

ISIS in Their Own Words: Recruitment History, Motivations for Joining, Travel, Experiences in ISIS, and Disillusionment over Time – Analysis of 220 In-depth Interviews of ISIS Returnees, Defectors and Prisoners

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ISIS in Their Own Words: Recruitment History, Motivations for Joining, Travel, Experiences in ISIS, and Disillusionment over Time - Analysis of 220 In-depth Interviews of ISIS Returnees, Defectors and Prisoners

Abstract

Two hundred and twenty Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) defectors, returnees, and imprisoned ISIS cadres were in-depth interviewed by the author, a research psychologist working for the International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism (ICSVE) from 2015-2019. These interviews were conducted in Turkey, Iraq, Syria, the Balkans, Europe, and Central Asia with ISIS prisoners, returnees, and defectors. The purpose was to learn about their recruitment history, motivations for joining, travel, experiences inside the group, disillusionment over time, and defection, return or capture. This article reports on a sample of both male and female former ISIS members representing over 35 countries. It examines their demographics, contextual, and other qualitative variants regarding their psycho-social vulnerabilities and motivations for joining. It then discusses the influences and recruitment patterns drawing them into the group, their roles, experiences, and relationships inside it, variance in their will to fight and support violence, and their disillusionment and attempts to leave (when it occurs)—as well as their advice to others about joining. Although a convenience sample, the findings are consistent with other quantitative studies on ISIS and we believe highly informative on many important topics.

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Introduction

ISIS is one of the largest and the most lethal terrorist groups to date. It functioned with its so-called Caliphate as a proto-state for over four years. At its zenith in 2014, ISIS had managed to take over approximately 40 percent of Iraq and 60 percent of Syria.¹ It also attracted over 40,000 foreign fighters to its ranks from over 130 countries.² ISIS terrorized those in the territories it overtook, as well as mounted terrorist attacks all over the world, in cities as far ranging as: Brussels, Dhaka, Istanbul, Jakarta, London, New York, Nice, Orlando, Paris, and Sydney, to name but a few. ISIS also spread its brand globally to over 14 affiliates across the Middle East, Africa, and Central Asia.³

Moreover, it was one of the richest terrorist groups in history, with its financing coming from a number of sources including: Bank theft, ransom for hostages, takeover of the oil wells in Syria, and subsequent sale of oil to Turkey and Assad's government. Additionally, it profited from looting, sale of antiquities, human trafficking of sex slaves, taxation of its population, and takeover of local commerce in the areas under its control. ISIS at one point had a daily income of 3 million United States Dollars (USD) with an annual revenue of 2.9 billion USD.⁴

Understanding the inner workings of this group is crucial, but it is only possible to glean such information from a number of vantage points: From studying its publicly available propaganda and statements, its captured internal documentation, and interviewing those who either lived under or actually served inside the group. While there is a great deal of readily accessible ISIS propaganda to study, internal documentation has only recently been collected and captured, but is still not available to all researchers. What has been studied of ISIS propaganda provides a rich body of literature which can be accessed elsewhere, but is not covered here in any detail given the desire to report on what ISIS members themselves say in primary interviews.

Primary interviews of those who lived under ISIS are possible for those willing to travel into Syria and Iraq where ISIS is unfortunately still active. In these danger zones, interviews of victims of ISIS are relatively easy to come by, but interviews of ISIS cadres are much more difficult to obtain, as most prison interviews reside within the realm of classified intelligence,

and research access is often limited to one-off and superficial interviews. Defectors' and returnees' interviews are possible closer to home, but are often hard to locate, access, and may still constitute a threat. All three groups of ISIS insiders (prisoners, defectors, and returnees) are often reluctant and fearful about giving interviews.

Consequently, there is a dearth of primary source data regarding terrorists in general—and ISIS in particular—due to the difficulty of gaining safe access to imprisoned, defected, or returned terrorists for purposes of interviewing them and, once access is achieved, convincing them to talk. The researchers involved in this study worked hard to overcome such obstacles with the primary researcher managing to gain access to a significantly large and wide range of both male and female, local and foreign, younger and older, ISIS cadres ranging from foot soldiers and family members, to ISIS emirs and members of the *emni*—the ISIS intelligence arm. The resulting data set has yielded an enormous cache of information that sheds new light on how ISIS recruits both locally and from afar, the motivations and vulnerabilities with which its recruiters create resonance, how travel to ISIS is arranged and occurs, entry into the group including training and indoctrination, positive and negative experiences inside the group, and changes over time regarding commitment to the group and the militant jihadist ideology espoused by it— changes often related to disillusionment, defection, return or capture. This study reports on 220 in-depth interviews and managed to include interviews from ISIS cadres hailing from 35 countries and representing 41 ethnicities.

Research Method

The research method for this study was to attempt to gain access to any member of ISIS, male or female, whether he or she be a defector, returnee from the battleground, or imprisoned ISIS cadre. Then, we conducted a semi-structured, video-recorded, in-depth psychological interview with that ISIS member. The lead researcher worked with prison officials, fixers, translators, and research associates who arranged access, recorded video, and translated the interviews and in two cases carried out the interview in the researcher's absence (in one case due to the ISIS cadre arriving unannounced, and in the second due to the interviewee refusing to talk to a woman).⁵

In all cases the semi-structured interview started with a brief history of the individual focusing on early childhood and upbringing, covering life experiences prior to becoming interested in ISIS. This was done to create a baseline with inquiry into basic demographic information, educational level, family stressors, and other background information. Questions then turned to how the individual learned about the conflicts in Syria, and about ISIS, and became interested to travel or join. Questions explored the various motivations and vulnerabilities for joining and obtained a detailed recruitment history: How the individual interacted with ISIS prior to joining, whether recruitment took place in-person or over the Internet, or both; how travel was arranged and occurred; ISIS intake procedures and experiences with other militant or terrorist groups prior to joining ISIS; and training and indoctrination. The interview then turned to the interviewee's experiences in ISIS: Family, living and work experiences including fighting history; inquiry about what was good and what was not good in ISIS; questions about disillusionment and doubts; traumatic experiences; experiences and knowledge about one's own or others attempts to escape; being, or witnessing others, being punished; imprisonments; owning slaves; treatment of women, and marriages. The interview covered where the individual worked and lived during his or her time in ISIS, and changes over time in orientation to the group and its ideology, often from highly endorsing it to wanting to leave.

A strict human subjects protocol was followed in which the researchers introduced themselves and the project, explained the goals of learning about ISIS, and the interview would be video recorded with the additional goal of using this video-recorded material of anyone willing to denounce the group to later create short counter narratives for the ICSVE *Breaking the ISIS Brand Counter Narrative Project*. This is a project that uses insider testimonies denouncing ISIS as un-Islamic, corrupt, and overly brutal to disrupt ISIS's online and face-to-face recruitment and to delegitimize the group and its ideology. The subjects were warned not to incriminate themselves and to not speak about crimes they had not already confessed to the authorities, but rather to speak about what they had witnessed inside ISIS. Likewise, subjects were told they could refuse to answer any questions, end the interview at any point, and could have their faces blurred and names changed on the counter narrative video if they agreed to it.

These interviews took place in prisons, camps, interrogation rooms, offices, and in the field in the countries of Syria, Iraq, Turkey, Belgium, Denmark, Kosovo, Kyrgyzstan, Albania, and Kenya. More than half the interviews took part in another language and required a translator, although the researchers themselves could speak Albanian, Arabic, Bosnian, French, Turkish, and Russian, as well as English. All of the interviews touched on highly traumatic material and often required psychological expertise to support the individual to continue speaking about painful events that were difficult to discuss. The interviewer is a research psychologist and has been conducting in-depth psychological interviews and field research for over 25 years, has interviewed over 700 terrorists and their family members, and is highly experienced working with translators and dealing with traumatic material and in quickly gaining rapport in the interview setting. Hence, the interviews generally went smoothly, and interviewees opened up and shared a great deal of information. Local translators often offered helpful explanations of locations and local customs to which the interviewees referred, but sometimes their English was limited when translating quickly about highly emotional topics. Thus, all of the interviews that were audio or video recorded were retranslated by professionals after the fact (in a few cases recording was refused) with the professional translators correcting any mistakes made in the written records.

In general, the interviews took about an hour and a half. In that time, there was a sense of closure in having covered most important topics, but in some cases prison and camp authorities rushed the interview, which made it difficult to go in-depth on all issues. In others, prison authorities allowed the researchers up to five hours to interview; for instance, when the author interviewed an ISIS emir in Iraqi prison for five hours about the wide range of topics and experiences about which he had detailed knowledge.

Sampling

The sample for this study is by necessity a convenience sample, as it is extremely difficult to gain safe access to ISIS cadres to interview, and to obtain their informed consent for an in-depth interview, thus random sampling is not possible. The interviewer did attempt to obtain a

representative sample in terms of requesting access to women as well as men and attempting to talk to a wide range of nationalities and ethnicities, age groups and roles fulfilled within ISIS.

To gain access to defected, returned, and imprisoned ISIS members, the main author contacted numerous national authorities, security services, police, journalists and others requesting the possibility to interview. Given that the author directs the ICSVE *Breaking the ISIS Brand Counter Narrative Project*, a project that creates video clips of ISIS insiders denouncing the group that are then used for prevention and intervention purposes globally, many national authorities strongly endorsed the project and granted access to their prisoner population to help the project expand. Police and journalists also at times had access to returnees and defectors and helped gain access.

Once access was granted, it was still a challenge to gain permission from the ISIS cadres themselves, who were often afraid to speak about their experiences for many and varied reasons. Imprisoned ISIS members were generally wary of being interviewed, many having had bad experiences with journalists who were often less interested in the actual person and experiences in the group than looking to promote horrific headlines. When the interviewees understood that a sensitive and careful interview was sought, that they controlled whether or not it would appear in public, and that they could hide their identities, they were more willing to grant permission to be interviewed. Nevertheless, many asked that their identities be hidden in terms of having their names changed and faces blurred in the counternarrative video, or the video never used, and at least eight prisoners refused interviews altogether, as did some defectors. In some cases, women only wanted to be interviewed by a woman and refused to have males present. Two of the male interviewees (both Albanian imams) were uncomfortable speaking with a woman, one granting the interview only to a male colleague, the other sitting facing away from the author and not making eye contact.

