

# Internal Debates, Doubts and Discussions on the Scope of Jihadi Violence: The Case of the Turnup Terror Squad

by Donald Holbrook

## Abstract

*Do Islamist extremists express any doubts on the use of violence? This article seeks to address this question by studying private conversations between Islamist militant sympathisers, including ISIS supporters and those who went on to plan acts of terrorism. It identifies internal brakes on violent escalation from these threads and groups these according to four overlapping debates concerning group identity, targeting and exclusion, family and friendship dynamics, and knowledge acquisition. It examines how these brakes relate to logics of strategy, morals, ego-maintenance, out-group boundaries and organisation, shedding light on the interplay between macro-, meso-, and micro-level dynamics and developments in the in-group's external environment. It finds that while consensus regarding the legitimacy of mass-casualty terrorism remained consistent, disagreements emerged regarding the exclusion and targeting of members of the faith community, knowledge acquisition and evidence, the legality and morality of public executions, and the impact of organisational splits. Yet, the article also finds that despite these differences, in-group cohesion was not undermined, and violence may have been redirected, rather than abandoned, as a result of braking dynamics.*

**Keywords:** Terrorism, Islamist extremism, jihadism, internal brakes, Telegram, *takfir*, identity

## Introduction

In autumn 2014, counterterrorism police in London arrested two young British men who had been in the advanced stages of planning terrorist attacks in the city. School friends Tarik Hassane and Suhaib Majeed, both 22, had planned to use a small motorcycle and illegally acquired firearms to carry out a drive-by shooting, most likely targeting soldiers or police officers. Majeed was arrested first, in late September, after he had collected a gun, ammunition and a silencer from contacts in the criminal underworld. Hassane was arrested two weeks later, after returning to the UK from Khartoum, where he had been studying medicine. Majeed was a physics student at King's College London and chairman of its Islamic Society. The pair, and their social circle, were said to have had contacts with Islamist militants fighting in Syria, which Hassane claimed to have visited a year prior to his arrest, where he practiced using firearms. He pledged allegiance to the leader of the Islamic State group (ISIS), Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, in July 2014, a few days after Baghdadi declared himself 'caliph' of the Islamic State. It is unclear when Hassane and Majeed, or their associates, began developing their attack plans, but prosecutors argued that their intent and capability to carry out these acts had been established beyond any doubt. In March 2016, they were convicted and sentenced to life in prison.[1]

This is thus a case involving individuals with declared sympathies for one of the most violent militant organisations of recent times, who had successfully acquired the means to carry out lethal acts of violence and were foiled in the final stages of executing their plan. At first, therefore, it may seem counter-intuitive to examine this case for any evidence of internal brakes on violent escalation, or self-imposed efforts to restrain or limit violence. Yet, as I hope to demonstrate below, this case reveals important instances where members of the in-group questioned or sought to temper the level of violence being endorsed or deployed.[2] These doubts, disquiets and efforts of moderation emerged at the outer reaches of the ideological milieu with which the perpetrators and their associates identified: the Islamist militant movement that spawned groups such as ISIS and Al-Qaeda.

These individuals had already accepted the legitimacy of mass casualty terrorism, but were open to debates about its timing, direction and scope. These peripheries are arguably particularly worthy of analysis with respect to internal brakes on violence, since they highlight the nuances of braking contexts and the relevance of this framework across the spectrum of political violence, including different *degrees* of lethal violence. This case involves individuals who tried to carry out acts of terrorism, so the ‘brakes’ that can be highlighted are not binary questions about whether or not lethal violence can or should be used. Instead, conversations about restraint were more complex and centred on the levels of violence with which members were comfortable.

The dynamics discussed below are also important because they reveal examples of pre-existing notions about the legitimate scope of violence being tested by new developments, interpretations or information. Furthermore, the debates described in this article are significant because they incorporate macro-, meso- and micro-perspectives whereby individual concerns expressed among group members reflect broader organization-level developments (meso), which in turn are shaped in part by major strategic and ideological shifts within the wider Salafi-jihadi or Islamist militant milieu (macro)—especially the emergence of ISIS and related intra-militant disputes about legitimate violence.[3] While this article concentrates on debates among a close-knit group of individuals, therefore, it sheds light on the interplay between these micro-level dimensions and broader meso- and macro-level developments. Finally, the perspectives adopted in this article are important as they rely on private and candid exchanges between individuals actively involved in planning acts of terrorism, captured during the time these plans were being formulated, thus giving us a rare glimpse of these internal dynamics.

The data that is analysed consists of 3,200 online private messages that were sent via the social networking platform Telegram, between July and September 2014, involving the two convicted individuals and twenty-eight of their additional associates who had also declared their support for Salafi jihadism and were members of a chat group called Turnup Terror Squad. Documents containing these threads were prepared by the prosecution and presented at court during the trial of the two subjects and were accessed by the author after their conviction.[4]

While the nature of this case—involving declared ISIS supporters planning acts of terrorism—sheds important light on internal braking dynamics that still might be found at such extremes, its timing brings added significance which is worthy of brief elucidation.

2014 was one of the most tumultuous years in the modern history of Islamist militancy. The Islamic State group, which had declared its independence from Al-Qaeda in 2013, was finally disowned by the latter in February 2014, accentuating the disunity within the movement. ISIS reached what was arguably the peak of its power in June when it captured Mosul, Iraq’s second-largest city. Its leader declared himself caliph whilst other rivals denounced his authority. Members and sympathisers of this movement were presented with stark choices and conflicting interpretations of events and decisions, and the religious, political or practical justifications behind them. There were fundamental divisions over the strategy, legality, and morality of militancy, represented by the violent excess of ISIS, on the one hand, and Al-Qaeda’s vision for a milder, more restrained - but ultimately more sustainable - campaign of violence, on the other.[5]

The Telegram members in this study were confronted with this reality, prompting divergent - and often conflicting - expressions of group loyalty and support. ISIS’s excesses triggered further debates about the appropriate and legitimate scope of violence and members questioned their ability and authority to contribute to these different groups and agendas. Different internal braking dynamics could thus be detected in these threads, where members engaged in frank discussions about the Islamist militant universe and their place in it. These dynamics are described in detail below and discussed in relation to our understanding on the internal brakes on violent escalation.

