

Destination Jihad: Italy's Foreign Fighters

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Executive Summary

The conflicts in Syria, Iraq, and Libya have attracted tens of thousands of foreign fighters, who travelled to those countries to join the ranks of the so-called Islamic State (IS) and other armed groups. Although Italy's contingent is remarkably smaller than those seen in other Western European countries, the issue of foreign fighters and the threat they may pose is certainly on the security agenda. According to official data, foreign fighters linked to Italy in various forms (not only citizens and residents) number 135 as of July 2018. In comparison, around 1,900 foreign fighters travelled from France and almost a thousand from Germany and the United Kingdom.

Most foreign fighters linked to Italy joined jihadist groups such as the so-called Islamic State, Jabhat al-Nusra (and its successors), and other smaller extremist groups. Others sided with the Free Syrian Army and minor non-jihadist formations. By July 2018, 26 foreign fighters had already returned to Europe.

The present study thoroughly analyses the profiles of 125 individuals with ties to Italy who travelled to zones of conflict since 2011, using original and exclusive information provided by the Italian Ministry of Interior that is updated to October 2017. This data enables a public and systematic investigation of Italy's foreign fighters for the first time. By studying in detail 21 individual categories of variables, several observations can be made. Namely, that Italy's contingent of foreign fighters mainly consists of male, relatively young, first-generation immigrants who were born abroad and often are in possession of a foreign citizenship, in particular from North African countries. Generally, they also come from modest economic backgrounds and enjoyed modest levels of education. Most of them can also be characterised to have weak and unstructured ties with other militants and extremist organisations.

In particular, the analysis highlights the following aspects:

- 90.4% of foreign fighters with ties to Italy (113 out of 125) are male.
- At the time of their departure, their average age was 30 years old. The youngest individual featured in the database was a 16-year-old girl living abroad, while the oldest fighter was a 52-year-old Moroccan national. It is worth noting that the list provided by the Italian Ministry of Interior does not include individuals under 14 years of age.
- In contrast to trends observed in other Western European countries, most foreign fighters linked to Italy were born abroad: respectively, 40 individuals were born in Tunisia, 26 in Morocco, 14 in Syria, 6 in Iraq, 11 in Western European countries, and 11 originated from countries in the Balkans. Only 11 individuals (8.8% of overall profiles studied) were actually born in Italy.
- With regard to citizenship—once again, in contrast with profiles seen in other Western European countries—only a minority of foreign fighters are Italian citizens: 24 individuals (accounting for 19.2% of the overall profiles), including 10 dual citizens. Most foreign fighters come from North African countries (50.4%); 16% are Syrian or

Iraqi nationals,¹ and 9.6% are citizens of the Balkan countries. Finally, the database also features a US national and a French national.

- A significant number of foreign fighters with ties to Italy are of foreign descent. First-generation immigrants (born and raised abroad) account for 66.4% of the overall contingent, including at least 3 naturalized individuals. On the other hand, second-generation immigrants account for 16.8% of total profiles.
- With respect to the individuals' place of residence, it can be argued that, in general, the foreign fighters phenomenon has mainly affected Northern Italy, especially the region of Lombardy, and to a lesser extent Central Italy. This geographical distribution mirrors Italy's broader jihadist landscape. Interestingly, unlike other Western European countries, Italy's foreign fighters do not predominantly hail from metropolises or large urban centres.
- Just 35.2% of foreign fighters with ties to Italy were married at the time of their departure.
- In terms of employment, 44.8% of them were blue-collar workers (in a broad sense), while 8% were white-collar workers, and 2.4% were students. Finally, 34.4% were unemployed.
- Information on their level of education was available for 81 individuals. 87.7% of them had a low level of education, whereas only 12.3% were deemed to enjoy a medium-high level of education.
- Converts account for 11.2% of Italy's overall foreign fighters. They appear to be overrepresented among foreign fighters, when considering the fact that they represent only a tiny part of Italy's Muslim community.
- 44% of the 125 foreign fighters had a criminal record (not necessarily in relation to extremist activities) prior to traveling to the warzone.
- 22.4% of them had been detained before departure (not necessarily in connection with extremist activities).
- At least 42.4% of overall individuals had known ties with other foreign fighters from Italy. At least 24% of them had a known connection with extremist groups in Italy or Europe.
- By far the most common destination among Italy's foreign fighters was Syria: 88.8% of the overall contingent headed there. Some 5.6% reached Libya, and 2.4% travelled directly to Iraq. Departures recorded a peak between 2013-2014.
- With respect to the foreign fighters' affiliation to armed groups on the battlefield, some of them have more than one affiliation. 76 individuals joined—at least for a certain period of time—the so-called Islamic State. 18 sided with Jabhat al-Nusra (a group which was originally affiliated with al-Qaida) or its successor groups; 5 with the Free Syrian Army; 31 fought with other smaller organizations (Jaysh al-Islam, Suleiman Fighting Company, etc.).
- Out of these 125 foreign fighters, by April 2018 at least 33.6% are reportedly dead, while 19.2% have already returned to Europe (notably, 9.6% to Italy). Besides this, at least 24% are alleged to be still in the area of conflict, although available information is quite murky.

¹ A minority of these individuals returned to their home countries to fight, so—strictly speaking—they cannot be defined as “foreign fighters”, as they are not foreigners. See the methodological note.

Introduction

In the wake of the Islamic State’s substantial military defeat and its massive territorial losses, many questions are still looming at the regional and global level regarding the future scenarios in areas once held by jihadist militias. One of the questions beleaguering the counterterrorism community worldwide has to do with the fate of the so-called “foreign fighters”, i.e. the over 40,000 combatants who came from at least 80 countries all over the world to travel to Syria and Iraq, joining the Islamic State and to a lesser, but not irrelevant degree other jihadist groups.²

This phenomenon poses a number of challenges, ranging from the interception of foreign fighters leaving Syria and Iraq, to legal and moral dilemmas concerning those who have been arrested by authorities in the region or in their countries of origin. In Europe and elsewhere, there are fears of a “blowback effect”, which is the possibility that foreign fighters could benefit from the training, experience, social status, acquaintances and contacts acquired on the battlefield to perpetrate attacks in their countries of origin.³ This is the case of the Paris–Brussels cell, which included various former foreign fighters and was responsible for the November 2015 and March 2016 attacks.⁴ Such concerns have intensified as recent estimates suggest that around 30% of European combatants have returned to their home countries.⁵ Besides this, it is feared that, as already seen in the past, jihadist veterans may turn into jihadist entrepreneurs, becoming key figures of the European jihadist scene and shaping new clusters of militants.⁶

This is not a new issue. Mobilisations inspired by other causes and ideologies occurred in the past and are still present today, like for example, the Ukrainian-Russian conflict. Moreover, if we solely focus on jihadist ideology, the phenomenon of individuals leaving Europe to join militant groups abroad dates back to the early 1980s, when the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan prompted the predecessors of the global jihadist movement to fight alongside the Afghan mujahidin. Similar mechanisms were at play during the 1990s in Bosnia and Chechnya, as well as during the 2000s, in Iraq and Somalia.

