

Swedish Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq

An Analysis of open-source intelligence and statistical data

Linus Gustafsson
Magnus Ranstorp

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Summary

The conflict in Syria and Iraq has resulted in an increase in the number of violent Islamist extremists in Sweden, and a significant increase of people from Sweden travelling to join terrorist groups abroad. Since 2012 it is estimated that about 300 people from Sweden have travelled to Syria and Iraq to join terrorist groups such as the Islamic State (IS) and, to a lesser extent, al-Qaeda affiliated groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra. Even though the foreign fighter issue has been on the political agenda for several years and received considerable media attention, very little is known about the Swedish contingent.

The purpose of this study is to examine a set of variables of the foreign fighters that have travelled from Sweden to join jihadi terrorist groups in Syria and Iraq in the period of June 2012 to September 2016. Much of the statistical data analysed have been declassified and provided by the Swedish Security Service. The variables examined are: time of travel; age; gender; geographical concentration in Sweden; citizenship and country of origin; average time spent in the conflict area; numbers of individuals killed; number of returnees; number of fighters remaining in the conflict area; social media activities; and the financing of foreign fighters. The analysis includes 267 people that are or have been residents of Sweden.

36 people (first-time travellers) travelled to Syria or Iraq in 2012, 98 in 2013, 78 in 2014, 36 in 2015, and 5 in 2016. In addition, some of the foreign fighters have travelled back and forth between the conflict area and Sweden. About 80 percent are associated with IS, and more than 30 percent are associated with Jabhat al-Nusra. 76 percent of the foreign fighters are men and 24 percent are women. The amount of women has significantly changed during the period, from “a few” in 2012 to 18 percent in 2013, and constituting about 40 percent of the foreign fighters in the conflict area in 2014 and 2015.

The average age of the foreign fighters is 26, and there are no significant differences between the average age of men and women. Still, there is a great variation indicating there are very young travellers but also older ones, as the age ranges in a span of 50 years. 18 percent of the travellers (45 people) are 19 or younger, while about 60 percent (154 people) are between the ages of 20 to 29. Very few people above the age of forty seem to travel. The average age does not change over the period.

A majority of the foreign fighters, an estimated 80 percent, come from four of Sweden's 21 counties – Västra Götaland, Stockholm, Skåne and Örebro. About one third of the foreign fighters are, or have been, registered in Västra Götaland County, one quarter in Stockholm County, and a tenth in Örebro County and a tenth in Skåne County. More than seventy percent have been residents of an exposed area (socially deprived areas hit by high criminality and low socio-economic status). There is information that there have been recruiters in some of the areas, but social media may also have played a role in the mobilisation of foreign fighters.

75 percent of the foreign fighters are Swedish citizens, and 34 percent are born in Sweden. There are geographical concentrations to North Africa, the Horn of Africa and the Middle East, as was seen in the 1990's and 2000's. There are also concentrations to the Former Yugoslavia and Russia. 38 countries are represented when analysing country of birth, and most of the foreign fighters have at least one parent with country of birth outside of Sweden

The average time spent in the conflict area is 16 months, but there is great variation where some foreign fighters have been there for only a month and others for several years. The average time spent for men is 16 months, while the average for women is 21 months.

At least 49 people from Sweden have died in Syria or Iraq. All of them are men. The data shows that there are no indications that a larger group of the Swedish foreign fighters has been killed in one single battle. Not more than three people have died during a single month. About half of those who have died are from the Västra Götaland region.

As of September 2016, 106 foreign fighters (40 percent) had returned to Sweden, while 112 (42 percent) were still in Syria or Iraq. It is estimated that 49 of the 267 (18 percent) have died in the conflict.

Foreword

The Center for Asymmetric Threat Studies (CATS) at the Swedish Defence University is a national research centre assigned with developing and disseminating scientific and policy-relevant knowledge of asymmetric threats.

In this ground-breaking study, Linus Gustafsson and Dr. Magnus Ranstorp are exploring the phenomenon of Swedish foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq by analysing unique information provided by the Swedish Security Service. The aim is to fill empirical gaps and understand the Swedish foreign fighter contingent by analysing an interesting set of variables in the period of 2012 to 2016. The study is the result of a one-year research project at the Center for Asymmetric Threat Studies (CATS) at the Swedish Defence University.

We wish to thank all of those who have shared their knowledge and provided valuable comments on the manuscript, and especially to Professor Kjell Engelbrekt here at the Defence University for the institutional scientific review. We owe a debt of gratitude to the Swedish Security Service for providing us data and being accommodating in the process of our empirical gathering.

Lars Nicander
Director
Center for Asymmetric Threat Studies

Preface

The two authors present, contextualise, interpret and assess a wide range of open-source intelligence alongside novel statistical information derived from a dataset compiled on the basis of classified material collected by Swedish authorities. The authors were offered the opportunity to consult with Swedish Security Service case officers and analysts during the course of this research and writing process. A statistical analysis, using the same dataset and primary material, has been declassified and released by the Swedish Security Service in the context of this cooperation.

Because of the nature of the topic and the legal constraints regulating how classified information is utilized, it has not been possible to subject the entire research process and the full spectrum of empirical data consulted to quality control and review on our part. Yet, even with these important caveats, we endorse the publication and dissemination of this report in the hope that it will contribute to our understanding of the phenomenon of terrorism, the social conditions of terrorist recruitment, the modus operandi of contemporary jihadist movements, and the effectiveness of government policies, or lack thereof, aimed at addressing this problem.

Kjell Engelbrekt, Swedish Defence University

Contents

Summary	5
Foreword	7
Preface	9
1. Introduction	13
2. Methods, data, concepts, and limitations	17
3. The terrorist threat to Sweden and foreign fighters: A chronological timeline	23
4. Syria, Iraq and terrorist groups	37
5. Foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq – an international perspective	47
6. Foreign fighters from Sweden	75
7. Summary findings	103
8. Reflections and preliminary lessons	105
9. Further research	107
10. Bibliography	111
Appendix 1. Exposed areas	135

1. Introduction

*We are Mujahideen Fi Ash Sham and we bear witness that Jihad is mandatory for everyone who believes in Allah, his prophet and judgement day. Jihad is mandatory in Syria and in the whole world. /.../ My brothers, remember that Jihad does not need you, but that you need Jihad.*¹

The statement above is an excerpt from the first video from Swedish foreign fighters in Syria. The group ‘Swedish Mujahideen Fi Ash Sham’ which claimed to be operating in Syria published the statement in Swedish in November 2012. At that time, about 30 people from Sweden had travelled to Syria. Since 2012 it is estimated that about 300 people from Sweden have travelled to Syria and Iraq to join terrorist groups such as the Islamic State (IS)² and al-Qaeda affiliated groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra³.

The terrorist threat to many European states has changed dramatically during the last years, and several EU member states assess the terrorist threat as high.⁴ The number of plots by jihadi terrorists has never been as high as in the period 2014–2016, and there is “an ‘IS-effect’ on jihadi terrorism in Europe from the turn of 2013.”⁵ The number of arrests for jihadi terrorist activities has increased dramatically in the EU during the last few years with more than 600 arrests in

¹ The video was published on Vimeo on November 21 2012

² The Islamic State, also known as Daesh, was previously known as the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). Daesh is the Arabic acronym for Dawla al-Islamiya fil Iraq wa Sham (the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham)

³ Jabhat al-Nusra, also known as the al-Nusra Front, was rebranded in 2016 as Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, and again in 2017 rebranded as Tahrir al-Sham

⁴ ‘European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2016’, Europol, p. 27

⁵ Nesser, Petter, Stenersen, Anne & Oftedal, Emilie, ‘Jihadi Terrorism in Europe: The IS-Effect’, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 10, Issue 6, December 2016

2015 (395 in 2014, 687 in 2015).⁶ According to Europol, “IS has been linked to over 100 terrorist plots against the West”⁷ until July 2016, and European law enforcement and security services have prevented several plots.⁸ Nevertheless, all attacks are not planned or executed by the organisation of IS, as “the majority of attacks claimed by IS appear to be masterminded and perpetrated by individuals inspired by IS”.⁹

Since the protests erupted in Syria in 2011, the authoritarian Syrian government has tried to crack down and suppress the opposition by military force. The development in Syria has resulted in a multidimensional armed conflict and the largest humanitarian crisis in the world today with almost half a million people killed, more than six million internally displaced persons and five million people seeking refuge in other countries. Most of the opposition fighters in Syria and Iraq are not from a foreign country but are native Syrians and Iraqis.¹⁰ Syria and Iraq has nevertheless become the epicentre of global jihad with more than 5,000¹¹ foreign fighters from Europe, and more than 36,000¹² world-wide are estimated to have joined the ranks of terrorist groups in Syria and Iraq, resulting in widespread destabilisation, unspeakable carnage, destruction and hardship for the civilian population and aiding some of the most brutal militant movements in the world.

IS has announced that European countries are legitimate targets, and several attacks have struck European cities such as Paris, Brussels, Nice, Manchester, London and others. The modus operandi of the attacks varies, and some of the perpetrators are returning foreign fighters. The first attack in the EU by a returnee from the conflict in Syria took place in May 2014, when French-Algerian Mehdi Nemmouche killed four people at the Jewish Museum of Belgium in Brussels. In Paris, in November 2015, 130 people were killed and 368 injured by IS members in an “a series of [seven] complex and well-coordinated attacks”¹³ with at least seven of the members previously trained in Syria.¹⁴ In March 2016, 16

⁶ ‘Changes in modus operandi of Islamic State (IS) revisited’, *Europol*, November 2016; ‘European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2016’, *Europol*, p. 7

⁷ ‘Changes in modus operandi of Islamic State (IS) revisited’, *Europol*, November 2016

⁸ Neumann, Peter R., (2016) *Radicalized: New Jihadists and the Threat to the West*, I.B. Tauris, London & New York, p. 108

⁹ ‘Changes in modus operandi of Islamic State (IS) revisited’, *Europol*, November 2016

¹⁰ Neumann (2016) p. 83

¹¹ Estimates by Europol at the end of 2015, ‘European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2016’, *Europol*, p. 27

¹² Clapper, James R., ‘Statement for the record. Worldwide Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community’, *Senate Armed Services Committee*, February 2016

¹³ ‘Changes in modus operandi of Islamic State terrorist attacks’, *Europol*, January 2016

¹⁴ ‘Changes in modus operandi of Islamic State terrorist attacks’, *Europol*, January 2016; ‘European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2016’, *Europol*, p. 22; van Bibi, Ginkel, & Entenman, Eva (ed.) ‘The Foreign Fighters Phenomenon in the European Union’, *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism*, April 2016, p. 9

people were killed at the Brussels Zaventem airport, and another 16 killed in the following attack on the Maalbeek metro station in Brussels. More than 300 people were injured and IS claimed responsibility for the attacks.¹⁵

In April 2017, Sweden was hit by a terrorist attack in Stockholm killing five people and wounding 15. In the afternoon of April 7, 2017, a lorry was hijacked by Uzbek national Rahmat Akilov in central Stockholm, a stone throw away from where Taimour Abdelwahab had launched his attack in December 2010. In a large lorry, Akilov proceeded to drive down Drottninggatan, the busiest pedestrian shopping street in Stockholm, ploughing down and killing five individuals and injuring at least 15 before finally crashing into Åhlens department store. Akilov escaped and disappeared down through the underground and the central railway station and was caught on CCTV cameras. He was later apprehended in the suburb of Märsta, after he had travelled there on a commuter train.

Akilov was found to be an asylum seeker whose application had been rejected by the Migration Authority. In fact Swedish border police was searching for him to carry out the expulsion order to Uzbekistan. The Swedish Security Service had been investigating Akilov previously in a counter-terrorism investigation. Akilov had indirectly been connected to a company fraud scheme and he had also through the Russian-language social media site Odnoklassniki been linked to Abu Saloh, a leader of an al-Qaeda-affiliated group in Syria.¹⁶ Abu Saloh had been a suspect involved in ordering a suicide bombing in St Petersburg only days before the Stockholm attack. The exact linkages to Uzbekistan or to jihadist groups in Syria or elsewhere is still uncertain.

About 300 people from Sweden have travelled to Syria and Iraq, joining groups such as IS and Jabhat al-Nusra and engaging in terrorism and other serious crimes abroad. There is a risk that some of the returning foreign fighters intend or can be swayed to commit attacks in Sweden and other countries outside of the conflict area, and at least two Swedish returnees were involved in the recent Paris and Brussels attacks.¹⁷ In addition, foreign fighter returnees have accrued experiences in Syria and Iraq that may help them building the capacity to plan, prepare and conduct terrorist operations upon return.

Even though the foreign fighter issue has been on the political agenda for several years and received considerable media attention, very little is still known about the Swedish contingent. Who are they? When did they leave Sweden and when did they return? Where in Sweden do they live? Are they from the segregated suburbs hit by high criminality and poor socio-economic conditions? How old are they? Have they migrated to Sweden before going abroad to fight

¹⁵ 'Brussels explosions: What we know about airport and metro attacks', *BBC*, April 9, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-35869985>

¹⁶ 'Akilov kopplas till nätverk kring efterlyst jihadledare', *Sveriges Radio*, May 12, 2017.

¹⁷ Such risks are recorded in the Security Service's annual reports (see bibliography)

or are they born in Sweden? Are they Swedish citizens? How many women are involved? How many have died, and how many have returned? Are there any changes in these variables over time?

The purpose of this study is to identify and analyse the sets of variables of the foreign fighters that have travelled from Sweden to join jihadi terrorist groups in Syria and Iraq in the period of June 2012 to September 2016. The variables examined are: time of travel; age; gender; geographical concentrations in Sweden; citizenship and country of origin; average time spent in the conflict area; how many have been killed; how many have returned; how many remain in the conflict area; social media activities; and what we know about the financing of foreign fighters.

The aim of this first chapter is to give the reader a brief introduction of the problem that is being examined in this study, why it should be studied, and what is being studied. Chapter two focuses on the empirical evidence or 'the data' that has been analysed, the methodological approach, and the concept of 'foreign fighters' and 'Salafi-Jihadism'. In the third chapter, the authors present a chronological timeline of the terrorist threat to Sweden and foreign fighters. Chapter four provides a presentation of the context and development in Syria and Iraq in recent years, and the evolution of the Islamic State and al-Qaeda affiliated groups. In chapter five, the authors focus on foreign fighters from other countries, and theoretical findings related to those variables examined in the analysis of Swedish foreign fighters. In the sixth chapter, the authors examine the foreign fighters from Sweden who have travelled to Syria and Iraq to join jihadi terrorist groups. Summary findings are presented in chapter seven, and reflections regarding the examination and its results are presented in chapter eight. In chapter nine, the authors elaborate on a few topics that have not been investigated in this study but deserve closer examination for future studies conducted on the topic of foreign fighters.

2. Methods, data, concepts, and limitations

There are several methodological limitations and challenges with respect to the data examined in this study. Most of the quantitative data is based on the information the Security Service has gathered and compiled, and only later provided to the authors. In that respect, the authors (and the readers) have to trust the Security Service and its processes and cannot ascertain for themselves that the information is reliable and valid. It is likely that there is some degree of incorrect information in the material, as it may be difficult for security services and the intelligence community to know the details of every variable. The Security Service is not necessarily interested in, or has the mission to, analyse the same parameters as the authors are, and thereby does not have all information of every variable or of every foreign fighter.

When declassifying the data, the information has been processed by the Security Service and the authors have not obtained specific information of the names, personal numbers (akin to social security numbers) or any information of the identities of the foreign fighters. *All* data contained in this report have been declassified. The Security Service has, when needed, aggregated data when there is a risk that the authors or other readers may be able to identify individuals. This can, for example, be the number of foreign fighters from a county that has very few foreign fighters or when there is only one foreign fighter with a specific country of origin. All data is not presented in detail in respect to state security, and the integrity and privacy of the analysis object.

The statistical data from the Security Service is augmented by examples and cases in relation to the specific variables. For example, when data on age is analysed, the authors present illustrative examples of foreign fighters in relation to that data, the former of which is drawn from media, social media, court documents, and government agencies. The aim is to add qualitative data to the statistical information on the foreign fighters. Some statements by Swedish foreign fighters in social media have also been included and translated into English. All of the

latter texts have not been literally translated since the linguistic skills of the writers are sometimes quite poor, which can detract from the intended meaning if quoted verbatim. Some of the examples and contexts in relation to the variables include the names of the foreign fighters since they have been publicly known through media or court documents.

These limitations notwithstanding, the authors have painstakingly pieced together four types of data: (1) reports from official government sources including security and intelligence services; (2) academic and policy-oriented studies; (3) other open-source material such as court documents and mass media; (4) statistical data drawn from a dataset compiled by the Swedish Security Service.

The chronological account of the development of terrorism in relation to Sweden and Europe in chapter three is based on the Security Service's public annual reports between 2001 to 2016, Europol TE-SAT reports from 2011 to 2016, other Europol assessments and analysis, academic studies, media reports, and court documents. In chapter four, on the other hand, most of the information is derived from academic and journalistic reports, describing and explaining the development and situation in Syria and Iraq, and terrorist groups in the conflict area. There are thankfully several useful studies of the conflict in Syria and Iraq and the development of IS, Jabhat al-Nusra (together with subsequent rebranded names) and other armed groups. Nevertheless, it is an ongoing conflict that only has been occurring for about six years meaning there is still much more knowledge and research needed.

The data in chapter five, devoted to European foreign fighters, are mainly based on official public reports by various European Member State government agencies, the UNSC Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team pursuant to Security Council resolutions 1526 (2004) and 2253 (2015) concerning Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and the Taliban and associated individuals and entities.¹⁸ In some instances, as official information is lacking the data is drawn from academic studies and media reports on specific figures and breakdown of details of the various national foreign fighter contingent, as reflected in the references.

The data analysed in chapter six, analysing key variables with regard to Swedish foreign fighters, is entirely unique. A dataset has been built on information gathered by the Swedish Security Service, and elucidated through articles in media, statements by authorities, and court documents. The authors have requested the Security Service for information on foreign fighters from Sweden that have travelled to Syria and Iraq and joined jihadi terrorist groups in the period of 2012 to 2016. The request has included variables such as age, gender, citizenship and country of birth, parents' country of birth, were in Sweden the foreign fighters live, and development over time. The Security Service has compiled data on 267 individuals that have been resident in Sweden and travelled to Syria and Iraq

¹⁸ These reports can be found here: http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2016/210

in the period of June 2012 to September 2016 to join terrorist groups.¹⁹ There are examples of people that have tried to travel to Syria from Sweden but are registered in other countries and do not live in Sweden.²⁰ These are not included in the foreign fighters' material.

Notably, the 267 individuals are very close to the estimated 300 individuals in total – in principle making the selection generalizable. Needless to say, the 300 foreign fighters is an estimate by the Security Service, and there may be more or less individuals that have travelled from Sweden to engage in the conflict. The exact number of foreign fighters cannot be conclusively established. Admittedly, 267, or 300, people are very few when conducting a quantitative study. When the variables are analysed separately the number of people become so few that one have to be careful in drawing to far-reaching conclusions. That being said, the data from the Security Service provides more detailed information than previously known and lends itself to hypothetical with regard to numbers and proportionality of different variables.

The “foreign fighter” concept

The “foreign fighter” concept has in previous research been defined in many different ways. In his research on foreign fighters, Malet argues that:

*All definitions of foreign fighters advanced since 2005 have centred on their linkage with non-state organizations or communities and lack of formal affiliation with state regimes or regular armies. Likewise, none have included volunteers in foreign legions or private military companies, which are likewise state employees and operate with at least the tacit acceptance of the incumbent government in civil war zones.*²¹

The definition of a foreign fighter, e.g. someone who has joined IS, can according to Malet be defined as “a non-citizen of a state experiencing civil conflict who arrives from an external state to join an insurgency.”²² Malet's definition is

¹⁹ 'Analys av resenärer från Sverige som anslutit sig till terrorgrupper i Syrien och Irak', *Säkerhetspolisen*, February 16, 2017

²⁰ 'Prøvde å få tak norsk IS-medlem (25) i Syria før avreise', *VG*, June 11, 2015, updated September 18 2015, <http://www.vg.no/nyheter/innenriks/politiets-sikkerhetstjeneste-pst/proevde-aa-faa-tak-norsk-is-medlem-25-i-syria-foer-avreise/a/23468804/>; 'Etnisk norsk 18-åring pågrepet for å ville slutte seg til IS', *VG*, June 9, 2015, updated September 20, 2015, <http://www.vg.no/nyheter/innenriks/is/etnisk-norsk-18-aaring-paagrep-for-aa-ville-slutte-seg-til-is/a/23467354/>; 'Norsk 18-åring terrorkrøp - pågripen på veg til Syria', *NRK*, June 9, 2015, <https://www.nrk.no/norge/norsk-18-arig-terrorkrøp-paagripen-pa-veg-til-syria-1.12400630>; 'En 18-årig man har gripits for terrorplaner', *Expressen*, June 9, 2015, <http://www.expressen.se/gt/en-18-arig-man-har-gripits-for-terrorplaner/>

²¹ Malet, David, 'Foreign Fighter Mobilization and Persistence in a Global Context', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 0:1-20, 2015, p. 5

²² Ibid. p. 6

similar to that of the United Nations, which has been adopted by several states. Resolution 2178 of the UN Security Council (2014) defines foreign *terrorist fighters* (foreign fighter and foreign terrorist fighter are synonymous terms in this report) as:

*[...] nationals who travel or attempt to travel to a State other than their States of residence or nationality, and other individuals who travel or attempt to travel from their territories to a State other than their States of residence or nationality, for the purpose of the perpetration, planning, or preparation of, or participation in, terrorist acts, or the providing or receiving of terrorist training.*²³

The resolution's and Malet's definitions are not applicable in this analysis since the data provided by the Security Service also include people from Sweden who travel to a state where they are also citizens or are born in. However, they cannot be residents of the state they travel to since a criterion in the data has been people resident in Sweden who travel to Syria and Iraq. As applied in this study, the concept of a foreign fighter is defined as an (1) individual resident in Sweden; that (2) have travelled to Syria and/or Iraq; and (3) joined a jihadi terrorist group. The primary purpose for travel does not have to be to join a jihadi terrorist group as people from Sweden (and elsewhere) have joined other militant groups upon arrival but later joined jihadi terrorist groups such as the Islamic State or Jabhat al-Nusra. In that respect, this study excludes people from Sweden joining terrorist groups outside of Syria and Iraq or non-Sunni terrorist groups in the conflict area, e.g. militant groups such as the PKK, YPG, Peshmerga or Hezbollah. However, there are Swedish residents who have travelled to the conflict area to join these groups.²⁴ With this definition applied, former residents and citizens of Syria and Iraq that are registered in Sweden when traveling are included in this study.

²³ Resolution 2178 (2014), *United Nations Security Council*, Adopted by the Security Council at its 7272nd meeting, on 24 September 2014, S/RES/2178 (2014) (6.a)

²⁴ 'Man från Uddevalla död i strid i Syrien', *Sveriges Radio*, November 6, 2015, <http://sverigesradio.se/sida/artikel.aspx?programid=125&artikel=6296629>; 'Svensken strider mot IS: "Det är min plikt"', *Aftonbladet*, May 29, 2015, <http://www.aftonbladet.se/nyheter/article20876018.ab>; 'Karwan från Göteborg strider mot IS', *Göteborgs-Posten*, July 19, 2015, <http://www.gp.se/nyheter/göteborg/karwan-från-göteborg-strider-mot-is-1.116465>; 'Bankmannen strider mot IS utanför Mosul', *Expressen*, October 17, 2016, <http://www.expressen.se/nyheter/bankmannen-strider-mot-is-utanför-mosul/>; 'Svensk peshmergasoldat strider mot IS', *Sveriges Radio*, July 2, 2015, <http://sverigesradio.se/sida/artikel.aspx?programid=83&artikel=6203482>; 'Svenske Aysar, 30, strider mot IS i Irak: "De har försvagats"', *Aftonbladet*, November 17, 2016, <http://www.aftonbladet.se/nyheter/utrikes/article23917044.ab>; 'Svenske Niclas slåss mot IS i Irak', *Aftonbladet*, May 25, 2016, <http://www.aftonbladet.se/nyheter/article22879638.ab>; 'Axel förhörde terrorist – som sedan dödades', *Aftonbladet*, January 25, 2017, <http://www.expressen.se/nyheter/axel-forhorde-terrorist-som-sedan-dodades/>; 'Flera Halmstadbor i striderna', *Hallandsposten*, September 14, 2015, <http://www.hallandsposten.se/nyheter/halmstad/flera-halmstadbor-i-striderna-1.342515>

The word “fighter” may also be misleading and inaccurate. Yes, foreigners join militant organisations and groups, but that does not necessarily mean they themselves are engaged in combat. The armed groups in Syria and Iraq are dependent on logistics and other utilities to be able to function. For instance, IS are offering foreigners various work opportunities – from propaganda producers to engineers. As IS has gained territorial control of large areas and is aspiring to build a nation-state, it is also in need of all positions and services necessary for a society to function – from operating bakeries to administering medical services to fighting other rebel groups.²⁵ According to Neumann, “not all recruits to the Islamic State are deployed militarily and only a minority of the Western Europeans are on active combat duty or involved in war crimes.”²⁶ Still, their services provide essential infrastructure for the terrorist organisation, and can in that respect be involved in war crimes. The third criterion of the applied concept of a foreign fighter, is “joined a jihadi terrorist group” and not necessary planning, preparing or participating in terrorist acts, as is the case with the U.N. definition.

Salafi-jihadism

The groups that the Swedish foreign fighters have joined are mostly the Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra. Both groups can be placed within the concept and movement of salafi-jihadism. In his examination of salafi-jihadism, Shiraz Maher argues that there are “five essential and irreducible features” of the salafi-jihadi movement:²⁷

1. *Tawhid* – The unitary oneness of God; the core component of Islam and the single most important factor in Salafism.
2. *Hakimiyya* – The rule of Allah; securing God’s sovereignty in the political system
3. *al-wala wal-bara* – To love and hate for the sake of Allah; loyalty and disavowal
4. *Jihad* – Literally and linguistically means to struggle or exert effort, although it has a legal meaning which relates to combat and fighting
5. *Takfir* – Excommunication of other Muslims, banishing them from faith

As such, salafi-jihadism is an ideology that is not only antidemocratic but also implicitly violence-promoting as their Manichean worldview divides enemies into opposing camps of believers and unbelievers and the legitimacy of using violence against all those outside their fold.²⁸ In this study, salafi-jihadism and jihadism are applied interchangeably. Similarly, the term ‘violent Islamist extremism’ refers to salafi-jihadism.

²⁵ Weiss, Michael & Hassan, Hassan (2015) *Isis: Inside the Army of Terror*, Regan Arts, p. 223

²⁶ Neumann (2016) p. 101

²⁷ Maher, Shiraz (2016) *Salafi-Jihadism: The History of an Idea*, Hurst & Company, London

²⁸ ‘Ideology and Strategy of Jihadism’, *National Coordinator for Counterterrorism*, December 2009, http://intelcenter.org/library/dutch/Ideology_and_Strategy_in_Jihadism.pdf

3. The terrorist threat to Sweden and foreign fighters: A chronological timeline

In 2010, the Swedish National Centre for Terrorist Threat Assessment (NCT) raised the threat level from “low” to “increased”. The five-grade system had only existed for a few years, but this was the first ever rise of the threat level in Sweden. Up until then, about 30 people from Sweden had travelled to Somalia and joined al-Shabaab, and at least four of them had been killed. Two men were also sentenced but later acquitted in the Court of Appeal suspected of plotting terrorist attacks in Somalia in 2009.²⁹ Senior leaders of al-Shabaab have also lived in Sweden and been religious leaders in Stockholm and Gothenburg – e.g. Fuad Shangole and Abdulkadir Mumin.³⁰ A Security Service report from 2010 estimated that there were about 200 people in the Swedish violent Islamist extremist environment.³¹ This figure has never been publicly revised.

Since the 1970's, residents of Sweden have had connections to terrorist groups such as Hezbollah, Hamas, PKK, GIA, the Abu Nidal Organisation, the Japanese Red Army, the Red Army Faction, al-Qaeda and others.³² Beside violent Islamist extremists, right-wing extremists and white supremacists have committed assaults and murders of political opponents in Sweden, and actors in the left-wing extremist scene have also committed violent crimes. The terrorism activities in Sweden during the 1970's, 1980's and 1990's were mostly based on

²⁹ 'Swedish Security Service 2010', *Swedish Security Service*

³⁰ 'Före detta Stockholms-imam terrorhotar Kenya', *Sveriges Television*, May 23, 2014, <http://www.svt.se/nyheter/utrikes/fore-detta-rinkeby-imam-terrorhotar-kenya>; 'Nya terrorledaren bodde i Sverige', *Expressen*, August 5, 2012, <http://www.expressen.se/gt/nya-terrorledaren-bodde-i-sverige/>

³¹ 'Violence-promoting Islamist extremism in Sweden', *Swedish Security Service*, 2010, <http://sakerhetspolisen.se/download/18.4f0385ee143058a61a89f3/1392294843261/Reportonviolence-promotingIslamistextremisminSweden.pdf>; 'Swedish Security Service 2009', *Swedish Security Service*

³² Gustafsson, Linus (2012) *The Swedish Connection*, Swedish National Defence College

different types of financial and logistical support from Sweden to terrorist groups abroad. In the 1990's supporters and sympathisers in Sweden had connections to al-Qaeda, some travelling to bin Laden's training camps in Afghanistan.³³ Financial and logistical support of terrorism by a number of residents in Sweden continued during the 2000's, often directed to Somalia, Iraq, and Afghanistan, but later also to Yemen and Syria.³⁴ The logistical and financial support have in many cases been very difficult to prove in criminal courts, but in May 2005 two people active in Ansar al-Sunna and Ansar al-Islam were sentenced in a Swedish court for financing terrorism in Iraq.³⁵ The financial and logistical support of terrorism and terrorist groups from Sweden is still continuing.

After the al-Qaeda attacks in the United States on 11 September 2001, the Swedish Security Service intensified its monitoring of violent Islamists in Sweden, resulting in identifying more al-Qaeda supporters. Some of them promoted militant jihad and had contact with al-Qaeda affiliates in Europe.³⁶ At that time, the Security Service concluded that the "majority of them have studied Islam at radical Islamist centres in e.g. Yemen and Saudi Arabia."³⁷ In 2002, the Counter-Terrorism Section at the Security Service allocated more resources to monitor and counter these supporters, and the terrorist threat to Sweden was assessed as an "augmented threat" but "no information indicat[ed] that al-Qaeda intends to carry out attacks against Sweden or Swedish interests."³⁸ Some foreigners trying to entry Sweden were refused and expelled due to suspected links to international terrorism.³⁹ A case that received a lot of attention was when Swedish authorities together with the CIA extradited two Egyptians, Ahmed Agiza and Mohammed Al-Zery, in December 2001.⁴⁰

Overall, the terrorist threat to Sweden has been low, but in 2005 the Security Service assessed an increased risk of terror attacks against foreign interests in Sweden.⁴¹ Foreign embassies and residences in Sweden may be exposed to other security threats than Swedish institutions, as was the case in 1975 when members of the Red Army Faction carried out a siege at the West German embassy in Stockholm. Previously, in February 1971, members of Croatian Ustaša had occupied the Yugoslavian Consulate in Gothenburg, and in April 1971 other

³³ 'SÄPO – Annual Report 2002', *Swedish Security Service*

³⁴ 'Swedish Security Service 2008', *Swedish Security Service*; 'Swedish Security Service 2009', *Swedish Security Service*; 'Swedish Security Service 2013', *Swedish Security Service*

³⁵ 'Swedish Security Service 2005', *Swedish Security Service*

³⁶ 'SÄPO – Annual Report 2001', *Swedish Security Service*

³⁷ 'SÄPO – Annual Report 2001', *Swedish Security Service*

³⁸ 'SÄPO – Annual Report 2002', *Swedish Security Service*

³⁹ 'SÄPO – Annual Report 2001', *Swedish Security Service*; 'SÄPO – Annual Report 2002', *Swedish Security Service*

⁴⁰ 'Bodström reported over CIA terror deportations', *The Local*, January 19, 2009, <https://www.thelocal.se/20090119/17020>

⁴¹ 'Swedish Security Service 2005', *Swedish Security Service*

members of Ustaša murdered the Yugoslavian ambassador to Sweden at the Embassy in Stockholm. Seven members were sentenced for the crimes. In an attempt to get the imprisoned members released, a commercial airliner was hijacked in September 1972. In 2005, the Security Service emphasized that security threats against unspecified foreign interests in Sweden was still significant.

In the 2007 *Country reports on terrorism*, released by the U.S. Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism, it was stated that “authorities on the subject have estimated there are approximately 1,500 members and supporters and 100 persons with ties to terrorist organizations in Sweden⁴².” So far these numbers have never been verified or revised by Swedish authorities.

