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Talking to Foreign Fighters: Socio-Economic Push versus Existential Pull Factors

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TALKING TO FOREIGN FIGHTERS:

SOCIO-ECONOMIC PUSH VERSUS EXISTENTIAL PULL FACTORS

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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, and, for many, replace it with an Islamic State. Many of these fighters are joining proscribed jihadist terrorist groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS. This phenomenon has become a dominant security concern and considerable effort is being made to track and understand what is happening, and stop the migration of new fighters. This report presents some initial findings from one of the few studies currently underway to acquire primary data about these foreign fighters, through interviews with fighters in Syria and Iraq, their families, friends and associates, and other online supporters of jihadism, including wannabe foreign fighters.
- From mid-December 2015 to February 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 those with fighters in Syria and Iraq took the form of extended social media dialogues.
- The interviews focused on the backgrounds of the foreign fighters, their process of radicalization, and their experiences and perceptions. For legal and ethical reasons operational aspects of their involvement with these groups were excluded from consideration.
- 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 identified in Calgary, Edmonton, Ottawa, Toronto, and Montreal.
- Taking into consideration space and time limitations and the inherent complexity of the material, this report summarizes the findings from the initial analysis of 20 interviews with foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq.
- The findings of four other recent studies of the foreign fighter phenomenon that are based on some primary data are summarized. These studies rely on data derived from interviews with the families, friends, and associates of foreign fighters and wannabe fighters, as well as a few interviews with individuals who have left to fight in Syria and Iraq, or wanted to do so. The findings of these studies provide the most immediate and pertinent comparative



context for our research. These studies conclude either that there is no clear profile of who is leaving or why, or that those leaving appear to be mainly marginalized individuals with limited economic and social prospects, who are experiencing various kinds of frustration in their lives. One study goes so far as to argue that foreign fighters are drawn from a “no future subculture” amongst emerging adults in Europe and elsewhere. Proponents of this view downplay the significance of religion as a motivational factor, favouring instead a more exclusive focus on social, economic, and psychological “push” factors. Our initial findings challenge this point of view.

- Our overall sample of 40 foreign fighters runs the gamut from troubled youth with personal problems to accomplished young men and women from stable backgrounds. In the 20 interviews analyzed here, however, none indicate, directly or indirectly, that forms of socio-economic marginalization played a significant role in their motivations to become a foreign fighter. As our interactions with these individuals are so heavily mediated by a religious discourse we also think that religiosity (i.e., a sincere religious commitment, no matter how ill-informed or unorthodox) is a primary motivator for their actions. Religion provides the dominant frame these foreign fighters use to interpret almost every aspect of their lives, and this reality should be given due interpretive weight.
- Studies of radicalization in general, and the jihadi foreign fighter problem in particular, are punctuated with passages assigning a casual role to the pursuit of greater purpose, meaning, identity and belonging in explaining why some individuals radicalize to violence and/or become foreign fighters. These pervasive references are used, at least implicitly, to compensate for the problem of specificity that afflicts their analyses. Many individuals are impacted by the social and economic push factors commonly prioritized by these studies, so it remains unclear why so few become involved in violent oppositional activities. Based on what we are hearing in interviews with foreign fighters—more interviews than anyone has yet to report on—we think more attention and significance should be given to the repeated affirmations of the positive benefits of being jihadists. More attention should be dedicated, in other words, to understanding the “pull” factors involved—to the influence of ideology/religion and deeper existential issues in their decision to become foreign fighters.
- Funds are in place to continue this research until March 31 2017, and more funding is being sought. Future reports will extend the analysis of the foreign fighter interviews we are collecting and the unique, large, and growing sample of interviews with the parents of foreign fighters.



1. INTRODUCTION TO THE ISSUE AND PROJECT

The conflict in Syria and Iraq has attracted “foreign fighters” (Hegghammer 2011; Malet 2013) from across the globe in unprecedented numbers. Most of these fighters have come from countries in the Middle East (e.g., Tunisia, Jordan, Saudi Arabia), but a surprisingly large number have also come from Europe, the United Kingdom (UK), Canada, Australia, and the United States (i.e., something in the order of 25,000–30,000 overall and probably 4,000–5,000 from the West; Soufan Group 2015; Schmid and Tinnes, 2015). Large numbers have come from France, Germany and the UK in particular, and disproportionately (relative to their populations) from Belgium, the Netherlands, Denmark, and Sweden (Neumann 2015). By late 2015 many more also were coming from Russia and Central Asia as well. Most of these people, largely young men but also some young women, are joining the Islamic State (also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham/Syria, ISIS, or ISIL), perhaps the most radical and dangerous of all jihadi groups. The problem of foreign fighters is not as serious in Canada. But in its 2014 threat assessment Public Safety Canada (PSC) reported that there were at least 130–145 individuals “with Canadian connections who were abroad and who were suspected of terrorism-related activities” (Public Safety Canada 2014). The report also stated that there were at least 30–40 Canadians fighting in Syria or Iraq. By mid-2015 we were estimating this number had risen to at least 50–60. And in a statement before the public safety committee of the Canadian Parliament on February 23, 2016, Michel Couombe, Director of CSIS, revised these numbers upwards, stating that “the total number of people overseas involved in threat-related activities—and I’m not just talking about Iraq and Syria—is probably around 180.” “In Iraq and Syria,” he said, “we are probably talking close to 100” (Fife 2016).

The government has serious concerns about what these citizens are doing, the implications for Canada’s international relations, and what might happen when any of these radicalized individuals return. The overall rate of return may be in the 20–30% range (Hegghammer 2011), and officials estimate, for example, that as many as 350 of the over 700 British foreign fighters have returned (Soufan 2015). At this time there are no accurate figures for the number of return-



ees to Canada, but in his report to the parliament “Mr. Coulombe said about 60 suspected foreign fighters have returned to Canada, although he stressed the numbers keep changing almost daily” (Fife 2016). It is unclear just what this figure entails. We think it is a ball park figure for an extended period of time and is not referring exclusively to returnees from the contemporary conflict in Syria and Iraq. Certainly some individuals have come home from that zone of conflict, but we suspect no more than 5–10 individuals by early 2016. When we have found returnees, they have refused to be interviewed, noting that they have already been visited by CSIS and the RCMP. In any event, whether the returnees are disillusioned, disengaged, or still operational, they pose security challenges to their host societies (Amarasingam 2015a). It now appears, for example, that as many as seven of the perpetrators of the tragic attacks in Paris (November 13, 2015), that killed 130 people, were either returnees or agents purposefully sent by ISIS (Callimachi 2016a). This also appears to be the case for many of the perpetrators of the bombings in Brussels (March 22, 2016). In fact, as *The New York Times* reports, it appears these attacks are part of a larger campaign of assaults, small and large, attempted and successful, that has been initiated in Europe by operatives that ISIS is training in Syria (Callimachi 2016b).

While the number of Canadians travelling to Syria is relatively low compared to many other countries, Canadian fighters have figured prominently in the English language videos circulated by the Al Hayat Media Centre of the Islamic State. The world-wide publicity generated by these videos significantly magnified the attention paid by Canadians and their government to the emerging new threat posed by the foreign fighter phenomenon. Andre Poulin, from Timmins, Ontario, was the first Canadian to appear in Islamic State propaganda (CBC 2014a). In the video Poulin, known as Abu Muslim, explains how he was an average Canadian, with a good life, yet felt compelled to come to the defense of his fellow Muslims in Syria. The video ends with footage of his martyrdom during battle. Two more videos soon followed in 2014. In one, Farah Shirdon from Calgary, known as Abu Usamah as-Somalee, is shown burning his Canadian passport and threatening Western powers (CBC 2014b). Shirdon, who for a time was thought to have been killed, achieved further notoriety when he appeared in an interview with Vice News in September 2014 (Vice 2014). Another video features John Maguire from Ottawa. Standing in the rubble



of war, Maguire, like Poulin, implores his fellow Muslims in the West to make *hijrah* (emigrate) to the Islamic State (Bell 2014). He goes on to praise the ISIS inspired lone-actor attacks in Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu and Ottawa in October 2014 which killed Warrant Officer Patrice Vincent and Corporal Nathan Cirillo, respectively. These attacks, he declares, are in retaliation for the Canadian decision to join the bombing campaign against ISIS. The video is laced with threats to Canadians for their opposition to ISIS:

Your people will be indiscriminately targeted as you indiscriminately target our people. I warn you of punishment in this worldly life at the hands of mujahedeen, and I also like to warn you of a greater punishment and that is the eternal punishment of hell-fire promised to those who died not having submitted as Muslims to the one true God of all that exists ... So, the mujahideen continue to call you to one of two options: hijrah or jihad. You either pack your bags or you prepare your explosive devices. You either purchase your airline ticket or sharpen your knife.

The rise of ISIS is a game changer in the struggle with terrorism. Al Qaeda and its affiliates have threatened the West since before 9/11, and spawned an expanding web of inspired individuals and groups who have hatched hundreds of deadly plots. For al Qaeda, however, the utopian promise of instituting a truly Islamic state, and more specifically re-establishing the divinely sanctioned Caliphate, was a more or less distant possibility. In declaring himself the Caliph, on June 29, 2014, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi galvanized the attention of the jihadi community, usurping in many ways the worldwide leadership of al Qaeda. ISIS is not merely seeking to hurt the enemy and force the withdrawal of Western military forces from the Middle East. ISIS is physically planting the foundations for a new socio-political reality and challenging young Muslim rebels the world-over to play a role in this transformative historical moment. As the chief spokesman for ISIS, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, urged in September 2014, if you cannot make your way to Syria then the “best thing you can do is to make an effort to kill an infidel, French, American, or any other of their allies ... Smash his head with a rock, slaughter him with a knife, run him over with a car, throw him from a high place, choke him or poison him” (cited in Schmid 2015: 8).