Yet, the mobilisation that began in 2011 and quickly gained momentum—first towards Syria, and then towards Iraq—possessed a distinct character when compared with past ones, from both a quantitative and a qualitative perspective. If European foreign fighters

² In particular, Joana Cook and Gina Vale. “From Daesh to ‘Diaspora’: Tracing the Women and Minors of Islamic State.” Report, *International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation (ICSR)*. July 23, 2018, 7. <https://icsr.info/2018/07/23/from-daesh-to-diaspora-tracing-the-women-and-minors-of-islamic-state/>

³ Lorenzo Vidino, “European Foreign Fighters in Syria: Dynamics and Responses,” *European View*, Vol. 13, Issue 2 (2014): 217-224. See also Thomas Hegghammer, “Should I Stay or Should I Go? Explaining Variation in Western Jihadists’ Choice between Domestic and Foreign Fighting”, *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 107, no. 1, February 2013 1-15.

⁴ See Jean-Charles Brisard and Kévin Jackson, “The Islamic State’s External Operations and the French-Belgian Nexus”, *CTC Sentinel* 9, no. 11 (December 2016), 8-15. <https://ctc.usma.edu/the-islamic-states-external-operations-and-the-french-belgian-nexus/>

⁵ See Europol, *European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2018 (TESAT 2018)*.” June 20, 2018, 26. <https://www.europol.europa.eu/activities-services/main-reports/european-union-terrorism-situation-and-trend-report-2018-tesat-2018>

⁶ Thomas Hegghammer, “The Future of Jihadism in Europe: A Pessimistic View,” *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 10, No. 6, 2016: 156-170.

taking part in earlier conflicts were some hundreds at best,⁷ those who travelled to Syria and Iraq between 2011 and 2017 were 5.000-6.000, according to the most reliable estimates.⁸ Especially worrying are the figures seen in some Western European countries, including France (approximately 1,900 foreign fighters), the United Kingdom and Germany (almost a thousand individuals in both cases), but also in countries with smaller populations, such as Belgium (around 500 combatants), Austria (around 250-300), Sweden (around 300), and the Netherlands (more than 250).⁹

Besides the bigger size difference, the mobilisation towards Syria and Iraq also features different characteristics, and fits into a new international context. In the past, the foreign fighter phenomenon was more limited and confined to specific warzone and timeframe. However, there have been numerous cases of returnees who engaged in terrorist activities upon returning to Europe. This reflects the Islamic State's view of the battlefield: it is not confined to spatial or temporal boundaries, but it is global.

Italy is not exempt from this worldwide phenomenon. On the contrary, it has traditionally played a significant role in the earlier jihadist mobilizations. For instance, during the Bosnian conflict, Egyptian and Maghrebi networks based in Lombardy acted as central hubs.¹⁰ Notably, Milan's Islamic Cultural Institute (ICI) in Viale Jenner¹¹ served as a gateway to the Balkans, allowing volunteers from all over the world to fight in defence of Bosnian Muslims. The centre's imam, an Egyptian national named Anwar Shabaan, rose to the leadership of the foreign mujahidin battalion in Bosnia. Moreover, the very same Viale Jenner network was at the root of the first jihadi-inspired suicide attack in Europe: a car bomb driven by an Egyptian once living in Milan, against a police station in Rijeka, Croatia, in 1995.¹²

Nearly ten years later, the jihadist mobilisation affected Iraq, where al-Qaeda-linked militias fought US troops and the post-Saddam Iraqi government. Although there were few fighters left from Italy, some of them became known for taking part in the first and bloodiest attacks by al-Qaeda in Iraq. A notorious case is that of Fahdal Nassim, an Algerian national who left Milan and died in the August 2003 attack on the United Nations headquarters in Baghdad, which resulted in 22 victims, including UN Special Representative Sérgio Vieira de Mello.¹³

As previously mentioned, Italy has witnessed a far smaller number of foreign fighters in relation to the Syrian-Iraqi conflict: 135 individuals, according to the latest official data

⁷ Thomas Hegghammer, "The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters: Islam and the Globalization of Jihad", *International Security*, Vol. 35, No. 3, January 4, 2011, 53-94. https://www.mitpressjournals.org/doi/10.1162/ISEC_a_00023

⁸ Among others, Europol, "European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2018 (TESAT 2018)", 26; Cook and Vale. "From Daesh to 'Diaspora': Tracing the Women and Minors of Islamic State," 14.

⁹ See Richard Barrett, "Beyond the Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Returnees". *The Soufan Group*, October 2017. <http://thesoufancenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Beyond-the-Caliphate-Foreign-Fighters-and-the-Threat-of-Returnees-TSC-Report-October-2017-v3.pdf>; Cook and Vale. "From Daesh to 'Diaspora': Tracing the Women and Minors of Islamic State."

¹⁰ Lorenzo Vidino, *Home-Grown Jihadism in Italy: Birth, Development and Radicalization Dynamics*, Foreword by Stefano Dambruoso. Milan, Italian Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI), 2014. <https://www.ispionline.it/it/EBook/vidino-eng.pdf>.

¹¹ Viale Jenner is the name of the street on which the Institute is located.

¹² Vidino, *Home-Grown Jihadism in Italy*.

¹³ Ibid.

(July 2018), which means 1/14 of France's contingent and nearly 1/4 of Belgium's. This is probably due to a variety of reasons. In particular, from a threat perspective, one relevant (indirect) reason concerns a demographic lag: unlike other Western European countries, large-scale Muslim immigration to Italy began only in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Therefore, the first wave of "second-generation Muslims" - a category which in general has been mostly affected by radicalization in Europe over the last ten to fifteen years - has only recently entered adulthood. Moreover, high-risk neighbourhoods or suburbs, like Molenbeek in Belgium, are currently not present in the country. On the other hand, in terms of the threat response, the Italian counter-terrorism system has proved itself to be effective thanks to extensive CT legislation, appropriate tools and methods, and proper organization with a high level of coordination and experienced personnel.¹⁴

Although the phenomenon is less pronounced, it is still essential to understand who Italy's foreign fighters are, where they come from, how they radicalize, their socio-economic conditions, and the interactions they entertained in Italy before leaving. This analysis aims to identify radicalisation trends that are not confined to the Syria- and Iraq-bound mobilization—which still poses a threat, given that a number of foreign fighters have returned home—but rather that will keep manifesting themselves in the coming years.