First, though, it is important to set out the position of the Telegram members with respect to the use of violence and targeting, given the heterogeneity of groups and arguments around them. As mentioned, these individuals

were at the outer reaches of Salafi-jihadism, but it is important to explain what that looked like in this case, what was considered ‘normal’, and thus to highlight more clearly how, when and where those norms were tested or where resistance to escalation emerged.

### ***Extremist Positioning***

The Turnup Terror Squad, perhaps as the name suggests, recognised and apparently cherished its fringe position and referred to other members of the faith community as “moderates” who had been led astray. They spoke of “sending Awlaki”—a reference to Anwar al-Awlaki, the Yemeni-American extremist preacher who joined Al-Qaeda—to correct the errors of the “moderates” via his published lectures and sermons that were frequently shared, and quoted from, on the forum.

Members of the Telegram group shared other extremist content too, including ISIS videos, which they uploaded onto YouTube, and religious edicts on the need for jihad. Their position on violence was clear: they celebrated acts of terrorism and terrorist groups and their leaders. One member commented: “I just told my english [*sic*] teacher publicly that I support 911”—a reference to the September 2001 attacks in the United States. Others engaged in debates about who had been a more important figure, Awlaki or Usama bin Ladin, the erstwhile leader of Al-Qaeda. Members shared pictures of themselves viewing or brandishing jihadi propaganda under the heading “ScholarSelfies”.[6]

Fighting, violence, “jihad fisabeel allah” (war in the name of God) was openly endorsed and celebrated and the group was urged to help the jihadists either by joining them, sending money, supporting their families or at least speaking “good about them.”[7]

There was complete contempt for non-Muslims too. One participant in these threads complained about the “filthy najis [unclean]” that he had encountered at his local supermarket in the UK. Another wrote in a separate context: “let’s do a amaliya [operation] on kuffar [unbelievers] whilst they’re shopping.” “I’m down,” his friend replied, “send them straight to jahanam [hell] and save whoever we can and help them on to path to Jannah [heaven].”[8]

Attitudes towards other Muslims were similarly disdainful. Hassane warned one of his friends that he would “make a TK” (*takfir*) - or declare him an unbeliever - if he continued to go to a Sufi mosque.[9] Several spoke of their dismay when a group of British Imams published a video condemning ISIS: “uk sunni + shia against isis smh [shaking my head]”, one remarked. Of women in Islam, one Turnup participant wrote that they had *udhr*, an excuse, for their ignorance “because they’re all dumb bitches.” His friend replied: “Effffff women.”[10]

Specific issues and themes were raised too. One group member was asked: “what do you think of Democracy?” He replied, “I think that its [*sic*] shirk [idolatry] and everyone in the parliament are kuffar [unbelievers]”. The issue of a covenant of security was discussed too. This refers to verbal or written contracts or agreements (*ahd*) between people promising mutual peace and security (*aman*) between them, based on the prophetic method, rendered void if either side violates the compact.[11] In a post from early August, Majeed, quoting from an Islamic scholar, wrote: “There is no such thing as a visa being a covenant, especially with countries that have openly declared war on Islam, and even if it was a covenant they would have broken it already because they have laws that protect the insulting of the Prophet [...] and this is enough to wage Jihad on them let alone other things”. His friends and associates echoed these sentiments, confirming that they reflected the position of “triple A” (Awlaki) and “obl” (bin Ladin).[12]

To be clear, these issues - on *takfir*, covenant of security and related topics - reflect major and bitter debates about relations between believers and unbelievers, the composition of those categories, and the nature of conflict between them, that have raged and shaped different currents of Islamist militancy for decades.[13]

Members of the Turnup Terror Squad absorbed some of these debates, tried to understand and interpret them and relate to their reality, as they saw it.

### ***Internal Brakes***

Despite the universality of extremist sympathies within this group of friends, however, some doubts, distractions and objections could be detected in these threads that brought into question the level of violence that could or ought to be endorsed. The context of these conversations can be grouped into four overlapping categories. First, there were concerns over group membership and identity that reflected the increasingly fractured world of Islamist militancy where Al-Qaeda and ISIS had emerged as major rivals, effectively splitting this world into two camps with very different visions on the way forward, as mentioned. Second, there were debates about targeting and the boundaries of the in-group and out-group, particularly in relation to the aforementioned *takfir*. Third, members reported quarrels and concerns over family and friends, the prospect of “converting” them to a jihadi mindset or the frustration of encountering their disapproval for the extremist outbursts of group members. Fourth, members questioned their level of knowledge, understanding and access to information, and how this might affect their position and ability to act and make decisions.

Let us unwrap these in sequence, while remembering that these debates often fused together. For example, group participants might seek to respond to the out-group definitions of external organisations and leaders, that might, in turn, prompt disputes with friends or searches for relevant evidence. For purposes of clarity, however, it is useful to discuss these separately in more detail.