In the context of this crisis it is imperative that we have a better grasp of why and how young Canadians are being drawn to the ideology and mission of ISIS, and other similar extremist movements. The research on radicalization to violence in the case of “homegrown jihad-



ists” tells us that in most cases we are dealing with remarkably ordinary people deciding to do extraordinary things, and the focus of our attention should be the process of radicalization by which this transformation happens (Wiktorowicz 2005; Horgan 2008; Dalgaard-Nielsen 2010; McCauley and Moskalenko 2011; Hafez and Mullins 2015). The objective of this research, then, is not to develop a profile per se of foreign fighters and wannabe fighters. Analysts have largely abandoned this aspiration in the face of the sheer diversity of the people we know have been drawn to violent extremism (Horgan 2008; Rae 2012). The task in this report is much more foundational and circumscribed. Research into the process of radicalization continues to be hampered by a lack of appropriate primary data. For the most part, the research on jihadi radicalization is based on fragmentary data painstakingly gleaned from open sources, such as court records, media stories, and some biographic and autobiographic accounts. In his authoritative 2008 survey of the research literature on terrorism, Andrew Silke lamented that systematic interviews had been used to secure primary data in “only 1 percent of research reports” (101). Things have improved since then, but not much (Dawson 2014: 67-68). Our project is aimed at ameliorating this deficiency by interviewing Canadians, and many others, fighting in Syria and Iraq; those aspiring to join them; online supporters of ISIS and other jihadist groups; and the family, friends, and associates of those who left to fight. At this point we are modestly seeking to learn as much as we can about the background and experiences of these individuals, and to develop a record, however incomplete, of their perceptions, thoughts, and explanations. In doing this work we are guided to some degree by the insights we have gleaned from the research literature and integrated into an evolving social ecology model of homegrown terrorist radicalization. This model is too complex to delineate here, but since it influences our approach to the foreign fighter issue a brief and simplified overview is provided in Section 2. This model is not being tested per se in this report, since neither it nor the data in hand are sufficient at present to warrant thinking in such terms. We are still at a much more preliminary and exploratory stage of knowledge generation, and will be until more primary data is available.



2. A SOCIAL ECOLOGY APPROACH TO RADICALIZATION¹

Some experts have argued that we should divert our attention from unfathomable “why” questions about the motivations for terrorism and concentrate on the more manageable questions about “how” terrorism happens (Horgan 2008). But in the minds of most people it is nigh on impossible to separate the two questions. We may never fully understand why anyone becomes a terrorist, but the careful comparative analysis of many cases points to some similarities that we need to explore further. In doing so, we argue that it would be beneficial to take an ecological approach. An effort should be made to model the many and diverse factors that impact, in various combinations and to varying degrees, the progression of an individual along the path of radicalization towards violence. In line with the ecological modes of thinking now engrained in our awareness, we need to move beyond linear or stage models of this progression. We are not dealing with an easily delimited set of factors which lead someone almost inevitably towards radicalization. Rather we need to think in terms of the dynamic interplay of many sets of variables, including hard-to-predict contingencies, that work in complex but identifiable ways to radicalize individuals, but rarely in the exactly the same way.

In sketching our ecological model of radicalization we began with the most general and pervasive factors that may be pertinent and moved towards more specific and discriminating factors that we have strong reason to think are relevant. We moved, in other words, from consideration of factors for which we have the least direct empirical evidence to ones that are better substantiated in the research on radicalization (Dalgaard-Nielsen 2010; Hafez and Mullins 2015).

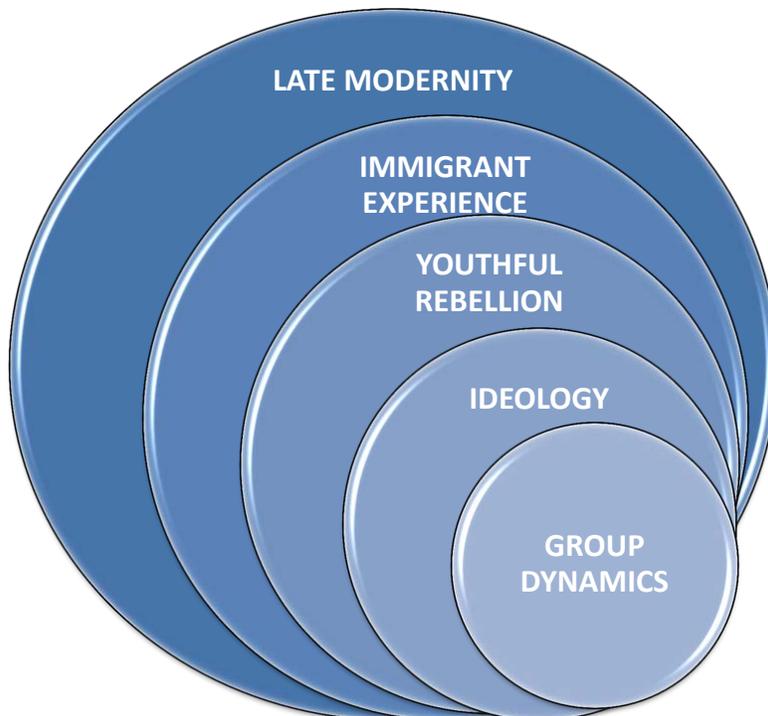
At the highest level of generality, we must recognize that homegrown terrorism is a product of the new social conditions in which we all live, what some sociologists call “late modernity”, the “risk society”, or “liquid modernity” (Giddens 1991; Beck 1992; Baumann 2000). The full range of social structural changes and their social psychological consequences addressed in

¹ Versions of this ecological model have been presented in a wide variety of forums in the last several years, including, for example, the RCMP E Division INSET (January 29, 2015), RCMP 2015 National Security Interviewing Workshop (April 24, 2015), Memorial University (April 27, 2015), Canadian Forces College (October 8, 2015 and February 9, 2016), Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (February 25, 2016), Canadian Network for Research on Terrorism, Security and Society Workshop (February 26, 2016), and Queen’s University (March 16, 2016). The account presented in this paper is derived from Lorne Dawson, “How Terrorism Grows at Home,” *The Globe and Mail*, April 23, 2013.



these theories is far too complex to dwell on here, but most obviously homegrown terrorism is a product of the process of globalization, which is at the heart of all these theories. Homegrown terrorism is born of the unprecedented movement of peoples around the world, the ability of immigrants to stay in regular contact with people and issues in their homelands, and the capacity to spread the messages fueling terrorism with relative ease by the Internet. It is also reflected in the intense pressure felt by the children of immigrants to manage the expectations of two often discordant worlds, the cultural traditions and norms of their parents and the pervasive pop cultural demands of their non-immigrant peer groups. For the young, there is a desperate need to fit in, and yet be seemingly unique, and the torque of the situation can be particularly acute for those from cultural and ethnic minorities. Finally, we live in a world where the local and the global are increasingly merged, where global conflicts and grievances receive attention every day in the media and penetrate into every home. We now worry about what is happening to people continents away. This combination of factors is not completely unique to the late modern world, but it is fair to say that no previous generation of young people, especially immigrant youth, have borne their combined impact to the same degree.

FIGURE 1. THE FIVE ECOLOGICAL NICHEs OF HOMEGROWN TERRORIST RADICALIZATION



For the individuals who radicalize, these factors play into and aggravate the identity struggles characteristic of adolescence and young adulthood, literally making a bad situation worse. But for whatever reason these young men, and some women, are having a really hard time finding themselves. Their lives may also be buffeted by seemingly minor experiences of discrimination and abuse born of their “alien” status, things they have taken to heart in ways that may surprise us. Outwardly, as the New York City Police Department report on homegrown radicalization asserts (Silber and Bhatt 2007), these young people may appear “remarkably ordinary.” Friends and family are little aware of the inner struggles going on, yet studies reveal that the seemingly sudden turn to violence usually has its roots in a prolonged inner turmoil.

Three other complicated yet, in a sense, easily understood psychological factors seem to play a role—one which separates these individuals from other confused and rebellious youth. It is the combination and intensity of these factors, in the right social conditions, that is decisive. First, there is evidence of a marked “quest for significance” (Kruglanski et al. 2014), a desire to make a mark in the world, or to separate from the crowd. Second, there is a real concern with moral issues, with knowing and doing the right thing—again not as determined by the seemingly apathetic and corrupt surrounding society—but by some higher or transcendent authority (Ginges et al. 2011). Third, there is a strong orientation to action, to adventure and risk.

When individuals in this condition come into contact with the terrorist narrative, which more often than not they have sought out, a cognitive opening exists to be recruited to a cause. The terrorist ideology connects the dots in a satisfying way, one which offers a simple but definitive explanation for their angst, offers a grand solution, targets a culprit, and prescribes a course of action. Most of all it sets the individuals struggles in a transcendent frame of meaning that gives an ultimate and virtuous purpose to their existence. It places their personal troubles in solidarity with those of a whole people (Wiktorowicz 2005). The initial appeal may be just fanciful, and the young men play at being radicals. But interaction with others further along in the process, or those fully committed to the cause, online or in person, will consolidate the leanings in rapid order. Invariably it is the shared nature of the experience between close friends or family members that ratchets-up the enthusiasm, and eventually the courage to act. The small



group dynamics are crucial as loyalty to the group takes precedent to everything else, as with a platoon of soldiers at war. As experimental social psychologists have shown in myriad ways, our behaviour is shaped in crucial ways by the contexts into which we are put, far more than we are willing to admit. The students designated as prisoners and guards in the famous Stanford County prison experiment reverted to abusing each other in a matter of days, though they knew full well that they were just role-playing, and the experiment had to be terminated (McCauley and Moskaleiko 2011).

In most cases we would say the help and encouragement of some other outside mentors is required to complete the process of radicalization, to turn wannabe terrorists into deployable agents or independent martyrs for the cause. The process of self-radicalization needs to be legitimated to be complete. Anger and frustration have their role to play in the process, but it is the positive investment in an alternate world-saving role that matters most, no matter how strange it may appear to outsiders. More often than not, the acts of violence will be precipitated by some triggering event, which may be either public or private in nature. The trigger may not make much sense to the rest of us, but it will be consequential in symbolic ways in the terrorist's story of the struggle of good and evil.

In the end, many contingent factors will determine if anyone radicalizes, let alone commits an act of terrorism. In recognizing this we need to be honest about our own lives. Our careers and marriages often are the result of happenstance; the result of meeting the right person or situation at the right time. Such is also the case in the lives of terrorists, and consequently it is the occurrence of a perfect storm of factors that account for why any individual ultimately decides to plant bombs and kill innocent civilians, or leave everything behind to serve the Islamic State in a distant and foreign land.



3. THE PROJECT, METHODS, AND SAMPLE

Our project is quite straightforward in its nature and objectives. Given the dearth of primary data on homegrown terrorists, especially Canadians, at least detailed data anchored in “talking to the terrorists” (Bartlett and Miller 2012; Ilardi 2013), we proposed developing a set of case studies of individual contemporary terrorists based on interviews with them, their family members, friends, and other associates. With the rising concern over foreign fighters the focus of the research shifted primarily to the study of Canadians and other Westerners who were radicalizing and leaving to fight for various jihadist groups in Syria and Iraq. This change reflected the new priorities of the government, but also the contacts we were developing with potential participants in our study. It became apparent that access to these individuals and those who know or support them may be easier than anticipated, given the new role that social media was playing in fomenting and documenting this wave of foreign fighters.

