

## Who Are They and Why Do They Go?

### The Radicalisation and Preparatory Processes of Dutch Jihadist Foreign Fighters

by Daan Weggemans, Edwin Bakker and Peter Grol

#### **Abstract**

*How do European Muslim men and women become involved in a violent jihadist struggle abroad? After the sharp increase in the number of European jihadist foreign fighters in Syria since 2012, this has become a pressing question for both academics and policymakers. Concrete empirical examples of radicalisation processes and preparations for engaging in the violent jihad in Syria can help to increase our understanding of these processes. In this article we will discuss the main elements of five Dutch jihadist foreign fighters' radicalisation and preparatory acts. This information is derived from interviews with persons who had been in the direct environment of these jihadists during their radicalisation phase and the time they were preparing their travel to Syria. The findings are brought together and presented in the form of two composite stories of fictional Dutch foreign fighters—'Daan' and 'Driss'—that can be regarded as typical for a number of other Dutch cases.*

**Keywords:** *the Netherlands, Syria, foreign fighters, jihadism*

#### **Introduction**

The phenomenon of European foreign fighters is not a new one.[1] There are many examples of groups and individuals that, for a variety of motives and from various ideological backgrounds, have joined an armed struggle abroad. The phenomenon of jihadist foreign fighters is not new either. In the past two decades, European Muslims took part in the civil war in Bosnia or went to fight in Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia and other parts of the wider Islamic world. In the case of Syria, the phenomenon of foreign fighters emerged after the nonviolent protests in March 2011 turned from riots into a full-blown civil war in the summer of 2011. At an early stage, the conflict drew fighters from other parts of the world, including persons from EU member states such as the Netherlands.

The presence of jihadist foreign fighters in general and that of European foreign fighters in particular has raised worries in many of the countries where these people originate from. Authorities in Europe fear that individuals who participate in the fight in Syria may become further radicalised, become trained in the use of weapons and explosives, and then return to Europe as part of a global jihadist movement.[2] Moreover, with the ever rising numbers of foreign fighters in Syria who may some day return, European countries are heading for a serious security problem as most countries do not have the capacity to track or pursue all possible returnees.

As a consequence, in many European countries a strong emphasis has been placed on the prevention of potential jihadists leaving for Syria. However, the legal tools to do so are limited. In addition, it is not always clear what to look for and what to do if there are signs of radicalisation or preparation for travel to Syria. It requires a great deal of capacity and experience, and the necessary manpower, as well as excellent coordination and cooperation between authorities and other relevant stakeholders to at least have a chance to stop potential jihadists from departing via Turkey to Syria. One of the main obstacles for early detection and intervention is a lack of knowledge among front line social workers and police officers about radicalisation and the foreign fighter phenomenon. In addition, limited experience with, and available means for

countering radicalisation can lead to a situation in which signals are observed but are not linked to the jihad in Syria. Moreover, individual signs of radicalisation and preparation often do not provide a complete picture of the situation. Yet even when different pieces of the puzzle are combined, their interpretation often remains difficult. ‘Something’ is going on, but what? It remains unclear what exactly friends and family members or the authorities need to worry about. Many young people change their behaviour and attitudes during teenage years or in their early twenties, but what developments point in the direction of radicalisation and finally to heading for Syria?

Concrete empirical examples of radicalisation processes and preparations for engaging in a violent jihad can increase the awareness and understanding of these processes among potential first line responders (teachers, social workers, community police officers) and parents, friends or acquaintances of potential jihadists. From a more academic perspective these empirical examples are essential for gaining a thorough understanding of a process like radicalisation.[3] This brings us to an apparently fundamental problem of (counter-)terrorism and radicalisation studies.[4] Silke and Sageman, for instance, have stressed that although the number of publications in this field has expanded rapidly since 9/11, only a small percentage of them presents new empirical information and digs deep enough.[5] A substantial part of the literature on terrorism consists of literature reviews and conceptual work.[6] Notwithstanding the inherently complicated nature of obtaining primary-sources based data, this poses a significant obstacle for ‘moving terrorism research forward’.[7]

