of doubt, encourage the children to return, or at least leave the zones of conflict for a safer place. Parents need help from trained religious leaders, interventionists or youth workers to guide how they communicate with their children.

“ In most cases, young people left with little resistance from their families, since the parents had little real grasp of what was occurring. ”

Introduction

The conflicts in Syria and Iraq attracted “foreign fighters” from across the globe in unprecedented numbers.³ Most came from countries in the Middle East (e.g., Tunisia, Jordan, Saudi Arabia), though a surprisingly large number also came from Europe, the UK, Canada, Australia and the US (some 25,000–30,000 overall and probably 4,000–5,000 from the west).⁴ Large numbers came from France, Germany and the UK in particular, and disproportionately (relative to their populations) from Belgium, the Netherlands, Denmark and Sweden.⁵ By late 2015 many more were also coming from Russia and Central Asia. Most of these people, largely young men but also, surprisingly, many young women,⁶ joined the Islamic State (also known as ISIS or ISIL), perhaps the most radical and dangerous of all jihadi groups.

The rise of ISIS has been a game changer in the struggle against terrorism. Al Qaeda and its affiliates threatened the west since before 9/11, and they have spawned an expanding web of inspired individuals and groups who have hatched hundreds of deadly plots. For Al Qaeda, however, the utopian promise of instituting a truly Islamic state, and more specifically re-establishing the divinely sanctioned caliphate, was a more or less distant possibility. In declaring himself the Caliph, on 29 June 2014, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi galvanised the attention of the jihadi community and attempted to usurp the worldwide leadership of Al Qaeda. The objective for ISIS is not merely seeking to hurt the enemy and force the withdrawal of western military forces from the Middle East, but to physically plant the foundations for a new socio-political reality and challenge young Muslims the world over to play a role in this transformative historical moment.

In the context of this shift in the basic parameters of the jihadist threat, it is imperative to develop a better grasp of why and how young people are being drawn to the ideology and mission of ISIS and other similar extremist movements. The research on radicalisation to violence in the case of “homegrown jihadists” tells us that in most cases we are dealing with remarkably ordinary people deciding to do extraordinary things. Accordingly, analysts have largely abandoned the quest to develop a profile of foreign fighters and wannabe fighters per se.⁷ Rather the focus of attention is the process of radicalisation by which this transformation happens.⁸

Throughout our research we have attempted to tease apart the nuances of the radicalisation process by talking to foreign fighters themselves and those closest to them, to get a better sense of their motivations, the kinds of changes that friends and families saw happening, and how they interpreted them. The primary focus of this report is the young people who travelled or attempted to travel abroad to join a variety of militant movements in Syria and Iraq, and the kind of insights those closest to them can shed on how these youth came to make these fateful choices. Our second aim is to contribute to the nascent discussion of whether and how the parents, siblings and friends of foreign fighters can be mobilised to intervene in, or reverse, the radicalisation of these individuals by better capturing a sense of what happens to the families of these young men and women, and their perceptions of the situation.⁹

This fundamental research concern continues to have significance in the face of the physical demise of the caliphate of ISIS. While the military defeat of the ISIS caliphate in Iraq and Syria has seriously compromised the organisation and its appeal, the power of its call to arms persists, spread by an elaborate network of supporters worldwide.¹⁰ ISIS hugely influenced the terrorist playing field, and others will be motivated by its legacy to launch further attacks in its name. The lessons learned from paying closer attention to the thoughts and perceptions of individual foreign fighters, and the experiences and perceptions of the parents, siblings and friends of such fighters, will have a relevance that long outlasts the ISIS caliphate.

Much of what we are learning from talking to foreign fighters, their families and friends conforms to expectations – it reflects the conclusions of earlier work based largely on secondary sources. Yet it is important to confirm these insights, using primary data, and to add nuance and texture to any conclusions drawn, making the circumstances of each case of radicalisation come alive. It is also important to secure the kind of information that points to new considerations not previously discussed or whose potential relevance was not understood. Ironically, the more human we can make these foreign fighters, the better chance we have of grasping how and why they were willing and able to do so many inhumane things.

Method and approach

This report is broadly based on over four years of research, which is still ongoing, and contains insights gleaned from interviewing foreign fighters themselves and those closest to them from Canada, the US, the UK and other European countries. We recruited interviewees through purposeful sampling, working closely with community members, social workers, as well as other parents and friends. We included in the sample those who had at least one child, a sibling or close friend who travelled abroad to join a militant jihadist movement.

We have conducted 43 face-to-face interviews so far, and research is ongoing to understand how families and friends are reacting and coping with the shifting dynamics on the ground in Syria and Iraq. All the interviews have been audio recorded, and typically lasted between one and four hours. The interviews have been transcribed and are still being thematically coded for analysis. This report is preliminary in nature, providing some insights from our initial reading and analysis of the interviews.

We have also completed 38 interviews with actual western foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq, and three interviews with fighters who were engaged in older theatres of jihad such as Afghanistan, Bosnia and Chechnya. An initial analysis of aspects of our findings for 20 of these interviews was reported in an article we published last year.¹¹ Some of these interviews (which are not part of this report) were held in person but most were conducted over Skype, Kik messenger, Telegram or another text-messaging application. It was not possible, for practical and ethical reasons (issues of confidentiality), to secure interviews with the families and friends of these specific fighters. The face-to-face interviews with family members and friends discussed here involve other foreign fighters.

Given the sensitivity of the interviews with family members and friends, and the often fragile nature of the network of social relationships that allowed us to contact these people and gain their trust and confidence, not all the interviews are as structured and complete as might be desired. For example, it was unrealistic when dealing with a distraught parent to pursue certain lines of questioning. Our objective was to gain access and secure their "story" in as natural a manner as possible. On the one hand we had to proceed opportunistically, and on the other hand we took constant care not to overtax or re-traumatise our

participants. The resultant interviews tend to resemble ethnographic field interviews rather than a structured and controlled form of qualitative research. The challenges of the entire situation may well explain why there is so little other research involving primary data from families and friends of western jihadist fighters.¹²

This report is therefore based on 43 interviews about 30 men and women who travelled to Syria and Iraq (Figure 1). We held interviews with friends, parents, siblings, community members and religious leaders from a variety of western countries, including Canada, the US, the UK and others in Europe. The data collected is uneven in many ways. For example, in some instances, several friends of one fighter were interviewed, one individual friend sometimes provided insights on multiple fighters, siblings were interviewed while parents refused to talk or vice versa, and sometimes one parent would agree to be interviewed while the other declined. It was therefore difficult to acquire the basic demographic information that researchers normally collect when undertaking qualitative research. For instance, friends of a foreign fighter often knew about the process of their radicalisation, but had no information about an individual's upbringing or their friend's household income. Given the sensitivity of the research topic, we decided to speak to anyone who would speak to us, knowing fully well that there would be gaps in the data.