This latter point warrants special emphasis, since even when we started to think about this project, in late 2013 and early 2014, it was not readily apparent just how many foreign fighters were online and using Twitter and other platforms to talk about their experiences (Prucha and Fischer 2013; Carter, Maher and Neumann 2014; Klausen 2015). This kind of mass, real-time communication of individuals engaged in terrorism has never happened before. On the whole terrorist organizations have been early adopters of propaganda online, though never in the ways that ISIS has mastered (Winter 2015a and 2015b). But the independent spread of the word through social media is something unforeseen. The young people travelling to fight in Syria and Iraq are from the first generation in history accustomed to constantly communicating with their friends, family, and others through social media. When they arrived in the war zone many of them simply kept their accounts alive and stayed connected to people back home and elsewhere. ISIS, it appears, soon became aware of this fact and decided to capitalize on it. They have allowed much of the existing communication to continue, though often with some guidelines in place (as our participants have indicated; see SecDev 2015). They also developed teams of recruiters to exploit the more intimate forms of contact allowed by social media. Students of terrorism have



adapted to this new state of affairs just as quickly, so we tend to forget how new and novel the situation is, and hence the originality of seeking to exploit these new channels of communication for research.

In our contacts with foreign fighters and their supporters we make it clear we were not interested in securing operational information or any information that could open them up to prosecution, beyond the fact that they are members of illegal organizations (e.g., information about travel arrangements, contacts, collaborators, specific violent actions or plots). Rather the questions we developed to guide our semi-structured, open-ended, and informant-oriented interviews were focused on: (1) the personal and family background of the foreign fighters; (2) the social networks and sense of identity of the foreign fighters; and (3) the process of becoming foreign fighters. We were seeking to capture a finer sense of their “definition of the situation” of the participants (Meltzer, Petras and Reynolds 1975: 22, 26-27)—their perceptions and interpretations of relevant aspects of their lives and experiences, or in the case of family and friends, of the lives of the foreign fighters they knew. Given the semi-structured and open-ended nature of the interviews, no two are the same. But certain themes are consistently addressed.

In most cases a great deal of time and effort must be invested to even begin to establish the trust necessary to undertake an interview. Some exchanges have been marked by cycles of tolerance, intolerance, and renewed tolerance as well since jihadists have pressed us to offer support for propositions we cannot agree with. We sought to be empathetic but neutral in the face of attempts to convert us or rants condemning us.

In accordance with the dictates of the ethics clearance under which we operate, exceptional efforts are made to de-identify the data and to keep our sources as confidential as possible (see Dawson and Amarasingam 2016). But there is no doubt this is a “high risk” undertaking for all the parties involved.

We aspired to secure perhaps 30–40 interviews, in total, in the short time available to us. By the end of February 2016 we had completed 130 interviews. The composition of this set of interviews is provided in Tables 1 and 2. We can only verify that eight or nine of the actual fighters



interviewed are Canadians. For the rest of the sample, interviewees came from the United States, parts of Europe, the Middle East, and Africa. With a few exceptions, when Skype was used, these “interviews” were actually extended social media dialogues stretching over days, weeks, or even months. The other interviews, with a few exceptions again, were conventional face-to-face encounters which were audio recorded.

In addition, we developed a computer program to monitor relevant Twitter accounts. As of February 2016 we were monitoring 5,604 accounts and we had accumulated a database of over 3 million tweets. This aspect of the project started in a rather ad hoc way as we were monitoring social media contacts in pursuit of potential interviewees. Working in collaboration with others, this program has been revised and improved, and we are currently designing special algorithms to mine this Twitter database and lay the foundations for some machine-learning approaches to the data set. We are seeking to detect and track the language markers of such things as: the progressive radicalization of individuals or groups; detecting when someone has moved from talk to action, or left to become a foreign fighter; the relative importance of religion and politics to individuals and sub-communities of online jihadists; and examining the consequences and effectiveness of Twitter account suspensions. All of this work is still in its initial stages and we are seeking some additional funding to support it as a separate project.

TABLE 1. AFFILIATION OF THE FOREIGN FIGHTERS INTERVIEWED

AFFILIATION	FIGHTERS (MEN & WOMEN)
ISIS	15
Jabhat al-Nusra	12
Free Syrian Army	3
Other Rebel Groups (largely jihadist)	10
Total:	40

TABLE 2. LOCATION OF CANADIAN FAMILY MEMBERS AND FRIENDS INTERVIEWED

PROVINCE	NUMBER OF INTERVIEWEES
Alberta	18
Ontario	12
Quebec	7
British Columbia	3
Total:	40



In addition to our interviews we sought to acquire more general information about Canadians engaged in jihadism. To the best of our knowledge at least 19 Canadians have died fighting in Syria and Iraq: eight from Ontario, eight from Alberta, and three from Quebec. All of these were men and five of them were converts to Islam. We have good reason to believe that the majority of the Canadians in Syria and Iraq are fighting with ISIS. This holds true for our sample of fighters as well; we can identify about 12 or more Canadians fighting with Jabhat al-Nusra, Ahrar as-Sham, or other jihadi and rebel groups. Fifteen or more Canadians appear to have fought with Kurdish or Christian militias. It also is likely that around 10–15 women have left Canada to become supporters of ISIS, and most likely brides of jihadists in Syria and Iraq. We know that three have given birth to babies as a result of their marriages to ISIS fighters, who are usually other foreign fighters. At least two more Canadian women are thought to be pregnant when this report was being written. It is extremely difficult to verify any of this information, however, and for the most part we are merely reporting what one or more individuals have told us. In some cases, the sources are so close to the individuals under consideration that we have every reason to be confident of the information, but in other instances the links are more tenuous and second-hand.

The official number of Canadians fighting in Syria and Iraq is 100. We have confirmed the identity of 62 (see Table 3), but have heard rumors of many more.

TABLE 3. CANADIAN FOREIGN FIGHTERS WE HAVE IDENTIFIED (2011–2016)

GENDER		PROVINCES		ETHNIC BACKGROUND	
Male	52	Ontario	22	Unknown	11
Female	10	Alberta	17	Somali	11
		Quebec	16	Algerian	8
		Unknown	4	Lebanese	5
		British Columbia	3	Bangladeshi	4
				Pakistani	4
				Syrian	4
				White	4
		Afghan	3		
		Jamaican	2		
		Moroccan	2		
		Bosnian	1		
		Indian	1		
		Libyan	1		
		Sudanese	1		

For additional information on the novel methods employed in this groundbreaking research, see Appendix 1. For information on the complex process and innovative result of the application for ethics clearance for this project see Dawson and Amarasingam 2016.

Given the time and space constraints involved in this report and the complexity of the material, the following discussion is limited to our initial findings for individuals actually fighting in Syria and Iraq. The 40 interviews completed to date with parents and family members are rich enough to warrant separate and more fulsome treatment elsewhere, while the interviews with various wannabe foreign fighters and other kinds of online supporters of jihad are very diverse in nature and harder to code and compare. Some information from all three sets of interviews has been briefly discussed in several conference presentations (Dawson and Amarasingam 2015).

4. SOCIAL MEDIA INTERVIEWS WITH JIHADISTS: CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS

In the case of the fighters in the zone of conflict, the social media “interview” process is, of course, wholly unlike a conventional face-to-face research interview and the format poses several problems that need to be kept in mind.

- First, during these text conversations, the interviewer cannot take account of the body language, facial expressions, and other mannerisms of the participants when asking questions and following up on answers.
- Second, while face to face interviews tend to last two or three hours, and are characterized by fluid back and forth exchanges, these text conversations tend to be quite disjointed and some are ongoing after many months and years. Two or three questions may be sent to fighters before there is a response, and then the response may only address some of the questions. Conversations can begin but lead nowhere as the interviewee simply disappears. Days or weeks may pass before people message us back, and at that point the conversation usually needs to be started again. They may forget what they have already said and repeat themselves. On several occasions, partway through the interview, we have come to learn that our participant has been killed.
- Third, even when they do answer questions openly, their answers tend to be very brief



(compared to those from a conventional in-person interview). This is a consequence of the medium. People “say more” than they are willing to take the time to type (especially on small handheld devices).

- Fourth, it is clear that many of the participants remain wary of expressing some thoughts through social media no matter what assurances are provided or level of rapport is achieved.
- Fifth, even taking this into consideration, we must admit that the fighters we have interacted with are less forthcoming with their personal stories than we hoped. By circumstance, and perhaps by nature, they seem to be relatively unreflective or lacking in self-awareness, or fairly inarticulate in discussing their past and thoughts. Much of this can be attributed to the youthfulness of the sample. It may also reflect the fact that they are more oriented to action than words. We are acquiring pertinent information, but not with the richness of detail we anticipated.
- Sixth, it is apparent that the fighters we have contacted prefer to use existing jihadi religious conceptions of life in general to make sense of their own circumstances and the behavior of others. This proclivity is typical of religious converts and is both a hindrance to our efforts and a significant finding in itself.

Nonetheless, we think we are acquiring useful information and insights through this process (see Section 6.4 below), and it must be recognized that there are few alternatives available. Relative to the dearth of existing primary data about foreign fighters, we have begun to acquire an extraordinary body of data. But we are learning as well, through experience, how we might conduct these interviews better in the future.

5. CANADIAN CLUSTERS

The short history of Canadians leaving to fight in Syria and Iraq adds support to one of the more robust findings of the study of homegrown terrorism: the central role played by pre-existing social networks, of kinship and friendship largely, and the social-psychological dynamics of the small groups, in recruitment and radicalization of extremists (Sageman 2004, 2008; McCauley and Moskalenko 2011; *Tsintsadze-Maass and Maass 2014; Hafez and Mullins 2014*). In the course of



this study it became increasingly apparent that Canadian foreign fighters have largely left to join the fight in “clusters,” and so presumably they had radicalized together as well.

One of the first clusters Canadians became aware of was in Calgary, Alberta. The Calgary cluster consisted of Damian Clairmont, Salman Ashrafi, Gregory and Collin Gordon, as well as a few other individuals we have identified but still need to confirm further (Stark 2014; Bell 2014b). They left for Syria sometime in November or December 2012. While they were friends, their biographical details are quite varied. Ashrafi was born Muslim, educated at the University of Lethbridge, held a prestigious job with Talisman Energy, and he was married with a child. In November 2013, he died in a suicide attack in Iraq that killed forty others (Bell 2014c). Clairmont, in contrast, was a white convert, suffered from bipolar disorder, was a high school dropout, and was homeless for a time in Calgary. Clairmont and Ashrafi were close friends and part of an Islamic study circle with the Gordon brothers and several others. Interviews with their friends in Calgary indicate that Clairmont was the dominant personality, and influenced many of the other young men in this cluster. He left Calgary in late 2012 and fought with the al-Qaeda-affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra and later ISIS. He was captured and killed by the Free Syrian Army in January 2014 (Bell 2014d).