In a synergy between counterterrorism authorities and the research community, something which is common in other European countries but seldom seen in Italy, Italy's Ministry of Interior and the "Service for the Fight against Extremism and External Terrorism of the Central Directorate of the Prevention Police" (*Servizio per il Contrasto dell'Estremismo e del Terrorismo Esterno della Direzione Centrale della Polizia di Prevenzione*, DCP/UCIGOS) kindly provided the researchers of this paper with information on 125 foreign fighters linked to Italy. The data provided was collected by the Ministry of Interior with the contribution of the entire Italian counterterrorism system. When necessary, this original material was supplemented by judicial documents and, secondarily, scientific studies and news reports, always specifying the source used. By using this unique source of information, the authors have been able to analyse Italy's foreign fighter contingent in unprecedented detail.

¹⁴ Lorenzo Vidino and Francesco Marone "The Jihadist Threat in Italy: A Primer." *Italian Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI)*, November 2017. https://www.ispionline.it/sites/default/files/pubblicazioni/analisi318_vidino-marone.pdf; Francesco, Marone, "The Use of Deportation in Counter-Terrorism: Insights from the Italian Case". *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague (ICCT)*, 13 March 2017. <https://icct.nl/publication/the-use-of-deportation-in-counter-terrorism-insights-from-the-italian-case/>; Francesco Marone, "The Italian Way of Counterterrorism: From a Consolidated Experience to an Integrated Approach," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Global Counterterrorism Policy*, ed. Scott N. Romaniuk et al. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 479-494.

Methodological note

Criteria for the inclusion of individuals

As previously mentioned, this study is based on exclusive information supplied by the Ministry of Interior regarding 125 known individuals who travelled to areas of conflict (Syria, Iraq and Libya) and have a certain connection to Italy. The official list has an obvious practical role and is not based on an academic definition of “foreign fighter”. In examining the profiles of all the individuals present in this list, this study uses the “foreign fighter” expression, which has become popular in the last few years, in a broad sense. In addition, a commonly accepted definition of the term does not exist.¹⁵ Nonetheless, it is possible to take the following definition into consideration: an agent who (1) has joined, and operates within the confines of, an insurgency, (2) lacks citizenship of the conflict state or kinship links to its warring factions, (3) lacks affiliation to an official military organization, and (4) is unpaid, unlike a mercenary.¹⁶

It is important to highlight that this definition applies to the majority of the individuals in the official list, but *not to all*. Furthermore, regarding the country being travelled to, the list compiled by the Italian Ministry of Interior includes a minority of individuals (less than 20 out of 125) who cannot be considered “foreign” in the more restrictive sense, as they were natives of the state in which they fought. In fact, some of the subjects were Syrian, Iraqi or Libyan nationals who resided in Italy and simply returned to their country of origin. In other words, the official list takes into consideration the condition of country of habitual residency (with the exception of a Syrian citizen and three Iraqi citizens who did not reside in Italy) and not the more restrictive condition of country of origin.

The country of departure presents another critical point. In fact, unlike other countries, Italian authorities include all individuals who have had some degree of connection to Italy, not just Italian citizens and/or individuals residing in the country. In a few cases, the ties to Italy are rather weak: for example, there were some individuals living abroad who acquired Italian citizenship by birth (*ius sanguinis*) despite having been raised or even born abroad. In other words, the expression “foreign fighters with ties to Italy” is more appropriate than “Italian foreign fighters”.

If the term “foreign” requires a clarification for the aforementioned reasons, so does the term “fighter”. In fact, not all the people who left for the area of conflict became fighters in the literal sense: not all subjects actively took part in the hostilities. The so-called Islamic State in particular is a terrorist group, but also established a “quasi-state”, capable of enforcing control over a territory and a population of considerable size. For

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¹⁵ Alex P. Schmid and Judith Tinnies, “Foreign (Terrorist) Fighters with IS: A European Perspective.” *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism - The Hague (ICCT)*, December 2015. <https://icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/ICCT-Schmid-Foreign-Terrorist-Fighters-with-IS-A-European-Perspective-December2015.pdf>

¹⁶ Thomas Hegghammer, “The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters: Islam and the Globalization of Jihad”, *International Security*, Vol. 35, no. 3, (January 2011): 53-94 (57-59). https://www.mitpressjournals.org/doi/10.1162/ISEC_a_00023. See also David Malet, *Foreign fighters: Transnational identity in civil conflicts*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Andrea De Guttry, Francesca Capone and Christophe Paulussen (eds), *Foreign fighters under international law and beyond*. (The Hague: TMC Asser Press - Springer, 2016).

this reason, in the past few years, it was possible for people to join the organizations as “citizens” of this new “state” without necessarily carrying out military tasks. Since the proclamation of the so-called Caliphate on June 29th 2014, the organization led by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi requested that every “faithful Muslim” would fulfil their duty and immigrate to the land under his control.¹⁷ This appeal made the trip to Syria and Iraq attractive for a heterogeneous audience, including men and women of different ages and even families with children.¹⁸ Many of these volunteers effectively assumed combat roles and became fighters in a literal sense, however certainly not all of them did so.

It is also important to note that the official list does not include subjects who were less than 14 years old at the time of departure. Children and youth who travelled with family or acquaintances and were below this age threshold are thus not included.

Finally, it is also important to highlight that not every subject in the database joined a jihadist faction or a group that engaged in terrorist activities. At least 10 of these subjects, mainly Syrian nationals, fought with organizations like the Free Syrian Army, which are generally not seen as terrorist groups. On the other hand, individuals with ties to Italy who joined Kurdish-majority secular forces, such as the YPG (*Yekîneyên Parastina Gel*, “Popular Protection Units”), that fought against jihadist groups in Syria and Iraq were not included in the government sources.¹⁹ In short, a minority of the individuals examined in this work do not appear to fall under the legal definition (which is not devoid of problematic elements) of “foreign terrorist fighter” (FTF).²⁰

Geographical and temporal limitations

Based on the official list, this report only includes individuals who travelled to areas of conflict in the Middle East and North Africa where jihadist armed groups are active. Fighters linked to Italy who left for other areas of conflict like the Donbass are not included. The report includes all individuals who left for areas of conflict between 2011 (year of the outbreak of the Syrian and Libyan civil wars) and October 2017.

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¹⁷ Among others, Andrea Plebani (ed.), “New (and old) patterns of jihadism: al-Qa’ida, the Islamic State and beyond.” *Italian Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI)*, October 2, 2014.

<https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/new-and-old-patterns-jihadism-al-qaida-islamic-state-and-beyond-11099>

¹⁸ Among others, Edwin Bakker and Roel de Bont, “Belgian and Dutch Jihadist Foreign Fighters (2012–2015): Characteristics, Motivations, and Roles in the War in Syria and Iraq,” *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 27, no. 5 (2016), 837–57.