#### *Group Identity*

In early July 2014, Hassane wrote a message on the Turnup Telegram group saying: “guys I gave bayah [pledge of allegiance] btw.”[14] He had given his fealty to the leader of ISIS, and urged his friends to do the same. But a civil war had broken out among Islamist militants fighting in Syria and beyond, which coloured and confused debates about group loyalties at the grassroots. Some members of Turnup promoted the Al-Nusra Front instead, which was Al-Qaeda’s ally at the time and ISIS’ chief rival in Syria. “Go listen to Joulani’s speech”, one critic of the Al-Nusra front was told, referring to Abu Muhammad al-Joulani, the leader of the group. Al-Nusra was going to become an Islamic Emirate in Syria, “in the next few weeks”, group members were told. “I don’t like JN [Jabhat al-Nusra]”, another user retorted. The Al-Nusra Front represented the “weirdest case”, a third member reflected, they “looked so promising” and “were intelligent”, but ultimately a disappointment.[15]

There was disappointment about the direction taken by Al-Qaeda after the death of bin Ladin too. One member of the Turnup Terror Squad posted a video by Al-Qaeda’s new leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, who had been the group’s second-in-command for many years. “Az getting old, you can tell he’s ageing from when we first saw him”, one user responded. Others felt Al-Qaeda’s stance against ISIS undermined the Caliphate and the unity among the jihadists, whilst one user complained that “Jn is a disgrace to al Qaeda”, for denouncing members of ISIS.[16]

ISIS, its leader, its military achievements and nascent state - as well as the propaganda output that glorified these accomplishments - were repeatedly promoted and celebrated on these threads. “I don’t like people who chat crap about the Khilafah,” one user commented. “It is fully established”, another agreed.[17]

Yet the group was also criticised. Notably, and despite calls from Hassane and others for complete and unwavering support for the new “caliph”, these divergent views appeared to be tolerated. Debate was not shut down and there appeared to be a degree of flexibility as far as group loyalty was concerned, despite the bitterness of the disputes that were unfolding between Islamist militant groups in the Levant, and their backers globally. Whilst this flexibility may have helped members to stay involved in the Turnup Terror Squad despite their differences,

it may also have muddled perceptions about the direction of Islamist militancy, and its outer limits.

Majeed, Hassane's long-term friend and co-conspirator, was far less keen on ISIS, for example. In one post he wrote: "I read somewhere dawla [ISIS] make takfir on Hamas," which Majeed admired, adding nine cry-face emojis. Others wondered whether the controversy the group had attracted among other Salafis and jihadists was in some way warranted. "It seems like a lot of knowledgeable [sic] disapprove of the khilafah", one user pointed out. Later, reinforcing this sentiment, Majeed informed 'Turnup' members that Muhammad al-Hasan al-Dedew, a prominent Salafi scholar from Mauritania, had "ripped" the "caliphate", denouncing its leader. "I'm baffled", one member commented. "So he's not Amir of every Muslim in the world?" asked another, referring to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. "That's what he [Dedew] was [saying]", Majeed replied. In response, some members tried to defend ISIS. "The knowledgeable people who disapprove of it have been refuted hardddd. By books & PDFs", one user commented, without giving specifics. Those who criticised ISIS were not "fully aware" of what was going on in the "caliphate", another suggested.[18]

Meanwhile, calls for unity among jihadists were universal. Referring to Zawahiri, a Turnup member commented: "if the aq man etc give bay'a then khalas [enough] 100% [the caliphate is] correct". "Why don't they [Al-Qaeda] and make us all united?" his associate asked. Majeed wrote in another post: "If everyone unites that will be sick, inshaAllah it happens, 2015 gonna be one peak year boy." [19]

But there were questions about the extent to which ISIS had contributed to the disunity, which in itself would be seen as a grave sin. Responding to criticism of the Al-Nusra Front, one member of the Turnup Terror Squad wrote: "Disunity came from people in dawla sayin you are either with us or this will happen to you". Turning this argument on its head, an ISIS supporter replied: "fighting them [ISIS] causes more bloodshed and disunity. A khilafa can become legit simply by the strength of the leader", he argued. Reflecting on the group's record of violence, the ISIS critic retorted: "People don't want to risk killing Muslims". "Then they should realise that staying disunited will cause the death of more muslims," the ISIS supporter replied. "I don't think the khilafa is 100% legit", the critic warned. A third member then joined the conversation: "I think the Khilafah is 100% legit. And the best way for unity is the Khilafah. And if IS make mistake you should make baraa'a [disavow] from the mistake not from the group as many have done". "The sahaabah [companions of the prophet] [made] mistakes in their time when they done J [jihad]," he added.[20]

But the debate continued and turned to the morals of ISIS' actions. "Don't ever get gassed [beguiled] and think the way dowla beheads ppl is good", the original instigator of the discussion wrote, adding: "It's completely contradictory to the sunnah [prophetic method]". He continued: "And the displaying heads in public is not from the sunnah at all. Abu bakr [ibn Uthman] was shown a head and he rejected it. They [the companions of the prophet] said the Persians and Romans do this [beheading]". A fourth member of Turnup then joined the conversation, claiming "Isis are like alhajjaj ibn yusuf". This is a reference to an Umayyad governor of Iraq and Persia who was known for his harsh tactics and brutal treatment of his adversaries. Notably, the comparison between ISIS' leaders and ibn Yusuf featured repeatedly in denunciations of ISIS by other jihadists such as Ayman al-Zawahiri.[21] The staunch supporters of ISIS were put on the defensive: they suggested that some mistakes may have been made in relation to beheadings and accepted that there were legitimate disagreements over the public execution of US journalist James Foley, beheaded just five days before these discussions took place.[22]

The original ISIS critic pressed his point further: "Beheading ppl in this crazy manner. Parading the heads is not something normal. Having little kids hold heads is not normal. Taking picture with [their] heads isn't normal". The ISIS supporter finally conceded: "Yeah beheading needs to be addressed". Seeking common ground, the ISIS critic noted that ultimately unity among the jihadists was key and that the "kuffar" were "loving" these quarrels, adding "#DivideAndConquer". Perhaps in an effort to lighten the mood, he called the ISIS supporter a "blind dowla fanboy haha". "Loooooo I'm supporting the haqq [the truth]", he replied, adding he would now point to a hundred mistakes that the Al-Nusra Front had made, referring to the ISIS critic's declared support

for that group.