Against this backdrop, the authors conducted an exploratory study that aims to contribute to our understanding of jihadist foreign fighters from the Netherlands by presenting the ‘biographies’ or life stories of five Dutch jihadist foreign fighters who went to Syria.[8] The data for this Research Note were collected through interviews with eighteen persons who had been in the direct environment of five Dutch jihadists during their radicalisation phase[9] and during the time they were preparing[10] their travel to Syria. The five life ‘biographies’ were ‘translated’ into two condensed life stories that contain the key observations regarding the radicalisation period and the preparation phase. Using a focus-group discussion with twenty-five experts (frontline professionals and policymakers) who deal with radicalisation and (returning) foreign fighters, we compared these key observations with their experience in working with these youngsters or the stories they had been told by the friends and families of foreign fighters originating from the Netherlands. Thus we attempted to address the following two questions: a) what does the radicalisation process of a foreign fighter in the Netherlands look like and b) what do their preparations for travelling to Syria look like?

In the remainder of this Research Note we will first give a general introduction to the problem of jihadist foreign fighters from the Netherlands on the basis of the publications of the General Security and Intelligence Services (AIVD) and the National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism (NCTV) who were the first to report on this phenomenon. Subsequently our research approach and methodology will be discussed before presenting the two condensed life stories that synthesise crucial elements of the ‘biographies’ of the five researched Dutch jihadist foreign fighters. In the conclusion we will reflect upon the key elements of these life stories.

### ***Jihadist Foreign Fighters from the Netherlands***

In December 2012 and the first months of 2013, Dutch authorities observed a rapidly growing number of Dutch citizens and residents going to Syria to join the fight against the regime of Bashar al-Assad on the side of jihadist groups. Initially, the authorities were taken by surprise by the flow of persons from the Netherlands that participated in the jihad in Syria. For years, the terrorism threat level in the Netherlands (*Dreigingsbeeld Terrorisme Nederland*; DTN) had been ‘limited’. However, the DTN report of December 2012 remarked that

the conflict in Syria was becoming 'a new jihadist 'magnet' [...] drawing jihadists from the Arab world but also from Europe'.<sup>[11]</sup>

In January 2013, the AIVD decided to bring this potentially threatening new development to the attention of the general public. In an interview on television, the head of the AIVD stated that many of the foreign fighters join the jihadist group Jabath al-Nusra (JaN).<sup>[12]</sup> A few months later, the country's official threat level was raised to 'substantial', the second highest. One of the reasons was the significant increase in the number of jihadists travelling to countries in Africa and the Middle East, especially Syria.<sup>[13]</sup> In April, the AIVD explained why the phenomenon of travelling jihadists was a source of concern to the Netherlands. According to its Annual Report 2012, 'when abroad, these jihadists acquire combat and other skills and contacts, and may also return in a traumatised condition'.<sup>[14]</sup> It noted a large increase in the number of jihadists travelling to Syria at the end of 2012, pointing at the extensive media and internet attention for the conflict in Syria, and the easy accessibility of the country.<sup>[15]</sup>

The first wave of jihadist travellers to Syria was composed of members of activist radical Islamist movements, such as Behind Bars and Shariah4Holland.<sup>[16]</sup> During 2012 the dividing line between radicalism and jihadism was blurred as these movements created an environment – living room meetings, outdoors events, websites, etc. – in which radical ideas developed into jihadist views. This resulted in the rapid radicalisation of many individuals and a rise in actual attempts to participate in the jihad in Syria.<sup>[17]</sup> Today, many of the 'members' of these and other activist radical Islamist groups have gone to Syria or constitute the core of a 'scene' that is still fervently promoting the jihad in Syria, either on the streets of Dutch cities or on the Internet. Quite openly, they express support for, and display loyalty to groups like the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and the earlier mentioned Jabhat al-Nusra.<sup>[18]</sup>