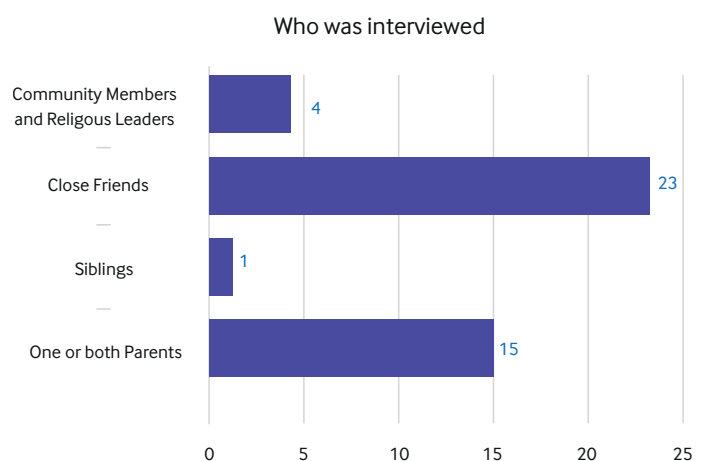


Figure 1. The number of interviewees, by category (N=43)

The details of the 30 men and women who travelled to Syria gleaned from these 43 interviews are similarly diverse. Of the 27 men and 3 women who had travelled to Syria and Iraq, 21 were either first or second-generation immigrants, 9 were born in Europe, the UK, the US or Canada to parents who were also born in these countries, 26 were either high school graduates or had some college or university education, and 3 had bachelor’s degrees. Half (50%) had parents who were still married, 30% had divorced or separated parents, and information was unobtainable for the remaining 20%.

The extent to which these youth kept in touch with friends and family while travelling or in Syria was interesting, as the case studies below demonstrate. More than two-thirds of our sample maintained fairly consistent communication with friends and family (Figure 2).

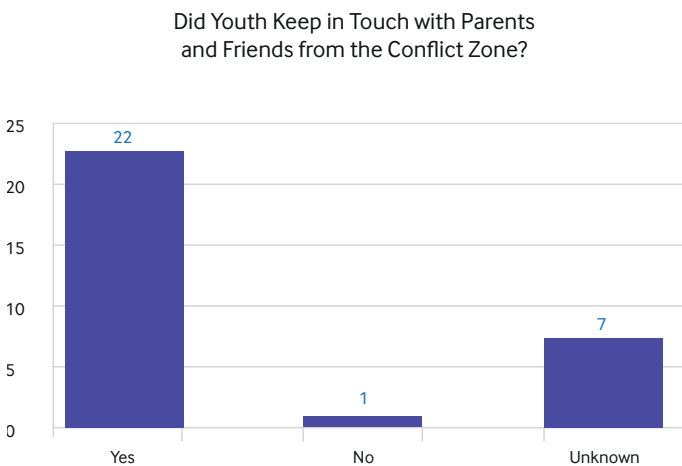


Figure 2. The number of young foreign fighters who kept in touch with friends and family from the conflict zone

We found that 17 (57%) individuals in our sample were born Muslim, while 13 (43%) were converts to Islam. It should be noted that this does not necessarily suggest that converts are disproportionately more likely to be foreign fighters than those who were born Muslim, but perhaps only that parents and friends of converts are more likely to talk to researchers. Some parents of Muslim children who have travelled to fight abroad point out that many of their co-workers and colleagues often assume that their radicalisation happened in the home. It is not surprising, then, that many of these families are more reluctant to come forward with their story.

There is no shortage of theoretical research on the process of radicalisation among young people in the west who are either attempting to travel abroad to

fight with militant movements or plotting to carry out an attack in their home countries.¹³ However, close examination of family-level and social-network-level risk factors in the study of radicalisation is still very much in its infancy and continues to suffer from a lack of primary data.

In doing this work we are guided to some degree by the insights we have gleaned from the research literature and integrated into an evolving social ecology model of homegrown radicalisation to violence. This model is influenced in turn by our findings from the interviews with foreign fighters and the family members and friends of foreign fighters. It is too complex to delineate fully in this report, but since it influences our approach to the foreign fighter issue and constitutes one of the outgrowths of this research, we provide a simplified overview after discussing some of our findings.¹⁴

“The lessons learned from paying closer attention to the thoughts and perceptions of individual foreign fighters, and the experiences and perceptions of the parents, siblings and friends of such fighters, will have a relevance that long outlasts the ISIS caliphate.”

Case studies¹⁵

A young American Muslim

"In the beginning, many people couldn't look at me but little by little they came and they grieved with me," Habiba says of her co-workers, taking slow and purposeful bites of her garden salad. She is the mother of a young American, her son Majid, who has gone off to fight with ISIS. She agreed to meet provided we anonymise almost every detail of her and her son's life. She was worried that telling her story publicly would have huge consequences for her family: "I want to do some activism around these issues, but I can't. I'm grieving hard right now. I'm not there yet. And what about my job? And my other kids?" It was a common fear – that making their story and their grief public wouldn't result in anything positive. The public wouldn't really understand. She might lose her job, her daughter might be called a terrorist at school, and everyone in the family will have a difficult time once employers inevitably Google their last name.

She answers questions about her son's upbringing and family background with some hesitation at first but then starts to open up about some of the challenges: "My husband is a very serious guy. Typical Middle Eastern. He's not the 'let's go catch a game' and 'let's go drink beer together' kind of guy with the kids." When Majid was in the fifth grade, Habiba confided in him that she was thinking about leaving his father: "He was a strict guy, not religious strict, but you cannot laugh with him or have fun with him. Just a serious guy. But Majid cried and cried and said mommy you have to stay with daddy." The children witnessed the couple fighting and the family quarrels, but Habiba doesn't think this is a reason for his radicalisation or departure. As she says:

But, listen, this is not the reason he went. I mean, how many perfect families do you see? When I think about it, we were pretty decent. A normal dad, working hard for the kids. We didn't leave the kids at home chasing after fun. They had faithful parents. The last thing Majid said to us before he left was "I love you dad, I love you mom". I've seen many kids in worse situations. And they are good. You see families fall apart. Mom is in one place. Dad is in another place. And the kid is good. I don't see why this happened to me.

A few months before Majid left for Syria, Habiba and the family noticed some changes in his attitude and behaviour, none of which were extreme enough to raise red flags. He asked about Sunnis and Shias, started praying for the first time, and started dressing differently: "He came and asked about Sunni and Shia,

and I told him there were never really any problems. And he responds that Sunnis are better than Shias."

As with most parents and family members we have interviewed, the sudden onset of religiosity and piety was often seen as very positive by the family. Their children used to go out drinking and partying late into the night, had friends who they didn't approve of, and were sometimes performing poorly in school. As these young people start to change, all of this goes away. They stop drinking, start going to mosque, and leave their old friends behind. From the perspective of the parents, these are all welcome changes. Habiba told us:

He used to go out drinking with his friends and suddenly just stopped all that. My husband is a Muslim, but he drinks. My son used to lecture him about taking away the beer and the wine from the home. That's when I also noticed that he started to pray. He never used to pray before.

After Majid graduated from high school, he told his mother that he was having a hard time deciding what he wanted to do with his life. Once she noticed that his grades were slipping, she phoned the college he was attending to find a mentor who could help him. "I'm one of those moms, you know, I checked his grades all the time, you have to understand, we did everything for him." Habiba has a smile on her face when discussing Majid's obsession with fancy clothes and expensive items:

He was a guy who didn't just buy shampoo at the store. He ordered a special one online. He was always concerned with his teeth. I took him to do different skin procedures for simple pimples here and there. We went to a specialist for that. He took care of himself. Worked out and wanted to be in the best shape. He wanted the best clothes. And then all of a sudden, everything changed.