### *Targeting*

These disagreements over group alignment and the implications of identifying with particular rival factions touched upon the issue of targeting and in particular the excommunication (*takfir*) of fellow Muslims. This was a thread that ran through these captured conversations. Members of the Turnup Terror Squad often seemed eager to declare co-religionists unbelievers if they felt their belief was insincere. They wielded *takfir* quite literally as a rhetorical weapon against other believers, with the implication that once they were declared non-Muslim, they could in turn be targeted with violence. One user commented in response to criticism of ISIS, “I’m loading my TK [takfir] gun.”[23] In approaching the concept of *takfir* so casually, the group followed a longer tradition of near boundless excommunication that had come to define sectarian militant groups like ISIS and highlight internal disputes among jihadists.[24]

Turnup participants repeatedly announced that they were “doing TK” on various individuals and groups based on what they had heard about their actions or beliefs. They even threatened to “do TK” on those who failed to “do TK” when exposed to transgressions, a notion sometimes referred to as “chain *takfir*”.[25] These debates were informed by some of the thinking that has shaped contemporary approaches to *takfir*, in particular the ten “nullifiers” in Islam developed by 18<sup>th</sup> century Islamist reformist Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab, concerning deeds and thoughts that would render Muslims non-believers.[26] Turnup members declared the King of Saudi Arabia a non-Muslim, for instance, because he had become guilty of Wahhab’s eighth nullifier, supporting the polytheists against the Muslims.

In discussing “TK”, the group would also explore limitations on the application of *takfir*, which given its implications for targeting are essential for any emergent brakes on violence or its justification. Members debated historical and theological precedent that would qualify the application of *takfir*, such as the excuse of ignorance - *Udhr bil-Jahl* - whereby *takfir* would be inapplicable if the person who had erred simply didn’t know any better. Some pointed to exegesis that suggested that even if such ignorance was corrected, *takfir* could still not be declared because the misinterpretations could be too deep-rooted. One Turnup member quoted Abu Qatadah, a prominent Salafi cleric and critic of ISIS:

We cannot make takfir on someone once we expose to them the errors in their ta’weel [interpretation]. This is because we don’t know whether they accept our arguments deep down in the heart, so they may still believe in their ta’weel. Ibn Tammiyah [d. 1328 CE] refrained from making takfir on the people at his time who rejected the attributes of Allah, for this reason.[27]

Others noted the importance of establishing the evidence before implementing *takfir* or its punishments. Referring to a hypothetical case of how to deal with an incarcerated transgressor, one member wrote: “I would qeem the hujja [establish the truth] before I behead him.” Others pointed out that such punishment would only be lawful if power over the transgressor was absolute and the above caveats, concerning the excuse of ignorance and entrenched misinterpretation, had been addressed.[28]

Ultimately, the Turnup members agreed that the issue of *takfir* was fraught with difficulty: “I need to study the fiqh [jurisprudence] of TK”, one commented. “You will never finish it lol”, another replied. But there was recognition of the harmful consequences of excessive *takfir* too. “Makin TK aint a joke,” one user cautioned, “its [*sic*] a BMT [Big Man Ting].” “We love making tk dont we?” another wrote. One member pointed out: “You don’t want to make tk. We want ppl to be muslims.”[29]

The notion of targeting non-Muslims was a less controversial topic. Members of the Telegram group celebrated acts of terrorism against non-combatants, as noted above, and accepted - without exception - the legitimacy of violence against unarmed adversaries. Yet, some statements to this effect appeared to test the outer limits of

such targeting of non-Muslims too. “Can u target women and children like specifically”, one member of Turnup asked, before qualifying: “if she is a leader of kufr [disbelief] [...] an assassination”. “How is a child goin to be a leader of kufr”, his associate retorted. “Calm down akhi [brother]”, another urged. A third member noted that according to Muhammad ibn al-Uthaymeen, a Saudi Salafi scholar, non-combatants could be killed only as an act of reciprocity, in response to an enemy’s targeting of the faith community’s non-combatants: “we can do the same to them as they do to us”, the member wrote.[30]

In light of this understanding, however, other questions remained. The case of abducted British aid worker Alan Henning, whose death had already been rumoured by late September 2014, was raised towards the end of these Telegram discussions. “Is it true Alan henning had a covenant with muslimen?” Majeed wrote shortly before he was arrested, implying his killing would be unlawful. Another contributor wondered why his aid convoy had been “unable” to find a Muslim driver, suggesting the episode could have been avoided. ISIS released a video showing Henning’s execution on 3<sup>rd</sup> October.[31]

### *Family and Friends*

Greater complexity was added to debates about targeting and excommunication when the position of close friends and family was considered in this regard. Several threads from the Turnup Terror Squad pointed to members’ frustration as they encountered opposition from relatives to their extremist sympathies. One Telegram participant told his friends that he had argued with his uncle about the illegitimacy of the government where he resided, claiming they did not rule by sharia. The uncle dismissed these thoughts: “he was like [...] focus on your studies”. Remarkably, another member then replied: “Hujja [proof] has been made... his blood is halal [permissible] and baraa’a from [disavow] him”. Family opposition, therefore, did not always translate into brakes.[32]

