What Makes A Foreign Fighter?
Radicalisation and Extremism in Belgium

Michael Depuydt[1]

Abstract

This article aims to explore the complex issue of what „makes" a foreign fighter: the origins, the key characteristics, the factors that push one away from one's home country and towards, in the case examined in this article, the Islamic State. Stripping away distorted narratives and political discourse, the article attempts to outline the core of the radicalisation process within the Belgian context based on an overview of available sources. To reach a baseline of understanding as to why Belgian foreign fighters are disproportionately represented among Islamic State combatants, the article delves into the history of Islam in Belgium. This is necessary to be able to trace the processes that led to the contemporary situation. The article subsequently offers a discussion of the elusive profile of aspiring jihadist recruits.

Keywords: foreign fighters, radicalisation, Salafism, Belgium

Introduction

It is not in the scope of this work to lay out the academic debate on how to disentangle the ambiguous, ill-defined and complex concept of radicalisation.

For the purpose of clarity let it be stated that „radical" is a relative term, positioned in relation to mainstream political ideologies. Radicalism is thus understood – in a succint definition I would offer here – as striving for a break with the current order for political, economic or religious motivations. Processes like radicalisation have led to political violence and terrorism in the past, and Belgians have volunteered for foreign wars before.

[1] Michael Depuydt is an International Relations Expert. He holds a Bachelor of Arts in International Relations from Corvinus University and is currently a postgraduate student in Conflict, Security and Development at King`s College London.

It is with these parametres in mind that one needs to study the historical background of the present foreign fighter mobilisation in Belgium for service on the side of the Islamic State.

The historical background

The wave of Europeans in foreign battlefields that started in the 1980s did attract an unknown number of Belgian volunteers to fight in Afghanistan, in the Bosnian and Algerian civil wars, and finally in Iraq. Clandestine cells in Belgium have facilitated the journey of volunteers to the Afghan-Pakistan border since the early 2000s. For example, the perpetrators of the assassination of Commander Ahmed Shah Massoud[2] in Afghanistan on the eve of 9/11 originated from Belgium (Coolsaet, 2015).

However, Islamic radicalism specifically, in the form of ultra-conservative Salafism, has been spread by Saudi-Arabia for more than half a century. Even in Belgium, Saudi-Arabia sees it as its moral and political duty to spread this interpretation of Islam. Saudi diplomats have held sway over the Islamic Cultural Centre (ICC) since the 1960s (Benyaich, 2015). This body was considered the „representative of Muslims in Belgium" and its direct influence was measurable throughout the '70s, '80s and '90s (Benyaich, 2015). This ICC appointed hundreds of Wahhabi imams and teachers, and although control over this key role was stripped from Saudi emissaries in the late 1980s and given into the hands of Belgian Muslims, the effects are manifest up to the present.

For further reading on the historical background of radicalisation and foreign fighters in Belgium I recommend the work of Rik Coolsaet, both the edite volume „Jihadi Terrorism and the Radicalisation Challenge" (2011) and his standalone research papers such as „Facing the fourth foreign fighters wave: what drives Europeans to Syria, and to IS? Insights from the Belgian case" (2015). The Dutch General Intelligence and Security Service has published work on the changing profiles of Dutch and Belgian foreign fighters (2014), as have Edwin Bakker and Roel de Bont (2016). For a broader picture of the composition of foreign fighters in Europe I recommend the work of Van Ginkel and Entenmann (2016). For an introduction to the Belgian context that serves both political scientists, policymakers and those interested in counterterrorism Benyaich's „*#radicalisme #extremisme #terrorisme*" (2015) proves very useful. This aricle will make frequent references to these works.

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[2] The commander of „Northern Alliance" (a.k.a. „United Islamic Front for the Salvation of Afghanistan") forces opposing the Taliban at the time.

The current wave of foreign fighters

In the past decade, the Belgian jihadi scene was in a gridlock. A few networks were discovered and their members arrested – the local jihadist scene consisted only of these small, isolated, and largely invisible networks (General Intelligence and Security Service, 2014). The known number of Belgian foreign fighters was consistently between no more than 10 to 15 people, the number of willing candidates for departure was low, and even amongst those with such aspirations the success rate was minimal.

