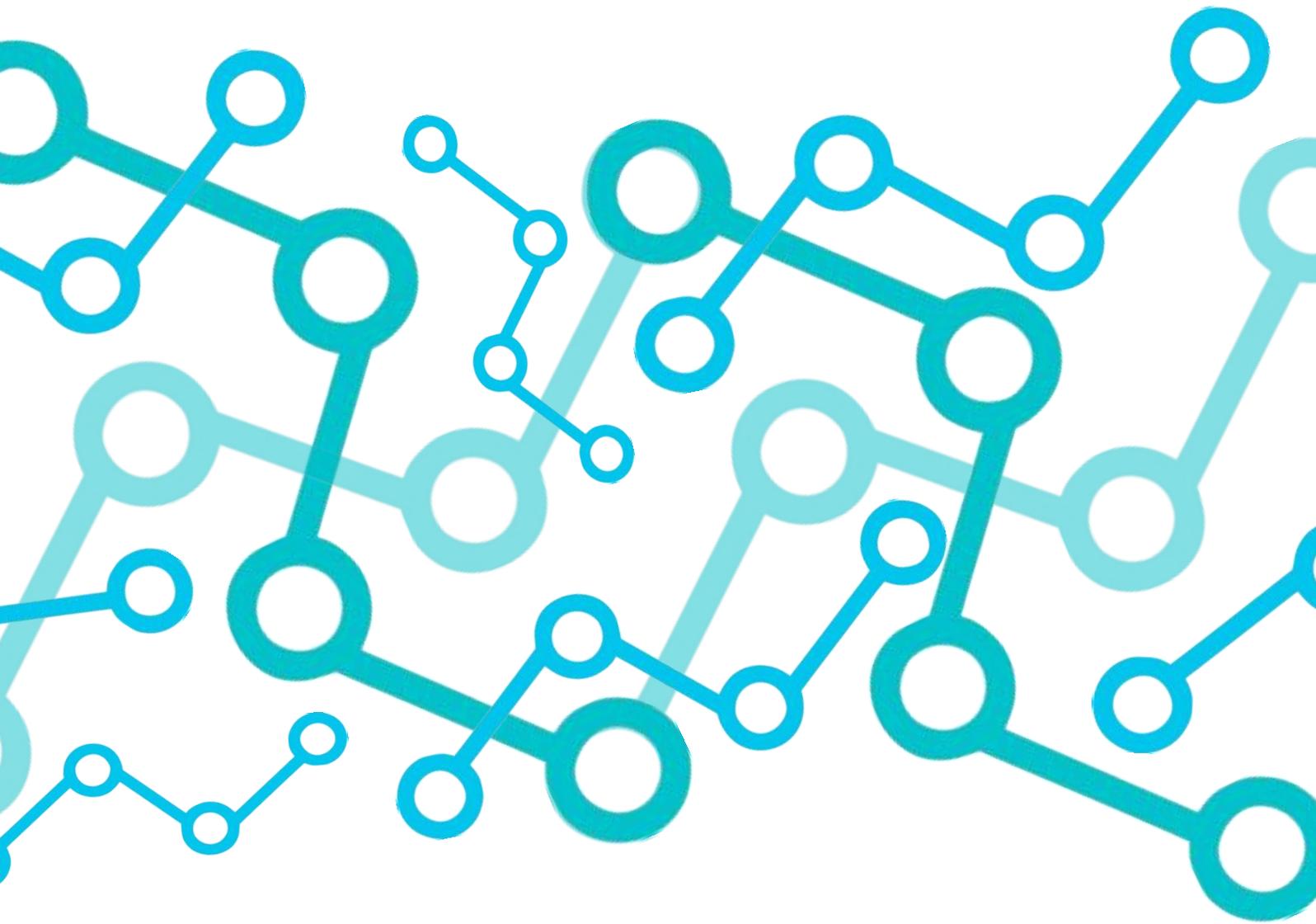


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Jihadists in Syria and Iraq: Recalibrating Concepts, Threat Radar, and Reintegration Policies

Edited by Michael Kowalski

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Editor's Note

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As the caliphate in Syria and Iraq is declining or may be even falling apart altogether, a thorough analysis of the future threat and the development of reasonable policy responses based on meaningful theoretical concepts is urgently needed. In this issue of the Journal of Security and Global Affairs a fairly unique mix of perspectives is offered to get a better understanding of this pressing issue. Especially the combination of insights from both academic and governmental specialists can empower reflections on how to address future challenges in this field.

What is known about the life in the Syrian territories that are controlled by jihadists? Roel de Bont, Daan Weggemans, Ruud Peters and Edwin Bakker offer in the first article a rich understanding of what life looks like for the average person who travelled to Syria to join the jihad. The insights provided explain overarching patterns that shape the lives of Dutch and other Western individuals. Men often receive military training, women become beyond the role of wife and mother engaged in supporting duties and children are prepared for their future roles from the age of six. The mix of military training, ideological indoctrination and mental stress or even traumatic experiences constitutes the overall 'luggage' potential returnees can carry with them. Expertise about the life as jihadist is crucial to design a proper response to the phenomenon of potential returnees, be it as relative, frontline professional or security professional. Last but not least these insights can also inform the judicial domain and promote international accountability and justice.

Concepts that shape our understanding of issues have an impact on how we act on issues at the same time. In the second article Stef Wittendorp illustrates that our common understanding of the travel of Western citizens to the battlefields of Syria and Iraq is securitised. This implies that all governmental responses are designed from a perspective of national security. Wittendorp argues to leave that focus behind since security is the outcome of political processes and the issue at stake is much more complex than that. He suggests a broader space of possibilities to think about the cultural, social and political implications of joining the battlefield. The concept of counter-culture might help us to reach such a broader understanding and to better differentiate between relevant concepts like identity, citizenship, sovereignty and territory.

Once the conceptual focus is right, the question arises whether governments are acting on the right threat. Hans van Miert reflects in the third article from a governmental perspective on returnees and the current jihadist threat. Van Miert wonders whether the focus in several Western European countries on the threat of potential returnees is really justified. Based on an analysis of twenty-two jihadist attacks in the West in 2016, Van Miert demonstrates that there is a wide variety in the group of returnees and that there are other groups of jihadists that may pose a serious threat as well. The jihadists in Western Europe merge in spite of their different backgrounds and characteristics in a ‘melting pot’ that can survive the decline of the caliphate in the Middle East and can continue to pose a threat to West. Security authorities would be well advised to avoid tunnel visions and to address in their policies all those different kinds of threats.

A core challenge in facing the caliphate is posed by the children who lived there and were indoctrinated, trained and traumatised over there. Liesbeth van der Heide and Jip Geenen face in the fourth article the reintegration challenge of the children of the caliphate. Their analysis of rehabilitation and reintegration programmes shows that most of those programmes do not differ a lot from programmes designed to deal with non-terrorist criminal offenders. Approaches to rehabilitation and reintegration could benefit from those experiences. Although it remains crucial to tailor them to the specific needs of extremist juveniles. The importance of both age and attitudes should according to Van der Heide and Geenen inform any tailor-made approach for juvenile violent extremist offenders. With the potential rise of juvenile returnees from the caliphate governments are well-advised to install such measures, in the best interest of future generations.

The contributions to this special issue of the Journal of Security and Global Affairs help to reconsider our conceptual assumptions, to recalibrate our threat radar and to rethink our take on dealing with juvenile extremists. I hope that the composition of this special issue inspires both academics and practitioners in their reflections on and dealings with the challenges ahead of us.

About the author(s)

Michael Kowalski is linked to the Institute of Security and Global Affairs as part-time guest researcher working on his Ph.D. thesis on the ethical dimensions of counterterrorism since 2014. Michael is co-founder and member of the steering committee of the European Expert Network on Terrorism Issues. His latest publication is *Ethics of counterterrorism* (2017), Amsterdam: Boom.



Life at ISIS: The Roles of Western Men, Women and Children

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Introduction¹

Since March 2011, Syria has been torn by civil war. With the conflict being in its seventh year, it has been estimated that more than 400,000 people have been killed to date (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights 2017). In addition, over half of the Syrian population has been forced to leave their homes. Whereas almost 5 million Syrians have fled their country as refugees, there has been a considerable group of foreigners who made the reverse journey (UNHCR 2017). They travelled to the war-ravaged region to participate in some way in the conflict. Initially, it mainly concerned individuals from surrounding Arabic countries. However, soon they were followed by citizens from EU member States, Turkey, Russia and even countries such as Australia, the United States and China.

Estimations of the number of individuals who have travelled from the European Union to the conflicts in Syria and Iraq range from 3922 to more than 4294 (Van Ginkel and Entenmann 2016, 4). A significant number has joined the ranks of jihadi-salafi groups such as Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS)² and *Jahbat al-Nusra* (now called *Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham*).

¹ Sections of this article have been published before as part of Weggemans, Daan, Ruud Peters, Edwin Bakker, and Roel de Bont. 2016. "Destination Syria: An Exploratory Study into the Daily Lives of Dutch 'Syria Travellers'." *Institute of Security and Global Affairs, Leiden University*.

² This organisation has been referred to in various ways during the past few years (examples include: 'Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant' (ISIL), 'Islamic State in Iraq and Syria' (ISIS), more recently as 'Islamic State' and in

While over the last decennia many countries have been confronted with individuals traveling to foreign conflict areas, the sheer number has been a reason for increased concern. These concerns are not limited to the families and communities who fear for the loss of their youth in an increasingly violent civil war; governments and security agencies are especially worried about the potential security threats these individuals pose (Bakker, Paulussen and Entenmann 2013, 3). It is feared that (returned) foreign fighters may foster the radicalization of others as well as play a role in the preparation or committing of terrorist attacks (Byman 2015; AIVD 2016; Ministry of Security and Justice 2017).

Over the last years a considerable number of national and international publications have focused on the backgrounds and motives of western fighters in Syria and Iraq. What prompted them to move to this area of conflict? Their involvement in serious human rights violations has also been a central focus of attention. A subject much less written about has been the daily lives of foreigners at or behind the battlefield. One of the reasons for this is, of course, the dangerous situation in the country during the height of the conflict. Only a handful of journalists and scientists were brave enough to conduct local studies. Also, it has proven to be difficult to come into contact with people in Syria by telephone or via the internet. Sometimes technology simply does not allow for it, in other cases it led to major safety risks for those involved.

With ISIS losing territory in the Middle East, it is expected that many European nationals who travelled to the caliphate will consider to return to their homelands (Reed, De Roy van Zuijdewijn and Bakker 2015). When this scenario will become reality, it is important to gain more insights into their experiences in Syria and Iraq. What is life like in Syria for the average person who travelled to Syria to join ISIS? Those who travelled to Syria to join ISIS (or another jihadist group) are oftentimes labelled as jihadist ‘foreign fighters’ by scholars, politicians, practitioners and journalists alike. But do they by default actually become fighters, or are there other options too? Such questions are not only relevant for the prosecution of individuals who left for Syria and Iraq, but also for those organizations who are involved in their reintegration. Against this backdrop, this article aims to outline the roles of men, women, and children in ISIS territory. In what follows, we will first address the study’s methodology. Subsequently, we will discuss some general factors that greatly influence what daily life looks like in ISIS territory. This is followed by an outline of what daily life looks like respectively for men, women, and children. The article is concluded with a reflection and some notes on what implications these insights hold in terms of responding to returning jihadists.

Arabic as ‘ad-Dawlah al-Islāmiyah fī ‘l-‘Irāq wa-sh-Shām’ shortened to Da’ish or Daesh). For the sake of readability of this article, the authors have opted to consistently use the abbreviation ISIS.

Methodology

The work presented in this article is mostly part of an independent expert-study that was commissioned by the Dutch court. With this study the Dutch court hoped to gain more insights in the daily lives of Dutch nationals in Syria in the year 2014. For the purpose of the present article, we somewhat shifted our scope. First, given the current pressure on ISIS and the likely resulting flow of returnees to their home countries, this article specifically zooms in on the lives of foreigners at ISIS. Second, instead of mainly focusing on Dutch cases, we focused on the overarching patterns that shape the lives of these Dutch – and other – Western individuals. As such, the article can be tailored to presenting more generally applicable experiences and roles. This makes the presented insights not only valuable for the Dutch case, but also for other western countries. Finally, we choose to not solely focus on the year 2014, but to provide a more general overview on daily life in ISIS territory. This meant conducting some additional research, which allowed us to incorporate more recent insights on daily life in the caliphate.

Data collection

The presented data is based on open sources, a number of legal dossiers and in-depth interviews. Open sources include government reports, newspaper articles, research literature, weblogs and social media (e.g. Twitter, Facebook and Telegram). This also includes insights from leaked ISIS documents as well as multiple Arabic sources. Moreover, we studied a number of official legal case dossiers of individual who allegedly attempted to travel to Syria or Iraq or were suspected of involvement in terrorism. Unfortunately, these official reports did not provide much relevant additional information that could not be found in the above mentioned sources. Finally, a series of ‘semi-structured’ interviews has been conducted. Semi-structured interviews are held on the basis of pre-set topics, but at the same time allow for space to raise additional questions and subject. The order of topics discussed in the interviews did not follow a pre-determined structure. Semi-structured interviews make it possible to talk about complex and sensitive subjects. The researcher can probe when relevant information about a certain these is discussed. This method offers the opportunity to vary the way in which certain topics are discussed. Because we interviewed people with different social, cultural and professional background for this study – in both English and Dutch – it is possible that certain words and concepts have different meanings for the respondents. The possibility to deviate from certain questions makes it possible to take these different backgrounds into account (Harrell and Bradley 2009; Weggemans and De Graaf 2015, 19). The analysis of the interviews ultimately focused on their latent content (the underlying meaning) rather than their manifest importance (the specific use of words and definitions).

Selection of respondents

The respondents for the interviews were selected on the basis of their experiences and expertise. We aimed to interview people who were living in Syria, as well as for individuals or organizations that were in direct contact with people in Syria. In some cases, these individuals were found in our own networks. In other cases, we were able to contact them on the basis of information from the media, or we came into contact with relevant discussion partners through others (convenience sampling). Some contacts were also made via social media.