Other messages, though, suggested that such family quarrels often irked group members. Referencing a conversation about Usama bin Ladin, universally revered among this group, one participant complained: “Lol my mum was like he killed innocent people. She was like ‘Id [*sic*] never kill someone innocent, Muslim of kafir’. ‘He made a big mistake’. My brother & sister were like ‘HES A TERRORIST.’ Others responded recounting similar experiences: “I’m having bare arguments with my fam. They don’t give me a chance to [speak]”, one member complained. “I told them that jews and christians goin to hell”, he continued. His associate replied: “Allah made takfeer on them in several ayat so if allah and the messenger [...] made takfeer on anyone we do it aswell [*sic*]”. “I think my mum thinks ahl al kitab [people of the book: Jews, Christians] aren’t kuffar”, a third participant wrote. A fourth member then joined the conversation reporting that his father had reprimanded him saying: “who are you to call someone a kafir u dont knw if one day he myt [*sic*] become a good muslim even if he commits act of kufr”. His friend replied: “your dad refuted himself :( [He] ain’t muslim [*sic*]”. But the son seemed less keen to disavow his father, replying simply: “[it] is complicated man.”[33]

This conversation flared up again a few weeks later. The Telegram member had had another argument with his father, this time about the Kurds, who were at that moment spearheading the fight against ISIS in northern Iraq. His father supported the Kurds, pointing to their suffering under the reign of Saddam Hussein, whilst the son was a declared and enthusiastic supporter of ISIS. People were too “nationalistic”, Majeed complained.[34]

Confrontations with, or interventions from, friends were reported too. Majeed told fellow group participants about a friend in Syria who “calls Isis Khawarij and hates them.”[35] Another said one of his best friends was from Raqqa, which ISIS had claimed as its “capital”, and hated the group “with all his heart”. “Smh [shaking my head]” one friend replied. “Im [*sic*] currently loading my tk gun...” wrote another. Yet another friend of a group member was reported as being “soo anti-isis.” “Lol ignore him”, his associate urged. “He is a sick guy tho”, the other replied, pointing out he supported other “J groups” such as Al-Qaeda. “Lol then he’s not up to date with J [jihad]”, his friend retorted. “And brainwashed”, the other member agreed.[36]

Members of Turnup also spoke in jest about their interactions with family, knowing that they would encounter objections to their views on jihad and violence. “Anytime I get on an ayah [verse] about jihad I’m gonna ask my mum what it means haha”, one member joked. Another wrote: “Oi I was like to my mom in going turkey to turn up with my friends she was like ok. Then she was like u wanna go to syria from there. I was like loooooool.”[37]

Recognition that close friends and family did not share the extremist expressions of the group had other manifestations too. Several members described efforts to “recruit” those closest to them and convince them of the merits of their cause. One Turnup member was asked whether his sister was “on manhaj,” or the correct path. “She knows little about islam. So no”, he replied, though he noted: “she doesn’t speak when i big up obl [bin Ladin] and that. And she knows how sick j is in islam”. But on the other hand, he noted, she had Shia friends. “I need to remind her to read the wala wal bara [loyalty and disavowal] books”. “From what I’m hearing from you now, ur sister is open to manhaj”, a fellow Telegram participant responded, adding: “Give her AA”, Anwar al-Awlaki. Others described similar efforts to convince family and friends. One user talked of sending a book by Abdullah Azzam, a seminal figure of modern jihad, to his mother. “I’m radicalising my friend”, one member wrote. “Im radicalising my lil bro”, wrote another. The presence of loved-ones who were seen as “jahil”, religiously ignorant, was thus a bugbear, and one that group members sought to address by sharing propaganda, extremist literature and engaging in debate, whilst also resisting or ignoring criticism and denunciation of the extremist position they had adopted.[38]

### *Knowledge*

A limiting factor as far as the Turnup members’ extremist expressions were concerned, however, was their incomplete understanding of the world around them and their place in it, which caused some confusion about the roles and positions they could adopt and the consequences of such decisions. One participant who had engaged in a long thread about his intention to declare the King of Saudi Arabia a non-Muslim, then asked: “Do I have to know Arabic to make takfeer on the king?”[39]

Even though Hassane went on to develop plans to carry out an attack in London in the autumn, after his declaration of fealty to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in July 2014, he seemed initially unsure of what this decision would entail. “I gave bayah u know,” he wrote. “So what now?” Majeed asked. “Yeah now I’m just carrying on medicine and that’s my ameer [leader] lol”, Hassane replied. Majeed asked again: “Lool don’t you need to make hijrah? [emigrate to the caliphate]”. “Shaykh said medicine is permissible”, Hassane remarked. Majeed then asked which other professions might be permissible, but Hassane didn’t respond.[40]

Whilst establishing facts was seen as important, the group members often struggled to reach a consensus about what these facts might be and the evidence behind these. Rumours abound and the evaluation of sources caused headaches which affected debates about the key issues described above, such as group identity and targeting. Reflecting Salafi norms, the group was keen to rely on scripture and scholarly evidence from the formative years of Islam, but often struggled to apply or interpret these. Whilst the principle of living according to the precedent set by the first faith communities was universally accepted, what this meant in practice was unclear.