In October 2008, the Swedish citizen of Moroccan origin Mohammed Moumou, a.k.a. ‘Abu Qaswarah al-Maghribi’, was killed in Iraq. Moumou was ISI’s second-in-command and its “*wali* (governor) of Ninawa governorate, and thus protector of the most important centre of ISI power, in the city of Mosul.”⁴³ In the 1990’s, Moumou attended terrorist training camps in Afghanistan, and before going to Iraq, Moumou was “suspected of leading a violence-promoting Islamist network in Sweden.”⁴⁴ In 2004, Moumou “was arrested in Denmark on suspicion that he was involved in the 2003 Casablanca suicide bombings that left 33 people dead.”⁴⁵ According to the U.S. Department of the Treasury, Moumou served “as Abu Mus’ab al-Zarqawi’s representative in Europe for issues related to chemical and biological weapons.”⁴⁶ The same year Moumou was killed, a Swedish citizen of Moroccan origin, Ahmed Essafri, was sentenced to three years in prison in Morocco for terrorism-related crimes.⁴⁷ Both Essafri and Moumou are thought to have been active in the radical Brandbergen Mosque south of Stockholm city.⁴⁸

Moumou shared the address with another man in Stockholm who has been linked to the Jyllands-Posten plot, and the Mumbai terrorist David Headley who also had an assignment to attack Jyllands-Posten.⁴⁹ Shortly after his death,

⁴² ‘Country Reports on Terrorism 2007’, *Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism, U.S. State Department*, April 30, 2008, <https://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2007/103707.htm>

⁴³ Lister (2015) p. 57

⁴⁴ ‘Swedish Security Service 2008’, *Swedish Security Service*

⁴⁵ Ranstorp, Magnus, Gustafsson, Linus & Hyllengren, Peder, ‘From the Welfare State to the Caliphate’, *Foreign Policy*, February 23, 2015, http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/02/23/from_the_welfare_state_to_the_caliphate_sweden_islamic_state_syria_iraq_foreign_fighters/

⁴⁶ ‘Treasury Designations Target Terrorist Facilitators’, *U.S. Department of the Treasury*, December 7, 2006, <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/hp191.aspx>

⁴⁷ ‘Moroccan Swede jailed on terror charges’, *The Local*, June 11, 2008, <https://www.thelocal.se/20080611/12360>; ‘Swede questioned about Stockholm mosque’, *The Local*, January 16, 2007, <https://www.thelocal.se/20070116/6107>

⁴⁸ ‘Al Qaeda in Iraq’s second in command was a Swedish citizen’, *Long War Journal*, October 16, 2008, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2008/10/al_qaeda_in_iraqs_se.php

⁴⁹ Gustafsson (2015) p. 39; ‘Dansk Säpo-chef pekar ut svensk’, *Svenska Dagbladet*, October 10, 2016, <https://www.svd.se/dansk-sapo-chef-pekar-ut-svensk>

Moumou was replaced by Syrian Abu Mohammed al-Jolani, a.k.a. 'Abu Abdullah', who had been released from Camp Bucca detention facility in Basra, Iraq, the same year, and who would later become the leader of Jabhat al-Nusra and its successive rebranded name Jabhat Fateh al-Sham.⁵⁰

Another man who received training in Pakistan was Somali-born Gouled Hassan Dourad who had migrated to Sweden in 1993. He later travelled to Somalia and got involved with an al-Qaeda cell in East Africa, and was in 2004 arrested and sent to Guantanamo.⁵¹

In 2009, Swedish citizen of Lebanese origin Oussama Kassir was found guilty in a U.S. court for providing material support to al-Qaeda. Kassir is thought to previously have attended training camps in Pakistan, and he was sentenced for conspiring to establish a jihadi training camp in Oregon, USA. He had provided training lessons on weapons and established several websites with instructions on how to make explosives.⁵²

Since the mid-2000 and onwards, the development of the threat to Sweden by violent Islamist extremists is in many cases (but not all of them) related to the caricatures of the Prophet Mohammed published in Swedish and Scandinavian press, and journalists, publishers, editors and artists affiliated with those publications and drawings. The events surrounding the cartoons eventually put Sweden on the jihadi terrorists' target list. Previously, Usama bin Laden had even stated in a speech "to the people of America" that the small country in northern Europe is not of his interest: "I say to you that security is an indispensable pillar of human life and that free men do not forfeit their security, contrary to Bush's claim that we hate freedom. If so, then let him explain to us why we don't strike for example - Sweden?"⁵³ A new rising jihadi leader would later change that assessment.

Abu Omar al-Baghdadi, then leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), reacted to the cartoons and threatened to kill the Swedish cartoonist Lars Vilks who had drawn caricatures of the Prophet Mohammed. Al-Baghdadi stated: "We are calling for the assassination of cartoonist Lars Vilks who dared insult our prophet ... and we announce a reward during this generous month of Ramadan⁵⁴." In September 2007, the Associated Press Stockholm office reported:

⁵⁰ Lister (2015) pp. 57, 269

⁵¹ Gustafsson (2012) p. 34

⁵² 'Swedish Citizen Oussama Kassir Found Guilty of Providing Material Support to al Qaeda', *U.S. Attorney's Office, Southern District of New York*, May 12, 2009, <https://archives.fbi.gov/archives/newyork/press-releases/2009/nyfo051209.htm>; 'Mustafa Kamel Mustafa, A/k/a "Abu Hamza," Sentenced In Manhattan Federal Court To Life In Prison', *Department of Justice, U.S. Attorney's Office, Southern District of New York*, January 9, 2015, <https://www.justice.gov/usao-sdny/pt/mustafa-kamel-mustafa-aka-abu-hamza-sentenced-manhattan-federal-court-life-prison>

⁵³ 'Full transcript of bin Laden's speech', *Al Jazeera*, November 1, 2004, <http://www.aljazeera.com/archive/2004/11/200849163336457223.html>

⁵⁴ 'Artist under al-Qaida death threat in hiding', *The Guardian*, September 18, 2007, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2007/sep/18/alqaida.artnews>

3. The terrorist threat to Sweden and foreign fighters: A chronological timeline

*The bounty of \$100,000 (£50,000) would increase to \$150,000 if Vilks was "slaughtered like a lamb", the al-Qaida leader said. He also offered \$50,000 for the killing of the chief editor of a local newspaper, Nerikes Allehanda, which reprinted Vilks's cartoon on August 19.*⁵⁵

The infamous al-Qaeda ideologue Anwar al-Awlaki explicitly mentioned the cartoons and Lars Vilks in his lecture *The dust will never settle down*, and al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) later published a "Most Wanted" poster in its Inspire magazine aimed at Lars Vilks and others involved in the cartoon crisis. One of the Swedish foreign fighters, Mohamed Yusuf, a.k.a. 'Abu Zaid', who had travelled to Somalia in 2008 to join al-Shabaab, threatened to kill Lars Vilks in a video statement recorded in Mogadishu. Yusuf was together with another Swedish citizen arrested in 2012 by FBI agents in the Horn of Africa. The men were transferred to the United States and later sentenced for terrorism.⁵⁶

The U.S. citizen Colleen La Rose, a.k.a. 'Jihad Jane', conspired to kill Vilks, and was in 2014 sentenced to ten years in prison in the United States.⁵⁷ In May 2010, two brothers were arrested for arson, trying to set Vilks house on fire. The brothers were sentenced to prison.⁵⁸

On 11 December 2010, a couple of months after NCT's raise of the threat level, the Swedish citizen of Iraqi origin Taimour Abdulwahab al-Abdaly detonated his car and later his suicide vest only a few meters from a crowded shopping street in central Stockholm.⁵⁹ Luckily, no one died. In his audio recording sent to media and the police, he explained his motives being the presence of the Swedish Armed Forces in Afghanistan and the publications of the Mohammed cartoons. He also said: "Now the Islamic State has fulfilled what they promised you. We are here in Europe and in Sweden, we are a reality, not an invention, I will not

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ 'Three Members of al Shabaab Plead Guilty to Conspiring to Provide Material Support to the Terrorist Organization', *U.S. Attorney's Office, Eastern District of New York*, May 12, 2015, <https://www.fbi.gov/contact-us/field-offices/newyork/news/press-releases/three-members-of-al-shabaab-plead-guilty-to-conspiring-to-provide-material-support-to-the-terrorist-organization>; 'Svenskar terroranklagade i USA', *Sveriges Radio*, December 22, 2012, updated December 23, 2012, <http://sverigesradio.se/sida/gruppsida.aspx?programid=3437&grupp=19015&artikel=5390594>; 'Vad hände när två svenska medborgare fördes från Djibouti till USA och terrorätalandes?', *Sveriges Radio*, June 3, 2013, <http://sverigesradio.se/sida/artikel.aspx?programid=1637&artikel=5553390>; 'Sverige hjälpte USA att åtala svenskar', *Sveriges Radio*, May 24, 2013, <http://sverigesradio.se/sida/gruppsida.aspx?programid=3437&grupp=19015&artikel=5545093>

⁵⁷ 'Jihad Jane' Colleen LaRose gets 10 years in prison', *BBC*, January 6, 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-25630399>

⁵⁸ 'Bröder dömda för branddåd mot Vilks', *Aftonbladet*, July 15, 2010, <http://www.aftonbladet.se/nyheter/article12390868.ab>

⁵⁹ Ranstorp, Magnus, 'Terrorist Awakening in Sweden?', *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 4, Issue 1, January 2011

say more about this.”⁶⁰ It is possible he acted upon previous al-Qaida statements claiming Sweden is a legitimate target, and AQAP’s Inspire was not late in saluting the suicide attack in the following issue of the magazine. In August 2012, the Algerian Nasserddine Menni was found guilty of financing terrorism, as he had transferred more than £5,000 to al-Abdaly.⁶¹ According to the head of Iraqi counter-terrorism, al-Abdaly had been trained in Iraq and was in contact with a senior al-Qaida leader in Iraq before the attack.⁶² However, Swedish authorities have never confirmed al-Abdaly’s activities in Iraq.

On December 28 2010, only a couple of weeks after the suicide attack, a group of four terrorists travelled by car from Stockholm to Copenhagen, Denmark, to commit an attack on the Danish newspaper Jyllands-Posten. It was Jyllands-Posten that had originally published the Mohammed cartoons in 2005. In June 2012, four men were convicted in Copenhagen for the plot. The members of the group included Lebanese-born Munir Awad who had been arrested in Somalia in 2007, and later again in 2009 in Waziristan, Pakistan, together with the former Swedish Guantanamo detainee Mehdi Ghezali. In Stockholm, Awad lived with two persons who in 2010 had been convicted of planning a terrorist attack in Somalia, but were later acquitted in a higher court.⁶³ One of the other members in the Copenhagen plot, Sahbi Zalouti, was also arrested in Pakistan in 2009.⁶⁴ The Jyllands-Posten cell shows that returning foreign fighters may have the capabilities and intent to commit terrorist attacks.

On the tenth anniversary of the September 11 attacks, in 2011, another group of men was arrested for plotting to kill Vilks at an art exhibition in Gothenburg, but later acquitted in higher court. Before being arrested, the men had listened to Awlaki’s *The dust will never settle down*, and read the Inspire issue where Vilks is mentioned.⁶⁵

⁶⁰ ‘Stockholm bombing: police suspected from start that Taimour Abdulwahab had accomplices’, *The Telegraph*, March 8, 2011, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/sweden/8368829/Stockholm-bombing-police-suspected-from-start-that-Taimour-Abdulwahab-had-accomplices.html>

⁶¹ ‘HMA v Nasserddine Mennis’, *Judiciary of Scotland*, <http://www.scotland-judiciary.org.uk/8/933/HMA-v-NASSERDINE-MENNI>

⁶² ‘Gripen al-Qaïdaledare påstås ha varit Taimours kontakt’, *Sveriges Television*, September 30, 2015, updated October 1, 2015, <http://www.svt.se/nyheter/inrikes/gripen-al-qaidaledare-pastas-ha-varit-taimours-kontakt-1>

⁶³ ‘Terrorbas i Sverige’, *Aftonbladet*, December 31, 2010, <http://www.aftonbladet.se/nyheter/article12724200.ab>

⁶⁴ ‘Munir Awad bodde med dömda terrorister’, *Svenska Dagbladet*, December 30, 2010, <https://www.svd.se/munir-awad-bodde-med-domda-terrorister>; ‘Här är de dömda terroristsvenskarna’, *Svenska Dagbladet*, March 2, 2012, <https://www.svd.se/svd-har-kartlagt-de-atalade>

⁶⁵ Gustafsson (2012)

In 2012, a few individuals from Sweden were still in Somalia, but no new arrivals were observed.⁶⁶ Instead, interest in the Syrian conflict grew among radicalised youths in Sweden and a few individuals travelled to Syria and Iraq to join various groups of the armed opposition. The Swedish Security Service assessed that there would not be “any growth in violence-promoting Islamist circles in Sweden”⁶⁷, it was additionally stressed that:

*It is probable that countries experiencing temporary instability present new arenas for Islamist-motivated terrorism. This in turn is assessed to have an impact on those in Sweden who engage in activities linked to terrorism in these countries, for example in financing and travelling to join terrorist groups.*⁶⁸

With Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Somalia in mind, the Swedish Security Service made the assessment that people would continue to travel to countries with a high presence of jihadi terrorist organisations. The situation in Syria was becoming more violent, prompting a larger number of Swedish residents to join armed Islamist groups opposing the Assad government. Some of the Swedish foreign fighters travelling to Syria and Iraq had previously been engaged in other conflicts abroad.⁶⁹ What the Security Service did not know was that this was only the beginning of a new wave of foreign fighters that was going to develop and grow ten-fold the size of the foreign fighters’ contingent going to Somalia.

Even though the focus of violent Islamists in Sweden changed towards the Syrian conflict, the security threat related to the cartoon crisis was still significant. A few years after the Swedish cell’s plot against Jyllands-Posten in Copenhagen and the plot to kill Vilks in Gothenburg, Vilks was attending a cultural centre in Copenhagen, and was attacked by the 22-year-old Danish Omar El-Hussein. Danish police later killed El-Hussein after his second attack at Copenhagen’s Great Synagogue.⁷⁰ The terrorist attacks occurred only weeks after the attacks on the French satire newspaper Charlie Hebdo in Paris, and the subsequent attack on a Jewish supermarket in January 2015. Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula later claimed responsibility for the attacks on Charlie Hebdo. The perpetrator at the supermarket, and the killing of a police officer the day before was associated with the Charlie Hebdo cell but members also pledged allegiance to IS.⁷¹

In November 2015, Paris was again hit by a series of attacks now targeting the football stadium Stade de France, the Bataclan theatre, restaurants and cafés

⁶⁶ ‘Säpo utreder terrorsvenskar’, *Svenska Dagbladet*, December 14, 2014, <https://www.svd.se/sapo-utreder-terrorsvenskar>

⁶⁷ ‘Swedish Security Service 2013’, *Swedish Security Service*

⁶⁸ ‘Swedish Security Service 2013’, *Swedish Security Service*

⁶⁹ ‘Utsatta områden – sociala risker, kollektiv förmåga och oönskade händelser’, *Polismyndigheten*, December 2015, p. 37

⁷⁰ Skjoldager, Morten (2016) *Syv År For PET*, People’s Press

⁷¹ ‘European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2016’, *Europol*, p. 22

leaving more than 130 people killed and 368 injured. One of the suspects in the attacks was Swedish-Algerian Mohamed Aziz Belkaid, who was later killed in a police raid in Brussels. Belkaid travelled to Syria and the Islamic State in April 2014, and was selected to coordinate the Paris attacks from an apartment in Brussels.⁷² In April 2016, Osama Krayem from Sweden was arrested suspected for involvement in the Paris attacks in November 2015. He is also suspected of involvement in the Brussels attacks in March 2016 when a cell detonated two nail bombs at Brussels Airport and the following attack at the Maalbeek metro station. In 2014, Krayem had travelled to Syria to join IS.⁷³ According to media reports, Belkaid and Krayem travelled together from Syria in September 2015.⁷⁴ The Krayem and Belkaid case shows that there are returning Swedish foreign fighters from Syria that possesses both the capability and intent to commit terrorist acts in Europe.

Osama Krayem is not the only foreign fighter from Sweden who has been arrested. In October 2014, the Swedish citizen Bherlin Gildo was arrested during an overlay at London's Heathrow Airport on his way to Manila in the Philippines. He was accused of "possessing information likely to be useful to a terrorist"⁷⁵, having received weapons training when attending a terrorist camp in Syria in 2012 and 2013. Pursuing the indictment became complicated, as his defence attorney argued that "British intelligence agencies were supporting the same Syrian opposition groups as he was"⁷⁶, and Gildo was later released. Gildo was one of the administrators of the Swedish Mujahedeen Fi Ash Sham Facebook account.⁷⁷

In December 2015, Hassan Mostafa al-Mandlawi and Al Amin Sultan from Gothenburg were sentenced for terrorism committed in Syria in 2013. Al-Mandlawi and Sultan had an active role in the execution of two men in Aleppo, in that they staged and filmed the assassination, and propagating that the

⁷² 'Så blev småtjuven Belkaid en ökänd terrorist', *Sveriges Television*, November 30, 2016, updated December 1, 2016, <http://www.svt.se/nyheter/lokalt/stockholm/sa-blev-smatjuven-belkaid-en-okand-terrorist>; 'Terrornätverket som skakade Paris och Bryssel', *Sveriges Television*, November 11, 2016, updated, March 22, 2017, <http://www.svt.se/nyheter/utrikes/terrornatverket-som-skakade-paris-och-bryssel>

⁷³ 'Säpo tog Osama Krayems datorer i beslag i Malmö', *Sydsvenskan*, February 3, 2017, <http://www.sydsvenskan.se/2017-02-03/sapo-tog-osama-krayems-datorer-i-beslag-i-malmo>

⁷⁴ 'IS-svenskens terrorcell dödade 162 personer', *Expressen*, March 22, 2017, <http://www.expressen.se/nyheter/is-svenskens-terrorcell-dodade-162-personer/>

⁷⁵ 'Suspected terrorist stopped at Heathrow with a guide to jihad walks free after intelligence services 'refuse to hand over evidence'', *Daily Mail*, June 1, 2015, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3105884/Terror-suspect-Bherlin-Gildo-freed-intelligence-services-refuse-hand-evidence.html>

⁷⁶ 'Terror trial collapses after fears of deep embarrassment to security services', *The Guardian*, June 1, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2015/jun/01/trial-swedish-man-accused-terrorism-offences-collapse-bherlin-gildo>

⁷⁷ Gustafsson (2015)

victims would be slaughtered as lambs.⁷⁸ At least six individuals from Gothenburg were attending the execution, and the others were later arrested in absence of a Swedish prosecutor. Some of them have probably by now died in Syria and will therefore never face criminal charges.⁷⁹

In January 2016, the Serb-Swede Mirsad Bektasevic and a Yemeni with Swedish residence were arrested in Greece carrying army uniforms, machetes, and other combat paraphernalia in their luggage. Bektasevic has previously been convicted of conspiracy to commit a terrorist offence in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, in 2007, and had been in Syria before being arrested by Greek law enforcement.⁸⁰ In Sarajevo, police found a large number of firearms, a suicide belt, and 30 kg of explosives.⁸¹ According to the prosecutors, Bektasevic and his comrades “planned an attack in Bosnia or another European nation to force the government involved to pull out troops from Iraq and Afghanistan.”⁸²

In June 2016, Aydin Sevin from a Stockholm suburb was sentenced for terrorism. He was arrested by Turkish authorities twice in 2015 as he tried to travel to Syria to join IS. When Sevin failed to join IS, he started to prepare a suicide attack in Sweden, and began to download IS propaganda, instructions of explosives and how to put together a bomb. During his preparations he bought the ingredients necessary for building a bomb, which included a pressure cooker, several bottles of acetone, duct tape, steel bearing balls, and an old Nokia cell phone. With the help of his family, authorities could prevent the attack.⁸³ Even though this was a success story for Swedish counter-terrorism, the Sevin case shows the risk of a boomerang effect with lone actors. If they were unable to enter Syria and join the Islamic State they could still pose a major security threat.

⁷⁸ Dom B 9086-15, *Göteborgs tingsrätt*, December 14, 2015

⁷⁹ ‘Misstänkt terrorist häktad’, *Upsala Nya Tidning*, January 12, 2016, <http://www.unt.se/omvarld/misstankt-terrorist-haktad-4059834.aspx>; ‘Häktningsframställan mot tre personer för medhjälp till terroristbrott’, *Åklagarmyndigheten*, January 11, 2016, <https://www.aklagare.se/nyheter-press/press-meddelanden/?id=28&newsId=682DF053483C680F>; ‘Tre män häktade för terroristbrott’, *Sveriges Radio*, January 12, 2016, <http://sverigesradio.se/sida/artikel.aspx?programid=104&artikel=6343427>; ‘Misstänkta terrormedhjälpare häktas’, *Helsingborgs Dagblad*, January 12, 2016, <http://www.hd.se/2016-01-12/misstankta-terrormedhjelpare-haktas>; ‘Grupperna inom de svenska IS-krigarna’, *Expressen*, April 28, 2016, <http://www.expressen.se/nyheter/grupperna-inom-de-svenska-is-krigarna/>

⁸⁰ ‘Two Swedish jihadists arrested in Greece’, *The Local*, January 31, 2016, <http://www.thelocal.se/20160131/two-swedish-jihadists-arrested-in-greece-police>; Number X-K-06/190, The Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina, January 10, 2007; ‘Mirsad Bektasevic poserar med vapen i Syrien’, *Gudmundson*, June 5, 2014, <http://gudmundson.blogspot.se/2014/06/mirsad-bektasevic-poserar-med-vapen-i.html>; ‘Swedish ‘jihadists’ face terror claims in court’, *The Local*, February 2, 2016, <https://www.thelocal.se/20160202/swedish-jihadists-face-terror-allegations-in-court>

⁸¹ Skjoldager, Morten (2009) *Truslen indefra: De danske terrorister*, Lindhardt og Ringhof

⁸² ‘Terror’ trial opens in Sarajevo’, *BBC*, July 20, 2006, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/5197964.stm>

⁸³ Dom B 546-16, *Attunda tingsrätt*, June 2, 2016

In addition, there are residents of Sweden that have been arrested for other crimes in relation to the conflict in Syria and Iraq. In 2016, a man was arrested and later sentenced for serious crimes against international law as he was fighting for an armed opposition group in Syria and was part of an execution of government soldiers.⁸⁴ Another man was sentenced, in December 2016, for war crimes as he had uploaded photos in social media with him posing next to dead and mutilated IS members.⁸⁵

In 2014, the Security Service suspected a man living in Stockholm of giving detailed instructions to his son in Syria of how to build explosive devices. When the father served time in Swedish prison (for another crime) in 2012, the son, Nur-Ali, travelled to Chechnya to fight. When he did not manage to enter Chechnya, he stated he continued to Waziristan and received training. In 2013, when the father was released from prison his son had travelled from Waziristan to Syria and IS. One of his missions in Syria was to help the campaign to release people in an Aleppo prison, and received instructions by his father on how to build an explosive device to enter the building and free the prisoners. Except Waziristan, the son had previously received military training as a young boy living together with his father in Chechnya. In 2017, the father was acquitted from the charges of having instructed his son, who had died in Syria in January 2014.⁸⁶

The foreign fighter phenomenon – together with the issues of non-violent extremism, political violence, and terrorism – has been widely debated in Swedish media and politics. The perceived and real security threat from these actors, their anti-democratic agendas and actions have led to several measures initiated by the Swedish government and parliament, government agencies and authorities, municipalities, and the civil society, in order to prevent and combat the issues.⁸⁷ In 2015, the Swedish government decided to send the Swedish Armed Forces to northern Iraq to provide training and advice to the Iraqi defence forces in its efforts to combat IS.⁸⁸ Counter-terrorism strategies have been updated, and local and national action plans to prevent violent extremism have been written. Local

⁸⁴ 'Man åtalas för grovt folkrättsbrott', *Åklagarmyndigheten*, December 29, 2016, <https://www.aklagare.se/nyheter-press/pressmeddelanden/?newsId=42D46D1A5013CE85>; 'Livstid för folkrättsbrott i Syrien', *Sveriges Radio*, February 16, 2017, <http://sverigesradio.se/sida/artikel.aspx?programid=83&artikel=6631771>

⁸⁵ 'Sex månaders fängelse för krigsförbrytelser', *Sydöstran*, December 6, 2016, <http://www.sydosttran.se/karlskrona/unikt-arende-om-krigsbrott-avgors-2/>

⁸⁶ Förundersökningsprotokoll, 0105-K079-14, AM-76869-15, *Säkerhetspolisen*; 'Grupperna inom de svenska IS-krigarna', *Expressen*, April 28, 2016, <http://www.expressen.se/nyheter/grupperna-inom-de-svenska-is-krigarna/>

⁸⁷ Ranstorp, Magnus, Gustafsson, Linus & Hyllengren, Peder (2015) *Förebyggande av våldsbejakande extremism på lokal nivå: Exempel och lärdomar från Sverige och Europa*, Försvarshögskolan

⁸⁸ 'Svenskt deltagande i den militära utbildningsinsatsen i norra Irak', prop. 2014/15:104, *The Swedish Government*, April 9, 2015, <https://data.riksdagen.se/fil/A5F2C81C-3F35-453F-B570-D18A92353F19>

prevention coordinators have been established in many municipalities, and, as in many other countries, policymakers, practitioners and the research community is searching for effective measures to prevent and counter violent extremism.

New laws have been implemented but, as mentioned before, it has been very difficult for law enforcement and prosecutors to collect and present evidence – especially regarding the foreign fighters. Even during the wave of foreign fighters travelling to Somalia, the Security Service complained that “Swedish legislation provides limited opportunities to stop people who want to leave Sweden to take part in training or combat.”⁸⁹ With respect to the UN Security Council resolution 2178 (2014), Sweden adopted a new law in April 2016 criminalizing foreign terrorist fighters. The Deputy Director-General at the Swedish Security Service stated in an interview that the Security Service “would gather a degree of suspicion already before the departure, which means we can intervene and stop things. We can’t actually do that today. Today we can only have voluntary talks.”⁹⁰

Only two weeks after the implementation of the new law, a 25-year-old man was arrested at Stockholm Arlanda Airport suspected of travelling to Turkey and further into Syria to join Jabhat al-Nusra.⁹¹ The man was later released in the district court.⁹² According to the Security Service, the new law have had an effect as the extremist environment in Sweden now talks about it. Several people have also been arrested but never prosecuted, said the Director-General in February 2017.⁹³ It is not a criminal offence in Sweden to join a UN or EU listed terrorist organisation.⁹⁴

In sum, citizens and residents of Sweden have financially and logistically supported terrorism abroad during the last decades – with some of them also travelling abroad to join terrorist groups. Since 2000, a few people have participated in terrorist plans and plots in Sweden and Europe and several people travelled to Somalia to join al-Shabaab. The publication of the Mohammed cartoons and subsequent events served to mobilise several actors to commit violence

⁸⁹ ‘Swedish Security Service 2008’, *Swedish Security Service*

⁹⁰ ‘Concerns that new terror laws won’t have effect’, *Sveriges radio*, March 29, 2016, <http://sverigesradio.se/sida/artikel.aspx?programid=2054&artikel=6399183>

⁹¹ ‘Åtal för brott mot ny terrorlag’, *Åklagarmyndigheten*, May 25, 2016, <https://www.aklagare.se/nyheter-press/pressmeddelanden/?newsId=93A7DAB57C62D7DF>

⁹² ‘Tingsrätten ogillar åtalet i mål om “terroristresa”’, *Attunda tingsrätt*, June 14, 2016, <http://www.attundatingsratt.domstol.se/Om-tingsratten/Nyheter-och-pressmeddelanden/Tingsratten-ogillar-atalet-i-mal-om-terroristresa/>

⁹³ ‘Säpochefen: Lagen om terrorresor har haft effekt’, *Sveriges Radio*, February 20, 2017, <http://sverigesradio.se/sida/artikel.aspx?programid=83&artikel=6634615>

⁹⁴ An inquiry has investigated the issue of criminalising participation in a terrorist organisation in armed conflicts, see ‘Straffrättsliga åtgärder mot deltagande i en väpnad konflikt till stöd för en terroristorganisation’, SOU 2016:40, <http://www.regeringen.se/contentassets/fde512ceb1444e85a7be662142f9bcd3/straffrattsliga-atgarder-mot-deltagande-i-en-vapnad-konflikt-till-stod-for-en-terroristorganisation-sou-2016-40.pdf>

and issue threats of violence against Sweden and Swedish interests. Since 2012, perhaps more importantly about 300 individuals from Sweden have travelled to Syria and Iraq to join jihadi terrorist groups. They pose a security threat to the society in Syria and Iraq, and by joining IS they may have increased capability of committing terrorist acts in Sweden and elsewhere. The involvement in and support of IS, the self-described caliphate and its violent ideology, might also enhance foreign fighters' desire to commit terrorist acts outside of the conflict area –especially following IS' announcements that the West is a legitimate target and taking into account that several Western states participate in the anti-IS coalition. According to NCT's threat assessment in 2017, a future terrorist attack in Sweden will probably be inspired by IS or al-Qaeda, even though Sweden at present is not a primary target by IS.⁹⁵ Nevertheless, the conflict in Syria and Iraq has resulted in an increase in the number of violent Islamists extremists in Sweden, and a significant increase of people from Sweden travelling to join terrorist groups abroad.⁹⁶

A need for knowledge

The foreign fighter issue has been a subject of concern for several years and very little is known about the approximately 300 people from Sweden who have joined different jihadi terrorist groups in Syria and Iraq. A few Swedish journalists have written about some of the individuals, and indeed often have done excellent investigative reporting, but neither media nor the academic community has explored the Swedish foreign fighter contingent systematically. Of course, the flow of foreign fighters to Syria and Iraq is still occurring and has only been going on for a few years. To a large extent, the social networks of foreign fighters is an underground movement and thus difficult to map and study.

So far there have only been fragments of information and anecdotal depictions of the Swedish foreign fighters, but which have touched upon several interesting variables that need further analysis. In addition, news reports including interviews with returnees have contained very interesting information of the actors' motives and the context of decisions to travel and join IS or other terrorist groups in the conflict area.

As the responsible agency for counter terrorism in Sweden, the Security Service has at times shared bits and pieces of information regarding the foreign fighters. Most of the information has been related to the changing volume and the security threat the foreign fighters may pose upon return. Established dur-

⁹⁵ 'Bedömning av terrorhotet mot Sverige 2017', *Nationellt centrum för terrorhotbedömning/ Säkerhetspolisen*, http://sakerhetspolisen.se/download/18.1beef5fc14cb83963e73383/1484663040490/NCT_Helarsbedomning_2017.pdf

⁹⁶ 'Utsatta områden – sociala risker, kollektiv förmåga och oönskade händelser', *Polismyndigheten*, December 2015, p. 20

ing the Cold War when a security service's mission was to keep secrets and not confirm anything, the Swedish Security Service has in recent times to a greater extent than previously shared parts of its strategic analyses and assessments of the security threats posed to Sweden, especially related to the exceptional number of foreign fighters. For example, in June 2016 the Security Service confirmed that the number of foreign fighters was decreasing, that about 140 people had returned to Sweden, that one third were women, and that roughly forty had been killed in Syria and Iraq.⁹⁷ Still, the information provided is too limited to be able to conduct an adequate analysis of the foreign fighter contingent from Sweden.

In a 2015 study by the Swedish Defence University on violent Islamist extremism and social media, it was found that several people from Sweden who had travelled to Syria and Iraq to join jihadi terrorist groups were very active in social media. They were spreading IS and al-Qaeda propaganda, grooming new prospects and appealing others to join them. There were fragments of different narratives portrayed in the social media forums, e.g. religious, political, humanitarian etc.⁹⁸ Another study examined trends and modus operandi regarding financial behaviour of the foreign fighters.⁹⁹ Swedish authorities have since then put more emphasis on countering the financing of terrorism but it is still a difficult task to investigate, and even more difficult to research. Government agencies have also compiled several reports on prevention of violent extremism in Sweden, but very few of them contain substantive analysis of the problem they seek to prevent and counter.

At least two journalists have written extensively on foreign fighters from Sweden and made some interesting empirical findings. In a study based on 18 foreign fighters, conducted at a time when there (officially) were about 30 foreign fighters in Syria, Gudmundson found that:

*[...] although the typical fighter from Sweden in the Syrian war is a young man with an immigrant background, most of the fighters are not of Syrian descent. The majority of the fighters come from relative poverty, while many have criminal records. Half of the fighters have previous links to terrorism or activities in the global jihadist movement.*¹⁰⁰

⁹⁷ 'Halvering av förstagångsresenärer', *Säkerhetspolisen*, June 29, 2016, <http://sakerhetspolisen.se/ovrigt/pressrum/aktuellt/aktuellt/2016-06-29-halvering-av-forstagangsresenarer.html>

⁹⁸ Gustafsson, Linus (2015) *Väldsbekämpande islamistisk extremism och sociala medier*, Försvarshögskolan, <http://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:867179/FULLTEXT01.pdf>

⁹⁹ Normark, Magnus, Ransörp, Magnus & Ahlin, Filip (2017) *Finansiella aktiviteter kopplade till personer från Sverige och Danmark som anslutit sig till terrorgrupper i Syrien och Irak mellan 2013 – 2016*, Försvarshögskolan, <https://www.fhs.se/Documents/Externwebben/forskning/centrumbildningar/CATS/publikationer/2017/Forsvarshogskolan%20uppdrag%20fran%20Finansinspektionen%202017.pdf>

¹⁰⁰ Gudmundson, Per, 'The Swedish Foreign Fighter Contingent in Syria', *CTC Sentinel*, Combating Terrorism Center, West Point, September 24, 2013, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-swedish-foreign-fighter-contingent-in-syria>

Even though Gudmundsons findings are based on a very small sample, and data from public records and social media, the results may give us an indication of who these fighters are. Likewise, the investigative journalist Magnus Sandelin found that most of the foreign fighters were Swedish citizens, and about 60 percent born outside of Sweden. The average age was 27, and 57 people in his dataset were men and 13 were women. More than one third had previously been convicted for criminal acts. A majority of them lived in a socially deprived area, and there were various different individual profiles.¹⁰¹ Although there are some methodological uncertainties and not Sandelin's ambition to conduct a comprehensive academic study, his results based on 70 foreign fighters provide interesting empirical findings and variables that deserve further exploration.

The subject matter is understudied and there is in particular a lack of empirical evidence based on a larger sample of foreign fighters' background, age, gender, citizenship and foreign origin, time of travel, geographical concentrations and the overall development of the phenomenon from a Swedish perspective. At the time when this study is conducted, individuals still seem to travel from Sweden to join terrorist groups in conflict areas – placing this examination into a wider process which in all likelihood we have not seen the end of.

The lack of knowledge and empirical studies makes it difficult for the government, and society at large, to prevent and counter foreign fighters in specific, and violent Islamist extremism in general. Detailed empirical evidence of age, gender, geographical concentrations, ethnic background, and the development over time, is clearly useful for creating and developing policies and measures aiming to prevent and counter violent Islamist extremism and foreign fighters. The purpose of this analysis is not to examine the causes and motives regarding the foreign fighters, even though the authors stress that more interdisciplinary research is needed if we want to be able to analytically understand these actors more deeply.