The short time window of the study and the willingness to cooperate proved to be major restrictive factors for the organization of the interviews. Some people we interviewed were afraid of the publicity, while others feared that by taking part in the study, they may eventually become subject of legal investigation. Some organizations feared for their reputation in terms neutrality when taking part in a legal study. Moreover, in the Netherlands, the number of returnees is limited (approximately 40 when conducting this study). Contacting people who were still in Syria or Iraq also proved to be increasingly difficult. And, given the dangerous situation in the region, conducting fieldwork locally was not considered an option. In total 26 interviews were conducted. The backgrounds of the respondents range from academics and individuals currently residing in the conflict area, to people with an extensive network in Syria (including in ISIS territory) and individuals who lived in Syria for their entire lives and recently left the country.³

Validity

During the data collection process, there were many instances of recognition: fragments that gave an insight into daily life had already been discussed during other interviews or encountered in other sources. Insights confirmed by several sources may be proof for a bigger validity of the findings of this study. In addition, based on the expertise of the respondents, we can also derive confidence in respect of the validity of the findings. However, the study remains subject to various restrictions. First, it is a study into the past. Although much of the data is also validated by other sources, the risk of the interviews is that the reconstruction of the situation in 2014 contains incorrect elements. People may have forgotten things or stored them incorrectly.

A second potential restriction is that interviews do not tell you all about a person's precise ideas and experiences. A person may have various reasons for intentionally telling or sharing a different version of the story on social media than the actual event. This study recognizes the relative value of the interviews conducted. By means of triangulation

³ Note that, given the somewhat shifted scope of this article in comparison to the initial study, not all of the conducted interviews were equally relevant for this article.

(combining different methods and sources) we have tried to prevent these problems for the validity of the study.

Daily life in the context of the Syrian civil war

War-torn Syria

In 2011, the ‘Arab Spring’ reached Syria. In a number of cities, protesters took the streets to demonstrate for more freedoms, democratic reforms and the release of prisoners. These local acts of confrontation with representatives of the regime would soon develop into a nationwide uprising against the Syrian regime as a whole (Ismail 2011, 539). The Syrian regime responded by launching a series of large-scale military operations. This would prove to be a milestone towards what would ultimately result in a civil war with hundreds of armed parties involved (Cafarella and Casagrande 2014; Blanchard, Humud and Nikitin 2014). After this escalation, three main fighting opposition parties can be identified: nationalists (e.g. the Free Syrian Army), local groups (e.g. the Kurds) and jihadist movements. The position of nationalist or secular rebels who revolted against corruption and human rights violations by the al-Assad regime has weakened considerably, partly in view of the emergence of these jihadists groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra, the Islamic Front coalition (whose participating organizations have since either been absorbed into other groups or returned to being separate entities) and the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. In addition, the Kurds have also been playing an increasingly prominent role in the conflict and many foreign states as well as organisations outside of Syria have become (directly or indirectly) involved in the conflict over the years.

The ISIS administration and the establishment of the caliphate

A key event during the conflict was the establishment of the caliphate by ISIS. In the summer of 2014, the Consultative Council (*Majlis al-Shura*) of ISIS proclaimed a transnational ‘Islamic state’ and named Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as caliph. ISIS was henceforth to be known as Islamic State – no longer containing specific country names to underline the global character of the caliphate. Muslims from across the world were called to settle in this newly proclaimed caliphate (*hijra*) and to contribute to the continued building and expansion of this state. That this state does need more than fighters to function is shown by al-Baghdadi’s speech on July 1st, 2014, at the Great Mosque of al-Nuri in Mosul.

We make a special call to the scholars, *fuqaha*’ (experts in Islamic jurisprudence), and callers, especially the judges, as well as people with military, administrative, and service expertise, and medical doctors and engineers of all different specializations and fields. We call them and remind them to fear Allah, for their

emigration is *wajib ‘ayni* (an individual obligation), so that they can answer the dire need of the Muslims for them (Al-Hayat Media Center 2014, italics added).

Effects of the war and ISIS rule on daily life

Until August 2014, the danger for ISIS was mainly concentrated at its frontlines. Those residing in ISIS territory away from the frontlines were initially relatively safe. This changed when the US-led coalition against ISIS commenced its campaign in August 2014. The US-led coalitions – as well as the Syrian and Russian air forces – have been targeting both frontlines and hinterland, causing a distinction between the two to blur. When under attack, ISIS has also been known to resort to using civilians as human shield. Yet the effects of the war are not limited to violence. Many ISIS controlled areas have been confronted with increased poverty, inflation, food and water shortages and a lack of medication. This is especially the case for areas at the frontlines, where citizens of besieged cities see their already scarcely available resources dwindle.

Life in ISIS controlled territory is also greatly influenced by ISIS rule. Life in the caliphate is subject to strict rules. Ministries (*diwans*) were installed to govern the controlled territories and to enforce new laws. Through these ministries, ISIS holds a firm grip on what daily life in the caliphate looks like. This includes aspects like education, the position and roles of men and women, clothing regulations, taxes and law enforcement. Along with revamping society towards ISIS ideology comes harsh punishment for those who do not submit to these new rules. Executions and other punishments take place in public on an almost daily basis, oftentimes in front of the local population forced to watch. The severity of these punishments, as well as their arbitrary nature and the ease in with which they can be imposed, have resulted in high levels of fear among many of the citizens in ISIS territory. Consequently, the daily lives of many of the local residents in the caliphate largely moved indoors during the course of 2014.

The above constitutes the scene to which tens of thousands foreigners travelled towards (Neumann 2015; Schmitt and Sengupta 2015). This environment greatly shaped the daily lives of these men, women, and children – which will be discussed below.

The role of men

Screening procedure

Foreigners that travelled to Syria from Turkey are brought to an ‘application centre’ (safe house) by an ISIS member which facilitates the border crossing (employee Dutch Ministry of Security and Justice, personal communication, December 2015; researcher and anthropology expert, personal communication, December 2015). Here, the men and women are separated,

as each follows a different path henceforth.⁴ After being separated from the women, the men take an oath of loyalty (*bay'a*). By this oath, a recruit declares that he will carry out all duties assigned to him by ISIS leadership. Then, the recruits undergo a process of questioning and monitoring. For a period of approximately two or three weeks, they will be extensively interrogated and closely monitored to safeguard against infiltration (former employee organisation for social support, personal communication, November 2015; Groen 2015). New recruits are questioned on a variety of topics, including their name, blood type, origin, marital status, educational level, previous occupation and level of sharia expertise. Other questions concern whether the person previously engaged in jihad, whether the person has a recommendation (*tazkiyya*) and what kind of role the person would like to fulfill within the ranks of ISIS. Answers are filled out in 'registration forms' and well documented, as is shown by the mass leak of ISIS registration forms in 2016 (e.g. see Ramsay 2016; Dearden 2016; Dodwell, Milton and Rassler 2016). In general, the interviews take longer for someone who was involved in another local group prior to this period than for a 'new recruit'. Those who used to be a member of another organization have to complete a process of forgiveness or repentance (Speckhard and Yayla 2015). Despite these screening measures, it has been relatively easy to join the ranks of ISIS – especially in comparison to other jihadi groups such as the now called Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham.⁵ Still, the requirements to join have become considerably stricter over time, with *tazkiyya* seeming increasingly important.

Training

Many foreigners arrive in Syria without any military or security experience upon which jihadist organizations can draw (Perliger and Milton 2016, 37). Hence, after the screening phase in the safe house, the men are taken to a training camp.⁶ Other than in the safe houses, there is no clustering according to origin in these camps; all nationalities train together. This encourages foreigners to learn Arabic, which is the primary language during the preparation and execution of military operations. Training at training camps includes lessons in Arabic, lessons in religion and military training. One's training trajectory usually starts with theological issues to explain the basis of the religion. The subject matter then turns more political. The religious curriculum is said to be completed with a Sharia exam. The military curriculum concentrates on physical development, dealing with hunger and cold, handling various weapons (particularly the Kalashnikov, rocket propelled grenades and hand grenades) and becoming familiar with combat techniques and strategies (employee Dutch Ministry of

⁴ For more information on travelling to Syria (routes, the border crossing, reception at safe house), see: Weggemans et al. 2016; Dodwell, Milton and Rassler 2016.

⁵ Previously known as Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (July 2016 – January 2017) and Jabhat al-Nusra (January 2012 – July 2016).

⁶ Note that there are also instances in which the screening and training phase take place rather simultaneously at a training camp.

Security and Justice, personal communication, December 2015; researcher and Islamologist, personal communication, November 2011; head of press agency focussed on Syria, personal communication, November 2015; French Ministry of Justice 2015; Hassan 2015; Al-Tamimi, 2015).

A typical day at a training camp seems to start with morning prayer (*salat al-fair*) at the first break of day. This is followed by endurance training in the morning and lessons in religion in the afternoon. Training days usually end with weapon and combat training (family member of Dutch foreign fighters, personal communication, December 2015, French Ministry of Justice 2015). During training, recruits are generally not sent to the front lines. However, they can be assigned with guard duty (*ribaati*) at border regions or checkpoints (Hassan 2015; employee Dutch Ministry of Security and Justice, personal communication, December 2015). This serves as a first practical experience in being part of a fighting force and taking part in an armed struggle.

A recruit's average training phase seems to take between one and two months (researcher and Islamologist, personal communication, November 2011). However, recruits might receive fewer or additional lessons based on factors such as learning pace, competences and wishes (e.g. specializations). Consequently, the period spent at a training camp can vary considerably from person to person, ranging from a couple of weeks to over a year (Hassan 2015). That this training phase can be physically demanding is evidenced by several stories from family members about their relatives who went to Syria to wage jihad losing a lot of weight during this stage.

Deployment

After the training phase, recruits will, in principle, be deployed on the basis of their competences and wishes, as well as the current needs of the organization. In practice, most newcomers from abroad are given a choice between a fighting role, a supporting job or carrying out a suicide attack (AIVD 2016, 7). Most foreigners will become fighters (researcher and Islamologist, personal communication, November 2011; researcher [1], personal communication, November 2015; co-founder local activist group in ISIS territory, personal communication, November 2015; inhabitant ISIS territory [1], personal communication, November 2015; inhabitant ISIS territory [2], personal communication, November 2015; former employee organisation for social support, personal communication, November 2015; employee Dutch Ministry of Security and Justice, Personal communication, December 2015; AIVD 2016). The foreign fighters will be assigned to a battalion (*katiba*) under the command of an *emir*. For practical purposes, these battalions seem, like the safe houses, to be organized on the basis of a shared language (journalist [1], personal communication, October 2015; co-founder local activist group in ISIS territory, personal communication, November 2015;

French Ministry of Justice 2015) – partly negating the earlier stimuli to learn Arabic. However, in due time, several of these ‘national battalions’ have been dissolved by ISIS due to unintended consequences of having homogeneous groups enjoying different treatment than local ISIS fighters. (Weiss 2015) According to the Dutch General Intelligence and Security Service (AIVD), when these ISIS battalions capture new territory, it is not unusual that ISIS members – whether ordered to do so or not – resort to torture and rape (AIVD 2016, 7). These battalions are not constantly engaged in combat. A considerable amount of time is spent on other armed military tasks, such as guard duty and patrolling. At times, this may involve combat activities or inflicting corporal punishment. Moreover, as in all armies, periods at the front lines are alternated with activities in the hinterland. This may include guard duty, *dawah* (i.e. inviting others to Islam through dialogue) or simply enjoying spare time.

Other ISIS members choose or are assigned a supporting role. Such options appear diverse and include, among others, a job as an engineer, a doctor, an administrative worker, a cook, a driver, or a job at the religious police or a Sharia court (researcher and Islamologist, personal communication, November 2011; aid organisation focused on Syria, personal communication, November 2015; employee Dutch Ministry of Security and Justice, personal communication, December 2015; head of press agency focused on Syria, personal communication, November 2015; journalist [2], personal communication, December 2015; French Ministry of Justice 2015). ISIS requires individuals with such backgrounds in order to function as a state. This need is explicitly mentioned in the above presented quote by al-Baghdadi in July 2014. Such supporting activities are nonetheless often difficult to see separately from the violent jihad. Violence seems inherent to certain supporting jobs. For instance, agents of the *Hisbah* (religious police), are engaged in addressing, arresting, and punishing those who have violated the rules of ISIS. The boundaries between a violent and non-violent role are also blurred by the fact that recruits usually receive a rifle (usually a Kalashnikov), and are expected to be armed (journalist [1], personal communication, October 2015; family member of Dutch foreign fighters, personal communication, December 2015). Moreover, regardless of one’s day job, it appears all can be expected to have a fighting role (Dodwell, Milton and Rassler 2016, 28). This becomes apparent when looking at the ISIS registration forms. Newcomers are asked whether they want to be a fighter, a suicide fighter or a suicide bomber, as well as what their ‘specialty’ is. Options for the latter are ‘fighting’, ‘Sharia’, ‘security’ and ‘administrative’. While there appears to be some overlap between these two questions, both likely address a different level of involvement in the organization (ibid). In practice, individuals at ISIS (and other jihadist groups) have indeed shown to take on multiple roles. Examples include foreigners being engaged in fighting as well as making propaganda, and foreigners being both a fighter and a liaison with other fighting groups

(Perliger and Milton 2016, 37; employee Dutch Ministry of Security and Justice, personal communication, December 2015). That fighting may be expected from all members also becomes apparent when looking at the implications of swearing allegiance. As stated above, new recruits need to swear an oath of allegiance. Consequently, they can – regardless of their assigned role – be called upon to engage in combat or otherwise violent activities (family member of Dutch foreign fighters, personal communication, December 2015; employee Dutch Ministry of Security and Justice, personal communication, December 2015; journalist [2], personal communication, December 2015; AIVD, 2016). In other words, everyone who is not a fighter is thus *de facto* a reservist. Therefore, not only the fighters, but also those who are mainly deployed for duties other than fighting, end up being part of the military structure of ISIS after the training phase.

