

A Framework for Assessing the Mobilization of Westerners by Jihadists in Syria and Intervention Points for Counter-Measures

by Joshua Sinai

Abstract

This Research Note presents a framework for mapping the radicalization and mobilization pathways of radicalized Western Muslims (who represent a small proportion of their countries' overall Muslim populations) into (1) becoming foreign fighters in Syria to engage in insurgent and terrorist activities or to decide to return to carry out such attacks in their home countries, (2) becoming radicalized in the West by these jihadist organizations and their local surrogates to carry out terrorist attacks in their own home countries without leaving them, and, to validate the framework's preemptive counter-measures, (3) becoming radicalized into deciding to become jihadi fighters in Syria but being prevented from traveling there either at border crossing points, such as Turkey, or through other preventative measures at various stages of their mobilization in their home countries. To accomplish these objectives, the framework presents five categories that characterize such trajectories, which are broken down into thirteen factors, with each factor marked by critical points for preemptive intervention by government security services.

Keywords: *Radicalization; Mobilization; Foreign Fighters; Terrorism; Counterterrorism; Countering Violent Extremism; Disengagement from Terrorism.*

Introduction

Since the breakdown of Middle Eastern states such as Syria in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, which began in late 2010, Western security services have been highly concerned about three distinct developments resulting from the radicalization and mobilization of thousands of Western Muslims (whether Muslim-born or converts) by the so-called "Islamic State" (IS, also known as Daesh) and al Qaida-affiliated jihadists in Syria – which had become a failed state as a result of this insurgency, as well as other factors. The first development of concern is the proliferation of thousands of Western Muslims (as well as Muslims from other global regions) into becoming foreign fighters on behalf of these jihadist organizations, particularly in the Syrian civil war, with an estimated 5,000 Western European individuals reportedly joining the jihadists in Syria, with an additional 280 coming from North America, by the end of 2015.[1] In the second development, some of these radicalized Western foreign fighters have returned to their Western countries to conduct attacks on behalf of these jihadist groups, such as the terrorist attacks by such returnees (and their local cells) in Brussels, Belgium (May 24, 2014 and March 22, 2016) and Paris, France (January 2015 and November 14, 2015). In the final development, the jihadi ideology of IS has radicalized other homegrown Islamist extremists to remain and conduct terrorist attacks in their Western home countries, such as the shooting rampage by the husband-and-wife team of Syed Rizwan Farook and Tashfeen Malik (although she had grown up in Pakistan) in San Bernardino, California (December 2, 2015).

Objective

In light of these three inter-related jihadist threat trends, Western security officials are concerned that, to demonstrate its continued relevancy as a 'world class' Islamist insurgency, IS, in particular, may be intensifying its efforts to set up terrorist cells in Western Europe to conduct further attacks, including potentially, a nuclear attack, while continuing its operations to expand the areas it controls in Syria and Iraq (where fewer Western foreign fighters are reported to be present).[2] To upgrade the capability of

governmental counter-terrorism services to better understand how these three threat trends have converged and to effectively counter them through appropriate preventative measures, this Research Note presents a framework for mapping the radicalization and mobilization pathways of such individuals into violent extremism along five categories that characterize these trajectories, which are broken down into thirteen factors, with each factor marked by critical points for preemptive intervention by government security services.

This framework is also intended to upgrade the counter-terrorism capability of other entities such as non-governmental organizations in local communities that play an important role in countering violent extremism and facilitating the disengagement of such violence-prone individuals into peaceful activities because they are the first line of defense against the outbreak of violent extremism in their midst since they are familiar with the neighborhoods where such individuals live and the tailored measures required to de-radicalize them. For academic analysts, it is hoped that this framework will serve as a building block for further research and analysis to shed additional light on how to track and counter these distinct radicalization and mobilization trajectories of Westerners into jihadist violence, since many of those who traverse these paths share common characteristics that can be generalized into theories and hypotheses for testing and validation purposes.