Debating whether the Al-Nusra Front in Syria had transgressed, for instance, Turnup members sought to rely on the example set by the pious forefathers when they tried to resolve disputes. But they disagreed on what these mechanisms of conflict resolution had looked like at the time, including the composition of consultative assemblies. Ali ibn Talib, the fourth caliph, had been present at a particular assembly one participant insisted. “He wasn’t,” another replied. “Ali was there I checked,” the other retorted. “Where’d u check?” came the reply. “Multiple sources,” he said. “Show me one,” the other insisted, but received no reply.[41]

The authenticity of more contemporary statements was questioned too. There was a debate about how the “Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan” - the Taliban in Afghanistan - had responded to developments in Syria, with claims and counterclaims about the validity of certain statements. “This whole thing can be a big fake”, one

member commented.[42]

Unsurprisingly, group participants used the forum as a sounding board for their ideas or asked for tips on religious edicts. One member wrote: “quick whats [*sic*] the hadith [prophet’s record] that the non Muslim is not safe until he accepts Islam. I forgot the hadeeth and cant [*sic*] find it.” “Kitab al iman”, his friend replied, adding: “It’s very sahih [authentic] lol”. Some members also gave updates on their efforts to acquire more knowledge and the challenges this entailed. Majeed wrote: “I’m reading abu qatadas 21 pages on the khilafah, 5 pages in I’m done bruv, tiring work”. “Keep it up bruh”, his friend urged.[43]

Some sources of knowledge and inspiration, however, also came from less obvious directions. At one point, a group member posted a link to an article on *Vice* news titled “British Fighter in Syria Describes Angels and a Battlefield ‘Miracle’”, about a video from a British jihadist fighting in Syria who said he experienced divine intervention during an attack on a government checkpoint.[44] Other forum members praised the apparent miracle and reposted the story, as if it was a piece of Islamist propaganda. “I felt an immense love for this brother,” one of them wrote. Other aspects of mainstream news, however, were often treated with suspicion. “Never believe the media unless it’s confirmed by the Muslims”, one member wrote. Another complained about the “moderates” lack of evidence on issues such as *takfir*, commenting: “when you ask them for evidence they being [*sic*] BBC, CNN, AlJazeera. Eff that![45]

Majeed initiated another thread in late July that revealed more profound doubts about jihad and their ability to embrace it. He wrote: “sometimes I think that we talk about j so much we’ve convinced ourselves were going to get shahadah [martyrdom] and that’s it. But reality is, with what I do I’m not gonna get it”. His friend echoed these concerns and wondered whether they had been “deceived” into focusing too much on jihad, at the expense of other elements of their faith. “I’m not saying it’s not a massive part”, Majeed continued, referring to jihad, but added: “It is when we talk about it so much we feel like it’s the only part to the deen [religion]. When there’s so many things that we have to do before we ever get there. [...] I’m saying Allah won’t give us shahadah if were wastemans to begin with. We end up becoming ahl al kalam. Ppl who just speak”. “Yeah i know wat you mean”, his friend agreed. Majeed asked: “Like do we really know the fiqh of salah [jurisprudence of prayer] or the fiqh of inheritance or fiqh of hajj”. “Let us worry about developing a relationship with quran and having good manners”, his friend replied, adding: “I have knowledge that I’m not applying so I’m not concerned with learning more”. But Majeed seemed unconvinced: “This year I haven’t forgotten about j but I’ve neglected everything else. I get this motivation to do Quran. Then it dies out for so long”. A few weeks later he would finalise his plans to carry out acts of terrorism.[46]

## **Discussion**

In these threads we have caught glimpses behind the scenes of the mostly frank and unguarded conversations between advocates of Islamist militancy. Yet, it should be stressed that this picture is incomplete, especially in relation to the involvement of key participants in violence. The two principal subjects whose case unveiled these exchanges became involved in the planning of acts of terrorism towards the end of this timeline, at least by autumn 2014, but the involvement of their Turnup friends in similar activities remains unknown.

Tying expressions to actions, in short, especially thoughts on violence to efforts to employ it, is inherently difficult. The “brakes” we can extract from these threads, therefore, are more abstract, illustrative of the types of issues that might cause concern among a grassroots group of Islamist extremists. Nevertheless, these discussions reveal insights that are of clear relevance to internal efforts to limit or qualify violence. The “internal brakes” typology developed by Busher, Holbrook and Macklin identified five related logics upon which such brakes on violence were based: strategy (‘what works?’), morals (‘what’s right?’), ego-maintenance (‘who are we?’), out-group definitions (‘who are they?’) and organisation (‘what can/do we do?’).[47] The Telegram threads provide numerous insights into how this framework applies at the outer reaches of Islamist extremism, and political

violence more generally.

Whilst some manifestations of violence against non-combatants were accepted by all 30 Turnup members, expressions were also made that could be interpreted as brakes on its escalation. These concerned - or were prompted by - thoughts regarding group identity, targeting, family and friends, and knowledge acquisition and deficits. Some of these rested on strategic logics: roles such as medicine were considered as alternatives to combat in support of the nascent 'state' created by ISIS, and there was protracted debate about the potential blowback from excessive use of *takfir* - excommunication. Moral logics played a major role: members expressed their disquiet regarding beheadings and the violent excesses of ISIS. Legality was a central, and related, question, prompting conversations about evidence and source material used to establish or critique the legitimacy of particular decisions.

As regards the logic of ego-maintenance, loyalty to different militant groups, such as ISIS, Al-Qaeda, the Al-Nusra Front, and Hamas, demarcated different approaches towards violence and, in the case of anti-ISIS groups, delineated certain brakes on violence that incorporated the position of these organisations and highlighted the excesses of ISIS. On an individual level, attitudes towards *takfir* - and in turn the labelling of those who were too cavalier with the concept as *takfiri* - further shaped these self-perceptions. Notions of *takfir* were also central to the out-group logics of these brakes. Whilst the term was liberally applied, there was recognition that allowances had to be made for non-Muslims to become Muslim, and that such transitions ought to be encouraged, whilst for those believers who had allegedly transgressed there were debates about the justifications that could be made in their defence, such as their ignorance of the 'correct' interpretations. Out-group definitions were challenged, however, when it came to family and close friends who rejected extremism. Several members suggested they had a closer bond with their fellow Turnup associates or like-minded individuals than with their blood family as the latter contradicted their ideological positioning.