¹⁰¹ Sandelin, Magnus (2016) *Svenska IS-krigare*, Fri Tanke förlag

4. Syria, Iraq and terrorist groups

The evolution of the Islamic State, its history, predecessors, ideology and theological references can be examined through a historic perspective going back to the ages of the Prophet Mohammed, medieval Sunni Muslim theologians like Ibn Taymiyyah, the evolution of Salafism and jihadism in the 20th century, the fall of the Ottoman Empire, and the Sykes-Picot agreement in 1916. The aim of this study is neither to explore the evolution of the Islamic State nor its root causes. The purpose of this chapter is rather to give a very brief background of the development of IS and al-Qaeda affiliated groups, and a very brief context to the contemporary situation that the Swedish foreign fighters are in.

The dynamics in the conflict area and the number of actors with different interests and agendas involved in the conflict are many. It is assessed that the conflict in Syria involves more than 1,500 armed groups and more than 150,000 insurgents.¹⁰² Beside different clans and tribes, ethnic and religious groups, national loyalties, regional actors have an interest in the conflict, and the situation in Syria and Iraq has been at the top of the international community's agenda for several years.¹⁰³

In March 2003, the U.S. and its allies invaded Iraq with the justification that Saddam Hussein was possessing weapons of mass destruction and that Iraq was a safe haven for al-Qaeda, which was responsible for the attacks on September 11 2001. The US-led coalition rapidly removed Saddam Hussein from power. The removal was seen as a military success, but the strategy for the political and societal transition was far from successful, and in the following years the violence increased and a civil war erupted, weakening the state and its institutions. This

¹⁰² Lister (2015) p. 2

¹⁰³ Cockburn, Patrick (2015) *The Rise of the Islamic State: Isis and the New Sunni Revolution*, Verso Books, pp. 9, 35; Lister (2015) p. 83; Neumann (2016) p. 75

created widespread social turmoil and sectarianism leading to a deepening and widening of the Sunni-Shia divide.¹⁰⁴ The Iraqi government under Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki “played a central role in pushing the Sunni community into the arms of ISIS”¹⁰⁵, and the Sunni population in Iraq were disadvantaged and marginalized under his government.¹⁰⁶ In a period of eight years, the United States spent \$28 billion equipping and training the Iraqi army.¹⁰⁷ Some of the weapons and equipment would later fall into the hands of the Islamic State. So would some of the men serving in the Iraqi army.

In many ways, the start of IS began in 1999 when Jordanian Abu Musab al-Zarqawi was released from the al-Sawwaqa prison in Jordan, and travelled to Afghanistan to set up a training camp and form a militant group.¹⁰⁸ Al-Zarqawi would later travel to northern Iraq where the 2003 invasion would give him purpose, and in September 2004 he swore an oath of loyalty to bin Laden and established al-Qaeda in Iraq.¹⁰⁹ The relationship became problematic as al-Zarqawi’s methods of targeting Muslims civilians were vehemently criticized by bin Laden and his successor Ayman al-Zawahiri.¹¹⁰ In January 2006, al-Qaeda in Iraq merged with several other factions in Iraq, now calling itself Majlis Shura al-Mujahideen (MSM) or the Mujahideen Advisory Council in Iraq.¹¹¹ Six months later, US forces killed al-Zarqawi, and Abu Ayyub al-Masri became the new leader.¹¹²

In October 2006, MSM was rebranded as the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI), and al-Masri pledged allegiance to the new ‘Emir of the Believers’.¹¹³ The new emir was Abu Omar al-Baghdadi, the man who called for the assassination of Swedish cartoonist Lars Vilks. In April 2010, Abu Omar al-Baghdadi was killed together with other members of the ISI leadership, and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi took over the leadership of ISI.¹¹⁴

The Arab spring that began in Tunisia in late 2010 resulted in large-scale protests in many countries in North Africa and the Middle East, with some leading to unseat authoritarian governments. “Friday of the Children” protests began in Syria in 2011, and much of the protests would later become militarized and parts of it radicalized as a reaction to the government’s brutal crackdown on civilians.¹¹⁵ The conflict has developed into a complicated geopolitical war that on the surface concerns values and norms, but in reality concerns more regime

¹⁰⁴ Gerges, Fawaz A., (2016) *ISIS: A History*, Princeton University Press, pp. 8–12

¹⁰⁵ Cockburn, Patrick (2014) *The Jihadis Return: ISIS and the New Sunni Uprising*, OR Books, p. 32

¹⁰⁶ Neumann (2016) p. 80

¹⁰⁷ Stern, Jessica & Berger, J.M., (2016) *ISIS: The State of Terror*, HarperCollins, p. 45

¹⁰⁸ Lister (2015) pp. 261, 262

¹⁰⁹ Stern & Berger (2016) pp. 13, 17; Lister (2015) p. 262; Gerges (2016) p. 8

¹¹⁰ Stern & Berger (2016) pp. 21–22; Weiss & Hassan (2015) p. 28

¹¹¹ Weiss & Hassan (2015) 49; Lister (2016) p. 266

¹¹² Stern & Berger (2016) p. 26

¹¹³ Weiss & Hassan (2015) pp. 63, 116

¹¹⁴ Stern & Berger (2016) pp. 37–38; Lister (2015) p. 270; Cockburn (2015) pp. 43–44

¹¹⁵ Gerges (2016) p. 15

change versus regime stability.¹¹⁶ Structural economic, religious, political and social factors were underlying conditions making the protests and later the insurgency to develop.¹¹⁷ The revolution was not mainly sectarian in the beginning, but “framed around demands for justice, freedom, equality and other such liberal mores.”¹¹⁸ However, the narrative by the Syrian government and state media was that the opposition was a ‘foreign conspiracy’ and many of the protestors were labelled as ‘terrorists’. Activists and demonstrators were arrested or killed by army men, the security service and the police, and detainees were raped and tortured.¹¹⁹ Charles Lister, author of *The Syrian Jihad*, explains the uprising as following:

To put it simply, several decades of mismanagement, corruption, violence and short-termist opportunism within the Assad family, the Baath party and similarly invested spheres of political influence meant that when Mohammed Bouazizi set himself on fire in Tunisia on December 17 2010, several key elements within Syrian society made a revolution a real prospect.¹²⁰

Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and the Islamic State of Iraq benefited from the protests and violence in Syria. A few months after the killing of bin Laden in Abbottabad, Pakistan, al-Baghdadi sent operatives to Syria. One of them was Abu Mohammed al-Jolani – the successor of the Swede Mohammed Moumou and ISI leader in Mosul.¹²¹ In January 2012, al-Jolani declared war on Syria and al-Assad, and officially announced the presence of his group Jabhat al-Nusra.¹²² Al-Nusra would become a powerful organisation in Syria in 2012 and 2013, and together with the Free Syrian Army and other jihadi factions gain several significant victories in northern Syria.¹²³ Between July 2012 and July 2013, ISI’s one-year *Breaking the Walls* campaign resulted in hundreds of prisoners freed from prisons and detention facilities in Iraq.¹²⁴ One of the eight campaigns included an attack against the Abu Ghraib prison.¹²⁵ The prisons had become radicalisation facilities, and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi’s strategy included recruiting jihadis from prisons.¹²⁶ Al-Baghdadi had previously been imprisoned in the US Camp Bucca, which sometimes is labelled as the “terrorist academy” as many of the jihadis have spent time there.¹²⁷

¹¹⁶ ‘JW v DOD and State’, *U.S. Department of Defence*, 2012 (Pgs. 287–293 (291) JW v DOD and State 14-812DIA), <https://levantreport.com/2015/05/19/2012-defense-intelligence-agency-document-west-will-facilitate-rise-of-islamic-state-in-order-to-isolate-the-syrian-regime/>

¹¹⁷ Lister (2015) p. 31

¹¹⁸ Lister (2015) p. 61

¹¹⁹ Lister (2015) p. 80; Weiss & Hassan (2015) p. 132, 314

¹²⁰ Lister (2015) p. 30

¹²¹ Stern & Berger (2016) p. 41; Cockburn (2015) p. 47; Weiss & Hassan (2015) p. 149

¹²² Weiss & Hassan (2015) p. 149; Stern & Berger (2016) p. 4; Lister (2015) p. 59

¹²³ Lister (2015) pp. 84–85, 110–111, 120; Stern & Berger (2016) pp. 41–42

¹²⁴ Stern & Berger (2016) p. 39

¹²⁵ Lister (2015) p. 159; Weiss & Hassan (2015) pp. 97–98; Cockburn (2015) pp. 46, 74

¹²⁶ Weiss & Hassan (2015) p. 83; Stern & Berger (2016) pp. 34–37

¹²⁷ Weiss & Hassan (2015) p. 66; Cockburn (2015) pp. 44–45

During the winter of 2012–2013, there was a deeper ‘Islamisation’ of the armed groups in northern Syria. Besides the ‘Breaking the Walls’ campaign between July 2012 and July 2013, the next one-year plan entitled Soldier’s Harvest started in July 2013, aimed at “eroding military capabilities and reputation; collecting intelligence on local community dynamics and the armed forces; and intimidating local security force personnel and diminishing their morale.”¹²⁸ In 2013, the violence escalated and an average of 5,000 people every day was leaving Syria.¹²⁹

In April 2013, al-Baghdadi stated that al-Nusra was merged into ISI, and Islamic State of al-Sham/the Levant (ISIS/ISIL) was created. However, al-Nusra rejected this and appealed for support from al-Qaeda. In May and June 2013, IS was present in Deir ez Zour, Aleppo, and Raqqa, and continued its state-building project and expanded in northern and eastern Syria in 2013.¹³⁰ In 2013 and 2014, there was an intensification of inter-factional conflicts and fighting between ISIS and al-Nusra and other groups.¹³¹

In an official statement in February 2014 al-Qaeda disavowed ISIS.¹³² In a letter to al-Jolani, al-Zawahiri wrote that al-Nusra should stay in Syria and ISIS should stay in Iraq. As these letters became public, al-Baghdadi and his chief spokesman al-Adnani stated that the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham would remain.¹³³ Al-Adnani later declared “takfir on the entire moderate Syrian opposition, thus declaring them targets in the eyes of ISIS”.¹³⁴

Al-Zawahiri stated that al-Baghdadi was “wrong when he announced the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant without asking permission or receiving advice from us even without notifying us”¹³⁵, and that al-Jolani was “wrong by announcing his links to al-Qaeda without having our permission or advice, even without notifying us.”¹³⁶ Al-Qaeda’s General Command stated; “We were not informed of its creation. It did neither await our orders, nor were we consulted. We were not happy with this; rather, we ordered [ISIS] to stop working.”¹³⁷ As Stern and Berger puts it, ISIS had become “[...] a jihadist army so brutal and out of control that it was officially disavowed by al-Qaeda.”¹³⁸ In February 2014,

¹²⁸ Lister (2015) p. 271

¹²⁹ ‘Number of Syrian refugees tops 2 million, with ‘more on the way,’ – UN agency’, *UN News Centre*, (no date), <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=45757#.WNlJLvmGNnQ>

¹³⁰ Lister (2015) pp. 119, 135, 151

¹³¹ Stern & Berger (2016) p. 43; Lister (2015) pp. 166, 171; Neumann (2016) p. 155

¹³² Stern & Berger (2016) p. 43; Cockburn (2015) p. 52

¹³³ Lister (2015) pp. 139–142, 147

¹³⁴ Lister (2015) p. 191

¹³⁵ Weiss & Hassan (2015) p. 185

¹³⁶ Weiss & Hassan (2015) p. 185

¹³⁷ Lister (2015) p. 201

¹³⁸ Stern & Berger (2016) p. 3

al-Qaeda stated that it has no relationship with ISIS, and ISIS formally broke with al-Zawahiri and al-Qaeda in early 2014.¹³⁹

ISIS move into Syria was possible because of personal relationships between ISIS leaders and leaders of different factions in Syria. A large amount of the recruitment base was coming from Jabhat al-Nusra, and people from the Islamic Front, including Ahrar al-Sham fighters, started to defect to ISIS in 2014.¹⁴⁰ In 2013, Omar al-Shishani together with many of his supporters in Jaish al-Muhajireen wa'l Ansar (The Army of Emigrants and Partisans) had joined ISIS. Al-Shishani would later become ISIS' commander in Aleppo and 'chief of operations' in northern Syria.¹⁴¹ Thousands of international volunteers followed suit and joined the expanding terrorist group.

In January 2014, when ISIS took Fallujah, al-Nusra, FSA factions and other groups began an offensive against ISIS.¹⁴² In the summer of 2014, ISIS launched a major offensive in Iraq, and in June it began the campaign to take over Iraq's second largest city Mosul.¹⁴³ In Mosul, ISIS seized the Iraqi Security Forces' Saudi- and American-made weapons.¹⁴⁴ Tikrit fell soon after the offensive in Mosul.¹⁴⁵ At this time, ISIS stormed the Badoush Prison, and murdered about 600 inmates – most of them Shia.¹⁴⁶ As argued by Gerges;

*[ISIS's] seizure of Mosul and their growing military momentum in the summer of 2014, Baghdadi's battalions seemed unstoppable and unbeatable, fired with a "faithful ideology". More than any other factor, ISIS's swift expansion attracts recruits from near and far.*¹⁴⁷

But not all were voluntary soldiers. Up to 800 or 900 children were kidnapped in Mosul for military and religious training.¹⁴⁸

On the start of Ramadan, on June 29, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was announced as the new "Caliph Ibrahim" and the self-described Caliphate – the "Islamic State" – was established.¹⁴⁹ This was the first Caliphate since 1924. IS published two videos entitled *The End of Sykes-Picot* and *Breaking the Border*. A third video

¹³⁹ Weiss & Hassan (2015) pp. 64, 196

¹⁴⁰ Weiss & Hassan (2015) pp. 152, 175, 205; Lister (2015) pp. 134, 226

¹⁴¹ Steinberg, Guido, 'A Chechen al-Qaeda? Caucasian Groups Further Internationalise the Syrian Struggle', *Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik*, SWP Comments, June 2014, https://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/comments/2014C31_sbg.pdf

¹⁴² Lister (2015) p. 185

¹⁴³ Cockburn (2015) p. 10; Lister (2015) p. 258

¹⁴⁴ Weiss & Hassan (2015) p. 207

¹⁴⁵ Cockburn (2015) p. 13; Stern & Berger (2016) p. 46

¹⁴⁶ 'Iraq: ISIS Executed Hundreds of Prison Inmates', *Human Rights Watch*, October 30, 2014, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/10/30/iraq-isis-executed-hundreds-prison-inmates>

¹⁴⁷ Gerges (2016) pp. 46–47

¹⁴⁸ 'World Report 2017', *Human Rights Watch*, 2017, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2017>

¹⁴⁹ Stern & Berger (2016) pp. 46f

was released the same day with al-Adnani declaring the renaming of ISIS to IS and the birth of a new Caliphate under al-Baghdadi.¹⁵⁰ The Arabic acronym 'Daesh' or 'Daash' is a derogatory term of ISIS, and not used by the group itself. A more common term used by the group and its sympathizers is 'Dawla', which is the Arabic word for 'state'.

The declaration meant that Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi now challenged the Afghan Taliban leader Mullah Omar as the caliph, and al-Qaeda Central as the leading jihadi group.¹⁵¹ In an address in the 800-year-old Great Mosque of al-Nuri in Mosul, al-Baghdadi stated:

O Muslims everywhere, glad tidings to you and expect good. Raise your head high, for today – by Allah's grace – you have a state and khilafah, which will return your dignity, might, rights, and leadership. It is a state where the Arab and non-Arab, the white man and black man, the easterner and westerner are all brothers. It is a khilafah that gathered the Caucasian, Indian, Chinese, Shami, Iraqi, Yemeni, Egyptian, Maghribi (North African), American, French, German, and Australian. Allah brought their hearts together, and thus, they became brothers by His grace, loving each other for the sake of Allah, standing in a single trench, defending and guarding each other, and sacrificing themselves for one another. Their blood mixed and became one, under a single flag and goal, in one pavilion, enjoying this blessing, the blessing of faithful brotherhood. If kings were to taste this blessing, they would abandon their kingdoms and fight over this grace. So all praise and thanks are due to Allah.

Therefore, rush O Muslims to your state. Yes, it is your state. Rush, because Syria is not for the Syrians, and Iraq is not for the Iraqis. The earth is Allah's. {Indeed, the earth belongs to Allah. He causes to inherit it whom He wills of His servants. And the [best] outcome is for the righteous} [Al-A'raf: 128]. The State is a state for all Muslims. The land is for the Muslims, all the Muslims.

O Muslims everywhere, whoever is capable of performing hijrah (emigration) to the Islamic State, then let him do so, because hijrah to the land of Islam is obligatory.¹⁵²

Jabhat al-Nusra, the Islamic Front, and several other factions in the conflict area denounced the proclamation. Al-Jolani stated that the declaration was illegitimate, and the FSA also urged IS to leave Syria.¹⁵³ IS's *takfir* on Syrian groups and the

¹⁵⁰ Lister (2015) pp. 236, 237

¹⁵¹ Gerges (2016) p. 4; Lister (2015) p. 238

¹⁵² 'Islamic State Leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi Encourages Emigration, Worldwide Action', *SITE Intelligence Group*, July 1 2014, <https://news.siteintelgroup.com/Jihadist-News/islamic-state-leader-abu-bakr-al-baghdadi-encourages-emigration-worldwide-action.html>

¹⁵³ 'The Islamic State', *Stanford University*, Mapping militant organisations, April 4, 2016, <http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/1>; Lister (2015) pp. 240, 243; Weiss & Hassan (2015) p. 194

targeting of Muslims was also criticized by several established Salafi theorists and people in the militant Salafi community.¹⁵⁴ As a ‘proof’ and symbolic gesture of the establishment of a new Islamic state and as a part of its influence campaign, black Islamic State passports were issued.¹⁵⁵

In August 2014, the United States launched airstrikes against IS targets in northern Iraq and in September it launched its airpower in Syria against both Jabhat al-Nusra and IS.¹⁵⁶ The coalition against IS would later grow to include France, the United Kingdom, Germany, the Netherlands, Canada, Australia, Turkey, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and others.¹⁵⁷ Although the number of coalition countries against IS was great, equally diverse were the national interests and priorities in this conflict. In August 2014, IS responded to the US airstrikes with the beheading of the journalist James Foley wearing an orange Guantanamo-like jumpsuit executed by “Jihadi John” in the video *A Message to America*. The ‘beheading videos’ continued from August to November showing beheadings of Peshmerga soldiers, the journalist Steven Sotloff, aid workers David Haines and Alan Henning, and later Rahman Kassig. Law and order in IS territories became even tougher after the Western intervention.¹⁵⁸ As a reaction to the airstrikes, al-Adnani released a speech in September:

*If you can kill a non-believing American or European – especially the spiteful and filthy French – or an Australian, or a Canadian, or any other non-believer from the non-believers waging war, including the citizens of the countries that entered into a coalition against the Islamic State, then rely upon Allah, and kill him in any manner or way however it may be. Smash his head with a rock, or slaughter him with a knife, or run him over with your car, or throw him down from a high place, or choke him, or poison him.*¹⁵⁹

In a study of the potential threat to the West posed by the Islamic State, Hegghammer and Nesser argue:

[T]hat Islamic State does not currently pose the same type of terrorist threat to the West as al-Qaida did in the 2000s. IS has not yet “gone global” in the sense of having committed a substantial proportion of its resources to out-of-area operations. Instead, it has assumed a profoundly ambiguous, hard-to-read posture toward terrorism in the West. In words, its leaders have promised to conquer Rome and called on supporters to carry out international terrorist

¹⁵⁴ Maher, Shiraz (2016) *Salafi-Jihadism: The History of an Idea*, Hurst & Company, London, pp. 4, 209

¹⁵⁵ ‘Anything to declare? ISIS launches passport holders for the international terrorist as part of its campaign of ‘psychological warfare’’, *Mail Online*, August 12, 2014, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2722637/Anything-declare-ISIS-launches-passport-holders-international-terrorist.html>

¹⁵⁶ Cockburn (2015) p. 23; Lister (2015) p. 252

¹⁵⁷ Stern & Berger (2016) p. 49

¹⁵⁸ Lister (2015) pp. 255, 258, 274

¹⁵⁹ ‘Changes in modus operandi of Islamic State (IS) revisited’, *Europol*, November 2016

*attacks, but the same leaders have not explicitly promised to devote their organization to major operations in the near future. In deeds, the lower echelons of the organization have been implicated in several plots, but the top leadership appears not yet to have groomed attack teams for major operations in the US or Europe the way Usama Bin Ladin and Ayman al-Zawahiri did.*¹⁶⁰

IS seeks monopoly on violence, and when it has taken over a town it enforces Sharia laws, establishes Sharia courts, and the Sharia police (*hizbah*) are practising the new rules in town.¹⁶¹ A place or a square is taken to conduct punishments such as lashings, beheadings, stoning, crucifixions, whippings and other forms of punishment.¹⁶² It is prohibited to play music in public, women must wear the full niqab, and it is prohibited to sell or use water pipes and cigarettes.¹⁶³ Testimonies confirm IS fighters have been raping girls and women, and kidnapping them as sex-slaves. A market was even established for selling Yazidi girls and women, and thousands of people from the Yazidi religious minority have been killed.¹⁶⁴ IS has also kidnapped numerous reporters and aid workers.¹⁶⁵ The fatalities in Syria reached more than 470,000 deaths in 2015.¹⁶⁶

Evidently, IS is a brutal organization, often the physical nature and atrocities are focused on, but there is another side. At the same time it has recognised the importance of winning hearts and minds through social services and local governance. A study of the detainees in Iraq found that many jihadists did not care about regional or global terrorism. They “cared about their hometowns or local areas” and a primary motivation was money rather than ideology.¹⁶⁷ It is important to state that the motives and causes for joining IS may differ from person to person. In their many interviews with IS associates, Weiss and Hassan found that:

*[...] what draws people to ISIS could easily bring them to any number of cults or totalitarian movements, even those ideologically contradictory to Salafist Jihadism. Far from homogenous, the organization spans an array of backgrounds and belief systems, from godless opportunists to war profiteers to pragmatic tribesman to committed takfiris.*¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁰ Hegghammer, Thomas & Nesser, Petter, ‘Assessing the Islamic State’s Commitment to Attacking the West’, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 9, No. 4, 2015, <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/440/html>

¹⁶¹ Weiss & Hassan (2015) pp. 230–232; Neumann (2016) p. 79

¹⁶² Weiss & Hassan (2015) p. 230; Lister (2015) pp. 185, 274

¹⁶³ Lister (2015) p. 195, 196

¹⁶⁴ Gerges (2016) p. 31f; Lister (2015) p. 252; Cockburn (2015) p. 34

¹⁶⁵ ‘Country Reports on Terrorism 2015’, U.S. State Department, Bureau of Counterterrorism and Countering Violent Extremism, June 2016, p. 374

¹⁶⁶ ‘Confronting Fragmentation’, *Syrian Center for Policy Research*, February 2016, <http://scpr-syria.org/publications/policy-reports/confronting-fragmentation/>

¹⁶⁷ Weiss & Hassan (2015) pp. 84, 225

¹⁶⁸ Weiss & Hassan (2015) p. 153

Witnesses say that IS “fixed damaged roads, planted flowers in the street, cultivated gardens, and cleaned the local schools.”¹⁶⁹ Having lived under Assad’s repressive government, “for many Syrians the Islamic State is the lesser of two evils”¹⁷⁰, and as argued by Lister:

*The lack of better alternative in either country sets the bar rather low for viable substitute. IS has sought to fill these gaps with limited municipal services such as policing, judiciary, free education, facilities management, local infrastructure repair and management, as well as social outreach initiatives in the form of tribal engagement, Islamic da’wa and recruitment into the IS structure. Public transport services are often restored where they had previously been stopped, and new services are introduced. IS has also been known to operate consumer protection offices to inspect the quality of goods sold at local markets, as well as to operate soup kitchens for the poor and to provide healthcare and vaccinations for children.*¹⁷¹

As argued by Cockburn, “[t]he ISIS offensive has succeeded because it has been joined by a wide uprising of former Iraqi army officers who fought the Americans and young men from Sunni villages and towns across the country.”¹⁷² The Iraqi army’s corruption, lack of discipline and moral are other factors behind the IS success.¹⁷³ In addition, FSA and other militant groups have failed to organise a unified opposition.¹⁷⁴

In the summer of 2014, IS had become the wealthiest terrorist organization not only in Syria and Iraq, but in the world.¹⁷⁵ The financial assets and the number of members make IS an insurgency organisation and a violent movement with territorial control rather than a ‘traditional’ terrorist organization or group as we have seen them before. The major revenue generator for IS has been oil, which has been smuggled to e.g. Jordan and Turkey.¹⁷⁶ It is estimated that IS controlled up to 60 percent of Syria’s total potential oil production in 2014.¹⁷⁷ But by the end of 2014, IS had lost most of its oil revenues.¹⁷⁸ Taxes, alms and charities (*zakat*), and extortion also help fund the IS organisation. Taxes are extracted from profits and capital assets, and revenues also come from gas, kidnappings, agriculture, and black market trading.¹⁷⁹ A special poll tax (*jizya*) has to be paid by non-Muslims living in the territories of the Islamic State. Its predecessor, AQI, was financed

¹⁶⁹ Weiss & Hassan (2015) p. 218

¹⁷⁰ Neumann (2016) p. 175

¹⁷¹ Lister (2015) p. 273

¹⁷² Cockburn (2015) p. 146

¹⁷³ Cockburn (2015) pp. 64–65

¹⁷⁴ Lister (2015) p. 115

¹⁷⁵ Neumann (2016) p. 77; Lister (2015) p. 273

¹⁷⁶ Weiss & Hassan (2015) p. 233

¹⁷⁷ Lister (2015) p. 242

¹⁷⁸ Weiss & Hassan (2015) p. 238

¹⁷⁹ Weiss & Hassan (2015) pp. 234, 235; Lister (2015) pp. 231, 272

through oil smuggling, stealing and trading with weapons, kidnappings, and other criminal activities. Donors from the Gulf also helped.¹⁸⁰ Weapons, ammunition, military equipment have also been seized in new territories.

In November 2014, provinces, or “wilayat”, were established in Algeria, Libya, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen.¹⁸¹ Even Boko Haram in Nigeria was being incorporated in the Islamic State global affiliates network. Several regional leaders of the Pakistani Taliban joined IS under the new province of Khorasan.¹⁸² Terrorist groups and organizations such as the Abu Sayyaf Group in the Philippines, Ansar Bayt al-Maqdisi (ABM) in the Sinai region of Egypt, have pledged loyalty to IS. Splinter groups have emerged from al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb creating Jund al-Khalifa. The establishment of a global “IS network” does not necessary mean that all franchises are following the same strategies and tactics as the IS leadership.¹⁸³ As stated by Gerjes:

*However, as the group suffered military setbacks in Syria and Iraq in 2015, it began to target the far enemy by relying on its far-flung affiliate groups in Egypt, Libya, and limited networks of followers and stay-at-home groupies in Europe and North America. These attacks against the far enemy divert attention from ISIS's military losses in Syria and Iraq and also reinforce its narrative of invincibility and triumphalism. Despite this tactical shift in ISIS's modus operandi in attacking Western targets, Riyadh, Baghdad, and Damascus are ISIS's immediate strategic targets, not Rome, Paris, London, and Washington.*¹⁸⁴

IS is a product of the jihadi movement in 1980's Afghanistan, the conflict in and invasion of Iraq, the Arab spring, and is an extension of al-Qaeda in Iraq.¹⁸⁵ It is unknown how large IS has become. The estimates varies from 20,000 up to 200,000 depending on how you define IS, its fighters, supporters, and affiliates.¹⁸⁶ Some experts argue that the non-state actor has become a proto-state, while others argue that it is “only an unusual advanced terrorist organisation”¹⁸⁷ with the capability of working as a light infantry.¹⁸⁸ IS is not only a physical entity, namely a terrorist organisation, but also an intangible product. It is useful to view the IS phenomena through such lenses as branding and marketing. The informational aspects support and project the physical battlefield.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁰ Weiss & Hassan (2015) pp. 57,58

¹⁸¹ Stern & Berger (2016) pp. 51, 184

¹⁸² Neumann (2016) pp. 164–165

¹⁸³ Stern & Berger (2016) pp. 61f; Lister (2015) p. 281

¹⁸⁴ Gerjes (2016) p. 6

¹⁸⁵ Gerjes (2016) p. 8; Neumann (2016) pp. 56–57

¹⁸⁶ Neumann (2016) p. 70

¹⁸⁷ Lister (2015) p. 271

¹⁸⁸ Lister (2015) p. 276; Gerjes (2016) p. 22

¹⁸⁹ Simons, Greg, 'Fatal Attraction: The Lure of Islamic State', *Sustainable Security*, Oxford Research Group, September 16, 2016, <https://sustainablesecurity.org/2016/09/16/fatal-attraction-the-lure-of-islamic-state/>

5. Foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq – an international perspective

There are several estimates of how many fighters there are from Europe and elsewhere in Syria and Iraq. Behind the numbers are different sources, methodologies, criteria and definitions of the concept “foreign fighter” making it difficult to conduct a comparative analysis of the phenomenon. It is vital to stress that these numbers are estimates and assessments sometimes based on very vague information and unreliable sources. It is of course of interest for academia (and for government) to receive knowledge and analyse the statistics of terrorism to be able to examine *why* there are differences and similarities. Different conflicts may also generate or impact different types of foreign fighters – with different causes, motives, aims and means. Complex dynamics affect foreign fighter behaviour, from different degrees of involvement of radical milieus and facilitation methods and entry processes into these terrorist groups. Different threshold exists as to screening processes between groups as exemplified by the open secret that the Islamic State would almost take anyone willing to join while Jabhat al-Nusra (later Jabhat Fatah al-Sham) was thus more selective and careful in the screening process of recruits. The current foreign fighter problem has evolved from previous jihadi conflicts in Afghanistan, Bosnia, Somalia, Iraq, Yemen, and Syria together with other emerging areas of instability.¹⁹⁰ Some have even argued that there has been a deeper strategy driving the jihadist evolution over the last twenty years, behind the apparent heterogeneity of the phenomenon¹⁹¹

This chapter provides an overview of how the foreign fighter phenomenon has developed across different EU member states, specifically highlighting studies and

¹⁹⁰ ‘Al-Qaeda, ISIL and Their Offspring’, *Canadian Security and Intelligence Service*, February 29, 2016

¹⁹¹ Fishman, Brian H., (2016) *The Master Plan – ISIS, al-Qaeda and the Jihadi Strategy for Final Victory*, Yale University Press

evidence-based data on actual numbers who have travelled from Europe to join the Islamic State (IS) in Syria and Iraq between the period 2012–2017. It will examine key differences and similarities of age, gender, socio-economic factors, the role of geography and social networks together with national and ethnic background. What have been influencing factors? How similar and/or different are foreign fighter contingents across different EU member states?

Background

The current foreign fighter issue is not a new problem. It has gradually emerged in time and space and across multiple, interlocking conflicts that have attracted legitimate Muslim concern in defence of Muslim people and lands. The complex causes and contexts have been analytically explored elsewhere. It is not the purpose in this chapter to further explore these dimensions. Yet it is important to recognise that the internationalisation of the foreign fighter phenomenon that began with the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan providing a focal point for jihadi armed resistance. It continued gathering force and pace as other theatres of conflicts erupted and as communication technology revolutionised interconnectivity and propaganda power for jihadists. About 20,000 jihadists travelled to Afghanistan between the period 1980 and 1992. Between 1992 and 1996 about 2,000 foreign fighters travelled to Bosnia to fight the Orthodox Christian Serbs.¹⁹² The number of people from Europe travelling to Afghanistan in the 1980's and later to Bosnia was estimated to be in the region of a couple of hundred.¹⁹³ Many of them spent periods of time in multiple conflict zones building up combat experience, social networks and contacts.

The conflicts in Chechnya became another foreign fighter destination though considerably fewer foreign fighters were accepted by the Chechens in the First and Second Chechen wars.¹⁹⁴ The emergence of al-Qaeda and their involvement in Chechnya commandeered the cause and internationalised the conflict through the foreign mujahideen.¹⁹⁵ This would lead to al-Qaeda inspiring, sheltering and training militants from Central Asia and the Caucasus region. Several hundred foreign fighters travelled to join the Arab mujahideen in Chechnya though they were mainly from the Arab world rather than from Europe.