Finally, this framework is intended to supplement other academic studies on these issues. These include Peter Nesser's *Islamist Terrorism in Europe: A History*, which attempts analytically "to demonstrate how jihadi terrorism in Europe emerged through an intricate interplay between foreign and European factors, between top-down and bottom-up processes of radicalization, and between social and ideological motivations." [3] Another valuable analytic study is Phil Gursky's *The Threat From Within: Recognizing Al Qaeda-Inspired Radicalization and Terrorism In the West*, [4] which analyzes key conceptual drivers that influence such radicalization and mobilization pathways, such as socio-economic backgrounds, psychological characteristics, as well as physical venues, as well as key concepts from Islam and Muslim history and attitudes towards Western ways and policies, that help shape what the author terms an "extremist mindset." This framework is also intended to augment the work of academic research institutes on these issues, such as the International Center for the Study of Radicalization's (ICSR) study of the motivations, trajectories and personal histories of Western (and Australasia) foreign fighters engaged in the Syrian civil war.⁵

To operationalize this framework, three basic endpoint scenarios that characterize Western jihadist violent extremism are posited: (1) becoming foreign fighters in Syria to engage in insurgent and terrorist activities or to decide to return to carry out such attacks in their home countries, (2) becoming radicalized in the West by these jihadist organizations and their local surrogates to carry out terrorist attacks in their own home countries without leaving them, and, to validate the model's preemptive counter-measures, (3) becoming radicalized into deciding to become jihadi fighters in Syria but being prevented from traveling there either at border crossing points, such as Turkey, or through other preventative measures at various stages of their mobilization in their home countries.

In this Research Note's primary section, the radicalization and mobilization of susceptible individuals into these potential endpoint scenarios are mapped in Table 1. "A Framework for Modeling the Radicalization and Mobilization Pathways into Jihadist Terrorism and Intervention Points for Effective Preventative Countermeasures." The framework's five categories and their thirteen factors are then applied to three case studies of prototypical Western individuals to test whether they have exhibited any of the characteristics of these three types of radicalization and mobilization trajectories. If the framework is found to be testable against these cases, then it is hoped it will be capable of providing counterterrorism services, as well as academic analysts, with a framework to map where their persons of concern may be located along the trajectory of early radicalization to further mobilization in order to enable them to implement appropriate counter-measures for successful preemption during the formative early pre-incident attack or pre-foreign

travel phases. It is recognized that this preliminary framework does not cover all the pathways to jihadist violence that can be found among Muslims and recent converts to Islam in Western diasporas and that further research and analysis is required to develop a more comprehensive, detailed and exhaustive mapping of these processes into terrorist violence, which will constitute a larger effort into understanding how to influence such individuals towards the trajectory of de-radicalization and disengagement pathways from terrorism.

Elements of the Framework

The framework proposed here consists of five categories broken down into thirteen factors, marked by critical points for preventative intervention, that characterize the pathways driving radicalization and mobilization into jihadist violent extremism, whether as homegrown terrorists or as foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq.

Table 1. “A Framework for Modeling the Radicalization and Mobilization Pathways into Jihadist Terrorism and Intervention Points for Effective Preventative Countermeasures.” [6]

<i>Pathways into Jihadist Violent Extremism In-Country & Becoming Fighters in Foreign Conflict Zones</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Preventative Measures</i>
Category I: Radicalization Factors	A process by which individuals or groups are indoctrinated and mobilized to adopt increasingly intolerant and extremist political and/or religious beliefs and behaviors , ranging from aggressive proselytizing to violent extremist.	Preventative Measures: “Soft” multidisciplinary programs to counter extremist ideologies, promotion of social cohesion and socio-economic integration in society, law enforcement programs to identify and apprehend extremist radicalizers.
I-1 - Push Factors: Personal Crisis	Cognitive opening (“born again”-type) to embrace extremist ideologies due to feeling socially marginal and downgraded by others, often accompanied by family, relational and/or employment problems, and a sense of uprootedness and alienation from own or host society.	Preventative Measures: Focusing on integration into society and economy by addressing discrimination and other issues that give rise to personal grievances. Target at-risk individuals to make them more resilient to extremist ideologies ; implement individual self-empowerment programs.
I-2 - Push Factors: Domestic Issues	Personal and/or group-specific grievances such as beliefs that host or own society is discriminating against them and co-religionists rather than accepting them as equals .	Preventative Measures: Promoting a sense of belonging and shared identity through inter-personal dialogue at grassroots level , anti-discrimination projects, improving educational opportunities, and encouraging non-violent and legal ways to address grievances.
I-3 - Pull Factors: Foreign Issues	Feeling outrage at the unjust suffering of co-religionists in a foreign conflict to which one’s Western government, in their view, is indifferent or hostile.	Preventative Measures: Counter-narratives that Western government involvement in Syria (and Iraq) is not motivated by religious Christian antipathy towards Islam.