Today, the terrorism threat level in the Netherlands continues to be 'substantial' given the on-going threat posed by the above mentioned groups and the increasing number of those returning from Syria. In February 2014, the National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism (NCTV) spoke of more than twenty returnees.<sup>[19]</sup> In April, this number had grown to about thirty.<sup>[20]</sup> These returnees are part of a group of more than one hundred Dutch citizens and residents who have travelled to Syria. The assessments of May 2014 speak of more than seventy persons that are in Syria, at least ten who have died there, and of about thirty returnees.<sup>[21]</sup> In 2014, the fight in Syria also seemed to have attracted new groups of potential foreign fighters, including an increasing number of women.<sup>[22]</sup> Against this background it is obvious that there is no standard Dutch foreign jihad fighter. However, although there is no clear profile of these foreign fighters, there are a number of general observations that can be made based upon what is communicated by Dutch intelligence and security services. The group of Dutch foreign fighters is comprised of mainly male youngsters, and persons with various ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds. Moreover, according to the AIVD, the average age of those who travel to Syria is decreasing.<sup>[23]</sup> The majority of the Dutch foreign fighters has a jihadist agenda and has joined either ISIL or JaN.<sup>[24]</sup> All of these individuals have been active in jihadist circles for various lengths of time, in the virtual or real world.<sup>[25]</sup> The fact that most Dutch foreign fighters have joined jihadist groups is one of the main reasons why the authorities are worried and the threat level has remained 'substantial'.

According to the AIVD several fighters have returned to the Netherlands, 'frequently bearing alarming baggage: they are trained, traumatized or radicalised even further'.<sup>[26]</sup> To limit the potential threat, the authorities aim to contain the flow of persons travelling to Syria and are further developing a strategy to deal with those returning. Policies related to returnees range from 'soft' assistance programs by local authorities to 'hard' criminal investigations and persecution efforts by the public prosecutor's office. The various security partners involved are asked to remain alert to radicalisation and possible signs of preparation for travelling to

Syria.[27]

To that end, the NCTV provides advice to practitioners and promotes the development of expertise, for instance by offering or supporting security awareness training. However, this is easier said than done. As mentioned earlier, recognising the radicalisation process and the preparation phase of those that want to join the jihad in Syria is very difficult. For instance, this process can sometimes be very short.[28] There are several cases of youngsters who, seemingly out of the blue, became foreign fighters within a few weeks or months. Even many parents were taken by surprise, let alone teachers, social workers, community police officers and local authorities who make up the second ring of possible observers of changes in attitudes and behaviour among these youngsters.[29] Sometimes certain signals were observed, but did not provide a clear and complete picture, as a result of which follow-up actions were postponed.[30] Even when different signals are brought together it is still difficult to make a proper assessment as there is limited material to compare with. Some signals about changes in attitudes and behaviour provide reasons to worry, but to worry about what? Youngsters at the age of most of the foreign fighters show all kinds of changes in attitude and behaviour, but which ones indicate a process that leads to becoming a foreign fighter? To answer these highly relevant questions, we need more empirical research. We need more concrete examples that can help to give an overview of the puzzle in order to a) recognise signals or information, and b) to put the pieces of the puzzle together and assess the situation.

### ***Research Approach and Methodology***

This Research Note aims at getting a better picture of Dutch jihadist foreign fighters. With this explorative study we hope to gain some preliminary insights on this phenomenon by reconstructing the radicalisation and preparation processes of a small number of Dutch jihadist foreign fighters who left for Syria. We studied the life stories of five young men who participated in the struggle against the Assad regime between summer 2012 and fall 2013. In this article we will present two abstracted stories consisting of the main elements of these five cases.

The five cases were selected, to the extent information was available, in such a way as to represent the larger population of at least one hundred Dutch jihadist foreign fighters in terms of age, ethnic background, percentage of converts to Islam, social economic background and region of residence. However, accessibility of sources, especially access to persons who were close to our research subjects during their radicalisation phase and the preparation for leaving for Syria, proved to be an important factor for our case selection as well. It was, as expected, not easy to find respondents who agreed to an interview. Feelings of shame and sorrow or fear that talking with researchers would lead to repercussions, such as intimidation by members of the Dutch jihadist scene or trouble with the authorities, formed important obstacles. These obstacles proved bigger in relation to persons of Moroccan descent than in relation to Dutch converts. As a result, the share of converts from ethnically Dutch families, two out of five, is inflated.

For each case three to seven people were interviewed (a total of eighteen respondents of whom seven were interviewed regarding multiple cases) between November 2013 and April 2014. The semi-structured interviews were based on a set of topics to be discussed in depth.[31] These topics were related to the following categories: questions about character or personality, family situation, social network, meaning of life and religion, political ideas, personal experiences. We asked our respondents to focus on the following time periods in the life of the foreign fighters: childhood, adolescence, adult life (if applicable), year before going to Syria and last weeks before travel.