Majid suddenly started wearing only a white t-shirt and pants that stopped above the ankles: "I asked him why he changed so suddenly, and he said he didn't need all those things anymore, this was maybe three months before he left. He was so simple. Not the fancy boy I used to see." The family was getting increasingly confused and worried, but also didn't know what to make of this increased religiosity. Habiba continues:

On Sundays, it was the only time we made kebabs on the barbeque and had dinner together as a family. But, he was missing some Sundays. Going to the mosque. Believe it or not, we followed him one day. Saw him go into the mosque and went inside. We wanted to see if he was lying and going somewhere else. But he was in the mosque. He asked us, am I doing something wrong by being here? He convinced us and we left. He came home after two or three hours. A few months before he left, we started noticing these things. We noticed, but we didn't think it would lead to this. He also went and spent a few weeks with his girlfriend. After he left, we realised he was just saying goodbye to her. Then he told us he was going camping with friends. He used to do that all the time, so we didn't have a clue. Go camping and stay at different state parks. That was it. He left us.

Like most parents we have interviewed, Majid's family were at a loss over what to do once he had left for Syria. Habiba and her husband looked online and scoured the newspapers for ideas about how they could bring their son back. They found stories about groups inside Syria and other individuals around the world who knew how to rescue young people who had decided to join ISIS. So the family decided to try too: "We told the FBI immediately, but no one came to help, so we found another way, and my husband got on a plane to Iraq." It didn't take long for Habiba's husband to realise that this was perhaps a fool's errand, and that he was getting taken advantage of by the man they hired to help them.

"They went to Erbil, and this man was like 'my tooth is hurting', so my husband took him to the dentist to fix not just one, but several of his teeth." The man they hired to help then started asking for new jackets, gifts for his children, and other brand name goods. While Habiba's husband was in Iraq, Majid called home. As she recalls, "I told him your daddy is there looking for you. He said, 'Why mom! They are going to cut his head off. It's dangerous. Tell him to go back!' I said, I don't know where he is, why don't you go find your dad and talk to him." After Habiba's husband returned home empty handed, the man they had hired to help them insisted that they try again. He said he had made better contacts and this time things would be different. After her husband refused to go, Habiba boarded a flight to Turkey.

"It was really, really bad. I met some very dangerous people," Habiba recalls. Like her husband, she was also taken advantage of, promised many things in exchange for money, and left the country with nothing: "I met some Syrian fighters and they were charging us for everything. [They said:] 'Give me \$1000, I will find your son.' I gave them money, and never saw them again." She paid for their food, hotel stays, and got nothing in

return. The last people she dealt with told her that Majid was part of the suicide brigade in ISIS and therefore they cannot get close to him. The next time that Majid called, Habiba asked him about it. He said, "No mom, I'm not at that level." Habiba continues:

These guys, he said give me \$3,000 now and when I get your son out, you pay me another \$10,000. I sent him a picture of my son, and other information about him. He didn't disappear right away. He messaged a couple of times saying, "We are doing this, we are doing that, calm down, we are watching your son." But, nothing happened.

Now back in the US, Habiba struggles to find joy in her life. Driving through their neighbourhood, she breaks down crying several times: "All of these places were places he walked, places he played." Majid would call home often and talk to his family. He apologised and asked for forgiveness for lying to them, but never once suggested that he regretted his decision. Habiba told us:

I always told him, I'll never forgive you for this. You changed my life, you changed everyone's life. We were just regular people, a normal life, just middle-class working people. We were a family. I would say, this is not the way to God, you're wrong my dear. This is not it, look at what you're doing, look at all of these people who don't have a home. They are refugees. Why are you participating in these things? I tried but he always had answers. He used to copy and paste things to me. Things about paradise, things about jihad, you know? Cut and paste. "Mom read this, mom read that."

Most parents of foreign fighters find that eventually the arguments stop and they decide to relish the few times that their children call home. We have learned that some families never once got a call from their children after they left for Syria. Others spoke every few weeks. After their initial conversations after their child's departure, to ensure that they keep calling back, parents try to talk to them as if little has changed, asking them what they ate for dinner and what's new in their lives, and telling them to stay safe: "I argued a lot with him, but people told me that if I keep arguing with him, he may stop calling. So I stopped. His brother was very close with him and every now and then I catch him crying. Majid just says I'll see you all in Jannah."

Every day is now a struggle for Habiba and her husband to keep the family together and move on with their lives. Last year, they received an unexpected call from Syria telling them that their son had become a shaheed (martyr). Majid's father was so upset that he screamed at the fighter on the phone and hung up. Habiba wants to go to Syria:

I have to go there, I want to open every grave and see my son. I want to find him. How did he die? What was the last thing he said? Like a dream, he came and went. I'm not living this life. I'm not dead. I'm somewhere floating in between. I mean... I used to be a person, like a person, person. Gym membership, friends, everybody used to come visit me. Everything has stopped. I wanted to kill myself at one point. After my son died, I was in my bed, I didn't want to come out. My life is all about pills now. It's just anxiety pills, sleeping pills, headaches. All of these different pain pills. My husband is worse. He's definitely worse than me. He doesn't talk to anybody, none of his friends know his situation. He stopped talking to his sister here, and he is not talking to his father. He comes home, he goes to the garage, and sits in there with a glass of wine or vodka and cries. A good cry for a solid 20 minutes.

Most parents of foreign fighters find it helpful to speak to other parents who have lost their child to the conflict in Syria. These parents understand the issues at stake: privacy, emotional uncertainty and stigmatisation within mainstream society. Listening to them about the path their children have taken has been eye-opening for many, but they still cannot find real answers to their questions. They still wonder who radicalised their child, why he or she found these ideologies attractive, and whether they could have done anything differently. As these case studies should make clear, a lot of those who were close to foreign fighters still do not know what they could have done differently. There was no red flag that suggested they should notify law enforcement agents, and sometimes they thought the changes they observed in their children were welcome developments in their maturity – until it was too late. As Habiba states:

He used to kiss me all the time. He used to compliment me all the time: "Mom, you're beautiful. I wish I can find a lady like you for myself." When my father died, he said to me, "Mom, you're very sad and I don't want you to be this sad. Let's go to dinner, just you and me." We went to a fancy restaurant where one of his friends used to work. We went there and he told his friend, "Get the best bottle of wine you have for my mom." He paid for my dinner and paid for my wine. Why would you think in your wildest dreams that this kid would turn out to be ISIS?

A few months later, Majid was gone.

“ Majid would call home often and talk to his family. He apologised and asked for forgiveness for lying to them, but never once suggested that he regretted his decision. ”

A European convert

Noah's mother Christie first got in touch with us through another mother of a foreign fighter whom we had interviewed. It had been almost a year since she and her husband had heard from their son and they were extremely worried that something might have happened to him. They asked whether we could help in some way by reaching out to western fighters in Syria and Iraq to ask whether they had seen or heard from him, if they knew whether he was injured or killed, and plead with him to phone home. She provided several pictures and her son's kunya, or nom de guerre, as she remembered it. The family was nervous, didn't know whether they could trust us with all these details, but they were desperate for any speck of information that they could find about their son. We asked a few fighters, and only got back scattered information – he was maybe spotted in an internet café or restaurant, he may have been injured, but if he hasn't called home, he must have his reasons. As one fighter responded, "My advice is to tell the parents to move on. If brothers don't call home, that's their choice."