Risks for the researchers included the possibility of being attacked during the interview or tracked afterward and harmed. Likewise, as many prisoner and detainees are held in Syria and Iraq, there is the necessity to travel into dangerous areas for those located in conflict zones, meaning exposure to possible hostage-taking, bombs, missiles, mortars, and

roadside IEDs, as well as attacks inside the prisons or camps themselves in which riots occur and ISIS enforcers are active. In prisons and camps, a guard usually remained in the room, or just outside it, and in some cases a minder was assigned to watch the interview. Dangers existed in the prisons, despite having a guard nearby, as the author was well aware, having been shown during work in 2006 and 2007 a collection of metal shanks created by prisoners in Camps Cropper and Bucca. Likewise, the female guards in the camps all told about having been attacked themselves inside the camps, and murders and riots among detainees had occurred both in the camps and prisons in Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) territory during the time period of these interviews.

Defectors interviewed out in the field feared for their safety and wanted to be interviewed in highly private settings which increased the dangers for the interviewers. ISIS defectors and those released from short stints in prison also posed a risk, as some defectors told about being re-contacted by ISIS and directed to work for them, or about their own wishes to return to ISIS, or reneging on their denunciations and still wanting to be part of ISIS.⁶ One ex-prisoner, for example, ended our time with him by telling us that he hoped we would be beheaded in Syria, while another still endorsed ISIS, and was later returned to prison for violent behaviors.⁷

It was never clear if defectors, and those released whom the researchers met in the field, had totally disengaged from the terrorist group—or could still be acting on its behalf—until the interview got well underway. In one case, a Syrian woman being interviewed in Turkey admitted she hated Americans and Westerners due to killings of civilians during bombings in Raqqa, and that she wished to return to ISIS to die as a martyr on their behalf. The researchers were relieved that she had not decided to martyr herself that day or lacked the means to do so.⁸ Likewise, our Turkish research colleague learned that ISIS members in Turkey had followed a defector to one of our interviews and our colleague was warned by his Turkish police colleagues that ISIS might try to kill him as a result. This was no idle threat given other ISIS assassinations were carried out in his border town of Sanliurfa.⁹ The researchers took all available precautions for their own safety, but budgets did not allow for armed guards, armored vehicles, and other security apparatuses. At times these were provided by host governments, yet the risks of doing this research were considerable.

The sample reported herein, collected over a period of four years and still growing, consists of 220 ISIS defectors, returnees, and imprisoned ISIS cadres interviewed from September 2015 to September 2019. Thirty-five nationalities and 41 ethnicities are represented in the sample. The sample consists of 182 males and 38 females. The participants were interviewed in a variety of locations: 27 were interviewed in Turkey, three were interviewed in Belgium, seven were interviewed in Kosovo (one in prison, the rest in home settings), two in a Kyrgyzstan prison, one in an Albanian prison, one in a Kenyan prison, 75 in Iraqi prisons, and 104 in detention facilities in northeast Syria (prisons and camps) overseen by the SDF and Kurdish *Asayish*, the Kurdish security. Two of the men (1.1%) and three of the women (7.9%) never lived in ISIS territory. Some worked as recruiters in their home countries, while others were stopped en route to Syria and sent back; these were also included in the analysis, as their not having lived under ISIS did not preclude them from being active believers in the ideology and contributors to the cause.

Demographic Results

Males. The 182 men in the study were from 35 countries and represented 41 ethnicities. 51.1 percent were foreign members of ISIS, while 34.1 percent were Iraqi and 14.8 percent were Syrians.

On average, they were 26.00 years old at the time that they joined ISIS and were 29.95 years old at the time of the interview. This is a bit older than conventional expectations of terrorists ages, perhaps because many foreign fighters were motivated in part by lack of employment, discrimination, and marginalization among other issues. Male foreign fighters were older than their local counterparts, with an average age of 27.88 at the time they joined ISIS and an average age of 32.58 at the time of the interview. While the expectation for terrorists' ages tends to equal the age estimates of criminals in general, factors like discrimination and marginalization, as well as subscription to ISIS's ideology, may prevent burnout and motivate older people to become involved or to maintain their involvement in the terrorist cause.

Most men in the sample had spent on average 30.4 months inside ISIS. This relatively short period, in comparison to other studies of terrorist group membership, is due to ISIS's relatively short lifespan, with only a

few joining in its inception (as al-Qaida in Iraq) in 2007 and remaining until the siege at Baghouz in 2019. In contrast, most interviewees joined after the declaration of the Caliphate in 2014, and either left or were captured as ISIS began losing territory in 2017.

Of the men, 81.3 percent were born and raised Sunni Muslim, while 1.6 percent were born and raised Shia Muslim, later converting to Sunni Islam. Of those who were not raised in Islam (n=28), half were born into Sunni Muslim families and (n=14) reverted to the religion of their parents, and the other half (n=14) converted from atheism, or Christianity.

Prior to joining ISIS, 44.5 percent of the men had never been married, 46.7 percent were married, and 4.4 percent were divorced. One of the drawing points of ISIS for men in countries where unemployment often precludes marriage—like Tunisia—or for men finding it difficult to marry for other reasons, was the promise of marriage. ISIS even ran a marriage bureau in Raqqa to arrange marriages for ISIS members. As a consequence, at the time of the interview, only 24.2 percent had remained single, 71.4 percent were married, 1.1 percent were divorced, and 0.5 percent were widowed. Given many women lost their partners in battles and bombardments, the low rate of widows in the sample reflects the ISIS practice of encouraging swift remarriage.

Socioeconomically, 65.4 percent of the men were from middle-class roots, with 18.7 percent and 3.8 percent coming from working- and upper-class families, respectively. The men had on average 11.18 years of education and represented a variety of occupations prior to joining ISIS: 43.4 percent worked in blue collar jobs, 15.4 percent were students, 13.2 percent worked in white collar jobs, 6.6 percent were itinerant, 3.8 percent were self-employed, 2.2 percent were unemployed and not looking for work, and 1.1 percent were unemployed. Among the foreign men, 31.2 percent worked in blue collar jobs, 19.4 percent worked in white collar jobs, 15.1 percent were students, 8.6 percent were itinerant, 4.3 percent were self-employed, 4.3 percent were unemployed and not looking for work, and 2.2 percent were unemployed. The higher levels of unemployment and underemployment among foreign men indicates that these men had fewer opportunities and ties to home, allowing them to leave for Syria and Iraq, and were perhaps more susceptible to ISIS's promises of wealth, social inclusion and work.

Females. The 38 female participants were from 18 countries and represented 22 ethnicities. Of the women, 76.3 percent were foreign members of ISIS, while 13.2 percent were Iraqi and 10.5 percent were Syrians. They were, on average, 24.32 years old when they joined ISIS and 27.33 during the interview, having spent 32 months on average inside the group. Of the women, 55.3 percent were born and raised Sunni Muslim, while 5.3 percent reverted to the religion of their parents. In contrast to the low number of male converts represented, 34.2 percent of the women in the study (all foreigners, consisting of 10.7 percent of the foreign fighter sample) had converted to Islam from atheism or Christianity.

Prior to joining ISIS, 28.9 percent of the women had never been married, 60.5 percent were married, and 7.9 percent were divorced. At the time of the interview, however, only 2.6 percent remained single, with 57.9 percent married, 7.9 percent divorced, 5.3 percent separated, and 26.3 percent widowed. This accords with ISIS's strong policy of requiring women to marry or stay locked up inside of dirty, overcrowded, and difficult to survive ISIS guesthouses called *madhafas*. Of the women who married during their time in ISIS, regardless of whether they arrived married and were widowed or arrived single, 70.0 percent were married only once, 20.0 percent married twice while in ISIS, and 10.0 percent married three times while in ISIS. 44.7 percent of women were widowed at least once while in ISIS and 10.5 percent were divorced.

Socioeconomically, the women paralleled the men in that 63.2 percent came from middle-class families, with 21.1 percent and 5.3 percent coming from working- and upper-class families. Similar to the men, the women had on average 11.59 years of education, but their employment represented a slightly narrower scope: 26.3 percent were students, 21.1 percent worked in blue collar jobs, 18.4 percent were housewives and stay-at-home mothers, 13.2 percent worked in white collar jobs, 5.3 percent were unemployed and not looking for work, and 2.6 percent were itinerant.

Table 1. Demographic Results

Demographic	Mean	Standard Deviation	Range
Age When Joined	26.00	8.68	10-55
	24.32	7.45	12-44

Age When Left	27.86	9.22	10-53
	26.57	8.05	14-48
Age at Arrest	29.11	9.22	12-57
	26.96	8.29	14-48
Age at Interview	29.96	9.06	14-58
	27.33	7.56	14-49
Socioeconomic Status	18.7% Lower Class; 65.4% Middle Class; 3.8% Upper Class		
	21.1% Lower Class; 63.2% Middle Class; 5.3% Upper Class		
Length of Time in ISIS (Months)	30.40	24.18	<1-84
	32.00	16.30	<1-60
Religious Status	81.3% Born Sunni Muslim; 1.6% Born Shia Muslim; 7.7% Revert; 7.7% Convert		
	55.3% Born Sunni Muslim; 5.3% Revert; 34.2% Convert		
Marital Status (Prior)	44.5% Single; 46.7% Married; 4.4% Divorced		
	28.9% Single; 60.5% Married; 7.9% Divorced		
Marital Status (Current)	24.2% Single; 71.4% Married; 1.1% Divorced; 0.5% Widowed		
	2.6% Single; 57.9% Married; 7.9% Divorced; 5.3% Separated; 26.3% Widowed		
Employment	2.2% Unemployed and Not Looking for Work; 1.1% Unemployed and Looking for Work; 6.6% Itinerant; 3.8% Self-Employed; 43.4% Blue Collar; 13.2% White Collar; 15.4% Student		
	5.3% Unemployed and Not Looking for Work; 18.4% Wife/Stay-at-Home Mother; 2.6% Itinerant; 21.1% Blue Collar; 13.2% White Collar; 26.3% Student		
Education (Years)	11.18	3.73	0-18
	11.59	2.63	5-15
Legal Status at Interview	1.6% Served Sentence and Released; 1.1% Stay of Sentence with Conditional Release; 72.5% Incarcerated Pre-Sentence; 2.2% Currently Serving Limited Sentence; 2.2% Currently Serving Life Sentence; 5.5% Sentenced to Death; 14.8% Unknown		
	2.6% Stay of Sentence with Conditional Release; 76.3% Incarcerated Pre-Sentence; 10.5% Currently Serving Limited Sentence; 10.5% Unknown		

There are scant samples to which the present sample may be compared. Thus, there is no way to determine representativeness of the sample. However, a noted publication describing foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) in ISIS is the 2017 report by The Soufan Center. The present sample's 116 FTFs represent approximately 0.4 percent of the total foreign fighters identified by The Soufan Center. Individual countries, however, are represented in different proportions.