<p>I-4 - Extremist Sub-cultures/Local Radicalizers</p>	<p>Pervasiveness of extremist ideologies that are spread by local radicalizers and recruiters, whether preachers, community leaders, jihadist veterans, and other operators and facilitators, working often by means of family and friendship networks.</p>	<p>Preventative Measures: Outreach programs that cooperate with responsible local community leaders to counter extremist ideologies with counter-narratives and self-empowering programs that promote constructive engagement in society rather than a turn to violent extremism.</p>
<p>I-5 - Social Media & Influential jihadist or religious Leaders</p>	<p>Extremist groups employ social media venues, incl. websites, online magazines, or Twitter and YouTube videos, featuring influential spiritual and jihadist leaders to promote extremist activities on behalf of their cause, including becoming fighters on behalf of their co-religionists in a foreign conflict. Vulnerable individuals “buy” their polarizing narratives and reject Western values while embracing jihadist interpretation of Islam. Anti-Christian, anti-Semitic and anti-Shia hate rhetoric</p>	<p>Preventative Measures: Vetting and monitoring extremist social media websites, countering their extremist leaders with counter-narratives to encourage disengagement from extremism and discouraging travel to foreign conflict region.</p>
<p>Category II: Triggers</p>	<p>Triggers might include, a personal crisis or media-transmitted narratives of suffering of co-religionists; a belief that there is a need to join insurgent groups to avenge for the death of their associates (even if these are neither family members nor friends) and that it is their religious duty to embark on warfare to defeat the enemies of their religion.</p>	<p>Preventative Measures: To counter such triggers, utilizing disillusioned returnees or local community leaders to dissuade potential recruits from traveling through messages such as explaining that they will be exploited as ‘cannon fodder’, that the insurgents themselves are committing brutal atrocities against innocent fellow Muslims, and that their potential travel or resort to terrorism will serve to destroy any chances for advancement in their own societies.</p>
<p>Category III: Preparation for Travel to Foreign Conflict Zone</p>	<p>Prepare to travel to the foreign conflict zone by taking measures such as intensifying contacts with ‘returnees’/recruiters/facilitators that will enable them to enter the conflict zone; start to make travel plans; adopt a ‘cover story’ for their travel; and start selling/giving away personal possessions because they realize they may never return.</p>	<p>Preventative Measures: Identifying the warning signs that an individual may be preparing to embark on suspicious travel to a foreign conflict zone and dissuading or preventing such travel by taking away passports.</p>
<p>III-1 - Funding Sources</p>	<p>Fund travel by depleting one’s personal bank account, seeking donations from associates or others for the foreign travel, receive funds from unexplained sources (e.g., radicalizers/recruiters/jihadi charities who manage such travel), or engage in illicit activities such as credit card fraud to raise funds.</p>	<p>Preventative Measures: Monitoring and tracking suspicious funding activities to facilitate travel to a foreign conflict zone.</p>
<p>III-2 - Logistical Facilitators</p>	<p>Seeking logistical facilitators in a local community or on the Internet to enable foreign travel.</p>	<p>Preventative Measures: Monitoring and tracking those who contact logistical facilitators.</p>
<p>III-3 - Transit Routes</p>	<p>Transit routes stretch from countries of origin to bordering countries, such as Turkey, which may or may not require entry visas. Once in-country, local smuggling facilitators collect Western recruits at airports and transport them to safe houses at designated border towns for eventual smuggling them into Syria or Iraq.</p>	<p>Preventative Measures: Multilateral and bilateral level monitoring programs that collect data on suspicious foreign travel and the logistical networks that smuggle them to their destinations.</p>

<p>Category IV: Activities in Syria or Iraq (Fighting, Training or, less often, Humanitarian Aid)</p>	<p>Once at their conflict zone destinations, Westerners are likely to become fighters, or martyrs or receive training and indoctrination for deployment upon their return to their Western countries of origin.</p>	<p>Preventative Measures: Monitoring and tracking these individuals’ movements and activities, such as in social media, including contact with their families and associates in their home countries.</p>
<p>Category V: Returning to Western Countries of Origin</p>	<p>A minority might return to their Western home countries, for reasons ranging from disillusionment with fighting in harsh battle environments, to even further radicalization upon completion of their training and indoctrination to become radicalizers, recruiters, sleepers or terrorist operatives in their home countries.</p>	<p>Preventative Measures: Canceling passports, revoking residence permits and denying re-entrance to home country’s border crossings, arresting returnees at border crossings, or permitting them to return but tracking their activities in their local communities, or engaging them in programs to de-radicalize and disengage them from terrorism.</p>