When we spoke to Noah's mother and father months later, nothing had changed. They had heard nothing. They agreed to tell us the story of Noah's transformation, but requested complete anonymity, and asked that we change their names and country of origin. "Everyone who needs to know about what happened to him knows already", Noah's mother said, "we are just trying to go on with our lives, but of course there is not a day that goes by when I don't think about him."

Christie told us, "From a young age, Noah was really quite independent, and his childhood was very normal. Nothing special." Their household wasn't a religious one, and Noah never really showed any interest in religion growing up. Christie's parents were Protestants and her husband came from a Catholic household: "His grandparents were quite religious [and] we both chose not to go with religion in our own life so we didn't bring up our kids religiously." They told their kids that if religion interested them and they wanted to go to church, they could go with their grandparents, and if they wanted to explore religion for themselves, it would be their own choice. "But Noah was never into it. He didn't ask about religion or go to church."

"He was a very popular kid, and had lots of friends, but he was dyslexic and had some struggles with learning, and that caused him to not like school very much," Christie says. Noah was diagnosed with dyslexia around the age of 13, and he had difficulty concentrating in school. Christie recalls that Noah started to care less and less about finding ways to do well in the classroom:

"It was a bit difficult to handle, because he wasn't doing well in school, and he stopped caring about it even though he was very intelligent." In high school, Noah met his first true love, a girl from a Muslim family: "She was a very nice girl. She came to visit us at home from time to time, but she did it in secret because she didn't want her parents to find out." Two years into the relationship, Noah converted to Islam:

He started to know more about Islam. He got interested in it, and started to do more research, but eventually he went too far. His girlfriend says she tried to tell him that this was not what Islam was about. She tried to keep him on track.

A year later, the couple went their separate ways. Christie believes this was because Noah was becoming more and more radicalised, and started to see his girlfriend as potentially misguided in her faith.

As with many parents we have interviewed, such as Majid in the first case study, when a child adopted a more religiously strict lifestyle they often exhibited a number of behavioural changes that initially put the family at ease. A lot of the issues associated with youthful rebellion faded away. Christie told us:

We learned when he was a bit older that Noah was smoking cigarettes and smoking pot and drinking. When he converted to Islam, we noticed a lot of positive changes. He was more focused. He was helping his friends when they were in financial difficulties. He stopped drinking. He stopped smoking. So to us, those were good things that we really admired. But, he very rarely opened up to us about his feelings. He's very hard to read. He's very hard to know. That's also something that runs in our family, I think. He didn't talk much about things. He became less and less focused on his emotions and became very logical in his thinking. As if he wanted to shut off his emotional side. So, he almost never talked about what he was feeling. Just said, "everything is ok", that's it. He didn't really take us into [his] confidence like we wanted him to. I'm not saying he didn't trust us, but he didn't confide in us.

While they saw positive changes in Noah when he converted to Islam, the family admits that they were initially a little worried and told him that all religions have their good and bad sides:

We never gave him a religious upbringing, but in Islam he found some happiness. He just wasn't a happy kid at that time. Once he started to learn about Islam, everything changed. I think he felt like he belonged to something.

He got strength out of it. He got brotherhood out of it. He felt like he belonged.

The family tried to be supportive as Noah was learning more about Islam. At the age of 18, two years into his new-found religious quest, when he still hadn't formally converted to Islam, his parents visited a mosque with him. As Christie recalls, the day presented them with a bit of a shock they had not prepared for:

We went to just talk with the imam and learn more about what Noah was doing there and so on. The imam greeted us, and we talked with him and then all of a sudden, he asked Noah, "do you want to convert?" and Noah said yes. We were flabbergasted because we had no idea that was going to happen. The imam said one sentence and Noah repeated it and it was done. We were shocked, but we thought it was probably good for him, since over the last two years, we were already seeing good things. In the car ride home, we told him we were happy for him. We just told him, "I don't really know what happened there, but I think you just became a Muslim."

“ I was always concerned that he wanted to leave for Syria, we were learning about Assad and the bombing of his own people. He was very angry about that. ”

After Noah converted, the family noticed gradual changes in his appearance and behaviour, but nothing that raised any alarm. He grew a beard, wore the jilbab, and sometimes a skullcap on his head. Christie looks back at this period and doesn't see anything that was outside the norm of religious practice and belief. As the change was gradual change, they didn't immediately notice the onset of Noah's more radical thinking. Hearing her tell the story now, Christie and her husband clearly suspected he was becoming more conservative or stricter in his thinking, but didn't really know what to do about it:

We didn't really grasp the severity of the changes because it was a gradual process. A little bit here and a little there. We were probably too naïve to assess the severity of the situation in time. He's your son, so if this is what makes

him happy, then who are we to tell him that this is not the right thing for him? We were afraid of losing him also. He might leave and say he's not coming back if we argued with him too much or weren't supportive. I think he would have done that. He's so strong minded, I believe he would have done that.

In our interviews with other family members and friends, one of the more difficult changes that those closest to radicalised individuals noticed was when they would treat them as dirty or impure and as sinful nonbelievers or apostates. For parents who had raised their children with unconditional love, this was particularly heartbreaking. Looking back, Christie suspects that Noah probably believed this about them, but never said anything outright: "It was only after he was in Syria that he would tell us, 'Oh you are not a Muslim so I don't need to listen to you,' but he never said that when he was here."

As foreign fighters left Europe in large numbers and it became reported in the local media and newspapers, Christie also began to suspect that Noah might be thinking about travelling abroad to fight. She asked him about this repeatedly, but he always said that he was not interested in doing that:

I was always concerned that he wanted to leave for Syria, we were learning about Assad and the bombing of his own people. He was very angry about that. He would always say that Assad was bombing his own people and nobody was doing anything about it.

Now that Noah is gone, she blames herself for not pushing harder, for not asking more questions, for not nagging him more about his intentions: "He was very withdrawn. Looking back now I think he had already made up his mind. I don't know when these plans started, but he had made up his mind."

Many foreign fighters try to convince their parents that they have discovered the truth. For parents of converts, this is especially frustrating because their children's opinion of them and interactions with them range from trying to save them from damnation through repeated arguments to complete withdrawal. This was very much a point of contention in Christie's house, especially since she and her husband had been so accepting and open about Noah's conversion to Islam:

I think he became more withdrawn and in his own world. We were his mom and dad, but he didn't respect us just because of that. Because we didn't also believe that Islam was for us. That was towards the end. He said, "I can't believe you don't understand how beautiful Islam is and that you also don't want to become Muslim." We

told him, we respect your choice, so you should respect our choices too. That was very hard for him. He didn't say this to us in the early days, but really let us know later on. I would definitely get frustrated with this. He really wanted me to convert. We are both stubborn people, and we really got into it sometimes. And then he would say, "Oh that's my mom. She's getting emotional. You can't get emotional. If you look at it logically, you'll see that I'm right." Then I would stop before things got too angry. That was normally how our debates went.