All interviews were conducted in a face-to-face setting. The interviewees included friends and family

members as well as employers, social workers and local police officers and persons connected to mosques. The respondents were in the direct environment of our research subjects during their radicalisation and while engaging in preparatory acts for leaving for Syria. We argue that this makes them valuable respondents for our study as they possess important, first-hand, knowledge on how these processes unfolded and because they are able to reflect upon potential (missed) signals of a forthcoming departure.[32]

The interviews were supplemented, when available, with open source information on the five cases. This resulted in five biographies of Dutch jihadist foreign fighters that describe their lives before leaving for Syria and the subjective interpretations of their radicalisation and preparation phase by the interviewees. Considering the sensitivity of the matter at hand, all personal data in the five life stories has been anonymized (different names and places have been used as well as hobbies and other personal characteristics have been feigned). This, however, has no consequences for the scope and meaning of these biographies. We named the persons Erik, Tarik, Faysal, Elmir and Steven.

Erik and Steven are two boys who were raised in ethnically Dutch families and converted to Islam after finishing their high school education. Tarik and Elmir on the other hand were raised in immigrant families. Tarik was raised in a traditional and religious Turkish family while Elmir's family is from the West Indies and converted to Islam when he was 18 years old. Faysal was born to a Iraqi-Kurdish father and a Dutch mother and converted to Islam during his last years of high school.

The life stories of these five individuals encompass different elements of the development towards becoming a foreign fighter in Syria; personal, ideological, political and social. The elements that were most often encountered in the interviews or in open source information on the five cases were extracted from these five biographies and comprised into the 'fictive' life stories of Daan and Driss. Due to the limited length of this Research Note, we opted for this type of presentation, instead of, for instance, producing a list of observations or possible relevant factors or indicators, as it gives more opportunity to highlight the complexity and the importance of context with regard to the radicalisation and preparation phases of the Dutch foreign fighters. [33] This presentation also corresponds with the explorative nature of this study. Moreover, using compressed stories allows for comparing these cases with the experiences of practitioners and experts in the field in focus group meetings (see below). In the end, all radicalisation processes are to a certain extent idiosyncratic. It is therefore impossible to speak of a single 'typical' radicalisation pathway. However, some elements or themes stood out in the cases we looked into. By combining the recurrent elements and themes from multiple cases into two condensed stories, we aim to provide a grounded insight into these recurring elements of the radicalisation processes whilst acknowledging their inherent complexity.

We opted for two composite stories to be able to present and discuss a number of key contrasts or dissimilarities that recurred in the five researched cases: uncertain/self-confident behaviour, follower/leader types, of Moroccan background/of other ethnic background, and of Muslim background/convert. These contrasts or differences are partly interrelated and can be translated into two stories that reflect recurring or typical elements of the cases we studied. The story of Daan shows the development of a somewhat uncertain teenager who converted to Islam. He could be described as a 'follower'. Driss' story is one about a popular, rather self-confident young man of Moroccan background with many friends in his neighbourhood. He is more a 'leader-like type'. The key elements that constitute the basis of the life stories of Daan and Driss include, amongst others, traumatic experiences in (family) life, difficulties at school or work, confrontations with charismatic persons, personal disappointments, trouble with the authorities, a change of home address, developments at school, (new) friendships, and an increased interest in religion.

In a workshop with a focus group panel of twenty-five professionals (frontline workers, representatives of

local NGOs, community police officers and local policymakers who deal with the issue of radicalisation and foreign fighters) we presented the two condensed life stories. In that version, we underlined the most recurring and most typical elements in the 'biographies' of Daan and Driss. In group discussions, we compared these key observations with their experiences in dealing with radicalisation and returning foreign fighters. There appeared to be very much overlap between the outcome of our earlier interviews and their translation into the life stories of Daan and Driss and what the members of our focus group had been confronted with. In fact, they regarded both stories as rather typical for the cases they had been confronted with. Based on the input from the focus group we only altered the wordings of some of the key observations in the stories of Daan and Driss. They related to traumatic experiences in life, such as the death of a close family member and not knowing what to do with one's life. In this way we designed the two composite life stories presented below.