Two other major conflicts attracted foreign fighter contingents from Europe. The emergence of al-Shabaab in Somalia around 2005–2006 attracted many

¹⁹² Neumann (2016) pp. 42, 47

¹⁹³ Nesser, Petter (2015) *Islamist Terrorism in Europe: A History*, Oxford University Press, p. 273

¹⁹⁴ Tumelty, Paul, 'The Rise and Fall of Foreign Fighters in Chechnya', *Terrorism Monitor*, Vol.4, Issue 2, 2006

¹⁹⁵ Vidino, Lorenzo, 'How Chechnya Became a Breeding Ground for Terror', *Middle East Quarterly*, Summer 2005, pp.57–66; Hughes, James (2008) *Chechnya – From Nationalism to Jihad*, University of Pennsylvania Press

hundreds of foreigners from around the world from wherever Somali diaspora was located.¹⁹⁶ In 2010 the former MI5 head Jonathan Evans warned about the internationalisation of al-Shabaab and the potential security blowback effect from British nationals travelling out and back to join al-Shabaab in Somalia.¹⁹⁷ The post-Saddam Iraqi cauldron attracted foreign fighters from the Arab world and beyond as they were eager to confront the US-led coalition. A couple of hundred fighters from Europe travelled to Iraq in the mid-2000 period and about 5,000 in total estimates.¹⁹⁸

Consequently, the foreign fighter phenomenon is nothing new, but the magnitude of foreign fighters that has mobilized in Syria and Iraq since 2011 is exceptional.¹⁹⁹ The geographical proximity to Europe has significantly lowered the ease and cost of involvement by foreign fighters into an array of jihadist groups and anti-Assad opposition groups. Even though IS and the conflict in Syria and Iraq have attracted most foreign fighters from around the world, there are still people joining terrorist groups in Chechnya, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Mali, Somalia and Yemen.²⁰⁰ The IS “province” in Libya has also attracted foreign fighters from North and sub-Saharan Africa.²⁰¹

Before the creation of the Islamic State, foreign fighters had flocked to join al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) with most of them originating from Saudi Arabia but also neighbouring Syria, North Africa and Yemen.²⁰² With the weak Iraq-Syria border, most of the foreign fighters were smuggled back and forth between Iraq and Syria.²⁰³ An interesting feature of foreign fighters recruited into AQI as opposed to the Islamic State was that significantly more AQI recruits signed up for suicide bombing missions rather than frontline fighter roles.²⁰⁴

Joining IS

In the beginning of 2012, reports were published that there were foreign fighters traveling to Syria from the region – particularly Lebanon and Iraq.²⁰⁵ And it was also a development expressly encouraged by al-Zawahiri.²⁰⁶ In July 2012, foreign

¹⁹⁶ Taarnby, Michael & Hallundback, Lars, (2010) *Al-Shabaab: The Internationalization of Militant Islamism in Somalia and the Implications for Radicalization Processes in Europe*, Danish Ministry of Justice

¹⁹⁷ ‘Jonathan Evans terrorism speech’, *Daily Telegraph*, September 17, 2010

¹⁹⁸ Neumann (2016) p. 109

¹⁹⁹ See for example: Malet, David (2013) *Foreign Fighters*, Oxford University Press

²⁰⁰ ‘European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2016’, *Europol*, p. 27

²⁰¹ ‘European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2016’, *Europol*, p. 7

²⁰² Stern & Berger (2016) p. 21

²⁰³ Lister (2015) p. 41

²⁰⁴ Dodwell, Brian, Milton, Daniel & Ressler, Don, ‘Then and Now: Comparing the Flow of Foreign Fighters to AQI and the Islamic State’, *West Point Combatting Terrorism Center*, December 2016

²⁰⁵ Lister (2015) p. 69, 73

²⁰⁶ Lister (2015) p. 71

fighters could a lot easier travel to the conflict as the Syrian government lost control of several border crossings with Turkey and Iraq in favour for insurgent groups.²⁰⁷

In the beginning of 2013, at least 3,000 foreign fighters had joined different jihadist groups in Syria.²⁰⁸ According to Stern and Berger, “[i]n November 2013, the impulse to travel to Syria and get involved in the conflict was not necessarily extreme. By November 2014, the landscape had changed radically.”²⁰⁹

In fact, IS has attracted foreign fighters from the entire world. There are different estimates of how many fighters IS has, one of them is 30,000.²¹⁰ The amount of foreign fighters that have joined IS are also difficult to assess. In September 2014, CIA officials estimated about 15,000 foreign fighters in Syria – 2,000 of them labelled as ‘Westerners’.²¹¹ In January 2015, the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (ICSR) at King’s College London estimated more than 20,000 foreign fighters in Syria and about 4,000 from Western European countries. With this assessment the ICSR concludes that “this makes the conflict in Syria and Iraq the largest mobilization of foreigner fighters in Muslim majority countries since 1945. It now surpasses the Afghanistan conflict in the 1980s, which is thought to have attracted up to 20,000 foreigners.”²¹²

Neumann argues that there were two big influxes to Syria – the first in the summer of 2013, and the second the following summer. The first influx was related to Hezbollah’s support to the Syrian army, while the second wave related to the proclamation of the Caliphate. In 2013 foreigners from Europe wanted to join IS, rather than Jabhat al-Nusra.²¹³ According to Weiss and Hassan, “the majority of foreign fighters in al-Nusra’s ranks went over to ISIS²¹⁴.” It is possible that the motives were different for those who travelled in 2012 and 2013, compared to those in 2014 and 2015. According to Neumann, people wanted to protect the suffering Sunni population from Assad’s repressive state.²¹⁵ A UN report show that the number of foreign fighters rose by 71% from mid-June 2014 to March 2015.²¹⁶

²⁰⁷ Lister (2015) p. 77, 78

²⁰⁸ Lister (2015) p. 84, 111

²⁰⁹ Stern & Berger (2016) p. 196

²¹⁰ Gerges (2016) p. 21

²¹¹ ‘ISIS can ‘muster’ between 20,000 and 31,500 fighters, CIA says’, *CNN*, September 12, 2014, <http://edition.cnn.com/2014/09/11/world/meast/isis-syria-iraq/>; Weiss & Hassan (2015) p. 167

²¹² ‘Foreign fighter total in Syria/Iraq now exceeds 20,000; surpasses Afghanistan conflict in the 1980s’, *International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence*, January 26, 2015, <http://icsr.info/2015/01/foreign-fighter-total-syriairaq-now-exceeds-20000-surpasses-afghanistan-conflict-1980s/>

²¹³ Neumann (2016) pp. 88–89

²¹⁴ Weiss & Hassan (2015) p. 186

²¹⁵ Neumann (2016) p. 90

²¹⁶ Lederer, Edith M., ‘UN report: More than 25,000 foreigners fight with terrorists’, *AP*, April 2, 2015.

Other groups such as Kataib al-Muhajireen became a focal point for a large amount of foreign fighters from the North Caucasus and Libya.²¹⁷ The flow of foreign fighters from North Caucasus caused some irritation and disappointment by the emir (leader) of the Caucasus Emirate who saw his men leaving North Caucasus for the battles of Syria.²¹⁸ In November 2013 the leader Abu Omar al-Shishani pledged allegiance to Abu Baker al-Baghdadi, the leader of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIL), and brought with him many Caucasus and European foreign fighters, who integrated into the fold of ISIL.²¹⁹ As ISIL advanced capturing city after city and finally Mosul before proclaiming the establishment of the worldwide Caliphate with Al-Baghdadi as *Amir al-Mu'minin*, ISIL was renamed *al-Dawlah al-Islamiyah*. This became a rallying cry for some salafi Muslims around the world. It was now an explicit religious duty to perform *hijrah* to join the project of state-building to expand and consolidate the Caliphate. It was also framed in an eschatological apocalyptic framework about the coming Judgement Day.²²⁰

The causes and motivations of European foreign fighters to join IS have been multiple and complex as evidence suggests there is no common socio-psychological profile. Successful recruitment has not only been influenced by personal circumstance but also by specific local social contexts. It can be best described as a kaleidoscope of infinite combinations involving primary factors such as socio-psychological; social; political; religious-ideological; and identity issues.²²¹ These can create multiple combinations and sequences of push- and pull-factors. The radicalisation engine is often described as a combination of the role of group dynamics, charismatic leadership and recruitment facilitation, alongside the power of social media.²²²

A wide variety of motivations have been identified for why foreign fighters travelled to join IS: excitement and adventure; ideology; identity quest; family expectations; a sense of belonging; humanitarian and duty to assist other Muslims in need; utopia; escape from personal problems; anger and frustration with the immediate social environment such as dysfunctional families, etc. This

²¹⁷ Lister (2015) pp. 74, 75

²¹⁸ Lister (2015) p. 92

²¹⁹ Moubayed, Sami (2015) *Under the Black Flag*, I.B. Tauris, pp.170–175

²²⁰ McCants, William (2016) *The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State*, St. Martin's Press

²²¹ Ranstorp, Magnus, 'The Root Causes of Violent Extremism', *RAN Issue Paper*, January 2016, https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/ran-papers/docs/issue_paper_root-causes_jan2016_en.pdf

²²² For example, see: Lohlker, Rudiger (2013) *Jihadism: Online Discourses and Representations*, Vienna University Press; Halverson, Jeffrey R., Goodall, Jr., H.L., & Corman, Steven R. (2013) *Master Narratives of Islamist Extremism*, Palgrave Macmillan

'kaleidoscope' of factors vary for every individual recruited as to the dominant motivational factor for why they decided to join these jihadi groups.

According to the U.S. Director of National Intelligence, James Clapper, more than 36,500 foreign fighters have travelled to Syria from more than 100 countries – with at least 6,600 from Western countries – as of February 2016.²²³ Later that spring, the U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security claimed that the total number was more than 42,900 foreign fighters and there were 43 groups either affiliated with or proclaiming to support IS.²²⁴ The majority of foreign fighters from Europe have joined IS or Jabhat al Nusra.²²⁵

Turkey has been the transit country for foreign fighters and, according to Europol's Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2016, it remains the primary transit.²²⁶ It has been relatively easy to travel to Syria from Europe, and IS has also published extensive guidelines of what to pack, how to travel, and how to behave when going to Syria.²²⁷

Travelling to Syria

Recruitment into the fold of violent extremism takes place in various ways. The Internet and social media play a crucial role in combination with offline social relationships. Recruiters are very good at exploiting the virtual space to fish for recruits and target their individualised recruitment at home and from the conflict zone. They guide potential recruits from open to closed forums and onwards to encrypted communication channels.²²⁸ Charlie Winter describes three complementary mechanisms to 'recruitment' as a three-pronged process:

1. The echo chamber: a recruit's exposure to and absorption into the jihadist micro community. Interaction with this group, whether online or off line, can catalyse an individual's radicalisation, isolate them and harden their extremist leanings.

²²³ Clapper, James R., 'Statement for the record. Worldwide Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community', *Senate Armed Services Committee*, February 2016

²²⁴ 'Protecting America from the Threat of ISIS', Chairman Johnson Opening Statement, *U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs*, May 26 2016, https://www.hsagac.senate.gov/media/majority-media/chairman-johnson-opening-statement_protecting-america-from-the-threat-of-isis

²²⁵ 'European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2016', *Europol*, p. 29

²²⁶ 'European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2016', *Europol*, p. 28

²²⁷ Neumann (2016) p. 98

²²⁸ 'UNSC Eighteenth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2253 (2015) concerning Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities', *United Nations*, July 19, 2016, pp. 28–29, http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2016/629

2. The propaganda: as mainstream influencers and other channels of information are proactively avoided, the recruit's pro-Islamic State persuasion can be contemporaneously amplified by a second aspect, propaganda, which can gradually realign a curious individual's moral norms.
3. The enlister: echo chambers and propaganda alone rarely lead to recruitment. A third party, and enlister, is usually required before an individual takes the leap and physically joins the jihadist cause. The presence of the enlister, as a provider of logistical information and humaniser of risk, is critical.²²⁹

Travel routes used to join IS or other terrorist groups are through flights to cities in Turkey, and further travel to the Turkish-Syrian border. There recruits are facilitated across the border by IS facilitators where recruits are interviewed or interrogated, filling in recruitment forms to cross-verify facilitators and other checkable personal details. These forms include 23 data fields.²³⁰ Foreign fighter testimonies reveal that recruits are then separated out where IS identified specific skillsets that determined if the recruit would after training camp fulfil frontline duties or more specialised roles.²³¹ Recruitment manuals such as *Hijrah to the Islamic State (2015)* provide practical advice for preparation, equipment and travel tips as well as concealment upon arrival in Turkey enroute to safe houses along the border.

In a dataset of 4,119 Islamic State personnel records of foreigners intercepted by US forces, the youngest person was 12 years old and the oldest 69.²³² Recruits were also asked who recommended them or could vouch for them and what role they wanted to play. Specifically, they were asked to “select from three options: fighter, suicide bomber, and suicide fighter (inghimasi).”²³³ While very few selected suicide bomber on their entry registration form, Swedish national Muhammed Belkaid, who was operationally involved in the November 2015 Paris attack and in the March 2016 Brussels attack, did select the martyrdom or ‘suicide option’.

The increased interdiction of foreign fighters has meant that travel routes have “diversified from direct travel to conflict zones and have increasingly opted for indirect or “broken” travel.”²³⁴ Once in Turkey, crossing into Syria used to

²²⁹ Winter, Charlie, ‘An integrated approach to Islamic State recruitment’, *APSI*, April 2016, p. 6, <https://aspi.org.au/publications/an-integrated-approach-to-islamic-state-recruitment/SR88-IS-recruitment.pdf>

²³⁰ For example see: Dodwell, Brian, Milton, Daniel & Rassler, Don, ‘Then and Now: Comparing the Flow of Foreign Fighters to AQI and the Islamic State’, *West Point: Combating Terrorism Center*, December 2016

²³¹ ‘Life with ISIS: the Myth Unravelling’, *General Intelligence and Security Service*, January 2016

²³² Dodwell, Brian, Milton, Daniel & Rassler, Don (2016)

²³³ *Ibid.* p. 20

²³⁴ ‘Analysis and recommendations with regard to the global threat from foreign terrorist fighters’, *United Nations Security Council*, May 19, 2015, http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2015/358

occur “via at least seven main crossing points: Ar Ra’i, Atimah, Bab al Hawa, Azaz, Jarabulus, Latakia, and Tal Abyad.”²³⁵ Since the autumn of 2015 travel rates was nevertheless reduced. Slowdown in travels have been caused by depletion of recruits, disillusionment of returning fighters, military and territorial losses by IS, and security measures against foreign fighters.²³⁶ For example, German authorities’ report that only 260 out of total 778 foreign fighters have left since the Caliphate was declared in June 2014.²³⁷

In Syria and Iraq, the foreign fighters may meet a society and culture they are not familiar with. As argued by Neumann, the foreign fighters “don’t know the local conventions, have no ties to the area and often don’t speak Arabic.”²³⁸

Women are escorted across the border into IS-controlled territory in Syria. There women are placed into IS “all-female safe house in Islamic State-controlled Syria, known as the maqar”²³⁹ where it serves as “a matchmaking service and a jihad-style finishing school, Al-Zawra.”²⁴⁰ Apart from raising their children into becoming IS fighters, women play an important role in the recruitment of other women.²⁴¹ Life in Syria is hard and difficult for those who join. The role of violence is intrinsic part of everyday public life as “it is preached, glorified and used on a daily basis”²⁴² to inculcate fear, respect and obedience to IS application of Sharia and security control.

The foreign fighter trend to Syria and Iraq – the numbers

There were no direct changes in activities or immediate reactions of the Arab spring on al-Qaeda groups in Europe in 2011.²⁴³ In 2011, some EU nationals were posting propaganda for ISI.²⁴⁴ In Europol’s annual *EU Terrorism Situation and Trend Report* from 2013 it is stated “Syria emerged as the destination of

²³⁵ Dodwell, Brian, Milton, Daniel & Rassler, Don (2016) p. 14

²³⁶ ‘UNSC Eighteenth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2253 (2015) concerning Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (Da’esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities’, *United Nations*, July 19, 2016, http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2016/629

²³⁷ ‘Analysis of the background and process of radicalization among persons who left Germany to travel to Syria or Iraq based on Islamist motivations’, *Federal Criminal Police Office, Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution and the Hesse Information and Competence Centre Against Extremism*, October 2016, p. 32

²³⁸ Neumann (2016) p. 83

²³⁹ Spencer, Amanda N., ‘The Hidden Face of Terrorism: An Analysis of the Women in Islamic State’, Vol.9, Issue 3, 2016

²⁴⁰ Ibid.

²⁴¹ ‘Life with ISIS: the Myth Unravelling’, *General Intelligence and Security Service*, January 2016

²⁴² Ibid.

²⁴³ ‘European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2012’, *Europol*, p. 15

²⁴⁴ ‘European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2012’, *Europol*, p. 19

choice for foreign fighters in 2012.”²⁴⁵ Europol estimated in the end of 2013 that there were between 1,200 and 2,000 foreign fighters who had left the EU member states to travel to Syria and Iraq.²⁴⁶

Europol estimated around 3,000 to 5,000 foreign fighters from EU member states until the end of 2014. How many of these had died or returned was unknown to Europol in 2015, even though several EU member states reported an increase in the number of returnees.²⁴⁷ For example, France reported an increase in the number of foreign fighters with 86 percent in 2014.²⁴⁸ In January 2015, ICSR estimated that more than 20,000 have travelled to Syria and Iraq from more than 90 countries.²⁴⁹ This number is supported by the UNSC Monitoring Team, which reported in 2015 that there were at least 20,000 foreign fighters from over a 100 countries.²⁵⁰

The reports by EU member states about numbers of foreign fighters from each country are fraught with difficulties as different countries and agencies apply different standards as to the verification of foreign fighters who have departed, who are dead and who have returned to their home countries. While these figures are fluid and uncertain they do give an indication as to the scale and scope of the problems posed by foreign fighters. For some EU member states, there exist no publically available data breaking down the figures into age, gender, socio-economic background and other relevant factors. For example, the United Kingdom does not provide such public figures by government agencies beyond the fact that 850 foreign fighters have left.²⁵¹ Similarly Denmark has announced that at least 145 fighters have departed since summer 2012.²⁵² In these two cases, news organisations have compiled their own databases and analysed the results, providing a partial picture of various features.

There are, however, data and evidence-based studies on foreign fighters that include significant data-points that are reliable and based on intelligence and law enforcement sources. For example, German law enforcement agencies have conducted statistical analysis of variables considered relevant for the 778 foreign

²⁴⁵ ‘European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2013’, *Europol*, p. 22

²⁴⁶ ‘European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2014’, *Europol*, p. 24

²⁴⁷ ‘European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2015’, *Europol*, p. 22

²⁴⁸ ‘European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2015’, *Europol*, p. 22

²⁴⁹ Neumann (2016) p.87

²⁵⁰ ‘Analysis and recommendations with regard to the global threat from foreign terrorist fighters’, *United Nations Security Council*, May 19, 2015, http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2015/358

²⁵¹ ‘Who are the British jihadis’, *BBC*, February 22, 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-32026985>

²⁵² ‘Vurdering af terrortruslen mod Danmark’, *Center for Terror Analyse*, February 7, 2017 <https://www.pet.dk/Publikationer/-/media/VTD%202017/VTD2017DKpdf.ashx>

fighters.²⁵³ Similarly, the Norwegian Security Service has produced interesting data and analysis on 80 foreign fighters from Norway and 137 individuals who have either left or at some point have been part of the Norwegian jihadi environment.²⁵⁴

In Belgium around 470 foreign fighters departed for Syria²⁵⁵ while in the Netherlands there are around 290 jihadists who have travelled since 2012.²⁵⁶ In France there were 1,704 foreign fighters that departed for Syria between 2012 and June 2015. This was a tripling of the number since January 2014 when the French Interior Ministry recorded 486.²⁵⁷

In Finland the authorities have provided a figure of 80 foreign fighters that have left but they admit that the real number is much higher.²⁵⁸ In Spain there are about 190 foreign fighters that departed to join IS in Syria between the period 2013–2016.²⁵⁹ In September 2015, Italian Defence Minister Roberta Pinotti said that 87 foreign fighters travelled from Italy.²⁶⁰

A more comprehensive report by the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague (ICCT) from April 2016 estimated that a total of 3,922–4,294 foreign fighters from EU Member States with approximately 30 percent who at that time had returned to their country of origin.²⁶¹ Analysing eleven EU member states, it found that over 90 percent came from large urban centres and many from the same neighbourhoods; on average 17 percent of foreign fighters were women; there was no clear pattern of nationality or ethnic backgrounds; a significant number of converts to Islam were among the foreign fighters.²⁶²

²⁵³ 'Analysis of the background and process of radicalization among persons who left Germany to travel to Syria or Iraq based on islamist motivations', *Federal Criminal Police Office, Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution and the Hesse Information and Competence Centre Against Extremism*, October 2016

²⁵⁴ 'What background do individuals who frequent extreme Islamist environments in Norway have prior to their radicalisation', *PST*, September 12, 2016, http://www.pst.no/media/82364/Radikaliseringsprosjektet_rapport_uograd_eng_12-09-16.pdf

²⁵⁵ Coolsaet, Ric, 'Facing the Fourth Foreign Fighters Wave: What Drives Europeans to Syria, and to Islamic State? Insights from the Belgian Case', *Egmont Paper 81*, March 2016

²⁵⁶ 'Assessment for the Netherlands', *NCTV*, November 2016, p. 43

²⁵⁷ 'Fait au nom de la commission d'enquête sur la surveillance des filières et des individus djihadistes' *Assemblée nationale*, June 2015, http://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/14/rap-enq/r2828.asp#P1221_347923

²⁵⁸ 'Väldsam extremism, lägesöversikt', *Inrikesministeriet (Finland)*, February 2017, http://julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/79235/03%202017_Vakivaltaisen%20ekstremismin%20tk%201_2017.pdf

²⁵⁹ Garcia-Calvo, Carola and Reinares, Fernando, 'Patterns of Involvement among Individuals Arrested for Islamic State-related Terrorist Activities in Spain, 2013-2016', *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol.10, Issue 6, December 2016, pp.109–120

²⁶⁰ Marone, Francesco, 'Italian Jihadists in Syria and Iraq', *Journal of Terrorism Research*, February 2016

²⁶¹ van Ginkel, Bibi & Entenmann, Eva, (eds.) 'The Foreign Fighters Phenomenon in the European Union', *ICCT*, April 2016, https://www.icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/ICCT-Report_Foreign-Fighters-Phenomenon-in-the-EU_1-April-2016_including-AnnexesLinks.pdf

²⁶² Ibid.

The next sections will closely examine the data on foreign fighters from EU member states as reported by official government reports or by academic studies. This will provide a useful overview against which to compare data between different states and highlight specific trends across foreign fighter contexts. It will also provide an introductory baseline assessment of foreign fighter issues that frame the Swedish foreign fighter contingent explored in the next chapter.

Age

How old are the foreign fighters? Security and intelligence services define foreign fighters differently where some states, for example, include children from a certain age as foreign fighters. As foreign fighters from Europe have children during their stay in Syria and Iraq, the children are not, from a strictly legal and conceptual point of view, foreign fighters. Even very young children may not be assessed as foreign fighters as they follow their parent(s) to the conflict area. Many foreign fighter children are born into IS so-called Caliphate state and these children will risk facing statelessness as IS birth certificates are invalid to the Syrian or Iraqi government. As pointed out by Human Rights Watch, “the absence of any UN or international relief organization operating in IS areas also means that when the dust settles, there will be no UN- or independently-issued documents—such as UNHCR certificates or vaccine booklets—that could help establish a child’s identity.”²⁶³

Recruitment of children into IS begins formally at the age of 9 and continues until they are 15 years old. The Dutch General Intelligence and Security Service (AIVD) report that children as young as 9 years of age receive weapons training.²⁶⁴ Children are recruited through multiple pathways ranging from religious socialisation and co-option by the parents they trust, by the leaders they respect in mosques and through various financial enticements. This socialisation goes through at least six stages: seduction, schooling, selection, subjugation, specialization, and stationing.²⁶⁵ These IS “cubs” are forced to attend training camps where they are subjected to intense ideological indoctrination, taught about jihad and fighting skills, martial arts and self-defence and how to deal with prisoners. Loyalty to the Islamic State and martyrdom as the highest cause is instilled through indoctrination through religious instructions and watching IS videos are combined with the honing of fighting skills.

²⁶³ Houry, Nadim, ‘Children of the Caliphate: What to do about kids born under ISIS’, *Foreign Affairs*, November 22, 2016, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/levant/2016-11-22/children-caliphate>

²⁶⁴ ‘Focus on Returnees’, *AIVD*, 2017, <https://english.aivd.nl/publications/publications/2017/02/15/publication-focus-on-returnees>

²⁶⁵ Horgan, John G., Taylor, Max, Bloom, Mia & Winter, Charlie, ‘From Cubs to Lions: A Six Stage Model of Child Socialization into the Islamic State’, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, August 2016

Once they are socialised into the Islamic State ranks they perform multiple roles: spies, preachers, recruiters, soldiers, executioners, suicide-bombers.²⁶⁶ Children are also used in IS propaganda efforts as IS film and distribute execution videos where children murder captives in barbaric ways. IS use of children is not only tactical but also strategic in shaping its state-building efforts and in fostering a new generation.²⁶⁷

Growing up in IS held territory with parents and perhaps later returning to Europe, children will be of special interest and focus for not only European security and intelligence agencies and law enforcement but also for the social services. The risks they are exposed to and the trauma they may have suffered at a very young age could be developed into a security threat in the future.

In 2014, EU member states reported an increase of the number of children travelling to Syria.²⁶⁸ According to Europol, “[...] younger people are found to be more impressionable and radicalise quicker than older candidates.”²⁶⁹

*Of particular concern are the children of foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) who live with their parents in IS territory. One third of the minors that are children of Dutch women currently living in Syria/Iraq were born there. In their propaganda, IS has often shown that they train these minors to become the next generation of foreign terrorist fighters, which may pose a future security threat to Member States.*²⁷⁰

In the Netherlands, the AIVD estimates that there are about 70 Dutch children in IS-controlled territories. Out of these 70 children fewer than “20% are older than 9 years with over half of them born in IS-controlled territory or brought by the parents to the conflict zone.”²⁷¹ In 2017, AIVD revised the figure to 80 children.²⁷² In another study of 140 foreign fighters, it was revealed that women (at 17%) are more often underage than men (5%).²⁷³ In Austria there are 270 foreign fighters with 40 being under the age of 18.²⁷⁴ According to information by Belgian officials given to the authors there are around 98 Belgian children in Iraq and Syria.

²⁶⁶ Benotman, Noman & Malik, Nikita, ‘Children of the Islamic State’, *Quilliam Foundation*, March 2016

²⁶⁷ See: Bloom, Mia, Horgan, John & Winter, Charlie, ‘Depictions of Children and Youth in the Islamic State’s Martyrdom Propaganda, 2015–2016’, *CTC Sentinel*, February 16, 2016

²⁶⁸ ‘European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2015’, *Europol*, p. 6

²⁶⁹ ‘Changes in modus operandi of Islamic State terrorist attacks’, *Europol*, January 2016

²⁷⁰ ‘European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2016’, *Europol*, p. 7

²⁷¹ ‘Janene Pieters Prosecute Dutch Jihadists Still in Syria, Iraq: Public Prosecutors’, *NL Times*, February 16, 2017

²⁷² ‘Focus on Returnees’, *AIVD*, 2017, <https://english.aivd.nl/publications/publications/2017/02/15/publication-focus-on-returnees>

²⁷³ Weenink, Anton W., ‘Behavioral Problems and Disorders among Radicals in Police Files’, *Perspectives on Terrorism* Vol.9, No.2, 2015, <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/416/html>

²⁷⁴ ‘Is Austria underestimating the threat of radicalization?’, *The Local*, January 29, 2016, <http://www.thelocal.at/20160129/is-austria-underestimating-the-threat-of-radicalization>

The number of French children joining IS are estimated to be 80 out of which 45 are girls.²⁷⁵ It is unclear whether this number involves those who travelled alone to join IS or includes children brought from France to IS by their parents. Overall French officials have informed authors that there are 460 French minors in Syria and Iraq; around half of them are under five years old and a third were born in theatre. Similarly, there are officially around 50 minors who come from the United Kingdom.²⁷⁶ German authorities keep the most detailed records of minors leaving as they have “recorded 56 minors that had left Germany between 2012–2016 accounting for 7% of the overall total number. Women minors constitute 39% of those that travelled.”²⁷⁷

Across the different EU states there is a wide age span of foreign fighters from 13 to 69 years of age.²⁷⁸ The average age of Belgian foreign fighter was 23 years old.²⁷⁹ In Germany, the mean average age is 25.8 years and ranges from 13 to 62 years of age. Out of a dataset of 784 German foreign fighter cases, 322 individuals were between 22–25 years; 164 individuals were between 18–21 years and 143 persons were between 26–29 years old.²⁸⁰

While the average age span of most foreign fighters is relatively uniform across most EU states, Italy and Spain stand out compared to other cases as they have significantly older foreign fighters. In Italy, out of 87 cases, 33 are in the 18–30 age range while 54 are over 30 years of age.²⁸¹ In Spain, the average age for men is 35 years old while for women it is 22.²⁸²

²⁷⁵ ‘Fait au nom de la commission d’enquête sur la surveillance des filières et des individus djihadistes’ *Assemblée nationale*, June 2015, http://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/14/rap-enq/r2828.asp#P1221_347923; Also see: Bisserbe, Noemie & Meichtry, Stacy, ‘French Children Adds to ISIS Ranks’, *Wall Street Journal*, December 25, 2015

²⁷⁶ Sengupta, Kim, ‘Isis indoctrinating children to plan attacks on Big Ben, Eiffel Tower and Statue of Liberty’, *Independent*, December 19, 2016, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-islamic-state-children-iraq-syria-western-targets-a7485316.html>

²⁷⁷ ‘Analysis of the background and process of radicalization among persons who left Germany to travel to Syria or Iraq based on Islamist motivations’, *Federal Criminal Police Office, Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution and the Hesse Information and Competence Centre Against Extremism*, October 2016, p. 45

²⁷⁸ Neumann (2016) p. 89

²⁷⁹ Bakker, Edwin & de Bont, Roel, ‘Belgian and Dutch Jihadist Foreign Fighters (2012–2015): Characteristics, Motivations, and Roles in the War in Syria and Iraq’, *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, Vol.27, No.5, 2016, pp. 837–857

²⁸⁰ ‘Analysis of the background and process of radicalization among persons who left Germany to travel to Syria or Iraq based on Islamist motivations’, *Federal Criminal Police Office, Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution and the Hesse Information and Competence Centre Against Extremism*, October 2016, p. 11

²⁸¹ Vidino, Lorenzo, unpublished paper (2016)

²⁸² Interview with Spanish intelligence officials at Swedish Defence University, September 30, 2016

Gender

What is the proportion of men and women? To what extent are men overrepresented and are there any changes over time?

The issue of gender constructions and masculinity in Islamic militancy has increasingly been identified as being an important aspect. Some argue that the role of masculinity is not a causal driver of extremism. Others have advanced that there is a strong correlation between the two where violent extremism becomes “an expression for putting masculinity into action or practice.”²⁸³ Evin Ismail points to the fact that for young men IS represents hypermasculinity through the holy warrior ideal that combines heroism with martyrdom framed within a preordained apocalyptic battle.²⁸⁴

Similarly Muslim femininity plays a significant role in producing ideals and roles. Women recruited into IS are active agents and some voiceless victims.²⁸⁵ Research has shown that women are recruited into IS due to utopian ideals and supporting the idea of an Islamic State, together with traditional role as wife, mother and supporter of *mujahideen*. This makes them particularly suitable to occupy active roles as recruiters and enlists.²⁸⁶ Research has identified these multi-layered roles why women find IS attractive and what actually happens within IS fold.²⁸⁷

Women who enter IS territory marry soon after arrival, and are strictly controlled and have to “obey their husbands, cater for children and educate them in line with IS ideology.”²⁸⁸ Marrying women in Syria is also one of the narratives by IS in their attempt to attract male recruits, and some women marry online before travel.²⁸⁹ According to Europol, women also participate in weapons training, but

²⁸³ Aslam, Malecha (2012) *Gender-based explosions: The nexus between Muslim masculinities, jihadist Islamism and terrorism*, United Nations University Press; Lifton, Edward J., ‘A Clinical Psychology Perspective on Radical Islamic Youth’ in Abbas Tahir (ed.) (2007) *Islamic Political Radicalism*, Edinburgh University Press

²⁸⁴ McCants, William (2016) *The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State*, St. Martin’s Press; Ismail, Evin, ‘Ung och Extrem – om våldsbejakande islamistisk extremism’, *MUCF*, 2016, https://www.mucf.se/sites/default/files/publikationer_uploads/ung-och-extrem-islamistisk.pdf

²⁸⁵ Chatterjee, Debangana, ‘Gendering ISIS and Mapping the Role of Women’, *Contemporary Review of the Middle East*, Vol.3, No.2, 2016, pp. 201–218

²⁸⁶ Spencer, Amanda N., ‘The Hidden Face of Terrorism: An Analysis of the Women in Islamic State’, *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol.9, No.3, Fall 2016; Peresin, Anita & Cervone, Alberto, ‘The Western *Muhajirat* of ISIS’, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, Vol.38, Issue 7, 2015

²⁸⁷ Saltman, Erin Marie & Smith, Melanie, ‘Till Martyrdom Do Us Part’ Gender and the ISIS Phenomenon’, *Institute for Strategic Dialogue*, 2015; Tarras-Wahlberg, Louisa, ‘Seven Promises of ISIS to its Female Recruits’, *International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism*, 2016

²⁸⁸ ‘European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2016’, *Europol*, p. 26

²⁸⁹ ‘Returnees’, *General Intelligence and Security Service*, Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations, February 2017

it is still not known how many girls and women who have combat experience or have conducted terrorist attacks. IS *may* be using women for suicide attacks, but Europol assess that women do not participate in combat.²⁹⁰

It is forbidden for women to return to Europe, and attempts are punished.²⁹¹ The difficulties to return may be a variable that explains why there is information pointing to a larger proportion of women over time. Nevertheless, the international coalition's airstrikes may have killed foreign fighters from Europe but also made it more difficult to return to their home countries. In example, the Netherlands had 32 returnees in 2014 and only 9 in 2015. According to Europol, one reason for this may be the difficulty in leaving IS held territory.²⁹² According to a Human Rights Watch report in 2017, "women and girls continue to face discrimination and severe restrictions including on their freedom of movement in ISIS-held areas."²⁹³

The proportion of women from Europe that have travelled to Syria and Iraq has increased since 2012. It accelerated in 2013 and 2014 after the end of Ramadan. In 2014, EU member states reported an increase in the number of women foreign fighters.²⁹⁴ At the end of 2015, about one-third of the 280 travellers from the Netherlands were women and about 20 percent in Germany and Finland.²⁹⁵ In a study of 140 Dutch foreign fighters, 117 were men (84%) and 23 women (16%).²⁹⁶ In the Netherlands, over half of the women travelling out to Syria did so after IS announced the established of the Caliphate at the end of June 2014.²⁹⁷ Other European states have witnessed an increase in the number of female travellers.

