WHAT DRIVES EUROPEANS TO SYRIA, AND TO IS?
INSIGHTS FROM THE BELGIAN CASE

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INTRODUCTION

'A bizarre phenomenon,' *Der Spiegel* concluded, after trying to figure out why young-sters left Germany to become foreign fighters in Syria. The magazine painted a portrait of two thirty-somethings with similar background and the same hobby – martial arts. One became director of a martial arts school in Hamburg, the other became a terrorist poster boy in Syria.[1]

'Bizarre' wasn't exactly the word Major General Michael K. Nagata, the Special Operations commander for the United States in the Middle East, used in a confiden-tial memo in 2014. But still, he too admitted to being puzzled by the Islamic State's appeal: 'We do not understand the movement, and until we do, we are not going to defeat it… We have not defeated the idea. We do not even understand the idea.'[2]

According to CIA estimates at the end of 2014, Islamic State (a.k.a. ISIL a.k.a. ISIS) in Syria and Iraq musters between 20,000 and 31,500 fighters, more than half of them foreign fighters. Fighters from Middle Eastern countries make up the largest contin-gent, but Europeans are well represented too. The UK Centre for the Study of Radicalisation (ICSR) estimates nearly 4,000 have signed up since 2012. Recent American estimates of Western fighters are somewhat lower (3,400), whereas Gilles de Kerchove, the EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator, puts the number of Europeans who have had military training in Syria or Iraq, at 4 to 5,000.[3]

The first European to depart for Syria was probably a 28-year-old Frenchman who joined the Free Syrian Army in March 2012. A month earlier, the Syrian city of Homs had been shelled by the Syrian army. The Baba Amr district was the scene of widespread fighting between al-Assad's army and poorly organized rebel forces, with hundreds of civilian deaths as a result. The Syrian civil war had begun.

Other Europeans soon followed suit. In the summer of that year, the first Belgians arrived in Syria. Sean Pidgeon was the first to be killed, at 23 years old. He was born in a Belgian-Congolese family from Laeken, a municipality of north-west Brussels, and converted to Islam at age 14. He had left for Syria four months earlier. By March 2013, foreign fighters had become front-page news in Belgium (and the rest of Europe), after public statements by Eurojust president Michèle Coninsx. An estimated 70 Belgian youngsters were then said to be in Syria. Almost all were

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[1]   'Why young Germans are answering call to holy war', *Der Spiegel,* 28 November 2014.
[2]   *New York Times*, 29 December 2014.
[3]   Remarks by ICSR Director Peter R. Neumann at the White House Summit to Counter Violent Extremism, 19 February 2015, Washington DC (http://icsr.info/2015/02/icsr-insight-professor-neumanns-remarks-white-house-summit); www.nctc.gov/docs/Countering_Violent_Islamist_Extremism.pdf; Bloomberg Business, 21 March 2015. *[Latest figure update: 26 March 2015.]*

members of Sharia4Belgium, a neo-radical Islamist group created in early 2010 and particularly active in Antwerp.[4]

The topic became a media frenzy. Fear of attacks by returnees was a constant theme. That led to hyperboles reminiscent of the post-9/11 atmosphere. The theme thus also reached the political agenda. In April 2013, the Belgian Minister of Home Affairs Joelle Milquet hurriedly proposed a series of preventive and repressive measures. In a parallel effort, mayors from cities that had seen tens of their youngsters leave for Syria, such as Antwerp and Vilvorde, started their own deradicalisation quest. Later on, after the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks in January 2015 and the subsequent raid on a terrorist cell in Verviers (near Liège), all levels of government, from local to regional to national, hastily started to devise deradicalisation programmes – without a great deal of coordination.

According to the most reliable public estimates, the number of Belgian combatants in Syria and Iraq totals some 360 individuals as of January 2015 (the latest ICSR estimates overstate the Belgian contingent), mostly young men. Not included in this figure, are the 50 or so who never made it to Syria. More than a quarter of them (some 110) have now returned, while 50 have been killed. As of early 2015, nearly 200 are still active in Syria or Iraq. The figures indicate an order of magnitude, and no absolute certainty. Comparisons with other countries are risky, since definitions of what constitutes a foreign fighter and counting methods differ, even among EU Member States. Nevertheless, Belgians are well represented in the ranks of IS. This is often viewed as an indication that Belgium is being confronted with a significant radicalisation movement. When taking office in October 2014, the incoming Belgian government stated in its coalition agreement: 'The preservation of the democratic system and the safety of our citizens are for the government an absolute priority. Today, it is under pressure from a growing threat of radicalisation and terrorism.' But is it?

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[4]   *De Standaard* (Belgian Dutch-language newspaper)*,* 11 March 2013.
[5]   Rik Coolsaet is Professor of International Relations at Ghent University (Belgium). He is chair of the Ghent Institute for International Studies (GIIS) and senior associate fellow at the Egmont – Royal Institute for International Relations in Brussels. He was invited to join the original European Commission Expert Group on Violent Radicalisation (established 2006) and the European Network of Experts on Radicalisation (ENER). Since 2003, he has been coordinating research on terrorism and radicalisation, which resulted in several publications, including: *Jihadi Terrorism and the Radicalisation Challenge. European and American Experiences* (Ashgate, 2011).

THE BIRTH OF A CONTESTED CONCEPT

Over the past decade and a half, a huge amount of public money has been spent on research into radicalisation, either by the EU or by Member States. This has resulted in a substantial number of in-depth studies, profiles and even models aimed at conceptualizing the process by which an individual turns into a terrorist. But when the scale of the Syria phenomenon became public in 2013, everyone was surprised, even in countries like the Netherlands or the United Kingdom which had taken a substantial lead in the field of radicalisation studies. Mid-2014, the Dutch intelligence service AIVD reported consequently that the existing tools focusing upon profiles and indicators had proven to be of only limited use.[6] This observation should not surprise anyone. Right from its inception, the notion of 'radicalisation' itself was a source of ambiguity and confusion.