Table 2. Comparison to The Soufan Center Reported Numbers of FTFs

Country	Percent in Sample
Switzerland	4.3%
Belgium	2.3%
Trinidad and Tobago	2.3%
United States of America	2.3%
Canada	2.2%
Kosovo	2.2%
Germany	2.0%
Serbia	2.0%
Australia	1.8%
The Netherlands	1.8%
Algeria	1.2%
Bosnia and Herzegovina	1.2%
Albania	1.1%
Sweden	1.0%
Turkey	0.8%
Denmark	0.7%
Indonesia	0.7%
United Kingdom	0.6%
Libya	0.5%
Kazakhstan	0.4%
Morocco	0.4%
Pakistan	0.3%
Russia	0.3%
Kyrgyzstan	0.2%
Tunisia	0.2%
Azerbaijan	0.1%
France	0.1%
Saudi Arabia	0.1%

Regionally, the present sample includes 1.7 percent of the FTFs from the Balkans, 1.6 percent of the FTFs from North America, 0.9 percent of the FTFs from Western Europe, 0.4 percent of the FTFs from South and Southeast Asia, 0.2 percent of the FTFs from The Maghreb, 0.1 percent of the FTFs from former Soviet Republics, and 0.09 percent of the FTFs from the Middle East (excluding Syria and Iraq).

The Soufan Center's report also includes specific data regarding foreign women in the Islamic State. The present sample includes approximately 8.2 percent of the Belgian women who joined ISIS, 4.2 percent of the German women, 2.9 percent of the Canadian women, 2.3 percent of the Kosovar women, 1.1 percent of the Dutch women, 0.6 percent of the

French women, 0.5 percent of the Kazakh women, and 0.4 percent of the Moroccan women.¹⁰

Results

The qualitative interview data obtained in these interviews was coded on a myriad of variables ranging from psycho-social vulnerabilities to ISIS recruitment, to methods of recruitment, travel, experiences inside ISIS, disillusionment, and will to fight. Data was coded both for presence and level of significance, ranked on a Likert Scale: 0 = “Not Present”; 1 = “Present but Not Important”; 2 = “Present and Somewhat Important”; 3 = “Present and Very Important”. In some cases, there was missing data due to the interview being cut short, the subject having no experience with that variable, or a failure to explore it much in the interview due to time constraints or the subject being unwilling to discuss. Two members of the ICSVE staff created the coding system through numerous iterations, beginning with approximately 60 basic variables and ending with 288. The second author coded the interviews and discussed with the interviewer any variables about which she was not certain.

Psycho-Social Vulnerabilities to ISIS Recruitment

Psycho-social vulnerabilities to ISIS recruitment were coded in terms of emotional abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional neglect, physical neglect, exposure to domestic violence, substance abuse in the household, mental illness in the household, parental separation or divorce, having an incarcerated household member, having a parent die when the participant was a minor, having unmarried parents, having a father with multiple wives, family conflict, poverty, leaving home early, personal divorce, previous criminality, and unemployment or under-employment. The subjects themselves mentioned most of these variables in taking their brief family histories. However, the first ten psycho-social vulnerability variables are the Adverse Childhood Experiences, life events and circumstances that—when occurring in combination with each other—exponentially increase a child’s risk of mental and physical health difficulties in adulthood.¹¹

In this study, psycho-social vulnerability variables are distinct from motivation variables. Psycho-social vulnerabilities refer to life experiences

and situations that made the individual susceptible to recruitment or able and willing to travel to ISIS. Motivations are the reasons that the interviewees gave for why they made the concrete decision to join ISIS. There are many variables that are therefore included in both the psychosocial vulnerabilities and motivations sections of this article but may have different results. For instance, unemployment and under-employment were coded as vulnerabilities because the people who were unemployed or under-employed were not as tightly tied to their home communities and may have felt that their home countries had failed to provide them with opportunities for meaning and socioeconomic advancement. These same people, however, often did not mention employment as a motivation for joining ISIS; that is, even though being unemployed made it easier to leave home and travel to Syria, they did not do so because ISIS promised them employment.

Similarly, drug and alcohol abuse, as a vulnerability, often contributed to foreigners' feelings of *jahiliyyah* (the Islamic view of sinful ignorance) causing them to revert or convert to Islam while still having little in-depth knowledge of the religion, making them susceptible to charismatic recruiters promising them a new life defined by honor and purity. If the foreigners joined ISIS with the expressed intention of getting clean, this was coded as a rehabilitation motivation.

Among the men, the most commonly present vulnerabilities were poverty, unemployment and underemployment, and a criminal history. When rating the vulnerabilities in relation to the participant's own assessment of reasons for joining ISIS, the top three were poverty, unemployment and underemployment, and substance use. It should be noted that unemployment and under-employment were coded as one variable, including not only those without a full-time job, but those who could not find permanent work or felt that they could not get jobs consistent with their abilities and education level as well. These vulnerabilities turned out, not surprisingly, to be contextual and based on the location of the ISIS recruit. For instance, the most common vulnerability for male locals was poverty, whereas for male Europeans it was personal substance abuse and for male non-European foreigners it was previous criminality and substance abuse.

Many Iraqi youth described being hungry, since for those who lived in territory that ISIS controlled, ISIS quickly took over all the trade and made it difficult to find a job without working for ISIS. Many of these youth joined expecting the ISIS training camp to deliver good meals, pay, and other financial benefits. Eighteen-year-old Iraqi Abu Huthaifa for example, describes the way that poverty made him vulnerable to ISIS's recruitment efforts, "The videos got me because I was in a poor family and I thought joining would help us buy a house, because we were in a rental."

Unemployment and underemployment represented not only a financial challenge for locals, but also a grievance for many participants who felt unable to rise in socioeconomic status. Thirty-five-year-old Iraqi Abu Hamid al Baghdadi, for instance explains, "A lot of things prevented me from getting this job: Corruption, bribes, sectarian shares." For these frustrated Sunni Iraqis and Syrians, suddenly ISIS was offering promising employment opportunities.

For male Europeans, the most common vulnerability was personal substance abuse. Europeans also cited unemployment and underemployment as grievances they attributed as a consequence of being Muslim. In many cases, vulnerabilities were multi-factorial. Thirty-eight-year-old Dutch Munir Hassan al Kharbashi, who is of Moroccan descent, recalls his parents divorcing when he was 15, after which "[I] started living the criminal life in my youth, smoking and drinking...do what your friends do, trying to be with them. Joy riding, stealing cars, making money to smoke and enjoy women." Munir continued with his reckless behavior "until I was 23. [Then,] I started focusing on my religion, praying and going to mosque. I started having other friends." He also recalls Dutch anti-immigrant politician Gert Wilders being problematic for him in terms of promoting discrimination: "I had a beard and long clothes, and my wife and I felt discriminated against." After numerous bouts with the law and three failed marriages he decided to go join the ISIS Caliphate.

For male non-Westerners, the most common vulnerabilities were previous criminality and substance abuse. For example, 29-year-old Tunisian Abu Sara had been drinking excessively during the Tunisian Arab Spring in 2012. He explains,

“I used to sit in my room and drink with some music and so. In mosques, I used to see people with long beards saying to me, ‘You must stop drinking, this is wrong, you have to pray with us.’ I never prayed in my life. After some time, I realized that I was wrong, so I quit alcohol. I just go to night clubs and smoke cigarettes. After a while, I stopped going to clubs and I wanted to pray to feel good, as they claim. I wanted to save my life.”

Among the women, the most commonly present vulnerabilities were poverty, family conflict, and prior trauma, with Europeans citing family conflict most often and locals citing poverty most often. The most meaningful vulnerabilities in relation to the participant’s own explanations about joining ISIS were prior trauma, poverty, and family conflict—in that order. Describing the impact of her prior traumatic experiences, 46-year-old Canadian Kimberly Pullman speaks about suffering deep distress watching the televised news from the trial of a serial rapist who had assaulted her, among many other Canadian women:

“I started failing at university when his trial began, I had a hard time focusing, stopped sleeping, [had] nightmares... It was like a DVD that wouldn’t shut off; I couldn’t make it stop.”

Falling into a relationship over Twitter with a man already in ISIS, Kimberly found solace as he talked to her about restoring honor and that she shouldn’t feel suicidal when her services as a nurse were so needed by Muslims in Syria. Slowly, he seduced her into marrying him over the Internet while she was mired in emotional despair over previous traumatic episodes, and he guided her into escaping her problems by coming to Syria, ostensibly to help others.

Women from Europe also cite discriminatory practices that made life difficult and even hard to hold employment. Thirty-year-old Umm Abdallah from Germany says once she converted and began to wear hijab, she was told to find another job and then finding that in hijab she could not get hired to positions equal to her capabilities. Similarly, 37-year-old Lisa Smith from Ireland left the military after converting and being told she could not wear hijab to work.¹² Twenty-five-year-old Belgian Selene, who is of Turkish and Moroccan descent, recalls being afraid that her

children would experience discriminatory practices, as she had in Europe, saying, “I know people who change their name. They won’t get work.”

Others speak about being spit at or insulted on the streets for wearing Muslim attire in public. Some young European female converts were thrown out of their family homes after converting, making them vulnerable to being taken to Syria by male partners. Others followed their husbands and boyfriends, believing that they would be divorced or abandoned if they didn’t agree to travel, although many women also encouraged their husbands and partners to travel.