Proportionally most EU member states report that women constitute around 20 percent. While Denmark and France estimate that around 20 percent are women, Belgium report that 81 percent are male and 19 percent are female.²⁹⁸ In a study of 130 individuals arrested for Islamic State-related terrorist activities

²⁹⁰ 'European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2016', *Europol*, p. 7, 26, 29

²⁹¹ 'European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2016', *Europol*, p. 26

²⁹² 'European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2016', *Europol*, p. 27, note 3

²⁹³ 'World Report 2017', *Human Rights Watch*, p. 575

²⁹⁴ 'European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2015', *Europol*, p. 6

²⁹⁵ Bakker, Edwin & de Bont, Roel, 'Belgian and Dutch Jihadist Foreign Fighters (2012–2015): Characteristics, Motivations, and Roles in the War in Syria and Iraq', *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, Vol.27, No.5, 2016, pp. 837–857

²⁹⁶ Weenink, Anton W., 'Behavioral Problems and Disorders among Radicals in Police Files', *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol 9, No 2, 2015, <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/416/html>

²⁹⁷ 'Assessment for the Netherlands', *NCTV*, November 2016

²⁹⁸ Bakker, Edwin & de Bont, Roel, 'Belgian and Dutch Jihadist Foreign Fighters (2012–2015): Characteristics, Motivations, and Roles in the War in Syria and Iraq', *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, Vol.27, No.5, 2016, pp. 837–857

over 83% were men.²⁹⁹ In one of the most detailed reports, Germany reports that 79 percent of its foreign fighters were men while 21 percent were women.³⁰⁰ Not only were women on average three years younger than men upon departure but women were also more likely to travel with family members in over half the cases while men did so in every five cases.³⁰¹ Interestingly, in the German case out of 688 cases, 44 percent were single and “two hundred and ninety departees are known to have children.”³⁰²

The outlier nations when it comes to the proportion of men and women joining IS are United Kingdom, Italy and Spain. While Italy report that “83 are men, 4 are women”³⁰³, the figure for Spain is that about 10% of foreign fighters are women.³⁰⁴ The figure for the United Kingdom is less reliable as there is no consolidated analysis of the more than 850 who joined IS. Nevertheless, in a BBC dataset of 200 British foreign fighters with 85 still in Syria/Iraq out of there are 58 men and 27 women.³⁰⁵

The recruitment of converts is also interesting. Out of the French foreign fighters there are an estimated 23 percent who are converts out of which women account for 25 percent.³⁰⁶ According to a comprehensive survey by the *International Center for Counter Terrorism (ICCT)* the French authorities report that 23 percent are converts.³⁰⁷ In Italy, 29 percent were converts.³⁰⁸ In a Danish dataset of 77 foreign fighter cases there are at least 11 converts.³⁰⁹

²⁹⁹ Garcia-Calvo, Carola and Reinares, Fernando, ‘Patterns of Involvement among Individuals Arrested for Islamic State-related Terrorist Activities in Spain, 2013–2016’, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol.10, Issue 6, December 2016, pp.109–120

³⁰⁰ ‘Analysis of the background and process of radicalization among persons who left Germany to travel to Syria or Iraq based on islamist motivations’, *Federal Criminal Police Office, Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution and the Hesse Information and Competence Centre Against Extremism*, October 2016

³⁰¹ Ibid. p. 36

³⁰² Heinke, Daniel H., ‘German Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq: The Updated Data and Its Implications’, *CTC Sentinel*, March 10, 2017.

³⁰³ Boncio, Alessandro, ‘Italian Foreign Fighters. Numbers, Features and Case Studies’, *International Security Observer*, November, 16, 2015

³⁰⁴ Garcia-Calvo, Carola and Reinares, Fernando, ‘Patterns of Involvement among Individuals Arrested for Islamic State-related Terrorist Activities in Spain, 2013–2016’, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol.10, Issue 6, December 2016, pp.109–120

³⁰⁵ ‘Who are the British Jihadis’, *BBC*, January 22, 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-32026985>

³⁰⁶ Pietransta, Sébastien, ‘La déradicalisation outil de lutte contre le terrorisme’, June 2015, <http://www.ladocumentationfrancaise.fr/var/storage/rapports-publics/154000455.pdf>

³⁰⁷ van Ginkel, Bibi & Entenmann, Eva, (eds.) ‘The Foreign Fighters Phenomenon in the European Union’, *ICCT*, April 2016, https://www.icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/ICCT-Report_Foreign-Fighters-Phenomenon-in-the-EU_1-April-2016_including-AnnexesLinks.pdf

³⁰⁸ Boncio, Alessandro, ‘Italian Foreign Fighters. Numbers, Features and Case Studies’, *International Security Observer*, November 16, 2015

³⁰⁹ ‘GRAFIK: Her er de danske syrienkrigere’, *DR*, September 15, 2016, <https://www.dr.dk/nyheder/indland/grafik-her-er-de-danske-syrienkrigere-0>

Geography

As the UNSC Analytical Monitoring and Sanctions Team on al-Qaeda and associated entities and individuals (1267 Committee) notes, geography matters when it comes to recruitment largely because of the influence of social networks and facilitation. Specifically, this Analytical Monitoring Team stressed that “(h)uman contact remains important, which is why there are clusters of recruitment around towns or schools (as seen in the United Kingdom), prisons (as seen in France) and criminal networks (as seen among ethnic Chechens resident in Austria).³¹⁰ The importance of geographical concentration for recruitment was clearly revealed in the so-called West Point’s CTC Sinjar report, which showed a heavy concentration of recruitment of al-Qaeda to Iraq from specific towns.³¹¹ Sometimes smaller towns had a disproportionate number of foreign fighters due to close-knit social circles of extremists or due to the presence of effective recruitment facilitators.

A lengthy study on how jihadist networks operate underscored that social facilitators, fellow foreign fighters and ‘brokers’ are continuously present and decisive for the actual departing of prospective foreign fighter recruits.³¹² They operate locally and provide essential information about travel conditions and fixers who provide entry-points into Syria to the right groups. Other studies argue similarly that departures of foreign fighters are influenced by “peer-to-peer social networks as evinced by clustered mobilization and small-group recruitment from within pre-existing radical milieus.”³¹³ For example, Reynolds and Hafez show through social network analysis “that 82 of the 99 profiled fighters had pre-existing peer-to-peer relationships with at least one fighter, recruiter, supporter, or Salafist scene leader before their departure to Syria and Iraq.”³¹⁴ As such, bloc recruitment is a key variable through pre-existing social networks and foreign fighters facilitators.

These extremist social networks and radical milieus have been decisive in certain EU member states. In Belgium, the role of Sharia4Belgium has been decisive as the main incubator and as facilitator of foreign fighter departures. The clusters of militants coming from Antwerp and Brussels can be explained by the fact that they radicalised around several radical preachers and extreme

³¹⁰ ‘Analysis and recommendations with regard to the global threat from foreign terrorist fighters’, *United Nations Security Council*, May 19, 2015, http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2015/358

³¹¹ Felter, Joseph, & Fishman, Brian, ‘Al-Qa’ida’s Foreign Fighters in Iraq: A First Look at the Sinjar Records’, *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point*, 2007, <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/45910/CTCForeignFighter.19.Dec07.pdf>

³¹² De Bie, Jasper L., (2016) *How Jihadist Networks Operate*, Leiden University, PhD thesis,

³¹³ Reynolds Sean C., & Hafez, Mohammed M., ‘Social network analysis of German foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq’, *Journal Terrorism and Political Violence*, 2017

³¹⁴ Ibid.

organisations. Most of the Belgian foreign fighters were mobilized around three main clusters: Sharia4Belgium; Resto du Tawhid – The Jean-Louis Denis Network; and the Zerkani network.³¹⁵

This Sharia4Belgium network proved crucial at the outset of the Syrian civil war recruiting at least 80 Belgian foreign fighters.³¹⁶ This network recruited mainly in Brussels, Antwerp and the Brussels suburb of Vilvoorde. The Resto du Tawhid network operated out of the Gare du Nord district in central Brussels and recruited around 50 members.³¹⁷ It was the Zerkani network that “focused its recruitment activities in and around the Molenbeek district in Brussels. Over 60 recruits from the Zerkani network left for Syria to join IS, including the later coordinators of the terror attacks in Paris and Brussels.”³¹⁸

The importance of pre-existing extremist social networks is also evident in the case of Spain. In a study of IS-related foreign fighters, it was shown that “76.3% had a network in Spain facilitating the travel to Syria/Iraq”³¹⁹ and “64% were part of jihadist networks established from 2011 onwards while 36% were part of previously established networks.”³²⁰

Foreign fighters across Europe tend to cluster in certain geographical areas. In French-speaking countries, such as Belgium and France, it is evident that a majority of foreign fighters come from certain ‘geographic belts’. In a Belgian dataset of 203 persons, more than 65 percent were from Antwerp or Brussels.³²¹ Another sizeable number came from the city of Vilvoorde located in Flanders, just north of Brussels. In a smaller dataset of 83 fighters it was found that almost all were from the Antwerp and Brussels areas.³²² According to a larger study of 469 Belgian foreign fighters, at least 355 fighters (75 percent) can be located

³¹⁵ van Ostaeyen, Pieter, ‘Belgian Radical Networks and the Road to the Brussels Attack’, *CTC – Sentinel*, June 16, 2016

³¹⁶ van Vlierden, Guy, ‘Molenbeek and Beyond. The Brussels-Antwerp Axis as Hotbed of Belgian Jihad’, in Varvelli, Arturo (ed.) (2016) *Jihadist Hotbeds: Understanding Local Radicalisation Processes*, European Foundation for Democracy, ISPI, p. 53

³¹⁷ van Ostaeyen, Pieter, ‘Belgian Radical Networks and the Road to the Brussels Attack’, *CTC – Sentinel*, June 16, 2016

³¹⁸ Ibid.

³¹⁹ Garcia-Calvo, Carola and Reinares, Fernando, ‘Patterns of Involvement among Individuals Arrested for Islamic State-related Terrorist Activities in Spain, 2013–2016’, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol.10, Issue 6, December 2016, pp.109–120

³²⁰ Ibid.

³²¹ Bakker, Edwin & de Bont, Roel, ‘Belgian and Dutch Jihadist Foreign Fighters (2012–2015): Characteristics, Motivations, and Roles in the War in Syria and Iraq’, *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, Vol.27, No.5, 2016, pp. 837–857

³²² Perliger, Arie & Milton, Daniel, ‘From the Cradle to the Grave: the Life Cycle of Foreign Fighters in Iraq and Syria’, *West Point: Combatting Terrorism Center*, November 2016

within this stretched out belt between Antwerp to Brussels.³²³ After the 2016 Brussels attacks, police investigations looking into the Brussels district Molenbeek uncovered 51 organisations with suspected ties to terrorism.³²⁴

Similarly in France, a 2015 French parliamentary commission report on jihadist networks indicated that just six regions in France provided the majority of the foreign fighters: Ile-de-France, Rhone-Alpes, Provence-Alpes-Cote d'Azur, Languedoc-Roussillon, Nord Pas De Calais and the Midi-Pyrenees.³²⁵ Interestingly, another study of foreign fighters seems to indicate the French Riviera (including cities such as Cannes, Lunel, and Nice) constituted considerable recruitment hubs.³²⁶

This pattern is also seen in the Netherlands where more than 70% of 122 Dutch jihadists analysed resided in and around four main urban centres: Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague, and Utrecht. Most of these foreign fighters come from the greater The Hague area, which also includes the cities of Delft and Zoetermeer.³²⁷ Similarly in the Nordic region, in Denmark most foreign fighters hail from the Copenhagen area or Aarhus while in Norway the majority come from south-eastern Norway around Oslo such as Fredrikstad, Moss, Skien and Drammen.³²⁸

In Italy, foreign fighters come mainly from the northern region where Muslim communities reside in greater numbers from the districts of Lombardy, Veneto and Emilia Romagna. It is also here that prominent Islamist extremists operate from, through networks of militants.³²⁹

The situation in Germany seems more complex at first glance. While 89% of German foreign fighters reside in urban areas, 778 foreign fighters originate

³²³ van Vlierden, Guy, 'Molenbeek and Beyond. The Brussels-Antwerp Axis as Hotbed of Belgian Jihad', in Varvelli, Arturo (ed.) (2016) *Jihadist Hotbeds: Understanding Local Radicalisation Processes*, European Foundation for Democracy, ISPI, p. 53, http://www.ispionline.it/sites/default/files/pubblicazioni/jihadist.hotbeds_ebook_0.pdf

³²⁴ Cynthia Kroet, 'Belgium's Molenbeek home to 51 groups with terror links: report', *Politico*, 20 March 2017.

³²⁵ van Vlierden, Guy, 'Molenbeek and Beyond. The Brussels-Antwerp Axis as Hotbed of Belgian Jihad', in Varvelli, Arturo (ed.) (2016) *Jihadist Hotbeds: Understanding Local Radicalisation Processes*, European Foundation for Democracy, ISPI, p. 53, http://www.ispionline.it/sites/default/files/pubblicazioni/jihadist.hotbeds_ebook_0.pdf

³²⁶ Perliger, Arie & Milton, Daniel, 'From the Cradle to the Grave: the Life Cycle of Foreign Fighters in Iraq and Syria', *West Point: Combatting Terrorism Center*, November 2016

³²⁷ Bakker, Edwin & de Bont, Roel, 'Belgian and Dutch Jihadist Foreign Fighters (2012–2015): Characteristics, Motivations, and Roles in the War in Syria and Iraq', *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, Vol.27, No.5, 2016, pp. 837–857

³²⁸ Nesser, Petter & Lia, Brynjar (unpublished).

³²⁹ Jordan, Javier, 'The Foiled Attacks in Italy in 2006', in Hoffman, Bruce & Reinares, Fernando (eds.) (2014) *The Evolution of the Global Terrorist Threat: From 9/11 to Osama Bin Laden's Death*, Columbia University Press

from a total of 162 German cities and towns.³³⁰ There are, however, clusters of regional concentration. There are only 13 cities from which more than 10 or more foreign fighters have departed “accounting for nearly half of the cases”³³¹ (394 persons) that departed from Germany.

Socio-economic factors

There is a significant, bifurcated academic debate about the role of socio-economic factors in relation to other influencing factors such as ideology or the role of identity issues. Evidence from certain EU member states suggests that ideology matters to some degree. For example, in Germany 268 persons out of 778 were active in some kind of mosque organisation before their first departure and 515 persons were associated with known Islamists/Salafists or groups before they departed.³³² In particular, the study showed that the Salafi scene and real social contacts play an important role at the start and later stages of radicalisation for many of those that departed from Germany.

It is difficult to determine the speed of the radicalisation processes and the depth of ideological commitment as *the* key causal factor. The German official study, which is the most comprehensive to date, does offer interesting insights about the length and speed of radicalisation. Over half of the German foreign fighter cases radicalised between the onset of the civil war in Syria until the IS proclamation of the Caliphate. The study found that “(m)ore than one-fifth (22%) were sufficiently radicalised within six months to leave Germany. Nearly half (46%) left within one year of first becoming radicalised. About two-thirds (68%) left within two years of first becoming radicalized.”³³³ Similarly, the Norwegian Security Service found that “73% of the individuals in our survey have entered

³³⁰ ‘Analysis of the background and process of radicalization among persons who left Germany to travel to Syria or Iraq based on islamist motivations’, *Federal Criminal Police Office, Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution and the Hesse Information and Competence Centre Against Extremism*, October 2016

³³¹ ‘Analysis of the background and process of radicalization among persons who left Germany to travel to Syria or Iraq based on islamist motivations’, *Federal Criminal Police Office, Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution and the Hesse Information and Competence Centre Against Extremism*, October 2016, p. 13

³³² ‘Analysis of the background and process of radicalization among persons who left Germany to travel to Syria or Iraq based on islamist motivations’, *Federal Criminal Police Office, Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution and the Hesse Information and Competence Centre Against Extremism*, October 2016, p.16.

³³³ ‘Analysis of the background and process of radicalization among persons who left Germany to travel to Syria or Iraq based on islamist motivations’, *Federal Criminal Police Office, Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution and the Hesse Information and Competence Centre Against Extremism*, October 2016, p. 23

their radicalisation process after the onset of the Syria conflict”³³⁴ and “61% of those who became radicalised have immigrated to Norway in their childhood or youth”.³³⁵ In fact 86% of Norwegian foreign fighters radicalised after 2013.³³⁶

The role of converts among foreign fighter contingents varies across different EU member states. The number of converts is relatively high in Germany (134 people or 17% of total number).³³⁷ About one-third of these converts were female and almost two-thirds of all converts were younger than 22 years of age at the time of conversion.³³⁸ However, the definitions of “convert” may differ between different countries and studies.

While ideology plays a role as a veneer to legitimise actions of foreign fighters, it is clear that socio-economic factors seem to play a significant role. For example, some researchers have advanced the idea that France is particularly vulnerable due to Francophone countries adopting strident French secularism.³³⁹ Recent research suggests that IS fighters tend to come from countries where Muslims are culturally isolated. This research suggests that “ISIS fighters tend to come from countries that are ethnically and linguistically homogeneous, where assimilation is more difficult for immigrants.”³⁴⁰ The argument here is that it is not economic conditions that are driving the flow of foreign fighters but rather ideology and the difficulty in, and resistance to, assimilation. In other words, social isolation seems to contribute to inducing radicalisation which is accelerated by IS appeal and social media propaganda and other recruitment techniques.³⁴¹

³³⁴ ‘What background do individuals who frequent extreme Islamist environments in Norway have prior to their radicalisation?’, *PST*, September 12, 2016, p.2, http://www.pst.no/media/82364/Radikaliseringsprosjektet_rapport_ugrad_eng_12-09-16.pdf

³³⁵ ‘What background do individuals who frequent extreme Islamist environments in Norway have prior to their radicalisation?’, *PST*, September 12, 2016, p.2, http://www.pst.no/media/82364/Radikaliseringsprosjektet_rapport_ugrad_eng_12-09-16.pdf

³³⁶ ‘What background do individuals who frequent extreme Islamist environments in Norway have prior to their radicalisation?’, *PST*, September 12, 2016, p.4, http://www.pst.no/media/82364/Radikaliseringsprosjektet_rapport_ugrad_eng_12-09-16.pdf

³³⁷ Heinke, Daniel H., ‘German Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq: The Updated Data and Its Implications’, *CTC Sentinel*, March 10, 2017

³³⁸ Heinke, Daniel H., ‘German Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq: The Updated Data and Its Implications’, *CTC Sentinel*, March 10, 2017

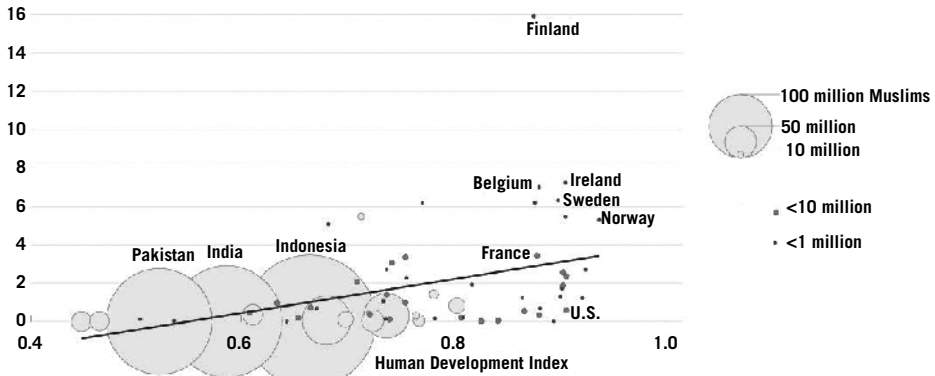
³³⁹ McCants, William & Meserole, Christopher, ‘The French Connection: Explaining Sunni Militancy Around the World’, *Foreign Affairs*, March 24, 2016, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2016-03-24/french-connection>

³⁴⁰ Benmelech, Efraim, & Klor, Esteban F., ‘What Explains the Flow of Foreign Fighters to ISIS?’, *NBER Working Paper* 22190, 2016

³⁴¹ ‘Which countries do ISIS’s foreign fighters come from?’, *World Economic Forum*, July 1, 2016. <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/07/which-countries-do-isis-foreign-fighters-come-from>

ISIS FIGHTERS AND ECONOMIC CONDITIONS

Human Development Index is positively correlated with flow of ISIS fighters
Number of foreign ISIS fighters, per 10,000 Muslims in population



Source: Authors' calculations using data from the Soufan Group, Pew Research Center and the United Nations

Source: World Economic Forum

Other research has argued that there is a pattern emerging across Europe that “links the number of Syria fighters to low labour market participation and lack of educational achievements among immigrant populations.”³⁴² These macro studies do not consider facilitation factors such as salafi preachers, facilitation and recruitment networks or other unique local factors that influence radicalisation. They do, however, show that there may be correlations of *both* isolation factors and low socioeconomic status and educational achievement. As argued by Werwimp: “the larger the gap of immigrants with the native population (the larger the disadvantage experienced at the group level) is in a given country, the more jihadi recruits are likely to emerge from that country.”³⁴³

As pointed out by Thomas Hegghammer, “a recent theoretical contribution by the political scientist Alexander Lee suggests there is a difference between rich and poor countries: we can expect terrorists to be middle class in poor countries but lower class in rich countries.”³⁴⁴ This research finding was tested by Hegghammer who examined the available n-studies on jihadists in Europe where he found that European jihadists are usually socio-economic underperformers with low education, high unemployment, high criminal conviction rates and

³⁴² Werwimp, Philip ‘Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq and the Socio-Economic Environment They Face at Home: A Comparison of European Countries’, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol.10, No.6, December 2016, pp. 68–80.

³⁴³ Ibid.

³⁴⁴ Hegghammer, Thomas, ‘Revisiting the poverty-terrorism link in European jihadism’, Speech at Society for Terrorism Research Annual Conference, Leiden, November 8, 2016, http://hegghammer.com/_files/Hegghammer_-_poverty.pdf

other negative indicators.³⁴⁵ The hypothetical mechanisms at work were social mobility closure, horizontal inequality, opportunity costs and neighbourhood effects that need to be tested further.

This argument is supported by Neumann who argues that “(i)n Germany, Belgium, France and Scandinavia, a large majority come from deprived backgrounds and have neither school qualifications, professional training nor any prospect of a decent job.”³⁴⁶ Others have argued that a sense of grievance (discrimination, social and economic marginalisation) plays a central role as a driver of violent extremism which seeks out a violence-promoting ideology, as it seems to be about less of a religious obligation than an emotional response to a feeling of injustice in their home societies, or what French novelist Erick Orsenna calls “the breeding ground of hopelessness”.³⁴⁷ This resembles the bifurcated debate between Gilles Kepel and Oliver Roy about the causes and drivers of violent extremism among youth. Of course, Gilles Kepel acknowledges youth rebellion (which is Oliver Roy’s thesis) but would argue that it is “the ideological ideological/religious roots that radicalise these youths– namely, Salafism and its religious structures and tools.”³⁴⁸ Of course the reality lie somewhere in between the two positions.

The case for socio-economic factors as a significant variable seems to be supported by the evidence from different EU member states. For example, 82 percent of Belgian foreign fighters originate “from municipalities with a per capita income below the Belgian average, while 35% lived in Belgium’s ten poorest towns.”³⁴⁹ In the Netherlands, as noted by Hegghammer, in a dataset of 140 Dutch foreign fighters, there was “nobody with a degree, nobody with a steady career, 47% convicts and 6 homeless people.”³⁵⁰ Another study of Dutch and Belgian foreign fighters by Bakker and De Bont, reveal that 67 percent of

³⁴⁵ Hegghammer, Thomas, ‘Revisiting the poverty-terrorism link in European jihadism’, Speech at Society for Terrorism Research Annual Conference, Leiden, November 8, 2016, http://hegghammer.com/_files/Hegghammer_-_poverty.pdf

³⁴⁶ Neumann (2016) p.89

³⁴⁷ van Ginkel, Bibi & Entenmann, Eva, (eds.) ‘The Foreign Fighters Phenomenon in the European Union’, *ICCT*, April 2016, https://www.icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/ICCT-Report_Foreign-Fighters-Phenomenon-in-the-EU_1-April-2016_including-AnnexesLinks.pdf

³⁴⁸ Elham, Manea, ‘Defining the phenomenon of jihadist radicalisation: drivers and catalysts – local and global’, in *The Challenge of Jihadist Radicalisation and Beyond*, 2017, <http://europeandemocracy.eu/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/2017-The-Challenge-of-Jihadist-Radicalisation.pdf>

³⁴⁹ van Vliet, Guy, ‘Molenbeek and Beyond. The Brussels-Antwerp Axis as Hotbed of Belgian Jihad’, in Varvelli, Arturo (ed.) (2016) *Jihadist Hotbeds: Understanding Local Radicalisation Processes*, European Foundation for Democracy, ISPI, p. 53

³⁵⁰ Hegghammer, Thomas, ‘Revisiting the poverty-terrorism link in European jihadism’, Speech at Society for Terrorism Research Annual Conference, Leiden, November 8, 2016, http://hegghammer.com/_files/Hegghammer_-_poverty.pdf; For the original study, see: Weenink, Anton W., ‘Behavioral Problems and Disorders among Radicals in Police Files’, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol.9, Issue 2, 2015

Dutch foreign fighters originate from lower socio-economic strata while the same figure for Belgium was 47 percent.³⁵¹

The overview from Germany and its foreign fighter contingent reveal a more detailed picture from a larger dataset. Out of 778 foreign fighters only 94 individuals had started university education and only 10 percent had completed education before departure. Additionally, around two-thirds (504 persons) of German foreign fighters had a criminal record with “at least 53% had been convicted for three or more offences while nearly two-third (32%) had been associated with six or more criminal offences.”³⁵²

In France, the 2015 Commission of Inquiry stated that the dominant characteristics of radicalisation was related to a cocktail of factors: identity issues, many jihadists being converts and reverts to Islam, academic difficulties and drop out of schools, socioeconomic problems (unemployment, financial difficulties, etc), criminal history of petty delinquency, dysfunctional families with domestic violence and separated or absent parents often with father figure lacking.³⁵³ Gilles de Kerchove, EU’s counterterrorism coordinator, says French prisons have been identified as an incubator of radicalisation.³⁵⁴ An estimated 70 percent of the French prison population are Muslim (a high rate as they comprise 8 percent of the population) in overcrowded prison conditions.³⁵⁵ Both France and Austria reported to the UNSC Monitoring Team that foreign fighters had a background in petty criminal activity.³⁵⁶

The situation in Denmark has shown that foreign fighters are often connected, on a personal level, to criminal gang milieus. This so-called “cross-over” phenomenon is, according to Danish Center for Terror Analysis (CTA), based on family

³⁵¹ Bakker, Edwin & de Bont, Roel, ‘Belgian and Dutch Jihadist Foreign Fighters (2012–2015): Characteristics, Motivations, and Roles in the War in Syria and Iraq’, *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, Vol.27, No.5, 2016, pp. 837–857

³⁵² ‘Analysis of the background and process of radicalization among persons who left Germany to travel to Syria or Iraq based on Islamist motivations’, *Federal Criminal Police Office, Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution and the Hesse Information and Competence Centre Against Extremism*, October 2016, p. 18

³⁵³ Pietransta, Sébastien, ‘La déradicalisation outil de lutte contre le terrorisme’, June 2015, <http://www.ladocumentationfrancaise.fr/var/storage/rapports-publics/154000455.pdf>

³⁵⁴ ‘EU anti-terror chief urges rehab, not prison, for jihadists’, *CBS News/AP*, January 27, 2015, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/eu-anti-terror-chief-urges-rehab-not-prison-for-jihadis/>

³⁵⁵ ‘What is going wrong in France’s prisons?’, *Daily Telegraph*, January 15, 2015, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/france/11352268/What-is-going-wrong-in-Frances-prisons.html>

³⁵⁶ ‘Analysis and recommendations with regard to the global threat from foreign terrorist fighters’, *United Nations Security Council*, May 19, 2015, http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2015/358

relations and familiar upbringing in certain neighbourhoods.³⁵⁷ Interestingly, a considerable number of Danish foreign fighters seem to come from middle class rather than lower class backgrounds.³⁵⁸

A study by the Norwegian Security Service (PST), focusing on 137 individuals who are both jihadi extremists and foreign fighters, found that 68 percent of men and 46 percent of women had either been prosecuted for crimes or were known to the authorities.³⁵⁹ An interesting finding by the PST study was that 42 percent had been involved in drug-related crime and those who left for Syria have more often than not “been involved in violence prior to their time of radicalisation (58%) compared to those who do not travel (35%).”³⁶⁰ The study also found low levels of higher education (4%) and that “64% had long periods of unemployment and low affiliation to Norwegian society.”³⁶¹

Another significant finding of the PST study on Norwegian foreign fighters was the fact 17,5% have lost their parents during their childhood and seems to correlate that there is “a higher number who has travelled to Syria or other conflict areas (67%) than among those who had not lost their parents (42%).”³⁶²

While many foreign fighters have a criminal past, there are European member states where this pattern is not so prevalent. In Italy, 21 percent of foreign fighters have a pre-existing criminal record.³⁶³ Also in Spain, one-third of foreign fighters have a criminal past.³⁶⁴

Citizenship and country of origin

According to Europol, social bonds such as language, ethnic and geographical commonalities and common background are “(i)mportant elements in recruitment

³⁵⁷ ‘Militant islamistisk radikalisering’, *Centre for Terror Analyse*, April 28, 2016, <https://www.pet.dk/publikationer/-/media/VTID%202016/20160428Militantislamistiskradikaliseringpdf.ashx>; For critical view of the cross-over phenomena, see: Wilchen Christensen, Tina og Lerche Mørck, Line, ‘Bevægelser i og på tværs af ekstreme grupper og bande- og rockermiljøet’, *Aarhus University*, 2016, http://edu.au.dk/fileadmin/edu/Udgivelser/E-boeger/Ebog_-_Bevaegelser_i_og_paa_tvaaers_af_ekstreme_grupper.pdf

³⁵⁸ Sheikh, Jakob, ‘I Just Said It. The State: Examining the Motivations for Danish Foreign Fighting in Syria’, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol.10, Issue 6, December 2016; Sheikh, Jakob (2015) *Danmarks Born i Hellig Krig*, Lindhardt og Ringhof

³⁵⁹ ‘What background do individuals who frequent extreme Islamist environments in Norway have prior to their radicalisation’, *PST*, September 12, 2016, http://www.pst.no/media/82364/Radikaliseringsprosjektet_rapport_ugrad_eng_12-09-16.pdf

³⁶⁰ Ibid: p.11.

³⁶¹ Ibid.

³⁶² ‘What background do individuals who frequent extreme Islamist environments in Norway have prior to their radicalisation’, *PST*, September 12, 2016, http://www.pst.no/media/82364/Radikaliseringsprosjektet_rapport_ugrad_eng_12-09-16.pdf

³⁶³ Vidino, Lorenzo, unpublished paper (2016)

³⁶⁴ Garcia-Calvo, Carola and Reinales, Fernando, ‘Patterns of Involvement among Individuals Arrested for Islamic State-related Terrorist Activities in Spain, 2013–2016’, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol.10, Issue 6, December 2016, pp.109–120

and the development of group structures”.³⁶⁵ Before the Islamic State crystallized and was officially announced at the end of June 2014 many recruits joined and were organized according to nationality, linguistic ability and ethnic background. At the same time, IS recruitment efforts focused on promises of “a utopian society without distinction based on origin, language, colour or race.”³⁶⁶ The operational reality joining IS focused on induction and interrogation to weed out any spies trying to infiltrate ranks. Afterwards recruits joined training camps which combined physical training, arms instruction and indoctrination. This was often organised along linguistic ability, nationality and ethnic background. French-speaking from France and Belgium formed contingents in parallel to recruits from Nordic countries that joined English-speaking contingents. Similarly foreign fighters from the Caucasus formed their own contingents.