Another fighter with some connection to the Calgary study circle is Ahmed Waseem from Windsor, Ontario. Waseem’s story is particularly interesting because he came back to Canada after being injured sometime in 2013 (Kwan 2014; Logan 2014). After experiencing increased surveillance and having his passport seized by Canadian intelligence agents, he secured a fraudulent passport, returned to the Middle East and, according to his Twitter feed, had been regularly involved in fierce battles in Syria ever since. Around January 2015, he joined ISIS along with some other Western fighters. He was killed in the battle of Tal Hamis in March 2015.

Farah Shirdon, who was discussed above, also left from Calgary for Syria and ISIS. He had some contact with the Calgary cluster and is often associated with them in media reports, but he was not part of this cluster.

While it was the Calgary cluster that initially made the news in Canada, Ontario is still the



point of origin for far greater number of foreign fighters. Of the 60+ Canadian foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq that we have tried to investigate, close to half are from Ontario. Perhaps the most intriguing case is the story of Andre Poulin (known as Abu Muslim) from Timmins, who was discussed above. Born in 1989, Poulin converted to Islam from Roman Catholicism in 2009, noting in an online forum that he was “convinced through the scientific nature of the Qur’an that it was indeed the truth.” Poulin also traveled to Syria in November or December 2012 (as did the Calgary cluster). Initially he did not seem to be part of a “cluster” — indeed the media attention he received stressed how outlandish and threatening it was that someone from Timmins, a small and isolated northern city (43,000 people) with few Muslims and no mosque, could become the star of an ISIS propaganda video. But our research, and the investigation of reporters, showed the truth to be otherwise. Around 2011, Poulin told family and friends that he was moving to Toronto to be closer to other Muslims. In Toronto, Poulin met with Muhammad Ali from Mississauga (Bell 2014e). They had become friends in an online forum long before this first meeting and in Toronto they would see each other regularly. Ali was born in 1990 and went to Ryerson University to study aerospace engineering. He did not do well, however, and “failed out” after a year. It was then that he started asking questions about life and the afterlife, and found many answers in Islam, the religion of his upbringing. He went to online forums and began interacting with fellow Muslims — one of them being Poulin. Ali would leave for Syria in April 2014, almost a year after Poulin had died. Of course Poulin made other friends when he was in Toronto, some of whom he seems to have influenced significantly. At least four young men in Toronto (three Bangladeshi-Canadians and one Indian-Canadian) became his friends and left for Syria around the same time he did. At this time, very little is known about these men, however, except that some or all of them returned to Toronto in late 2013, only to leave again in July 2014. Interestingly, on July 13, 2014, Muhammad Ali posted a screenshot of a text-message conversation he was having on his phone. The message read: “This is the friends of Omar Abu Muslim [i.e., Poulin] from Canada. We are in Turkey now and we want to know which way to get into Syria and join Islamic State.” From this message we can deduce that while Ali and Poulin were friends in Toronto, Ali likely did not know Poulin’s other Toronto friends until later.



Early in 2015 news broke about another cluster of young men from Ottawa. In January charges of participation in a terrorist activity were brought against Suliman Mohamed and two twin brothers, Ashton and Carlos Larmond, for seeking to fly to Turkey and join ISIS. Then in February more charges were leveled against three others: Awso Peshdary, John Maguire, and Khadar Khalib. All of these men knew each other and it is thought that Peshdary played a key role in the radicalization of the others. Maguire, who we discussed above, and Khalib managed to make it to Syria, where they joined ISIS. It is thought that they had been reaching out to other members of a network of friends to recruit them to join ISIS in Syria (Baksh and Arsenault 2015).

Almost simultaneously, another group of young people, at least two women and four men, left Montreal together for Turkey and then Syria (January 2015). All were students together at a Montreal college, Collège de Maisonneuve. In May of 2015 ten more young people were detained at the Montreal airport on their way to join the militants in Syria. They were returned to the cognizance of their parents and, because they are underage, not much is known about them. But it is thought they had ties with the six who left earlier and were from the same college (CBC News 2015a and 2015b).²

Community sources have also told us about other possible clusters. But it is often hard to confirm the details of what we heard from confidential sources. We were told some time ago about, and interviewed family members and friends of, three Somali Canadians from Edmonton who had died fighting in Syria. Recently released ISIS application documents confirm that Omar Abdirahman, brothers Hamza and Hersi Kariye, and their cousin Mahad Hersi all entered ISIS territory in Syria on November 12, 2013 (Arsenault and Baksh 2016). We heard that as many as ten others may have departed Edmonton in 2013 and 2014.

Since then a number of other individuals, singly or in pairs, have either been arrested on terrorism charges because they have attempted to fly to Turkey and then join a jihadist group in Syria or the government has sought peace bonds to significantly restrict their activities for the same reason. Three of the more publicized examples are: Aaron Driver from Winnipeg (Barghout 2015), Kevin Omar Mohamed from Waterloo (Bell 2016a), and Kadir Abdul and Samuel Augus-

² We have interviewed several of their friends, and have more interviews planned for this year.



tine Aviles in Toronto (Bell 2016b).

During the course of the coming year, we will be interviewing more Canadians who have become or tried to become foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq. We are not seeking here, however, to provide a definitive account of such Canadians.

6. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS FROM RECENT STUDIES OF FOREIGN FIGHTERS

Numerous reports have appeared in the last few years on various aspects of the foreign fighter issue. Many have concentrated on describing and analyzing the virtual imprint of the “Caliphate,” that is the prolific and adroit creation and dissemination of propaganda online and the exploitation of a wide array of social media platforms to spread the message and actively facilitate the travel of people to Syria, and even groom new foreign fighters (Prucha and Fischer 2013; Lynch et al. 2014; Klausen 2015; Winter 2015a and 2015b; Amarasingam 2015a; Zelin 2015). Other reports have been broader in scope, reporting on the latest data about foreign fighters and the nature of the phenomenon (Hegghammer 2013; Batrawi 2013; Gudmundson 2013; Pantucci 2013; Zammit 2013; Zelin 2013; Barrett 2014; Carter et al. 2014a and 2014b; Reinares and Garcia-Calvo 2014; Saarinen 2014; AIVD 2014; Gates and Potter 2015; CSIS 2016). Two brief publications have focused specifically on Canadian foreign fighters (Anzalone 2015; Amarasingam 2015b).³ These reports, however, are overwhelmingly descriptive in nature. They largely rely on summaries of information available from public sources, items in the news, government statements, and some court documents.⁴

Four recent reports are more substantive and original in nature, and based largely on new primary data (in addition to conventional open sources). In order of their publication, these studies are:

1. Daan Weggemans, Edwin Bakker, and Peter Grol, “Who are They and Why do They Go? The Radicalisation and Preparatory Processes of Dutch Jihadist Foreign Fighters,” *Perspectives on*

³ There also is a lot of very good news reporting on the foreign fighter issue, especially from such sources as *The New York Times* and *The Guardian*.

⁴ More generally three good books have been published as well: Jessica Stern and J. M. Berger, *ISIS: The State of Terror* (New York: HarperCollins, 2015); Michael Weiss and Hassan Hassan, *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror* (New York: Reagan Arts, 2015); William McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2015).



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2. Edwin Bakker and Peter Grol, "Motives and Considerations of Potential Foreign Fighters from the Netherlands" International Centre for Counter Terrorism (ICCT) Policy Brief, July 2015
3. Lorenzo Vidino and Seamus Hughes, "ISIS in America: From Retweets to Raqqa" Program on Extremism, George Washington University, December, 2015
4. Rik Coolsaet, "Facing the Fourth Foreign Fighter Wave: What Drives Europeans to Syria, and to Islamic State? Insights from the Belgian Case" Egmont—Royal Institute for International Relations, March 2016

These reports also aim to provide better insights into the motivations of foreign fighters and wannabe foreign fighters, though the analysis provided is still largely descriptive. As such they provide the most immediate and logical comparative context for analyzing our findings.

6.1 Dutch Foreign Fighters: "Low Prospects" and the Search for "Purpose"

The two studies by the Dutch researchers report on early and important efforts to develop detailed case studies of individuals. In the first study, Weggemans, Bakker, and Grol develop the biographies of five Dutch jihadist foreign fighters based on interviews "with eighteen persons who had been in the direct environment of the five [individuals] during their radicalization phase and during the time they were preparing their travel to Syria" (2014: 101). This material is presented in the form of two composite life stories. The key observations derived from this exercise also were shared with a focus group of twenty-five "frontline professionals and policymakers" dealing with radicalization and the foreign fighter issue. Their reactions are folded into the analysis offered, but given the small sample of foreign fighters under consideration the analysis remains very descriptive and the authors are leery of drawing generalizations. The second study by Bakker and Grol is based on semi-structured interviews with twenty people who were close to six individuals who at some point had entertained travelling to fight in Syria. Interviews were also conducted with four of the six potential leavers. Both these studies relied on relevant infor-



mation available in the mass media as well.

Regrettably the results from these two similar studies are not presented in a uniform manner, or even very systematically. A critical synthesis of their conclusions, however, reveals the following findings of note (see below). The labels used to sort this material are provided by us. To convey an accurate sense of the findings, however, and make the comparison with our own findings as authentic as possible, we have retained some of the redundancy and ambiguity of the categories, findings, and discussions offered in the two Dutch studies.

1. **Role of the Internet:** In the case of the five people who left, it is stated that the internet did not play “a decisive role” in their radicalization (2014: 107). While “most” of the six people who thought about leaving but choose not to, “had intensive contact (via the Internet, social media) for longer or shorter periods of time with ideologically like-minded people who—most probably—managed to strongly influence the person in question and encouraged him or her to leave” (2015: 13).
2. **Children of Immigrants and Some Converts:** The leavers and the non-leavers came predominantly from Islamic immigrant families, but some also came from ethnically Dutch families.
3. **Age:** The explicit age of everyone is not mentioned in each case covered by the studies, but it is clear they are mainly individuals in their early twenties.
4. **Socio-Economic Status:** As a whole, both sets of individuals come from lower or lower middle class backgrounds and they attained modest levels of education. They have also been raised, it is said, in “relatively bad neighbourhoods” (2014: 107). More specifically it is stated that the non-leavers have been “exposed to crime and drug abuse (in their immediate circle)” (2015: 13).
5. **Frustration and Meaninglessness:** With regard to the leavers it was noted that they have likely experienced “strong frustrations... in the years before they left about their own societal position ... or that of their ethnic groups” (2014: 107). Going further, it is stated: “Among our research subjects we found feelings of apathy and lack of meaningfulness in their lives in the period before they left for Syria” (2014: 108). While for the non-leavers it is simply stated that



most of them had “limited chances on the labour market and of a social career.” In addition, it is noted that most of them “have few friends and/or limited contact with their families. Some of them can be classified as loners or lonely” (2015: 13).