Six months before he left for Syria, Noah moved away and found work in a European city nearby. He visited his parents often during the weekends and his father would regularly take him out to dinner and make sure he was doing well. Looking back, Christie wonders whether Noah was using his time away to work and raise money and plan his travel to Syria, away from the prying eyes of his parents. "Your guess is as good as mine," she says.

Noah left for Syria in early October 2014, without telling his parents. Christie called him repeatedly during the week that he left and could sense that something was wrong. She called the landlord of the building where Noah was staying: "It was sheer luck that we had her number." She called and asked the landlord to look in to Noah's room to make sure he was there. The landlord initially refused, but relented after some pleading. Noah's parents stayed on the phone with the landlord as she entered the apartment: "She told us that in her opinion, the place looked like nobody was living there. We had to then call the police so that they could be there with us when we looked through his apartment the next day." The police searched the apartment, took Noah's computer and several phones that were lying around, and spoke to other residents in the apartment building. Several mentioned that Noah probably left for Syria. Christie said: "One of the neighbours told us, 'I have to tell you that I think he has gone to Syria.' And that's when everything started. Everything changed from that moment."

Christie and her husband went back home. They told some members of their family and close friends about what had happened. They returned to Noah's apartment a week later and packed up all his things. They didn't hear from their son until early December: "I just got home from work, and the phone rang, and it was him. He said, 'I am in Raqqa with the Islamic State.' He said he was fine and that he wanted to stay there." Noah had borrowed another fighter's phone to make the call, so the conversation only lasted a few minutes. A month later, he called again and the family had more frequent contact over Skype until March 2015. They haven't heard from him since: "We don't even know how to talk about him." The family has no idea whether he is alive

or dead after over three years of silence. "The fact is," Christie says, before pausing for a few seconds, "the fact is that our life is turned upside down since his departure, but it also has to go on."

With Noah's sudden departure, there were a lot of loose ends surrounding his life that his parents needed to tie up. Even to this day, over three years since he left, they still receive mail in his name, with collection agencies threatening to take them to court for money owed. Christie observed:

He left us with phone bills, a lot of traffic fines, insurance and bank stuff, and so many other things. It took a lot of time to get everything in check. And that's just the practical stuff. Then there are the mental questions, of why he did what he did and whether we could have done more to prevent it.

Like many family members we have spoken to, Noah's parents noticed changes in him and tried to take measures to address them. They asked the imam whom they met during Noah's conversion to keep a closer eye on him, and spoke to his doctor about changes they noticed in his behaviour: "At that time in the middle of 2014, there wasn't enough around this issue for someone to take any special steps. So yes, more should have been done, but we tried. Nothing happened," Christie told us...In between the emotional turmoil at home, Noah periodically phoned the house. These conversations with him were always difficult, because his parents wanted to ask so many questions and express their anger, but they held everything back:

I didn't want to make him angry or push him away, so I was not very strict or nagging him to come home or calling him stupid or anything. I didn't ask him too many difficult questions, because I know how he is and I was too afraid that he would stop wanting to have contact with us.

Not hearing from Noah since March 2015 has been difficult, and every day the family struggles with the uncertainty around what he may be doing and what might have happened to their son. Christie's voice cracked as she told us:

Maybe he doesn't miss us anymore. Maybe he feels like we are not useful to him anymore. He once said that maybe if he stops contacting us, we will be able to forget about him and move on. I said to him, "How can you even think that? We can't ever forget you." You see, he doesn't have any children, so he has no idea. He has no idea what parents go through.

The uncertainty can be truly unbearable for many parents, and they often say that once they received that dreaded call from Syria telling them that their son has died, they were at least able to find some closure amid the grief. Not knowing either way is what is most emotionally taxing. For now, the family waits. Christie notices mothers with their children: "Every time I see a mother with a child now, I always think please, please, please cherish the time you have, because you never know what can happen."



He left us with phone bills, a lot of traffic fines, insurance and bank stuff, and so many other things. It took a lot of time to get everything in check. And that's just the practical stuff. Then there are the mental questions, of why he did what he did and whether we could have done more to prevent it. ””



The boys and girls from Quebec

According to our research, around 100 men and women have travelled to Syria and Iraq from Canada to fight with a wide variety of rebel and jihadist groups. Around a third of this number have departed from Quebec, and several more have been arrested for attempting to leave.¹⁷ There has been much theorising about why this might be the case, ranging from the distinctive relationship that Quebec has had with religion and religious symbols worn by adherents to an argument put forth by some that Quebec is uniquely anti-immigrant and xenophobic. While analysis of these questions is outside the scope of this report, it is important to note that young Muslims in Quebec whom we have interviewed continue to express a deep sense of uneasiness about their place in the province. They were born and go to school there, but as visible Muslims they do not feel included in the fabric of the province, one that is often openly hostile to their religious identity. Below, we discuss the cases of two young men and one young woman who left Quebec to fight for and live in the Islamic State.

One of the most interesting individuals who migrated from Canada to fight for ISIS is Mohamed Rifaat, a 20-year old from Laval, Quebec, who was famous among his friends for his skills at Quranic recitation. We sat down with some of his friends over the course of several months to get a better understanding of why he might have left his life in Canada behind. "He was a self-proclaimed imam," one of his close friends told us. "If you had a religion-related question, you would go to him. He acted like our religious leader or our role model." In asking questions about Rifaat, we also learned about how broader policy decisions in a particular locale can affect youth identity over time. A young woman observed,

Our school was about two identities. There were those who were assimilated 100% and those who were resisting and revolting. There were those who chose the extreme of drugs and not caring about their tradition and those who chose the extreme side of religion. It was a crisis of identity.

While young people were struggling with these identities, Quebec politicians attempted to pass the Charter of Secular Values, which sought to bar public sector employees from wearing religious symbols on the job, required those receiving government services to uncover their faces, and attempted to amend the Quebec human rights legislation to limit when individuals could make claims around religious accommodation. The Charter went a long way in politicising many young Muslims in Quebec. It became

the new point of revolution and political activism. Before the Charter, some young Muslims demonstrated and demanded prayer spaces for themselves at school. Fighting for religious accommodation and equality served to make some of them return to their religious identity as a kind of protest. A young woman in Quebec said:

I noticed that being cool for Muslims revolved around wearing the hijab, the jilbab, beards for the guys, and so on. It was about being religious and showing your religion. It became fashion. And then came the Charter of Values, which encouraged most of us to wear hijabs and to revolt against everything. I know girls who did not wear the veil but after the Charter, they suddenly decided to wear it and become religious.

Rifaat's identity as a religious leader among his friends was closely tied to his political activism around religious accommodation at his school. These issues became more pronounced with the ongoing debate around the Charter. And "Sheikh Rifaat", as one of his friends jokingly calls him, placed himself at the centre of the religious and political battle that was happening in their school:

You know, I wasn't surprised when I heard about his departure. He once said that if the Prophet were alive, he would never live in Canada. He wanted to live in a Muslim country. He considered himself the leader. I remember one morning, I was taking the bus to school, and he got in and sat at the back. He sat alone in the corner and started crying while Qur'an recitation played on his phone very loudly. He kept crying, leaning on the window, until we got to the school. I sometimes felt ashamed of myself because I was not religious like him. He made us feel bad for falling short. So we would avoid him in the school hallway because we felt we had less value than him. He was rebellious against school rules also. I remember one day we prayed at the school gymnasium without asking for permission. Rifaat was the architect of that. We were being rebellious by showing off how religious we were. I know all of those guys and girls who challenged the school administration about the issue of praying, most of them were not religious. We were all looking for a collective identity, I think. When Sheikh Rifaat left [laughs], the movement died with him. Now the school is back to normal.