Across Europe there is great variation of nationality and ethnic background in the make-up of the foreign fighter contingents. In Austria, for instance, out of 270 foreign fighters present in Syria “approximately 50% [...] originally come from the North Caucasus.”³⁶⁷ There are around 30,000 Chechens residing in Austria, making it one of the largest Chechen communities in Europe. Other large groups are mainly Bosnian and Turkish-born.³⁶⁸ Recruitment tentacles stretch into the Western Balkans “where radicals in Austria have cross-fertilized with networks in the radical community in Gornja Maoca and [a] dozen other villages.”³⁶⁹ According to Austrian Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution and Counterterrorism (BfV) the Austria and the Western Balkans nexus “serves as an area of retreat and a place for fundraising and recruitment activities for members of the ‘Caucasus Emirate’.”³⁷⁰

In neighbouring Italy, the Interior Ministry reports “that of those 75 individuals without Italian citizenship, 24 are originally from Tunisia, 19 from Morocco, 14 from Syria, 5 from Macedonia, 3 from Bosnia, 3 from Albania and the others from other less represented countries.”³⁷¹

In Spain, most of foreign fighters are individuals born in Spain and are of Moroccan descent, many hailing from Ceuta and Melilla. In a study of 130 individuals arrested for Islamic State-related terrorist activities it was found

³⁶⁵ ‘Changes in modus operandi of Islamic State terrorist attacks’, *Europol*, January 2016

³⁶⁶ ‘European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2016’, *Europol*, p. 23

³⁶⁷ ‘European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2015’, *Europol*, p. 21

³⁶⁸ ‘Vienna ‘a hub for European jihadists’’, *The Local*, August 25, 2014 <http://www.thelocal.at/20140825/vienna-a-hub-for-european-jihadists>

³⁶⁹ Holman, Timothy ‘Foreign Fighters from the Western Balkans in Syria’, *CTC Sentinel*, Vol.7, Issue 6, June 2014, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/foreign-fighters-from-the-western-balkans-in-syria>; ‘Violent Extremism in the Western Balkans’, *Austrian National Defence Academy*, (undated), http://www.bundesheer.at/pdf_pool/publikationen/pfpc_31st_rssee_policy.pdf

³⁷⁰ ‘Verfassungsschutzbericht’ 2014, *Bundesamt für verfassungsschutz und terrorismusbekämpfung*, http://www.bmi.gv.at/cms/BMI_Verfassungsschutz/BVT_VSB_2014_V20140613_online.pdf

³⁷¹ Vidino, Lorenzo, unpublished paper (2016)

that 43% were Spanish nationals and 41.4% were Moroccan nationals with 40 percent being second generation descendants.³⁷² In the Netherlands a study of 140 Dutch foreign fighters portrayed the following background; “78 individuals (56%) had Moroccan second-nationality, 13 individuals with Turkish second nationality and only 18% with only Dutch nationality.”³⁷³ Similarly in Belgium, “Belgian- Moroccans are significantly overrepresented among the Belgian Syria travellers, accounting for up to four-fifths.”³⁷⁴

These concentrations of backgrounds are similar in some countries and quite diverse in others. For example, in the Finnish contingent there were at “least 19 different ethnic backgrounds represented though Somalis and recent converts are strongly represented.”³⁷⁵ In neighbouring Norway, the foreign fighter contingent is rather ethnically diversified hailing from more than 30 different backgrounds.³⁷⁶ Interestingly, in Norway there is a diversity of ethnic background so there is no dominant group which meant that Somalis and Pakistanis (who constitute the largest ethnic immigrant groups) were underrepresented given their size.³⁷⁷

In Germany, in a study of 784 foreign fighter cases, it was found that 61 percent were born in Germany. Those who were born abroad represented 38 different countries which included: “Turkey (6%), Syria (5%), Russian Federation (5%), Lebanon (3%), Morocco (3%), Afghanistan (2%).”³⁷⁸ Another relevant detail is that “of the individuals born abroad, 39% immigrated at an age of under 14 years, 23% as teenagers and adolescents, and 38% at an age of more than 21 years.”³⁷⁹ In this study it was also shown that 35 percent of foreign fighters departing for Syria and Iraq had exclusively German citizenship while 43% held dual citizenship.³⁸⁰

³⁷² Garcia-Calvo, Carola and Reinares, Fernando, ‘Patterns of Involvement among Individuals Arrested for Islamic State-related Terrorist Activities in Spain, 2013-2016’, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol.10, Issue 6, December 2016, pp.109-120

³⁷³ Weenink, Anton W., ‘Behavioral Problems and Disorders among Radicals in Police Files’, *Perspectives on Terrorism* Vol.9, No.2, 2015, <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/416/html>

³⁷⁴ Coolsaet, Ric, ‘Facing the Fourth Foreign Fighters Wave: What Drives Europeans to Syria, and to Islamic State? Insights from the Belgian Case’, *Egmont Paper 81*, March 2016

³⁷⁵ Saarinen, Juha, ‘The Finnish Foreign Fighter Contingent in Syria’, *CTC Sentinel*, Vol.7, Issue 3, March 2014

³⁷⁶ ‘What background do individuals who frequent extreme Islamist environments in Norway have prior to their radicalisation’, *PST*, September 12, 2016, http://www.pst.no/media/82364/Radikaliseringprosjektet_rapport_ugrad_eng_12-09-16.pdf

³⁷⁷ Ibid.

³⁷⁸ ‘Analysis of the background and process of radicalization among persons who left Germany to travel to Syria or Iraq based on islamist motivations’, *Federal Criminal Police Office, Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution and the Hesse Information and Competence Centre Against Extremism*, October 2016, p.13.

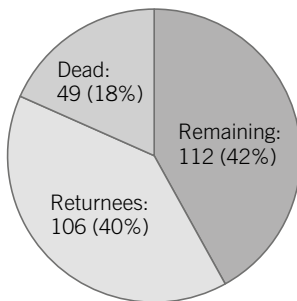
³⁷⁹ Heinke, Daniel H., ‘German Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq: The Updated Data and Its Implications’, *CTC Sentinel*, March 10, 2017

³⁸⁰ Heinke, Daniel H., ‘German Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq: The Updated Data and Its Implications’, *CTC Sentinel*, March 10, 2017

6. Foreign fighters from Sweden

Since 2012, it is estimated that about 300 people from Sweden have travelled to Syria and Iraq to join terrorist groups. Most of the data presented in this chapter are based on the Security Service's information of 267 individuals who are or have been residents of Sweden and travelled to Syria or Iraq in the period of June 2012 to September 2016. As of September 2016, 106 foreign fighters (40 percent) had returned to Sweden, while 112 (42 percent) were still in Syria or Iraq. It is estimated that 49 of the 267 (18 percent) have died in the conflict.³⁸¹

Amount of returnees, dead, and remaining foreign fighters as of September 2016



In the period from June 2012 to December 2012, at least 36 people travelled from Sweden to Syria or Iraq. Some of them stayed for a few months and returned to Sweden before the end of the year. Although most of the foreign fighters in 2012 were men, which also seem to be the case in other countries, a few of the foreign

³⁸¹ 'Analys av resenärer från Sverige som anslutit sig till terrorgrupper i Syrien och Irak', *Säkerhetspolisen*, 2017 (in notes: Säkerhetspolisen (2017))

fighters that travelled in 2012 were women.³⁸² Some of the first foreign fighters from Sweden encouraged more people to join the conflict. In November 2012, Mujahedeen Fi Ash Sham published the first Swedish jihad video from Syria.

*We are Mujahedeen Fi Ash Sham and we bear witness that Jihad is mandatory for everyone who believes in Allah, his prophet and judgement day. Jihad is mandatory in Syria and in the whole world. /.../ My brothers, remember that Jihad does not need you, but that you need Jihad.*³⁸³

The sudden surge in 2013, with a threefold increase in the number of foreign fighters, provided fresh impetus. At least 98 people travelled from Sweden, and some of the returnees who had travelled in 2012 again travelled to the conflict in 2013. About 50 to 60 of the foreign fighters returned to Sweden in 2013. In September alone, 18 people travelled from Sweden – which is the highest number of travellers during a single month. What is quite interesting is that the month after, in October 2013, Sweden witnessed the highest number of returnees in a single month, which were 13.³⁸⁴ Why there was so much traffic of foreign fighters in September and October 2013 is unknown. There were no arrests of recruiters in Sweden during this period – even though there were several Swedish jihadi forums in social media where Swedish al-Qaeda and IS supporters were grooming new candidates.³⁸⁵

In 2013, the popular Swedish jihadi Facebook group *Ghuraba Syrien Syrien* posted information of the situation in Syria, and the readers were encouraged by Swedish foreign fighters to ask questions and if they wanted to hear interviews from people in the area.³⁸⁶ In another post on Facebook it was written, “For how long are we going to witness this? You are missing something big...”³⁸⁷ In October 2013, the Swedish jihadi Facebook group *Sollentunas muslimer* published the following post:

*I began my journey in the desert of Homs, and travelled through Syria during three days. Raqqa, ma sha Allah, is the most beautiful city I've even seen. Unfortunately I did not take any photos of the city while spending time in the ISIS security forces. We were patrolling the streets by night and looking after the children. What struck me was that families with children enjoyed the nightlife of Raqqa, even after midnight hours. It offered a quiet and calm atmosphere with the best weather, and other attractions. The evenings and nights of Raqqa offered cafes, restaurants, internet cafes, and carousels. When Islam is implemented, the night and day belongs to the people, and not alcoholics or drug addicts, alhamdolilla.*³⁸⁸

³⁸² Säkerhetspolisen (2017)

³⁸³ The video was published on Vimeo on November 21 2012

³⁸⁴ Säkerhetspolisen (2017)

³⁸⁵ Gustafsson (2015)

³⁸⁶ Gustafsson (2015) p. 16

³⁸⁷ Gustafsson (2015) p. 55

³⁸⁸ Gustafsson (2015) p. 16

Travellers from Sweden had begun writing stories of their journeys in Syria in 2013. The narratives were often positive with a romanticising view of the life in the conflict. Most of them were men, but a few women also portrayed their life in Syria.³⁸⁹ In 2013, women seem to get a greater attraction of travelling to the conflict, and it is estimated that about 18 percent of the foreign fighters travelling in 2013 were women.³⁹⁰

In the summer of 2014, the so-called Caliphate and Islamic State was declared, and the interest in the conflict was still holding strong, with almost as many people travelling in 2014 as the previous year. Though the number of first-time travellers decreased to 78, while the total number of travels from Sweden was 94. The traffic between Syria/Iraq and Sweden continued in 2014 and 43 foreign fighters returned. At least 16 of the foreign fighters that had returned to Sweden travelled back to Syria in 2014, and up to 18 people died.³⁹¹

It was not until 2015 that the flow of foreign fighters stagnated, but as people tend to stay in the conflict area for several months, there was a culmination of Swedes in the conflict area in the fall 2015. It is estimated that 137 foreign fighters from Sweden were in Syria or Iraq in the fall of 2015 – which is about half of the entire Swedish foreign fighter contingent. About as many travelled in 2012 as in 2015, an estimate of 36 people in each year, but the number of travels from Sweden was 57, meaning people travelled for their second or perhaps third time. The amount of women continued to change, from “a few” in 2012 to 18 percent in 2013, to about 40 percent of the foreign fighters in the conflict area in 2014 and 2015. One of the reasons why the Swedish contingent was made of up of so many women is probably due to the factor that men engage in combat and get killed, and are exposed to greater risks than women. There are no indications of any women from Sweden killed – nor do data or media reports show any female casualties.³⁹²

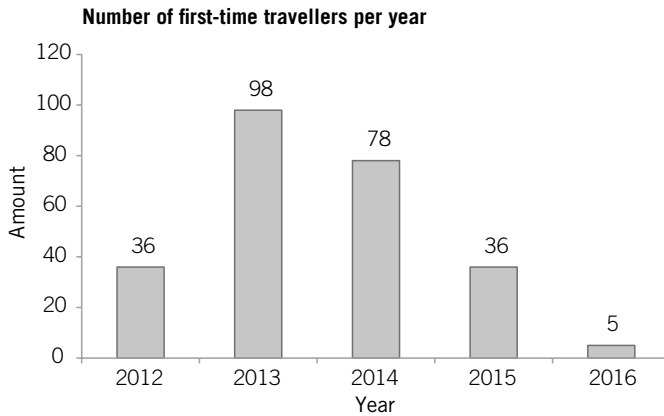
The stagnation in 2015 was followed by a major decrease in 2016 with only five foreign fighters travelling from Sweden. Nevertheless, more than a hundred Swedes were still in Syria or Iraq as of September 2016. This means that Sweden will probably experience more returning foreign fighters in the future years, but at the same time it is likely that the death toll will increase.

³⁸⁹ Gustafsson (2015)

³⁹⁰ Säkerhetspolisen (2017)

³⁹¹ Säkerhetspolisen (2017)

³⁹² Säkerhetspolisen (2017)



Undoubtedly, there are several reasons explaining the decrease and increase of the flow of foreign fighters from Sweden (and elsewhere). Indeed, Europol has assessed “that the Turkish-Syrian border’s accessibility is one factor why more European volunteers travelled to Syria rather than to Afghanistan, Mali, Somalia or Yemen.”³⁹³ The conflict area has been relatively accessible and it does not cost a fortune to travel there. A flight ticket from Stockholm to one of Turkey’s tourist destinations does not cost more than a few hundred euros – if not less. Traveling by car has been another option for some fighters from Sweden – which also is a tactic to avoid passenger records. Evidently, it has not been difficult for Europeans to travel to Turkey and continue towards the border of Syria, even though it probably has been more difficult to travel in 2015 and 2016.

Certainly, the proclamation of a Caliphate and the establishment of the Islamic State have attracted more people to travel to Syria and Iraq. Of course, the stories in media that IS is losing control and not being the emerging millenarian Islamic ‘superpower’ in the way it claims to be and aims for, and that more and more of their leaders have been killed, probably influences potential foreign fighters abroad in a direction that fighting with IS in Syria and Iraq becomes less attractive. It is known that IS has on occasion brutally killed and threatened foreign fighters that wanted to leave the territory under its control.³⁹⁴ At the same time, the data shows that many foreign fighters have been able to travel back and forth between the conflict area and Sweden. Most of the foreign fighters have joined IS, but in 2016 it lost attraction and most of the

³⁹³ ‘European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2014’, *Europol*, p. 23

³⁹⁴ ‘Islamic State executed nearly 2,000 people in six months: monitor’, *Reuters*, December 28, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-casualties-idUSKBN0K60EK20141228>

foreign fighters joined Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (former Jabhat al-Nusra).³⁹⁵ Still, the number of foreign fighters in 2016 seems to be quite small.

It might also be the case that measures in Sweden have had an effect on the flow of fighters. It has not been evaluated how or if preventive and repressive actions in Sweden have caused the flow of foreign fighters to stagnate and decrease, but it *may* be a variable that have had an effect. There are several examples that social services, the police, the security service and civil society organisations have dissuaded young people from leaving Sweden for the conflict in Syria.³⁹⁶ It is a fact that if there would not be any efforts to prevent and counter this phenomenon, there would be more Swedish foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq. Still, about 300 people have managed to travel to the conflict, and some of them have even travelled several times.

Age

The dynamics of the terrorist networks in Sweden have changed in recent years with “many of those who have been most active in the recent past are of a younger generation.”³⁹⁷ In Sweden and elsewhere, it is known that whole families have travelled, and parents have taken their very young children with them to the conflict, exposing them to very serious risks.³⁹⁸ However, the statistical data does not include young children who have accompanied their parents. Still, there are a few cases that can exemplify this phenomenon. A well-known case is the 29 year-old Michael Skråmo, a.k.a. ‘Abdul Samad’ from Gothenburg, who in August 2014 travelled with his wife and four young children to Raqqa.³⁹⁹ He incited people to join him in Syria, and also encouraged people in Sweden to read AQAP’s Inspire magazine and make bombs to commit attacks.⁴⁰⁰ In addition,

³⁹⁵ ‘Bedömning av terrorhotet mot Sverige 2017’, *Nationellt centrum för terrorhotbedömning/Säkerhetspolisen*, http://sakerhetspolisen.se/download/18.1beef5fc14cb83963e73383/1484663040490/NCT_Helarsbedomning_2017.pdf

³⁹⁶ “‘Josef’ skulle kriga i Syrien – ångrade sig”, *Expressen*, January 18, 2015, <http://www.expressen.se/gt/josef-skulle-kriga-i-syrien--angrade-sig/>; ‘Hans släkting reste för att kriga med IS’, *Sveriges Television*, September 30, 2014, <http://www.svt.se/nyheter/inrikes/hans-slakting-lamnade-sverige-for-att-kriga-med-is/>; “Vi hindrar blivande IS-terrorister”, *Sveriges Television*, November 26, 2014, <http://www.svt.se/opinion/article2500729.svt>

³⁹⁷ ‘Possible changes to the threat posed to Sweden’, *Swedish Security Service*, <http://sakerhetspolisen.se/en/swedish-security-service/counter-terrorism/threats-and-threat-assessment/possible-changes-to-the-threat-posed-to-sweden.html>

³⁹⁸ ‘Unga göteborgare krigar i Syrien’, *Göteborgs-Posten*, Augusti 1, 2014, <http://www.gp.se/nyheter/goteborg/unga-goteborgare-krigar-i-syrien-1.218185>

³⁹⁹ ‘Michael, 29, tog med familjen till IS i Syrien’, *Expressen*, December 14, 2014, <http://www.expressen.se/gt/michael-29-tog-med-familjen-till-is-i-syrien/>

⁴⁰⁰ “Börja göra bomber från simpla grejer från ica eller coop”, *Gudmundson*, June 12, 2015, <http://gudmundson.blogspot.se/2015/06/borja-gora-bomber-fran-simpla-grejer.html>

Skråmo has incited the public in social media to kill Lars Vilks.⁴⁰¹ Before going to Syria, Mirsad Bektasevic who got arrested in Greece was registered at Skråmo's address in Sweden.⁴⁰²

In late 2015, a 33-year-old man from Örebro was arrested in absence as he had taken his two children to join IS in Syria.⁴⁰³ The man was later arrested in Turkey and extradited to Sweden.⁴⁰⁴ Another case concerns a three-year-old child from western part of Sweden who died while playing with a hand grenade.⁴⁰⁵ There are also minors that have tried to go to Syria but for different reasons never made it. For example, in the spring of 2015 a 15-year-old from Vivalla, Örebro, was stopped in Turkey as she was trying to join the Islamic State.⁴⁰⁶ According to the National coordinator to safeguard democracy against violent extremism, up to 40 children from Sweden were living in Syria in the beginning of 2016. A social worker in the Gothenburg suburb of Angered estimated that about 10 of the children come from Angered.⁴⁰⁷

In 2015, there was an increase in the number of children travelling from Sweden.⁴⁰⁸ The age of the youngest person is unknown. But, evidently, parents are taking very young children to the conflict while others give birth there. One case that got a lot of attention was when Swedish state television showed the story of Marilyn. Marilyn was only fifteen years old when she and her boyfriend travelled to IS. She became pregnant and her boyfriend later died in Iraq. In a third attempt to rescue her, the parents managed to take her and her new-born child home to Sweden.⁴⁰⁹

The average age of the foreign fighters is 26, and the majority are "young adults". Still, there is great variation indicating that there are very young travellers but also older ones as the age ranges in a span of 50 years. 18 percent of the

⁴⁰¹ 'Svenske IS-krigaren utreds nu av Säpo', *Expressen*, June 18, 2015, <http://www.expressen.se/gt/svenske-is-krigaren-utreds-nu-av-sapo/>

⁴⁰² 'Grupperna inom de svenska IS-krigarna', *Expressen*, April 28, 2016, <http://www.expressen.se/nyheter/grupperna-inom-de-svenska-is-krigarna/>

⁴⁰³ 'Örebroare misstänks ha tagit barnen till IS i Syrien', *Sveriges Radio*, December 3, 2015, <http://sverigesradio.se/sida/artikel.aspx?programid=159&artikel=6317109>

⁴⁰⁴ 'Örebroare misstänks ha tagit barnen till Syrien - begärs utlämnad', *Sveriges Radio*, April 6, 2016, <http://sverigesradio.se/sida/artikel.aspx?programid=159&artikel=6405222>

⁴⁰⁵ 'Uppgifter: Svensk pojke död i Syrien', *Bohuslänningen*, July 4, 2016, <http://www.bohuslaningen.se/nyheter/sverige/uppgifter-svensk-pojke-dod-i-syrien-1.3453367>

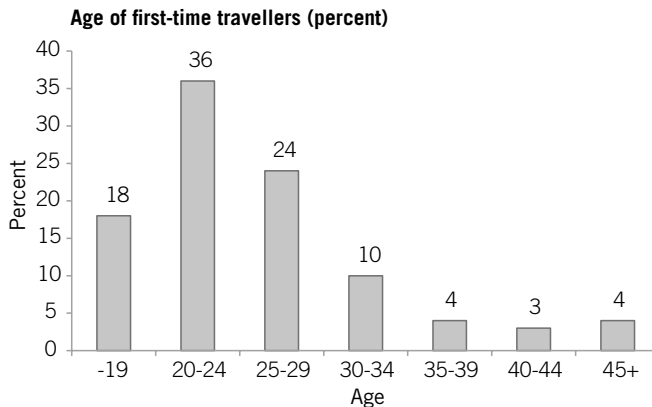
⁴⁰⁶ '15-årig flicka i Örebro ville ansluta till IS', *Sveriges Radio*, May 20, 2015, <http://sverigesradio.se/sida/artikel.aspx?programid=159&artikel=6168735>

⁴⁰⁷ 'Viktigt med stöd om barnen kommer tillbaka', *Sveriges Radio*, February 1, 2016, <http://sverigesradio.se/sida/artikel.aspx?programid=83&artikel=6358626>

⁴⁰⁸ 'Säkerhetspolisen 2015', *Säkerhetspolisen*, http://www.sakerhetspolisen.se/download/18.1beef5fc14cb83963e7273f1458212474047/Sapo_arsbok15_webb.pdf, p. 32

⁴⁰⁹ 'Mot alla odds fick de hem dottern från IS', *Sveriges Television*, December 14, 2016, updated February 14, 2017, <http://www.svt.se/nyheter/inrikes/ensamma-mot-its>

travellers (45 people) are 19 or younger, while about 60 percent (154 people) are between the ages of 20 to 29. The diagram below shows there is a span in age but an overwhelming majority of youths and young adults. Very few people above the age of forty seem to travel from Sweden and other parts of northern Europe.⁴¹⁰ It is possible that there are IS sympathisers above the age of forty that stay in Sweden but support IS and the foreign fighters by other means than travelling themselves.



An interesting observation is that the average age has not changed over the period. The foreign fighters travelling in 2012 are neither younger nor older than those travelling in 2015. Yet, according to the data the average age in 2016 is 21,8 – which is a lot younger than the previous years. However, there are only five first-time travellers in 2016. Age seems to be stable in relation to several variables. When analysing those who have returned, died or are still in the conflict area, there are no significant differences in age. The hypothesis that primarily younger people take great risks and thereby a larger extent dies in the conflict cannot be validated here. Still, many of the foreign fighters are young. Neither are there any differences in average age when looking separately at different counties.⁴¹¹ Foreign fighters from the suburbs of Stockholm are neither younger nor older than those from Gothenburg or Malmö. Since all children are not included in the data, there may still be more children from one area than another.

⁴¹⁰ Säkerhetspolisen (2017)

⁴¹¹ Säkerhetspolisen (2017)

Gender

The majority of the foreign fighters are men, but women started to travel from Sweden in late 2012. The data shows that 76 percent are men and 24 percent are women. The number of women has increased during the conflict, where there were only “a few” in 2012 while they represented up to 40 percent of the people in the conflict area in 2014 and 2015. As most of the foreign fighters are young adults, this can also be said about the women. When separating the average age of men and women, men have an average age of 26 at the first trip while women are 25 years old. Women are to the same extent as men (about 70 percent) from Sweden’s ‘exposed areas’, as will be shown below.⁴¹²

As mentioned before, there is information of several cases where Swedish foreign fighters have engaged in combat, but there is no information that women have been on the battlefield or conducted suicide operations. It may be the case that women have different roles in comparison to their male companions. Still, some of them have been active in social media and assisted in mobilisation. One of the female foreign fighters states: “It is time to wake up my siblings. Our Ummah is bleeding and the only thing you do is to publish pictures on Facebook and like comments. Pack your bags and come. Defend your Ummah with strength and not only words!”⁴¹³ Women have also become pregnant abroad and given birth. The patriarchal culture and structures of IS clearly indicates women should marry, stay at home and learn the skills of knitting and cooking.⁴¹⁴

Geography

In January 2017, the Swedish population reached 10 million people. To put the amount of foreign fighters in perspective, one in about 37,000 people have travelled to the conflict.⁴¹⁵ Sweden is divided into 21 counties and 290 municipalities. The largest cities are Stockholm, Gothenburg and Malmö, which are in the counties of Stockholm County, Västra Götaland County, and Skåne County. A majority of the foreign fighters, an estimated 80 percent, comes from these three counties and Örebro County. Even though there is a concentration of foreign fighters in these four counties, the data also shows a geographical variation, with 20 percent coming from other counties. About one third of the foreign fighters are, or have been, registered in Västra Götaland County, one quarter in Stockholm County, and a tenth in Örebro County and a tenth in Skåne County.

⁴¹² Säkerhetspolisen (2017)

⁴¹³ Gustafsson (2015) p. 17

⁴¹⁴ ‘Female jihadist publish guide to life under Islamic State’, *The Guardian*, February 5, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/feb/05/jihadist-girl-marry-liberation-failed-islamic-state>

⁴¹⁵ Säkerhetspolisen (2017)



The largest concentration of foreign fighters is in Örebro County where about one in 11,500 have travelled to the conflict (compared with 1 in 37,000 in Sweden), which means the county is where as many as 25 to 30 foreign fighters reside.⁴¹⁶

Women do not make up the majority of foreign fighters in any county, and the portion of women is to some extent smaller in Skåne and Örebro than in Västra Götaland and Stockholm. A finding very difficult to explain is that there are disparities in the average time spent in the conflict area between different counties. According to the data, foreign fighters from Stockholm have in an average been in Syria and/or Iraq for about 21 months. This is more than double the time compared with those from Skåne. Of course, Skåne has much fewer foreign fighters, but one reason why foreign fighters from Västra Götaland and the city of Gothenburg do not make it to the top of the list is that almost half of all foreign fighters that have died are from Västra Götaland. However, it should be added that the data regarding death tolls should not be overanalysed since it in many cases is very difficult for intelligence and security services to find the exact date when someone has died – and sometimes even if they have died at all.

‘Exposed areas’

In the search for concentrations of foreign fighters in Sweden, it may be interesting to be more precise and try to find local concentrations rather than regional ones. In 2014, the Swedish Police Authority published a national overview of criminal networks having large negative impact on local communities in Sweden. The

⁴¹⁶ Säkerhetspolisen (2017)

Police identified 55 such areas.⁴¹⁷ An update of the report was published in 2015, finding 53 socially deprived areas hit by serious crime, and 15 of those being particularly exposed. These areas have in the media sometimes been labelled as “no-go zones”. It is known that Islamist extremists have been present in many of these areas and that some of the foreign fighters have lived or been active there. The aim of this section is to explore this issue further.

Most of the ‘exposed’ areas (swe. *socialt utsatta områden*) in Sweden are neighbourhoods built during the ‘Million Homes Programme’ (swe. *Miljonprogrammet*).⁴¹⁸ Due to housing shortages in the 1950’s and 1960’s, the Swedish Parliament decided that one million dwellings should be built in Sweden. Today, many of the areas suffer from high unemployment rates, social stigmatization, and cramped housing conditions. According to the police, an exposed area is characterised by low socioeconomic status where criminals have a negative impact on the local community. This impact includes threats, extortion, violent acts in public spaces, and overt trade of narcotics. In the ‘particularly exposed areas’ (15 in total), the citizens’ experience of being threatened by criminals, which depresses levels of reporting crime and appearing in court because of fear of repercussions. According to the police, the situation in the particularly exposed areas makes it virtually impossible for the police to carry out its mission. In the particularly exposed areas there are tendencies of ‘parallel societies’, a high concentration of criminals, extremism and fundamentalism affecting the inhabitants’ constitutional rights, and recruitment of foreign fighters.⁴¹⁹

There are methodological challenges when linking people to a certain geographical area. People tend to move or are registered in another area than they actually live. Defining the borders to the area may also change the outcome in different ways. The data is based on the Police Authority’s definition (which is not unproblematic), and people that are registered in the areas. This variable is measured in two ways. The first includes those who were registered at an address in the exposed areas at the time of travel, while the other examines if a foreign fighter *at any time* have been registered in an exposed area. Looking at the first one, 126 foreign fighters have been registered in a particularly exposed area, and 38 in a risk area or exposed area. Using the second criterion, another 23 persons are added in some of the three categories of exposed areas. Overall, 71 percent of foreign fighters (the same for men and women) have sometime lived in an exposed area, risk area or particularly exposed area. It is important to state that

⁴¹⁷ ‘En nationell översikt av kriminella nätverk med stor påverkan på lokalsamhället’, *Underrättelseroteln, Rikskriminalpolisen*, October 2014

⁴¹⁸ ‘Insatser mot brott och otrygghet i socialt utsatta områden – en kunskapsöversikt’, *Brottsförebyggande rådet*, Rapport 2016:20

⁴¹⁹ ‘Utsatta områden – sociala risker, kollektiv förmåga och oönskade händelser’, *Underrättelseenheten, Nationella operativa avdelningen*, December 2015

not all exposed areas have foreign fighters, and in some there are very few.⁴²⁰ More than 70 percent is a significant amount since far from 70 percent of the Swedish population live or have lived in an exposed area.

Many of the people in the exposed areas are of foreign origin – themselves or their parents are born in another country than Sweden. The majority of the immigrant foreign fighters (111), but not all of them (39), have lived in an exposed area. 76 of the non-immigrants have lived in the exposed areas while 41 have not.⁴²¹

Exposed areas and immigration

	Immigrant	Non-immigrant
Exposed area	111	76
Non-exposed area	39	41

39 percent of those not living in the exposed areas are born in Sweden and 71 percent Swedish citizens. Immigrants in non-exposed areas have to a larger extent immigrated to Sweden at an older age. The overall average age for immigration is 16 years. The data also shows that foreign fighters from the exposed areas die to a larger extent. One tenth of those from non-exposed areas have died as of September 2016, while there is one fifth in total.⁴²²

Several areas of concern

There is a geographical concentration of foreign fighters to the counties of Västra Götaland, Stockholm, Skåne and Örebro, and about 70 percent of the foreign fighters have lived in an exposed area. The following section provides a deeper examination of some of the areas of concern.

The particularly exposed area of Vivalla is a small suburb to Örebro city (Örebro County) with a population of about 7,000, and 25 to 30 foreign fighters.⁴²³ In September 2013, the regional newspaper *Nerikes Allehanda* (the newspaper that Abu Omar al-Baghdadi had threatened in 2007, and offered \$50,000 for the killing of its chief editor) began reporting that people from Vivalla was travelling to Syria.⁴²⁴ At least 12 youths from Örebro is thought to have travelled

⁴²⁰ Säkerhetspolisen (2017)

⁴²¹ Säkerhetspolisen (2017)

⁴²² Säkerhetspolisen (2017)

⁴²³ 'I Vivalla vet nästan alla någon som anslutit sig till IS', *Dagens Nyheter*, May 28, 2016, <http://fokus.dn.se/radikala-islamismen-i-sverige/>

⁴²⁴ 'Sammanfattning: Örebro och IS', *Nerikes Allehanda*, April 23, 2015, <http://www.na.se/orebro-lan/orebro/sammanfattning-orebro-och-is>

to Syria in 2013.⁴²⁵ In October 2013, there were reports that the first of them had returned to Vivala, and in 2014, all of the twelve were thought to have returned.⁴²⁶ However, some of the returnees later again travelled back to Syria.⁴²⁷

In August 2014, Christian assemblies and organisations gathered in Örebro to demonstrate against the Islamic State and the overall situation in Syria and Iraq.⁴²⁸ Some of the demonstrators also received anonymous threats.⁴²⁹ According to a local real estate company, IS supporters and returnees have openly displayed their presence in Vivala.⁴³⁰ During local meetings regarding prevention of violent extremism in April and May 2015, two of the Syria returnees attended and started to propagate for the Islamic State.⁴³¹

In the spring 2015, Turkish authorities in Istanbul stopped two men and the first female foreign fighter from Örebro. The three later made a second attempt to travel to Turkey, this time from the Greek island of Kos to Turkish Bodrum where they were stopped for a second time.⁴³² They later managed to arrive to Syria and joined the Islamic State.⁴³³ One of them is the younger brother of former Swedish Guantanamo detainee Mehdi Ghezali.⁴³⁴ The other man later died.⁴³⁵

⁴²⁵ "Någon i Örebro bakom Syrien-rekryteringar", *Nerikes Allehanda*, September 8, 2013, <http://www.na.se/orebro-lan/orebro/nagon-i-orebro-bakom-syrien-rekryteringar>; 'IS-oron breder ut sig i Örebro', *Nerikes Allehanda*, September 26, 2014, <http://www.na.se/orebro-lan/orebro/is-oron-breder-ut-sig-i-orebro>; 'P1 Dokumentär: IS-krigarna från Vivala', *Sveriges Radio*, April 7, 2016, <http://sverigesradio.se/sida/artikel.aspx?programid=159&artikel=6406359>

⁴²⁶ 'IS-oron breder ut sig i Örebro', *Nerikes Allehanda*, September 26, 2014, <http://www.na.se/orebro-lan/orebro/is-oron-breder-ut-sig-i-orebro>; 'En av örebroarna har återvänt från Syrien', *Nerikes Allehanda*, October 22, 2013, <http://www.na.se/orebro-lan/orebro/en-av-orebroarna-har-atervant-fran-syrien>

⁴²⁷ 'Sammanfattning: Örebro och IS', *Nerikes Allehanda*, April 23, 2015, <http://www.na.se/orebro-lan/orebro/sammanfattning-orebro-och-is>

⁴²⁸ 'Stor demonstration för kristna i Irak och Syrien', *Nerikes Allehanda*, August 16, 2014, <http://www.na.se/orebro-lan/orebro/stor-demonstration-for-kristna-i-irak-och-syrien>

⁴²⁹ 'Sammanfattning: Örebro och IS', *Nerikes Allehanda*, April 23, 2015, <http://www.na.se/orebro-lan/orebro/sammanfattning-orebro-och-is>

⁴³⁰ 'Säpo grep man – ska ha rekryterat till IS', *Expressen*, June 1, 2015, <http://www.expressen.se/nyheter/sapo-grep-man-ska-ha-rekryterat-till-is/>

⁴³¹ 'Extremister som varit i Syrien svåra att omvända i Örebro', *Sveriges Radio*, May 25, 2015, <http://sverigesradio.se/sida/artikel.aspx?programid=159&artikel=6171771>

⁴³² 'IS-örebroare jagas på semesterort', *Nerikes Allehanda*, May 19, 2015, <http://www.na.se/orebro-lan/orebro/is-orebroare-jagas-pa-semesterort>; 'Säkra uppgifter: Första IS-kvinna från Örebro', *Nerikes Allehanda*, April 24, 2015, <http://www.na.se/orebro-lan/orebro/sakra-uppgifter-forsta-is-kvinna-fran-orebro>

⁴³³ 'IS-svenskar från Örebro framme i Syrien', *Aftonbladet*, June 3, 2015, <http://www.aftonbladet.se/lokala-nyheter/0fd91813-0cb2-43d2-8faf-ba4229003d42@omni>

⁴³⁴ 'Sweden asks Turkey for help finding Islamic State-bound nationals', *Yahoo News/Reuters*, May 19, 2015, <https://www.yahoo.com/news/sweden-asks-turkey-help-finding-islamic-state-bound-124926641.html>

⁴³⁵ 'Svensk IS-krigare uppges ha stupat', August 27, 2015, <http://www.sydsvenskan.se/2015-08-27/svensk-is-krigare-uppges-ha-stupat>

In June 2015, a 45-year-old man was arrested in Vivalla suspected for recruiting people to Syria. The man, a religious teacher at the local mosque, was released after three weeks but still suspected of having committed a crime during the fall 2014 and spring 2015 as he had been in contact with several foreign fighters.⁴³⁶ As the police had difficulties to gather evidence and interview recruited foreign fighters, the attorney withdrew the charges.⁴³⁷ The Security Service states that there are radicalisation and recruitment in mosques in Örebro and Eskilstuna. However, according to the Security Service, it is neither the mosques nor the religious organisations that are suspected of recruitment or radicalisation but specific persons attending the mosques.⁴³⁸ The intelligence unit at the national police has stated that active recruitment in religious gatherings, and places where there are concentrations of many young men, has occurred.⁴³⁹ The recruitment activities somehow decreased after the arrests of the suspected recruiter.⁴⁴⁰ The Qatari-based salafist charity organisation Eid Charity has donated at least eight million Swedish kronor to the mosque.⁴⁴¹ One of the founders of Eid Charity has been accused of financing al-Qaeda affiliated groups in Syria.⁴⁴²

One of the men travelling from Örebro took his two children with him, without telling his wife. He was later arrested in Turkey and sent back to Sweden.