However, shortly thereafter this impasse ended, and Syria became a new magnet for foreign fighters. Activist groups of aspiring jihadists rose to the forefront attracting a large amount of media attention. They heralded, as Benyaich describes (2015: 20), a „new phase:"

> „For the first time youngsters that were born and raised in Belgium publicly and shamelessly exalted the holy war, martyrdom and the 'Islamisation of the West'. It was a small clique of reborn, converted or strictly religious Belgian Muslim young people – most of whom were second or third generation. Suddenly the number of people that openly raved about the jihad were a multitude of the number of actual jihadists."

The import of Saudi Salafism, the decades-long lack of supervision or monitoring of radical voices among the imams and teachers appointed in Muslim communities, and the media hype over terrorism trials in the 2000s: all these factors formed the „tinder," and with the „spark" of the Syrian crisis the idea of jihadism (be it in a celebratory or actual participatory role) spread like wildfire amongst a new generation of youngsters.

A key and striking difference between this generation and its forerunners is the suddenness, speed and scale of their departure. The Dutch General Intelligence and Security Service (2014: 24) compares it to other contemporary mass social phenomena, where an online hype can trigger a rapid mobilisation with an eventual impact offline. It is aptly described as:

> „A swarm, highly decentralised with numerous individual and largely autonomous elements that collectively however maintain a cohesion and direction (…) in the absence of a strong hierarchy and leadership structure, the main driving force within the movement is horizontal influence by friends, relatives, neighbours and other like-minded individuals in both the online and offline world."

Major networks

While the networks, or network-elements, do act autonomously, that is not to say that they are unconnected. In the mosques of Brussels and Antwerp, underground networks have formed around key figures with experience in the jihadi scene, entrapping eager or vulnerable recruits into a process of radicalisation. Two major uncovered networks were that of Sharia4Belgium and the one organised around Khalid Zerkani (Van Vlierden, 2016). These are best described by juxtaposition.

Sharia4Belgium has always been considered the most significant (and definitely the most mediatised) factor in explaining the radicalisation of Belgian foreign fighters. The number of fighters linked to this group is estimated to be up to 80, out of a total of up to 589. The Zerkani network is, however, in a close second position, with at least 59 recruits who departed to Syria and Iraq under their guidance (Van Vlierden, 2016). Despite three of these recruits playing a direct role in Europe's latest terrorist attacks (Abdelhamid Abaaoud and Chakib Akrouh were perpetrators of the Paris attacks, while Najim Laachraoui made bombs and participated in the attack at Brussels airport), this network was still largely unknown as late as in 2015.

This is perhaps the most striking difference between the two networks, the well-known Sharia4Belgium with its public demonstrations and its leader Fouad Belkacem regularly participating in debates and receiving media attention for his condemnation of what he calls „kafir" Belgian politicians. The most renowned recruit of the group is perhaps Jejoen Bontinck, whose story was widely discussed in the media.[3]

The mostly Dutch-speaking organisation is an off-shoot of the Islam4UK movement, and had no ties to other radical networks or the older Belgian jihadi scene. For a long time it was considered an outspoken yet relatively harmless group that relied on rhetoric rather than violence, yet it still managed to recruit, radicalise and transfer a substantial number of would-be foreign fighters.

By contrast, there is the Zerkani network, an opaque French-speaking underground gang based in Brussels. Khalid Zerkani, a 42-year-old Moroccan based in Molenbeek, found potential recruits under the guise of community sports activities (Van Vlierden, 2016). His network has no specific name, no logo and no website, nor does he

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[3] Jejoen Bontinck is a Muslim convert who was recruited into Sharia4Belgium and departed for Syria at the age of 18. He returned disillusioned after 8 months and was given a suspended sentence. His former appearance on a TV talent show and his father's sensationalist yet unsuccessful quest to track him down in Syria led to wide coverage of this story.

hold public demonstrations. Members committed petty theft to fund their future travels and radicalised behind closed doors. When it finally came to light, the network proved to be the most dangerous jihadist organisation in Belgium. While these organisations were not entirely separated, there is evidence of harder elements of Sharia4Belgium slowly merging with the group into a tangled web or conglomerate.