It appeared for the first time in May 2004 in an internal EU document listing possible root causes, or underlying factors, that were conducive to the recruitment of vulnerable individuals by foreign extremists. The attacks in Madrid, two months before, and in London, in July 2005, pushed the concept to centre stage. Radicalisation emerged as the holy grail of European counterterrorism efforts, pushing all alternative root causes to the side lines.

It soon turned into a catch-all concept. Many different expressions of an individual's ideas and behaviour were being labelled as signs of radicalisation, and these ranged from the increased presence of girls and women wearing the hijab, men dressed in Salafi trousers, orthodox preachers and the terrorists themselves. Putting these disparate signs together into a box labelled 'indicators of radicalisation' emptied the word of all explanatory meaning, turning it into a container concept.[7]

To clarify the concept, the European Commission established an Expert Group on Violent Radicalisation in 2006. In its report, the group noted that the very concept of 'violent radicalisation' had originated in EU policy circles after the 2004 Madrid bombing, and that it had not been widely used in social science as a concept. They qualified it as inherently problematic, and cautioned in particular against its ambiguity. The experts suggested replacing it with concepts that were rooted in existing knowledge about political violence and terrorism. 'Socialisation to extremism which manifests itself into terrorism,' was suggested as an alternative by the Expert Group.[8]

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[6]   *The Transformation of Jihadism in the Netherlands. Swarm dynamics and new strength*. The Hague, AIVD (General Intelligence and Security Service), September 2014, p. 52.

[7]   Rik Coolsaet, 'Europe: Reinforcing Existing Trends', in Mohammed Ayoob, Etga Ugur (eds.), *Assessing the War on Terror*. Lynne Rienner, 2013, pp. 137-159.

[8]   *Radicalisation Processes Leading to Acts of Terrorism*. A concise Report prepared by the European Commission's Expert Group on Violent Radicalisation (15 May 2008).

But 'radicalisation' proved irresistible as a concept. Because of its apparent simplicity, but also its ambiguity, it became entwined with the public disenchantment over immigration that had developed since the 1980s, and had become intermingled with unease over Islam and Muslims boosted by the 9/11 attacks. Radicalisation made it possible to speak about these issues in a way that seemingly differed from the anti-Islam rhetoric of right-wing pundits and movements. But still, it came to be seen as a unique contemporary process that was linked almost exclusively to Muslim-related phenomena – exactly what the European Commission's Expert Group had hoped to avoid.

The myriad of radicalisation studies produced since then have nevertheless yielded some useful results. Radicalisation is indeed first and foremost a socialisation process in which group dynamics (kinship and friendship) are more important than ideology. These studies have provided us with a more detailed understanding of the stages in the socialisation process. The process of political radicalisation into extremism and, eventually, into terrorism, happens gradually and requires a more or less prolonged group process. Feelings of frustration and inequity first have to be interiorized and then lead to a mental separation from society (which is considered responsible for those feelings). Individuals then reach out to others who share the same feelings, and create an 'in-group'. Within such a group, personal feelings get politicized (what are we going to do about it?). Groupthink gradually solidifies into an unquestioned belief system and attitude, with alternative paths to violence being pushed aside. In this process, ideology helps to dehumanize the outside-group and transforms innocents (who bore no responsibility for the original feelings of frustration and inequity) into guilty accomplices. In this process of political radicalisation into extremism, it is not the narrative (i.e., the ideology) that eventually lures an individual into terrorism. There is no path dependency between the acquisition of extreme ideas and the actual turn to violence.

Still, the central position that this concept of radicalisation acquired in policy, police and academic circles had an important adverse implication. As Mark Sedgwick reminds us, 'the concept of radicalisation emphasizes the individual and, to some extent, the ideology and the group, and significantly de-emphasizes the wider circumstances' and the context in which it arises.[9] The emphasis on radicalisation was thus detrimental to the 'why-terrorism-occurs approach' advocated in terrorism research since the late 1960s. According to the latter approach, the causes of terrorism lie in a facilitative or conducive environment that permits it and in the direct motivating factors that propel people to violence.[10] After 9/11, context, preconditions, and root causes took a back seat.

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[9]   Mark Sedgwick, 'The Concept of Radicalization as a Source of Confusion', in *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 2010, 22: 4, pp. 480-481.

[10]   Martha Crenshaw, 'The Causes of Terrorism', in *Comparative Politics*, 1981, 13:4, pp. 379-399.

(Not) a new phenomenon

When defined as socialisation, 'radicalisation' is nothing new. Such processes led to political violence and terrorism in the distant past too. Neither is it novel for Belgians (and Europeans) to volunteer for foreign theatres of war. During the Spanish Civil War, some 1,600 Belgian volunteers engaged in the International Brigades. Many more joined the Waffen-SS and went to the Russian Front during the Second World War. These are examples of bygone times.