Table 3. Vulnerabilities

Vulnerability	Men Mentioned	Women Mentioned	Men Average Score	Women Average Score
Criminal History	13.7%	5.3%	0.29	0.11
Prison History	10.4%	0%		
Emotional Abuse	0%	7.9%	0.00	0.22
Physical Abuse	1.7%	7.9%	0.05	0.25
Sexual Abuse	0%	2.6%	0.00	0.08
Emotional Neglect	1.7%	0%	0.05	0.00
Physical Neglect	0%	0%	0.00	0.00
Domestic Violence Exposure	1.7%	5.3%	0.04	0.11
Household Substance Abuse	1.7%	7.9%	0.05	0.22
Household Mental Illness	2.2%	0%	0.05	0.00
Parental Separation/Divorce	8.8%	21.0%	0.20	0.42
Incarcerated Household Member	1.1%	5.2%	0.03	0.14
Deceased Parent	12.1%	7.9%	0.32	0.19
Unmarried Parents	1.1%	7.9%	0.01	0.19
Father Had Multiple Wives	5.0%	0%	0.06	0.00
Family Conflict	9.3%	23.6%	0.28	0.69
Personal Substance Abuse	13.2%	5.3%	0.34	0.17
Poverty	24.2%	26.3%	0.65	0.69
Left Home Early	2.7%	10.5%	0.06	0.34
Personal Divorce	3.8%	7.9%	0.07	0.24
Unemployment/Underemployment	19.2%	2.6%	0.49	0.03
Prior Trauma	11.6%	23.6%	0.32	0.72

Recruitment Influencers

Understanding ISIS’s recruitment is crucial, given their unprecedented efficacy in drawing foreign fighters to their cause and to the battlefields. Jihadist terrorist groups have recruited Muslims living in the Western

diaspora for decades, most notably during the war following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the war in Bosnia, and increasing greatly following the terrorist attack of September 11, 2001.¹³ ISIS can be differentiated from other militant Islamist groups by its rising during the Internet era, a time when the world, especially for young adults, feels smaller and more connected than ever before. ISIS recruits in many ways, from face-to-face on the ground recruiting to utilizing friends' and relatives' networks, as well as through cold-calling online. In the latter, recruiters utilize methods of swarming and love-bombing, in which those who respond to ISIS recruitment on social media by liking, retweeting, sharing or otherwise endorsing ISIS propaganda messages are then contacted by ISIS recruiters.¹⁴ The recruiters pay them lavish attention and try to meet their needs in efforts to seduce them into the group. Others attract recruits by drawing them into religious and political conversations designed to take them down the ISIS pathway.¹⁵

The most frequently mentioned and most meaningful influencers in terms of joining for men were friends, face-to-face ISIS recruiters, and passive viewing of videos posted mostly on YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter by ISIS, other related groups, and also from Syrians suffering Assad's atrocities. Twenty-nine-year-old Belgian Abu Usama al Belgique recalls watching videos that convinced him that it was his obligation as a Muslim to help the Syrian people, saying,

“[It was all] emotion for me going to Syria. Assad is killing civilians, barrel bombs, and airstrikes. Civilians were calling people, crying, ‘Where are the Muslims in the world? You can help us militarily and humanitarian!’”

Many European and Balkan respondents recall watching such videos and hearing the cries of Syrians pleading with the world, asking, “Muslims, Muslims, where are you? Come and help us!” Many felt helpless in the face of the world powers remaining passive and felt they must take it into their own hands and go and join the fight.

Others were moved by statements made by their own and others' politicians and religious leaders. Thirty-five-year-old Trinidadian Ziad Abdul Hamid recalls, “I saw John McCain saying Syrians needed help. I was a Muslim and thought it's binding upon me to help.” Saudi Abu

Jazeera credits state-run television programs for motivating him to come. “Saudi, Qatari TV channels. This is what pushes us to come here.”

Abu Fatima, a 30-year-old German, describes the influence of a close friend on his decision to join ISIS: “We had many discussions. He was convincing me. He said we are far from the fronts, no air strikes, just come.” Others made friends over the Internet with those who went ahead and were encouraged by these new friends to come—many who misrepresented the realities on the ground in order to convince their new friends to travel and join ISIS.

While the Assad videos portrayed atrocities and victims calling out for help, ISIS propaganda videos often depicted the Caliphate as victorious and as a good place to live as a devout Muslim. The majority of males and females in the sample who spoke to ISIS cadres on the ground or watched ISIS propaganda materials expected a far more positive experience than what they actually encountered. ISIS portrayed *hijrah*, what they claimed as obligatory Islamic migration to live under shariah law and the Caliphate, as a means of gaining personal significance, purpose, belonging, living under Islamic ideals, enjoying prosperity, and being protected. They left out that the men would be forced to fight for the group whether or not they wished to, that women would need to remarry in succession if their husbands were killed, that once in there was no leaving, that the punishments for non-compliance were brutal, and that the ISIS *emni* could accuse and punish anyone, at any time, for anything. Thus, the recruiters portrayed an idealistic Islamic state and those traveling to join ISIS specifically for the most part, except those who went specifically to fight against Assad’s atrocities, claimed that they went believing in a sort of utopian dream which turned out drastically different from the actual reality.

Forty-five-year-old Indonesian, Abdullah, recalls the influence of a face-to-face recruiter upon him: “He had a long beard. He was inviting people to Islam,” he said, describing the low-key approach that later turned rigidly fundamentalist. “He once told me, ‘You are not Muslim.’ I was surprised. I’m good, my father and my mother are Muslims. He said, ‘If you don’t pray and don’t fast, you are not Muslim. You are a disbeliever.’” Slowly Abdullah was talked into changing his lifestyle and then selling all his belongings to follow this recruiter into traveling to Syria to join ISIS.

In addition to ISIS's distinction for the absolute numbers of foreign fighters swayed by their propaganda (40,000), ISIS also recruited many Western women to their ideology and territory. Female foreign ISIS members' motivations for joining are varied, but it is clear that ISIS used a specific recruitment strategy, namely, using women as online recruiters and glamorizing the ISIS lifestyle, even developing online magazine articles specifically targeting them.¹⁶ For women in the present sample, the most frequently mentioned and most meaningful influencers were spouses, Internet recruiters, and parents. Given that young women, particularly in conservative cultures, are often dependent on their spouses and parents and vulnerable to following their lead, especially if they have young children, and also that women and girls, in general, often make moral decisions in reference to relationships, it should be no surprise that relationships were primary influencers for females.¹⁷ That does not, however, negate their personal agency in deciding to join ISIS. Many women followed husbands, some fearing emotional or financial abandonment, and three in the sample claimed not to even understand where they were going, but the majority knew they were joining the Islamic State and agreed to it, albeit not making the decision completely independently.

Salma, a 22-year-old Belgian woman, remembers how her father said her life would improve when she travelled to join ISIS:

“My Dad, he wanted to live the really Islamic life. My Dad came first and then he called me. He just said, ‘Life is better here. You can wear your whole hijab. We’re not oppressed here.’”¹⁸

Twenty-nine-year-old German Umm Bilal describes how her husband decided to go to ISIS and convinced her to join him in Syria:

“He called after three weeks. He said there are a lot of people here who need drugs, orphans. Many need someone to take care of them. It’s a good thing for Allah and gives a high degree for Allah.”

Internet recruiters often were seductive to these women, promising marriage, significance in ISIS and traditional lifestyles. Aisha, a 27-year-old Kenyan woman, describes falling in love with her online recruiter, with

whom she believed she would fight and eventually go to Paradise: “He said he wanted to get married. We would go to Iraq and marry and fight together. And go to Jannah together.” He ultimately began preparing her for a suicide mission.¹⁹

Table 4. Influences

Influence	Men Mentioned	Women Mentioned	Men Average Score	Women Average Score
Spouse/Partner Influence	2.2%	55.3%	0.05	1.85
Parent Influence	3.8%	15.8%	0.11	0.43
Sibling Influence	6.6%	5.3%	0.20	0.14
Extended Family Influence	9.9%	5.3%	0.29	0.11
Friend Influence	35.7%	13.2%	1.03	0.35
ISIS Recruiter Influence	25.3%	7.9%	0.77	0.24
Preacher Influence	19.8%	0%	0.57	0.00
Internet Recruiter Influence	10.5%	18.4%	0.31	0.58
Passive YouTube Influence	24.7%	13.1%	0.75	0.36
Passive Facebook Influence	11.6%	7.9%	0.34	0.24
Passive Twitter Influence	5.5%	7.9%	0.16	0.26
Passive WhatsApp Influence	1.6%	2.6%	0.04	0.09
Passive Telegram Influence	1.6%	0%	0.03	0.00
Passive Other Internet Influence	1.1%	0%	0.03	0.00
Mainstream Media Influence	19.2%	10.5%	0.54	0.28
Prison Influence	5.5%	0%	0.15	0.00

Motivations for Joining

Motivations for joining ISIS differed dramatically by location. For foreign males who travelled to Syria and Iraq, the most common motivation was a helping purpose, meaning they wanted to provide humanitarian and defensive militant aid to the Syrian people. For European women, the top motivators were Islamic identity and family; non-European women simply wanted to pursue an Islamic identity. Men were more focused on employment, and the women were more focused on fulfilling basic needs, along with personal and familial safety. For both travelers and locals, solidification of an Islamic identity and an Islamist ideology focused on building a Caliphate were also present, with locals also often referring to grievances such as wanting Sunni rights that they believed would be delivered by a Sunni Islamist-run government as opposed to the Shia (and

Alawite) dominated governance in Syria and Iraq. Job seeking was also operational for foreign fighters and spouses who were unemployed or under-employed at home.

The helping-purpose mentioned by both men and women came from those who were watching Assad's atrocities while the international community stood silent, or spoke against Assad, but did little to stop him. Meanwhile, as mentioned earlier, strongly stirring videos were circulating showing Assad's atrocities, and Syrians calling out for foreigners to come to their assistance. These motivations, representing higher ideals and aspirations to play a role in the greater world, parallel those identified by other researchers studying terrorism across time and ideologies.²⁰

Twenty-eight-year old Kosovar Abu Albani witnessed Serbs invading his village as a young child. Years later, when his friends started passing around self-made videos from Syrians of Assad's atrocities showing butchered corpses, bombed out rubble, even gassed neighborhoods and women and children killed en masse, all his childhood terror and distress was brought back to the surface. He vividly remembered the American "foreign fighters" who had rescued Kosovo and felt that it was now his turn to go help—that it was his duty as a Muslim.

ISIS cadres from many parts of the world, but particularly the Balkans, who remembered suffering the effects of war themselves, were deeply distressed by watching videos of Assad's atrocities and Muslims calling out for outsiders to come help. Those who traveled early during the Syrian Civil War to fight Assad, or simply to help in a humanitarian manner, seemed to be well-intentioned in the beginning but were later drawn into ISIS for various reasons. Abu Albani, for example, wanted to repeat the good acts of Americans that had freed Kosovars, but he later fell in with ISIS and admitted to participating in some of their gory genocidal acts such as those committed against the al Sheitat tribe.²¹ Many foreign fighters spoke about becoming trapped in Syria as the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and Ahrar al Sham began hunting foreign fighters and the Turkish border was blocked for them. They sought safety in ISIS territory where they were welcomed, but also forced to join and become fighters for the group.

Many men and women described joining due to an underlying longing for an Islamic Caliphate to be re-established and having been extremely moved by the declaration of the ISIS Caliphate, supported by the fact that ISIS had taken control of such significant swathes of land in both Syria and Iraq. For instance, 44-year-old Havaz Hamadi Omar recalls,

“I was in Sweden when Baghdadi declared his Caliphate. Since we were in our childhood, we are studying in our school that one day the Caliphate will come and it will be established, so when we saw it in Mosul, we think this day has come, and we have to go and join it.”