⁴³⁶ 'Terrormisstänkt örebroare släppt', *Nerikes Allehanda*, June 24, 2015, <http://www.na.se/orebro-lan/orebro/terrormisstankt-orebroare-slappt>; 'Uppgifter: Ska ha värvat fyra män till IS', *Nerikes Allehanda*, June 10, 2015, <http://www.na.se/orebro-lan/orebro/uppgifter-ska-ha-varvat-fyra-man-till-is>; 'Utpekad rekryterare kallar IS okunniga', *Nerikes Allehanda*, September 11, 2015, <http://www.na.se/orebro-lan/orebro/utpekad-rekryterare-kallar-is-okunniga>; 'Terrormisstänkt verksam i Örebro', *Sveriges Television*, June 2, 2015, updated June 4, 2015, <http://www.svt.se/nyheter/lokalt/orebro/terrormisstankt-verksam-i-orebro>

⁴³⁷ 'Åklagare lägger ned utredning om IS-rekrytering', *Nerikes Allehanda*, September 1, 2015, <http://www.na.se/orebro-lan/orebro/aklagare-lagger-ned-utredning-om-is-rekrytering>

⁴³⁸ 'Tillslag i Örebro – misstänkt terrorrekrytering', *Säkerhetspolisen*, June 1, 2015, <http://sakerhetspolisen.se/ovrigt/pressrum/aktuellt/aktuellt/2015-06-01-tillslag-i-orebro---misstankt-terrorrekrytering.html>

⁴³⁹ 'Utsatta områden – sociala risker, kollektiv förmåga och oönskade händelser', *Polismyndigheten*, December, 2015, [https://polisen.se/Global/www%20och%20Intrapolis/%25C3%2596vriga%20rapporter/Utsatta%20omr%25C3%25A5den%20-%20sociala%20risker%20kollektiv%20f%25C3%25B6rm%25C3%25A5ga%20och%20o%25C3%25B6nskade%20h%25C3%25A4ndelser%20\(2\).pdf](https://polisen.se/Global/www%20och%20Intrapolis/%25C3%2596vriga%20rapporter/Utsatta%20omr%25C3%25A5den%20-%20sociala%20risker%20kollektiv%20f%25C3%25B6rm%25C3%25A5ga%20och%20o%25C3%25B6nskade%20h%25C3%25A4ndelser%20(2).pdf)

⁴⁴⁰ 'Färre IS-krigare rekryteras i Örebro', *Sveriges Radio*, October 3, 2015, <http://sverigesradio.se/sida/artikel.aspx?programid=159&artikel=6270347>

⁴⁴¹ 'Bokstavstroga har köpt inflytande i moskéerna i Örebro och Gävle', *Sveriges Radio*, December 3, 2015, <http://sverigesradio.se/sida/artikel.aspx?programid=159&artikel=6317875>; 'Fokus. Radikala islamismen i Sverige', *Dagens Nyheter*, May 28, 2016, <http://fokus.dn.se/radikala-islamismen-i-sverige/>

⁴⁴² 'Terrorfinansiär kopplas till Örebro moské', *Sveriges Radio*, December 5, 2015, <http://sverigesradio.se/sida/artikel.aspx?programid=159&artikel=6319172>; 'Treasury Designates Al-Qa'ida Supporters in Qatar and Yemen', *U.S. Department of the Treasury*, December 18, 2013, <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/jl2249.aspx>

Together with another man he was also suspected of having committed fraud before trying to go to Syria and join the Islamic State.⁴⁴³ At least two families in Vivalla whose family member had travelled to Syria were later awarded foster parenthood to at least four unaccompanied immigrant minors.⁴⁴⁴ By August 2015, at least four men from Örebro had died in Syria or Iraq.⁴⁴⁵ According to the police in Örebro at least seven of the 25 to 30 foreign fighters from the area have a Somali origin.⁴⁴⁶

About 33 percent of the foreign fighters come from Västra Götaland, which makes the region an exporter of approximately 90 foreign fighters in the period of June 2012 to September 2016. The police have identified six particularly exposed areas, and two exposed areas in Gothenburg. The north-eastern suburbs of Gothenburg seem to harbour most of the foreign fighters from Gothenburg, which is where most of Gothenburg's particularly exposed areas are located.⁴⁴⁷ The indicted six individuals suspected of cooperating in the assassination of Syrian residents, in the terrorism trial described above, were all from Gothenburg. Abdeljalil Joumane was one of those men arrested in absence in the Gothenburg terrorism murder case. In a photo on Facebook, Joumane is posing together with Omar al-Shishani. Joumane is thought to have died in December 2014.⁴⁴⁸

Local authorities have also prevented residents of Sweden from travelling to Syria, one of them subsequently sending an ironic greeting card to local authorities thanking for their 'help'.⁴⁴⁹ There are also people from Gothenburg that have been stopped by Turkish authorities when trying to go to Syria.⁴⁵⁰ On

⁴⁴³ 'Örebroare misstänks ha tagit barnen till IS i Syrien', *Sveriges Radio*, December 3, 2015, <http://sverigesradio.se/sida/artikel.aspx?programid=159&artikel=6317109>; 'Örebroare misstänks ha tagit barnen till Syrien – begärs utlämnad', *Sveriges Radio*, April 6, 2016, <http://sverigesradio.se/sida/artikel.aspx?programid=159&artikel=6405222>

⁴⁴⁴ 'Ensamkommande barn placerades i familjer med misstänkt IS-koppling', *Sveriges Radio*, January 24, 2017, <http://sverigesradio.se/sida/artikel.aspx?programid=83&artikel=6611771>

⁴⁴⁵ 'Uppgifter: Ännu en IS-örebroare död', *Nerikes Allehanda*, August 27, 2015, <http://www.na.se/orebro-lan/orebro/uppgifter-annu-en-is-orebroare-dod>

⁴⁴⁶ 'Reser till kriget i Syrien för att söka sin identitet', *Sveriges Radio*, February 6, 2014, <http://sverigesradio.se/sida/artikel.aspx?programid=3993&artikel=5776491>

⁴⁴⁷ Ranstorp, Magnus, Gustafsson, Linus & Hyllengren, Peder, 'From the Welfare State to the Caliphate', *Foreign Policy*, February 23, 2015, http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/02/23/from_the_welfare_state_to_the_caliphate_sweden_islamic_state_syria_iraq_foreign_fighters/; See appendix

⁴⁴⁸ 'Grupperna inom de svenska IS-krigarna', *Expressen*, April 28, 2016, <http://www.expressen.se/nyheter/grupperna-inom-de-svenska-is-krigarna/>; Gustafsson (2015) p. 41

⁴⁴⁹ 'Så ska Göteborg få bukt på extremismen', *Expressen*, November 17, 2015, <http://www.expressen.se/gt/sa-ska-goteborg-fa-bukt-pa-extremismen/>

⁴⁵⁰ 'Svenskar gripna i Turkiet – skulle ansluta sig till IS', *Sveriges Television*, March 30, 2016, updated March 31, 2016, <http://www.svt.se/nyheter/utrikes/fyra-man-med-koppling-till-sverige-gripna-skulle-ansluta-sig-till-is>; 'Göteborgsgrupp stoppade IS-anslutning', *Smålandsposten*, March 31, 2016, <http://www.smp.se/tt-inrikes/goteborgsgrupp-stoppade-is-anslutning/>; 'IS-svenskarna lämnas inte ut till Sverige', *Expressen*, April 2 2016, <http://www.expressen.se/nyheter/is-svenskarna-lamnans-inte-ut-till-sverige/>

at least two occasions, police in Gothenburg have found IS flags during stop-and-search operations.⁴⁵¹

Another city of concern in Västra Götaland is Borås. At least ten people from Borås are thought to have travelled to Syria.⁴⁵² Two brothers from Borås of Lebanese origin travelled to Syria in 2013. One of them, Moatasem El Hassan, is thought to have died when he detonated his car bomb at a checkpoint killing at least four people. The other brother died during a shootout. Both of them died during a campaign in Abou Zaid outside of Homs.⁴⁵³ A third brother was accused by Lebanese intelligence for his involvement in a terrorist attack in Beirut in June 2014. In a police raid, Lebanese law-enforcement found a suicide bomb-belt in his apartment in Tripoli, and the man was later killed.⁴⁵⁴ Swedish media reported that “in 2007, one of the youths’ uncles was killed fighting alongside Islamists in a fierce battle against the Lebanese army in the Palestinian camp of Nahr al-Bared.”⁴⁵⁵ There is also information indicating people from the city of Uddevalla have travelled to Syria.⁴⁵⁶

About 25 to 30 foreign fighters are from Skåne County. The most well-known is Osama Krayem who is thought to have participated in the terror plots in Brussels and Paris. As mentioned before, there are also people in Skåne’s capital city Malmö that has financed IS and Jabhat al-Nusra. However, Malmö is not the only city of concern. There are two known foreign fighters from Lund – a 17-year-old and a 21-year-old.⁴⁵⁷ The 17-year-old boy has figured in a propaganda video caring an assault rifle on his shoulder and inciting others to join him in Syria.⁴⁵⁸ The 17-year-old also defended the murder of the Jordanian pilot

⁴⁵¹ ‘Polisens nya order: Anmäl IS-symboler’, *Expressen*, February 20, 2015, <http://www.expressen.se/gt/polisens-nya-order-anmal-is-symboler/>

⁴⁵² ‘Polisen varnar: 100 IS-anhängare i Borås’, *Sveriges Television*, April 12, 2016, <http://www.svt.se/nyheter/lokalt/vast/100-is-anhangare-i-boras>

⁴⁵³ ‘Bröderna från Borås dog i kriget i Syrien’, *Expressen*, August 12, 2013, <http://www.expressen.se/nyheter/broderna-fran-boras-dog-i-kriget-i-syrien/>; ‘Grupperna inom de svenska IS-krigarna’, *Expressen*, April 28, 2016, <http://www.expressen.se/nyheter/grupperna-inom-de-svenska-is-krigarna/>

⁴⁵⁴ ‘Terrormisstänkt boråsare dödades vid polisräd’, *Borås Tidning*, July 20, 2014, <http://www.bt.se/nyheter/terrormisstankt-borasare-dodades-vid-polisrad/>; ‘Boråsare efterlyst i Libanon’, *Borås Tidning*, June 28, 2014, <http://www.bt.se/boras/borasare-efterlyst-i-libanon/>

⁴⁵⁵ ‘Islamist Swedish brothers in jihadist death’, *The Local*, August 3, 2013, <http://www.thelocal.se/20130803/49422>

⁴⁵⁶ ‘”Väldsbejakande islamism finns i Uddevalla”’, *Bohuslänningen*, December 18, 2015, <http://www.bohuslaningen.se/nyheter/uddevalla/valdsbejakande-islamism-finns-i-uddevalla-1.971609>

⁴⁵⁷ ‘Unga Lundabor misstänks ha anslutit sig till terrorgrupp’, *Helsingborgs Dagblad*, March 3, 2015, <http://www.hd.se/2015-03-03/unga-lundabor-misstanks-ha-anslutit-sig-till-terrorgrupp>

⁴⁵⁸ ‘Försvunnen 17-åring framträder i IS-film’, *Sydsvenskan*, May 18, 2015, <http://www.sydsvenskan.se/2015-05-18/forsvunnen-17-aring-framtrader-i-is-film>

Moaz al-Kasasbeh in January 2015, which the Islamic State burned alive and published in a propaganda video.⁴⁵⁹ The two young men left Sweden in January and February 2015.⁴⁶⁰

There are several areas in Stockholm County that have had foreign fighters. 65 to 70 people have travelled from Stockholm to Syria and Iraq, which makes about one quarter of the total number of the foreign fighters from Sweden. In June 2014, the al-Shabaab supporter Billé Ilias Mohamed travelled from Sweden to Syria. He had previously been known in Sweden during a terrorism trial where he was alleged of having trained with al-Shabaab in Somalia and was about to commit a suicide attack. In 2014, Mohamed is thought to have recruited and indoctrinated up to 14 young men and women in the Stockholm suburb of Rinkeby and then helped them travel to Syria. Before leaving, he used to share apartment with the Jyllands-Posten cell member Munir Awad.⁴⁶¹

In November 2014, 25 year-old Ahmed from the urban area of Fisksätra in Nacka Municipality east of Stockholm City, died in Syria. Ahmed was born in Mogadishu and came to Sweden as a three-year-old. He was described as an enthusiastic youth, playing soccer, writing for the local newspaper, and being very active in a local youth council. When returning to Sweden from religious studies in Egypt, Ahmed was together with another man in Fisksätra recruited to Syria. Ahmed, also known under his *kunya* 'Abu Bilal Swede', died during US airstrikes in Kobane in November 2014.⁴⁶² According to one of the local imams, there are some youths in the community who supports the Islamic State.⁴⁶³

There are also other cities of concern beside the ones in the four major regions, e.g. Halmstad, Karlskrona, Borlänge, Eskilstuna, Norrköping, Linköping, and others.

⁴⁵⁹ 'Här vill 17-åringen rekrytera fler till IS', *Expressen*, May 18, 2015, <http://www.expressen.se/kvallsposten/har-vill-17-aringen-rekrytera-fler-till-is/>; 'Jordan pilot hostage Moaz al-Kasasbeh 'burned alive'', *BBC*, February 3, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-31121160>

⁴⁶⁰ 'Unga Lundabor misstänks ha anslutit sig till terrorgrupp', *Helsingborgs Dagblad*, March 3, 2015, <http://www.hd.se/2015-03-03/unga-lundabor-misstanks-ha-anslutit-sig-till-terrorgrupp>

⁴⁶¹ 'Aftonbladet avslöjar: Han får unga att kriga för terrorarmén', *Aftonbladet*, May 22, 2015, <http://www.aftonbladet.se/nyheter/article20827746.ab?eav=7f4973978511c4ec2a3f0e78594e2b432d5d35c3>

⁴⁶² 'Partykillen Ahmed blev terrorist för IS', *Expressen*, December 20, 2014, <http://www.expressen.se/nyheter/partykillen-ahmed-blev-terrorist-for-is/>

⁴⁶³ 'Nätverk mot extremism', *Nacka Värmdö Posten*, March 24, 2015, <http://m.nvp.se/Arkiv/Artiklar/2015/03/Natverk-mot-extremism/>

A few people have left from Halmstad and a few of them have returned.⁴⁶⁴ One of the Islamic associations in Halmstad wrote on its website after the Paris terrorist attacks that the “attack in Paris is a great lie”⁴⁶⁵. One of the attackers at Jyllands-Posten, Munir Awad, lived for a long time in Halmstad.⁴⁶⁶

At least one person from Borlänge is thought to have travelled to Syria.⁴⁶⁷ A 25-year-old Swedish-Somali man with the kunya ”Abdelfatah AbuMaidah” was active in the local dawa team in Borlänge before posting photos of him together with the notorious German rapper Denis Cuspert, a.k.a ‘Deso Dogg’ and ‘Abu Talha al-Almani’ who he met in Syria.⁴⁶⁸ On his Facebook, the 25-year-old posted “So much warcriminals living now in Germany and Sweden...Huh Those who have no road to Khilafah should execute these Shia rats!”⁴⁶⁹

In 2005, Sweden witnessed its first prosecution of terrorism financing. The case involved a 29-year-old imam from Stockholm and a 25-year-old from Malmö who collected almost \$150,000 and sent it to Ansar al-Islam in Iraq to fund a terrorist attack. The money collection had inter alia been conducted in Gävle mosque where a man preached about suicide bombers during Friday prayers.⁴⁷⁰ The imam encouraged the audience to donate money for the families of the suicide bombers. A man from Gävle was one of the injured in the attacks in Iraq.⁴⁷¹ Abo Raad, the imam in Gävle has posted videos by Abdullah Azzam, the founding member of al-Qaeda, on his Facebook.⁴⁷²

⁴⁶⁴ ‘Kommunen bekräftar: Finns återvändare från IS’, *Sveriges Radio*, January 23, 2015, <http://sverigesradio.se/sida/artikel.aspx?programid=128&artikel=6075618>; ‘Hennes son strider för Isis i Syrien’, *Sveriges Radio*, November 3, 2014, <http://sverigesradio.se/sida/artikel.aspx?programid=128&artikel=5997975>; ‘Säpo: Problem för hela samhället’, *Sveriges Radio*, November 3, 2014, <http://sverigesradio.se/sida/artikel.aspx?programid=128&artikel=5999425>; ‘Föräldrar rädda för Isis – undviker moskéer’, *Sveriges Radio*, November 4, 2014, <http://sverigesradio.se/sida/artikel.aspx?programid=128&artikel=6000453>

⁴⁶⁵ ‘Sajt spred lögn om terrorattacken i Paris’, *Sveriges Television*, January 12, 2015, updated January 13, 2015, <http://www.svt.se/nyheter/lokalt/halland/moskebluff>

⁴⁶⁶ ‘Säpo: Inget hot mot Halmstad’, *Hallandsposten*, November 19, 2015, <http://www.hallandsposten.se/nyheter/halmstad/sapo-inget-hot-mot-halmstad-1.364877>

⁴⁶⁷ ‘KD i Borlänge om våldsbejakande extremism: ”Hög tid lyfta frågan politiskt”’, *Dalarnas Tidningar*, May 28, 2015, <http://www.dt.se/dalarna/borlange/kd-i-borlange-om-valdsbejakande-extremism-hog-tid-lyfta-fragan-politiskt>

⁴⁶⁸ ‘Borlängebo poserar med efterlyst IS-terrorist’, *Magnus Sandelin*, July 31, 2015, <https://www.magnussandelin.se/borlangebo-poserar-med-efterlyst-is-terrorist>

⁴⁶⁹ ‘IS-jihadisten från Borlänge uppmanar till mord’, *Dalarnas Tidningar*, September 24, 2015, <http://www.dt.se/dalarna/borlange/is-jihadisten-fran-borlange-uppmanar-till-mord>

⁴⁷⁰ ‘Fängelsestraff för insamling till terrordåd’, *Gefle Dagblad*, May 13, 2005, <http://www.gd.se/gastrikland/gavle/fangelsestraff-for-insamling-till-terrordad>

⁴⁷¹ ‘Misstänks ha stött terrordåd’, *Gefle Dagblad*, May 11, 2006, <http://www.gd.se/gastrikland/gavle/misstanks-ha-stott-terrordad>; ‘Samlade mullan in terrorpengar?’, *Gefle Dagblad*, April 27, 2005, <http://www.gd.se/gastrikland/gavle/samlade-mullan-in-terrorpengar>; ‘Adnan från Gävle skadad i attentat i Irak’, *Gefle Dagblad*, February 7, 2004, <http://www.gd.se/gastrikland/gavle/adnan-fran-gavle-skadad-i-attentat-i-irak>

⁴⁷² ‘Abo Raad pekas ut som militanta islamismens ledare i Sverige’, *Gefle Dagblad*, September 10, 2015, <http://www.gd.se/gastrikland/gavle/abo-raad-pekast-ut-som-militanta-islamismens-ledare-i-sverige>

Ali Abdalla Al-Ganas, one of the officials in the mosques in Örebro and Gävle praised Swedish foreign fighters in social media that were killed in Syria.⁴⁷³ Ganas has been responsible for the youth activities Örebro and the salafist dawa group in Gävle.⁴⁷⁴ On his Facebook account, Al-Ganas posted graphics of the 'Islamic State passport' and a flight ticket to the Caliphate.⁴⁷⁵ Still, according to the security service there is no connection between extremism and the mosque as an institution.⁴⁷⁶

Two people from Eskilstuna are thought to have travelled to Syria, and at least one of them has returned. In addition, neighbouring Katrineholm is also believed to have at least one traveller.⁴⁷⁷ There have been recruitment activities in Eskilstuna, and local authorities successfully intervened to prevent four to five people from travelling to Syria.⁴⁷⁸ IS supporters have tried to stop preaching in one of the Eskilstuna mosques.⁴⁷⁹ According to the imam Abd al-Haqq Kielan at the Årby mosque in Eskilstuna, salafists have also tried to take over the board of the mosque. This occurred after the mosque received donation of six million

⁴⁷³ 'Gävlebo hyllar stupade IS-krigare', *Gefle Dagblad*, January 13, 2015, <http://www.gd.se/gastrikland/gavle/gavlebo-hyllar-stupade-is-krigare>

⁴⁷⁴ 'Gävlebo hyllar stupade IS-krigare', *Gefle Dagblad*, January 13, 2015, <http://www.gd.se/gastrikland/gavle/gavlebo-hyllar-stupade-is-krigare>; 'TV: Al Ganas om sin hyllning till IS-krigare', *Gefle Dagblad*, January 14, 2015, <http://www.gd.se/gastrikland/gavle/tv-al-ganas-om-sin-hyllning-till-is-krigare>; 'Ali Al-Ganas önskan: IS-pass och flygbiljett till "Kalifatet"', *Gefle Dagblad*, September 8, 2015, <http://www.gd.se/gastrikland/gavle/ali-al-ganas-onskan-is-pass-och-flygbiljett-till-kalifatet>; 'Gävles moské vill sprida extrem tolkning av islam', *Gefle Dagblad*, September 7, 2015, <http://www.gd.se/gastrikland/gavle/gavles-moske-vill-sprida-extrem-tolkning-av-islam>

⁴⁷⁵ 'Ali Al-Ganas önskan: IS-pass och flygbiljett till "Kalifatet"', *Gefle Dagblad*, September 8, 2015, <http://www.gd.se/gastrikland/gavle/ali-al-ganas-onskan-is-pass-och-flygbiljett-till-kalifatet>

⁴⁷⁶ 'Säpo: Inga kopplingar mellan extremism och Gävle Islamiska Center', *Gefle Dagblad*, October 13, 2015, <http://www.gd.se/gastrikland/gavle/sapo-inga-kopplingar-mellan-extremism-och-gavle-islamiska-center>

⁴⁷⁷ 'Sörmlänningar strider för IS', *Sveriges Television*, April 1, 2015, updated September 7, 2015, <http://www.svt.se/nyheter/lokalt/sormland/sormlanningar-strider-for-is>; 'Sörmlänningar krigar för IS', *Eskilstuna-Kuriren*, April 2, 2015, <http://www.ekuriren.se/nyheter/sormlanningar-krigar-for-is/>

⁴⁷⁸ 'Eskilstuna övertygar blivande IS-krigare om att inte åka', *Sveriges Television*, September 8, 2015, <http://www.svt.se/nyheter/lokalt/sormland/eskilstuna-overtalar-blivande-is-krigare-att-inte-aka>; 'Så fångar socialtjänsten i Eskilstuna upp unga IS-anhängare', *Sveriges Radio*, November 21, 2015, <http://sverigesradio.se/sida/artikel.aspx?programid=87&artikel=6307849>; 'Tillslag i Örebro – misstänkt terrorrekrytering', *Säkerhetspolisen*, June 1, 2015, <http://sakerhetspolisen.se/ovrigt/pressrum/aktuellt/aktuellt/2015-06-01-tillslag-i-orebro---misstankt-terrorrekrytering.html>

⁴⁷⁹ 'Imamen kämpar mot stadens extremister', *Gefle Dagblad*, July 1, 2015, <http://www.gd.se/gastrikland/gavle/imamen-kampar-mot-stadens-extremister>; 'Män hotade imam i Eskilstuna', *Sydsvenskan*, June 28, 2015, <http://www.sydsvenskan.se/2015-06-27/man-hotade-imam-i-eskilstuna>

Swedish kronor from Qatari residents, who also serves as board members in the Gävle and Örebro mosques.⁴⁸⁰

The 45-year-old man suspected of recruiting to Syria in Örebro was also active in the al-Rahman mosque in Eskilstuna and an imam at the Råby mosque in Västerås.⁴⁸¹ After the arrests, young Muslims said that what he was doing was “brainwashing”. A 21-year-old man threatened a local politician who in public warned about extremism; “fear for Allah” and “your actions is kufr”, the man stated.⁴⁸² The same man has also shown sympathy for IS in social media.⁴⁸³

At least two to three individuals have travelled from Norrköping, and at least one of them has died.⁴⁸⁴ One of the men from Norrköping travelled to Syria to study religion when he was 19.⁴⁸⁵ After having returned to Sweden he later travelled to Saudi Arabia for more religious studies. The Swedish Security Service suspected he wanted to go to Syria again and contacted him.⁴⁸⁶ In 2013, he joined the Islamic State and later moved to Mosul. The 26-year-old has previously saluted the Stockholm suicide bomber and stated that what he did was not something wrong since Sweden has troops in Afghanistan. The man died in airstrikes in March 2016 close to the city of Bajar in Iraq.⁴⁸⁷

In February 2016, a 17-year-old girl from Linköping was sentenced in Austria to twelve months in prison for trying to join the Islamic State.⁴⁸⁸

⁴⁸⁰ ‘Salafister anklagas för kupp mot Årbymoskén’, *Eskilstuna-Kuriren*, December 4, 2015, <http://www.ekuriren.se/nyheter/salafister-anklagas-for-kupp-mot-arbymosken/>; ‘Bokstavstroga har köpt inflytande i moskéerna i Örebro och Gävle’, *Sveriges Radio*, December 3, 2015, <http://sverigesradio.se/sida/artikel.aspx?programid=159&artikel=6317875>; ‘Är extremisterna på väg att ta över?’, *Eskilstuna-Kuriren*, April 25, 2015, <http://www.ekuriren.se/nyheter/ar-extremisterna-pa-vag-att-ta-over/>

⁴⁸¹ ‘Jimmy Jansson (S) kräver hårdare tag mot extrema islamister’, *Sveriges Radio*, June 10, 2015, <http://sverigesradio.se/sida/artikel.aspx?programid=87&artikel=6187114>; ‘Kan ha förekommit varvning’, *VLT*, June 3, 2015, <http://www.vlt.se/vastmanland/vasteras/kan-ha-forekommit-varvning>

⁴⁸² ‘Jag tar hoten på stort allvar’, *Eskilstuna-Kuriren*, June 15, 2015, <http://www.ekuriren.se/nyheter/jag-tar-hoten-pa-stort-allvar/>

⁴⁸³ ‘Styrelseledamot önskade seger åt Islamiska staten’, *Magnus Sandelin*, June 15, 2015, <https://www.magnussandelin.se/styrelseledamot-onskade-seger-at-islamiska-staten>

⁴⁸⁴ ‘Östgötar strider för IS i Syrien’, *Corren*, October 1, 2014, <http://www.corren.se/nyheter/norrkoping/ostgotarstrider-for-is-i-syrien-7387084.aspx>; ‘Norrköpingsbor tros ha anslutit sig till IS’, *Norrköpings Tidningar*, November 15, 2015, <http://www.nt.se/nyheter/norrkoping/norrkopingsbor-tros-ha-anslutit-sig-till-is-12251837.aspx>

⁴⁸⁵ ‘Säpo försökte stoppa 26-åringens terrorresa’, *Sveriges Radio*, April 15, 2016, <http://sverigesradio.se/sida/artikel.aspx?programid=160&artikel=6412458>

⁴⁸⁶ ‘Säpo försökte stoppa 26-åringens terrorresa’, *Sveriges Radio*, April 15, 2016, <http://sverigesradio.se/sida/artikel.aspx?programid=160&artikel=6412458>

⁴⁸⁷ ‘IS-krigare från Norrköping död’, *Norrköpings Tidningar*, April 15, 2016, <http://www.nt.se/nyheter/norrkoping/is-krigare-fran-norrkoping-dod-om4096315.aspx>

⁴⁸⁸ ‘Ett års fängelse för 17-åriga svenskan i Wien’, *Sveriges Television*, February 18, 2016, <http://www.svt.se/nyheter/utrikes/dom-mot-17-ariga-svenska-is-flickan-i-wien>

Citizenship and country of origin

Among the few people who travelled from Sweden to Afghanistan in the 1990's, there were people originating from the Horn of Africa and Northern Africa.⁴⁸⁹ The individuals involved in the Islamist environment in Sweden at the beginning of the 2000's originated from the Middle East and North Africa. There were also male and female converts and second-generation immigrants born in Sweden.⁴⁹⁰ Examining the data of foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq, 38 countries are represented when analysing country of birth, and most of the foreign fighters have at least one parent with country of birth outside of Sweden.⁴⁹¹ In this aspect, it is not a homogenous group but rather a multi-ethnic one.

Nevertheless, 75 percent of the foreign fighters are Swedish citizens, and 34 percent are born in Sweden. There are geographical concentrations to North Africa, the Horn of Africa and the Middle East, as was seen in the 1990's and 2000's. There are also numerous of individuals with a background in the Former Yugoslavia or Russia.⁴⁹²

The data includes information regarding 150 foreign fighters having immigrated to Sweden, and the majority did so in the 1990's and 2000's, and only ten to twenty immigrated before 1990. The average age for immigration is 16. There is a large span of how many years the immigrated foreign fighters have lived in Sweden before they travel to the conflict, and the average number of years before travel is 13.⁴⁹³

As the diagram below shows, there is a wide spread in how many years those who have immigrated have lived in Sweden before they make their first trip to Syria or Iraq. 19 percent have only been in Sweden for 0 to 4 years, and precisely as many have resided in Sweden for 20 to 24 years.⁴⁹⁴ The majority, 55 percent, have spent 5 to 19 years in Sweden.