¹⁹ Tuck, Henry Tanya Silverman, and Candace Smalley, “Shooting in the Right Direction: Anti-ISIS Foreign Fighters in Syria & Iraq,” *Institute for Strategic Dialogue*, 2016. <https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/ISD-Report-Shooting-in-the-right-direction-Anti-ISIS-Fighters.pdf>

²⁰ In particular, according to UN Security Council Resolution 2178 (2014), FTFs are defined as «individuals who travel to a State other than their State of residence or nationality for the purpose of the perpetration, planning or preparation of, or participation in, terrorist acts or the providing or receiving of terrorist training, including in connection with armed conflict». Nevertheless, the resolution does not include nor refers to a definition of terrorism.

Data sources²¹

The authors of this report created a database using exclusive original information supplied by the “Service for the Fight against Extremism and External Terrorism of the Central Directorate of the Prevention Police” (*Servizio per il Contrasto dell’Estremismo e del Terrorismo Esterno della Direzione Centrale della Polizia di Prevenzione, DCP/UCIGOS*) of the Italian Ministry of Interior. The original information was updated to October 2017, with the exception of the figure on returnees which was updated to April 2018. The research does not include cases of foreign fighters with ties to Italy recorded by national authorities after October 2017 (in any case, a very small number).

When presenting the request for information to the Italian authorities, the authors of this research had submitted a list of 29 categories of individual variables, based on international literature on the subject. The exclusive information received (a total of approximately 300 pages) was in the form of police files, divided by individual, and took in consideration the list of categories requested by the authors. For confidentiality and privacy reasons, some of the names of the foreign fighters in the material supplied by Italian authorities were only reported with their initials and some details were omitted. All the initial information was examined by the research team, and where necessary, expanded and updated through the use of open source information.

Research limitations

The authors made every effort to ensure the database was as complete and accurate as possible. Nonetheless, in some cases even the counter-terrorism authorities are faced with a shortage of verified, detailed and updated information, especially on complex issues such as clandestine ties with other militants. Some variables were difficult to codify by their very nature, even when referring to primary information provided by the Italian authorities – that, obviously, were originally collected and processed for a different purpose than scientific research. For example, in some cases it was difficult to determine whether a foreign fighter had effectively been a part of a local network that was physically present in the territory (i.e., whether he/she personally interacted with other extremists in the group in a specific area, how often and in what way), before departure.

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²¹ On the problem of access to sources (especially primary ones) for the study of terrorism and radicalization, see among others, Bart Schuurman and Quirine Eijkman, “Moving terrorism research forward: The crucial role of primary sources.” *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism - The Hague (ICCT)*, June 27, 2013.
<https://www.icct.nl/download/file/Schuurman-and-Eijkman-Moving-Terrorism-Research-Forward-June-2013.pdf>

Analysis

This report analyses the profiles of the 125 “foreign fighters” linked to Italy featured in the Italian Ministry of Interior’s official list in October 2017. As shown by numerous empirical studies, there is no single, quintessential profile of foreign fighters, nor of jihadist militants in general.²² Still, as recently noted by Thomas Hegghammer, this assumption risks becoming “at best a trope and at worst a lazy excuse for not doing statistical work. *Of course*, there isn’t a single profile, but *populations* can still be described. Not all terrorists are the same, but for any given variable, there is a *median* terrorist”. As a matter of fact, some individual traits occur with greater frequency. For this very reason, Hegghammer urges the creation of new “datasets with a larger n and with better information on socioeconomic variables”.²³

This study attempts to cater to this need, providing the only systematic analysis of the profiles of Italy-related foreign fighters. This is also one of the few analyses worldwide that examines such an extensive sample of the population and with such an ample level of detail. In the following pages, 21 categories of variables are discussed. This yields a preliminary quantitative analysis of how these factors describe the Italy-related foreign fighter population. Where it was deemed meaningful, these figures are compared with data on other foreign fighter populations. Similarly, brief vignettes are provided to offer additional qualitative detail on some figures.

1. Gender

Out of 125 foreign fighters with ties to Italy, 113 (90.4% of the overall contingent) are men, while as few as 12 (i.e. 9.6%) are women (Figure 1).²⁴ Interestingly, 6 of these women (i.e., a half of them) are converts, and as many as 10 are Italian nationals (7 possessing only the Italian citizenship, and 3 being dual citizens). Moreover, unlike male foreign fighters included in the database, none of them have a criminal background or have been detained before departure, nor do they have a known history of substance abuse (more on this below).

Some of these cases of *muhajirat* (female emigrants) have been covered by news reports: for instance, it is worth remembering Maria Giulia Sergio, a convert to Islam who

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²² Among others Daan Weggemans, Edwin Bakker and Peter Grol, “Who are they and why do they go? The radicalisation and preparatory processes of Dutch jihadist foreign fighters,” *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Issue 8, No. 4 (2014): 100-110; Jasper L. De Bie, Christianne J. de Poot and Joanne P. van der Leun, “Shifting modus operandi of Jihadist foreign fighters from the Netherlands between 2000 and 2013: A crime script analysis,” *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol. 27, No. 3 (2015): 416-440. Bibi van Ginkel, and Eva Entenmann (eds), “The Foreign Fighters Phenomenon in the European Union.” *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism - The Hague (ICCT)*, April 1, 2016, 4. <https://icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/ICCT-Report-Foreign-Fighters-Phenomenon-in-the-EU-1-April-2016-including-AnnexesLinks.pdf>; Daniel H. Heinke, “German Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq: The Updated Data and Its Implications,” *CTC Sentinel* 10, No. 3, March 2017, 17. <https://ctc.usma.edu/german-foreign-fighters-in-syria-and-iraq-the-updated-data-and-its-implications/>; Lorenzo Vidino, Francesco Marone and Eva Entenmann. “Fear Thy Neighbor. Radicalization and Jihadist Attacks in the West,” *Italian Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI) –Program on Extremism at the George Washington University (PoE-GWU) – International Centre for Counter-Terrorism - The Hague (ICCT)*. June 2017, p. 77. https://www.ispionline.it/sites/default/files/pubblicazioni/radicalization_web.pdf.

²³ Thomas Hegghammer, “Revisiting the poverty-terrorism link in European Jihadism,” *Society for Terrorism Research Annual Conference*, Leiden University, 8 November 2016, 12: http://hegghammer.com/files/Hegghammer_-_poverty.pdf. Italics in original.

²⁴ Cook and Vale, “From Daesh to ‘Diaspora’: Tracing the Women and Minors of Islamic State.”

lived near Milan, and who travelled to Syria in 2014 with her new Albanian husband Aldo Kobuzi.²⁵ Her family converted to Islam too, and—persuaded by her words—sought to reach the Levantine region in 2015, however, all of them were arrested before their departure. In December 2016, Maria Giulia Sergio was sentenced to 9 years in prison by the Milan Assize Court (the sentence was confirmed in June 2018). However, she is currently still at large.