As for organisational logics, while the Turnup debates reflected the bitter disputes between jihadi organisations globally, particularly the Al-Qaeda – ISIS rivalry, this disunity did not appear to threaten the cohesion of the Turnup Terror Squad. Members did not abandon the group despite divergent opinions on group loyalties and remained cordial despite their different positions in this regard. Greater challenges, however, were posed by resource limitations, not in explicit ways but rather in terms of the absence of knowledge or the time required to absorb the theological precedent that some members felt they needed to become Salafi-jihadists.

## Conclusion

Through these private Telegram threads, we gain a unique insight into the discussions and debates that take place internally between individuals seeking to plan acts of terrorism and their immediate friends and associates. Few studies have managed to shed light on these dynamics. Such level of granularity, however, drawing on primary evidence in particular, is essential given the complexity of factors leading to terrorism and its rarity and 'abnormality' in terms of outcomes. Indeed, the study illustrates how an initial or superficial glance at the Turnup Terror Squad, their group affiliations and sources of ideological inspiration would have presented a very partial and misleading picture of the reality on the ground.

On the surface, Turnup members might have seemed resolute, having declared their support for major Islamist terrorist organisations, whose propaganda they shared and uploaded online. They were confident enough to dismiss other Muslims - including family - as ignorant or even unbelievers and to condemn non-Muslims to death. They cherished their extremist positioning, spoke of the "moderate" Muslim mainstream that they considered misguided and talked of "radicalising" others.

Yet, beneath the surface there were doubts. There were doubts about the terrorist organisations to whom they had declared their loyalty: about their legitimacy and the morality of their actions. There was concern over

disunity among militants and what this meant for the implementation of jihad in practice. Other believers were excommunicated wantonly, but questions remained about *takfir* and how to apply it. Some recognised that wielding the “tk gun” too liberally would harm the community, but seemed unsure about how to rein in this excess. There was consensus that knowledge was key in order to navigate this extremist space, but deep uncertainty remained about whether members had the right information, whether they could interpret the knowledge they had, whether their sources were valid and what the implication of getting it wrong might be. There was, at times, moral outrage over some of the actions of the Islamist extremists that otherwise were promoted, ISIS especially, and particularly in response to staged beheadings of people deemed to be “innocents.” Disquiet remained too about interventions from family and friends, how to respond to them and what that meant for these relationships.

However, this study also shows that even when doubts emerge, the result is not necessarily the abandonment of violence, but either the dismissal of doubts or a redirection of violence. The complexity of individuals’ relationship with the ideology of extremist groups is also revealed. This seems dependent not only on the nature of the material they consume, but also their interpretation of it and the circumstances of their exposure. Furthermore, the study serves as a reminder of the complexity and non-linearity of the relationship between consumption of, or exposure to, extremist ideas and involvement in violence.

The study, therefore, raises questions regarding the extent to which brakes were ultimately successful in tempering violence. After all, the two principal subjects went on to plan acts of terrorism and their Turnup associates seemed unwavering in their support for revolutionary violence when Hassane and Majeed were arrested. Certainly, Majeed’s concern that he had become too obsessed with jihad at the expense of his understanding of other core pillars of his faith did not result in him abandoning his plans to become involved in violence. Interventions from family and friends did not appear to have a braking effect either, though these were clearly framed as *external* attempts at braking violence, rather than internal. Members’ comments certainly suggested, however, that they caused discomfort within the in-group.

This study also helps to illustrate how the interplay between internal brakes and changing context can be seen unfolding at multiple levels: within intra-personal and intra-group practice.[48] The fusion of macro-, meso- and micro-level dynamics was particularly notable. For instance, the Turnup exchanges pointed to in-group resilience at the micro level in response to potential brakes - organisational splits - that were taking place at the meso- (organisational) and macro-(ideological) levels. Despite the bitterness of these organisational disputes and the depth of ideological divergence, the Turnup group retained sufficient flexibility in this regard to absorb these differences.

Temporality is another dynamic that can be unpacked. Whilst external developments such as ISIS’ declaration of a caliphate and concomitant demands of fealty impacted Hassane and shaped other group perceptions, its subsequent actions prompted others to question their position on sensitive issues such as the execution and dismembering of abductees, including James Foley and Alan Henning. ISIS’ successes thus helped shape the subjects’ worldview while its excesses led some to question the organisation’s fit within the broader family of Islamist militancy. These cycles were rapid, covering a period of just a few weeks, accelerated by a constant news cycle and the Turnup members’ constant social media presence where new events were interpreted and compared against existing perceptions of the world and their place in it.[49]

Ultimately, this case reveals that even at what may be considered a universally extremist realm - where mass casualty violence against civilians is accepted and promoted - brakes, or attempted brakes on the precise execution of such violence or its justifications emerge. From a counter-terrorism perspective, the case thus offers perhaps encouraging signs that attitudes towards violence at such peripheries are not set in stone, that some issues, *takfir* especially, remain deeply controversial, and that there is scope for moral outrage or existing moral norms to be tested. Conversely, however, the case also reveals that whilst these dynamics could evolve into successful and comprehensive brakes on violence, the result may not be to abandon violence, but rather to

channel lethal use of force into different directions that the perpetrators view as ultimately more sustainable.

**About the Author:** Donald Holbrook heads a research consultancy working on matters relating to counter-terrorism and preventing violent extremism. He also holds honorary and visiting positions at the Department of Security and Crime Science, University College London, the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism in The Hague, and the Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence at the University of St Andrews, and is a member of the RESOLVE Network Research Advisory Council.

## Notes

[1] *The Guardian* (2016) 'Two British students jailed for plotting Isis-style drive-by shootings', (22nd April); Richard Spillet et al. (2016) 'Middle-class jihadists plotting bloodbath on London streets', *Daily Mail Online*, URL: <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3497125/Terror-pair-face-jail-plotting-gun-British-soldiers.html>; Duncan Gardham (2016) 'Terror medics who recruited British doctors', *The Times* (24th March).