The role of women

Key responsibilities: Serving society from behind the scenes

The life of women is rather different than that of men, with their key responsibilities revolving around supporting their families (Winter 2015). Against this backdrop, unmarried women who joined ISIS are housed in a guarded dormitory (*maqar*) until a suitable husband is found whom they can marry. Oftentimes, these women already made contact with their future husbands via social media. Once married, couples move in together and they are expected to have children soon. Married women who joined ISIS are, as indicated above, separated from their husbands upon arrival at the safe house. Families are reunited after the husband has completed their training. In both scenarios, the woman's future is one of serving society from behind the scenes. Her primary role is to quickly (re)marry, to raise many children, and to obey her husband (researcher [2], personal communication, November 2015; family member of Dutch foreign fighters, personal communication, December 2015; Winter 2015). To that end, women are largely obliged to stay at home; to live a sedentary existence (Winter 2015; family member of Dutch foreign fighters, personal communication, December 2015). Venturing outside is usually only allowed under the supervision of the husband or another immediate male family member (inhabitant ISIS territory [1], personal communication, November 2015; Inhabitant ISIS territory [2], personal communication, November 2015). In these cases, a women is obliged to wear an *abaya* and *niqab* (Moaveni 2015).

Other roles

Although a women's key responsibility is to look after her family, there are several other roles women can fulfil. Many women were engaged in distributing online propaganda. As such, women played an important part in convincing other women to travel to Syria (researcher [3],

personal communication, October 2015). The role of women in distributing propaganda has however waned due to restrictions on their use of Internet. In some exceptional circumstances, women are exempted from the rule that they are to remain indoors. As both healthcare and education are separated according to gender in ISIS territory, women are allowed to work as a teacher or a doctor. Furthermore, a woman may also leave her house to study theology. A woman can also independently leave home if she is expected to take part in the armed jihad through an official legal directive; a *fatwa* (Neurink 2015, 67; Winter 2015). However, no such directive has been issued thus far (NCTV and AIVD 2017, 13).

This is not to say that women do not exercise violence. Women can join the ranks of the so-called *Al-Khansaa* brigade. This all-female counterpart of the above discussed *Hisbah* controls the adherence of women to moral conduct according to ISIS standards. Like the *Hisbah*, it has the mandate to enforce ISIS's laws and to punish those that disobey these rules, such as by whipping. Furthermore, there appears to be a recent shift in ISIS's position whether or not women can participate in combat (Winter and Margolin 2017, 23). Up until recently, the message conveyed by ISIS on the role of women underlined the key responsibilities as outlined above: to have and raise many children, to obey her husband, and to maintain a sedentary lifestyle. However, an article in the July 2017 edition of *Rumiyah* – ISIS's official magazine – stated that the time had come for women to take up arms and participate in the violent jihad (Rumiyah 2017, 15). Although it is currently unclear to what extent this apparent ideological shift changed the role of women in practice, there are increased recent (although mostly unverified) reports of alleged female suicide bombers and snipers in ISIS territory (e.g. see al-Bagdadiya News 2017; Trew and Shamary 2017; Al-Hakkak 2017; Reuters 2017), which might suggest that the shift could already be underway (Winter and Margolin 2017).

Children in ISIS territory

Preparing for adulthood

The roles of men and women, as outlined above, start at an early age, and preparation for these roles starts even earlier. Children attend primary school from about the age of six. ISIS has drastically changed the primary education by adding a layer of a strict interpretation of Islam to the provided classes. Terms such as 'homeland' and 'Syria' have been replaced with terms such as 'the land of the Muslims' and 'Islamic State'. Education at primary schools mainly consists of Koran lessons, Sunna lessons and history lessons about the caliphate of the Rashidun during the 7th century (Al-Tamimi 2014). Other classes cover Arabic, math, warfare, gymnastics and, for the children of Western fighters, English (family member of Dutch foreign fighters, personal communication, December 2015, AIVD 2016; NCTV and AIVD 2017). This

primary education in the caliphate serves to indoctrinate children with ISIS ideology and to instill them their future gender-based roles (Sullivan 2015).

At school, girls learn how they can best support their future husband. They need to wear a head scarf (*hijab*) at school from the fifth year of primary school. Outside, they need to be fully veiled. Girls are expected to marry an ISIS fighter when they reach puberty, but already can get married when as young as nine years old. From that moment onwards, their role will be as described above: bearing many children and supporting the family. For boys, there is special attention for physical training. In addition to such trainings being provided at primary schools, boys can also be sent to special training camps for youngsters from the age of nine. Boys can be either selected to join a training camp or be sent to one by his parents. At these camps, they receive lessons in Sharia, firearms, melee weapons and executions (Al-Tamimi 2015; AIVD 2016, 9).

Confrontations with violence

The Netherlands General Intelligence and Security Service (AIVD) underlines that life for children under ISIS is hard and traumatic. Being confronted with air strikes, death and destruction is a proven stressful experience for youngsters in ISIS territory (NCTV and AIVD 2017, 9). Many have had to cope with the loss of a family member. Children also run the risk of being injured or killed themselves. At training camps, boys can receive a beating if the instructor is dissatisfied. After training, boys can be used by ISIS for executions, fighting or a suicide attack (AIVD 2016; NCTV and AIVD 2017). With ISIS increasingly losing fighters and territory, the group has been increasingly sending children to the frontlines. Furthermore, ISIS members regularly take children to a public display of punishment, where they are forced to watch executions or corporal punishments. In some cases, parents have photographed their children with the remains of those executed (AIVD 2016, 9). Hence, the caliphate is a very stressful environment for youngsters. This constitutes a major challenge in terms of dealing with children upon their return to their home countries (see contribution by Van der Heide and Geenen elsewhere in this journal).

Conclusion

With the recent expulsion of ISIS from Mosul and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) closing in on Raqqa, the number of returnees travelling back to Europe is expected to rise. This will cause European countries – more than before – to face the complex challenge of how to effectively respond to these citizens who have been or still are part of the ISIS machinery. Against this backdrop, it is important to zoom in on the lives these citizens led in the caliphate. Although difficult to project on an individual-level basis, the analysis above provides

important insights into the 'luggage' returnees carry with them in terms of roles and experiences in ISIS territory.

In the case of men, this includes experience with weaponry. In principle, ISIS recruits receive military training upon joining ISIS. Most recruits have subsequently been assigned a fighting role, yet there are also examples of foreigners having other responsibilities. In case of the latter, this might still include exerting violence (e.g. as a religious police officer). In the case of women, key responsibilities revolve around being a wife and mother. However, women can also become engaged in other supporting duties by becoming a teacher, doctor, student (of theology), or an *Al-Khansaa* agent. In addition, many women have acted as recruiter. This means that not all ISIS women hold 'back seat' roles. Finally, in terms of children, preparation for these future roles of men and women start from the age of six. In addition to the fact that these children are already exposed to the horrors of war, the indoctrination and training these children undergo are deemed traumatic.

These insights are of particular relevance in various domains in which professionals are confronted with the phenomenon of (potential) returnees from ISIS held territory. They may be useful in the domain of mental health care in order to anticipate and threat adverse psychological effects among both children and adults who have been exposed to the Syrian civil war. Moreover, these insights may heighten awareness of parents and frontline professionals of what is really happening under ISIS rule and the importance of preventing radicalization. For professionals working in the security domain, the analysis presented here provides insights in the various activities, modus-operandi and network-structures of ISIS and its members which may be relevant for determining potential security threats. Lastly, these insights are relevant for the judicial domain as they can, and in the Netherlands already have been, used for the prosecution of persons who have joined the ranks of ISIS.

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Displacing the National Security-Narrative: on the (de-)securitization of the Governmental and Legal response to 'Foreign Fighters'

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Introduction

This article argues that the governmental response to the travel of European and American citizens to the battlefields in Syria/Iraq, and in particular when it concerns those citizens joining the so-called Islamic State (IS), is securitised.

¹ In other words, the authorities are inclined to view concerns about these individuals primarily through the prism of national security. This securitised understanding of travel to Syria/Iraq to join jihadist groups is constituted by the future involvement of these individuals in acts of terrorism upon returning to their home countries or countries of residence in Europe or the United States (US). While several perpetrators in recent attacks in Europe, in particular the November 2015 Paris attacks, have been linked to activities of IS, the experience with returning 'foreign fighters' is considerably more complex. Many have returned in a state of disillusion with the desire to resume their normal lives. The governmental and legal response is strongly influenced by national security concerns with the effect of limiting the space for long term approaches for coping with 'foreign fighters' as well as their own experiences in a non-securitised way.

Insights from Critical Security Studies (CSS) are mobilised in order to unpack the national security-narrative regarding battlefield travel to Syria/Iraq. This article draws in particular on securitisation theory which allows to problematize the notion of security as something that has no inherent, fixed or stable meaning (Krause and Williams 1997; Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde 1998; Balzacq 2011). Instead, security is the (continuous) outcome of political processes, not referring here to the institutions of politics, but a broader set of social struggles over the definition of the term. What is considered a security threat or risk is therefore not a given, but conditioned by social understandings *among* subjects (Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde 1998, 31). Adopting a security gaze means approaching something in terms of danger. This

¹ The author would like to thank Michael Kowalski and Marieke Liem for putting together the special issue and Hans van Miert for his very helpful feedback in rewriting the article. The article was written as part of the project 'Inventory of laws and policies related to tackling Jihadism' which is made possible by funding from the Dutch National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism (NCTV). The empirical material used here was gathered earlier in the context of this project which focuses on the laws and policies in seven countries: the Netherlands, Belgium, Denmark, Germany, France, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

security gaze is performative: it shapes its understanding of the problem at hand according to the aspects that define this gaze. The article thus conceptualises the governmental and legal responses as being necessarily implicated in setting the scope and intensity of the concerns and dangers associated with Syria/Iraq travellers, rather than being a reaction to a problem that exists outside our own understanding of the problem (Cf. De Graaf 2011; Wittendorp 2016).²

The number of ‘foreign fighters’ active in Syria/Iraq is estimated to be around 30,000 coming from 104 countries. Around 4,000 of them come from the European Union (EU) with the majority from just four member states: Belgium, France, Germany and the United Kingdom (Van Ginkel and Entenmann 2016, 3, 9). Governments have used several types of interventions regarding Syria/Iraq travellers (For a detailed overview see Wittendorp et al. 2017 [in Dutch]). There is a legal track as part of which courts in the Netherlands, Belgium, France, Germany, the United Kingdom (UK), and the United States (US) have convicted citizens attempting to travel to Syria/Iraq as well as returnees. Restrictive measures are also applied such as passport withdrawals (or with a similar effect the use of no-fly lists in the US), and measures for circumscribing movement or monitoring such as electronic tags, area bans and reporting duties are also used, although there are differences among the countries concerning the moment of applicability (pre- or post-imprisonment). On a different plane: the security services or law enforcement authorities in Germany, France and the US have approached suspected travellers to deter them from carrying out their plans. Re-integration programmes for returnees from Syria/Iraq exist in the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany and Denmark. Countries also undertake military activities in Syria/Iraq, although there are significant differences. The Netherlands limits its bombing campaign to the targeting of supply lines and strategic locations, French special forces have provided Iraqi troops with information about high profile French active in Syria/Iraq (El-Ghobashy, Abi-Habib, and Faucon 2017), the UK has carried out the targeted killing of one of its citizens in Syria, and its special forces are allegedly targeting high profile British citizens active in Syria/Iraq (Hookham 2016).

Limitations of space prevent this article from examining all the above measures in order to examine the national security-narrative. Instead, it focuses on several well publicised measures, i.e. court cases, the deprivation of nationality, and re-integration programmes. The structure of the article is as follows. It begins with a discussion of the literature on ‘foreign fighters’ and highlight the problematic nature of the term as well as the strong focus on the

² The article focuses only on those Syria/Iraq travelers that have joined so-called ‘jihadist’ groups and excludes European and American citizens that have taken up arms with the various Kurdish groups fighting against the Islamic State. This aspect – foreign citizens joining Kurdish groups – is also an aspect that receives scant attention in the academic literature; the same goes for the conflict in Eastern Ukraine.

security implications associated with Syria/Iraq travel. The next section examines several prominent ways in which ‘foreign fighters’ have become linked to the problem of terrorism. This concerns in particular United Nations (UN) resolution 2178 and subsequent national court cases prosecuting Syria/Iraq travellers for terrorist offences. The larger purpose is to question the conceptualisation of IS as a terrorist organisation. The section that follows shows how measures to deprive citizens of their nationality contributes to raise the stakes concerning citizens participating in foreign conflicts. Next, re-integration programmes are discussed, and in particular how these operate on a different logic (de-securitisation) although at the risk of de-politicisation. The subsequent section points to several ways of moving beyond the national security-narrative. The conclusion outlines some lines for further research for the academic inquiry into ‘foreign fighters’.

Debating ‘foreign fighters’

The notion of ‘foreign fighters’ is beginning to make its way into academia as a category of analysis. However, the embrace of the term has largely gone without sustained conceptual probing (Mendelsohn 2011, 192; Li 2009, 357). While such probing is not the main aim of this article, a few remarks are in order. Hegghammer (2010, 55) makes a case for establishing the ‘foreign fighter’ as a ‘discrete actor category’ in order to highlight a phenomena thus far ‘lost between local rebels (...) and international terrorists’. While Hegghammer’s attempt helps to destabilise the inside/outside logic that so strongly informs International Relations (Walker 1993), the term is also problematic due to what it reifies and obscures. Mendelsohn (2011, 192) argues that the ‘foreign fighter’ is a state-centric notion taking nationality as its starting point and therefor marginalising transnational processes of identity formation that might help explaining participation in foreign conflict (Cf. Mustapha 2013).

The ‘foreign fighter’ literature – works that explicitly draw on the term to understand the participation of individuals in conflicts of countries to which they are not citizens – actually predates the outbreak of the Syrian conflict in 2011 and initially centred on citizens travelling to Iraq (Hafez 2009; Mendelsohn 2011) or the ‘war on terror’ more broadly (Li 2009). The literature has focused on mapping behavioural characteristics and motivations (Weggemans, Bakker, and Grol 2014; Bakker and De Bont 2016; Lindekilde, Bertelsen, and Stohl 2016), the impact of ‘foreign fighters’ on the conflict they participate in (Rich and Conduit 2015; Bakke 2014), their relation to broader structures of the ‘jihadi’ phenomenon (Hegghammer 2010), and historical case studies (Malet 2013; De Roy van Zuijdewijn and Bakker 2014). This literature focuses almost exclusively on the ‘jihadist’ phenomena, although Malet (2013) has shown that many conflicts have witnessed the involvement of (substantial) contingents of outsiders.