### ***Composite Life Story # 1: Daan***

Daan grew up in a middle-sized town in the west of the country in a family of four; father mother and an older brother. The neighbourhood in which they lived had a bad reputation because of problems with youngsters from a variety of ethnic and religious backgrounds. Unlike most other kids in the neighbourhood, Daan started the second highest level of secondary education and initially managed without any problems to progress in class from year to year. Both in the neighbourhood and at school he was a bit of an outsider. He found it difficult to connect to other children who regarded him as a bit weird; always reading and studying instead of playing sports, playing on the streets and crossing the line into criminal activities every once in a while. He was known as a silent goody-goody. When Daan was sixteen, his family was confronted with a very serious illness of his father. For a long time, Daan was not told about the seriousness of the disease; talking about it was taboo. At school, his grades went down and he started missing classes. His mother did not really know his whereabouts at this time. 'We were so preoccupied with the disease of his father that I hardly knew where Daan was in the months before his dad died.'

Around that time, Daan increasingly began to hang around with two brothers of Iraqi descent that lived in the same neighbourhood. These boys were slightly older than Daan and had been 'in contact with the police' (as a Dutch euphemism goes), but subsequently had found structure and meaning in life through Islam. They took Daan to a mosque in another part of town. A few weeks after the death of his father, he converted to Islam. He kept it hidden for a while from his brother and mother. She was very surprised when she saw her son among other boys dressed in a traditional *djellaba*.<sup>[34]</sup> She was initially pleased when Daan explained to her why he had converted, that he had found brotherhood and that it helped him to deal with the death of his father. This feeling of relief quickly passed away when he suddenly started calling everything *haram* <sup>[35]</sup> at home and did not want to join them for dinner when the food was not *halal*.<sup>[36]</sup> Especially Daan's brother, Robert, took offense from this behaviour. This led to quarrels that occasionally became very heated. 'After a particularly fierce argument Daan suddenly grabbed a bag and he was gone', said the mother. 'I regret I did not report him as missing ... but he was 17 and I thought he will simply come home after few days'.

The mother was somewhat reassured the next day, when Daan sent a loving text message in which he said he was sorry and that he was staying with friends. After that, he came home only occasionally to pick up some stuff and to chat with his mother. She noticed that he often talked about politics and how wonderfully Islam protected weaker members of society. She found it hard to talk to him about such matters. Around that time, Daan stopped having contact with the few friends he had at high school, despite the fact that he went to school regularly again and even started having quite good grades. From then on, he became even more an outcast at school: the silent convert without any friends.

He did have friends outside school. According to a community police officer from another part of the city, Daan was a member of a group of radical Muslims who often came together to talk about religion and politics. This particular group was banned from several mosques after confrontations with other visitors. Youth workers knew several of them from the time they were younger and were causing many problems. According to the imam of a mosque where they were no longer welcome, '[t]hey intimidate our mosque attendants and feel that they alone represent the true Islam. I don't know. The misery in Syria hurts us all, but their hatred against Shiites and the West is way over the top. I am so worried about this.' The community police officer was aware of these concerns, but because the confrontations at the mosque had stopped, it was felt that no further actions were necessary. A rumour that two brothers from the radical group were fighting in Syria was seen as little more than bragging. Two days later, after their desperate parents had reported them missing, it was clear that they indeed had left for Syria—together with Daan.

### ***Composite Life Story #2: Driss***

Driss grew up on the streets of a large city in the Netherlands. As the third child in a family of eight his playroom was outdoors, especially the soccer field behind the flats of the bad neighbourhood in which they lived. Like most of his neighbours, he was of Moroccan descent. He had a hard time at school. His language deficiency – his mother could hardly speak any Dutch – he managed to overcome. During his high school years (at the lowest secondary education level) he was a locally well-known rapper who incorporated alleged discrimination against young immigrants into his sharp texts. This made him popular at school and in his neighbourhood. His Dutch teacher had always hoped Driss could have become a role model as a successful rapper. He was also generally regarded as a sympathetic and cheerful boy. He had once been caught during a burglary, but otherwise stood out positively among the rest of his friends and other kids in the neighbourhood. Unlike most of his friends he had a job as a general assistant in a supermarket. However, he lost this job when it appeared that he had been an accomplice of a robbery at the same store by opening a backdoor at about closing time to let in his criminal friends. As a consequence, he came into contact with the law, but eventually was sentenced only to community service. During this difficult period, he managed to finish high school. After that, he enrolled in an upper level vocational training program 'Trade & Enterprise' in a nearby town. After the first weeks he hardly showed up in class. He also seemed to have given up on rapping.