Illustrating the Use of the Framework

In this section, the framework’s categories and factors are operationalized by applying them to the following three case studies:

(i.) *Mehdi Nemmouche*

In an illustrative case of a Western homegrown violent extremist being radicalized by ultimately joining the jihadi insurgents in Syria and returning to the West to carry out a terrorist attack (Categories I-V), on May 24, 2014, Mehdi Nemmouche, aged 29, a dual French-Algerian national, walked into the Jewish museum in Brussels and killed four people with his Kalashnikov rifle. He was eventually arrested on May 30, at the Saint-Charles railway station in Marseilles, and in late July 2014 he was extradited to Belgium to face trial.

Like others fitting his trajectory, Nemmouche’s personal background matched the factors associated with Categories I-II. He had a history of juvenile delinquency while growing up in La Bourgogne, one of the poorest neighborhoods in Roubaix-Tourcoing, where he was raised by his grandmother.[7] Beginning in his early 20s, his criminal activities landed him in jail several times, with his last release from prison in early December 2012.[8]

Moreover, Nemouche’s trajectory of indoctrination into Islamism and jihadism also matched Category I’s 2-5, as he was reportedly radicalized while in prison (the exact circumstances of his radicalization process was unclear at the time of this writing, but are likely to be revealed in his trial’s proceedings).

Finally, Nemouche’s trajectory into joining ISIS followed Categories III-IV, as he made his way to Syria as part of a French contingent that had joined ISIS via Turkey in early January 2013. Once in ISIS, he remained with the group for some 11 months, eventually becoming one of their guards at a prison that held Western hostages.[9] It was there in 2013 that he reportedly bragged to several of his hostages (who were later released as part of a ransom deal) about his “ambitious plans to attack the July 14 Bastille Day parade in Paris.”[10] While his specific motivation or circumstances for his decision to return to Europe are not known, according to one report he may have either “fallen out with ISIS, or perhaps he just got bored or ISIS commanders decided he was too unreliable.”[11]

In an example of how French security services failed to adequately employ the preventative measures of Category V, starting with monitoring his trips to Malaysia and Singapore, Nemmouche managed to return to Europe via Frankfurt, Germany, in December 2013.[12] Interestingly, even though his name was included on

a French watch list[13] and the German authorities had alerted the French authorities that he had landed in Frankfurt, no further action was taken to apprehend him either by the German or French security services. [14] In a further example of how the preventative measures of Category V were not utilized by Western security services, Nemmouche may either have travelled to France from Frankfurt, in which case the French security services missed him, or had travelled straight to Brussels.[15]

(ii.) *Michael Zehaf-Bibeau*

In a case of a homegrown violent extremist being radicalized by the jihadi insurgents in Syria/Iraq and their radical subcultures in Western countries into carrying out attacks in one's own country, on October 23, 2014, Michael Zehaf-Bibeau, aged 32, shot Corporal Nathan Cirillo while on ceremonial guard at a memorial in the center of Ottawa, Canada, and then forced his way into the nearby Parliament building where he continued firing his weapon, shooting an officer in the leg to enter the facility. He was immediately killed by one of the local security officers.

Zehaf-Bibeau, like other homegrown Western Muslims, exhibited the characteristics of Category I's factors of 1-5. In terms of "Personal Crisis" he had a history of "criminality of violence and of drugs and of mental instability,"[16] he regarded himself to be socially marginal, experienced employment problems, and had a sense of uprootedness and alienation from Canadian society. He also believed that his society was discriminating against his co-religionists, and, in terms of "Foreign Issues", he felt outrage at his country's military activities against his co-religionists in Syria/Iraq.

It was especially in regard to Category 1-3, as well as Category II's "Triggers," that it was reported that the day prior to his attack, he was overheard by bystanders at an Ottawa shopping mall engaging in an angry and loud discussion with a stranger about the justification of killing of civilians by soldiers, in which he stated that "If soldiers bombed your family, wouldn't you want to kill them?"[17] Interestingly, this incident also revealed a gap in Canada's preventative measures – especially those matched to Category I's factors of 1-5, as well as Category II's "Triggers," since such angry statements, especially when directed against a stranger, should raise warning signals that such an individual may be predisposed to act on this angry sentiment – especially during a period of heightened levels of terrorism threats. Thus, if one of the bystanders had reported this exchange to the appropriate law enforcement authorities, it could have triggered a preemptive disruption of his planned attack the next day.