Another story that was covered by national media is that of Lara Bombonati, a woman who resided in the province of Alessandria, in Northern Italy, and converted to Islam along with her husband Francesco Cascio (who died in fighting in Syria at the end of 2016). Lara Bombonati travelled to Syria in early 2015 and is suspected of having provided logistical support to Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, by operating as a courier between Syria and Turkey. She returned to Italy in February 2017 and was arrested in June, before she could leave for Belgium. She was apparently on route to meet her future husband and travel to Syria again.

When examining data at a European level,²⁶ one notices that the proportion of female foreign fighters—which has increased over time—is a fluctuating one, currently ranging from 6% to 30% of the countries' overall contingent. On the whole Italy's percentage of *muhajirat* is in line with trends seen elsewhere in Europe—falling within the lower half of that interval of values. As a matter of fact, Europe's average percentage of female foreign fighters reaches 17%, which is higher than Italy's.²⁷

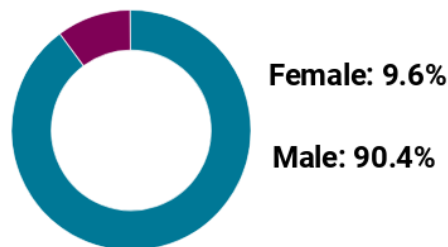


Figure 1: Gender of foreign fighters linked to Italy

2. Age

At the time of departure, the average age among foreign fighters was 30 years old (Figure 2), and most were in the 25-33 age bracket. Information is not available for 16 individuals. It is important to reiterate that the Italian authorities' list does not include individuals aged under 14. According to open sources estimates, at least 7 children travelled to warzones with their parents or acquaintances.²⁸

²⁵ In particular, Francesco Marone, "Italy's Jihadists in the Syrian Civil War". *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism - The Hague (ICCT)*, August 2016. <https://icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/ICCT-Marone-Italys-Jihadists-in-the-Syrian-Civil-War-August2016-1.pdf>

²⁶ In general, when saying "European", we refer to Member States of the European Union (EU).

²⁷ Van Ginkel and Entenmann, "The Foreign Fighters Phenomenon in the European Union," 51. The study analyzes foreign fighters from 11 countries, accounting for 80% of the EU overall contingent.

²⁸ On this topic, see among others John Horgan, Max Taylor, Mia Bloom and Charlie Winter, "From cubs to lions: A six stage model of child socialization into the Islamic State," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, Vol. 40, No. 7, September 10, 2016, 645-664.

The youngest individual featured in the list is a 16-year-old girl, daughter of the Italian convert M.G., and belonging to a family of Italian-Moroccan descent in Belgium (see Figure 3). The then-underage girl, who also holds an Italian passport, married an Algerian fighter in Syria who was acting as a local emir of the Islamic State in the North of the country. The girl returned to Belgium in 2014 and was arrested two years later at the Brussels airport with her mother, suspected to leave for Syria again. By contrast, the eldest combatant is a 52-year-old Moroccan national, A.Z., who left from Bristol, United Kingdom. The man had lived in Rome between 1986-2003, when he was affiliated with the Moroccan Islamic Youth Movement (*Jam'iyyat al-Shabiba Al-Islamiyya*). Two additional combatants, F.B. and M.Z., were also aged over 50 when they travelled to Libya. On average, Italy's foreign fighters seem to be slightly older than other countries', where most individuals fall within the 18-30 age bracket.²⁹

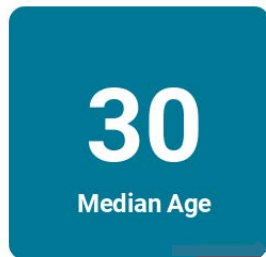


Figure 2: Italy's foreign fighters' average age at the time of departure

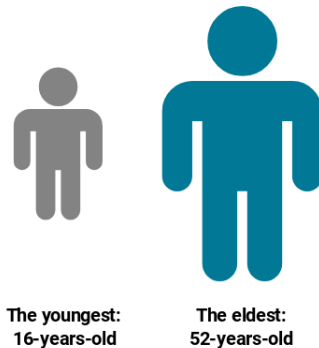


Figure 3: The youngest and eldest foreign fighters

3. Country of birth

Most of Italy's foreign fighters were born abroad (see Figure 4), mainly in Tunisia (40 individuals, that is 32% of the overall contingent) and Morocco (26 individuals, i.e. 20.8%). Only 11 people (8.8%) were born in Italy. That being said, a significant number of individuals were born in Syria (14) and Iraq (6). They travelled to their countries of birth to fight and therefore should not be categorized as "foreign fighters" strictly speaking, as they are not "foreigners".

Moreover, a non-negligible number of individuals (11) were born in other Western European countries (5 in Belgium, 3 in France, 2 in Switzerland, and 1 in Germany)—some of them being of Italian descent, at least on one parent's side. A noteworthy case

²⁹ See Van Ginkel and Entenmann. "The Foreign Fighters Phenomenon in the European Union," 51.

is that of the already mentioned family living in Belgium (composed of a Moroccan father, Italian mother, and three children), who left to join the ranks of the Islamic State. The list also includes various individuals from countries in the Balkans, such as Macedonia (4 individuals), Albania (3), Bosnia and Herzegovina (3), and Kosovo (1). Interestingly, there is also a US citizen, Brian Arthur Dempsey Sr., who was questioned by the FBI in Italy after returning from Syria, where he had fought with the Free Syrian Army.³⁰

The official list of foreign fighters linked to Italy only features a small number of individuals born in Italy. This trend is in direct contrast with the phenomenon witnessed in other Western European countries, where most fighters are born and raised on national soil.³¹ This suggests that at the time of the mobilization to the Middle East and Libya, Italian jihadism was still a phenomenon that mainly involved first-generation immigrants, unlike most other European countries. This finding is not entirely surprising given that, as was mentioned earlier, large-scale immigration to Italy from Muslim countries only began in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and therefore the first wave of “second-generation Muslims” has only recently entered adulthood.

4. Citizenship

Figure 4 clearly demonstrates that only a minority of Italy's foreign fighters (24, i.e. 19.2% of overall individuals) are Italian citizens: 14 individuals have an Italian passport, while 10 have a dual citizenship. As illustrated in the methodological note, the official list of foreign fighters with ties to Italy is not based on strict criteria, including non-Italian nationals and individuals who have not lived in Italy. Thus, Italy's contingent—which is modest in size compared to other European and Western countries—proves to be even smaller if only Italian citizens are taken into account.