Some of those who, like Omar, came to live under the Islamic State Caliphate claimed they didn't know they would be pushed into becoming fighters. Islam Khenkar Aliev, a 25-year-old Russian, explains how he was working to develop himself Islamically: “I didn't come here for fighting, I came for knowledge and *shariah*, I wanted to be a civilian and live in the Islamic State.” While it may have been self-serving denial, many men expressed complete surprise at being forced into fighting and claimed they came to learn and to live in an Islamic utopia, not to fight.

Tunisians and Europeans also often referred to being hassled at home for trying to live a Salafi lifestyle, the former hassled by security services, the latter by Islamophobic Europeans. Tunisian Abu Tahir, for instance, recalls being hassled by the police and even interrogated, as he explains, “If you go often to the mosque, they [the security services] look at you in a different way. This affected me.” A Tunisian friend who had gone before him told Abu Tahir that if he came to the ISIS Caliphate, he would be able to practice his Islamic rituals unhindered.²²

Muslim women often are the ones who suffer the most from Islamophobic attacks in the West, as their identities are so clearly marked due to their Islamic dress. It was not surprising then to learn that women often cite suffering from Islamophobia as a reason for wanting to live under what they believed would be Islamic ideals. Thirty-seven-year-old Lisa Smith, for instance, enjoyed her career in the Irish army until she converted to Islam, when she says, “I asked if I could wear headscarf. They said, ‘No.’ I knew I had to cover so I got out. If they had said ‘yes’ I may have stayed in till now.” She also referred to not wanting to serve in a military that was

fighting Muslims. Feeling unable to follow her new faith while in the military, alongside a charismatic recruiter telling her it was her duty to come live under the newly declared Caliphate was only one of the many experiences that Lisa says caused her to believe that she could not fully pursue her religion in Ireland, and therefore needed to make *hijrah* to the Islamic State.²³

Women moved by the declaration of the ISIS Caliphate and impressed by its territorial gains also described believing they had a duty to migrate and live in the Caliphate. Thirty-two-year-old Umm Mohamad, who grew up in Holland, says that she was swayed to travel to ISIS by exposure to mainline news as well as ISIS propaganda: “I believed that every Muslim has an obligation to live where they can practice their Islam. Their propaganda was very strong. ISIS was strong.” Umm Mohamad points out that it was not just ISIS propaganda that was convincing, and that in the beginning it was mainstream news that convinced her, as she explains, “Western media was also a big hype: They [ISIS] took over half of Iraq in three, four days.”

Others tell about their belief in the terrorist claim of having an Islamic duty to make *hijrah*. Beatrice, a 31-year-old woman from Belgium, had recently converted to Islam when she learned about *hijrah* and was told that it was her obligation to move to a country ruled by shariah. She remembers, “I wanted first go to Malaysia or Indonesia. I don’t know. I was confused. Then I read about Syria. I was on Facebook, you know, and I spoke with people in these days. And then, I fell to ISIS.”²⁴

Women frequently followed husbands. For instance, 23-year-old Belgian Cassandra Bodret, describes her fear of abandonment by her husband:

“He started warning me that if I don’t come, he’s going to divorce me, take a second wife—that I cannot accept. He came before me, and I was so touched, that he was here alone. Then I followed.”

While foreign women often decided to follow their partners into ISIS, one shouldn’t fall into the trap of zombifying women, as many security services do when describing them as completely powerless and without agency, as though they were completely manipulated and dependent on their male partners who decided to travel to and join ISIS. Women who followed their

men into ISIS were for the most part also often just as motivated to join, encouraging their husbands and agreeing with them about ideology and travel, and some were even the main driving force behind travelling. One Krgyz grandmother, for example, believed ISIS claims that there would be a signing bonus for as many family members as would come. She talked half of her extended family into traveling to Syria to join. She was not heard from again, and only her young grandson managed to escape. He was smuggled home with the message that they had believed lies and were doomed inside ISIS.²⁵

Only three of the women interviewed in this sample were actually deceived by their husbands and credibly appeared to have had little to no choice in traveling or didn't know to where they were going. All the rest chose to travel with their partners into ISIS, or traveled on their own, knowing they could have chosen otherwise and remained at home with extended family, divorced, or tried to talk their spouses out of joining. Many women recount their own strong desire to join the ISIS Caliphate, live under shariah and follow a traditional lifestyle. Some were proud that their husbands would be employed by ISIS, enjoy free housing and other benefits, and be helping to build the Caliphate.

As far as local women, the sample did not include many Syrian and Iraqi women (n=9) and those interviewed were all imprisoned in Iraq where they faced serious sentencing, except one Syrian woman who was interviewed in Turkey. Among the Iraqi locals, three young women tell of having been taken from Iraq into Syria by male family members belonging to ISIS and claim to have had no choice in the matter. These were also later forced to marry in Syria and seem genuinely traumatized by that experience, describing their husbands as rapists. The Syrian women interviewed, also in Iraqi prison, had been extracted from SDF territory to Iraq due to being wives of high-ranking Syrian ISIS members. These women claim not to have had integral roles as ISIS members, serving more as spouses, and claim to have joined not of their own volition, although they may have been hiding their guilt. Thus, it is hard to comment on local women's motivations for joining from this sample.

Table 5. Motivations

Motivation	Men Mentioned	Women Mentioned	Men Average Score	Women Average Score
Basic Needs	18.7%	13.2%	0.49	0.30
Employment	22.6%	5.3%	0.59	0.11
Personal/Family Safety	4.4%	13.2%	0.12	0.34
Family Ties	4.4%	42.1%	0.13	1.11
Immediate Sexual Gratification	0%	0%	0.00	0.00
Emotional Relationship Escape	5.5%	0%	0.15	0.00
Adventure	4.4%	2.6%	0.11	0.08
Romance	0.5%	15.8%	0.01	0.42
Masculine Identity	1.7%	N/A	0.04	N/A
Feminine Identity	N/A	5.3%	N/A	0.11
Islamic Identity	28.6%	50.0%	0.75	1.42
Discrimination	7.2%	13.2%	0.20	0.42
Ideology-Related Hassling	3.3%	2.6%	0.10	0.08
Ideology-Related Arrest	0.5%	0%	0.02	0.00
Belonging	6.0%	5.3%	0.15	0.11
Personal Significance	8.8%	5.3%	0.21	0.17
Helping Purpose	30.8%	21.0%	0.86	0.56
Anger Purpose	13.2%	2.6%	0.34	0.06
Caliphate Ideology	22.5%	13.1%	0.61	0.36
Jihad Ideology	19.3%	7.9%	0.56	0.19
Hijra Ideology	9.3%	7.9%	0.26	0.25
Takfir Ideology	2.2%	2.6%	0.06	0.06
Anti-Western Ideology	6.6%	0%	0.17	0.00
Sunni Rights	11.5%	0%	0.32	0.00
Eternal Rewards	4.4%	5.3%	0.13	0.17
Eternal Honor	0.5%	0%	0.01	0.00
Redemption/Forgiveness	1.1%	2.6%	0.03	0.08
Rehabilitation	5.5%	0%	0.14	0.00
Fear of Hell	1.6%	5.3%	0.04	0.14
Tricked	0.5%	2.6%		

Roles

Men's roles in ISIS were far more varied than the women's roles. The most commonly mentioned roles are that of *ribat* (border patrol) and fighter, with 34.6 percent and 35.2 percent of men reporting that they took on these roles, respectively. Of the men, 51.6 percent admitted to serving in

one or the other, or both, fighting roles during their time in ISIS. Likely many more were fighters but did not incriminate themselves by admitting it. Other commonly reported jobs were engineers, mechanics, and medical personnel. It was common for men to become terrified and disillusioned from battleground experiences or injured, and for both reasons they often cycled in and out of fighting roles. Those who were injured could get an ISIS doctors pass to serve in an administrative post while rehabilitating, and some also managed to get reassigned through connections. In both cases, those who were able-bodied were pressured back into fighting roles. Likewise, many men who became disillusioned with ISIS deserted and simply stopped working for the group. The cost of living in Syria was such that if they had brought money in with them, or were clever enough to run a side business, they could survive with a relatively high quality of life. Some of these described going to the riverside restaurants in Tabqa and enjoying family life—particularly those who had just married and were starting their families. Many of the deserters were arrested at some point, sometimes tortured, and forced back into military service.

In contrast, 97.4 percent of the women in this sample claimed to have acted as wives and mothers, and the roles of suicide terrorist, face-to-face recruiter, and medical personnel were also reported by one woman each. Additionally, two women report being members of the *hisbah*, ISIS's morality police. Men who speak about women's roles explain that Western women in particular were recruited into the ISIS *hisbah* and to be online recruiters based in a house in Raqqa. Likewise, ICSVE collected evidence that women in ISIS trained as fighters, learned to handle machine guns, grenades, and IEDs. One woman was reported to wear a suicide vest at all times. They also trained as spies and carried money and messages.²⁶

Marriage and motherhood were highly encouraged, if not outright mandated, for ISIS women. Women who arrived unmarried or who were widowed were not allowed to live as single women, and were generally forced to live in a women's guest house, what ISIS referred to as a *madhafa*. Conditions in the *madhafas* were so bad that single women and widows who otherwise would not remarry, frequently agreed to marriage simply to escape from them. Twenty-four-year-old Hoda Muthana, among others, says she did everything she could to avoid being forced back into a *madhafa*. However, in her case, this meant she had to try to run a small business on her own in order to live. She begged others to help her get

diapers and supplies for her infant, as ISIS did not allow women to travel in a taxi alone. Hoda finally relented and remarried out of desperation.²⁷ This coercion to remarry resulted in many ISIS women having serial marriages, sometimes even marrying before their *iddah*, the mandatory waiting period of four months in order to determine if a pregnancy resulted from the previous marriage, was completed between marriages. Likewise, many of these women are now arrested and in camps with their children from their multiple marriages. The children having different fathers and therefore different claims to nationality greatly complicates matters of repatriation for ISIS mothers and their children.