6. **Old and New Social Networks:** Both studies suggest that prior to leaving for Syria or planning to do so most of the individuals became increasingly isolated from their past social networks, developed bonds with new networks involving those who shared and helped to reinforce their radical views, and they came, at least somewhat, under the influence of “charismatic persons” or “inspiring figures” (2014: 108; 2015: 13).
7. **Personal Crises:** The study of leavers further notes that some of them had experienced personal losses and significant disappointments in their lives prior to radicalizing “such as loss of a loved one or experiencing difficulties at school or work and trouble with authorities” (2014: 108). No similar finding is reported in the case of the non-leavers.
8. **Religiosity:** Similarly, it is noted that the leavers “showed an increased interest in religion in the period before they left for Syria” (2014: 108). The study of potential leavers makes no similar observation, but notes that several persons cited religious reasons as part of their motivations for thinking about going to Syria, referencing the “new beginning” associated with the establishment of the caliphate by ISIS and the personal religious duty to emigrate to Syria and “help out Muslims in need” (2015: 14). Others, it is noted, were more concerned about helping relatives in Syria and moved by admiration for those battling against the Assad regime.
9. **Sense of Purpose:** Finally, both reports allude to these people seeking to participate in the Syrian conflict because it “seemed to provide them with a sense of purpose and fulfil their need to belong” (2014: 108), though the discussion of this point is rather muted and indirect.

Regrettably, it is not always clear what some of the comments made in these two studies mean, even after the individual case studies provided have been read several times. Moreover, both studies highlight two things: (1) the “complex and diverse picture” that emerges of the foreign fighters and their process of radicalization and preparation for leaving; (2) more empirical



case studies are needed “to arrive at a set of well-defined factors, circumstances or dynamics that will help us to understand this phenomenon” (2014: 108; 2015: 16).

Nonetheless a somewhat common impression is left about the motivations for joining the jihad, one which conforms with wider popular perceptions or even prejudices: most of the foreign fighters and wannabe foreign fighters are young people that have limited prospects in life, are relatively unhappy with what is happening in their lives, are looking for some greater meaning and sense of belonging, and are heavily influenced by the small groups they come into contact with as a result of their seeking some relief from their condition. Factually, up to a point, this set of observations is helpful.⁵ It fits, in many respects, with the classic relative deprivation explanation of the motivations for becoming a radical or extremist (Gurr 1970; Walker and Smith 2002). In this instance we are dealing with people who are actually deprived to some degree, but it is really their perception of their situation that matters most. They perceive that they, and the groups they identify with, are more deprived than they should be, and that something should be done about it. There is also a sense that there should be more to life, in terms of meaning and purpose. This account points to an expanded sense of the social, psychological, and even moral forms of relative deprivation that people may experience, in addition to the more conventional economic and political forms of deprivation (Glock 1964). But we are dealing with an impression that is not framed with the precision needed to explore these theoretical possibilities.

6.2 Belgian Foreign Fighters: “Youth Subculture of ‘No Future’”

If cast in terms of the push and pull factors accounting for recruitment to social movements, in the two Dutch studies the emphasis falls primarily on the push factors. In the most recent study of foreign fighters from Belgium, by Rik Coolsaet, this emphasis is even more explicit. Coolsaet chastises radicalization studies after the Madrid and London homegrown terrorism bombings (i.e., “post-2004 studies”) for being too preoccupied with tracing how individuals became terrorists at the expense of the emphasis in pre-9/11 terrorism studies on the “wider circumstances and context” in which terrorism arises (2016: 12-13). Insufficient attention has

⁵ This perspective is in line with the results of Edwin Bakker’s earlier analysis in “Characteristics of Jihadi Terrorists in Europe (2001-2009)” (see Bakker 2011).



been given to the role of “a conducive or instigating environment” (2016: 13). But, all the same, we have learned, Coolsaet also stresses, that radicalization is “a more or less prolonged group process” of “socialisation into extremism.” Much depends on understanding the group dynamics fostering strong loyalty to an in-group and estrangement from an out-group that is subject to dehumanization (2016: 12).

We agree, but in delineating his views Coolsaet sets an overly strong dichotomy between social processes and ideology. “Radicalisation is first and foremost,” he asserts, “a socialization process in which group dynamics (kinship and friendship) are more important than ideology.” In the process “of gathering extremism,” he concludes, “for most of the individuals involved, it is not the narrative (i.e., the ideology) that eventually lures them into terrorism. There is moreover no path dependency between the acquisition of radical ideas and the actual turn to violence” (2016: 12).

The radicalization of any one individual is a messy and complex process and the key causal factors are difficult to discern even when we have copious information about the person (Storm 2014; Seierstad 2015). Merely holding radical beliefs, we agree, is a poor indicator of the potential to actually engage in violent actions (Bartlett and Miller 2012; Khalil 2014; McCauley and Moskalenko 2014). Social contexts and small group dynamics are undoubtedly crucial to the process, as we stress in our social ecology model of radicalization. But our examination of the research literature and our interactions with foreign fighters incline us to disagree with Coolsaet. Nothing would happen without the framing work done by ideology, and consequently the religiosity of these foreign fighters is paramount in interpreting their actions. The religious ideology plays a central and constitutive role in their identity and their sense of purpose in life. Some naive analysts may place too much emphasis on the role of bad ideas in driving terrorism. But there is little to be gained by replacing one either/or scenario with another equally limiting one. We need to adopt a more holistic approach.

In comparing today’s European foreign fighters with those of past decades Coolsaet suggests there are four differences: (1) they “are on average many years younger” (i.e., 20–24); (2)



their decision to leave to fight is much more “sudden”; (3) “their acquaintance with religious thought is undoubtedly more shallow and superficial ... as is their acquaintance with international politics”; and (4) a great many more of them are leaving to fight (2016: 16-17). Some of these suppositions are probably correct, but little in the way of clear and substantial evidence is provided. Coolsaet relies on these differences, however, to undergird his main argument about the “newest wave of jihadi terrorism” (2016: 19). Drawing on the influential views of the French scholar of Islam Oliver Roy (2015), he argues two things: (1) we need to look to “a specific, age-related set of personal motives” as “the driving force behind [the] decision to go to the Levant,” and (2) “religion has systematically decreased as a driver of violence as the waves of foreign fighters unfolded” (2016: 20). Most specifically, he subscribes to Roy’s notion that contemporary jihadism is rooted in a “‘no future’ youth subculture” and not religion per se. In Roy’s view we are not witnessing “the radicalization of Islam” so much as “the Islamization of radicalism.” Today’s “terrorists are not the expression of a radicalization of the Muslim population, but rather reflect a generational revolt that affects a very precise category of youth” (Roy 2015, cited in Coolsaet 2016: 26).

Coolsaet argues that “two groups of Europeans traveling to Syria can be distinguished.” The first group cannot be distinguished from and often actually consists of the troubled youth that populate street gangs. For them the Islamic State is just the newest and most appealing “super gang” (2016: 21-22). As Coolsaet concludes: “For this group, the outbreak of the civil war in Syria and the emergence of IS as the primary jihadi group merely offered a new and supplementary channel for deviant behavior, next to membership in street gangs, rioting, drug trafficking, and delinquency” (2016: 23). The second group “is more fuzzy and is composed of individuals with widely varying personal, age-related motivations” (2016: 21). Referring to this more amorphous group Coolsaet comments (2016: 24):

They often mention earlier personal difficulties (of various kinds), that left them feeling stifled and discontented. Frequently, they express feelings of exclusion and absence of belonging, as if they didn’t have a stake in society. One gets the impression of solitary, isolated adolescents, frequently at odds with family ... and friends, in search of belonging. The succession of such estrangements result at a certain age in anger.

It is worth noting that Coolsaet does not present any direct evidence or primary data for this



summary view of what is happening. The limited citations are to a few brief autobiographic and biographic accounts published in the news media, magazines, and academic journals. Elsewhere he warns against “the risk of excessive generalization” when relying on “statements by combatants.” Quite rightly he observes that these “declarations might amount to nothing more than a discourse developed to make sense of and to justify their own behavior, rather than a truthful attempt to gauge the often complex motivations behind their decisions to voyage to a distant war zone” (2016: 21). This is a fair comment, but it poses problems. Sometimes we can use such sources, seemingly, and sometimes we cannot. But what criterion should guide us in making this decision? Is it simply whether the data in question happen to align with our interpretative inclinations? Decades of research with the accounts provided by converts to new religious movements reveals that ex-members may seek to cast their actions as stemming from social and psychological forces beyond their control. This interpretation of their past actions allows them to avoid taking full responsibility for their decisions, especially in the face of familial and social condemnation of the beliefs and actions of the groups they joined (Dawson 2006). This situation is the obverse of the one Coolsaet is postulating.

At any rate, in the end Coolsaet unites the two groups of young European foreign fighters under one interpretation: “Going to Syria is an escape from a life seemingly without prospects” (2016: 27). This conclusion sounds similar to the one reached by Weggemans, Bakker, and Grol (2014 and 2015), and it is broadly in line with the reference to marginalized immigrant youth in much of the literature on radicalization in Europe (Spalek, 2007; Cesari 2008, 2011; Githens-Mazer 2010).⁶ The problem is, the description probably applies to a much wider swath of youth in Europe than the tiny handful who entertain becoming foreign fighters, let alone engaging in terrorism. The specificity problem looms large, but none of the studies chooses to comment on this obvious limitation.

⁶ Coolsaet specifically draws a connection to information on the Dutch foreign fighter contingent, noting the similarities, on page 36 of his report.



6.3 American Foreign Fighters: “Diversity of Motives” and the Search for “Purpose”

Vidino and Hughes (2015) provide an excellent overview of ISIS-related activity in the United States. There are two parts to their study. In Chapter 1, they analyze the profile of the 71 individuals charged with various ISIS-related offences between March 2014 and September 2015. This profile is the result of the study of “7,000 pages of legal documents detailing ISIS-related legal proceedings ... [s]upplemented by original research and interviews with prosecutors, reporters, and, in some select cases, families of the charged individuals” (2015: 5). In Chapter 2, they take a close look at the extensive ways in which the internet and social media are being used by ISIS and its supporters with particular reference to the American context. Both discussions are well-illustrated with details from specific cases. Our concern in this context is limited to their overall finding with regard to the profile and motivations of Americans involved with ISIS.