As might be expected, this is not how Rifaat always was, as demonstrated by the reflections of a friend we interviewed, who had known him for five years. He recalls that Rifaat's father was quite strict with him over his education, and Rifaat simply couldn't live up to his father's demands. He was not interested in school and

was not doing well, and his father was applying a lot of pressure for him to do better and graduate from high school. Rifaat seemed to find an alternative sense of purpose and pride in the admiration he received from his peers for his religiosity. His friend told us:

In our group, we had people [who] practised Islam. Maybe that was an influence for him. I also started praying as well. I don't always pray but that was a way for me to help Rifaat with his struggles. We started to go praying together at the mosques. Not all the prayers but if we were playing soccer we stopped playing and prayed in the park. It was Rifaat [who led] the prayers. I think the reason he went deep in religion is because we respected him a lot for his passion for his religion. He was the one who recited the Qur'an during prayers and he was happy with this role. He felt that he was successful in this part of his life.

Rifaat wanted to go to Toronto to study the Qur'an further, and he watched "a lot of YouTube videos so he could see and listen to imams reciting the Qur'an". He started uploading audio and "wanted to have praise from the web community" so that he could earn the praise of others too for his way of reciting. Then in late 2012 and early 2013, his friend noticed that things began to change. His religious views became more conservative and "radical". In 2013, after Pauline Marois had become the head of the Parti Quebecois, a political party in Quebec, Rifaat took to Facebook and posted a hadith, which said that "every community led by a female will eventually become unsuccessful". His friend was quite shocked by the comment and tried arguing with him about it, drawing on the role of women in the Abrahamic religion. Rifaat refused to take any of these arguments into consideration:

Even when I wanted to participate in a protest during the student strikes so that the government reduces school fees, Rifaat told me I should be cautious. I found it strange, so I asked what he meant. Rifaat said, "In the protest, there will be guys but also girls. The girls and guys can mix during the protest." I replied, "Rifaat, this is nonsense, even if you walk in the streets there [are] females and males." Rifaat responded, "Yes, but when you walk in the street, you recite the shahada so that you have no perverted thoughts." I replied, "But I am able to control myself and control my sexual urges." I said that to him in a joking manner, but Rifaat said, "a'udhu billahi min as-shaytan ir-rajeem", which basically was him telling God that he had nothing to do with my statement or views. I replied, "Rifaat come on, I didn't say any abusive words. I just said I will control my way." Rifaat told me to do what I want, and if I want to take his advice I take it, and if you don't want, don't take it, and he left me on that.

Soon Rifaat started posting videos to his Facebook page about Bashar Al-Assad killing innocent civilians, and troubles in Libya. He became very political and called for the death of Assad and his supporters. His friend then left for university and never saw Rifaat again, but they continued to communicate occasionally on Facebook. He was always respectful in his dealings with our interviewee – showing his admiration for Muslims who became educated and could defend the community against its detractors, even if he felt that he didn't succeed in school. But his views became markedly "closer to the Salafist ideology than the Sunni ideology" as he declared that "Islam can't mix with democracy", condemned others for voting and paying taxes in Canada, and observed that "a country will only know peace with Sharia".

Other young people who left Quebec to travel to Syria and Iraq expressed a similar sentiment – that living in the west was against their new-found religiosity and that continuing to live in Canada was corrupting their religious identity. In interviews with friends of foreign fighters, we often asked what kept them in the country. Why were we interviewing them about their friends and not the other way around? They gave us various answers: some believed that the jihad in Syria was too chaotic, that there was no one group they could pinpoint as being on the path of truth; others argued that their jihad is much more local – taking care of their parents and making a noble life in Canada. One woman said, "My father lived through the civil war in Algeria, and he learned a lot from that. So what saved us I think is our parents engaging us in discussions around these topics, on all subjects." This was a common sentiment. On the other hand, many young people we spoke to felt that they were taught from childhood to stand up for justice and against tyranny, but when they had legitimate questions about atrocities in Syria, and their obligations as Muslim youth, the community and religious leaders failed to provide political or religious answers. It was a confusing and unsatisfactory situation.

Two other young people who migrated to Syria from Quebec were Imad Rafai and Shayma Senouci. The policy discussions around the Charter of Secular Values that were taking place locally, and the rise of ISIS abroad, only solidified their view that Muslims should not remain in the lands of the nonbelievers. One friend of Rafai noted, "After the Charter, he kept saying 'this is happening to us because we are in the lands of the kuffar. We should not stay here.' On his Facebook page, he would post all of this. I'm a Muslim too, but he was way over the top." The friend recalls Rafai posting videos of Christians insulting the Prophet, and Muslims eventually reacting to these insults with violence. "He commented saying that this is how we should defend

the Prophet, and his comments started a big debate online,” says one friend. “He kept saying we should kill them. We need to do this and that.”

The Charter served to crystallise a lot of political and religious views Rafai was already expressing and learning in Quebec. One of his friends told us,

At first, like everybody else, he didn't see Islam as something important, later he started to find meaning in it, and slowly got radicalised. Then the Charter came to make everything worse. From that moment, we noticed a change in the way he was talking. All of them are the same. They felt humiliated here.

The Charter was the straw that broke the camel's back for many young people whom we spoke to, it was the moment in which everything they were feeling and everything they suspected about wider Quebec society was confirmed. The friends of the young foreign fighters are careful to point out that it wasn't just the Charter – they were thinking and feeling these things beforehand. But, the Charter made them believe that their rather fuzzy sense of marginalisation was in fact accurate, and – even more importantly – it wasn't something that was going to change in their lifetime.

This sentiment is perhaps best expressed in a long email that Shayma Senouci sent home to her friends, who were in utter shock when they learned that she had travelled to Syria. “It has been a while since she left, but she has no regrets at all,” one of her friends said. She pulled out her phone, looked for the email and read it to us:

I am sorry it took me so long to respond! It also takes enough energy to explain everything, haha and you know me I am the laziest person ever! In all seriousness, I do not really know where to start, but I have to because it is my duty to provide explanations. Just to let you know, when I first arrived here I had no internet for security reasons and it was necessary to settle, etc. It took some time but I made it. I assume you already know that my explanations will revolve around Islam and Allah. I've already spoken to you a lot about religion. I do not know what to add to make you understand my beliefs. You should do your own research; you should also read the texts and the prophetic narratives that we both studied. It is almost five months since I left, but I have the impression that my departure didn't challenge anyone, because neither you nor my family have done the research to understand my actions, or the actions of thousands of people in the world, and I am carefully picking my words. Are we perhaps the Illuminati? Are we brainwashed? I don't think so, no, how do so many people, speaking different languages, from different cultures, respond to the same call and have the

certainty to take it upon themselves to respond to this call?