Table 6. ISIS Roles

Role	Men Reported	Women Reported
Ribat	34.6%	0%
Fighter	35.2%	0%
Suicide Attacker	1.6%	2.6%
Teacher	1.1%	0%
Preacher	0%	0%
<i>Emni</i>	1.6%	0%
<i>Hisbah</i>	3.8%	5.3%
<i>Shurta</i>	3.8%	0%
Wife/Mother	N/A	97.4%
Transporter	4.4%	0%
Ambulance	2.2%	0%
Accounting	2.7%	0%
Intake	2.2%	0%
Housing	1.6%	0%
Oil	3.3%	0%
Emir	3.3%	0%
<i>Madhafa</i> Oversight	2.7%	0%
Cook	3.3%	0%
Spy	2.2%	0%
Face-to-Face Recruiter	0.5%	2.6%
Internet Recruiter	2.2%	0%
Medical	6.0%	2.6%
Engineer/Mechanic	7.7%	0%
Other	20.9%	0%

Sources of Disillusionment

In this study, sources of disillusionment are defined as events, behaviors, and values that the participant found to be contrary to what had initially drawn them to ISIS or caused them to decide to defect from the group. The

sources of disillusionment have, in previous research, been described as push factors. The impetus to join a terrorist group consists of both push (reasons to leave one's home, such as marginalization or discrimination) and pull (reasons to go to the terrorist group, such as the promise of dignity and purpose) factors. In contrast, disengagement from terrorist groups has been shown to be primarily linked to push factors alone, that is, disappointing or even traumatizing experiences in the group, rather than new opportunities or political changes at home.²⁸ However, it should be noted that many of the respondents kept in close Internet contact with their mothers and some expressed deep regret for having caused their mothers distress by joining ISIS. Likewise, many male respondents referenced avoiding escaping ISIS and returning home when it might have still been possible to do so out of certainty that they would face prosecution and prison at home.

For men in this sample, the most commonly mentioned sources of disillusionment were mistreatment of civilians, lack of food, and mistreatment of women, with the most meaningful sources of disillusionment being mistreatment of civilians, lack of food, and mistreatment of ISIS members, which included imprisoning and torturing those who tried to leave. In contrast, the most common sources of disillusionment for women were the mistreatment of women, lack of food, and the acts of ISIS attacking outside their territory.

Mistreatment of civilians is often defined as hypocrisy on the part of ISIS leadership, illustrated by Syrian Ibn Mas, who says,

“They smoked in groups, but in public they looked for anyone smoking. Then they didn’t advise him but imposed a penalty on him. In the same time, they forgot to hold themselves accountable.”

This mismatch between the ISIS *hisbah* arresting, fining, and flogging men for smoking while the *hisbah* themselves smoked, as well as the hypocrisy of ISIS covering up rapes carried out by their members while brutally punishing sex crimes of any type in the general population is often cited in the sample. Likewise, men frequently cited mistreatment of women as something that disappointed them, but not as something that pushed them out of ISIS, although there were a few exceptions in this regard.

Nineteen-year-old Syrian Ibn Ahmed worked as a guard at a facility where ISIS held 450 sex slaves for serial rape. Once, he witnessed a pregnant woman being punished for spitting in the face of an ISIS soldier: “They took her out in the corridor and stomped on her and her abdomen. When she was done, they had kicked her so badly she was covered in blood [had miscarried].”²⁹ Of all the horrors he witnessed, the rape of a 15-year-old girl by a Sudanese foreign fighter remains etched in Ibn Ahmed’s psyche: “He raped this girl. I swear to God she was hemorrhaging [...] she died of internal bleeding. Our commander forbade us to talk to anyone about it.” When Ibn Ahmed saw that the Sudanese man was pardoned and released from ISIS prison after only seven days, he became overwhelmingly disgusted and decided to flee the group.

Abu Albani, who remains completely radicalized, admits that ISIS treated women especially poorly. He explains that when women got sick, ISIS would not permit them “to go to a hospital by themselves [...] They wouldn’t take them to a hospital. They didn’t take care of them.” He recalls a German widow of a Kosovar ISIS fighter: “She is in Syria with four of her kids and she is sick from cancer. They are not taking her back to Kosovo so she can get cured, or to some other place. Can you imagine? She is left alone and sick in Syria.”³⁰

The women who cited attacking outside of ISIS territory as a source of disillusionment often speak of sympathizing with women and children killed in ISIS attacks in Europe. Those who are from Europe express shock and dismay as well as concern for their own family members back home. Speaking about the attack at the Zaventem airport in Brussels, 22-year-old Belgian Salma says, “Killing people on a battlefield, they have guns shooting at you, but killing innocents, it could have been me.”³¹

Table 7. Sources of Disillusionment

Source of Disillusionment	Men Mentioned	Women Mentioned	Men Average Score	Women Average Score
Civilian Mistreatment	22.5%	7.9%	0.63	0.25
Failure to Fight Assad	3.8%	0%	0.10	0.00
Cooperation with Assad	1.7%	0%	0.05	0.00
Local Favoritism	11.6%	7.9%	0.31	0.22

Foreign Fighter Mistreatment	16.5%	2.6%	0.47	0.08
Lack of Pay	11.0%	2.6%	0.24	0.06
Lack of Food	20.9%	34.2%	0.51	0.92
Attacking Outside of ISIS Territory	5.5%	18.4%	0.13	0.56
ISIS Member Mistreatment	19.8%	18.4%	0.53	0.50
Women Mistreatment	19.2%	71.1%	0.39	1.97
Sunni Mistreatment	6.6%	2.6%	0.20	0.03
Practice of Takfir	7.7%	2.6%	0.21	0.08
Corruption/Theft	19.2%	2.6%	0.48	0.06
Bad Governance	13.7%	2.6%	0.36	0.06
Deradicalized	6.1%	7.9%	0.14	0.26
No Longer Supported ISIS	15.9%	7.9%	0.45	0.22
No Longer Believed in Caliphate	7.2%	13.2%	0.19	0.42
No Longer Supported Jihad	2.2%	2.6%	0.06	0.08
No Longer Supported Takfir	0%	0%	0.00	0.00

Traumatic Experiences

Traumatic experiences in ISIS were separated into three categories: Atrocities and crimes that were committed against or experienced by the participant, those witnessed by the participant, and those actively committed by the participant. The last of these is something the researchers warned subjects not to talk about so as to avoid incriminating themselves, but at times they would recount crimes for which they had already been prosecuted or spoke openly about crimes they had committed, despite the warning. In cases where they spoke about crimes for which they had not yet been prosecuted, the subjects were asked to move on to other topics so as not to harm themselves and provide evidence that might later be used against them.

Of the male participants, 46.2 percent reported experiencing bombings, 34.1 percent were imprisoned by ISIS, and 12.1 percent experienced physical torture. Smaller percentages of the men reported being wounded

in battle (8.8%), being wounded in bombings (8.2%), and being flogged (5.5%). Of the female participants, 65.8 percent experienced bombings, 42.1 percent were widowed by ISIS-related violence, and 21.1 percent were forced into marriage. Other traumatic experiences included being imprisoned by ISIS (15.8%) and rape (7.9%).

All of the subjects described bombing as terrifying, particularly those who stayed in Raqqa during heavy bombardments and for those who stayed in ISIS until the end, most moved from Raqqa to Mayadeen and then crossed over the Euphrates to escape Russian and Syrian bombings which eventually followed them. Twenty-seven-year-old Dutch Abu Sarayah recalls of Hajin, “Everywhere we went there were lots of bombings. I got injured one time, we were living at a friend of mine and the house got bombed by Russians and we had to pull [my wife] out of the rubble.” She had a broken leg, and the baby was fine. Those who made it to the last days of the Caliphate continued to flee bombings as they moved down river, ultimately ending in Baghouz. There, many described living in dug-out trenches where they tried to stay below ground level to avoid being hit by snipers while the entire area was bombarded. Twenty-eight-year-old Saudi American Abu Suahib recalls in Baghouz, “The coalition was very brutal in its bombings, killing whoever, smashing houses full of women and kids.” Forty-six-year-old Australian Abu Imran recounts in nearby Hajin, “In the last two months there were a lot of bombs. All the houses around me were bombed. I thought, ‘It’s my turn, we are going to die.’” When the U.S. coalition became involved, the bombardments, even in Raqqa, became much more precise and drones hunted anyone who went outside, killing those who appeared to be ISIS members. To avoid being identified and killed by the drones, ISIS men began donning burkas but this only resulted in women being targeted by drones as well as men.

ISIS’s torture methods came from Iraqi and Syrian security service members-turned-ISIS and were particularly gruesome. Abu Jason, a 25-year-old from Switzerland, remembers being tortured while imprisoned by ISIS: “They put me inside a tire, and chained my hands to poles... no water... under the sun [...] I was perspiring, and they gave me a little food.” Other forms of torture recounted by participants included electrocution, waterboarding, rape, and sexual assault. Additionally, torture included being beaten by rubber hoses and fists, being kicked, being hung from poles or the ceiling, being forced to listen to and watch the torture of

others, and being held for long hours in horrifically contorted stress positions.³²

Women who lived in the ISIS *madhafas* recounted the bad conditions and mistreatment endured there, including being unable to leave without agreeing to marriage. Twenty-two-year-old Iraqi Sahar's male ISIS family members took her into Syria with them. There, she was raped by the husband she was forced to marry. Upon capture, she learned that she was pregnant. After the trauma she suffered, Sahar says, "I cannot love this baby." When asked if she would get an abortion, she replies, "He's a victim; I will not allow myself to do something wrong to this victim." Instead, Sahar hopes that the baby will be adopted, but knowing that is unlikely, she worries and is unsure whether her family could ever "accept my baby or love my baby." Iraqi women who bore babies under ISIS marriages and are now widowed often face the added complication of being unable to register them legally.

ISIS women lacked rights in marriage, and many Syrian and Iraqi local women were forced to marry ISIS men. European female ISIS members in particular cited their shock and dismay over learning that they had to endure whatever abuse their husbands meted out to them. Twenty-six-year-old Belgian Bouchra Abouallal was the second wife to an ISIS member who kept her under his violent control. Bouchra claims he controlled her phone and posted on her social media: "He threatened Belgium with my Facebook account, he ruined my life." Bouchra eventually ran away from her husband, knowing that divorce would be nearly impossible.³³ The difficulty for women to initiate divorces was corroborated by Lisa Smith, a 37-year-old Irishwoman, who explains that during fights with her husband, he told her, "If you go to the judge [for a divorce], I will say you are a kufr [an unbeliever and therefore a spy]." The punishment for spying was death, so Lisa stayed with her emotionally and physically abusive husband until he was killed in Hajin.³⁴

The men also report witnessing many atrocities during their time in ISIS, including executions (23.1%), executed corpses (17.0%), hearing about the killing of a family member (15.9%), and torture (15.4%). The crimes witnessed by women were most commonly hearing about the killing of a family member, usually their spouse having been killed in battle or by a bomb attack, (55.3%), seeing executed corpses (10.5%), witnessing torture

(5.3%), and seeing a family member being killed, often by bombings (5.3%).