Interestingly, the number of Tunisian nationals (39, excluding dual citizens) is by far higher than the number of Italian citizens. It is worth noting that Tunisia is one of the countries with the highest number of foreign fighters traveling to Syria and Iraq (at least 2,900, according to conservative estimates).³² Italy's contingent comprises numerous Moroccan nationals (21, excluding dual citizens), plus 2 Egyptian nationals and 1 Libyan. The number of foreign fighters from North African countries equals 63—which means slightly more than a half (50.4%) of the overall sample.

³⁰ On the case of Dempsey, see also Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens, Seamus Hughes and Bennet Clifford, “The Travellers: American Jihadists in Syria and Iraq,” *Program on Extremism at George Washington University*, February 2018, 51-52. <https://extremism.gwu.edu/travelers>.

³¹ Guy Van Ginkel and Eva Entenmann, “The Foreign Fighters Phenomenon in the European Union,” See also Linus Gustafsson and Magnus Ranstorp, “Swedish Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq,” *Center for Asymmetric Threat Studies, Swedish Defense University*, March 20, 2017. <https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1110355/FULLTEXT01.pdf>; Pieter Van Ostaeyen and Guy Van Vlierden, “Citizenship and Ancestry of Belgian Foreign Fighters,” *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism - The Hague (ICCT)*, June 1, 2018. <https://icct.nl/publication/citizenship-and-ancestry-of-belgian-foreign-fighters/>. Conversely, the Italian case has several similarities to the Spanish one: Fernando Reinares, “Combatientes terroristas extranjeros: comparando España con Italia,” *Real Instituto Elcano*, June 13, 2018. <https://blog.realinstitutoelcano.org/combatientes-terroristas-extranjeros-comparando-espana-con-italia/>.

³² Barrett, “Beyond the Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Returnees,” 13; Aaron Y. Zelin, “Tunisian Foreign Fighters in Iraq and Syria,” *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, November 2018. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/tunisian-foreign-fighters-in-iraq-and-syria>. According to other estimates, they are 4,000: Cook and Vale, “From Daesh to ‘Diaspora’: Tracing the Women and Minors of Islamic State,” 16.

Another 20 individuals (accounting for 16%) hail from the Middle East, specifically from Syria (14) and Iraq (6). As implied earlier, although these combatants are featured in the Italian authorities’ official list, including them in the analysis may be questionable, especially considering the traditional definition of “foreign fighter”: they cannot be seen as genuinely “foreign” as they travelled back to their country of origin.

A further 12 fighters (9.6%) are citizens of states in the Balkans. Moreover, two individuals included in the official list come from France and the United States.³³ One stateless person is also included in the list. Finally, information is not available for 3 other individuals.

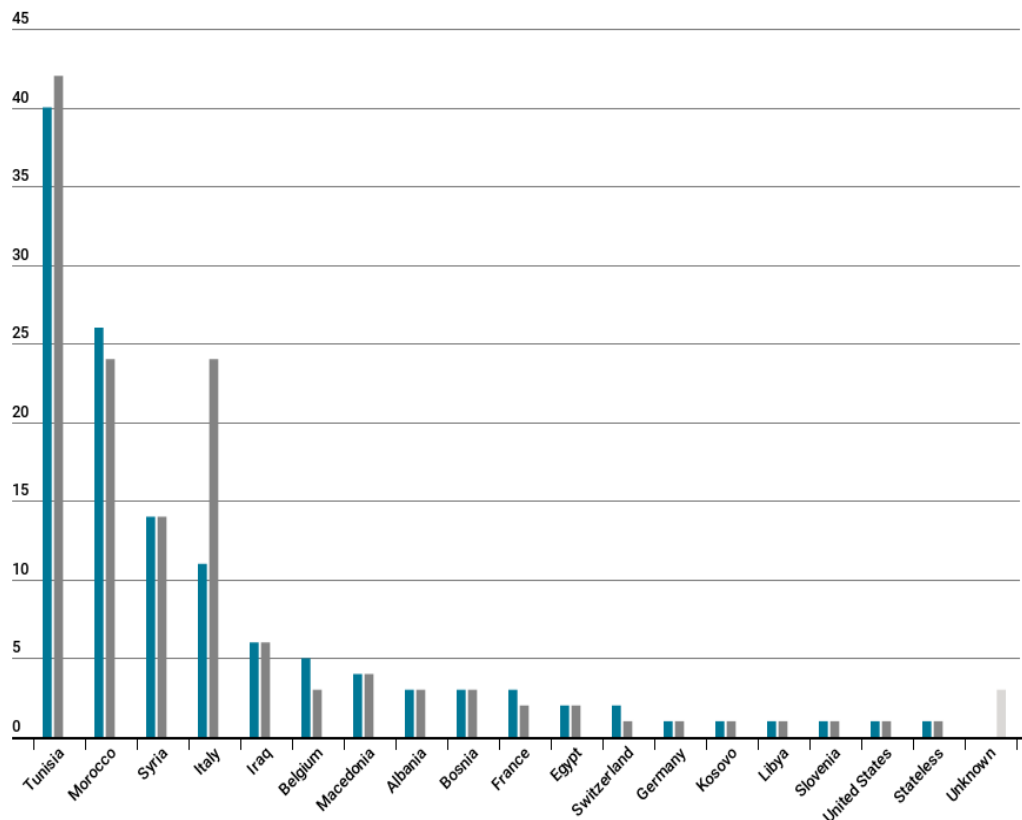


Figure 4: Country of birth and citizenship of foreign fighters linked to Italy (including dual citizens)

5. Place of residence

Information on foreign fighters with a single place of residence (in Italy and/or abroad) are available for 82 profiles out of the 125 overall individuals included in the database. A majority (66) of these 82 individuals lived in Italy, while a significant minority (16) lived abroad. With respect to individuals living abroad, 6 resided in Belgium, 3 in Switzerland, 2 in Finland, 2 in Germany, 2 in the United Kingdom, and 1 in France.

³³ See also Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens, Seamus Hughes and Bennet Clifford, “The Travelers: American Jihadists in Syria and Iraq.”

In Italy, the region which recorded the highest number of departures was Lombardy³⁴ - in Northern Italy: 26 foreign fighters resided there (39.4% of the 66 individuals who lived in Italy). Another 8 foreign fighters lived in Emilia-Romagna (12.1%); 7 in Veneto (10.6%); 3 in Piedmont - all three in Northern Italy - and Lazio - in Central Italy -, respectively (i.e. 4.5% in each case).

Broadly speaking, it appears that with regards to the individuals' place of residence, the foreign fighter phenomenon mainly affects Northern Italy, especially the region of Lombardy, and to a lesser extent Central Italy. This distribution is in line with geographical patterns traditionally displayed by Italy's jihadist scene.³⁵

In comparison with trends spotted elsewhere in Europe,³⁶ a remarkable difference can be observed. Italy's foreign fighters do not primarily hail from large cities or major urban centres, as only 12 individuals lived in cities with over 500.000 citizens, mainly in the North and the Centre of the country (5 in Milan, 3 in Turin, 2 in Roma and Genoa, none in Naples and Palermo). In several cases, individuals resided in minor towns, if not in rural areas.