From the 1980s onwards, a new generation of Europeans again started to join foreign battlefields. The war against the Red Army in Afghanistan, the civil war in Bosnia and the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 attracted an unknown number of volunteers from Belgium. The assassins that killed Commander Massoud in Afghanistan on the eve of 9/11 originated from Belgium. Ever since then, clandestine cells in Belgium have facilitated the journey of volunteers to the Afghan-Pakistan border area. The invasion of Iraq in 2003 marked a new uptick. The first Western female suicide bomber in Iraq was 38-year-old Muriel Degauque, a Belgian convert from Charleroi, who was killed in a suicide attack in November 2005.[11]

In 2010, a clandestine network centred around Malika al-Aroud was dismantled in Belgium. It had been channelling fighters to the Afghan-Pakistani border. By then, the local jihadist scene 'consisted of a number of small networks, which were relatively isolated and invisible.'[12] The number of candidates attempting to leave for foreign theatres was limited. Nevertheless, in Belgium and elsewhere, the chatter about leaving persisted, especially among youngsters, 'but only a handful ever put that wish into practice. And many of those attempts failed, due either to their own ineptitude or to intervention by the AIVD, the Dutch judicial authorities or their counterparts abroad. There was certainly no mass exodus to theatres of jihad.'[13]

Two years later, the gridlock in the jihadist scene in Belgium (and elsewhere) came to an abrupt end. Syria became a new magnet for foreign fighters, as Iraq had done after 2003. And a new generation of activist groups linked the desire to leave with the new theatre. But it is difficult to compare today's European foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq with the jihadis of the past decades. Several characteristics make them stand apart from their predecessors.

To begin with age, the Syria fighters are on average many years younger than their predecessors – even if 30-40 year olds still make up for a third of the total number.

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[11] Chris De Stoop, a Belgian investigative journalist, has painstakingly reconstructed her journey in his *Vrede zij met u, zuster* (*Peace Be with You, Sister* – Amsterdam, De Bezige Bij, 2010). It remains one of the best available accounts of a 'radicalisation process'. Unfortunately, no English-language translation is available.

[12] *The Transformation of Jihadism in the Netherlands*, p. 5.

[13] Ibid.

In previous decades, their average age was 28 years and the typical age range 25-35.[14] Nowadays however, it is more likely to be close to 20, and the age range of the foreign fighters from Belgium seems to be typically 20-24. On-going Dutch research also acknowledges 23.3 as the average age of the segment of foreign fighters from Belgium whose birth date and moment of travel could be determined with certainty (64 individuals).[15] Cheikh Bassam Ayachi, the 68-year-old Syrian-born head of the controversial Islamic Center (Centre Islamique Belge or CIB) in the Brussels district of Molenbeek, was probably the oldest to travel to Syria, in December 2013. But the youngest Belgian who left for Syria was only 13, and 15- to 20-year-olds are clearly no exceptions in Europe.

The suddenness of their decision to leave for Syria is also a striking characteristic for most of the youngsters (except for the first Belgian wave in the summer and autumn of 2012, comprising the core of Sharia4Belgium). Group dynamics continue to play a crucial role, since these youngsters meet and influence each other at school, sports clubs, or in the streets. But this is no longer linked to the more or less protracted process of political radicalisation that was typical of the radicalisation processes studied in the past decade. And as a result of this, but also of their younger age, their religious and political knowledge is even more superficial than their predecessors', as is their acquaintance with international politics. Geopolitics is less important to them than to their predecessors, who felt motivated by the struggle against the superpowers. Injustice was often a starting point in their predecessors' journey towards extremism and terrorism. This has now largely been overshadowed, with personal estrangement becoming the primary engine of their journey.

Once in Syria and Iraq, their yearning to place themselves at the centre of events (with numerous selfies and social media posts on trivia like kohl makeup for boys and other teenage themes) reflects a degree of narcissism that was largely absent among their older predecessors. Many Syria-based fighters are very self-centred and very conscious of the image they want to display. The decision to leave for Syria is now less the product of the standard radicalisation process, but rather a more-or-less impulsive response to everyday challenges in their direct environment, to a greater extent than in the past.

Finally, the suddenness, speed and scale of the departures distinguish the current foreign fighter from his or her predecessors. The Dutch AIVD compared it to a 'swarm': highly decentralised, with numerous individual and largely autonomous elements that collectively, however, maintain a cohesion and direction: for, 'In the

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14   Edwin Bakker, 'Characteristics of jihadi terrorists in Europe (2001-2009)', in: Rik Coolsaet (ed.), *Jihadi Terrorism and the Radicalisation Challenge. European and American Experiences*. Furnham, Ashgate, 2011, p. 141; Richard Barrett, *Foreign Fighters in Syria*. New York, Soufan Group, June 2014. *[Latest figure update: 26 March 2015.]*

15   My thanks goes to Roel de Bont and Arjen Brink (Leiden University), who made this information available before their own research results were published. It is part of a larger research project, 'Characteristics of Jihadist Travelers to Syria in the Netherlands and Belgium'.

absence of a strong hierarchy and leadership structure, the main driving force within the movement is horizontal influence by friends, relatives, neighbours and other like-minded individuals, in both the online and the offline world.' These characteristics prompted the AIVD to compare it with other contemporary mass social phenomena, which 'through online hype, are able to trigger a rapid mobilisation with an eventual offline impact.'[16]

So we're in a different ball game today – a different context – compared to the foreign fighter generations of the recent past. It remains the result of an interaction between personal trajectories, group dynamics, and an enabling environment. This environment is now creating specific push factors that are partly similar but also partly dissimilar from those which explained the departure of the foreign fighters from the 1980s onwards. However, the new generation, with its distinct characteristics, does not stand completely apart from its predecessors. It intermingles with the on-going dynamics of the earlier generations of foreign fighters, thus producing an increasingly intricate jihadi scene.

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[16]   *The Transformation of Jihadism in the Netherlands*, p. 24.