⁴⁸⁹ 'SÄPO – Annual Report 2002', *Swedish Security Service*

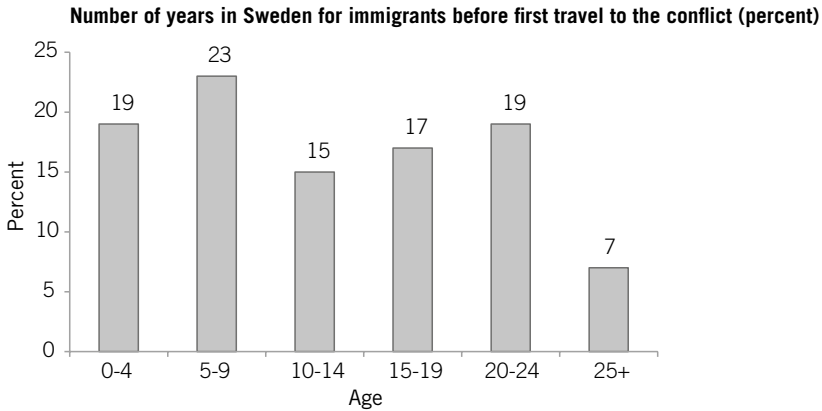
⁴⁹⁰ 'SÄPO – Annual Report 2003', *Swedish Security Service*

⁴⁹¹ The Security Service states that there are gaps regarding the information of the foreign fighters' country of origin

⁴⁹² Säkerhetspolisen (2017)

⁴⁹³ Säkerhetspolisen (2017)

⁴⁹⁴ Säkerhetspolisen (2017)



In the conflict area

There is not much information about what the Swedish foreign fighters have been up to in the conflict area. According to Lister, many new IS recruits begin with military and religious introduction, learning how to handle weapons and get fundamental tactical training.⁴⁹⁵ It is known that some of the Swedish foreign fighters previously have travelled to other conflicts abroad, and may in that case already have received training and gained experience.⁴⁹⁶

Swedish social media profiles indicate that several fighters from Sweden are clustered together in Syria.⁴⁹⁷ According to Iraqi media, a Swedish man named 'Abu Othman' was killed during a campaign against IS propaganda office in the Anbar province. Iraq's security service states that Othman was working with IS radio broadcasting.⁴⁹⁸ As mentioned before, some of the foreign fighters are very active in social media. One of the Swedish jihadi forums on Facebooks state the following while in Raqqa:

I would like to share my joy with you. In Raqqa, it is the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham that is governing. Mujahideen, muhajireen and ansar are in Raqqa and is witnessing something incredible. Raqqa is Syria's most modern city. It has many beautiful parts, which can remind you of Europe. A couple of months ago women walked around in the city wearing European clothing. People lived as they were living in Europe. You could find a woman walking

⁴⁹⁵ Lister (2015) p. 275

⁴⁹⁶ 'Utsatta områden – sociala risker, kollektiv förmåga och oönskade händelser', *Polismyndigheten*, December 2015, p. 37

⁴⁹⁷ Gustafsson, Linus (2015)

⁴⁹⁸ 'Svensk ansluten till IS uppges dödad i Irak', *Svenska Dagbladet*, July 14, 2015, <https://www.svd.se/svensk-ansluten-till-is-uppges-dodad-i-irak>

with a non-relative, and when asked they said they were study friends. In short, you can describe the city and their inhabitant as people far away from Islam. There are many Christians living in Raqqa. When IS took over the city, it decided to talk to the Christian leaders about their future in Raqqa. With Allah's mercy of the mujahideen, the brothers managed to establish the law of Allah on the earth. Twenty Christian leaders attended the meeting. By the help of Allah they followed Sunnah and offered the Christians to accept Islam and become Muslims. But the Christians did not accept Islam. Then IS told them to accept jiziyah. The Christians accepted jiziyah and that all women should cover themselves properly.⁴⁹⁹

The average time spent in the conflict area is 16 months, but there is great variation where some foreign fighters have been there for only a month and others several years. The average time spent for men is 16 months, while the average for women is 21 months.⁵⁰⁰

Some foreign fighters are associated with several terrorist groups, and about 80 percent are associated with IS. More than 30 percent are associated with Jabhat al-Nusra.⁵⁰¹ One of the Swedish IS men in Syria states the following on his Facebook, asserting that IS provides a sanctuary for genuine believers:

Asslamu alaykom. Islamic State I love you. Alhamdulillah, I have the honour of living in a real Islamic state. A state based on the practise of Allah's book and the Prophet's Sunnah. A state that gives Muslims security and safety. A state where you as a Muslim can practise your religion in public. I pray to Allah he let me and my brothers have the honour to reach shahadah as we are protecting the state. An advice to my friends: Why are you risking your life for something secular when you know that life is the most precious you have? You know that we love death and love seeing your blood flood. In general, we raise our children and youths to fight you, and show love to shahadah and the meeting with Allah. To you Muslims who hate us. Don't you have anything better to do than besmirch the Islamic state? In all debates about the state and all critique in the state, you never hear you say Allah said or the Prophet said. You are creating your thoughts and opinion from your perspective. Not from the perspective of Sharia. Have you ever thought about your situation? Look at your living, how much haram and kufr you see. But you take everything in ease. Living that way – humiliated and submissive, satisfies you. But you are dissatisfied with our establishment of Allah's law on earth and forbid what you see as common. It is embarrassing.⁵⁰²

⁴⁹⁹ Gustafsson (2015) p. 26

⁵⁰⁰ Säkerhetspolisen (2017)

⁵⁰¹ Säkerhetspolisen (2017)

⁵⁰² Gustafsson (2015) p. 30

Killed in conflict

At least 49 people from Sweden have died in Syria or Iraq, and very little is known of how they died. The data shows that there are no indications that a larger group of the Swedish foreign fighters has been killed in one single battle. Not more than three people have died during one month. The age of those who have died varies, and the average age when they left Sweden is 24. They have in average spent 12 months in Syria or Iraq before dying. 81 percent are from an exposed area, and 83 percent are Swedish citizens. About half of them are from the Västra Götaland region.⁵⁰³

In December 2014, three foreign fighters from Gothenburg died during US airstrikes in Iraq – one of them only 17 years old.⁵⁰⁴ Swedish foreign fighters have died in Idlib, and others during airstrikes in Raqqa, al-Ramadi and Kobane.⁵⁰⁵ Media reports indicate that up to ten Swedes got injured in and around Kobane in the fall of 2014.⁵⁰⁶

In April 2016, the US Army stated that two Swedish foreign fighters had been killed in two separate attacks in Iraq. One of them was 26-year-old Swedish-Bosnian 'Abu Zubary al-Bosni' from Norrköping. The other man was 'Khalid Osman Timayare', a.k.a. 'Abu Khalil al-Somali', from Gothenburg, whom the U.S. Army stated was "ISIL's deputy emir of the Anwar al-Awlaki Brigade"⁵⁰⁷. One of the leaders of Swedish Mujahedeen fi ash-Sham died in April 2013.⁵⁰⁸ However, the majority of those who have died travelled in 2012 and 2013.⁵⁰⁹

⁵⁰³ Säkerhetspolisen (2017)

⁵⁰⁴ 'Fler från Göteborg strider med IS', *Göteborgs-Posten*, January 4, 2015, <http://www.gp.se/nyheter/goteborg/fler-fran-goteborg-strider-med-is-1.40418>

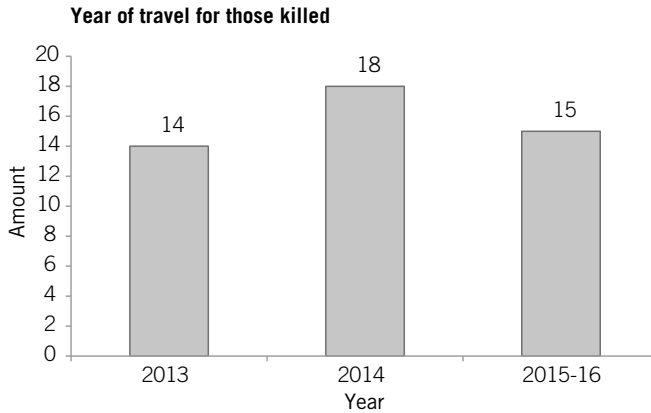
⁵⁰⁵ 'Göteborgare strider med IS', *Göteborgs-Posten*, October 12, 2014, <http://www.gp.se/nyheter/varlden/goteborgare-strider-med-is-1.244822>; 'Barndomsvänner från Göteborg strider i Syrien', *Göteborgs-Posten*, July 31, 2013, <http://www.gp.se/nyheter/goteborg/barndomsvanner-fran-goteborg-strider-i-syrien-1.568041>; 'Svensk IS-terrorist dödad i flygattack', *Expressen*, December 18, 2014, <http://www.expressen.se/nyheter/svensk-is-terrorist-dodad-i-flygattack/>

⁵⁰⁶ 'Partykillen Ahmed blev terrorist för IS', *Expressen*, December 20, 2014, <http://www.expressen.se/nyheter/partykillen-ahmed-blev-terrorist-for-is/>; 'Göteborgare dödad av amerikansk bomb', *Göteborgs-Posten*, October 30, 2014, <http://www.gp.se/nyheter/varlden/goteborgare-dodad-av-amerikansk-bomb-1.251917>

⁵⁰⁷ 'Coalition Kills 2 Foreign Fighters in Iraq, OIR Spokesman Says', *US Department of Defence*, April 7, 2016, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Article/Article/715735/coalition-kills-2-foreign-fighters-in-iraq-oir-spokesman-says>; 'Grupperna inom de svenska IS-krigarna', *Expressen*, April 28, 2016, <http://www.expressen.se/nyheter/grupperna-inom-de-svenska-is-krigarna/>

⁵⁰⁸ 'Barndomsvänner från Göteborg strider i Syrien', *Göteborgs-Posten*, July 31, 2013, <http://www.gp.se/nyheter/goteborg/barndomsvanner-fran-goteborg-strider-i-syrien-1.568041>

⁵⁰⁹ Säkerhetspolisen (2017)



Returnees

As mentioned before, some foreign fighters have travelled to Syria and Iraq back and forth. There are at least 138 return trips but 106 returnees in Sweden by September 2016. A majority of them (75 percent) are Swedish citizens and more than 50 percent have immigrated to Sweden.⁵¹⁰

A majority of the returnees are associated with IS.⁵¹¹ One of them is the 20-year-old son of the former al-Qaeda leader Mohammed Moumou. He was arrested by Turkish authorities in the fall of 2015 and suspected for involvement in the Islamic State. He claims he travelled to Syria to bring home his younger brother.⁵¹²

80 percent of the returnees are men and 20 percent are women. About one third are from Västra Götaland, one forth from Stockholm, one eighth from Örebro and one tenth from Skåne. 13 of the returnees travelled to the conflict in 2012, 45 in 2013, and 28 in 2014. 10 travelled in 2015 or 2016. The age varied when they travelled to the conflict. The average age is 28, but there is a span of 48 years between the youngest and the oldest. In average, the returnees have been in Syria and Iraq during eight months (which is a lot shorter than the average of the total).⁵¹³ What the returnees are occupied with upon their return to Sweden has not been studied. It is possible that some of them are returning to the Swedish Islamist extremist scene, having a higher status, and perhaps recruit others to go abroad to join terrorist organisations.

⁵¹⁰ Säkerhetspolisen (2017)

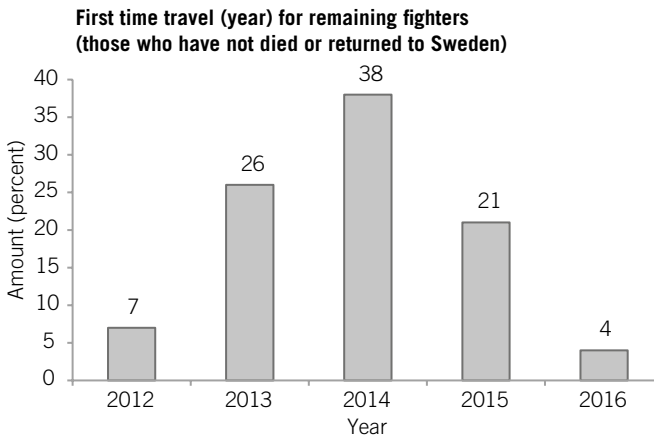
⁵¹¹ Säkerhetspolisen (2017)

⁵¹² 'Gripne svensken förnekar koppling till terrorister', *Dagens Nyheter*, December 30, 2015, <http://www.dn.se/nyheter/sverige/gripne-svensken-fornekar-koppling-till-terrorister/>

⁵¹³ Säkerhetspolisen (2017)

Those remaining

112 of the 267 foreign fighters have not died or returned, but decided to stay in Syria or Iraq. The average age when they travelled for the first time is 26. They have been in Syria and/or Iraq between six months up to four years, with an average of 26 months (the average in total is 16 months). What is very interesting is that when looking at those who stay in Syria and Iraq it is found that almost 40 percent of them are women. More than 70 percent of them are Swedish citizens, and almost 40 percent are born in Sweden. A majority of the remaining foreign fighters are associated with IS.⁵¹⁴



Social media

Many foreign fighters from Sweden in Syria and Iraq have been very active in social media. In 2015, one of the authors published a study on violent Islamist extremism in Sweden and social media. The following is a summary of some of the findings relating to Syria and Iraq.⁵¹⁵

People in Sweden have used Facebook as a tool and platform to spread propaganda from terrorist groups such as the Islamic State and al-Qaeda. Several Swedish-speaking forums have been established in relation to jihadism and the conflict in Syria and Iraq. They report “news” from the conflict, and state that “this is the truth”. In the summer of 2013, IS had to publish several videos acknowledging that jihad in Syria and Iraq was not a “five-star jihad”. The IS videos were a reaction to the many videos by fighters published on social media showing a glamorous life in the Caliphate.⁵¹⁶ Similarly, the Swedish foreign fighters published videos and photos of them fishing, eating candy and drinking soda.⁵¹⁷

⁵¹⁴ Säkerhetspolisen (2017)

⁵¹⁵ Gustafsson (2015)

⁵¹⁶ Neumann (2016) p. 128

⁵¹⁷ Gustafsson (2015)

IS logos and flags are published together with videos and photos from the conflict. The pamphlet “Get married and migrate to al-Sham” is spread in the forums. Another one is a rewrite of Adidas with the subtitle and acronym “All Day I Dream About Sharia”. The well-known British slogan “Keep calm and carry on” is revised to “Keep calm and love ISIS mujahideen”. Pictures and graphics of Bin Laden, al-Zarqawi, and al-Zawahiri are also posted. According to one of the major jihadi Facebook groups called *Sollentunas muslimer*, it is legitimate to kill:

One of the most common question people ask us here at “Sollentunas muslimer” is if it is legitimate to kill enemies, and where in the Koran you can read that we should kill our enemies. I want to start by stating a counter-question. What do you think Mohammed sallallahu aleyhi wa sallam and Sahaba radi Allahu ahum did with their enemies? Then you look up Sura al-Baqarah verse 191, where Allah says: “And kill them wherever you overtake them and expel them from wherever they have expelled you, and fitnah is worse than killing. And do not fight them at al-Masjid al-haram until they fight you there. But if they fight you, then kill them. Such is the recompense of the disbeliever.”⁵¹⁸

Information of the location of training camps is published, so has information of “martyrs” that have died in the conflict. One foreign fighter posted a picture of another Swedish foreign fighter and the text: “Latest martyr from Sweden in Syria, May Allah accept our beloved brother Abu Mohammed, he was much loved and will be missed much for his good spirits and the nesiha he used to give us. Ma Allah accept him, his blood smelled misk and his smile got bigger and bigger as closer we brought him to his grave...”

Injustices are reported from Syria showing the humanitarian situation, and hoping to elicit sympathy. One forum asks, “For how long are we going to be passive?” and linked to an article about a Syrian woman who had been raped. Another profile writes about perceived grievances:

Today, we live in a time where the Muslims are the targets. Muslims are slaughtered everywhere. All wars in the world today are against the Muslims. Our siblings are calling for help, but who is responding? Allah does not need me or you to be able to help someone in need. When Allah will ask you: what have you done for your Ummah, how have you helped them? How are you going to answer the question? Akho al Muslim, wake up and help your siblings before it falls upon you and you won't find someone helping you. May Allah give us Hidaya.

Another profile states, “I encourage all guys to do what I did and move from Sweden. Here you have the sea, beaches, and no tax!!!” The proclamation of the Caliphate received attention in Swedish social media, and people posted texts and graphic illustrations showing the ambition of the Islamic State. One profile posted a link to a new IS propaganda video and stating “IS awaited new video”. Later on, Swedish foreign fighters posted “successes” of IS. When IS did their major campaign into Mosul, the Swedish Facebook group *Ummah Nyheter* (Ummah News) stated:

⁵¹⁸ Gustafsson (2015)

*Happy news oh Muslims. IS has completely taken over the city of Mosul. Maliki sent two army brigades, but when hearing that Mosul had been freed from the Iraqi kuffar army they returned. The soldiers still in Mosul threw away their uniforms and escaped. Mosul is now completely in the hands of the Islamic State, Allah Akbar. The remaining Iraqi army weapons and other equipment is now in the hands of the Islamic State. New and fresh reports says that a new great offensive is aimed at another large city. This can only happen through the will of Allah Azawajals and mercy. Make duaa and may the Islamic State win! Allaho Akbar!*⁵¹⁹

Financing

As mentioned before, people resident in Sweden have financed terrorist groups abroad for decades. In respect to the foreign fighters, it has been difficult to prosecute people for financing their travel to Syria and Iraq. It is known that foreign fighters from Sweden have taken loans, been leasing cars, committed tax frauds and other crimes to finance their travels, and in many cases these activities are recognized only after the foreign fighters have left the country and are on their way to Syria.⁵²⁰

The Security Service have had investigations on people suspected of financing terrorism that later has been sentenced for economic crimes rather than terrorism financing.⁵²¹ In February 2015, Swedish Economic Crime Authority and the Police arrested four people suspected for money-laundering and other economic crimes. The prosecutor also suspected the group of having sent money to Syria and the Islamic State.⁵²² In the spring 2016, the Swedish Tax Agency had 61 investigations including 77 people connected with terrorism networks, and another 16 cases had

⁵¹⁹ Gustafsson (2015)

⁵²⁰ 'Sms-lån och billeasing finansierar terrorresor', *Säkerhetspolisen*, June 22, 2015, <http://sakerhetspolisen.se/ovrigt/pressrum/aktuellt/aktuellt/2015-06-22-sms-lan-och-billeasing-finansierar-terrorresor.html>; 'Lån och bedrägerier finansierar terrorresor', *Sveriges Radio*, June 22, 2015, <http://sverigesradio.se/sida/artikel.aspx?programid=159&artikel=6195058>

⁵²¹ 'Häktningsförhandlingar i uppmärksammat ärende', *Ekobrottsmyndigheten*, February 20, 2015, <https://www.ekobrottsmyndigheten.se/press/nyheter/2015/2/haktningsforhandlingar-i-uppmarksammat-arendel/>; 'Misstänkt terrorfinansiering utreds', *Säkerhetspolisen*, February 19, 2015, <http://sakerhetspolisen.se/ovrigt/pressrum/aktuellt/aktuellt/2015-02-19-misstankt-terrorfinansiering-utreds.html>

⁵²² 'Tillslag mot misstänkta IS-finansiärer', *Sveriges Television*, February 17, 2015, <http://www.svt.se/nyheter/inrikes/tillslag-mot-misstankta-is-finansiarer>; 'Razzia mot misstänkta svenska IS-finansiärer', *Expressen*, February 18, 2015, <http://www.expressen.se/nyheter/razzia-mot-misstankta-svenska-is-finansiarer/>; 'Tillslag mot misstänkta IS-finansiärer i Sverige', *Dagens Nyheter*, February 17, 2015, <http://www.dn.se/nyheter/sverige/tillslag-mot-misstankta-is-finansiarer-i-sverige/>; 'Större tillslag rörande svart arbetskraft och penningtvätt', *Ekobrottsmyndigheten*, February 17, 2015, <https://www.ekobrottsmyndigheten.se/press/nyheter/2015/2/storre-tillslag-rorande-svart-arbetskraft-och-penningtvatt/>

been closed.⁵²³ In February 2017, the Swedish Prosecution Authority managed to show enough reliable evidence to sentence Ahmad Qadan, a.k.a 'Ahmed Bin Sultan', to 6 months in prison for inciting people on Facebook to transfer money to an account with the purpose of financing IS and Jabhat al-Nusra.⁵²⁴ Qadan had previously collected money in Norway together with one of the leading Norwegian Islamists Mohyeldeen Mohammad. Mohammad later travelled to Syria.⁵²⁵

IS supporters have also collected money in Swedish jihadi Facebook forums to buy ambulances. The ambulances have later been driven to Syria.⁵²⁶ How much money has been transferred to terrorist groups abroad from residents and businesses in Sweden is unknown. There are also foreign fighters that have committed serious economic crimes prior to travelling to Syria. One case concerns a 20-year-old man from Stockholm who was engaged in importing cell phones from Latvia for 24 million Swedish kronor and later sold it for 28 million – without paying any VAT. He later unregistered himself in Sweden and left the country.⁵²⁷

In June 2014, Lebanese intelligence arrested 50-year-old Ihab Hallak from Stockholm accused of supporting Jabhat al-Nusra. Hallak admitted he had collected up to \$100,000 (870,000 SEK) in a Stockholm mosque and sent it to Jabhat al-Nusra. Hallak was later released in a prisoner exchange of al-Nusra members and 16 Lebanese soldiers. Hallak said he had been working for the charity organisation Islamic Relief but the organisation claims he never worked for them. When searching Hallak's apartment, the agencies found hand grenades, Kalashnikovs, a pistol and ammunition.⁵²⁸ In a public statement, the mosques spokesperson states that Hallak did not collect money in the mosque.⁵²⁹

⁵²³ 'Al Capone-modellen används mot extremister', *Dagens Nyheter*, April 11, 2016, <http://www.dn.se/nyheter/sverige/al-capone-modellen-anvands-mot-extremister/>

⁵²⁴ Dom B10658-15, *Malmö tingsrätt*, February 23, 2017

⁵²⁵ 'Abu Raad samlar in till Syrien', *Gudmundson*, December 14, 2012, <http://gudmundson.blogspot.se/2012/12/abu-raad-samlar-in-till-syrien.html>; 'Her poserer Mohyeldeen Mohammad med vapen', *VG*, October 15, 2012, <http://www.vg.no/nyheter/utenriks/her-poserer-mohyeldeen-mohammad-med-vaapen/a/10054469/>

⁵²⁶ Gustafsson (2015) pp. 38–39

⁵²⁷ 'Gripen svensk inblandad i skattehärva', *Expressen*, January 1, 2016, <http://www.expressen.se/nyheter/gripen-svensk-inblandad-i-skatteharva/>

⁵²⁸ 'Här fick han in 870 000 kr till terrorgruppen', *Expressen*, December 5, 2015, <http://www.expressen.se/nyheter/har-fick-han-in-870-000-kr-till-terrorgruppen/>

⁵²⁹ 'Felcitat och inkorrekt information om Islamic Relief och Stockholms Moské', *Islamiska förbundet, Stockholms moské*, December 5, 2015, <http://www.stockholmsmoske.se/felcitat-och-inkorrekt-information-om-islamic-relief-och-stockholms-moske/>

7. Summary findings

The conflict in Syria and Iraq has resulted in an increase in the number of violent Islamist extremists in Sweden, and a significant increase of people from Sweden travelling to join terrorist groups abroad. Since 2012 it is estimated that about 300 people from Sweden have travelled to Syria and Iraq to join terrorist groups such as the Islamic State (IS) and al-Qaeda affiliated groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra. Even though the foreign fighter issue has been on the political agenda for several years and received considerable media attention, very little is known about the Swedish contingent.

The purpose of this study was to examine a set of variables of the foreign fighters that have travelled from Sweden to join jihadi terrorist groups in Syria and Iraq in the period of June 2012 to September 2016. Much of the statistical data analysed have been declassified and provided by the Swedish Security Service. The variables examined are: time of travel; age; gender; geographical concentration in Sweden; citizenship and country of origin; average time spent in the conflict area; numbers of individuals killed; number of returnees; number of fighters remaining in the conflict area; social media activities; and the financing of foreign fighters. The analysis includes 267 people that are or have been residents of Sweden.

36 people (first-time travellers) travelled to Syria or Iraq in 2012, 98 in 2013, 78 in 2014, 36 in 2015, and 5 in 2016. In addition, some of the foreign fighters have travelled back and forth between the conflict area and Sweden. About 80 percent are associated with IS, and more than 30 percent are associated with Jabhat al-Nusra.

76 percent of the foreign fighters are men and 24 percent are women. The amount of women has significantly changed during the period, from “a few” in 2012 to 18 percent in 2013, and constituting about 40 percent of the foreign fighters in the conflict area in 2014 and 2015.

The average age of the foreign fighters is 26, and there are no significant differences between the average age of men and women. Still, there is a great variation indicating there are very young travellers but also older ones, as the age ranges in a span of 50 years. 18 percent of the travellers (45 people) are 19 or younger, while about 60 percent (154 people) are between the ages of 20 to 29. Very few people above the age of forty seem to travel. The average age does not change over the period.

A majority of the foreign fighters, an estimated 80 percent, come from four of Sweden's 21 counties – Västra Götaland, Stockholm, Skåne and Örebro. About one third of the foreign fighters are, or have been, registered in Västra Götaland County, one quarter in Stockholm County, and a tenth in Örebro County and a tenth in Skåne County. More than seventy percent have been residents of an exposed area (socially deprived areas hit by high criminality and low socio-economic status). There is information that there have been recruiters in some of the areas, but social media may also have played a role in the mobilisation of foreign fighters.

75 percent of the foreign fighters are Swedish citizens, and 34 percent are born in Sweden. There are geographical concentrations to North Africa, the Horn of Africa and the Middle East, as was seen in the 1990's and 2000's. There are also concentrations to the Former Yugoslavia and Russia. 38 countries are represented when analysing country of birth, and most of the foreign fighters have at least one parent with country of birth outside of Sweden

The average time spent in the conflict area is 16 months, but there is great variation where some foreign fighters have been there for only a month and others for several years. The average time spent for men is 16 months, while the average for women is 21 months.

At least 49 people from Sweden have died in Syria or Iraq. All of them are men. The data shows that there are no indications that a larger group of the Swedish foreign fighters has been killed in one single battle. Not more than three people have died during a single month. About half of those who have died are from the Västra Götaland region.

As of September 2016, 106 foreign fighters (40 percent) had returned to Sweden, while 112 (42 percent) were still in Syria or Iraq. It is estimated that 49 of the 267 (18 percent) have died in the conflict.

8. Reflections and preliminary lessons

One of the most significant findings in this study is the concentration of foreign fighters in exposed (segregated) areas. The next logical question to ask would be *why* there is such a concentration of foreign fighters from these areas. One answer may be that there is a high concentration of people coming from Muslim-majority countries which to a greater extent may be more attracted to the conflict and the Islamic State. It is evident that some of these areas have previous experiences with Salafism and violent extremism, which may be a significant parameter inducing individuals to travel to Syria and Iraq. It is clear socioeconomic aspects are contributing factors alongside group- and peer influences, ideological factors and local recruitment drives. While there is a correlation between exposed areas and foreign fighters the numbers are still relatively limited considering that there are many more that may be attracted to extremism but do not decide to travel to Syria or Iraq.

The reality so far indicates that very few of the returnees intend to commit terrorist acts in Sweden or Europe, in that their focus is primarily aimed at the conflict in Syria and Iraq. Important to say is that both the Islamic State and al-Qaeda affiliated groups have officially declared that Europe is a legitimate target, so that it cannot be excluded that future terrorist plots will involve returnees loyal to these organisations and movements. As some of the larger attacks in Paris, Brussels and Manchester illustrate there are instances that some terrorist attacks in Europe involve foreign fighter returnees.

The experience of foreign fighters from the conflict areas may include weapons and bomb-making training, combat experience, further indoctrination, recruitment of operatives and supporters and involvement in a broader international network of jihadi terrorists. Since law enforcement have difficulties in prosecuting the foreign fighters when they return to Sweden, some of them have the possibility to actually strengthen their support networks in Sweden and recruit more people to the extremist scene, online and through direct contact.

Time will tell how the returnees will affect the Islamist environment in Sweden. There are people from Sweden who have been fighting with Peshmerga forces *against* the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq as well. Returning IS and Peshmerga fighters may continue their conflict in Sweden that may lead to an increase in violence. There are already indications of violent sectarian conflicts within Swedish society, pitting groups against each other such as Sunni-Shia, Sunni-Kurds, etc. With more returning IS affiliates in Sweden it is likely that there will be more reactions by the right-wing extremist movement in the future.

When looking at the organisation, mobilisation and salafi and jihadi activism in Western Europe, it is striking that Sweden has not yet seen much activities of organisations that mobilises salafists and jihadists to a greater extent. In Norway, The Prophet's Ummah has played a role, and there are similar organisations in Denmark (Kaldet til Islam), Germany (Millatu Ibrahim), the Netherlands (Sharia4Holland), Belgium (Sharia4Belgium), the United Kingdom (Islam4UK and al-Muhajiroun), and France (Fursan Alizza and Sharia4France), to name a few. The discrepancy does not seem to lie in different legislation or that it is more difficult to organise oneself through political and social activities in a legal manner. The tendency is rather that the organisation in Sweden seems to be network-based and quite loosely organised, where the foreign fighters and IS supporters do not engage in public activism. Why the salafist scene in Sweden differs from other countries is unknown. It may be that they find the operating environment conducive and do not want to flag their activities. It is possible that there is a salafist scene that is organized in a different way. Instead of having one organisation it is perhaps spread among several associations, congregations and foundations in a more covert way. However, there are no publicly available studies on this subject.

If history is an indication, the flow of foreign fighters from Sweden and elsewhere will remain, and conflicts abroad will in the future continue to attract people for different reasons. The future will tell who they are and where they go, but the authors' hope is that this study will be used as a baseline to compare potential future waves of foreign fighters in order to examine empirical similarities and differences.

Research into these salafist milieus and influences have not been conducted by the Swedish academic community and much remains to be explored in relation to the hierarchies, networks and the dynamics of these radical salafi-jihadist milieus. The mechanisms of these transnational networks need to be further explored how Swedish milieus and radical individuals interact outside the country and vice versa how the international networks and dynamics influence the Swedish radical contingents.

9. Further research

Socioeconomic factors such as level of education, employment rate, income level including household income, and different levels of analysis including individual psychosocial and socioeconomic contexts in smaller geographical areas with concentrations of foreign fighters might further help in explaining potential factors causing violent extremism. In understanding individual motives *why* people travel to Syria and Iraq it is necessary to interview foreign fighters, their friends, relatives, and professionals that have had contact with them before or after travel. While access to these violent extremists is notoriously difficult, other field research efforts have proved it is possible to reach some foreign fighters. It is the combination of reliable biographical work combined with details gathered from intelligence, police and investigations that can provide a fuller picture of the underlying individual and collective drivers at work *why* some foreign fighters are radicalised and involve themselves fully in these extremist groups.

There are many interesting questions unanswered. How many of the foreign fighters have a criminal record and are engaged in serious and organised crime, and criminal gangs? Upon return, are they still involved in criminal activities? According to Europol's assessment of IS terrorists from the EU, "[...] a large proportion of recruits have criminal records varying from petty crimes to more serious offenses."⁵³⁰ By July 2016, 816 individuals have been reported to Europol both for involvement in serious and organised crime and terrorism-related offences, and "67% of the suspects reported for terrorism in the first six months of 2016 with links to serious and/organised crime were reported as foreign fighters (539 out of 816)."⁵³¹ It is still unknown how many of the foreign fighters from Sweden have a criminal record. However, criminal record per se may not be the most

⁵³⁰ 'Changes in modus operandi of Islamic State terrorist attacks', *Europol*, January 2016

⁵³¹ 'Changes in modus operandi of Islamic State (IS) revisited', *Europol*, November 2016

interesting variable without knowing what types of crimes are committed. Are the foreign fighters involved in violent crimes and assaults, hate crimes, property crimes, white-collar crime? How many of the crimes are ideologically motivated? According to the national police's intelligence unit, some of the foreign fighters from Sweden have committed crimes involving narcotics, violent crimes, weapons crime, and other forms.⁵³²

How many foreign fighters have issues of mental health issues before and/or after travelling to conflict area, and how does it affect their behaviour? Are there any particular syndromes or diagnoses represented? Does it differ from the population at large? According to Europol, "a significant portion of foreign fighters have been diagnosed with mental problems prior to joining IS."⁵³³ Added to these are often complex asocial psychological issues such as low-impulse control, no or little empathy or conflict management skills. How do these psychological background factors impact actual involvement in these groups?

How important are social networks in radicalisation and recruitment? Both the Netherlands and Belgium have reported that "individuals were called upon by friends, family or acquaintances already in Syria to join them, which they subsequently did" and that "family members who are already in Syria do everything they can to persuade others to join them."⁵³⁴

There is very little written about the Islamist extremism milieu and social networks in Sweden. How many supporters and sympathizers to IS and al-Qaeda affiliated groups are there? If there is a social network, what is the glue that holds them together? Is it ideology and belief; or identity issues; fellowship, community and leadership; or counterculture, rebellion and hatred or solidarity? What is pushing them into these extremist environments, and what in the environment is pulling and attracting them to these subcultures?

Are there any differences between the members of the milieu and the foreign fighters? What are the differences? What makes people in radicalised milieus reluctant or resistant not to go to Syria and Iraq? Are there any significant variables holding them back? What are the gender dimensions involved that explain motivations? What are the impact on children growing up and living under IS-controlled territory?

How are the foreign fighters' microfinancing themselves and what does the financial dimensions look like within these extremist networks? How are these financial dimensions interlinked with criminal schemes? What are the trends of terror finance within extremist networks and how is finance transferred into and out of Sweden? Previous Swedish Defence University studies show that there is a

⁵³² 'Terrormisstänkta kopplas till andra brott', *Sveriges Radio*, March 31, 2016, <http://sverigesradio.se/sida/artikel.aspx?programid=83&artikel=6397188>

⁵³³ 'Changes in modus operandi of Islamic State terrorist attacks', *Europol*, January 2016

⁵³⁴ 'European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2016', *Europol*, p. 28

mixture of funding from social benefit fraud, VAT and bankloan fraud, student aid and humanitarian collection. More studies needs to be conducted on how these criminal enterprises change over time.

There are many unanswered questions to explore for both the intelligence community and the academic community. This study has contributed to a piece of the puzzle in understanding both the context and the detail surrounding Swedish foreign fighter contingent as well as the broader extremist milieus. Much more needs to be studied to better understand the salafi-jihadi extremist ecosystem and how it works and its internal dynamics.

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Appendix 1. Exposed areas

Particularly exposed areas

1. Vivalla, Örebro
2. Hallunda/Norsborg, Botkyrka (Norra Botkyrka)
3. Husby, Stockholm
4. Ronna/Geneta/Lina, Södertälje
5. Rinkeby/Tensta, Stockholm
6. Araby, Växjö
7. Rosengård söder om Amiralsgatan, Malmö
8. Södra Sofielund (Seved), Malmö
9. Bergsjön, Göteborg
10. Biskopsgården, Göteborg
11. Gårdsten, Göteborg
12. Hammarkullen, Göteborg
13. Hjällbo, Göteborg
14. Lövgärdet, Göteborg
15. Skäggetorp, Linköping

Risk areas

16. Oxhagen/Varberga, Örebro
17. Tjärna Ängar, Borlänge
18. Alby/Fittja, Botkyrka
19. Tureberg, Sollentuna
20. Adolfsberg/Dalhem/Drottninghög, Helsingborg
21. Hässleholmen/Hulta, Borås

Exposed areas

22. Bäckby, Västerås
23. Gottsunda/Valsätra, Uppsala
24. Brandbergen, Haninge
25. Bredäng, Stockholm
26. Edsberg, Sollentuna
27. Finnsta, Upplands Väsby
28. Fornhöjden, Södertälje
29. Hagsätra/Rågsved, Stockholm
30. Hovsjö, Södertälje
31. Hässelby/Vällingby, Stockholm
32. Rissne/Hallonbergen, Sundbyberg
33. Skogås, Huddinge
34. Smedby, Upplands Väsby
35. Sångvägen, Järfälla
36. Termovägen, Järfälla
37. Älvsjö/Solberga, Stockholm
38. Östberga, Stockholm
39. Charlottesborg, Kristianstad
40. Gamlegården, Kristianstad
41. Holma/Kroksbäck/Bellevue, Malmö
42. Koppargården, Landskrona
43. Andersberg, Halmstad
44. Falkagård, Falkenberg
45. Hisings Backa, Göteborg
46. Kronogården, Trollhättan
47. Rannebergen, Göteborg
48. Tynnered/Grevgården/Opaltorget, Västra Frölunda
49. Fröslunda, Eskilstuna
50. Hageby, Norrköping
51. Lagersberg, Eskilstuna
52. Råslätt, Jönköping
53. Skiftinge, Eskilstuna

Swedish Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq

An Analysis of open-source intelligence and statistical data

In this ground-breaking study, Linus Gustafsson and Dr. Magnus Ranstorp are exploring the phenomenon of Swedish foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq by analysing unique information provided by the Swedish Security Service. The aim is to fill empirical gaps and understand the Swedish foreign fighter contingent by analysing set variables in the period of 2012 to 2016.

The study examine a set of variables of the foreign fighters that have travelled from Sweden to join jihadi terrorist groups in Syria and Iraq in the period of June 2012 to September 2016. The analysis includes 267 people that are, or have been, residents of Sweden.

The study shows that 76 percent of the foreign fighters are men, 24 percent are women and that the average age of the foreign fighters are 26. 18 percent of the travellers are 19 years old or younger.

Further, a majority of the foreign fighters come from four of Sweden's 21 counties – Västra Götaland, Stockholm, Skåne and Örebro. More than seventy percent have been residents of an exposed area. Finally, 75 percent of the foreign fighters are Swedish citizens, and 34 percent are born in Sweden.

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