Categories of foreign fighters

It is hard to list general characteristics of foreign fighters but most are male, between 18 and 35 years old, with an average age of 25.7 years, although 15-20 year-olds are far from being exceptions (Van Ginkel & Entenmann, 2015). In fact, this younger group is more substantial than in the previous generation of foreign fighters, and is overrepresented in certain categories of foreign fighters. They often have Moroccan roots and are second or third generation immigrants. The vast majority of them come from urban areas, specifically within the Flemish or Brussels regions, rather than Wallonia (Van Ginkel & Entenmann, 2016). There is no single profile of a European foreign fighter. In the case of Western Europe, beyond prison populations and badly integrated migrant youths, it is difficult to identify specific vulnerable individuals and groups (Schmid, 2013).

The causes that have led to their engagement are diverse, however they all eagerly use the Salafist framework and vocabulary to legitimise their behaviour because of its simplicity and absolutism. There are a multitude of subdivisions and categories by various scholars which cannot be outlined here so let me strongly advocate the work of Benyaich for a useful categorisation. It reflects the characteristics and behavioural patterns of modern foreign fighters and openly acknowledges that these categories are elastic. This „jihad elasticity," as Benyaich (2015) calls it, is twofold: on the one hand it refers to the fuzzy lines between categories such as the „loser," the „herd animal" and the „romantic" as they all involve impressionable young men seeking meaning and approval. At the same time, hardcore jihadis may have an opportunistic or glory-seeking motivation that is essential to the categories of „opportunist" and the „romantic." On the other hand, Benyaich's concept also refers to how each category responds differently, i.e. more or less, to deradicalisation programmes. Although the point made here is clear and widely recognized, it is still not reflected enough in policy measures: just as there is no single cause, there is no single profile and there is no single deradicalisation solution.

In terms of the aforementioned jihad elasticity, certain profiles are very elastic (Benyaich, 2015). They respond strongly to preventive and repressive measures. In this

part of the spectrum early detection, guidance and reprimands/punishment can truly make a difference. Foreign fighters who correlate more with the hardcore jihadi type have been socialised in the Salafist framework from an early age and have internalised its teachings to such a degree that deradicalisation would be at the very least much harder and in all probability impossible.

Jihadi brides: The peculiar role of women

So far this article has not covered the role of women among European youth joining the Islamic State. Despite being overlooked in much of the academic literature, an average of 17% of EU foreign fighters are female and the number of converts within that group range from 6 to 23% (Van Ginkel & Entenmann, 2016). Perhaps exactly because of the influence of Western society, their role has increased compared to previous generations, and women are being used especially more and more as recruiting agents.

Vranckx (2015: 149-150) offers a well-documented case of how such recruitment works: In 2012, a 21 year-old Dutch girl, Rosliana Geerman marries an Algerian man and converts to Islam. She starts liking ISIS-related posts on Facebook and gradually engages in contact with Belgian foreign fighters living in Syria. She also starts reaching out to other young Muslim girls interested in the events in Syria. Messages get passed along, describing how great it is to be there, how everyone has access to all they need, including pools and mansions, and that one can do whatever one wants. Eventually she convinces two girls from Antwerp to attempt to leave for Syria. 17 year-old Jessy and 18 year-old Hakima are intercepted just in time. (The girls were placed into juvenile detention and a governmental institution for youth protection. Geerman was arrested.)

This is reminiscent of the pictures of the two Austrian girls, Samra (16) and Sabina (15), on social media – veiled, yet armed with Kalashnikovs. They had left their homes in Vienna in 2014, leaving a note for the parents that read: „Do not look for us. We will serve Allah and we will die for him" (Dearden, 2015). Poster girls of the Islamic State, the Salafist equivalent of the „We Can Do It" WWII propaganda in the United States. By now it is believed that one has been killed in combat while the other was caught several times trying to flee from the Islamic State, following her friend's death, upon which she was raped repeatedly. She was subsequently offered as a sexual present to newly arriving fighters until she was finally beaten to death with a hammer (Dearden, 2015).

There are effective on-and offline channels specifically designed to recruit girls. A systematic procedure whereby they identify a harvest of potential female candidates

within a social group and then target a few directly. The notion of „Islamic Sisterhood"
is used here by recruiters advocating travelling with a friend to the caliphate. That way,
girls peer-pressure each other into leaving and they are less likely to change their minds
mid-journey. It is also noteworthy that the average age is lower than that of the men,
sometimes even 13 to 15 year-olds are involved, and they are very susceptible to the IS
propaganda at this age (Vranckx, 2015).

