

1.1: TALKING TO FOREIGN FIGHTERS: SOCIO-ECONOMIC PUSH VERSUS EXISTENTIAL PULL FACTORS (Lorne Dawson, University of Waterloo)

Executive Summary

The conflict in Syria and Iraq has inspired an unprecedented surge of foreign fighters, drawn from the Arabic and Western worlds, to oppose the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. Many of these fighters, including most of the 4,000-5,000 coming from Europe, North America, Australia, and elsewhere in the non-Arabic world, are joining proscribed jihadist terrorist groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS. This phenomenon has become a dominant security priority for the countries of these fighters and considerable efforts are being made to track and understand what is happening. This report presents the initial findings of one of the few studies in the world seeking to acquire primary data through interviews with fighters in Syria and Iraq, their families, friends and associates, and other online supporters of jihadism, including wannabe foreign fighters. This report deals with data from twenty interviews with foreign fighters engaged in combat in Syria and Iraq. This is the single largest set of interviews analyzed to date.

From mid-December 2015 to Feb. 29 2016 interviews were conducted with 130 people: 40 foreign fighters, 60 family members, friends and associates, and 30 online fans, recruiters, and potential fighters. These interviews were largely face-to-face but the “interviews” with fighters in the zone of conflict consisted of extended social media dialogues.

The interviews focused on the backgrounds of the foreign fighters, their process of radicalization, and their experiences and perceptions, and not operational aspects of their involvement with these groups.

The foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq arrived two waves. The first wave was marked primarily by political opposition to Assad and the second wave was much more ideologically driven and focused on establishing an ideal Islamic state. The fighters interviewed spanned both waves, and they noted the differentiation themselves. The latter objective is now predominant and there is a markedly religious, even theological, cast to the way most of the foreign fighters we interviewed now conceive of their lives and activities.

When this research began it was still somewhat unclear who was leaving from Canada and how. In the course of this research it has become evident that Canadian foreign fighters have been leaving in fairly distinct clusters, reflecting a pattern of mutual or collective radicalization amongst small groups of largely young men. Such clusters have been traced in Calgary, Edmonton, Ottawa, Toronto, and Montreal.

Other recent studies of this phenomenon based on some primary data, have concluded either that there is no clear profile of who is leaving or why, or that those leaving appear to be somewhat marginalized people with limited opportunities who are experiencing various forms of frustration in their lives. In fact one study argues that foreign fighters are drawn from “no

future subculture” amongst emerging adults in Europe and elsewhere. Proponents of this view downplay the significance of religion as a motivational factor. The findings of this study challenge this point of view and some of the other conclusions. The individuals that the researchers interviewed run the spectrum from troubled youth with personal problems to accomplished young men and women from stable backgrounds. But none attributes much significance to their low prospects socially and economically in shaping their radicalization. Alternatively, the interactions with these individuals are heavily mediated by moral and religious ideas and language. Religion provides the dominant interpretive frame they use to make sense of almost every aspect of their lives, and the researchers think “religiosity” is a primary motivator for their actions. This means their commitment to a religious worldview exceeds that of most ordinary believers, but it also means it is irrelevant whether their views are orthodox or founded on a deep knowledge of Islam. The issue is the sincerity of their commitment and religious self-understanding; this is what the data reveal.

In the end, the researchers argue, the focus on socio-economic push factors needs to be balanced with further inquiry into existential and ideological pull factors in accounting for the process of radicalization and the decision to travel to Syria and Iraq to fight.

The researchers have collected one of the first and one of the largest sets of interviews with parents of foreign fighters. Future reports will explore what this primary data can tell us about the children who left to fight, the impact on their families, and how insights from their experiences can be used to develop more effective programs to counter violent extremism.