In 2015 alone, Vidino and Hughes note, more people were arrested on terrorism charges in the United States than any year since 9/11. The average age of the people profiled over the whole period of their study is 26. Most (86%) are male; 51% were involved in either travelling or attempting to travel abroad to engage in terrorism; 27% engaged in plots to attack the United States itself; and their activities occurred in 21 states. A small number of these individuals have been killed: “three inside the U.S. and at least a dozen abroad” (2015: ix). “Approximately 40% of those arrested are converts to Islam” (2015: 7).

Most importantly, for our purposes, in their Executive Summary Vidino and Hughes report: The profiles of individuals involved in ISIS-related activities in the U.S. differ widely in race, age, social class, education, and family background. Their motivations are equally diverse and defy analysis.

This conclusion contrasts fairly sharply with the impression created by Bakker and Grol’s, and Coolsaet’s findings. The reasons for the difference remain unclear. Perhaps we are dealing with differences generated by a contrast in the levels and types of socio-economic integration (and hence “prospects”) experienced by Muslim immigrants in Europe and the United States. At this point we cannot know, and especially with regard to the foreign fighters from the West in Syria and Iraq, because we lack the data needed to make a sound determination.

More specifically, Vidino and Hughes go on to note that “[i]ndividuals with such diverse



backgrounds are unlikely to be motivated by the same factors” (2015: 15). Some policymakers and academics favour using social structural factors to explain what is happening, while others “stress personal factors such as the shock of a life-changing event” (2015: 15). But in the end, they state: “most experts agree that radicalization is a highly complex and individualized process, often shaped by a poorly understood interaction of structural and personal factors” (2015: 15).

With regard to the spectrum of support for ISIS in America they postulate there was a shift in people’s motivations. In the early stages of the conflict, they observe, “an underlying sense of sympathy and compassion appeared to play an important role in initially motivating young Americans to become interested and invested in the Syrian conflict. But [b]y the time ISIS formally declared its caliphate in June 2014, the motivations of recruits appeared to revolve more around fulfilling perceived religious obligations, such as performing *hijrah* ... and the opportunity to participate in the creation of a utopian Islamic society” (2015: 15). Still they insist, quite sensibly, that “ideological motivations are deeply intertwined with, and impossible to separate from, personal motives” (2015: 15); and they go on to conclude that a “search for belonging, meaning, and/or identity appears to be a crucial motivator for many Americans (and other Westerners) who embrace ISIS’s ideology” (2015: 16).

6.4 Our Sample of Foreign Fighters: “The Promise of More”

At this stage in our overall research we have yet to complete the analysis of all 40 of our interviews with actual foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq. The comments below stem from the detailed analysis of the interviews completed with 20 individuals fighting with either ISIS, Jabhat al-Nusra, or small independent groups aligned with al-Qaeda. The sample is small, but at this mid-point in our research the primary data is already significantly larger and more direct in nature than that accessed in the Dutch, Belgian, and American studies. Still, given the small and non-random nature of our sample so far, caution must be exercised in drawing any generalizations from the data. Things may change as more of our existing interviews are analyzed and more interviews are undertaken. Moreover, we must hold in mind the limitations of relying on extended social media “interviews,” as discussed in Section 3.



We are able to get specific information about the most basic aspects of how and why individuals radicalized from about two-thirds of our sample. The quality of the data is highly variable and some of the individuals we tried to interview were unwilling to move far beyond engaging us in religious and political discussions. These people are not part of the sample analyzed here. It is pertinent to mention them, however, since we think it further illustrates the primacy of religious ideas and commitments in the self-conception of those who have become foreign fighters.

The quotations from participants provided below offer some sense of the voice of these foreign fighters. They are presented in their original form, with all the typos, abbreviations, and other mistakes included. We also have retained the sequenced and short format of social media exchanges. Where necessary we have inserted statements to indicate the context of the comments. To sustain the fullest possible confidentiality, as required by the dictates of our ethics clearance, identifying information has been stripped from these quotations. Finally, the quotations used, it must be stressed, are merely illustrative.

Some of the most basic data derived from this initial sample of 20 foreign fighters is as follows:

- The sample is all male.
- All the members of this sample are jihadists and all have done some fighting, though many were doing media work or simple guard duty when we communicated with them.
- With the exception of one man who seems to be at least middle aged or older, and two men who would not state their age, our fighters were in their twenties, with ages arranging from 22 to 28.
- About a third are Canadians, a couple are American, and a couple are from the UK. The others are from unspecified places in the Middle East or Africa. Several were from mixed backgrounds, in terms of their ethnicity and nationality, and have lived some of their lives in the West and/or the home countries of at least one of their parents (e.g., India, Libya, Saudi Arabia, Yemen).



- The vast majority of the fighters we interacted with are from Muslim families, but there are five converts in this initial sample of 20 interviewees.
- Curiously the majority of this initial sample are opposed to ISIS, or as they more commonly called it *dawlah* (the State). This may be an artefact of our snowball sampling, since we were often tapping into existing social networks, and simply how far we have progressed in analyzing our interview transcripts. Several are members of Jabhat al-Nusra, though they often had been affiliated for a time with other independent groups or with ISIS. Many left their precise affiliation vague, but they are critical of the theological and the violent excesses of ISIS. In particular, ISIS was condemned for the promotion of *fitna*, or unnecessary conflict between Muslims. Several participants also indicated they objected to some of the ways in which ISIS was imposing *sharia* law. On this basis we assume they are members of one of the many small groups more or less affiliated with al-Qaeda in this conflict.

More thematically, certain findings from this sample stand out which help to locate these fighters relative to the findings from the Dutch, Belgian, and American studies:

(1) Both the converts and most of the Muslim youth in this sample say they either underwent their conversion or became much more religious, engaging in intensive study and practice of their faith, in their teenage years, with ages ranging from 14 to 18 years old. Only one person says he became much more religious at a somewhat later point, after dropping out of his first year in university. In one way or another almost everyone dwelled on the significance of this youthful turn to religion in explaining their process of becoming foreign fighters. For the Muslims it is a kind of “born-again” experience. This aspect of their story usually emerged quite spontaneously and without much prompting from us. An American convert, for example, explained:

I shahada [converted] at 15.

Where I lived there was no mosque or even no Muslims.

All my brother interaction was online.

I immediately practiced to the best of my abilities.

The conversion was prompted by the hypocrisy he saw around him, in his Protestant Christian world, and his confusion over all the different versions of the Bible and Christianity. He says:



Where I'm from people are religious in public
But at home use some vulgar [language] drink alcohol.
Things like that.
Was never confident with Christianity.
Things never seemed to fit together.

As fighter with a Muslim background told us:

I was taught about the importance of Islam and Arabic which helped me through my life.
During my life I always loved dawah [proselytizing] and telling people about Islam and it increased my faith. Living in the West harmed my religion as I was exposed to attractions of sins and life so naturally I went astray during my early teens

For this participant, when the promises of a "Western way of life" didn't produce happiness, he looked back on his own upbringing, and the traditions he grew up with. As he noted, "I got depressed and my life crashed." When asked why, he somewhat enigmatically said, "For chasing life and life running away."

In some instances, it is clear that even the initial turn to religion is fused with a partial process of radicalization. Speaking of his early childhood, for example, one Western Muslim participant said:

The zeal for jihad always struck me when I would sit in my room and read Qur'an with English translation. I would wonder how jihad was fought today. At the outbreak of 2011 war in Syria, the thinking of going began and brothers from town who had gone were an inspiration.

Another Muslim, originally from India, said he first thought about jihad during the second Intifada, when he must have been quite young:

Wanted to go to Palestine ... All friends would talk about it...
But was just talk ...
Someone referred me to milestones by sayyid qutb when i was in my teens ...
Read it ...
Studied more about jihad by al qaeda ... Seemed legit ...
Wanted to join some group long ago ... Didn't find any way ...
Allah brought us a mercy from himself in the form of Syrian civil war.
[ellipses were in the original message]

(2) Several of our participants are the only children in their families, and only one mentions a sibling radicalizing, and also becoming a foreign fighter. Several mention that their brothers and sisters were actively opposed to their decision. Most of their parents regret their decision to go to Syria as well, and are unsympathetic to jihadism. But we only encountered one instance of



where there was evidence of a significant clash between a father and son that may have factored into the person's radicalization. Most still respect and care about their parents, while disparaging them for being "coconuts" (i.e., brown on the outside and white on the inside). When asked whether he has brothers or sisters, one fighter pointed out:

I do and they are not happy about it. Especially my sister who is younger than me. But she learned to live with it I guess. She didn't know until I was here.

When asked about his parents, he noted:

I informed them through social media. My mom was shocked; my dad was angry too. They both tried with me to go back "before getting involved" as they put it but with time they got used to it, especially when I assured them that I was mostly involved in training.

(3) About half our sample reports at least going to university and a third mentioned graduating with specific degrees. Many of these individuals only fully radicalized after graduating. Several indicated that they enjoyed their studies, but most indicated that they were discontent while in school because they felt the need for something more in their lives. One Muslim participant from the West comments:

Before this jihad, I like the idea of shahada. The idea of no accountability in the grave and on the day of judgment, but I wasn't ready to leave the confines of my life in UK. In 2011, it was announced that a local brother was Shaheed in Syria – that's when it started. I started thinking and asking to myself – 'you know what, if he can do it, why can't I? He's in Jannah now while you are sitting here living a mundane life of simply university, work, making money'.

(4) None of our sample indicated coming from familial situations of poverty or marginality. On the contrary, many indicated they had fairly happy and privileged, or at least comfortable, childhoods. In general, there was almost no discussion of the economic situation of their families. Several participants made a point of stating that something about the West didn't "fit" with their religiosity and that they started to feel increasingly out of place. Quite typically a Western convert stated things very succinctly:

Family was average middle class.
Nice neighborhood.
Good friends.

Another fighter when asked about several aspects of his life in the UK stated:

Life was good, I was happy with my friends
and living a nice easy relaxing life
but wanted jihad to give back to Allah,



to prove myself to Allah that I can fight in his way.
All my relationships allhamdulillah wer (sic) good. no racism

When pressed to explain if he felt he had to escape a bad situation where he lived, one fighter took issue with media portrayals of why some people become foreign fighters:

Firstly these people who say muslims who join are bored or looking for adventure are propagandists. Its kind of orientalism. They want to portray the guys who go to jihad like the same people who in the west go on killing rampages for no reason or because they are bored or psychos.