(iii.) *Denver-Area Teenage Muslim Girls*

With an estimated 200 Western women radicalized into becoming foreign volunteers on behalf of the jihadi insurgents in Syria and Iraq by mid-2014,[18] this phenomenon continued to grow as more and more Western Muslim women appeared susceptible to these jihadi messages. In an example of how parental intervention plays a crucial role in preventative counter-measures (see Category III-3 – "Transit Routes" preventative measures), following the departure on October 17, 2014 of three teenage girls (as minor girls, their identities were not disclosed) from Denver, Colorado, to Frankfurt, Germany, en route to Turkey and Syria (reportedly to join ISIS), their parents immediately contacted the American FBI, to alert them about their arrival at the Frankfurt Airport. The three teenage girls consisted of a 15-year old of Sudanese descent, and two sisters, aged 15 and 17, of Somali descent. Upon finding out that his daughter was missing, the father of the 15-year old, Assad Ibrahim, called the father of the two sisters, Ali Farah (whom the sisters had told they were going to be studying at the library that day), the two fathers then contacted the FBI. The three teenagers were intercepted by German authorities at the Frankfurt Airport, who placed them on a return flight to the United States, where they were apprehended by FBI agents. As minors, they were questioned by the FBI and released to their parents' care.

Following the trajectory of Categories of I-III, the three girls had become radicalized into violent extremism via the Internet's extremist websites,[19] and then, once radicalized and indoctrinated into ISIS-type

jihadism, proceeded to begin Category III's 1-2 factors of researching the funding and logistical components of their travel to Syria, including, possibly, contacting potential logistical facilitators in Turkey.[20] It was reported that the 17-year old sister was the plan's instigator.[21] Interestingly, their online activity in extremist websites reportedly went unnoticed by U.S. security services.[22]

Conclusions

As demonstrated by the application of this framework to the three case studies (especially the one involving the three teenage girls from Denver, Colorado), it is possible to preemptively prevent such individuals from reaching their final destinations in Syria if those closely associated with such individuals are able to notice their worrisome radicalization activities or early suspicious travel patterns, and to alert the appropriate authorities to disrupt their travel prior to their arrival at their transit or border entry points. The cases of the attacks in Brussels in May 2014 and the cases of the November 2015 attacks in Paris and the March 2016 attacks in Brussels (which are not covered in this Research Note) demonstrate that gaps still existed in Western governments' counterterrorism measures to prevent such individuals from slipping through the preventative cracks. Finally, the case of the shooting rampage in early December 2015 by the husband-and-wife team in San Bernardino, California, demonstrates that gaps in domestic counterterrorism surveillance of foreign inspired jihadist adherents in the United States still needed to be fixed as well, especially in more effectively surveilling their extremist activities in physical and cyber realms.

In light of these conclusions, and the fact that the number of Western Islamist extremists and would be foreign fighters (which are reported to be on the decline as of mid-2016), it still needs to be acknowledged that the comprehensive surveillance program of such extremists based on the components presented by this framework may be beyond most Western counterterrorism and law enforcement agencies. For this reason it is crucial to obtain the active collaboration of the leadership of the relevant religious communities – especially on the local level – in identifying in their midst extremists and those in danger of becoming radicalized – and providing them the appropriate political opportunities to express themselves in a non-violent way, while also providing them the socio-economic means to advance themselves in their societies. It is also crucial to resolve the dilemma in Western societies to appropriately balance the requirement for security while still preserving citizens' civil liberties.

At the end of the day, however, it must be recognized that the main causes for radicalization of Muslims in Western Diasporas include Islamist narratives that blame the unresolved conflicts in the Arab and Muslim world on their apostate adversaries, as well as their very real integration problems in their own societies, for which there are no easy solutions. Against this background, even the most comprehensive and best intentioned efforts of those seeking to counter the radicalization, violent extremism and terrorism emanating from Western Muslim Diasporas are bound to remain an uphill battle.

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Notes

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[6] This framework is based on several sources, including a table developed by Rachel Briggs and Ross Frenett, "Policy Briefing: Foreign Fighters, the Challenge of Counter-Narratives," London, England: Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2014, pp. 8-9; URL: <https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/Countering%20the%20Appeal%20of%20Extremism%20Online-ISD%20Report.pdf>.

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