It is unrealistic for females to actively join in the fighting. The role of women
within the caliphate is inherently secondary – and sedentary. After marriage, which can
take place at an age as young as nine, the woman's place is in the household where she
„remains hidden and veiled and maintains society from behind" (Quilliam Foundation,
2015: 7). There are exceptions to this rule, yet they are few and strictly regulated (*ibidem*,
pp. 7-8):

> „In a jihadist perversion of feminism, then, the importance of women is championed.
> She is deemed to play a central role in the inner workings of the so-called Caliphate.
> However, this is only insomuch as the jihadist ideology permits her. She may be
> important, but she faces myriad restrictions and an imposed piety that is punishable
> by hudud punishments. One important caveat made to the above is that it is
> sometimes permissible for a woman to leave the house. The circumstances in which
> this is permitted are:
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>> a) if she is going to study theology;
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>> b) if she is a women's doctor or teacher;
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> c) if it has been ruled by fatwa that she must fight, engage in jihad because the
> situation of the ummah has become desperate, "as the women of Iraq and Chechnya
> did, with great sadness".'

The Islamic State has shown itself more than willing to supply travel documents and
financial means for the marital journey of female recruits, with varying success. Those
inolved are mostly pubescent girls who are exposed via social media to these „rebels with
a cause:" rugged and tough bandits that are vastly different from the clean-cut,
unattainable and overly marketed boy bands that their native peers adorn. Getting married
and birthing jihadists is a set of tasks in stark contrast with the contemporary Western
female gender ideal and ideals of gender equality (Vranckx, 2015).

The radicalisation process: Key factors

Radicalisation has become the key term in understanding European foreign fighters, regardless of its previously discussed troubled connotations. It is a process that starts with estrangement and is amplified by indoctrination, and has a plethora of diverse causes and risk factors.

These risk factors at play are, however, quite similar in all models, and they can be loosely grouped along religious/cultural, political, socio-economic and psychosocial lines. These categories are echoed in the work of various academics, with minor variations. It must be stated in advance that it remains one of the crucial gaps in radicalisation research to understand why there are many individuals exposed to these enabling background characteristics who however do not (or do not as fully) radicalise (Schmid, 2013).

Religious/cultural factors

Much more important and much more dangerous than mere membership of a certain religion are the sectarian and militant demonstrations, the attached mindset of superiority, and shrewd recruitment tactics (Benyaich, 2015). The described cases regarding the recruitment of girls display the level of sophistication of tactics aiming at enhancing radicalisation in receptive individuals.

Social media presence, for example, is often underlined in public discourse and the media coverage of IS recruitment tactics, but in fact they use both online and offline means of approach. The tactics concerned go beyond merely putting out an extensive stream of videos, tweets and photos for their audience to share. They are targeted and diverse, made to cater to each separate target audience.

For instance, prospective Western female recruits are convinced by the notion of Islamic sisterhood and fighting poster girls rather than by Arabic manifestos on the sedentary nature of women. The latter do not reach them as effectively, or may even be counterproductive. In the Quilliam Foundation's analysis:

> „IS propaganda is always carefully honed to a particular target audience. For example, all the videos and photo reports that make it into Western media are intended to find a home there – the atrocities they depict are, first and foremost, designed to provoke outrage in the international community, a tactic that is part and parcel of the IS polarization strategy. In the same vein, this manifesto will not have been translated because it will have been deemed ineffective – perhaps even

counterintuitive – in achieving its propagandistic aims with a Western audience. Certainly, it plays on strikingly different themes to the messaging that comes from the chief recruiters of Western women to IS, its English-speaking muhaajirat population." (Quilliam Foundation, 2015: 6)

Political factors

Radicals and extremists often participate in what is known as „system-blaming" (Benyaich, 2015). In their eyes, there is a „system" that treats them unjustly or even oppressively. On a national and local level, frustration because of a lack of inclusive and total citizenship, diminishing trust in local authorities, negative experiences with the judicial/educational/political system can all help shape these grievances.

At times, such grievances are not imaginary. E.g. in February 2015, the Antwerp judicial office declared that prominent right wing politician Filip Dewinter would not be prosecuted for his online video game that involved the targeting of giant Mosques and Muslims on flying carpets because the procedural costs would not be worth it (Arnoudt, 2015). Yet in the same month a trial against the radical organisation Sharia4Belgium was held, even as only 7 of the 46 defendants appeared because the rest were fighting in Syria or have already been killed (Thillo, 2015).