Many muhajireen I know came with their wives and children. Some were about to get married ...

Some divorced their wives ... Some left parents whom they loved the most ... All this is strange ...

This is all for the sake of Allah.

This is why they look strange to people ... hence ghuraba [the feeling of being stranger, associated with being a Muslim amongst non-Muslims].

[ellipses in the original message]

Another fighter makes relevant comments when asked why aspiring foreign fighters seem to leave for Syria in clusters:

We move in groups because your venturing into the unknown after having lived a life of ease, luxury and knowing your environment.

(5) Reports of the religiousness of the parents vary widely, but about half of the group received some formal religious education as a child (i.e., Quranic studies and Islamic schooling). For a few the religious education in childhood was intensive and prolonged; this was true for fighters who grew up in Africa, the Middle East, and some cases in the West too.

(6) Most of the sample are single, but several are married and a few have children. In several of the interviews quite a bit of time was spent talking about these matters. Many of our participants, though, made it clear that they were uncomfortable and unwilling to talk about their parents, families, or wives. We cannot say why since in keeping with Canadian Tri-Council ethical guidelines it is inappropriate for us to press further once they have made such a declaration.

(7) Overall our findings conform with many of the conclusions reached in the research literature on the process of radicalization to violence (Hafez and Mullins 2015). The process started in early adolescence, it involved a small group of friends, and the internet and social media played a fairly prominent role. Several fighters specifically commented on the importance of the online



lectures of Anwar al-Awlaki. One Western fighter stated:

Our deen [way of life] is what Qur'an and Sunnah said along with our prominent scholars – Bukhari, Muslim, Ibn Taymiyyah and others. Alhamdulillah I was exposed to the right path. Jihad came naturally if you are true with your teachings. I really admired and still admire [Anwar al-Awlaki]. He was so good, strong argument and that's the reason he was killed. He was so influential, particularly to the young.

(8) The decision to “go forth” to jihad was kept secret from most people, especially their parents. Some continued to deceive their parents even after arriving in Syria, saying they were working in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere. They commonly received assistance in preparing to go, and in actually travelling to Syria, from people already there or from other “brothers” in the communities where they lived. This seemed to involve assistance from people they were not close with before deciding to go.

(9) Several were inspired by the fact that others from their community had already left and many had become martyrs. They often were amongst the first individuals in their immediate groups to make *hijrah*, but in several cases they discuss how some others followed their lead. In most instances, once they were in Syria these friends found themselves dispersed in different groups or units of the same group, and their friendships were displaced by new bonds formed with other foreign fighters in Syria.

(10) All, with some consistency, calmly reiterate their desire to achieve martyrdom, and celebrate the martyrdom of others. But they scrupulously asserted that their fate is in the hands of Allah. When asked why he had undertaken jihad, one person typically said:

We are motivated by our religion, by our Qur'an and Sunnah and we are not ashamed of that. We left the convenient world to establish khilafah on the path of Prophethood so I really don't see what is the issue with some hypocrites who cave down to the kuffar. We are not motivated by politics, wealth, the love of this world. We are willing to die as shuhada in the path of Allah and that is to establish shariah in the land of the khilafah. We have declared it clearly and loudly that Islam will dominate the world. We know this fact from the Sunnah and hadith of our Prophet, prayers be upon him.

When asked why he was in such a “rush” to attain Jannah (paradise) a British fighter said:

The status of a Shaheed [martyr] is one of the highest known to attain. There is no death equivalent to the death of a matry (sic).

The Prophet Muhammad pbuh tells us that this dunya is a prison for the believer and a paradise for the kaafir. I am anxious I want to know now if I've made to Jannah and avoided hell-



fire – jannah is the goal of practicing faith in dunya. Furthermore jihad is obligatory now as the muslim blood is being shed and the word of Allah or the religion of Allah has to be highest in land. I can't go thru punishment and questioning – im too scared of that – I have too many sins on the hands.

(11) As indicated in the last quotation, and several others above, most of the fighters we interviewed provided justifications for being a foreign fighter that were largely moral and religious in character, more than explicitly political. Though there is little real separation between these things in the minds of these individuals. Leaving to fight is as much about rejecting the immoral nature of life in the West than anything else. As one young man with Jabhat al-Nusra noted:

[Islam] bans alcohol. Pornography. Over pricing. All these things. From adultery. And it has correct punishments. For instance, if someone rapes, they would be killed. Not get away after five years. And the Western regimes did a crusade on our faith and destroyed our empire. So now we are here to bring it back. We want to bring back the law of Allah, and destroy the evils of man their law. We want to defend the Muslims in their lands from the western armies and the governments that rule it. We don't call these governments Muslims because they have left islam when they decided to rule over it by [something] other than Islam.

Another fighter spoke more generally, as others did, about the Western “system” and its failings:

We emigrated because we don't want to live in the system anymore. And the system is the western governments. Their democracy. They control what you think and say; what you care for. And they tell you what is good and bad, from the media that you read and watch to the things you learn at school from young because the school curriculum is from them. But we have our own way of life, which is called Islam. Is it a complete way of life. It is a religion but also a governance. It has laws and ways in which you do everything from how you go to the toilet, drink water, and brush your teeth to how you worship Allah and how you run a business. It lets you see the world for what it is and keeps you away from harmful things in society.

(12) In general, as the quotations above also indicate, the interactions we recorded are laced with comments about the need to be strict in observing the differences between true Muslims and others.

The statements made by our 20 foreign fighters are brief, declarative, and perhaps too simplistic. But we have no reason to question their sincerity, and the sheer repetition of similar statements across the sample, and in diverse conversational contexts, causes us to ascribe some significance to what we have discovered so far.

In contrast with the individuals discussed in the Dutch and Belgian studies, three interrelat-



ed features stood out in the accounts we collected about how and why these individuals had radicalized: (1) the prominence of religious discourse and considerations, and solidarity with their fellow Muslims; (2) the focus on moral and not economic limitations in condemning their past lives and explaining their turn to extremism; and (3) the personal nature of the journey—it tends to be understood more as a quest of self-discovery than a explicitly political process. In our cases no one indicated, let alone explicitly stated, they were influenced by things we thought could be associated with “limited chances on the labour market and of a social career” (Bakker and Grol 2015: 13). “Lack of prospects” or some equivalent notion has yet to emerge as a relevant issue. Admittedly we did not ask a specific question about whether they were happy with their overall socio-economic situation before leaving for Syria. The questions we asked about their process of radicalization are more open-ended, allowing the participants to set the terms of reference for describing what happened to them and why.

7. CONCLUDING REMARKS: PUSH VERSUS PULL FACTORS

Of course none of the interpretive differences sketched above are sharp and clear. The analysis offered in all of the recent studies and ours is largely descriptive or phenomenological. In our case the interpretive difference is more a matter of listening to the overall nuance of the conversations we are having with these individuals. Consequently, we strongly caution that quotations taken out of context fail to communicate an adequate sense of the overall flow of the discussions, which on the whole are quite relaxed and shift quickly from comments on the most mundane aspects of life, past and present, to theological disputes, and declarative statements about the most serious life commitments. The people we are dealing with are more action oriented, we think it is fair to say, and not in the habit of engaging in extended critical reflection on their motives and actions. But this means they are also eager to find firm solutions for their existential worries.

The contrast in the conclusions of the Dutch and Belgian studies, and the American study may reflect differences in the social and economic conditions experienced by Muslim immigrants in Europe and the United States. As commonly argued, the lot of American Muslims is seemingly much better, so there is less reason to postulate a generation-wide experience of demoralization in the face of “low prospects”, as may be true for the second generation Muslim immigrants liv-



ing in the cities of the Netherlands and Belgium. But in truth the sample sizes in these studies are too small to draw any strong inferences in this regard. Moreover, the correlation between marginalization or lack of integration and radicalization are not as robust as is commonly assumed (see Rahimi and Graumans 2015).

As with the American followers of ISIS studied by Vidino and Hughes, there is considerable diversity in our sample of foreign fighters. But our sample is not limited to people from North America or even the West. The diversity encompasses foreign fighters from the Middle East and Africa as well. This diversity poses problems for accepting the “low prospects” thesis as well. But again the samples are too small and non-random to say much more at this time.

All of the studies make an almost inevitable and conspicuous reference to the quest for greater purpose in life in addressing the possible motivations for becoming foreign fighters (Weggeman, Bakker and Grol 2014: 108). Vidino and Hughes say a “search for belonging, meaning, and/or identity appears to be a crucial motivator for many Americans (and other Westerners) who embrace ISIS’s ideology” (2015: 16). Yet the discussion of what this means is truncated and vague. Even when such statements are made, however, the emphasis in the analysis is interpretatively regressive. The focus, at least implicitly, is on the presumption that the lives of the individuals who become foreign fighters must have been lacking in meaning, and in some fairly straightforward way, before they radicalized. Consequently, the process of radicalizing is interpreted as compensatory in some way. The compensation comes, it is implied, by way of their commitment to an ideology and a new community of believers.

There are some problems with this very popular way of thinking about the situation. The interpretive emphasis falls on the more material push factors and not the pull factors, or the merits of the pull factors, in explaining the choice to leave to fight. In many cases, however, there is nothing in the limited primary data in hand which demonstrates that this bias is justified. In our case, thus far at least, we think the data tips to the relative importance of the pull factors—to the promise of something more in life than material comfort and ordinary domesticity. In our social media interviews with contemporary foreign fighters we persistently hear more, both in terms of what is said and the tone of the conversation, about the positive reasons for being a *mujahid*, than the material inadequacies of life before becoming one.



This may reflect the state of mind of our participants at the time we talk to them, since they are fully engaged in their careers as jihadists. It may be that their perception of the past is being clouded more than normal by the psychological and social compulsions of the present. But it might also be a more generalizable insight into how and why they radicalized. Why, we may ask, would a turn to greater religiosity be such a satisfying and convincing compensation for the lack of material prospects in life? We may be able to formulate a plausible answer calling on research from the sociology, psychology, and history of religion, and social psychology more generally. But this kind of work has yet to be done in the context of terrorism studies. Yet the assumption of such a compensatory process is pervasive, at least implicitly, in terrorism studies. Once again, of course, we lack the primary data to discern which interpretation is more plausible. Therefore, in the interim we think it is important not to dwell overly on hypothetical push factors, when the subjects of study tend to lay primary emphasis on the pull factors. If we keep the specificity problem in mind, it is more parsimonious and defensible to follow this lead in the data. This will entail gaining a much better grasp of the operation of ideology in the process of radicalization towards violence (Crenshaw 1988; Orsini 2009; Maynard 2014).