6. Family status

The 125 profiles show diverse family backgrounds. With respect to marital status, over a half of them (76, amounting to 60.8%) were unmarried at the time of departure. The concept of "biographical availability" is relevant in the context of social activism, meaning "the absence of personal constraints that may increase the costs and risks of movement participation, such as full-time employment, *marriage*, and *family responsibilities*".³⁷ In other words, individuals who are married and/or have children tend to be less prone to engage in collective actions, especially risky ones, since family responsibilities are not only time and energy-consuming, but also raise the cost of the risks involved in these actions. In this regard, it is unsurprising that most of these foreign fighters are mostly young people without family responsibilities.

Interestingly, however, data available at the European level, albeit partial, displays a higher portion of married individuals compared to Italy (at least in some countries).³⁸ This indicates that biographical (in) availability may not be as significant an obstacle to participation in dangerous and time-consuming activities in every context.

7. Economic conditions and employment

³⁴ However, it should be remembered that, among Italy's twenty administrative Regions, Lombardy, with Milan as its capital, is the most populous one, with over 10 million inhabitants; overall, the country has roughly 60 million inhabitants.

³⁵ In particular, Lorenzo Vidino, *Home-Grown Jihadism in Italy: Birth, Development and Radicalization Dynamics*.

³⁶ Van Ginkel and Entenmann, "The Foreign Fighters Phenomenon in the European Union," 52.

³⁷ Doug McAdam, "Recruitment to High-Risk Activism: The Case of Freedom Summer," *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 92, no. 1 (1986), 64-90 (70, emphasis added).

³⁸ Among others, Heinke, "German Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq: The Updated Data and Its Implications."; Reinier Bergema and Marion Van San, "Waves of the Black Banner: An Exploratory Study on the Dutch Jihadist Foreign Fighter Contingent in Syria and Iraq," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, November 13, 2017.

The hypothetical link between economic conditions and radicalization has been a matter of debate for a long time. Some scholars contend that no significant link exists,³⁹ while others argue that on average, European jihadists tend to be economically deprived.⁴⁰ Unfortunately, the information available concerning the economic conditions of Italy’s foreign fighters at their time of departure is limited. However, based on what is available, there are a few examples of relatively wealthy individuals. For example, Italian-born convert Giuliano Delnevo—the first Italian foreign fighter to lose his life in Syria, in June 2013—belonged to a middle class family from the city centre of Genoa.⁴¹ Likewise, Moroccan national A.A. came from an affluent family; they worked in the textiles industry and were capable of maintaining an above-average standard of living in its country of origin.

Overall however, the available data suggests that most of Italy’s foreign fighters did not enjoy a high economic status. Their employment (before departure towards the warzone) indirectly provides a confirmation in this respect. The vast majority of them were either unemployed (43 individuals, accounting for 34.4% of the overall contingent) or blue-collar workers (56, i.e. 44.8%), at times working illegally. This category includes mechanics, peddlers, pizza makers, truck drivers, and people with occasional jobs. A further 10 foreign fighters (equal to 8%) were white-collar workers. Just 3 individuals (2.4%) were students (Figure 5).

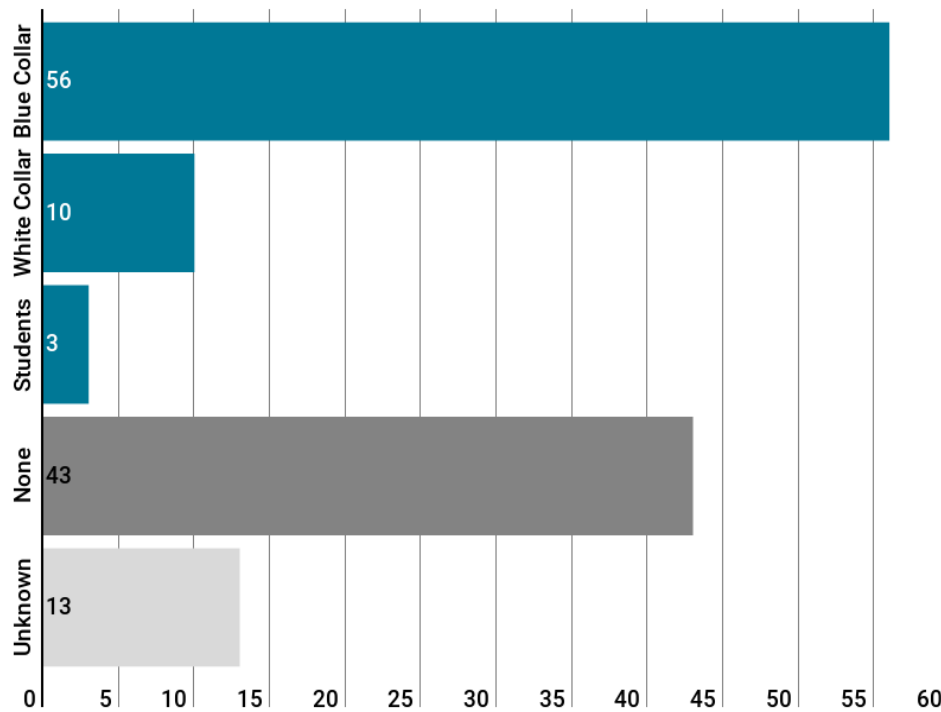


Figure 5: Employment status of foreign fighters linked to Italy

8. Education

³⁹ For instance, see Alan B. Krueger, *What Makes a Terrorist: Economics and the Roots of Terrorism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008.

⁴⁰ Hegghammer, “Revisiting the poverty-terrorism link in European Jihadism”.

⁴¹ Vidino, *Home-Grown Jihadism in Italy: Birth, Development and Radicalization Dynamics*; Marone, “Italy’s Jihadists in the Syrian Civil War”.

Information on foreign fighters' education is available for 81 individuals out of 125. For the purposes of analysis, education levels have been grouped in three categories:

- Low-level education: attendance of elementary (*scuola elementare* in Italian) and middle school (*scuola media*);
- Medium-level education: attendance of high school (*scuola superiore*);
- High-level education: attendance of university courses or post-secondary education.

Most of the individuals in the dataset have a low education level (71 cases, accounting for 87.7% of the 81 profiles with available information; see Figure 6). Excluding unavailable data, the number of foreign fighters with an intermediate or high education level is modest—barely 10, including two Italian-born converts, Giuliano Delnevo and Maria Giulia Sergio. The former attended the University of Genoa to study History, while the latter was pursuing a degree in Biotechnology at the University of Milan. Neither actually obtained a university degree.