Her friends replied to the initial email with dozens of questions, but there was no response. A full week went by, then another email arrived:

I am sorry, I stopped responding because I didn't know how to answer, I didn't know whether you'll understand, and I told myself that it's not worth it because some of you wear blinders and prefer not to fully investigate things and are very attached to this life, in which uselessness rules. I'll try to answer as simply as possible:

First, I left because it is impossible for a Muslim to live in a country of infidels. It is an obligation for him to immigrate to a Muslim country, a country where Allah's laws are applied. I left to be closer to Allah.

Second, I left because I felt imprisoned in this country, I felt dirty and deadly, an accomplice for the killings and the humiliations of Muslims worldwide. If you look again, you will notice that all these taxes and “fees” you pay are for the financing of armaments and for sending bombs here or in other Muslim countries to kill women and children, civilians (I live here and I am witnessing it).

The email went on for several more pages, providing detailed reasons why Shayma felt she didn't belong in the west and was obliged to migrate to a Muslim country. She ended by parroting a key ISIS talking point, that living in the so-called caliphate wasn't just about fighting and dying, it was about protecting and sustaining a new form of governance, one that is diametrically opposed to western liberal democracies: “It's not just youth who come,” the email continued, “it is entire families, the elderly, doctors, engineers, lawyers, etc. Every day they come from everywhere in the world with incredible stories, and I see happiness and smiles on their faces.”

“ I left because I felt imprisoned in this country, I felt dirty and deadly, an accomplice for the killings and the humiliations of Muslims worldwide.”

Becoming a foreign fighter: a social ecology approach

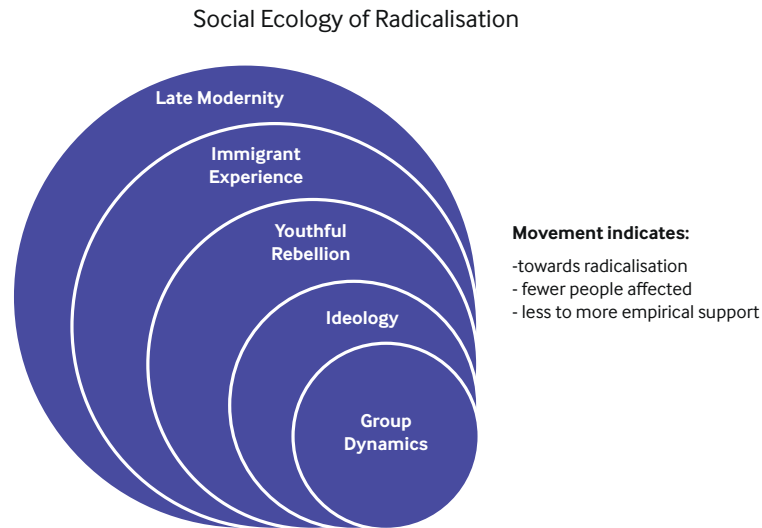


Figure 3. The five ecological niches that influence the radicalisation of western foreign fighters

As our case studies show, in seeking to draw generalisations from the data available on western foreign fighters we need to think about the dynamic interplay of many sets of variables, including hard-to-predict contingencies that work in complex and unique ways to radicalise individuals.

For certain immediate purposes we can content ourselves with deriving lists of behavioural indicators of radicalisation from the data.²⁰ But few researchers are satisfied with staying at this level of analysis. We need to develop a more refined understanding of how this identity transformation is happening. In doing so we doubt it is realistic to dissociate the analysis from an ongoing fascination with why it might be happening as well. To capture both concerns we should seek to model the many and diverse factors that have an impact, in various combinations and to varying degrees, on the progression of an individual along the path of radicalisation towards violence – in line with the ecological modes of thinking now engrained in our awareness.

In sketching an ecological model of radicalisation (see Figure 3), we begin with the most general and pervasive factors that may be pertinent and move towards more specific and discriminating factors that we have strong reason to think are relevant. In other words, we moved from considering the factors for which we have the least

direct empirical evidence to addressing those that are better substantiated in the research on radicalisation.²¹

At the highest level of generality, we must recognise that homegrown radicalisation to violence is a product of the new social conditions in which we all live, what some sociologists call “late modernity”,²² the “risk society” or “liquid modernity”. The full range of social structural changes and their social psychological consequences addressed in these theories is far too complex to dwell on here, but most obviously homegrown terrorism is a product of the process of globalisation, which is at the heart of all these theories. Homegrown jihadist radicalisation has grown from the unprecedented movement of peoples around the world, the ability of immigrants to stay in regular contact with people and issues in their homelands,²³ and the capacity to spread the messages fuelling terrorism with relative ease via the internet.²⁴ As we hope is clear from the cases described above, it is also reflected in the intense pressure felt by the children of immigrants to manage the expectations of two often discordant worlds, the cultural traditions and norms of their parents and the pervasive cultural demands of their non-immigrant peer groups.²⁵

There is a desperate need for young people to fit in, and yet be seemingly unique, and the torque of the situation can be particularly acute for those from cultural,

religious and ethnic minorities.²⁶ Finally, we live in a world where the local and the global are increasingly merged. Global conflicts and grievances receive attention every day in the media and penetrate every home. We now worry about what is happening to people continents away. For Muslim youth the situation is more specifically aggravated by living with the pervasive and often polarised media landscape of the post 9/11 world. This combination of factors is not completely unique to the late modern world, but no previous generation of young people, especially immigrant youth, has borne their combined impact to the same degree.

These factors play into and aggravate the identity struggles characteristic of adolescence and young adulthood among those individuals who radicalise, literally making a bad situation worse. For whatever reason these young men, and some women, are having a really hard time finding themselves. Their lives also may be buffeted by seemingly minor experiences of discrimination and abuse deriving from their "alien" status, things they have taken to heart in ways that may surprise us. Outwardly, these young people may appear to be very ordinary. As is clear from the case studies above, friends and family are often little aware of the inner struggles going on, yet studies reveal that the seemingly sudden turn to violence usually has its roots in a prolonged inner turmoil.²⁷

Three other psychological factors seem to play a role, which distinguishes these individuals from other confused and rebellious youth. It is the combination and intensity of these factors, in the right social conditions, that is decisive:

- There is evidence of a marked "quest for significance",²⁸ a desire to make a mark in the world, or to separate from the crowd, among young foreign fighters.
- These young people are often deeply concerned about moral issues, with knowing and doing the right thing – again not as determined by the seemingly apathetic and corrupt surrounding society, but by some higher or transcendent authority.²⁹ Young jihadists in the making are gripped by a stronger sense of moral duty than their peers, not less, as is commonly assumed.³⁰
- Many potential foreign fighters have a strong orientation to action, to adventure and risk.