At that time, he made an exasperated and restless impression, according to a social worker from his neighbourhood. 'He did not manage to deal with that thing with the robbery and the transition to a new school in a new town. Also his group of friends gradually fell apart. Some went to other schools, some had problems with the law and Driss did not seem to know what he should do with his life.'

A part of the group of friends that continued to hang around in the neighbourhood started to get an interest in religion after the arrival of a charismatic figure in a mosque in an adjacent part of town. Initially Driss met them only occasionally. When the discussion was becoming more political in nature, however, Driss' interest was aroused. With the same verve as from the time he was rapping, he emerged as a gifted speaker at the living-room meetings and on public squares in the neighbourhood. 'They performed *dawah*[37] and went up to youngsters who caused trouble to say something about their behaviour', said a community police officer. Driss stood out from the rest because he did not change his dress. 'He flourished again and that positive attitude of his attracted a lot of other people. Because of him, I then too started to study Islam for a while', said one of his neighbours. Driss became one of the key figures of an activist Islamist group. He and his fellow activists also went to demonstrate a number of times in The Hague against the burqa ban. By that time he had grown a thin beard.

When it was known that three members of the group had travelled to Syria, his parents were informed about this by acquaintances. They knew about the radical ideas of their son, but were not particularly negative or worried about it, though they did not like him being involved in demonstrations. Moreover, at home he hardly talked about politics or religion. In fact they were glad that Driss was interested and positive about something again. His father remembered that Driss told them he wanted to continue his studies and that he had a job at an Islamic butchers shop. 'When we heard that some of his friends had gone to Syria, we were shocked at first, but when Driss told about all his plans, we were just very relieved. To us this was proof that he would not go to Syria and that his future was here.' The parents were very upset and bitter when they learned two weeks later that Driss was in fact in Syria. 'Why did the secret police not warn us and stop him! Why had they not arrested him at that demonstration!'

### **Conclusion**

In this Research Note we looked into concrete cases of Dutch jihadist foreign fighters. We argued that more empirical data is needed to gain a better understanding their motivations. Based on interviews with eighteen individuals who were in the direct environment of five persons who had joined the struggle against the regime of Bashar al-Assad and supplemented with other available open source materials we reconstructed their life stories. Next we translated these five 'biographies' in two condensed life stories. These were compared with the experience of a focus-group of more than twenty experts in the field of radicalisation and foreign fighters and their observations and experiences were incorporated. The final versions of these two condensed life stories aim to address issues related to the radicalisation process of a foreign fighter in the Netherlands and his preparation before traveling to Syria.

Before we reiterate the key observations of our exploratory study, we would like to remind the reader that the two condensed life stories cannot possibly provide a complete picture of the phenomenon of Dutch jihadist foreign fighters and their radicalisation process and preparation phase. Here as elsewhere, radicalisation is foremost characterised by complexity and dissimilarity.[38] It goes without saying that the small number of cases that were studied prohibits us from drawing any general conclusions. The study limits itself to providing a set of often recurring elements in the life stories of five foreign fighters and a few preliminary assumptions that need further testing. Keeping this in mind, we present the following key observations of our study:

- Based on the publications of the AIVD and the NCTV it would appear that the Syrian conflict has attracted jihadist fighters from different ethnic backgrounds and from various parts of the Netherlands. The AIVD also stressed the virtual glorification of Dutch jihadist foreign fighters and regards this as one of the causes for the rise in jihadists traveling to Syria. However, during our interviews and from the expert panel we consulted, it did not emerge that the internet played a decisive role in the radicalisation of our research subjects and their decision to leave for Syria. Although some of them visited radical websites, this was not regarded by our interviewees as a very important reason for their radicalisation.
- Based on our interviews and the workshop with the expert panel, the group of Dutch foreign fighters consists mostly of individuals under the age of 25, with middle and low education levels, originating from lower or lower middle class socio-economic backgrounds. They were raised in relatively bad neighbourhoods in both traditional religious immigrant and Islamic families as well as in ethnically Dutch families.
- Some interviewees observed strong frustrations among our five research subjects in the years before they left about their own societal position in the Netherlands or that of their ethnic groups. Only in

some cases were frustration and concerns expressed about the Syrian conflict.