The executions described by the participants were no less gory than those posted by ISIS that shocked viewers all over the world. Abu Hamza, a 25-year-old Syrian, paints a terrifying picture of the incident that haunts him: “They put his head on the block [...] he moved so the [executioner] could not kill him, so someone pulled his hair. He moved again so the axe came to his head and broke his skull. He was suffering so badly. He didn’t die immediately.” Similarly, describing the moment at which she became widowed, 15-year-old Iraqi Dina recalls, “My husband resisted ... They killed him in front of me.”

Youth particularly spoke of being coerced into suicide missions and being forced to execute others, usually in beheadings. One Iraqi described being called to a scene of five Peshmerga soldiers dressed in orange jumpsuits arranged in a row on their knees. He was handed a knife and instructed to behead them while ISIS cadres filmed it. Knowing he would be killed if he refused, the youth carried out the beheadings.

Most of the subjects describe living under extreme fear, some from their first entry into ISIS, others developing this sense of terror as they realized that ISIS was a totalitarian state; the ISIS *emni* could accuse anyone of being a spy or other crimes and public executions and torture were normal occurrences. As a result, most did not have many friends and did not talk openly, sometimes not even sharing their doubts and fears within their families. Subjects told how ISIS trained youth to spy, even on family members, and how people informed on one another to the ISIS *emni*.

Due to our warnings not to self-incriminate as well our human subjects’ desire not to potentially cause harm, few men admitted to us about committing crimes while in ISIS, with 6.0 percent reporting that they had killed on the battlefield, 2.7 percent reporting beheading someone, 1.6 percent reporting performing non-beheading executions, and 1.1 percent reporting performing physical torture. One man also admitted owning a slave. The crimes of beating, flogging, and biting were all reported by one woman, who served in the ISIS *hisbah*.³⁵

Killing on the battlefield was an act laden with emotion for many of the participants. While for many the battlefield provided an appropriate and moral setting for killing, some regretfully remembered killing innocents in battle, such as that with the Sunni al-Sheitaat tribe, as 20-year-old Syrian Abu Musab, who, upon returning from killing fellow Sunni countrymen, was rejected by his own mother for having done so: “People hated us because we had killed the al-Sheitaat tribe.” Twenty-one-year-old Syrian Umm Rashid had survived so many traumas, from losing her first husband who served al Nusrah, to having her parents die in regime bombings, that once she married into ISIS, she fell completely under their ideology and empowered by them. She admitted that as part of the ISIS *hisbah*, she not only flogged and beat other women, “I also used to bite. It is like an artificial tool. Put in the mouth, we can bite any part of the body, her back, shoulders, breasts, from places you can’t see from the outside and where there is ample meat.” When asked if she was horrified by having done so, Umm Rashid says, no, that she felt the opposite—that brutally enforcing ISIS rules banished her fears and appeared to her as the right thing to do.³⁶

Finally, 12.8 percent of the men and 2.7 percent of the women were invited to become suicide bombers. While a few in this sample had agreed, they escaped or were arrested before carrying out their missions. Likewise, 3.3 percent of the men and none of the women admitted that they had been invited by the ISIS *emni* to attack their home countries, but many more knew of others who had been invited to attack at home.

Table 8. Traumatic Experiences

Traumatic Event	Men Reported	Women Reported
Flogging Victim	5.5%	0%
Physical Torture Victim	12.1%	5.3%
Electrocution Victim	1.6%	0%
Biting Victim	0%	0%
Psychological Torture Victim	5.5%	5.3%
Rape Victim	0%	7.9%
Forced Marriage Victim	0%	21.1%
Forced to Fight	1.6%	0%
Experienced Bombing	46.2%	65.8%
Wounded in Battle	8.8%	0%
Wounded in Bombing	8.2%	5.3%
Starvation	3.8%	5.3%

Imprisoned by ISIS	34.1%	15.8%
Imprisoned by Another Terrorist Group	0.5%	0%
Widowed by ISIS-Related Violence	1.1%	42.1%
Execution Witness	23.1%	7.9%
Stoning Witness	3.3%	2.6%
Executed Corpse Witness	17.0%	10.5%
Rape Witness	2.2%	0%
Torture Witness	15.4%	5.3%
Battlefield Deaths Witness	9.9%	0%
Family Killed Witness	1.6%	5.3%
Friend Killed Witness	1.6%	0%
Death of Family	15.9%	42.1%
Killed Others on Battlefield	6.0%	0%
Performed Non-Beheading Execution	1.6%	0%
Performed Beheading	2.7%	0%
Performed Beating	1.1%	2.6%
Performed Flogging	0%	2.6%
Performed Biting	0%	2.6%
Owned a Slave	0.5%	0%
Invited to Attack Home Country	3.8%	0%
Invited to Suicide Attack	12.6%	2.6%

The Will to Fight

The will to fight describes the motivation cited by ISIS fighters for why they fought and continued to go to battle for ISIS, oftentimes even after they were disillusioned. Commonly noted wills to fight were fighting the regime of Bashar al-Assad (9.9%), being a true believer in the ISIS Caliphate and ideology (13.2%), and fear of the brutal punishments meted out by ISIS if they refused to fight (12.6%).

Describing his motivation to fight Assad's army, 32-year-old Mauritanian Abu Omar says, "I wanted to fight the regime. In the news, even America was saying Bashar [al-Assad] is attacking his own people; doing crimes against his own people." In contrast, 23-year-old Dutch Marwan Rashid explains the difficult choice he made to continue fighting, even though he no longer believed in ISIS's cause: "In [ISIS] you cannot say 'no' for *ribat* or for fighting, either you go to *ribat* or go to prison, so for most of us foreign fighters it was between prison and fighting."

Table 9. The Will to Fight

Will to Fight	Men Mentioned
Claims Never Did	29.1%
Fighting Assad	9.9%
True Believer	13.2%
Afraid of ISIS Consequences	12.6%
Employment	7.7%
Afraid of Outside Consequences	7.1%
Afraid of Both ISIS and Outside Consequences	3.3%
Sunni Rights	2.2%
Believed Would Go to Jannah	2.2%
Fighting Iraqi Government/Army	1.1%
Gun Excitement	1.1%
Forced	1.1%
Chosen by Family to Fight	0.5%
Loyalty	0.5%
Family Ties	0.5%
Told Fighting Was His Obligation	0.5%
Takfir Ideology	0.5%
Cleanse Self of Sins	0.5%
Fear of Hell	0.5%
Given Choice Between Fighting and Suicide	0.5%
Basic Needs	0.5%

Radicalization Level

Because the interviews followed a largely chronological scheme, the participants' level of self-reported radicalization could be gleaned retrospectively at two timepoints, as well as the current timepoint. Therefore, the three timepoints recorded are: Prior to joining ISIS, at the participants' peak level of involvement, and currently, at the time of the interview. The level of radicalization was defined as an ideological commitment to ISIS and militant jihad in general, determined based on statements indicating that the participant was not at all radicalized (coded as 0), somewhat radicalized (1), very radicalized (2), and fully radicalized (3). In the coding scheme, fully radicalized people were those who still considered themselves committed members of ISIS. In contrast, people rated as very radicalized were those who still believed in the violent jihadist ideology but had become disillusioned regarding ISIS, and did not

believe that ISIS was the group to achieve those goals. For men, the average radicalization level at the prior, peak, and present timepoints were 2.26, 2.39, and 1.29. For women, the average radicalization level at those three timepoints were 2.07, 2.38, and 0.87. These scores indicate that, for both men and women, ISIS's initial ideological indoctrination and the experiences of living in the Caliphate increased ideological commitment. However, over time—with the fall of the Caliphate—having either escaped, defected, arrested, or disillusioned over negative experiences, both men and women significantly deradicalized. This is an important point as many argue for deradicalization schemes with ISIS prisoners. However, this data demonstrates some level of “spontaneous deradicalization” happening in many cases without any formal programming in place. This spontaneous deradicalization occurs based on ISIS's own failures. One deradicalized ISIS female respondent explained this phenomenon the most succinctly saying, “I didn't need any deradicalization program. ISIS itself was the best deradicalization program ever.”

Abu Sara, a 29-year-old Tunisian, provides an example of a participant whose radicalization level declined over time: “Yes, I believe the Islamic [State] is not Islamic but a terrorist organization; maybe in the beginning I didn't think so but after I work with them, there were changes.” Some, however, remained steadfastly radicalized, as in the case of Younes, a 27-year-old Belgian returnee from Syria who showed a journalist an ISIS flag hanging in his bedroom, says: “I didn't change my beliefs; I still believe living under Islamic law [is] better to live under than in a democracy.”³⁷

Proclamations of Innocence

Articles detailing the risks and benefits to “talking to terrorists” have mentioned the tendency for terrorists to claim that they had no idea that the group was committing such horrific attacks, and that they simply joined for humanitarian purposes, as many of the participants in this study also claimed.³⁸ While none of the participants denied knowledge of ISIS's atrocities at the time of the interview, many denied participating. Just over forty percent of the men and 31.6 percent of the women in this study claimed that ISIS had cheated, lied, manipulated, or otherwise tricked them into joining. This is an important point to consider in that many felt bad that they had joined ISIS, and were sorry for what they had taken part in, but they generally blamed ISIS, rather than taking full

responsibility for their own actions in supporting a virulent terrorist group.

While many considered themselves victims in the sense of having been lied to, this excuse may only be feasible for those who joined ISIS prior to the capture of Mosul and the establishment of the Caliphate in 2014. At that time, the mainstream media rarely featured news regarding atrocities carried out by the organization. Of the participants who joined ISIS in 2014 or later, when the group's true nature had largely been exposed in the mainstream media and through its own social media posts, 68.0 percent of the men and 40.0 percent of the women said that they felt lied to by ISIS. Those who didn't feel lied to may have believed a self-serving lie, or it may be those who joined ISIS had narrowed their focus to listening only to ISIS propagandists who did lie and tried to portray the Caliphate positively. Likewise, ISIS recruiters often told their recruits not to listen to mainstream news as it was lying about ISIS as part of a larger Islamophobic goal to tarnish the name of Islam. Thirty-two-year-old Umm Mohamed, a Dutch woman of Moroccan descent, says that she learned early on not to trust what she saw on the news in Holland: "I don't believe the media, as a Moroccan Muslim. The Western media lies about Muslims; they said the Taliban throws acid on women." She also credited the media hype about ISIS for convincing her that they were the true Caliphate and it was only once she experienced the horrors of ISIS that she realized, "what was said [against ISIS] in the media was true."