The literature has also explored the security implications associated with the participation of citizens in foreign conflicts. Some scholars view Syria/Iraq travellers primarily through the lens of national or international security (Hamaid 2017, 61–62; Baxter and Davidson 2016, 10). Others have pointed to mitigating factors that could limit the realisation of worst case scenarios such as the absence of inviting safe havens next to the conflict zone and government awareness of the phenomenon (Byman and Shapiro 2014, 16–22; Hafez 2009, 88–89). On the basis of historical analysis, typologies of post-conflict behaviour of ‘foreign fighters’ have been constructed, ranging from terrorists, transnational insurgents, recruiters as well as those returning to peaceful lives (De Roy van Zuijdewijn 2014; Hafez 2009). While the (historical) distribution across the types is unknown, Hegghammer’s (2013, 10) tentative data – one in nine ‘foreign fighters’ returns for a domestic attack – establishes both a ‘veteran effect’ and leaves room for nuance as most apparently do not engage in such activity. Malet (2013, 110), who has conducted the most wide ranging historical analysis of individuals participating in foreign conflicts, argues that the ‘vast majority of them went on to lead essentially ordinary lives’. Despite attempts to offer nuance, a concern about the security implications of citizens participating in foreign conflicts (implicitly) informs nearly all the literature.

In terms of how to respond, several scholars emphasise the need for a comprehensive governmental strategy. Hafez (2009, 90) points to intelligence collection and investments in border control, international diplomacy, and amnesty and reintegration programs. Bakker, Paulussen and Entenmann (2014, 27–29) foresee a role for both national actors such as intelligence agencies and local actors, including local police, families and communities, with policies ranging from hard measures (passport revocations and legal action) to softer approaches focusing on communication and reintegration. This article looks again at the recommendation of Bakker, Paulussen and Entenmann (2014, 31) to ‘[a]void the securitisation and politicisation of the issue of foreign fighters’. As will be demonstrated below, this securitisation of the ‘foreign fighter’ issue is exactly what has happened.

Linking the ‘foreign fighters’ with terrorism

UN Security Council resolution 2178, adopted on 24 September 2014, has been influential in connecting the issue of Syria/Iraq travel with national security concerns in general and terrorism in particular. Resolution 2178 viewed the participation of foreigners in the Syrian conflict as an ‘acute and growing threat’ for the conflict itself and potentially to the home countries as well (United Nations 2014, 2). The resolution introduced a new concept in UN legal parlance by isolating a particular phenomenon, the ‘foreign terrorist fighter’ (United Nations 2014, 2), a subset of the ‘foreign fighter’. Additionally, the resolution required the criminalisation of several activities – (attempted) travel abroad, funding of, organisation and

facilitation of such travel abroad – as terrorist offences (United Nations 2014, 4–5). This constituted a linking of the ‘foreign fighter’ with acts of terrorism. Further establishing this connection was the reorganising in December 2015 of the so-called Al-Qaida Sanctions Committee into the ISIL (Da’esh) and Al-Qaida Sanctions Committee. Since 1999 has the Committee enabled the freezing of assets of individuals and entities directly or indirectly associated with Osama bin Laden and the Taliban in the context of ‘acts of terrorism’ (United Nations 2015, 1, 1999). But linking ‘foreign fighters’, terrorism, and IS also occurs elsewhere. The US – unlike the EU – includes IS on its list of ‘Foreign Terrorist Organizations’ and notes that the entity was previously known as ‘al-Qa’ida in Iraq’ (U.S. Department of State 2017). This legacy, of situating IS as the successor organisation to al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), might explain why IS is understood through the lens of a terrorist organisation.³

The connection between the ‘foreign fighter’ and concerns about terrorism has also emerged through legal proceedings. In France, three men arrested on suspicions of wanting to travel to Syria to join the jihadist groups were sentenced to between two and four years imprisonment in 2014 on the basis of engaging in preparatory acts to commit terrorist offences in 2014 (L’Obs 2014). This legal basis informed some 220 out of 300 prosecutions against Syria/Iraq travellers in France between 2012 and 2016 (Assemblée Nationale 2016, 200, footnote 2). German authorities initiated legal proceedings against 202 persons in connection with travelling to Syria/Iraq on account of participation in a foreign terrorist group (Deutscher Bundestag 2016, 6); the first conviction on this basis of an individual for joining IS occurred in December 2014 (Oberlandesgericht Frankfurt am Main 2014). In February 2015, some 40 members of ‘Sharia4Belgium’ (S4B) who joined various jihadist groups in Syria in 2013 and 2014, including IS, were convicted, mostly *in absentia*, by a Belgian court on accounts of participation in and/or leadership of a terrorist organisation; sentences varied between 40 months and 15 years (Rechtbank van eerste aanleg Antwerpen 2015). In June 2016, a Danish court handed down a seven year prison sentence against a citizen who had returned from Syria/Iraq on the grounds of participation in and the financial support of a terrorist organisation, IS in this case (Berndtsen 2016; *Nyheder* 2016).

While court trials allow the (re-)confirmation of the connection between Syria/Iraq travellers and terrorist offences, a key part of the national security-narrative, the same courts also allow the contestation of this contestation (De Graaf 2016). This occurred in the S4B-case where the defence argued the category of terrorist offences did not apply to their clients because the Syrian conflict constituted an internal armed conflict to which international humanitarian law was applicable. Thus, reasoned the defence, the offences committed were war crimes – rather

³ This also occurs in academic accounts of IS’s origins, which pick up the story with the formation of AQI. See for instance (Stern and Berger 2015).

than terrorist offences – for which the court had no jurisdiction. The court rejected the reasoning by arguing that the jihadist groups in question (Jahbat Al-Nusra and Majlis Shura Al Mujahadin) did not meet the requirements for international humanitarian law to apply: a certain degree of command-and-control and the ability to respect international humanitarian law (Rechtbank van eerste aanleg Antwerpen 2015, 31–33). Leaving aside the question of the ability of these groups to respect *just in bello*, the more fundamental issue here concerns the conceptualisation of these groups, including IS, as terrorist organisations. Kurth Cronin (2015, 88) has questioned such an understanding of IS, pointing out it is a ‘pseudo-state’ instead. According to her, IS operates a complex administrative system, is financially independent of foreign backers, and has ‘developed a sophisticated light infantry army’ of around 30.000 fighters which is unlike how terrorist organisations are conventionally understood (Kurth Cronin 2015, 88, 91, 96; For the size estimate, see Zenko 2016).

Inquiring beyond the deprivation of nationality as a symbolic act

Recent years have seen modifications (or attempts thereto) to the conditions under which citizens and naturalised citizens can be deprived of their (dual) nationality. Some countries now have the mandate to deprive of citizenship on administrative grounds without needing a prior court conviction. The British Home Secretary is allowed since 2014 to revoke the nationality of citizens – even for those *without* a dual nationality – if this is considered conducive to the public good. Application of the measure has thus far been restricted to citizens carrying a dual nationality, however (Parsons 2016). The Dutch Minister of Security and Justice, after already being allowed in March 2016 to strip dual nationals of their Dutch citizenship following a court conviction for terrorist offences, was given the power in February 2017 to take away the citizenship of dual nationals without a court conviction in the interests of national security. Dutch Members of Parliament and the State Council were critical of the plan: the proposed measure was not considered proportional and existing measures were deemed sufficient (Raad van State 2015).

Belgium adopted an amendment in July 2015 which made it possible to deprive naturalised citizens of their Belgian nationality when convicted for terrorist offences. This amendment removed the ten year limit after acquiring the Belgian nationality after which such deprivations were no longer possible. Opposing politicians argued the measure was of symbolic value only and the mayor of Vilvoorde, a Brussels suburb which saw a considerable number of its inhabitants leave for Syria, pointed out the measure was of limited applicability (Knack 2015). France could deprive naturalised citizens of the French nationality after a conviction for terrorist offences already since 1998. Following the November 2015 Paris attacks the government proposed to deprive French-born dual citizens convicted of terrorist

offences of the French nationality. This provoked widespread social and political resistance, even leading to the French Minister of Justice Christiane Taubira stepping down in protest. President Hollande withdrew the proposal after the French parliament could not reach agreement on adopting the measure. Hollande later admitted the plan was of symbolic significance only and offered little added value for counter-terrorism.

To claim policies concerned with the revocation of nationality as symbolic situates their impact elsewhere: the policies demonstrate the resolve of the authorities to act, to take a tough stand on the issue of Syria/Iraq travel. The view of such a symbolic statement as mere political rhetoric misses out on the performative dimension. The measure might have limited *effectiveness* in terms of applicability or preventing terrorist acts, but as a performative act it nevertheless generates *effects*.⁴ By adopting legislation permitting the revocation of nationality in case of a conviction for terrorist offences or being listed as a Syria/Iraq traveller, the state signals certain acts are so unacceptable that breaking the law risks exclusion from citizenship rights and the national community (Cf. Beauchamps 2017), one of the highest penalties a (naturalised) citizen can face. This reconfirms the national security-narrative with regard to Syria/Iraq travel. The measure can further contribute to social divisions since it is applicable only to citizens with a dual nationality (which not all Syria/Iraq travellers have) and contribute to creating second-tier citizens (See Groenendijk 2015; Amnesty International 2017).

De-securitisation through re-integration programmes?

Some states have created programmes to facilitate the re-entry of their citizens into society after their return from Syria/Iraq. These programmes aim to defuse the national security-narrative by opening up an opportunity to become part of (mainstream) society again. In theoretical term this can be conceived of as a de-securitising move by rearticulating (Hansen 2012, 542–44) the experience of Syria/Iraq travellers in terms of re-integration. Denmark has offered citizens who are not considered a risk to national security and who do not face criminal charges facilities such as psychological counsel, healthcare, access to education or a personal mentor; the so-called Aarhus model. The Netherlands also undertakes extensive efforts to enable returnees from Syria/Iraq to resume their normal lives, including those who have been imprisoned for crimes committed in Syria/Iraq. This occurs at the local (municipal) level where returnees who want to can be assisted with finding an education or a job (El Hamidi and Van der Linde 2016). These interventions occur through multidisciplinary consultations involving police, social and mental health professionals as well as the Probation Service. Since September 2015 the Netherlands also operates a so-called exit-facility for individuals active in jihadist networks, including returnees, who want to leave behind

⁴ I owe this distinction to Marieke de Goede.

extremism (Nationaal Coördinator Terrorismebestrijding en Veiligheid 2015, 3). This parallels longer established German efforts at desistance and de-radicalisation since 2011, in turn following from decade old practices in the context of similar attempts with neo-Nazis (HAYAT-Deutschland, n.d.). Scholars have analysed such programmes in terms of encouraging a 'repressive liberalism' (Lindekilde 2012) or a 'policed multiculturalism' (Ragazzi 2016) that narrows the bounds in which politics can be conducted.

Historical accounts of so-called 'foreign fighter mobilisations' seem to suggest that for states care-taking of its citizens is preferable over excluding (naturalised) citizens from their (new) national communities. In many historical cases of citizens joining foreign conflicts they faced few obstacles or were actively supported in returning to their home countries. For instance, in the 2000s, the UN and the World Bank put in place a Multi-country Disarmament and Reintegration Program (MDRP) to assist the return home of foreigners after their participation in African conflicts. The anomalous case concerns the 'Arab Afghans' for which there were no such arrangements. These militants, Arab volunteers who joined the Afghan mujahedin in resisting the Soviet Union's occupation of Afghanistan (1979-1989), could not always return home. For instance, Egypt and Syria, where substantial numbers of 'Arab Afghans' came from, did not allow return because these countries thought the presence of these former militants at home could fuel domestic revolt. Malet (2015, 465–66) attributes the subsequent international dispersion of the 'Arab Afghans' to other conflicts (Bosnia, the Philippines, Chechnya, and Algeria) to the reluctance of governments to offer them a way out after having participated in foreign conflicts. Governments are in a tough spot with regard to Syria/Iraq travellers. Assisting disillusioned or traumatised Syria/Iraq returnees is certainly commendable, but it operates on a fine line with regard to who can be part of the national community under what conditions.

Accommodating the 'foreign fighter' experience in the long run

The question here is how can our thinking space be extended beyond the national security-narrative? This begins with dislocating Syria/Iraq travel and more general concerns about jihadism from the war on terror frame. National security is not abstracted from broader cultural and social developments and does the study of jihadism need a place among this. *Counter-culture* can 'help us understand the violent, political and religious aspects [of jihadism] within their immediate social context' (Hemmingsen 2015, 3). Others have put forward *counter-conduct* as a way to understand, in this case *da'wa* activism, as a form of resistance against governmental and media attempts to regulate and discipline them and their activities (De Koning et al. 2014). This is more than a purely academic exercise. Interesting were the reflections of the Belgian historian Bruno De Wever who labelled the Belgian

Syria/Iraq travellers as ‘amateurs’ compared to the degree of destruction caused by Belgians fighting with the Nazis on the Eastern front (almost 10.000) during World War II (Humo 2016). Shortly before the first anniversary of the March 2016 attacks in Brussels, Belgium’s Minister of Justice Koens Geens appropriated De Wever’s reference as a warning against a too repressive reaction against Belgian Syria travellers, pointing out the collaboration during World War II as well as the response to it had produced wounds that were still visible (Het Laatste Nieuws 2017). The question is not whether the World War II reference is appropriate or not: the point is to displace the national security-narrative concerning Syria/Iraq travellers and invite in a broader space of possibilities to think about their cultural, social and political implications.

Conclusion

Dealing with Syria/Iraq travellers and returnees is complex. It involves national and individual security concerns about attacks, whether directed, inspired or coached by IS in Europe and the US. More specifically, it involves accommodating the concerns of citizens about their personal safety when going about in public places, the emotions of citizens who lost loved ones after attacks, but also families and friends left behind by those travelling to Syria/Iraq, and the concerns of those who (attempt) to travel or return from Syria/Iraq. Accommodating all these emotions and concerns is complicated if it is possible in the first place. The national security-narrative that dominates thinking about Syria/Iraq travel – concerns about battle-hardened and ideologically committed jihadists willing to strike at home – co-exists uneasily with the observation that many have returned disillusioned. The article has tried to demonstrate by focusing on several well publicised measures how Syria/Iraq travel has become securitised (i.e. how it has become the overriding concern), and outlined how to move beyond this gaze.