- We found in our sample that some of our research subjects had been exposed to traumatic experiences, such as the loss of a loved one or experiencing difficulties at school or work and trouble with the authorities, in the period before joining a violent jihadist group in Syria.
- During the radicalisation and preparatory processes, our research subjects increasingly isolated themselves from society. This manifested itself in two ways: the radicalising individual cuts the ties with his former social environment (for instance with old friends or family members) or the social environment expels the radicalising individual (for instance when individuals or groups are being banned from mosques).
- In the researched cases individuals were confronted with, and shared their radical ideologies or ideas about, Syria via radical networks. Sometimes these networks consisted of old friends (often from the same neighbourhood) who had radicalised collectively. In other cases, a change of home address or school brought them in contact with new friends who belonged to radical groups or they encountered charismatic persons. In our cases, these charismatic persons were not religious authorities or former jihadi foreign fighters. Their role can be the articulating and disseminating of a radical agenda or the sharing of specific knowledge about how to become involved in the Syrian jihad. In addition, in most cases, other persons within the social networks of the five studied foreign jihadist fighters had preceded them in joining Syrian jihadist groups.
- Among our research subjects we found feelings of apathy and lack of meaningfulness in their lives in the period before they left for Syria. In these cases participating in the Syrian conflict seemed to provide them with a sense of purpose and fulfil their need to belong.
- The five persons studied showed an increased interest in religion in the period before they left for Syria. This manifested itself in visiting (different) mosques, changing eating habits, entering into religious debates, and visiting certain websites or online forums.
- Almost everyone near the individuals who radicalised and prepared for travelling to Syria, were caught by surprise when they found out that these individuals had actually left. Political statements of those who left for Syria were often escaping their attention since these were not made at home or in public. Preparatory acts were concealed from family members, who, in a number of cases, were deceived.

Our key observations and preliminary assumptions show a complex and diverse picture of the Dutch Muslim foreign fighters and their radicalisation process and preparation phase. Much more empirical research is needed to be able to arrive at a set of well-defined factors, circumstances or dynamics that will help us to understand this phenomenon. With the two condensed life stories we hoped to provide some empirical insights that can be used by other scholars who study the phenomenon of foreign fighters as a means of comparison and validation.