A CONDUCIVE ENVIRONMENT FOR NEW YOUTH SUBCULTURES

What do we know about the motives of (potential) foreign fighters originating from Europe? The authorities have at their disposal a wealth of raw data from different sources, even if it is not always systematically compiled into analyses. Its volume, however, exceeds by far the information on the earlier generations of foreign fighters. A small part of this information surfaces during trials, such as the major Sharia4Belgium trial in Antwerp, in February 2015. In the (semi-)public domain, social media are an important source, since it has been very widely used since 2012, including as a means of communication with the home country (until IS tried to stem this).[17] There are also the accounts of returnees who have been groping for answers about the motivations that pushed them to leave for Syria, as well as interviews with those still fighting there. Not all of these statements are equally straightforward or unambiguous. Often, returnees themselves are unable to offer a satisfactory explanation about their initial motives. Statements by combatants should be treated with caution. They might suffer from a mechanism similar to the well-known social desirability gap that hampers survey-based research. The interviewee's declarations might amount to nothing more than a well-rehearsed rationale that he or she has developed to justify their own behaviour, rather than a truthful attempt to gauge the often complex motivations behind their decision to voyage to a distant war zone.

Still, some tentative conclusions can be drawn from these sources. They often mention earlier personal difficulties (of various kinds), that left them feeling stifled and ill at ease. Frequently, they express feelings of exclusion and absence of belonging, as if they didn't have a stake in society. For a significant number of them, drugs, petty crime and street violence have been part of their former life. From the sources mentioned, one gets the impression of solitary individuals, sometimes also estranged from family and friends, who at a certain point became angry as a result of their estrangement. Going to Syria is one of a number of possible outlets for their anger. 'Anger with an Islamic dressing,' the Dutch Middle East expert Paul Aarts opined.[18]

But more often than not, today's foreign fighters are not fundamentalists in the real sense of the word: their knowledge of Islam is generally extremely superficial. They claim for themselves the right to interpret the Koran as they see fit – instead of studying it over decades, as Islamic scholars have been doing for centuries. In that sense, these European youngsters are the product of the modern, individualistic world. They develop and display a self-constructed discourse that is intended to give

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[17]   *JTTM*, Memri, 21 February 2015.
[18]   *De Volkskrant* (Dutch newspaper), 26 November 2013.

their conduct a semblance of justification and legitimation, at least in their own eyes. These mostly empty slogans are readily available on the internet, or are picked up within the kinship and friendship groups where their unease and dissatisfaction find an outlet. In August 2014, UK media reported the case of two British youngsters, both 22, who had left Birmingham for Syria. Before leaving, they had purchased *Islam for Dummies* and *The Koran for Dummies*.[19] That is not altogether different from what happened within radical left groups in the 1960s and 1970s.[20] Members of these groups often eagerly skipped *Das Kapital* and confined themselves to the *Little Red Book* of Mao Zedong, or the then very popular series of small Chilean booklets that explained Marxism in simple terms.

Who are these youngsters? However uncomfortable a truth, just as in the terrorist campaigns of the past, today's foreign fighter phenomenon is rooted in the charac-teristics of today's society. According to the Danish sociologist Aydin Soei, author of *Vrede unge mænd* (*Angry Young Men*, about the development of vulnerable neigh-bourhoods in Denmark from the 1990s onwards), the 22-year-old gunman who killed two people in Copenhagen in February 2015, was an 'exemplar of a phenomenon of Europe's urban neighbourhoods, not a product of the teachings of the Quran or their distortions by militant preachers… This wasn't an intellectual Islamist with a long beard… This was a loser man from the ghetto who is very, very angry at Danish society.'[21]

But contrary to the impression one might draw from Soei's characterisation, the foreign fighter phenomenon cannot be explained by mere socio-economic profiles. For long, terrorism research has indicated that neither poverty nor socio-economic deprivation are direct root causes of terrorism. It is not just the most disadvantaged who embark on the path to terrorism. Nor are they limited to the urban environ-ment, since the new generation of foreign fighters departs from villages and small towns as well as from big cities.

It's fair to characterize the current foreign fighter phenomenon as part of a youth subculture that has developed against a very specific social and international context. Moreover, it is a generational conflict. 'Pop-jihad as a lifestyle' was coined by the Dutch Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism.[22] But these youngsters' feelings of estrangement are real, as are their difficulties with fitting into society. Up to a point, the very same mechanisms were at play during the protest movements in the 1960s and the 1970s, when parts of the younger generation also rebelled against society, to the bewilderment of their parents, who couldn't comprehend their youngsters' discontent. This protest must have appeared to their parents as 'bizarre'

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[19]   *New Statesman*, 21 August 2014.
[20]   Yvon Bourdet, *Qu'est-ce qui fait courir les militants?* (*What Drives the Activists?*) Paris, Stock, 1976.
[21]   *New York Times*, 16 February 2015.
[22]   *De Volkskrant*, 26 November 2013.

and difficult to comprehend as today's foreign fighter phenomenon, to use *Der Spiegel*'s phrase.

But society – the context – now differs significantly from society in the 1960s and 1970s.

To begin with the most obvious transformation, society today puts much greater pressure on young people than it did 40 years ago. Individualisation and the lifting of traditional political, religious and ideological fault lines leave youngsters much earlier to their own devises and exposed to society than their peers back then. Adolescents' and young adults' need to belong and feel accepted has always been a crucial part of growing up. But, at a much earlier stage than in the past, today's young people have to make their own decisions in a society that offers incomparably more choices in all dimensions of life. Simply put, it's more demanding to be young today than it was back then. Society has become harsher, as experienced by Pupil Guidance Centres in Belgium, community teams of doctors, nurses, social workers, psychologists and pedagogues that work with schools: 'Increasingly, young people feel side-lined, or lose their grip on the situation. In kindergarten already, you hear: "They can't cope with it."'[23]

Belgium offers a case in point. Youth representatives in Belgium recently warned that many young people are depressed and feel hopeless. The enduring economic and labour market stagnation is certainly part of the explanation for why youngsters today have the impression that they are just fiddling around without decent job prospects.[24] The youth suicide rate (age 15-24 – broadly, the same age range as the foreign fighters) is much higher and has declined less in Belgium than in most other EU Member States. Dropping out of school also seems to more prevalent in Belgium than in neighbouring countries.