The challenge for academics and policy makers is to bring the discussion about Syria/Iraq travellers beyond concerns about terrorism that now dominate it (Cf. De Roy van Zuijdewijn 2016). Both struggle with the issue of conceptualisation. As already said, the notion of the ‘foreign fighter’ needs more probing. Does it indeed offer the analytical added value existing concepts such as the ‘insurgent’ or the ‘rebel’ cannot offer? The study of ‘foreign fighters’ is centred too strongly on the fields of security and terrorism studies, thus (unwittingly) reproduces the national security-narrative informing government policy. By bringing in other concepts and disciplines a more diverse and reflexive practice of knowledge production can be brought about. What does UN resolution 2178 mean for International Humanitarian Law and fundamental rights more broadly? If the ‘foreign fighter’ is in between driving and resulting from transnational processes, then how does this create differentiated constellations of overlap *and* disjuncture among identity, citizenship, sovereignty, and territory? The ‘foreign fighter’ is

emblematic of the modern international and a strong reminder that our sociological, psychological and cultural understandings should not be confined to nationalist quarters.

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The Right Target in Sight? Returnees and the Current Jihadist Threat

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Introduction

In the media as well as in the realm of policy, the discussion about the threat from jihadist networks in Western countries focuses mainly on a single section of the jihadi movement: the returnees from battlegrounds in Syria and Iraq. In March 2013, the National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism in the Netherlands (NCTV) raised the terrorist threat level from 'limited' to 'substantial' (NCTV 2013). The coordinator did so mainly because of the possible threat from future returnees from Syria. The security services and the police had noticed that dozens of mainly young Muslims had gone to Syria to fight against the armed forces of president Bashar al-Assad, predominantly joining jihadist groups in Syria. The threat level was raised even before people returned from this conflict. Since then, not a single parliamentary debate has passed without politicians and cabinet members reflecting on the threat posed by returnees and the policies needed to counter that threat. This focus became stronger in 2016, when the NCTV and the General Intelligence and Security Service (AIVD) warned that future returnees might pose a bigger threat to national security than the group of around forty returnees that had re-entered the Netherlands before that time (NCTV 2016a). Recently, the debate on the jihadist threat again focused on returnees when the AIVD published a non-confidential report on returnees in February 2017 (AIVD 2017). At the same time, the NCTV published a factsheet in Dutch and English called 'Comprehensive approach returnees' (NCTV 2017). There is no such factsheet on any other section of the jihadist movement or indeed on any other extremist group. Although no comparative analysis has been done for this paper, the impression of the author is that the debate in several Western European countries is dominated by the topic of returnees as well.

One might ask whether this strong emphasis on returnees is justified. Do they indeed pose the biggest jihadist threat? Are operatives sent by ISIS to wage war in the West really to be considered returnees? What other groups of potential dangerous jihadists exist? Are experts and governments overlooking potential threats?

The threat of jihadist returnees

That jihadist returnees are a potential threat to national security is beyond discussion. In 2013, the eminent Norwegian terrorism expert Thomas Hegghammer (2013) published an influential article on the motives for Western jihadists to either stay in their own country or leave for a jihadist-controlled area abroad. He reviewed the effect of returnees on domestic terrorist attacks. Hegghammer is aware of the flaws of his dataset, but estimates that about one in nine foreign fighters gets involved in domestic attack planning. Furthermore, he concludes that domestic attacks involving returnees are successful more often and result in more casualties compared to attacks without returnee involvement. The data did of course not include the massive flow of Western jihadists to Syria and Iraq. The scale of this flow is unprecedented: up until 2016, more than 5,000 persons from European countries went to Syria and Iraq to join jihadist groups (The Soufan Group 2015). This development undoubtedly distorts the 1:9 ratio. In an early assessment (mid-2015), Hegghammer and his colleague Nesser (2015) concluded that around 1 in 360 Europeans who left for Syria end up being involved in plotting a domestic attack. The ratio might change again if many foreign fighters would return after a military defeat of ISIS.

Since 2013, several terrorist attacks involving returnees were committed. The attacks in Paris (13 November 2015) and Brussels (22 March 2016) stand out in particular. Nine of the ten Paris attackers spent time with jihadist groups in Syria/Iraq, although some of them never lived in Europe before and should not be labelled as returnees. At least three of the Brussels attackers were returnees, whilst the other two probably tried to join jihadist organisations in Syria. The Paris and Brussels terrorists were operatives sent by an external operations unit of ISIS to Europe to plan and commit terrorist attacks.¹ Several other plots involving returnees were detected in time or failed otherwise.

But not only returnees are involved in committing jihadist terrorist acts. In fact, they only compose a small minority of jihadist terrorists in recent years. Who, then, are these other jihadist attackers? For an overview of recent jihadist attackers, a NCTV registration of 22 jihadist attacks in Western Europe in 2016 is used, as well as a recent analysis by the French Centre for Terrorism Analysis (Centre d'Analyse du Terrorisme, CAT).

22 jihadist attacks analysed

In 2016 about 22 jihadist attacks were committed in Western countries (Western Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand). 'About', because in some cases it is very difficult to establish that a violent act has been carried out because of a jihadist motive.² Therefore, the

¹ On this unit see: Brisard and Jackson 2016.

² Registration NCTV; see annexe.

precise number of jihadist attacks is hard to determine. For instance, is shouting ‘allahu akbar’ (‘god is great’) before an act of violence sufficient evidence for a jihadist motive? Or is this the case only when there are links with a jihadist network or a demonstrable interest in jihadist literature? Besides, open sources often do not contain crucial information about the background of the perpetrator or the context of the attack. Sometimes an attacker is under the influence of stimulants such as alcohol or drugs or is suffering from a psychosis. Does drug abuse or mental illness exclude the possibility of a jihadist attack? In practice, people can act out of different motives at the same time. An attack can be prompted by personal issues, jihadist conviction, use of drugs and mental challenges at the same time. The figure of 22 attacks might be too high, but also too low. Some incidents that may have been influenced by jihadist motives are not taken into account because the proof for such motives is very superficial.

In 2016 most attacks were committed in France (7), followed by Germany (5), the United States (4) and Belgium (3). In Canada, Australia and Denmark one attack was registered. In nine cases random groups of civilians were targeted, in one case a specific group: visitors of a nightclub frequented by homosexuals (Orlando, Florida, June 2016). In eight cases representatives of the authorities were targeted: the police (6), the army (1), prison staff (1). In four cases representatives of a religious community were targeted: Jewish (2), Catholic (1) and Sikh (1). The attack on a prison warden by a detained jihadist and the bombing of a Sikh temple in particular deviate from earlier jihadist preference for targets.

Remarkably, the terrorists succeeded in killing people in only 6 of the 22 attacks, killing about 181 victims in total (excluding killed perpetrators). In all other cases people were wounded but not killed – with the exception of the terrorist in several cases. It is also notable that in 19 out of 22 cases there was a single person committing the attack, though in several cases he had support from accomplices in preparing the attack. With the exception of one, all attacks were committed by males.³

In 12 different cases the attack was claimed by ISIS via the Amaq press agency. In five cases a video of the perpetrator was published in which an oath of allegiance to the leader of ISIS was proclaimed. Such a claim is not sufficient proof ISIS was involved in the attack, however. ISIS claimed the murder of a 15 year boy in Hamburg in October 2016 for instance, but the German police considers this unsolved murder not to be inspired by jihadist ideology.

In only one of the 22 attacks returnees from Syria or Iraq were involved: the double terrorist

³ In February 2016, a 15-year-old girl attacked a police officer in Hannover with a knife.

attack in Brussels on 22 March was prepared and carried out by a network of jihadists of which several members went to Syria or attempted to go there. None of the perpetrators of the 21 other attacks trained and fought with a jihadist group in Syria or Iraq.

So what background did these perpetrators have? In total, 29 persons were involved in the 22 attacks. With the exception of one, a French convert, all of them were first- or second-generation migrants. Six of them were recent migrants with a duration of stay of several months up to several years in Western Europe. The vast majority had stayed in Europe for a much longer period prior to the terrorist act they committed, some of them were born in a European country. There are indications in the cases of at least six attackers that they were 'frustrated travellers' and probably tried to reach Syria or Iraq in vain (the Bakraoui brothers of the Brussels attacks; the killer of the French policeman and his wife, 12 June; the two murderers of the Catholic priest in Normandy, 26 July; and the jihadist who attacked the prison warden in Osny, 4 September).

A dataset of 22 attacks in 2016 is not sufficient to draw general conclusions regarding the total group of jihadists who plan and commit terrorist acts in Western countries. For instance, thwarted attacks and disrupted plots are not included in this dataset. Besides, before 2016 several jihadist attacks were launched in Western countries that are not included in this limited dataset. To complement the dataset, attacks from 2012 to mid-2017 should be taken into account as well.

The study by the French Centre for Terrorism Analysis (CAT 2017) covers a much longer timeframe, 2013–2016, and includes not only attacks, but also thwarted attacks and serious plots in western countries.⁴ This analysis shows that 17.7% of the perpetrators (282 in total) were returnees. According to the CAT, 3% of all returnees in the timeframe 2013–2016 get involved in planning and committing terrorist attacks. This percentage is higher in the case of France (10.6%) and Belgium (13.5%). In addition to returnees, the frustrated aspiring travellers compose an important category. 18.8% of those involved in planning and committing jihadist attacks are persons who aspired to go to Syria or Iraq but, for differing reasons, were not able to achieve this ambition. They have been halted by the authorities, for instance, or were unable to get approval from the domestic jihadist network they belong to. Some of them turn on their homelands as an alternative to fulfilling their dreams of joining the so-called 'caliphate'. Given their share in planning attacks, it is remarkable that the media, experts and politicians pay so little attention to this category of potentially very dangerous jihadists. But even if we take the categories of returnees and frustrated travellers together, it is important to note that 63.5 percent of the persons involved in planning and committing

⁴ Unfortunately no definitions are given, so the exact distinction between attacks, thwarted attacks and plots is not clear.

jihadist terrorist attacks did not spend time in Syria or Iraq and never even tried to travel there.

Attacks by returnees exceptional but very lethal

Returnees from Syria or Iraq were involved in committing terrorist attacks in Western Europe, but up until May 2017 not yet in other Western countries. In retrospect, returnees were only involved in attacks staged and directed by the external operations unit of ISIS. This unit, purportedly led by Abu Mohammad al-Adnani who was killed in August 2016, is responsible for planning and executing terrorist attacks outside the so-called ‘caliphate’, including in Western countries. The multiple attacks in Paris (13 November 2015) and Brussels (22 March 2016) were committed by terrorists sent and directed by the external operations unit. Other attacks, some of them thwarted, are also connected to the unit or to persons who in a later stage were closely involved in creating the unit. This goes for the attack on the Jewish Museum in Brussels (May 2014), the dismantled terrorist cell in Verviers (January 2015), the failed attack on a church in Paris (April 2015) and the attempted attack on the high-speed train Thalys (August 2015) (NCTV 2016a; Callimachi 2016). In all these cases, attackers were involved who spent a shorter or longer spell with jihadist groups in Syria or Iraq, where they were trained and probably prepared to commit an attack in Western Europe.⁵

Besides attacks conceived and directed by ISIS, two other types of attack can be discerned. Firstly, attacks that are inspired by jihadist propaganda without any logistical support from ISIS or ISIS supporters, and secondly, attacks that are coached by ISIS adherents from North Africa and the Middle East who prey on vulnerable persons on the internet. The ‘coaches’ encourage them to commit attacks, advise them on target selection and modus operandi and provide logistical support if needed (NCTV 2016b; Joscelyn 2016; Callimachi 2017). The ‘inspired’ and ‘coached’ attacks in most cases are not committed by returnees, but by migrants who have usually spent a long time – although for some of them this is only a short period – in Western Europe.

Maybe this explains the actual lack of success of many jihadist attackers. As stated before, most attacks result in few or no victims. In several cases in which many people were killed the perpetrators were returnees (Paris, November 2015, Brussels, March 2016). Many small-scale attacks do not lead to killings although the weapons used, in most cases pointed weapons such as knives and axes, are potentially lethal. An obvious reason for this lack of success would be that the attackers do not have the skills to kill. ‘Inspired’ and ‘coached’ attackers usually lack training and fighting experience, and perhaps also the mental toughness required to massacre

⁵ With the exception perhaps of Sid Ahmad Ghlam, the church attacker, who was halted in Turkey. According to media reports it is not clear he ever reached Syria. He may be a frustrated traveller instead of a returnee.

innocent people. This supports the aforementioned conclusion of Hegghammer that attacks involving returnees are often more successful and lethal. A returnee is not a recipe for success however: Ayoub El Khazzani, the Thalys attacker, was equipped with an automatic weapon but did not manage to take a shot. Sid Ahmed Ghlam did not reach his target, a church, because he accidentally shot himself in his leg. But then again, maybe he was not a trained returnee, but a frustrated traveller and subsequently missed out on his training.

ISIS operatives: returnees or foreign terrorist fighters?

One could ask whether the term 'returnee' is truly applicable to the operatives sent by ISIS to commit atrocities in Western countries, the one type of attack in which 'returnees' up until now are involved. The term 'returnee' is used for different types of people: combatants, non-combatants, women who came along with their husbands or who went to marry a jihadist fighter, children taken along with their parents or born in the terrorist-controlled areas in Syria and Iraq. Some of these returnees will be angry, determined and resilient, others will be disillusioned, tired and looking forward to making a new start in their lives.

The external operations unit sends trained operatives to Western Europe and other countries to commit attacks. Many of them are deployed in the country they used to live in before joining ISIS, some of them never visited Europe before. Some of them travelled only for a very brief period to Syria and Iraq to receive training and are sent back to Europe. But are they really to be considered 'returnees'? The term 'return' in this context has the connotation of a more or less voluntary move to the country of origin after a period of living in Syria or Iraq, with or without the knowledge and approval of the terrorist organisation ISIS. The returnees leave the idealised 'caliphate' and break their promise to its leader. They try to get their life back on track, in some cases after having spent time in jail. Some of them remain true to the jihadist cause, others disengage and leave the jihadist networks.