[2] Joel Busher, Donald Holbrook, Graham Macklin (2019) 'The Internal Brakes on Violent Escalation', Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats (February), URL: <https://crestresearch.ac.uk/resources/internal-brakes-full-report/> [as of June 2020].

[3] Donatella Della Porta (2013) *Clandestine Political Violence*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; David A. Snow, E. Burke Rochford, Steven K. Worden SK and Robert D. Benford (1986) 'Frame alignment processes, micromobilization and movement participation', *American Sociological Review* 51, pp. 464-482.

[4] Hereafter referred to as R v Hassane/Majeed. This work builds on existing research concerning primary source material and involvement in terrorism. C.f. Donald Holbrook (2017) 'What Types of Media do Terrorists Collect?' *ICCT Research Paper* (September).

[5] Donald Holbrook (2017) *Al-Qaeda 2.0: A Critical Reader*, London: Hurst.

[6] R v Hassane/Majeed (2016). 'Turnup Terror Squad' Telegram threads. HM Courts & Tribunals Service.

[7] R v Hassane/Majeed (2016).

[8] Ibid.

[9] *Takfir* is usually defined as 'excommunication' and involves declaring someone an unbeliever, based on judgements of actions and thoughts considered to be such serious violations of religion so as to constitute *kufir*, unbelief. Joas Wagemakers (2012) *A Quietist Jihadi: The Ideology and Influence of Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[10] R v Hassane/Majeed (2016).

[11] Abdul Mun'em Mustafa Halimah Abu Basir (al-Tartusi) (no date) 'Covenants and Security in Islam' (*al-'ahd wa'l 'aman fi islaam*) available from URL: <http://www.en.altartosi.com/Covenants.pdf> (as of September 2020). What exactly constitutes 'agreement' and 'violation' of that agreement, remains hotly contested.

[12] R v Hassane/Majeed (2016).

[13] Brynjar Lia (2009) "'Destructive Doctrinarians": Abu Mus'ab al-Suri's Critique of the Salafis in the Jihadi Current', in: Roel Meijer (Ed.) (2009) *Global Salafism: Islam's New Religious Movement*, London: Hurst; Petter Nesser (2011) 'Ideologies of Jihad in Europe', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 23:2, 173-200, DOI: 10.1080/09546553.2010.537587; Assaf Moghadam, Brian Fishman (2011) (Eds.) *Fault Lines in Global Jihad: Organizational, Strategic, and Ideological Fissures*, Abingdon: Routledge; Quintan Wiktorowicz (2005) 'A Genealogy of Radical Islam', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 28:2, pp. 75-97, DOI: 10.1080/10576100590905057.

[14] *Bay'a* is defined as "pronouncement of allegiance to a ruler", Roel Meijer (Ed.) (2009): viii. As with other concepts dictating relations between people, it is hotly contested among Islamist militants and one of the key issues behind the split between Al-Qaeda and ISIS that revolved, among other things, about the degree to which declared fealty was 'inherited' by successors even when allegiance had been declared to their predecessors. Cf.. Donald Holbrook (2017).

[15] R v Hassane/Majeed (2016).

[16] Ibid.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Holbrook (2017), pp. 204, 264, 282.

[22] R v Hassane/Majeed (2016).

[23] Ibid.

[24] Roel Meijer (Ed.) (2009) *Global Salafism: Islam's New Religious Movement*, London: Hurst.

[25] Vera Mironova, Ekaterina Sergatskova, and Karam Alhamad (2017) 'The Bloody Split Within ISIS Inside the Group's Crackdown on Ultra-Extremists' *Foreign Affairs* (8th December).

[26] 'Abdul-'Azeez bin 'Abdillaah Ar-Raajihee (2003) *Explanation of The Nullifiers of Islaam of the Imaam and Mujaddid - Muhammad bin 'Abdil-Wahhaab*, Al-Ibaanah Book Publishing.

[27] R v Hassane/Majeed (2016).

[28] Ibid.

[29] Ibid.

[30] Ibid.

[31] Ibid.

[32] Ibid.

[33] Ibid.

[34] Ibid.

[35] Referring to a group which denounced the authority of Ali ibn Talib, though often a euphemism for extremists.

[36] R v Hassane/Majeed (2016).

[37] Ibid.

[38] Ibid.

[39] Ibid.

[40] Ibid.

[41] Ibid.

[42] Ibid.

[43] Ibid.

[44] Alice Speri (2014) 'British Fighter in Syria Describes Angels and a Battlefield 'Miracle'' *Vice News* (July), URL: <https://www.vice.com/en/article/2014/07/14/british-fighter-in-syria-describes-angels-and-a-battlefield-miracle/>

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[vice.com/en\\_us/article/vbnjjd/british-fighter-in-syria-describes-angels-and-a-battlefield-miracle?utm\\_source=vicenewstwitter](https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/vbnjjd/british-fighter-in-syria-describes-angels-and-a-battlefield-miracle?utm_source=vicenewstwitter).

[45] R v Hassane/Majeed (2016).

[46] Ibid.

[47] Busher, Holbrook, Macklin (2019).

[48] Joel Busher, Donald Holbrook, Graham Macklin (forthcoming) 'How the 'internal brakes' on violent escalation work and fail: Towards a basic conceptual framework for understanding intra-group processes of restraint in militant groups', in progress.

[49] David Snow and Robert D. Benford (1992) 'Master Frames and Cycles of Protest', in: Aldon Morris & Carol Mueller (Eds.), *Frontiers in Social Movement Theory*, New Haven: Yale University Press.