Struggling with identity and self-image might have been demanding for youngsters since time immemorial, but modern times gave it a new label: 'teenage angst'.[25] Today, moreover, this happens in an environment that has become very complex, with few benchmarks and points of reference, as a result of the dynamics of globalisation and the post-industrial revolution. And on top of this, the future doesn't look bright: 'The generation coming of age in the 2010s faces high unemployment and precarious job situations, hampering their efforts to build a future and raising the risk of social unrest.'[26]

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[23] *De Standaard*, 8 November 2014.

[24] *Brussel Deze Week* (local Brussels weekly), 13 November 2014.

[25] The Dutch novelist Abdelkader Benali has used this label in a poignant reflection on the *Charlie Hebdo* attack: 'From Teenage Angst to Jihad. The Anger of Europe's Young Marginalized Muslims', in *New York Times*, 13 January 2015.

[26] *Global Risks 2014*. Geneva, World Economic Forum, 2014, p. 10.

Secondly, pessimism rules today. All European countries have been increasingly under the spell of pessimism, according to the *European Social Survey* and other surveys. According to Roger Liddle, former advisor to European Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso, 'we may be the first generation since the great advance of material progress which began with the industrial revolution that believes life will not be as good for our children and grandchildren as it has been for us.'[27] The economic and financial crisis has further eroded confidence in the future. In 2012, 70% of the Belgian population responded that future prospects looked dim, which represented an increase of nearly 15% in six years. Southern European countries (and Ireland) showed a still greater jump in the rate of pessimism.[28] According to the 2014 Gallup International World Poll, however, Belgium was by far the most pessimistic (with only Italy slightly more pessimistic). The survey showed that globally approximately half (53%) of those asked about 2015 thought it would be better than 2014 (which was up by 5% from last year). In Belgium, however, only a fifth (19%) were optimistic about the new year, whereas 40% thought it would be worse. This Belgian pessimism score is surprisingly high in comparison to the European average of 26%.[29]

So, not only is growing up more demanding for youngsters than it used to be, the current pessimistic outlook also stands in stark contrast to the optimistic *zeitgeist* of the 1960s and 1970s, when the horizon looked bright, activism thrived, and radical changes for the better appeared to be within reach. Where pessimism rules, ideals die, resignation is omnipresent, and the energy to strive for change fades away.

Thirdly, and on top of all this, an additional factor of potential estrangement puts pressure on a specific segment of youngsters in Europe, and in Belgium. Exactly 30 years ago, the French weekly *Figaro Magazine* featured the portrait of a veiled Marianne to illustrate the cover story: '*Serons-nous encore Français dans trente ans?*' ('Will we still be French in 30 years from now?'). The children and grandchildren of the migrant workers that Belgian (and other European) authorities invited to come *en masse* in the 1960s to compensate for domestic labour shortages, are still being confronted with their origins. They are still routinely labelled 'migrant communities' – notwithstanding the fact that these families have now been present on European soil for three or four generations, and that many of them have acquired Belgian (or other European) nationality.

After 9/11, it became standard practice to equate 'immigrant' with 'Muslim'. The significant diversity within diasporic communities from Muslim-majority countries was thus compressed into a single monolithic category of 'Muslim community', conflating ethnicity with religion.

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[27] Roger Liddle, *Social Pessimism. The New Social Reality of Europe*. London, Policy Network, October 2008.
[28] Dirk Tirry e.a., *Tien jaar 'European Social Survey'*. KULeuven, Sociology Department, 2014, pp. 28-29.
[29] http://www.wingia.com/web/files/richeditor/filemanager/Belgium_Tables_V3_a.pdf.

This is part of the European variety of the identity politics the world is experiencing:

'New today is the rise of identity politics. In vastly different contexts and in different ways – from indigenous people in Latin America to religious minorities in South Asia to ethnic minorities in the Balkans and Africa to immigrants in Western Europe – people are mobilizing anew around old grievances along ethnic, religious, racial and cultural lines, demanding that their identities be acknowledged, appreciated and accommodated by wider society. Suffering discrimination and marginalisation from social, economic and political opportunities, they are also demanding social justice… Why these movements today? They are not isolated. They are part of a historic process of social change, of struggles for cultural freedom, of new frontiers in the advance of human freedoms and democracy. They are propelled and shaped by the spread of democracy, which is giving movements more political space for protest, and the advance of globalisation, which is creating new networks of alliances and presenting new challenges… These struggles over cultural identity, if left unmanaged or managed poorly, can quickly become one of the greatest sources of instability within states and between them – and in so doing trigger conflict that takes development backwards. Identity politics that polarize people and groups are creating fault lines between "us" and "them".'[30]

For the children and grandchildren of the 1960s and 1970s migrants, one way of positioning themselves in times of enhanced identity politics has been to emphasize the religious affiliation that society constantly throws in their face.[31] As a result of this, some think of themselves first as Muslims rather than as citizens of their country.[32] 'Proud to be a Muslim' became the theme in lyrics and Facebook accounts. Around 2008, a 'Cool Islam' movement emerged, developing into a youth subculture, with its own rap, designer clothes and magazines.[33] But some who could afford to started to look for opportunities to emigrate to more welcoming places, like Montreal or New York.[34]

Last but not least, this cultural divide in Europe is also intimately intertwined with a real socio-economic inequality that over the past few decades has been growing in European societies in general. Unfortunately, Belgium again offers a case in point. Jozef De Witte, director of the Belgian Equal Opportunity Centre, was the first to establish a link between the number of Belgian foreign fighters and the structural inequality in their home country: 'In Belgium, the gap between natives and

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[30] *Human Development Report 2004. Cultural Diversity in today's diverse world*. Washington, UNDP, 2004, pp. 1-2.