The operatives, on the other hand, are persons who do not break their vows but who, on the contrary, go out to prove them. They serve the so-called 'caliph' as violent ambassadors in a foreign country. Their pledge of loyalty to the 'caliph' provides them with a new identity and indeed nationality. Their old nationality is in some cases repudiated in a dramatic and symbolic way by burning the passport of their former countries. It is a rite of passage: from that moment onwards, their former homelands mean nothing to them anymore and the only nation served is the 'caliphate'.

From this point of view these operatives are not 'returnees', but soldiers on a foreign mission, indeed 'foreign terrorist fighters' (FTFs) in the maleficent West they once belonged to. They are trained to fight and to use weapons and explosives. They adhere to a radical and violent

ideology. Above all, they are sent on a mission by the ‘caliphate’ to wreak havoc amongst civilians of Western states. This is quite a different profile compared to most of the returnees from Syria and Iraq up until now.

This paper is not to be considered a plea to substitute the term ‘returnee’ with ‘foreign terrorist fighter’, although some of the returnees fit that profile better. This would not only unnecessarily confuse an already complicated discussion, but would be very unfitting in most cases. But authorities would be wise to acknowledge the variety in the group of returnees and to differentiate their approach regarding them – as well as to acknowledge that other groups of jihadists may pose a threat as well.

Post-return behaviour of returnees

There is little academic or governmental research on the topic of returnees in the Netherlands. In 2014, the Dutch government conducted a study on returnees which compared 24 cases (out of 29 at that time). In each of these cases data were collected from databases of the police, the General Intelligence and Security Service (AIVD) and many other governmental organisations. The research is confidential, but a summary was made available to the public in 2015. The study looked at different aspects, such as the background of the returnees, their process of radicalisation, their experiences in Syria or Iraq, the reasons for their return and their activities after return. Almost all males were involved in training and/or fighting for jihadist groups. Most of the returnees came back quickly, within a few months or even weeks. On the reasons for return the study states: ‘For a relatively large group, the main reasons for returning were personal experiences or disappointment (or a combination thereof). Some women returned because they got pregnant. Some Syria volunteers proved to be unsuitable for combat. Others suffered from homesickness and feelings of loss. Moreover, the “Syrian paradise” as depicted in propaganda proved to be very disappointing for various FTFs: they experienced chaos, a lack of leadership, “un-Islamic behaviour” towards the female population. There is a lot of quarrelling, about aspects such as power and money. There is an atmosphere of mutual distrust (Counterterrorism Infobox 2015).

None of the 24 returnees in the study were suspected to be part of a plot to stage a terrorist attack in the Netherlands. Most had difficulties getting their life back on track. Only a few had a stable job, many relied on social benefits. Only a small minority spent time in jail. In 2014 the legal authorities found it difficult to prosecute jihadist returnees, mainly for lack of proof. Some of the returnees joined their former jihadist networks upon return and went on to do what they used to do: spending time together, hanging out, engaging in sports. Others seemed to keep a very quiet profile, hardly engaging in social activities. This may be an indication for withdrawal from the jihadist movement but the reclusive life may well have other, more

disconcerting reasons as well, as they might be secretly engaging in jihadist activities. It is notable that quite a few returnees who came back disappointed rejoined their former networks upon return. Disillusionment with the Syrian experience apparently does not automatically imply disillusionment with the jihadist ideology or movement.

The data in this Dutch study are to some extent corroborated by a recent German study on jihadist foreign fighters (Bundeskriminalamt 2016). The authors found that in only one third of the cases the reasons for returning from Syria or Iraq could be determined. About 11% returned because of disillusion or frustration, 9% because of pressure from family or others, 10% because of pressure from jihadist or Islamist groups and 7% because of tactical reasons (for recovery or raisings funds for the jihadist struggle). About 51% rejoined the jihadist movement. The German researchers found it problematic to assess the threat posed by the returnees but they did not conclude that they were involved in planning terrorist attacks in Germany.

Of course, being part of a jihadist network can involve engaging in other jihadist activities than just planning an attack. Returnees can be of value in several different ways. They can share their experiences and inspire youngsters – although those who returned because of fear or unfitness for battle will inspire few ambitious jihadists. The returnees can share their knowledge on planning attacks, combat and handling weapons and explosives. They can also use their contacts to build transnational networks with other jihadists and criminals across Europe.

Furthermore, many of the returnees in the Dutch study and a significant part of the returnees in the German study left in the early stages of the Syrian conflict – before the proclamation of the so-called ‘caliphate’ – and returned within a relatively brief spell (the majority of them within a few months). It may well be that future returnees are more battle-hardened, more indoctrinated and more determined to endanger their homelands. Data indicate that since 2016, fewer people are leaving Western Europe to join jihadist groups in Syria and Iraq (NCTV 2017). For some aspiring travellers, the so-called Islamic State lost its stained and short-lived glory now that the terrorist organisation is under extreme military pressure. There are indications that more people wish to leave the area controlled by terrorist groups but are not able to do so. Up until now there has been no ‘massive return’: the return of dozens of jihadist foreign fighters in a short time. It is more like a trickle of individuals. But if more will find their way home, it is plausible these returnees would in some cases be more of a danger to their homelands than the ‘first generation’ of returnees who were described in the Dutch and (partially) in the German study.

Profile of jihadist networks in Western countries

Returnees are active in jihadist networks in the West and reinforce these with their knowledge and experience. But until now they hardly figured as plotters and perpetrators of terrorist attacks, unless they were sent by ISIS to do so. The jihadist scene in Western Europe has grown more diverse in recent years. The terrorist threat stems not only from returnees but comes from different directions. From the end of last century onward, in several Western European countries jihadist networks emerged that were built by sheikhs from the Middle East and North Africa and returnees from former conflicts, especially the Russian-Afghan war (1979-1989). These networks are diverse. They contain persons who travelled to jihadi areas and have returned and persons who never had the ambition to leave. They include second-generation migrants, converts and very recent migrants. Transnational connections were built and are kept vibrant in the virtual as well as in the real world. Old, al-Qaeda-related networks are connected to new networks established in the 21st century (Nesser, Stenersen and Oftedal 206). Furthermore, it isn't just males in the age group 18-30 that pose a threat. Since 2016, teenagers have been involved in plotting attacks more often (NCTV and AIVD 2017, 17). In France (September 2016) as well as in the United Kingdom (April/May 2017), jihadist cells were detected that were entirely or for a substantial part composed of women.⁶ The involvement of children and women had barely been designated a new trend when experts were surprised that five subsequent attacks in Europe were committed by middle-aged men.⁷ Are middle aged men the newest trend in jihadist terrorism? Or should we acknowledge that the threat has become even more unpredictable and really includes all sexes and almost all ages?

One could argue that persons of very different cultural background, age, sex, social-economic position, education, religious fervour, mental constitution and violent inclination merge in parts of Western Europe in a very diverse jihadist 'melting pot' in which the jihadist ideology is the binding factor. This melting pot does not have a geographical nucleus. Jihadists in Western Europe and beyond interact via the internet and social media. They use encrypted apps to communicate seemingly undetected and meet each other in person, sometimes using falsified documents or without any documents at all, aided by free movement in the Schengen zone. This is the jihadist movement in Europe, built of loosely connected networks. This is where the better part of the jihadist terrorist threat stems from. The upcoming military defeat of ISIS in Syria and Iraq will probably have some impact but will not cripple the movement.

⁶ In September 2016 four women were arrested in Paris on the charge of planning an terrorist attack in the French capital. The London police arrested 10 suspects of preparation of a terrorist attack in Willisden, North London and other places in April and May 2017; at least five of them were women.

⁷ Orly, Paris, 18 March 2017, age 39; London, 18 March 2017, age 52; Stockholm, 7 April 2017, age 39; Paris, 20 April 2017, age 39, Paris, 6 June 2017, age 40.

The rise of ISIS may have served as a driving force and focus point for the movement. It's military defeat, which by the way will not signify the definite demise of ISIS, will provoke the wish for revenge and possibly cause an influx of foreign fighters bringing their experiences, expertise and networks. The European jihadist movement is very much capable of existing on its own without a 'caliphate' in the Middle East.

Conclusion

This variety of potential perpetrators does not make it easier for security authorities. The threat is erratic and comes from many directions. It is imperative national governments take account of the diversity of the threat. Too much focus on one category, such as returnees, blurs a clear view on possible other threats. Intelligence and security services should avoid tunnel vision. Counter-terrorism policies should address all different kinds of threats. This way, some nasty surprises might be prevented.

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Annexe: 22 jihadist attack in western countries - 2016			
1	7-1-2016	France	Police shoot a man entering a police station in Paris with knife and fake suicide vest
2	11-1-2016	France	Teenager attacks Jewish teacher in Marseille with knives. Claims acting 'in the name of ISIS'
3	26-2-2016	Germany	15-year old girl attacks policeman with knife in Hannover. Islamist motive according to police
4	14-3-2016	Canada	Man attacks two soldiers with knife in Toronto. Claims acting 'on a mission from Allah'
5	22-3-2016	Belgium	Double attack by several men on airport and metro Brussels
6	16-4-2016	Germany	Two 16-year boys commit a bomb-attack on a Sikh temple in Essen
7	11-6-2016	USA	Man kills almost 50 people in Orlando nightclub. Claims acting 'in the name of ISIS'
8	12-6-2016	France	Man kills French policeman and his wife with a knife. Claims in video acting 'in the name of ISIS'
9	14-7-2016	France	Man kills 85 people in attack on 14 July festivities in Nice using a rented truck
10	18-7-2016	Germany	Asylumseeker attacks people in a train near Würzburg with a knife. Claims in video acting 'in the name of ISIS'
11	24-7-2016	Germany	Refugee detonates suicide vest in winebar near Ansbach. Claims in video acting 'in the name of ISIS'
12	26-7-2016	France	Two men take several people hostage in church in Saint-Étienne-du-Rouvray (Normandy), kill priest. Claim in video acting 'in the name of ISIS'
13	6-8-2016	Belgium	Man attacks police officers in police station Charleroi
14	19-8-2016	France	Man attacks Jewish man with knife while shouting 'Allah is great' in Strasbourg
15	31-8-2016	Denmark	Man attacks two police officers in Christiania, Kopenhagen. Has ties with jihadist group and admired ISIS.
16	4-9-2016	France	Man attacks prison wardens with knife in Osny prison
17	10-9-2016	Australia	Man attacks man on street and police during arrest with knife in Sydney. Has ISIS sympathy, shouted 'Allah is great'
18	17-9-2016	USA	Man attacks shoppers in Minnesota mall with knife. Claims to act in the name of Allah
19	17-9-2016	USA	Man detonates bombs at a running event in New Jersey and in Chelsea. New York. Sympathizes with jihadism
20	5-10-2016	Belgium	Man attacks police officers with knife in Brussels. Is in contact with Belgian FTF's
21	28-11-2016	USA	Man attacks people with a rand knife at Ohio State University campus. Sympathizes with jihadism
22	19-12-2016	Germany	Man uses truck to kill people at a Berlin Christmas market



Children of the Caliphate: Young IS Returnees and the Reintegration Challenge

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Introduction¹

In recent years, the world has been shocked time and again by gruesome images and actions of the self-proclaimed “Islamic State” (IS), but the footage and stories of children as young as eight executing people caused international outrage (Winter 2016). Children play an important role in the organisation: the children of the caliphate are seen as ‘the future of IS’, and education and propaganda are an important way of indoctrination (Engel 2016). IS has used children, from toddlers to teenagers, for suicide attacks, executions and fighting. Research has shown that IS propaganda between 2015-2016 included 89 eulogies of children and youths – a number that steadily increased on a monthly basis, showing that IS opts for this gruesome tactic gradually (Bloom et. al 2015-2016, 2). The role of minors and their future causes international concern for a broad range of reasons: growing up and potentially fighting in armed conflict will cause trauma for a number of these children (RAN 2016). Also, what will happen with these children if the Caliphate collapses? Human Rights Watch expressed concerns about the birth registrations that will most likely not be recognised by the international community – potentially leaving children stateless (Houry 2016).

This article focuses on minors returning from IS-territory.² When the Caliphate was declared, IS called on individuals to travel to the territory and settle in the caliphate together with families, including kids – a call that people from all over the world responded to positively (Van Ginkel and Entenmann 2016; The Soufan Group 2015). Additionally, research shows that these so-called Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTFs) have become younger over time (The Soufan Group 2015, 13). The UN (UN Security Council Resolution 2174, 2014) and EU

¹ This article has also appeared as a publication of the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT). URL: <https://icct.nl/publication/children-of-the-caliphate-young-is-returnees-and-the-reintegration-challenge/>

² In this article, the terms children and minors are used interchangeably to refer to those who are distinguished from adults, in most countries this group is seen as those aged 0-18 or 21 years old; the term juveniles is used in the context of the criminal justice system, referring to those above the national age of criminal responsibility who, by law, are distinguished from adult offenders in the criminal justice system on account of their age.

(Council of the European Union 2017) have expressed their concern about FTFs, and recently this concern increasingly focused on returning FTFs and the risks this might pose: not only are these returnees possibly sent home with an assignment to commit an attack or recruit people, but a number of returnees has committed crimes abroad or might return with mental health problems (for example, AIVD 2017). The Dutch General Intelligence and Security Service (AIVD) and National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism (NCTV) published a report in April 2017 titled “Minors with ISIS” (*“Minderjarigen bij ISIS”*) (AIVD and NCTV 2017). The report does not solely focus on what to do with young returnees, but largely on what life for minors looks like in the Caliphate, underlining the importance of these experiences when determining the needs of returning children. As a number of these returning FTFs (both adults and minors) will be prosecuted for offences committed in Syria and Iraq, it is important to consider rehabilitation and reintegration efforts, in order to mitigate risks and minimise the chance of recidivism.