Encountering the radical narrative of the jihadists when individuals are experiencing these conditions can produce a cognitive opening for recruitment to a cause, though in most instances the individuals have become "seekers" searching for relevant material online. Jihadist ideology connects the dots in a satisfying way, offering a simple but definitive explanation for their angst. It

offers a grand solution, targets a culprit, and prescribes a course of action. Most of all it sets the individuals' struggles in a transcendent frame of meaning that gives an ultimate and virtuous purpose to their existence. It places their personal troubles in solidarity with those of a whole people.³¹ The initial appeal may be just fanciful, and the young men play at being radicals. But further interaction with others who are more radicalised, or those fully committed to the cause, online or in person, consolidates the leanings in rapid order. Invariably it is the shared nature of the experience between close friends or family members that encourages the enthusiasm, and eventually the courage to act. The small group dynamics are crucial, as loyalty to the group takes precedence over everything else, as with a platoon of soldiers at war.³² As experimental social psychologists have shown in myriad ways, our behaviour is shaped by the contexts in which we operate far more than we are willing to admit. The students designated as prisoners and guards in the famous Stanford County prison experiment reverted to abusing each other in a matter of days, though they knew full well they were just role-playing, and the experiment had to be terminated.³³

In most cases, we would say the help and encouragement of outside mentors is required to complete the process of radicalisation, to turn wannabe terrorists into deployable agents or independent martyrs for the cause. The process of radicalisation needs to be legitimated to be complete. Anger and frustration have their role to play in the process, but it is the positive investment in an alternate world-saving role that matters most, no matter how strange it may appear to outsiders. Often the acts of violence are precipitated by some triggering event, which may be either public or private in nature. The trigger may not make much sense to most, but it is consequential in symbolic ways in the jihadist's story of the struggle of good and evil.

In the end, many contingent factors determine if someone radicalises, let alone commits an act of terrorism. This reflects the processes of decision making in most aspects of our lives. Our careers and marriages often are the result of happenstance, the result of meeting the right person or situation at the right time. Such is also the case in the lives of individuals radicalised to violence. A perfect storm of factors is behind an individual's ultimate decision to plant bombs and kill innocent civilians, or leave everything behind to serve ISIS in a distant land. Part of the way we can come to better understand this perfect storm of factors is by talking to radicalised individuals, and having honest conversations with those close to them – their families and friends.

Conclusion

As scholars commonly point out, no two individuals radicalise in exactly the same way, and the advantage of our qualitative approach is that it brings texture and nuance to that argument – to the extent that the individuals who heeded the call to serve as foreign fighters can become more fully humanised. However, there are noteworthy similarities emerging across our cases, which are of more immediate interest and long-term social scientific value. Clearly, people engage in political and religious violence because they have a burning desire to address grievances, so we must identify and understand these issues and the consequent goals of their actions. It is widely recognised that a much larger set of people share these grievances than those called to action, let alone violence and self-sacrifice. This is the specificity problem, which plagues all efforts to explain terrorism – as Marc Sageman has reiterated forcefully.³⁴

The social ecology approach to radicalisation tackles this explanatory challenge, and we assume that research into the origins of terrorism serves to close the resultant explanatory gap and not aggravate it. To this end, data must increasingly replace speculation – and especially primary data. Here are some important findings after spending four years interviewing foreign fighters, their friends and families.

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

Second, they do not appear to be emerging from dysfunctional or neglectful families, or from poor or stressful economic circumstances.

Third, their turn to more religious, and then eventually radical, worldviews coincides largely with the typical struggles of adolescence: the quest to establish their own meaningful identity and sense of purpose, in dialectic with the influences of their parents, their peers and broader popular culture.

Fourth, the increased religiosity of most of the emerging foreign fighters whom we learned about largely preceded the politicisation of their worldview and commitments. They began dressing differently,

started socialising with new friends, and became more politically aware, but often these activities were mediated through changes in their religiosity. In other words, they may have chosen a new “bunch of guys” to socialise with, and this social activity was crucial to their radicalisation, but these guys were chosen because they shared a worldview, especially a religious one. Many things play into the process, but it is religious beliefs and practices that focus the process.

Fifth, it seems, as Cottee and Hayward propose, “that terrorist activity may provide an outlet for basic existential desires that cannot find expression through legitimate channels”.³⁵ Something is driving these young people that the conventional social systems and ideals of western materialist societies cannot satisfy.

Sixth, local experiences of marginalisation can act as a significant trigger for radicalisation, or push individuals who already have radical views to escalate their behaviour towards violence. This was particularly clear with the social and political turmoil in Quebec surrounding the wearing of religious symbols and clothing by those serving the public or using public services.

Seventh, friends and family noticed some of the changes individuals were undergoing, but much remained hidden. For example, friends and family noticed changes in their clothing, religiosity and attitude; but rarely thought them overly troubling. The budding foreign fighters became more earnest and insular, more moral and moralistic. But apart from a few tense verbal disputes with their parents and peers about what halal and haram are, it appears that the changes taking place were kept largely hidden from view. At its core jihadist radicalisation is an inner struggle to understand what it means to be righteous and act righteously. With hindsight, the parents lament that they should have paid more attention to the outward signs of change, but in most cases the changes seem to have been for the better or just typical of the excesses of adolescence. Moreover, the parents appeared to be no more equipped, conceptually or practically, than other external observers to make the necessary links between outward changes they witnessed and the serious inner transformations that occurred in their children. There is an intensely private aspect to the process of radicalisation, at least for parents and friends, unless they are embarking on the same journey.

Finally, as only a few of our interviews have revealed so far (and none of those discussed here), we need to

learn more about the social psychological dynamics within young people who actively support the idea of becoming mujahideen. As biographical statements and court records suggest, and the social science literature indicates, much depends on the intense psychological pressures generated among small groups of like-minded individuals watching jihadist videos together, reading and discussing propagandistic texts, and debating current affairs. This is the final vortex in which the new radical identity is forged, and overarching loyalties shaped, sometimes under the additional impetus supplied by a persuasive charismatic figure. Some of those with whom we spoke were aware of the new friends and associates who entered the lives of their children or friends – and suspected them of exerting an undesirable influence – but they were ignorant of what was happening when these new groups met.

Overall what appears to be happening with these young people is a mixture of six factors: (1) acute, emerging adult, identity struggles, (2) in individuals with a moralistic problem-solving frame of mind, (3) conditioned by an inordinate quest for significance (to make a difference in this world), (4) which is resolved by a (religious) ideology and participation in a fantasy (literally) of world change, (5) by way of the psychological impact of intense small group dynamics and perhaps the influence of charismatic leadership, (6) resulting in a fusion of the personal identity of the individual with the new group identity and its cause.³⁶

Spending time with friends and family members of foreign fighters over the last several years has been deeply educational and a heartbreaking experience in field research. As scholars of radicalisation and terrorism, we often turn these individual stories into statistics and graphs and carry out analysis. However, it is important for researchers to sit with these stories and listen to parents and friends as they narrate the lives of young people too easily demonised and caricatured. Understanding the process of radicalisation is important but understanding the larger impact a young person's choice has had on those around them is equally relevant to ongoing policy discussions and evolving research questions.

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14. Versions of this model have been presented repeatedly to various audiences of academics as well as security, policing and policy officials. It was first published as Lorne L. Dawson, "Sketch of a Social Ecology Model for Explaining Homegrown Terrorist Radicalisation", *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague* 8, ICCT Research Note, 2017, DOI: 10.19165/2017.1.01. This statement of the model is reproduced with the generous permission of the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism.
15. To protect the identity of the participants in our interviews, pseudonyms are used throughout. Since the children of some of the family members we interviewed have already been mentioned in the news, they asked us to remove a lot more identifying information, such as ages, countries and cities of origin, date of departure. Any lack of such information is intentional.
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