[31] *Intolerance and Discrimination against Muslims in the EU. Developments since September 2001*. Helsinki, International Federation for Human Rights, March 2005, p. 12.

[32] *Muslims in Europe*. Pew Global Attitudes Project, 6 July, 2006.

[33] Maruta Herding, *Inventing the Muslim Cool: Islamic Youth Culture in Western Europe*. Bielefeld, Transcript, 2013.

[34] Nadia Fadil, in *De Morgen* (Belgian Dutch-language newspaper), 15 April, 2013.

immigrants (from outside the EU) in terms of employment and education is higher than anywhere else in Europe. Add to that, the statements made by Filip Dewinter [a leader of the main radical right party in Belgium] and others and you get barrels full of frustration looking for an outlet. How many people realize that half of our Moroccan community lives in poverty – compared to 15% of the Belgians without migration background. Yet, one cannot detect any sense of urgency among our decision-makers.'[35]

Other examples and numbers can be quoted, but the point is that in Belgium, citizens with a non-European family background are overrepresented in the lower rungs of most socio-economic categories (unemployment, housing, health, education). Compared to their peers, youngsters in this group are confronted with a number of real obstacles, in particular discrimination on the job and the real estate market and educational deficiencies. As was already noted a decade ago, within migrant communities, despair, discouragement and even fear about their youngsters' chances of overcoming these situations in the foreseeable future, has been prevalent for some time now.[36]

Mere socio-economic conditions have never been a direct pathway to extremism and terrorism. But the sense of inequity that derives from them feeds powerfully into the estrangement from society that youngsters experience. It is extremely difficult to comprehend the impact three decades of political, media and social misgivings combined with an overall bleak socio-economic future has instilled in the segment of society affected by them. The difficulties of everyday life endured by their parents make it even more difficult for the children to build up resilience against the pressures of their complex and increasingly demanding surroundings. This fault line between society and part of the younger generation is barely acknowledged by mainstream politics, and is essentially overshadowed by the reductionist debate on the compatibility of Islam with western values. In the parliamentary debates in Belgium following the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks and the subsequent events in Verviers, the argument has been advanced that 'society cannot be blamed for radicalisation', or 'the constitutional state guarantees equal rights for every one'. Unfortunately, this is not being perceived the same way by at least a number of youngsters. Some no longer believe in equal opportunities. Some do not have the impression that they are confronted with a multitude of choices in all dimensions of life, as was mentioned above. Quite the contrary. They feel as if they have 'no future' as their horizon. '*Un sentiment d'abandon'* ('a feeling of abandonment'), was the prevailing sentiment Latifa Ibn Ziaten, the mother of one of the soldiers killed by Mohammed Merah in 2012, had sensed when speaking at schools in the French *cités.*[37]

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[35] *De Morgen,* September 30, 2014.
[36] Rik Coolsaet, *Between al-Andalus and a failing integration. Europe's pursuit of a long-term counterterrorism strategy in the post-al-Qaeda era.* Egmont Paper 5, Ghent/Brussels, Academia Press/Egmont, 2005, p. 11.
[37] http://www.francetvinfo.fr/faits-divers/terrorisme/le-message-de-paix-de-latifa-ibn-ziaten_826641.html.

THE PUSH FACTORS – A WIDE ARRAY OF PERSONAL MOTIVES

Undoubtedly this social environment is a difficult burden for youngsters as a group, but it is even harder to support if they have the feeling of not being able to enjoy the same opportunities as their peers. And it is still harder for those for whom this is not merely a feeling, but a reality, because they live in precarious circumstances in neglected city districts with no prospects of decent work.

This is the conducive environment for the wide array of personal, age-related motivations through which a youngster may be tempted by a departure for Syria. In the aforementioned stories, one cannot fail to notice how frequently they refer to the absence of a future, to personal difficulties that have to be coped with in everyday life. Often these stories point to a desire to leave all this behind, to be 'someone', to be accepted. In short, to find refuge in a more welcoming environment, where they have the impression of not being excluded, and where they will be able to cope with their lives. Looking for absolute certainties, again, is probably a longing adolescents and young adults might have shared in the past too, but this is undoubtedly stronger for this subgroup, as a way out of the complexities of their surrounding environment. And this, IS can offer.

Other motives can also be identified. They want to look up to heroes – or to be one themselves. The need for activism probably plays a role for some of them. Especially at the beginning of the Syria phenomenon, anger at the West's indifference to the plight of the Syrian population or ideological extremism have been instrumentalised by the protagonists of Sharia4Belgium and like-minded groups. More malicious motives are at play too: some try to escape prison sentences by fleeing to Syria. Others adopt Rambo-style violence and display a 'jihadi is cool' attitude. Some are undoubtedly psychopaths, while still others are adventure seekers, looking for something more thrilling than everyday life in Belgium. Abdelhamid Abaaoud, the suspected mastermind of the Verviers cell, dubbed himself a 'terrorist tourist' in a movie on his mobile phone, illustrated with a series of selfies.

Posts on social media refer to Tupac Shakur, icon of American gangsta rap, shot in 1996.[38] At least some of the Belgian foreign fighters identify with his life and his rap lyrics, which indeed seem to fit well into the world outlook of this group. The foreign fighter phenomenon is rooted in a specific youth subculture that has developed in reaction to an environment young people feel and perceive as complex, demanding,

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[38] Amil Khan, 'Al Qaeda's New Front: Jihadi Rap,' in *Politico,* 31 August 2014, *Der Spiegel,* op.cit. Kevin Powell gives a detailed account of the life and work of Tupac Shakur in 'Bury me like a G: The short life and violent death of Tupac Shakur', in *Rolling Stone,* 31 October 1996.

unequal and devoid of hope for a change for the better. It is not the result of a process of political radicalisation, as is often touted by authorities. It is foremost an escape from their estrangement from society and the apparent resignation by that society and their elders to their situation.