Before looking more closely at approaches to rehabilitate and reintegrate these juvenile violent extremist offenders (VEOs) and IS returnees, it is important to have a proper understanding of the scope of the issue. Establishing the number of children living in the Caliphate is difficult: information coming from within IS territory cannot be verified. It is even more difficult to verify the numbers of children born in Syria or Iraq (RAN 2016). The EU emphasizes the large differences between these children and the context within which they were either brought to IS-territory by their parents or born there (Council of the European Union 2017, 3, 6). They distinguish between four groups of children: 1) minor refugees; 2) minor FTFs; 3) children born and raised by European FTFs in Syria/Iraq; and 4) children remaining in the EU, whilst parents/siblings have travelled to Syria and/or Iraq (Ibid, 3). Some countries have published statistics on minors in IS territory, for example, the Dutch security services claim there are at least 80 children with a ‘Dutch link’ in Syria and/or Iraq: half of them travelled with their parents, the other half was born there. 50% is therefore three years or younger, 30% is between four and eight, and under 20% is nine years or older (AIVD 2017, 6).³

Balancing risks and rehabilitation

But what risk do these children pose? And what to do upon their return in order to reintegrate them? Firstly, it is important to briefly note that age matters: naturally, there is a difference in both the short term and long term security risks posed by a 3-year-old child or a 15-year-old juvenile. To illustrate this, children of the Caliphate are perceived as ‘cubs’ growing into

³ ‘Dutch link’ refers to one or two parents with Dutch nationality or parents that lived in the Netherlands for a long period of time.

'lions': once they hit puberty, they can join the armed conflict (anywhere between the ages of 9-15) (AIVD 2017, 5). Secondly, as noted by the EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator (CTC) to the Council of the EU states, minors can be both a threat and a victim – with regards to children in armed conflict, posing a threat does not exclude being a victim (Council of the European Union 2017). This asks for a multidisciplinary reintegration approach for these juvenile returnees. In practice, that means law enforcement and security agencies as well as child protection services need to be included with a focus on both welfare and security (Ibid.). The Dutch security services report also argues that these minors are first and foremost victims of the so-called Islamic State, due to the stress and trauma inflicted by the violence experienced. The report emphasizes this does not mean there should be no attention for the risks these minors potentially pose to Dutch society or for the crimes they potentially committed abroad (AIVD 2017, 16-17).

The combination of training children might have received, potential crimes committed, the sheer volume of propaganda and indoctrination they experienced and potential traumas they might suffer, can provide a lethal mix – the security risks of which cannot be underestimated. These children are potential perpetrators of violent crimes, a fact that warrants an approach that goes beyond the view of victimised individuals. Even though the ultimate goal of any government initiative should be aimed at rehabilitating and reintegrating these minors (back) into society, they should be based within a clear security/law enforcement framework. As governments are shaping responses to returning FTFs, and the juvenile/youth aspect has shown to become increasingly relevant, it is important to understand *if* and *how* juvenile violent extremist offenders (JVEOs) are different from either regular juvenile criminal offenders or from adult violent extremist offenders.

In this article, we will look at the challenges regarding this specific group of FTF returnees. In part one we ask ourselves: What do current rehabilitation programmes for terrorists worldwide look like? And what do countries do differently for foreign terrorist fighters as opposed to 'regular' terrorist reintegration and rehabilitation programmes? In the second part we zoom in on the question of what sets juvenile VEOs apart from either their 'regular' criminal counterparts or adult terrorists?; and what do countries currently do regarding young children and adolescents who have engaged in (extremist) violence?; Third and finally, we aim to answer the question: what are the implications of these programmes and differences between offender types for the approach towards returning children of the caliphate and young violent extremist offenders in general?⁴ A number of initial recommendations will be

⁴ A note on terminology: in this article, we follow the definition of violent extremism as proposed by Schmid (2013, 10), namely people who are 'positively in favour of the use of force to obtain and maintain political power'. Terrorism is defined as 'a conspiratorial practice of calculated, demonstrative, direct violent action

presented based on the analysis, aiming at contributing to a comprehensive approach in dealing with JVEOs.

Rehabilitating and reintegrating violent extremist offenders: current approaches

In the past decade, numerous rehabilitation and reintegration programmes for violent extremists have been developed. For example, comprehensive programmes have been established in Europe (Sweden, Denmark, United Kingdom, Germany), Southeast Asia (Singapore, Indonesia), and the Middle East (Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Egypt). Each of these countries has developed its own approach to promote desistance from terrorism or violent extremism. The desistance process has been labelled differently as well, for instance, what is called rehabilitation in some countries could be labelled as reformation, re-socialisation, de-radicalisation, disengagement, reintegration, diversion or re-insertion in other countries. For the purposes of providing a clear overview, we will from here onwards use the term rehabilitation and reintegration programmes.

An initial analysis of rehabilitation and reintegration programmes leads to the conclusion that while many countries have implemented rehabilitation programmes, they vary widely as to 1) who is targeted by the programmes (e.g. terrorists, returnees or individuals who are deemed vulnerable to radicalisation); 2) in what phase or setting the programmes are implemented (e.g. pre-prison, in-prison, post-prison); 3) on what basis individuals participate in the programme (voluntarily or mandatory); 4) who is responsible for the implementation of the programme (e.g. prison wardens, social workers, psychologists or religious scholars); and 5) what components make up the programme (e.g. psychological counselling, education, religious counselling).

The majority of rehabilitation and reintegration programmes focuses on a broad category of terrorist (or violent extremist) offenders, thus including a focus on foreign terrorist fighters. Where some countries solely target those extremists who have committed an offense, i.e. Algeria's *Repentance and De-radicalization in Prison* programme that focuses specifically on prisoners convicted of terrorist acts (Ashour 2009); other programmes have a broader focus and aim not only to counter already radicalised individuals but also to prevent radicalisation either in society at large or for specific groups within society that have been deemed vulnerable to radicalisation. The Canadian city of Montreal initiated a prevention- oriented programme, implemented by the Centre for the Prevention of Radicalization Leading to Violence with the

without legal or moral restraints, targeting mainly civilians and non-combatants, performed for its propagandistic and psychological effects on various audiences and conflict parties' (Schmid 2011, 86-87). Foreign Terrorist Fighters is defined as 'an agent who (i) has joined, and operates within the confines of an insurgency, (2) lacks citizenship of the conflict state or kinship links to its warring factions, (3) lacks affiliation to an official military organisation; and (4) is unpaid' (Hegghammer 2010/2011, 56-57).

aim to "stop the spreading of extremism, identify individuals that are in a process of radicalization toward violence and contribute to their disengagement" (Bérubé 2015). The programme addresses issues of de-radicalisation and rehabilitation while at the same time being more preventative in nature.

Another element that differs per country is the phase in which violent extremists are targeted. Most programmes focus on the prison context, but the programmes that are more preventative in nature either focus on vulnerable individuals that have not yet committed a crime (pre-prison) or have an all-encompassing approach including both pre- and post-prison individuals. For instance, the UK developed the PREVENT and CHANNEL programme, focusing on individuals that are viewed as vulnerable to radicalization (website gov.uk 2015). Post-prison, countries focus on probation services, or other aftercare services such as assistance in finding employment and housing (Kouwenhoven 2015). The reason that most programmes focus on the prison context seems to be that the prison setting provides a delineated, controlled environment within a clear criminal justice framework.

The programme components of which most programmes consist range from religious interventions to sports activities and job skills training. The component that features most frequently is the mandatory participation of detained or suspected violent extremist offenders in religious discussion or religious lessons provided by the state or state-sanctioned religious leaders. The implementation of these religious interventions is based on the premise that most violent extremists have an incorrect interpretation of religious theology and/or have been misled by leaders in terrorist networks into believing violence is necessary to uphold their religion. As a result, sessions are often aimed at discrediting the ideological justification for extremism and stimulating violent extremists to distance themselves from extremism. This approach is for example used in Yemen, Singapore (website Religious Rehabilitation Group 2016) and Indonesia (Horgan and Braddock 2010). Other examples of programme components are psychological interventions such as cognitive behavioral therapy or anger management sessions (Mullins 2010); education, ranging from high school to university diplomas to specific certificates for individual courses; recreational activities such as participation in sports, theatre, arts and music (Boucek 2008, 18); and many programmes include job skills training by offering practical workshops in mechanical skills, tailoring, carpentry or agriculture.

Another common element that often plays a role alongside the content of the programme is financial support. Specifically, a number of countries incorporate some form of stipends for the violent extremist offender (i.e. Indonesia) (Neumann 2010, 53) or provide loans or financial support to the detainees' family (i.e. Saudi Arabia and the Philippines) (Ibid).

Poverty is often perceived as a fertile ground for violent extremism (Sterman 2015), thus – in many countries – include financial support based on the assumption that VEOs turned to extremist networks for additional income or to fight for social justice. Financial aid that is given to the individual as part of rehabilitation programmes is in place to reduce the incentive of re-joining terrorist networks upon release from prison. On the other hand, financial aid that is provided to the families of convicted radicals is intended to prevent family members from becoming financially dependent on terrorist networks or resorting to mass violence to express their frustration with their financial circumstances. In the Indonesian programme, for example, the costs of family members who travel to prison in order to visit the inmate are reimbursed (Sim and Huda Ismail 2016).

Finally, more and more rehabilitation and reintegration programmes include families and community networks in programmes. Aside from focusing on the individual violent extremist offender in de-radicalisation and disengagement programmes, governments often prepares communities to be more receptive to returning detainees and ex-terrorists (Boucek 2008, 4). The idea is to engage communities in the process of reintegrating ex-terrorists and improving social cohesion. An example is the Colombian programme, which focuses on the resettlement of families to remove them from the extremist environment (Horgan and Braddock 2010, 271).

What do countries do differently to reintegrate Foreign Terrorist Fighters ?

As the above shows, there is a wide variety of rehabilitation and reintegration programmes for violent extremist offenders on a global scale (Schuurman and van der Heide 2016). Although these programmes differ across countries, depending on contextual factors, their focus on violent extremism and terrorism is very clear. With the increasing concern about returning FTFs, the next question would be if any programmes specifically designed for this target group, and if so, what are the main differences between programmes for ‘regular’ terrorists and returned FTFs?

The United Nations emphasised the importance of designing and implementing rehabilitation and reintegration of returning foreign terrorist fighters in UN Security Council Resolution 2178 (2014), which calls for “developing and implementing prosecution, rehabilitation and reintegration strategies for returning foreign terrorist fighters” (UN Security Council Resolution 2174, 2014). The EU CTC, through the European Commission, made a similar claim, calling for the development of risk assessment tools and rehabilitation and reintegration programmes for these returning FTFs. The question of how to conduct risk assessment lies beyond the scope of this paper, but should nevertheless be an integral part of rehabilitation, as it provides information on individuals’ needs and the risks they pose. The EU CTC emphasises

that programmes should be developed both inside and outside of correctional settings, as programmes *outside* prison walls can be helpful in bridging the gap that has resulted from complications in prosecuting returning FTFs due to difficulties in collecting – and lack of – evidence (Council of the European Union 2016).

Despite this call, there are few programmes that focus specifically on returning FTFs. In an article analysing programmes developed by the Global Counter-Terrorism Forum (GCTF), eighteen of the 30 Member States of GCTF implemented specific rehabilitation and reintegration programmes for FTF – most of which build on existing programmes, whilst others developed new initiatives (Mehra 2016, 20). These programmes vary widely: for instance, a Dutch initiative called EXITs, focuses on returnees that can participate on a voluntary basis, whereas the Danish Aarhus programme includes an exit component that focuses solely on returning FTFs who are not being prosecuted for criminal charges (Ibid). In France, so-called “Centers for Prevention, Integration and Citizenship” were planned to open, focusing on de-radicalisation. The aim was to open twelve centers, of which one would focus specifically on individuals who traveled to conflict zones, but of whom it is unknown they joined a jihadist group (Uhlmann 2016). So far, these centers have faced complications: first, the opening of the centers has been delayed repeatedly, and secondly, the one center that did open has been widely criticised by the French Senate. Criticism focused on a lack of evaluation and preciseness in designing of the mechanisms and programme (McAuley 2017). Since 2012, the German al-Hayat programme includes an assessment of returned FTFs who are put through a process of counseling and reintegration if possible and needed. The programme focuses on ideological and pragmatic elements (such as finding employment) as well as addresses the re-establishment of family relations and potentially finding an alternative network (Lister, 2015). Although the focus lies on returnees, the programme elements differ little to non from VEO programme elements. Finally, Jordan designed a programme specifically for returned FTFs: most returned FTFs are sentenced to a high-security prisons, but for the individuals who pose a lower risk the Community Peace Centre opened in 2015. The center largely focuses on ideological aspects, as government-sanctioned clerics preach anti-violence messages to the participants (Counter Extremism Project 2017).

Despite these initiatives, most rehabilitation and reintegration programmes for VEOs do not seem to have a specific approach for returnees. Moreover, these initiatives appear to largely focus on individuals outside of the criminal justice sector, such as voluntary participants or individuals who are not being – or cannot be prosecuted. So far, inside prison walls, rehabilitation and reintegration programmes for VEOs are rarely specifically designed for returning FTFs. Overall, the programme elements appear to barely differ from the elements as

seen in the programmes for 'regular' VEOs.

Furthermore, researchers and international organisations alike note the possibility to implement rehabilitative efforts in different stages of the criminal proceedings, including the pre-trial stage, the trial stage and the post-trial stage. Finally, over the past years attention has increasingly been devoted for providing diversion programmes as an alternative to a prison sentence (Entenmann et. al 2015a; Entenmann et. al 2015b). The main lesson to be drawn from all these attempts is the importance of not reinventing the wheel: the sheer amount of experience and knowledge of rehabilitation and reintegration of VEOs can assist in doing the same for a specific target audiences such as returned FTFs or minor FTF (Entenmann et. al 2015b, 22).

What sets juvenile VEOs apart from their 'regular' criminal counterparts or adult terrorists?