Discussion

The results of this study provide an extensive description of a small but diverse sample of ISIS members providing insights on many key variables. Though the sample cannot be called representative, it consists of ISIS members ranging from minors to older adults, men and women, Muslims by birth and converts, from all over the world. The results, particularly when analyzed in detail on each of the variables, give decision-makers valuable information regarding the characteristics, motivations, influencers, recruitment, and travel patterns of those who joined ISIS. Likewise, the experiences of ISIS members once inside the group, including their ideological and weapons training, their experiences with ISIS, changes in their will to fight and their commitment to the group, and disillusionment or sustained support are important to understand. While

the sample is not necessarily representative, it is large and diverse enough to provide strong insights into these issues.

Likewise, policymakers in many countries are currently facing repatriation issues and need to better understand how dangerous ISIS returnees may be. This study found that the ideological indoctrination of ISIS—and perhaps the act of moving to the Caliphate—at first increased commitment to the group, but over time many ISIS members became disillusioned and less committed to ISIS. As the Caliphate lost its territory and members suffered bombardments, deaths of loved ones, battlefield losses, and ultimately arrest, many began to spontaneously deradicalize without any programming involved. Many in this sample gave strong testimonies against ISIS, and agreed to appear in a counter narrative video denouncing the group—sometimes asking that their identities be withheld for their own protection. Others remained highly committed to the group and we were also told about ISIS enforcers still operating in the prisons and waiting for the resurgence of ISIS. Clearly, there is a continuum of radicalization among those who were in ISIS and careful evaluations will be necessary to decide on dangerousness and to program appropriately. It is noteworthy that of the 1,000 European male foreign fighters currently being held by the SDF, most of whom will likely be repatriated at some point, this research interviewed 8.2 percent of them. Thus, this article provides a small but highly relevant window into what the international community may be facing with this population, showing that it is possible to interview and learn from them in hopes of better preparing for their return.

In 2016, the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague (ICCT) published a report on FTFs in ISIS. The report mentions that many FTFs joined Jabhat al-Nusra. The present sample includes foreign members of ISIS who did not travel to Iraq or Syria. However, of the 122 foreign-born men and women, 117, including 91 men and 26 women, actually lived in ISIS territory and can therefore be referred to as FTFs. In the present sample, 7.7 percent of FTFs reported having been members of Jabhat al-Nusra before joining ISIS. The ICCT report also details the considerations regarding returning FTFs, noting that “30 percent of [foreign fighters] who have left from the European Union are now thought to have returned.” Indeed, of the ISIS members in the present sample who travelled to Syria or Iraq, 7.7 percent were interviewed in their home

countries rather than in Iraqi or Syrian detention facilities. The report also states that returning FTFs may be “disillusioned with terrorist practices,” while others “return to their countries of origin with the intent and capability to carry out terrorist attacks.” Of the nine ISIS members this study interviewed in their home countries, one was deemed to be no longer radicalized, one as somewhat radicalized, three as very radicalized, and two as fully radicalized, with one person’s present radicalization level unable to be determined, supporting the suggestion that FTFs may return for a variety of reasons and with varying levels of radicalization. Likewise, this research found evidence of those who defected, but then later wanted to return to the group, making note that it is not always a one-way trajectory out of terrorism.³⁹

Therefore, a primary concern relating to returning FTFs is the provision of deradicalization and programs while they are disengaged from the terrorist group, and the prevention of further radicalization in prison and reintegration programs upon their release. The present study supports concern about prison radicalization. Of the foreign-born ISIS members in the sample, 3.4 percent cited experiences in prison prior to joining ISIS as an influence in their decision to join, with half of that group saying that prison was a strong influence. Of all those interviewed, only two (1.7%) reported taking part in a deradicalization program. Therefore, participation in such a program could not be determined to be predictive of the participant’s current radicalization level. Though, as noted earlier, the subjects themselves reflected on disillusionment and spontaneous deradicalization occurring as a result of bad experiences inside ISIS, as well as seeing the defeat of ISIS and their having been imprisoned. One particularly concerning case was Abu Albani, who became even more radicalized and committed to ISIS during his prison term following conviction in Kosovo for serving in ISIS. After he emerged from prison, he was interviewed once again by the researchers, in which he told how he had studied the texts of Maqdisi in Albanian while incarcerated and become even more committed to the aims of ISIS.⁴⁰

A striking issue in this study was how many foreign fighters came to ISIS out of a desire to help beleaguered Syrians, underlining how important foreign policy is and how interconnected the world has become. Young men in particular were moved into action when they saw governments failing to respond to the thwarted Syrian Arab Spring. Likewise, it is

striking to see how strongly videos and Internet propaganda and recruiting were in influencing foreign fighters and even locals to join ISIS. Notably, 8.2 percent of the sample said they were recruited into ISIS solely over the Internet, something that many researchers for years have denied as a possibility. Evidently, today's social media and the intimacy of chat and video interactions makes it feasible for terrorist recruitment to occur solely over the Internet—something policy makers in every country from which ISIS fighters came must consider in terms of ISIS continuing to recruit, now less for travel, and more for homegrown attacks.

Likewise, many travelers into ISIS referenced mainstream news as an influencing factor—that the many gains made by ISIS touted on the regular news made an impression in favor of ISIS for them. Similarly, some subjects referred to ISIS recruiters warning them not to believe mainstream news and to refer only to ISIS for information. Some Europeans stated that they found mainstream news Islamophobic and therefore ignored warnings about ISIS, chalking it up to Islamophobic Western reporting. These indicators demonstrate how important it is that mainstream media does not inadvertently glorify or spread terrorist messages. Moreover, counter messaging efforts must take into account how those listening to groups like ISIS may have narrowed their focus and only listen to ISIS insiders rather than others for any assessment of the group. Thus the importance of using actual ISIS insiders denouncing ISIS such as those featured in the ICSVE *Breaking the ISIS Brand Counter Narrative* videos.

It is also striking how naïve many Muslim recruits were in regard to their hope that ISIS would be able to deliver a promised utopia. For foreigners, the dream of becoming significant, having purpose, and a positive Islamic identity were strong drivers to ignore the warning signs about joining ISIS. Likewise, the ISIS provision of free housing and what appeared to be a high-quality life appealed to many. Local Syrians and Iraqis were often so hungry, literally and figuratively, for justice and dignity that they joined. In all cases, the joiners were yearning for an Islamic dream of dignity, justice, purpose, prosperity, and Islamic living. This underlines the fact that when individuals cannot find these things in their own lives they may turn to their religion and become more willing to ascribe to a manipulated dream than they might otherwise ignore. This points to the need to address local push factors and also delegitimize groups like ISIS in ways

like the authors do in the *Breaking the ISIS Brand Counter Narrative Project* by creating counter narrative testimonies of insiders that tell the truth about how un-Islamic, corrupt, and brutal ISIS really is.⁴¹

In addition to results specific to ISIS members, the ICCT report cited earlier also delves into the “nexus between FTFs and crime.” The report states that, depending on the sample, between 20 and 50 percent of jihadist terrorists have a criminal past. Of the total sample of FTFs in the present study, 17.9 percent had a criminal history, with 22.1 percent of European FTFs reporting a criminal history, again showing a strong interaction between terrorism and prior criminal behavior. Finally, the ICCT report further describes the role of women and children as FTFs. The ICCT report first notes that approximately 17 percent of European foreign fighters are women. In this sample, European women are more heavily represented (28.6%). Among the entire sample, 17.3 percent of the participants were women.⁴²

Likewise, 67.7 percent of the participants reported having children that they either brought with them to Syria or Iraq or that were born during their time in ISIS, and 11.8 percent of the participants interviewed for this project were minors themselves when they joined ISIS, with 5.9 percent under the age of 18 at the time of the interview. The issue of minors joining ISIS is a troubling one, particularly for those whose citizenship has been stripped, as in the famous case of UK ISIS member Shamima Begum (who has spoken with the main researcher but not yet given a full interview).⁴³ Minors should be treated with some deference for their immaturity by the law, particularly for those who traveled to ISIS as minors. However, in the case of ISIS it is also true that the group trained even young teenagers to be killers. Particularly poignant are the cases of young Iraqi and Syrian boys who went to training camps in hopes of being fed, stayed only a short time, and are now facing long sentences for having briefly served in ISIS. Similar to these are the tragedies of young local girls forcibly married into ISIS and now incarcerated as ISIS members.

Although the present sample represents a small contingent of ISIS fighters, particularly FTFs, it is relatively large compared to previous studies involving interview data on FTFs. That the results of this study are similar to those with smaller sample sizes provides evidence that “talking to terrorists” is a research method with strong convergent validity. Dawson

and Amarasingam's 2016 article on 20 FTFs in Syria included jihadists not associated with ISIS but nevertheless produced similar results. Just as the FTFs in the present sample focused more on the sense of identity and the "helping purpose," while Iraqi and Syrian participants spoke more of economic motivations, the FTFs in Dawson and Amarasingam's sample "provided justifications [...] that were largely moral and religious in character," rather than economic, similar to this sample which found a helping purpose often cited as a motivation for travel to Syria. The fighters in their sample also reported having been influenced by both Internet sources, specifically the speeches of Anwar al-Awlaki, and by close circles of friends, both of which were among the most meaningful influences for the male participants in this study.⁴⁴

The results of this study demonstrate the utility and validity of qualitative interview-based research with terrorists. From the stories of the participants' experiences in ISIS, it is clear that most FTFs living far from ISIS territory are motivated more so by a desire to bolster their Islamic identities which are often under attack by Islamophobic sectors of society, as well as the desire to help the greater Muslim community, versus being motivated for economic purposes. They are also responding to push factors at home including marginalization and discrimination. In contrast, these existential motivations are less important for those living in conflict, who felt pressure to join ISIS in order to secure food and some semblance of safety for themselves and their families. Thus, the risk of former ISIS members rejoining the group if they are released or escape from SDF detention in particular (as it is in a fragile state), even if they have been disillusioned with much of ISIS's ideology and methodology, should be a concern for military and intelligence personnel the world over. Moreover, the threat of FTFs returning to their home countries should be countered through deradicalization programs that address the vulnerabilities, influences, and motivations that drove them toward ISIS, as well as the traumas that they experienced while living under ISIS. Likewise, once rehabilitated these returnees will also need top-notch reintegration programs that help them to address the originally motivating forces that drove them into embracing terrorist ideologies in the first place.

Endnotes

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