Research has indicated that mere socio-economic profiles prove insufficient as an explanation for terrorism. Likewise, some European foreign fighters have college degrees and not all Belgian foreign fighters come from deprived neighbourhoods or face a precarious socio-economic and professional situation. But a majority never-theless does. No in-depth analysis of the socio-economic background of European or Belgian foreign fighters has yet been produced, but the available information indicates that a majority of these youngsters were indeed facing a precarious liveli-hood, combined with personal estrangement. Syria provides them with an escape from this, and an instant opportunity to go from zero to hero. Terrorists in the past originated from all segments of society, including well-off families and even the highest ranks. The current generation of foreign fighters from Belgium does not correspond with this standard portrayal.

In Belgium, Belgo-Moroccan families are among the most exposed to the complex tapestry of the aforementioned pressures in today's society. Hence it will come as no surprise that youngsters with Moroccan roots are overrepresented in the ranks of the foreign fighters from Belgium. While the Turkish community (itself no monolith) possesses a network of self-organisations, the Moroccan community is much more fragmented and thus offers less of a shelter. Moreover, feelings of exclusion are significantly more prevalent within the latter, in Belgium as well as in the Nether-lands.[39]

Escape to Syria is one of a series of possible outlets, next to drugs and delinquency (not unexceptional for many Syria fighters), membership of street gangs, suicide or other deviant behaviour. But the route that these youngsters choose is one that not only leads them to extremism and terrorist violence, but also engenders a backlash in their home country by enhancing the animosity against Islam and against Muslims – which is precisely part of the environment they fled or reacted to in the first place.

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[39]   Kris Vancluysen a.o., *Gekleurde steden. Autochtonen en allochtonen over samenleven* (*Coloured Cities*). Brugge, Vandenbroele, 2009; Mieke Maliepaard, Mérove Gijsberts, *Moslim in Nederland 2012* (*Muslims in the Netherlands*). The Hague, The Netherlands Institute for Social Research, November 2012, p. 20.

THE PULL FACTORS: WHY SYRIA – AND WHY THE ISLAMIC STATE?

Geography is part of the answer. Syria is easily accessible, especially for youngsters – in comparison to the earlier jihadist war zones. Hence it offers the opportunity that had been lacking since 2010. But from 2013 onwards, ISIS a.k.a. ISIL became a real magnet, attracting the bulk of foreign fighters. It was the direct successor to an earlier, also extremely brutal, terrorist movement in Iraq, founded by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in response to the US invasion. On 29 June 2014, ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi announced the establishment of a caliphate. ISIS morphed into 'Islamic State' (IS).

The rapid ascent of IS made it the most successful of all current jihadist groups. The impression of unstoppable expansion since January 2014 undeniably increased its appeal to potential volunteers. The hyperboles used in the Western media and in political discourse emphasized the existential threat that IS was said to represent to the West, unwittingly reinforcing amongst Western youths its appeal as a movement of winners. Winners attract winners. This image turned IS into a magnet for young foreign fighters.

Most importantly, it has a catalogue of solutions on offer for every one of the personal motives the potential volunteers carry with them. IS seemingly offers perspective, belonging, fraternity, respect, recognition, adventure ('They've watched too many Rambo movies,' a Syrian activist in Kafr Nabl stated to the *New York Times*),[40] heroism and martyrdom. It provides an alternative to drugs and petty crime, and an alternative society with clear and straightforward rules. It also offers material wealth: a salary and a villa with a pool. It offers, for those who join in, power over others, and, for those who would never admit it, even sadism in the name of a higher goal. Moral absolutes are part and parcel of IS' force of attraction, and all the more so since these can be applied immediately in large chucks of Iraq and Syria. Osama bin Laden's Al-Qaeda was never in a position to provide for this.

The strength of this pull factor is thus intimately linked to the maintenance of territorial and virtual progress. For that reason, IS needs to use all means available to stay in the media spotlight and remain in the centre of international and regional political discourse. To that end, it will pursue its brutal tactics, which offer the best guarantee for enticing new volunteers. IS will remain a magnet until its momentum has passed and its winner's image crumbles.

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[40]   *New York Times,* 4 December 2014.

SHARIA4BELGIUM AND CONSORTS: LINKING PUSH AND PULL FACTORS

In the early stages of the Syrian crisis, a number of small groups played a unique role of hyphen between push and pull factors. This was the case in Belgium with Sharia4-Belgium, Resto du Tawhid in Schaerbeek (where Sean Pidgeon volunteered), and the members of the old GICM cell (Groupe Islamique Combattant Marocain) in Maaseik, who were released from prison. The leaders of these groups were themselves inter-linked and on average older than the rest of these groups.