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## Notes

- [1] Edwin Bakker, Christophe Paulussen and Eva Entenmann, "Dealing with European Foreign Fighters in Syria: Governance Challenges & Legal Implications," *ICCT Research Paper* (International Centre for Counter-terrorism – The Hague, 2014); Thomas Hegghammer, "The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters: Islam and the Globalization of Jihad," *International Security*, vol. 35, no. 3 (2011): 53–94; Barak Mendelsohn, "Foreign Fighters—Recent Trends," *Orbis*, vol.55 no.2 (2011): 189-202.
- [2] See for instance: Algemene Inlichtingen- en Veiligheidsdienst (AIVD), "Annual Report 2013," (AIVD, 2013); National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism (NCTV), "Dreigingsbeeld Terrorisme 35," (NCTV 2013); EUROPOL, "TE-SAT 2013: EU Terrorism Situation and Trend Report," (EUROPOL 2014).
- [3] Bart Schuurman and Quirine Eijkman, "Moving Terrorism Research Forward: The Crucial Role of Primary Sources," *ICCT Background Note* (International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, 2013): 1.
- [4] As Alex Schmid and Albert Jongman stated already in 1988: 'There are probably few areas in the social science literature in which so much is written on the basis of so little research'. Alex Schmid, Albert Jongman, *Political Terrorism: A New Guide to Actors, Concepts, Data Bases, Theories, and Literature* (New Brunswick: Transaction Books, 1988), 179.
- [5] Andrew Silke, "The Devil You Know: Continuing Problems with Research on Terrorism," *Terrorism and Political Violence* vol.13, no. 4 (2011): 5; Andrew Silke, "Contemporary Terrorism Studies: Issues in Research," in Richard Jackson, Marie Breen Smyth and Jeroen Gunning (eds.), *Critical Terrorism Studies: A New Research Agenda* (New York / London: Routledge, 2009), 34-48; Marc Sageman, "The Stagnation of Terrorism Research," *Terrorism and Political Violence* (Forthcoming 2013): 1-16.
- [6] Neumann and Kleinmann showed that secondary academic literature remains the single largest source of evidence in radicalisation studies and the 'overall balance between [the use of] primary and secondary sources (54 percent versus 45 percent) demonstrates that researchers (...) [in this field strongly rely] on secondary sources for making their arguments'. Peter Neumann and Scott Kleinmann, "How Rigorous Is Radicalization Research?," *Democracy and Security*, vol. 9, no. 4 (2013): 372.
- [7] Schuurman and Eijkman, "Moving Terrorism Research Forward".
- [8] We define these jihadist foreign fighters as those who regard it their duty to participate in what they believe to be a jihad of the sword against the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and its Shiite allies, and who join local or foreign groups with a jihadist political agenda. The term jihad refers to the so-called violent or lesser jihad. A person who engages in this type of jihad is called a jihadist. Their actions are claimed to be in furtherance of the goals of Islam. These goals may include the establishment of a (pan) Islamic theocracy and their restoration of the caliphate. See: 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 Publishing Limited, 2011), 2.
- [9] We adopt Neumann and Rogers' definition of radicalisation as 'the changes in attitude that lead towards sanctioning and, ultimately, the involvement in the use of violence for a political aim'. See: Peter R. Neumann and Brooke Rogers, "Recruitment and Mobilisation for the Islamist Militant Movement in Europe," (King's College London, 2007), 11.
- [10] In this paper we define preparatory acts as the initial acts of a person who has conceived the idea of leaving for Syria to join the violent jihad. Examples of preparatory acts include raising money for travel expenses, gaining knowledge on the best way to enter Syria or how to join a specific jihadist group, obtaining military equipment, announcing the intent to leave or saying goodbye to loved ones.
- [11] National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism (NCTV), "Summary DTN 31," (NCTV, 2012). See: [english.nctv.nl/Images/summary-dtn-31\\_tcm92-476955.pdf?cp=92&cs=65038](http://english.nctv.nl/Images/summary-dtn-31_tcm92-476955.pdf?cp=92&cs=65038).
- [12] Bertolee, R. (2013);AIVD waarschuwt voor jihadgangers. *Nieuwsuur* 07-02-2013.
- [13] National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism (NCTV), "Dreigingsbeeld Terrorisme 32," (NCTV, 2013).
- [14] AIVD, "Annual Report 2012," 21.
- [15] Ibid.
- [16] Ibid.
- [17] Algemene Inlichtingen- en Veiligheidsdienst (AIVD), "Annual Report 2012," (2013), 21.

[18] AIVD, "Annual Report 2013," 11; NCTV, "Dreigingsbeeld Terrorisme 35".

[19] Ibid.

[20] Ronald Plasterk, "Press conference presentation AIVD annual report," (The Hague, 23 April 2014).

[21] AIVD, "Annual Report 2013," 9; Plasterk, "Press conference".

[22] AIVD, "Annual Report 2013," 3.

[23] Ibid., 3.

[24] Ibid., 9.

[25] NCTV, "Dreigingsbeeld Terrorisme 35".

[26] AIVD, "Annual Report 2013," 3.

[27] NCTV, "Dreigingsbeeld Terrorisme 35"; Interviews with local policy makers and NCTV officials (March 2013 – June 2014).

[28] Interviews with local policy makers and NCTV officials (March 2013–June 2014).

[29] Ibid.

[30] Ibid.

[31] Our semi-structured interviews consisted of multiple topics that related to our five cases on which the respondent was asked to reflect upon. Per answer the interviewer could ask for an elaboration (a probe). This kind of qualitative interviewing offers researchers the opportunity to ask respondents about underlying motivations, thoughts and ideas and collect detailed information.

[32] It is important to stress that the perceptions of respondents on the course of events may differ. Therefore multiple sources were used to describe the radicalisation process and preparatory acts of our research subjects. Moreover, there is the risk of subjectivity and the problem of asking all kinds of questions in hindsight about processes and phases these persons might have wanted to prevent.

[33] The five initial cases can be requested from the authors.

[34] Berber traditional long robe.

[35] Arabic term meaning sinful.

[36] Permissible according to Islam.

[37] Proselytizing or preaching of Islam.

[38] See also Alex Schmid, "Radicalisation, De-radicalisation Counter-radicalisation: A Conceptual Discussion and Literature Review," *ICCT Research Paper*, (International Centre for Counter-terrorism – The Hague, 2013); Coolsaet, *Jihadi Terrorism and the Radicalisation Challenge*.