Admittedly, much of what our participants say has a rhetorical aspect. The fighters are justifying their actions and that of the groups with which they are affiliated. Also they are probably emulating the implicit conversion narrative promoted by the reigning Salafi-jihadist worldview they identify with (see Beckford 1978; Stromberg 1993). But reading the transcripts of the interviews, one after another, leaves us with a markedly different impression of what is happening. We are developing an interpretive mindset that is less skeptical about the claims made by the jihadists. We are hearing and giving more credence to the revolutionary, as opposed to the nihilistic, nature of the claims being made. The revolution in question, moreover, is one which fuses the interests of the person and their personal story with the larger cause and movement.

At the core of this difference in interpretational orientation, and hence explanation for what is happening, is our more forthright approach to the intensely religious discourse of the foreign fighters, and the ways they use religious ideas to comprehensively frame their experiences. In part, this may be because we are speaking directly to fighters and more fighters than has been done in the other studies. It may also be because we are religious studies scholars, and thus more



professionally comfortable with such claims. In any event, it is apparent to us that the lives of these men (and women) are saturated with a Salafi-jihadist religio-political discourse. Consequently, we think their religiosity is pivotal to understanding their motivations, no matter how murky our attempts, as outsiders, to grasp these motivations (see Orsini 2009).

Research on jihadi terrorist radicalization tends to be skewed, in our estimation, by an implicit and unquestioned assumption that life in the West is good, even superior to anything available elsewhere in the world. Thus when someone from the West so shockingly turns their back on this life we are inclined to think it must be because they have yet to share in these benefits, and hence are frustrated with their lot in life. Yet we know that for segments of our population the material satisfactions of modern Western life are not enough. Many in this segment voluntarily make significant sacrifices, social, material, and psychological, to live an alternate lifestyle, one that offers other kinds of rewards: moral, spiritual, social and psychological. Our secular and materialistic society usually resists and denigrates this critical urge on the part of a few unconventional souls, but in some instances we admire and praise it. It all depends on whether the ideology or beliefs guiding the rejection of mainstream norms is sufficiently continuous with the base values of our society. Christian monks and nuns were once revered in our society for their ascetic rejection of normal life and their dedication to a higher order of being. As our values have changed this reverence has dissipated. But we do not tend to assume that the religious orders are now simply refuges for social losers. We recognize that some people will feel the need to commit themselves to a greater sense of purpose, and we often are willing to accept and even praise that decision, even if we think the ideology involved is fantastic in significant ways. When the fantastical worldview to which someone is committed clashes more overtly with the dominant mores and practices of life in the West, however, our defensive reaction may interfere with our capacity to empathetically acknowledge how a fundamental human urge for greater meaning in life, even at the cost of preserving one's life, may play a crucial role in fomenting their action.

It is difficult to pinpoint and study (from a social science perspective) the presence and influence of an existential aspect of extremism. It is easier to focus our attention on the more conspicuous things people may lack in their lives in postulating motivations. If such factors are relevant, moreover, they lend themselves more readily to remedy and to policy analyses and recommen-



dations.

But the specificity problem looms large when we dwell on the more obvious and socio-economic push factors for radicalization. When clearly many people experience the forms of deprivation discussed, both real and perceived, why is it that so few turn to systematic forms of oppositional violence? Consequently, in compensation, studies of radicalization are peppered with rather platitudinous references to quests for greater purpose, meaning, identity, and belonging. These conjectures are loaded with explanatory significance, but their meaning is not adequately explained. Simon Cottee and Keith Hayward suggest “that terrorist activity may provide an outlet for basic existential desires that cannot find expression through legitimate channels” (2011: 963; see McBride 2011 as well). The terrorists we are talking to say things that resonate with this idea. Perhaps with more, and better, interviews we may be able to put more flesh on the bones of this neglected interpretive possibility.



8. APPENDIX 1: ADDITIONAL INFORMATION ON METHODS

We began our research by following several open source (i.e., public) Twitter accounts of Canadians on what would later become widely known as “Jihadi Twitter,” a growing online community of *mujahidin* and their supporters. Social media accounts are used by some, but by no means all, *mujahidin* who have made *hijrah* to Syria and Iraq, as well as by their supporters in the West. Dr. Amarnath Amarasingam and Dr. Alexandra Bain, together with several student research assistants (RAs) used Twitter and other social media platforms, such as Tumblr, Ask. fm, and most recently Telegram, to gather a wealth of open source data from social networks of more than 3,000 English-speaking jihadists, not only from across Canada, but also the United States, the Caribbean, England, France, the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, Italy, Spain, Brazil, India, Malaysia, Indonesia, Turkey, etc. The database was expanded by going through the jihadists’ “Followers” and “Following” accounts of the open source Twitter accounts, and checking through their Twitter lines (public postings) for other accounts of interest: again primarily identified by *kunya* (use of Umm, Bint or Abu, or the words such as *muhajir* or *muhajirah*).⁷ Because our initial database consisted of screenshots of the accounts being captured, the RAs capturing and cataloguing the material became adept at recognizing themes and patterns in the account profiles. When Twitter started suspending accounts as a counter-terrorism measure, we were able to quickly identify, monitor, and catalogue returning accounts, based upon the habit of most jihadists of using the same image, or text, or slightly modified name for their new accounts. In most instances the same name was used with the simple addition of a number (i.e., indicating the number times their account had been suspended). The presence of these numbers became a badge of honour for the account holders and were commonly interpreted as an indicator of status and reliability by followers. We usually were able to link the different Twitter accounts to specific individuals using their *kunyas*. We started creating a spreadsheet based on this open source data, noting such basic demographic information as gender, age, ethnicity, country of origin, education, current location, and which group they support or belong to, along with a

⁷ Traditionally Muslim names had five aspects: (1) the *alam*, (2) the *kunya*, (3) the *nasab*, (4) the *laqab*, and (5) the *nisba*. The *kunya* (pronounced koon-ya) is an honorific given to the father (*abu*) or mother (*umm*) of an Arabic child—usually the first born child. *Abu Musa Ali*, for instance, means Ali the father of Musa. However, in addition the *kunya* may be used in a more abstract way, especially by those yet to have children. *Abu al-Fath*, for example means “the father of victory” or “the Victorious.” Both forms of *kunya* serve as nicknames or *nom de guerre* for the foreign fighters and are their preferred ways of being identified by others, especially outsiders (see, <https://cmes.uchicago.edu/sites/.../Traditional%20Muslim%20Names.pdf>).



database of hundreds of thousands of images, videos, and texts filled with examples of their propaganda, recruiting, and fundraising efforts. When the number of accounts became too many to follow manually (at about 350) this spreadsheet was used to seed a computer database which now collects the tweets from over 5,000 English-speaking Jihadi accounts. As indicated above, in collaboration with some information scientists, algorithms are being developed to mine this data in diverse ways.

We are not the only research group to focus on the presence of Western foreign fighters through an analysis of their social media accounts. Some work has already been done in terms of identifying jihadi social networking and applying sentiment analysis to these networks. What makes our research different is that it is built upon a core base of approximately 86 account holders who have agreed, at one time or another, to become participants in our qualitative research project. But in addition to collecting and cataloguing their multiple Twitter and other social media accounts (e.g., FaceBook, Tumblr, Ask, fm, Kik Messenger, Surespot), Dr. Amarasingam and Dr. Bain have been conducting semi-structured interview/conversations with many of the *mujahidin* and the supporters which are in the database. Some of these conversations have been for extended periods of time. Some exchanges that began in 2014 are in fact ongoing.

In order to conduct the interviews, Drs. Amarasingam and Bain each created public Twitter profiles identifying themselves as university researchers studying foreign fighters or *mujahidin* in Syria and Iraq. Although we began following public accounts of people who used a *kunya* identifying themselves as Canadian (e.g. Al Canadi, or Al Kanadi), within months it became apparent this global socio-religious movement warranted expanding our data search to include all Western *kunyas*, as well as accounts who communicated with them and expressed an interest in jihad. Initially, we requested these accounts “follow” us, and when they did we sent a brief direct message introducing ourselves and our research using protocols set in our respective research ethics agreements.⁸ If the person agreed to participate we continued to converse with them through direct messaging, usually switching to a more secure app such as KiK or Surespot.

In the case of the fighters in a zone of conflict the “interview” process is, of course, wholly unlike a conventional face-to-face research interview and the format poses several problems that

⁸ Dr. Bain’s project began before ours and she was operating under her own ethics clearance from St. Thomas University. We have not as yet pooled our data, but we have extensively discussed our experiences.



were addressed in Section 3 above.

Finally, it must be noted that an inordinate amount of time must be spent both gaining and keeping the trust of our participants, particularly the foreign fighters. Unlike conventional social scientific interviews, in most instances we must engage in extended periods of ordinary small talk to build rapport and establish a thread of worthwhile conversation between us and the participants. The process can be rather disjointed and tedious, and it commonly results in a dialogue that never matures into a proper research interview. During this “conversation” we are commonly being tested to see if we are actually journalists or government agents rather than academic researchers. One of the main attributes of the worldwide online network of jihadists is their vigilance in policing who should and should not be allowed access to the collective dialogue. At one point, Dr. Bain, who converted to Islam thirty years ago, was challenged because some Islamist had found a television interview she did in which she was not wearing *hijab*. This discovery led to a lot of accusations and the temporary suspension of “interviews” until explanations could be provided and trust rebuilt. Dr. Amarasingam, who was widely accepted as a credible interlocutor, because he is brown skinned and his family are refugees from a similar bloody civil conflict in Sri Lanka, has also been accused of being untrustworthy on occasion, as the following Tweets indicate:

I'll advise you all to stop interacting with Amarnath. Don't give him any kind of information about us. (2015-05-14, 10:20 AM)

Whoever gave interview to this Cow Worshipping, Urine Drinking, Shit eating, Bald Creature. (2016-01-01, 3:04 AM)

For the most part, however, the sheer volume and length of our own presence online, in the right circles, serve to keep the lines of communication open. To “get inside” the right circles, however, we learned to not ask too many questions too quickly about *hijrah* or *jihad*, and so on. A slow approach is necessary and this is time-consuming. But in the end many individuals, amongst the fighters and the online supporters, were quite open to interacting with us. In line with their slogan *baqiya wa tatamaddad* (i.e., “remaining and expanding”), in some cases we suspect they speak with us on the chance they might convert us to the cause. Interviews with members of new religious movements often proceed on the same premise.



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