The main question in determining how to treat juvenile VEOs is *if* and *how* they are different from either 'regular' juvenile criminal offenders or from adult VEOs. Unfortunately, there is a lack of rigorous research and reliable statistics on juvenile violent extremist offenders or young people who engage in terrorism (RAN 2016). Partially, this is due to general difficulties in the field such as the fact that the population of terrorists is already small in many countries. However, we do know more about juvenile criminal offenders that have been involved in conflict zones as many studies have been carried out analysing the role of recruitment of children, the role of child soldiers and the effects of indoctrination within the larger Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) framework (Human Rights Watch 2015; Stichick Betancourt and Tanveer Khan 2008).

For example, juveniles from conflict zones are, as discussed earlier, not just perceived as perpetrators, but also as victims – meaning that intervention is most likely needed for the trauma these children have experienced (RAN 2016). Trauma can have a wide range of consequences throughout the lives of these children, such as substance abuse, aggression, criminal behaviour and suicide (United Nations 1996). When it comes to the issue of the involvement of youths in terrorism, there is a range of theories as to why they are particularly vulnerable to extremist narratives. These include cognitive aspects such as the identity formation process and youths' vulnerability during this process, the social context of juveniles, including the impact of families or the lack of family ties, as well as the social milieu influencing juveniles. The latter is particularly relevant to the situation of young children and teens who have returned from conflict areas such as Syria and Iraq, where the social environment has provided such a strong and closed off specific group culture that they are essentially socialised into terrorism. IS is known for its instrumentalisation of children,

featuring children dominantly in its media output in roles ranging from soldiers to recruiters and executioners (Winter 2016). According to John Horgan and Mia Bloom, IS strategically lures children into its sphere of influence in subtle ways, 'attracting local children by offering free toys and candy in exchange for simply showing up' (Horgan and Bloom 2015). Minors are groomed, taught to spy on their families and friends and become socialized into IS ranks in different positions. Through being subjected to IS' indoctrination, which is specifically intended to turn them into child soldiers, such children require specific care (Horgan et. al 2016).

At the same time, this is not new, as many youths in conflict areas have been socialised into the violent extremist networks, although these are not always necessarily terrorist networks. Examples include juvenile offenders that have been members of the Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda, youths that have been recruited and trained by Boko Haram in Nigeria and young adults that have joined ranks with violent groups such as gangs in the United States (Arciaga Young and Gonzalez 2013). Children in particular may commit crimes because of their phase of maturity, susceptibility to peer and adult influence, and social circumstances, all of which are likely to be amenable to change (Richards 2011). Also, JVEOs have shown to participate in or attempt to engage in extremist violence for motivations ranging from indoctrination and coercion to criminal opportunism, or religious and political conviction (Global Center and ICCT 2016).

Young terrorists vs adult terrorists

As with adult VEOs, the importance of risk assessment and an individual approach are of vital importance to the rehabilitation and reintegration of JVEOs as well. As a result, in regular juvenile detention centers or facilities, a distinction is commonly made between males and females, violent and nonviolent offenders and classification is often made based on a differentiation of levels of temperament and maturity, as well as social and psychological needs. First of all, the age of the individual can give an indication of the life and role of the individual whilst in the caliphate. As discussed before, government reports generally assume that children join the armed conflict when puberty begins (AIVD 2017, 7-8). This means that young children will have a significantly different experience, although it may still be a violent experience, from teenagers. Compared to adult offenders, juveniles are especially vulnerable to mental, emotional, and physical abuse in the prison context, whether perpetrated by prison staff or incarcerated adults (Garcia Bochenek 2016). These differences in the experiences children had in the caliphate, makes them different from adults: at least of males, it is expected that they participated in training, the armed conflict, or supported this in one way or another (AIVD 2016, 7-8).

Any attempt to design specific interventions for this group needs to be grounded in a thorough understanding of youth participation in violence and/or criminal behavior. A study focusing on the characteristics of life trajectories of early onset and adult onset offenders, carried out by Zara and Farrington, found that children and adolescents who – at a young age – struggle with problems of internalization⁵ do not only run a greater risk of engaging in a criminal (potentially violent) career as adults, they also face the prospect of ‘a level of life failure as serious as that of early onset offenders’ (Zara and Farrington 2013, 245). As a consequence, the authors conclude that interventions aimed to prevent this risk from materialising should start as early as possible. They point at the essential role of personal support from parents and family members, which is deemed ‘a crucial aspect of ameliorating individual development and facilitating pro-social adjustment’. However, one of the main characteristics of the self-proclaimed caliphate – the specific, controlled, state-like environment provided by IS – means that the role of the social environment of the individual offenders as a positive, protective factor, does not apply here, as IS members are often desensitised from events in their personal environment, such as friends and families (Van der Heide and Huurman 2016, 18).

Another study by Zhang, Loeber and Stouthamer-Loeber analysed the relationship between delinquency and attitudes/behaviour from a developmental perspective. Their main conclusion points to the importance of children’s attitudes towards the use of violence and violent behaviour (Zhang, Loeber and Stouthamer-Loeber 1997). According to their analysis, youths who have a tolerant attitude toward violence are more likely to be deviant (in other words: likely to engage in criminal (potentially violent) behaviour) than their counterparts who had actually engaged in violence. This is particularly relevant for the issue of young returnees for two reasons. First, in light of their socialisation into the caliphate of IS, it is much more likely that their attitudes are in fact more tolerant or even positive towards the use of violence which, if true, would provide a strong indicator for vulnerability to later (potentially violent extremist) offending. Second, from a more pragmatic perspective, it is often difficult to determine behaviour in hindsight, which provides all the more reason to focus on attitudes when young children and adolescents return from Syria/Iraq.

All in all, despite the lack of specific studies into characteristics and treatment of juvenile violent extremist offenders, the literature on juvenile delinquency in general and research into children engaged in violent groups, gangs and the role of youths in war and conflict zones

⁵ Internalising behaviors refer to a wide range of behaviors in which children and adolescents direct feelings and emotional responses inward. This is perceived as the opposite of externalising behavior, which refers to expressing feelings and emotions into behaviors that are directed outward into delinquent or aggressive behavior. See Loeber, Rolf, Magda Stouthamer-Loeber and Helene Raskin White (1999).

specifically, do provide us with relevant insights for the question of how to deal with JVEOs. The main conclusions are first of all that juvenile offenders should be viewed as both victims as well as potential perpetrators. Second, that the process of identity formation makes juveniles more susceptible to indoctrination from violent (extremist) groups but that susceptibility can at the same time provide a starting point for treatment as well. Third, that the role of the social environment and peer pressure plays a bigger role compared to adult offenders and that in the case of IS – this provides a particular challenge as their social environment often does not provide a protective or positive influence. Fourth and finally, treatment should start with determining the level of internalising behaviours and assessing the attitude of youths towards violence – as these two factors have proven to be strongly connected to increased vulnerabilities for later criminal (potentially violent) careers.

What do countries do now with juvenile VEOs?

The aspects that set juvenile violent extremist offenders apart from both adult terrorists as well as from young, non-extremist delinquents can provide insight and opportunities for their treatment and rehabilitation. Research currently conducted by ICCT in cooperation with the Global Center on Cooperative Security (Global Center and ICCT, forthcoming) is mapping countries' approaches to the rehabilitation of JVEOs and has found that governments have attempted to deal with the issue of juvenile violent extremist offenders in three different ways, namely through (1) treating them as adult terrorist offenders, (2) treating them as regular juvenile criminals, or (3) providing them with specialised treatments.

A small number of countries treat juveniles as adults when it comes to terrorism-related offences: even if dedicated juvenile legislation is applicable, a certain exceptionalism is prevalent when it comes to terrorism. In Mali's capital Bamako, for example, juvenile offenders are held together with adult female offenders in the women's prison due to limited resources and infrastructure (US Department of State 2014). Several countries prosecute juveniles under (adult) terrorism legislation (UNICEF 2011, 86) and can sentence youths to severe punishments, including the death penalty. In other instances, juveniles are held in adult prisons despite the existence of dedicated juvenile facilities. In explicit response to perpetrators becoming younger and younger, several states are also in the process of lowering the age of criminal responsibility, allowing courts to prosecute children as young as 15 (Ibid, 15).

Other countries have taken a different approach and are treating juveniles similarly to other young offenders, prosecuting them in youth courts (Ibid), applying specialised legislation including diversion activities (Ibid, 90) and handing down more lenient punishments or sentences tailored to juveniles such as dedicated youth facilities. In Austria, which houses a

small number of juvenile VEOs, these juveniles are integrated with other juveniles in the *Justizanstalt Gerasdorf* juvenile correctional facility.⁶ At the same time, large numbers of child soldiers in armed conflict, zones, including minors in the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in Sri Lanka and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) in Colombia, are cared for in concentrated rehabilitation facilities (Global Forum for Counter-Terrorism, forthcoming). Both approaches, treating JVEOs as regular terrorist offenders or as regular juvenile criminals, involve different risks. On the one hand, housing JVEOs together with other juvenile offenders means there is no specialised staff available to deal with the ideological aspect of radicalised youths. Also, it carries the risk that extremist juveniles attempt to recruit and radicalise their peers. Finally, politically speaking the punishment of being sentenced to a juvenile institute for committing terrorist offenses might be perceived as being ‘soft on terrorism’ (BBC 2016). On the other hand, from a human rights perspective, housing JVEOs among adult violent extremist offenders has negative implications as it is generally believed that juveniles require specialised treatment and are particularly amenable to rehabilitative treatment (Simpson 1976). Also, according to a UN report (United Nations 2015) on the mental health of youth, incarcerated juveniles are ‘regularly subject of violence, intimidation, exploitation and inhumane conditions’. And housing JVEOs together with adult VEOs exposes potentially vulnerable JVEOs to negative influence from their environment.

The third option, providing specialised treatment for juvenile VEOs, potentially circumvents the negative implications of the two other policy alternatives. However, as most countries have very few juvenile VEOs (Global Center and ICCT 2016) to deal with, setting up designated programmes or even facilities for this group is both resource intensive and requires expertise that might not yet be available. The first question that needs to be answered by individual governments is what is the number of juvenile cases that warrants a separate approach, and second: how to best combine the insights from other juvenile offender categories (child soldiers, drug addicts) with the existing knowledge on radicalisation and violent extremism.

Conclusion

The approach to dealing with juvenile offenders has undergone considerable changes during the past 20 years, generally as well as for specific juvenile offender groups such as children and

⁶ Currently, 77 individuals are housed at this juvenile institute. As of June 2016, at least two JVEOs have served time at Gerasdorf. One is a 16-year old who has been convicted for his involvement in terrorist acts (the juvenile admitted to travelling to Syria and being a member of ISIL), and the other is a 15-year old self-radicalized individual who admitted to preparing terrorist acts in Vienna. See *Reuters World News*. 2015. “Teenager in Austrian ‘Playstation’ terrorism case gets two years.” 26 May. <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-austria-idUSKBN0OB0LK20150526>. See also *The Local*. 2016. “Is Austria underestimating the threat of radicalization?” 29 January. <http://www.thelocal.at/20160129/is-austria-underestimating-the-threat-of-radicalization>.

adolescents that have been involved in violent and terrorist groups. These legal and structural changes often concern the implementation of alternative measures, de-radicalisation or diversion programs and other restorative techniques in the majority of countries dealing with juvenile VEOs. Despite these positive developments, most approaches are still characterised by a focus on punishment rather than rehabilitation, prosecution rather than diversion, and on detention rather than community alternatives.

Based on our analysis of rehabilitation and reintegration programmes for violent extremist offenders and specifically for foreign terrorist fighters, we can conclude that most programmes are to a large extent similar to programmes and treatment for ‘regular’ criminal offenders. Authorities entrusted with the management and rehabilitation of children and youths in correctional settings may at times lose sight of the potential of regular approaches, partially due to the assumptions that come with the “terrorist” label and the political pressure of national security that may place strains on the rehabilitative approach. These practices often respond to public demands on reacting towards juvenile terrorists by more severe sanctioning.

Thus, rather than exceptionalising violent extremists in general and juvenile violent extremists in particular, this article presents approaches to rehabilitation and reintegration derived from already existing initiatives to and considerations on how they might be tailored to address the needs of juveniles convicted of or involved in violent extremism-related crimes. Approaches to promote disengagement from violence and extremism will be more effective if they build on existing structures for crime prevention and rehabilitation.

Overall, the criminal justice framework within which the treatment of juvenile offenders takes place is anchored on their reformative potential. The judicial system, together with the correctional and probations services and society at large, plays a critical role in the rehabilitation and eventual reintegration of a child in conflict with the law. The effectiveness of rehabilitating and reintegrating juvenile VEOs depends for a large part upon their knowledge of what sets youths involved in terrorism apart from their regular criminal peers or adult offenders, as well as on their collaborative and coordinated efforts throughout the duration of custody, rehabilitation, release, and post-release.

Rehabilitation and reintegration efforts for juvenile VEOs (including those returning from IS-territory), aside from a narrow focus on experienced trauma and criminal offenses committed, need to be based on two underlying assumptions: the importance of age and the importance of attitudes. Notwithstanding the tailored approach that every individual requires, age should inform decision-making and programming. Young children (zero to nine years old) (AIVD 2017, 5) who are born in IS-territory or brought by their parents at a very young age, should

be first and foremost be viewed as victims. For older children, other factors such as training and potential involvement in violent activities are more likely to play a role, demanding any approach that goes beyond the victim-perspective. Additionally, this older group will include adolescents who might have undertaken the journey to IS by themselves and who have deliberately and more rationally chosen to join IS. The younger group requires special attention regarding their internalisation process and professionals need to determine to what extent these children have been socialised into IS-culture and whether they cope with their experiences more internally or externally. Older individuals are most likely to have internalised IS violent culture and to have been involved in violent activities. To direct rehabilitative efforts for them, it is essential to assess their attitude towards violence and to what extent they have accepted IS' norms and behaviors.

As states increasingly confront younger people caught up in violent extremist activity, it is up to them to devise corresponding measures. It is not necessary to reinvent the wheel, especially where numbers of terrorism convicts in general, and juveniles in particular are low. But rehabilitation is considered to work best when tailored to individual needs and policymakers need to take into account the very distinctive needs of juvenile offenders as a separate class of offenders while respecting all relevant international law and human rights standards in the fight against terrorism. Decisions on managing and rehabilitating juveniles should be informed by the best interest for the child and by individualised assessments.

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