When sentencing Sharia4Belgium figurehead Fouad Belkacem in February 2012, the Antwerp court emphasized how the discourse of Belkacem had become 'increasingly provocative and violent' since the creation of the organisation in early 2010. Some of the core group travelled to the Middle East (Lebanon) as early as 2010 for ideological and physical training, according to the verdict in the February 2015 Sharia4Belgium trial. This points at a deliberate strategy by the groups' leaders – even before there was a war in Syria – to use *groupthink* to mould the minds of those involved towards participation in violent action, in Belgium or elsewhere. S4B played into the diverse personal expectations of its supporters in the same way IS would so successfully do some years later. Its activist mode – exactly the opposite modus operandi to the clandestine operations of the older jihadi cells – helped to cultivate a group identity, so that participants felt as if they finally belonged to a welcoming in-group. The emphasis on the 'humiliation' and 'oppression of Muslims worldwide' solidified the us-versus-them outlook. The increasing emphasis on violence and street disorder satisfied those who were seeking some form of activism. Preparation for martyrdom reflected the need for heroism and respect. Belkacem was a hero for his followers, 'some sort of pop star'.[41]

Anjem Choudary, the British leader of Sharia4UK, was one of the sources of inspiration for the leadership of S4B, whom he manipulated and guided into their deliberate strategy. They in turn tried to stimulate like-minded groups elsewhere. These and other transnational bonds reinforced the group identity and the feeling of being part of a broad and global movement.[42] The crucial role played by such groups in the new foreign fighters phenomenon becomes clear when examining the places of origin of the individuals who left for Syria in the first wave of departures. Most came from urban neighbourhoods where these groups had been most active, such as Antwerp, Vilvorde, and the Brussels municipalities of Schaerbeek and Molenbeek.

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[41] Kris Luyckx, counsel for Jejoen Bontinck (a repentant Syria fighter) in *De Standaard,* 30 August 2014.
[42] Martijn de Koning e.a., *Eilanden in een zee van ongeloof. Het verzet van activistische da'wa-netwerken in België, Nederland en Duitsland*. Nijmegen, Radboud University, 16 December 2014, pp. 116.

Yet the facilitating role of S4B and consorts should not be overestimated, nor should the impact of social media on their role as 'recruitment multipliers' be overstated. They could only have this impact because the conductive environment for their success was present. Without this facilitative breeding ground, the S4B discourse would have fallen on deaf ears. As in the past, the narrative, the extremists' ideology, is not the key to their success. Today, too, context is essential for understanding the current foreign fighters phenomenon. Even at the time of writing and notwith-standing (or rather, because of) the numerous accounts of cruelty, brutality, and violence, Belgian (and European) young men and women still leave for Syria, even though organisations such as Sharia4Belgium themselves have ceased to exist. Their role was taken over by peer recruitment and by small, fluid networks of friends and kin, sometimes set up by individuals who do not wish to leave themselves, but still want to have the feeling of being part of a heroic battle.

EPILOGUE

An elimination of the push factors that motivate European youngsters to depart for the Syrian-Iraqi war theatre cannot possibly be addressed by Muslim communities alone.

'Can you deradicalise a Muslim?' a respected Belgian newspaper wondered, undoubtedly not realizing how belittling such a headline was to Belgian citizens of Muslim faith. It expresses a widely held view in Europe, and in Belgium too, that Islam is the real problem and that the solution is to 'instil radical Muslims with more appropriate thoughts.'[43] This has been the angle chosen by the UK government of David Cameron: 'The root cause of this threat to our security is quite clear. It is a poisonous ideology of Islamist extremism that's condemned by all faiths and faith leaders.'[44] But in as far as the past can serve as a guide, efforts aimed at addressing the extremist ideology are seldom successful.[45]

An alternative explanation puts the blame exclusively on society, unable and unwilling to accept newcomers and address structural discrimination. The foreign fighter phenomenon is supposed to signal the failure of integration policies. This, too, is a reductionist statement of convenience, denying the individual responsibility for his or her actions. It not only reduces the individuals involved to mere puppets with no free will, it also turns a blind eye to the numerous success stories of migrants and their kin, successfully integrating into their new country, and it overestimates the scale of the subgroup in question.

Is there a light at the end of the tunnel? Following the tragedies at the Jewish Museum in Brussels (May 2014), *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris, Verviers and Copenhagen, much attention was directed at highly visible, repressive measures. These are however the easiest part of the answers. Moreover, some of the measures were merely meant as window-dressing. At the same time, there seems to be an increased consensus in the Belgian polity that repression alone will always be inadequate, and that prevention is equally crucial. 'Prevention', however, has many interpretations, and some of the initiatives that were taken under this banner in reaction to the events of 2014 may have had unintended adverse effects.

Anyhow, prevention understood as the strategy to counter the push factors behind the youngsters' rush into Syria is a complex endeavour, and will need time, resources, patience and some forward-thinking. Results will never be straightforward. Compared to repressive measures, preventive efforts will always be more

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[43] *De Standaard,* 24 October 2014 and 9 January 2015.
[44] *The Guardian,* 29 August 2014.
[45] Tore Bjørgo, John Horgan, *Leaving Terrorism Behind.* New York/London, Routledge, 2009, p. 4.

circumspect and difficult to gauge. Moreover, prevention lends itself less to political grandstanding. Even more important is realising that government action can only be part of the solution, perhaps even only a small part. In the realm of security, authorities play an irreplaceable role. In prevention, however, responsibility is much more widely shared and the involvement of many is needed.

Stopping youngsters from leaving in the first place is the essence of effective prevention. Each departure represents a human tragedy. From a place where only the law of the strongest prevails, no one returns unharmed, and certainly not a teenager or a young person in his or her 20s, who is at odds with himself or herself, and with society. Neither polity nor academia has fully come to grips with the fault line in society that gave birth to the subculture in which this new generation of foreign fighters thrive. To address this, the efforts of many are needed: government, civil society, media and citizens. Only when hope in the future is offered will the breeding ground dry up, and youngsters cease to be drawn 'to a country they do not know, in a culture they are not familiar with, and where a language is spoken that they do not understand.'[46]

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[46]   Ben Hamidou, who plays the role of ideological leader of a group of men leaving for Syria, in *Djihad*, a successful play in Brussels theaters in 2014. From *Brussel Nieuws*, 12 December 2014 (http://www.brussel-nieuws.be/nl/cultuur/toneelstuk-djihad-neemt-radicalisme-op-de-korrel).