In fact, trials are continuously being held, and sentences are handed out for foreign fighters and terrorists who are missing or dead. The trial against the Zerkani network featured only 13 of the 32 accused, as the rest were also in Syria or deceased. Not to say that these trials do not hold symbolic value, but no one has ever dared to question their usefulness over financial considerations. In the fight against extremism, double standards delegitimise the rule of law and polarise segments of the population. Maintaining a strong sense of legitimacy among the public regarding the fairness of the judicial and political system is paramount (Schmid, 2013).

Similarly, when the Minister of the Interior Jan Jambon tweeted that a „significant portion of the Muslim community was dancing and celebrating after the Brussels bombings" (quoted in Knack, 2016), it is hard to argue against this idea of polarisation and perceptions of a lack of full citizenship for Muslims living in Belgium. Both government and the media should be more aware of the importance of verbal-rhetorical signals.

Socio-economic factors

Another form of system-blaming also occurs: growing up in impoverished areas, unfair treatment in the job market, in social life, or in the housing market, the lack of social mobility are also often cited as grievances. While it is important to note that mere socio-economic conditions have never been a direct pathway to extremism and terrorism, the sense of inequity that stems from them may feed powerfully into a feeling of alienation and increasing frustration.

The word „ghetto" frequently pops up in describing infamous Belgian neighbourhoods as well, such as Schaerbeek and Molenbeek. This structural inequality in urban development and its socio-economic consequences feed said frustration strongly in Belgium, as Jozef De Witte, former director of the Belgian Equal Opportunity Centre describes:

> „In Belgium, the gap between natives and immigrants from outside the EU in terms of employment and education is higher than anywhere else in Europe (…) How many people realise that half of our Moroccan community lives in poverty- compared to 15% of the Belgians without migration background. Yet one cannot detect any sense of urgency among our decision-makers." (Quoted in Rabaey, 2014.)

Data clearly shows that Muslims more frequently feel the impact of social deprivation than non-Muslims (Kustermans, 2015). The fact that some of the Syrian combatants are from wealthier families does not exclude social-economic deprivation as a risk factor for radicalisation.

Psycho-social factors

Identity crises, lack of recognition, juvenile delinquency: all these phenomena can lead to a search for purpose, somewhere to belong. Pessimism and hopelessness as the zeitgeist for youngsters may not have a direct effect but can play a role in the decision to become a foreign fighter. And while these may loom over other European countries too, Belgium seems particularly affected. The youth suicide rate in Belgium for 15-24 year olds (a crucial age range for radicalisation) is much higher, and has declined less than in most other EU member states (Coolsaet, 2015). Polls have found Belgium to be the second most pessimistic country in Europe (Gallup, 2014).

There is no single cause but rather a multitude of risk factors. But the starting point is always a feeling of estrangement, a search for identity. Belgium's complex structure

and governmental divides further enhance this search, as there is hardly a basis of national identity to fall back on. Perhaps more so than in most other EU countries, the question of what it means to be Belgian is ambiguous and unclear, and radicalising young people more readily take to other aspects of their identity, e.g. their faith.

Conclusion

By giving a brief outline of the radicalisation process in the Belgian context in this article, I strived primarily to make the complexity of the issue apparent. There is a multitude of the types of foreign fighters and the lines between these categories are blurred. But the contributing elements form a matrix of risk factors, a set of recurring characteristics that are present to a varying degree in almost every individual fighter.

Whilst there are notable differences in generations of foreign fighters, the lack of a sense of urgency among Belgian policymakers involved in prevention and deradicalisation has remained constant. Deradicalisation is hard, and it requires a nuanced and individually focused approach. Like prevention, its results do not lend themselves easily for the purposes of political grandstanding.

Yet the focus needs to shift from repression to prevention. Rather than implement discriminatory punitive measures, the Belgian government should establish a framework for Islamic theology education and assert a tighter relationship with mosques within the country. It is only when there are imams who speak French or Dutch, who are key figures and have a feeling for the fabric of Belgian society, that the underground networks of unrecognised mosques can be halted. An extensive deradicalisation program is paramount, as well as bringing education on radicalisation to prisons, schools and youth care. A mere repressive attitude will push both would-be jihadists and returning fighters away from governmental oversight and into the shadows. Foreign fighters are a societal shortcoming, and we cannot condemn them without addressing the environment that shapes them.

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