Other individuals with a medium to high education level were B.H., an Albanian national born in 1985, who was awarded a Bachelor's Degree in Economics, and T.K.N.G., who attended an Institute of Design in Turin.

On the whole, education patterns seen among Italy's foreign fighters seem to be in tune with trends spotted in other European countries, where combatants have a lower education level in comparison with the general population.⁴²

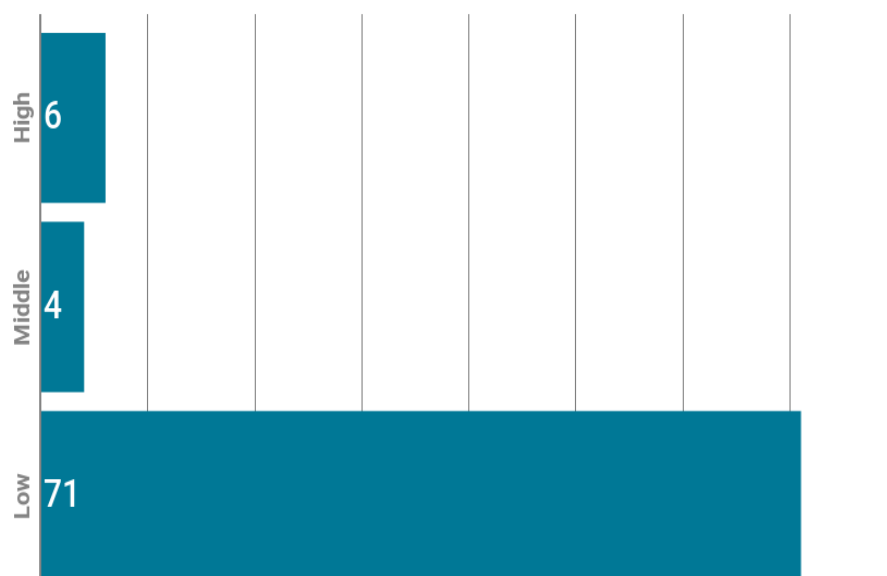


Figure 6: Education levels of foreign fighters linked to Italy

9. Converts

⁴² See among others, Hegghammer, "Revisiting the poverty-terrorism link in European Jihadism"; Arie Perliger and Daniel Milton, "From Cradle to Grave: The Lifecycle of Foreign Fighters in Iraq and Syria," *CTC Sentinel*, November 2016, 16. <https://ctc.usma.edu/app/uploads/2016/11/Cradle-to-Grave2.pdf>; Bakker and de Bont, "Belgian and Dutch Jihadist Foreign Fighters (2012–2015): Characteristics, Motivations, and Roles in the War in Syria and Iraq".

At least 14 fighters linked to Italy (representing 11.2% of the total) were not Muslim originally, but converted to Islam. The figure, which may seem scant at first, is significant considering that, according to available data (even if merely indicative), converts to Islam in Italy number approximately 80,000 and represent circa 3% of the 2.6 million Muslims residing in the country.⁴³

This ratio fits with what several studies on Western jihadists and foreign fighters have demonstrated; namely, that converts tend to be over-represented in extremist milieus.⁴⁴ In other words, the proportion of converts among jihadists (even if still a minority) is greater than the proportion of converts among the overall Muslim population of a country. For example, converts make up around 12-16% of the German foreign fighters contingent and 23% of the French ones, despite the fact that in both countries converts account for merely 4% of the Muslim population.⁴⁵

Another interesting element among the Italy-related convert foreign fighters is their gender. Of the 14 new Muslims present in the database, six of them are women (equal to 42.8% of the total), a noteworthy figure when considering the fact that out of 125 foreign fighters with ties to Italy, only 12 are women (equal to 9.6%).

Finally, it is worth pointing out that none of the 14 “new Muslims” had a criminal record or had served time in prison prior to leaving for the conflict areas; furthermore, none made use of illegal substances prior to their departure.



Figure 7: Foreign fighters linked to Italy who converted to Islam

⁴³ Rossana Miranda, “Islam, chi (e quanti) sono i convertiti in Italia,” *Formiche*, 2016, <http://www.formiche.net/2016/01/islam-convertiti-italia/>.

⁴⁴ Bart Schuurman, Peter Grol and Scott Flower, “Converts and Islamist Terrorism: An Introduction,” *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism - The Hague (ICCT)*, June 17, 2016. <https://icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/ICCT-Schuurman-Grol-Flower-Converts-June-2016.pdf>. See also, among others, Sam Mullins, “Re-Examining the Involvement of Converts in Islamist Terrorism: A Comparison of the US and UK,” *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 9, Issue 6 (2015): 72-84; Lorenzo Vidino and Seamus Hughes, “ISIS in America: From Retweets to Raqqa,” *Program on Extremism at George Washington University*, December 2015. <https://extremism.gwu.edu/isis-america>.

⁴⁵ Schuurman, Grol and Flower. “Converts and Islamist Terrorism: An Introduction”.

10. Online presence and IT skills

The importance of the internet (in various forms) in processes of radicalization is well known.⁴⁶ According to available information, at least 58 foreign fighters (46.4% of the total) had an online presence (Figure 8). Unfortunately, there are limited details available on their actual activities, roles and connections on the web and what platforms and channels they used. It seems reasonable to assume that many other individuals included in the database were active online, even if their activity could not be verified by the currently available data. Based on the overall European and Italian jihadist scenes of the past few years, it is evident that the cases of radicalization in which a web-related component is not present (even in terms of occasional viewing of propaganda) are exceptions.

Most foreign fighters with links to Italy were simply viewers of online jihadist material. However, some were involved in the “independent” production of more or less original content. For example, the young Meriem Rehaily, who lived in the province of Padua (North-Eastern Italy), had good IT skills, and was indicated by Italian Authorities as being responsible for the spread of appeals to attack 10 Italian police officers through several Twitter accounts.⁴⁷ Furthermore, one of these accounts had also shared a document that called for the “conquest of Rome”.⁴⁸

Anas El Abboubi, who left from the province of Brescia (not far from Milan) in 2013 to join the group which would later adopt the name Islamic State, had created a YouTube channel and at least two blogs named “Sharia4Italy” and “Banca Islamica” (Islamic Bank). As the name of the first blog suggests, the young man of Moroccan origin had attempted to open the Italian wing of the transnational movement Sharia4,⁴⁹ albeit without success.⁵⁰

Another interesting case is that of Giuliano Delnevo. The young Genoese convert had his own YouTube channel and was the creator of several pro-Islamist Facebook groups. Delnevo’s social media accounts are particularly interesting due to the creative (even surprising) combination of jihadist symbolism with elements typical of Western culture. For example in one instance, Delnevo used an image of a graffiti that portrayed Osama Bin Laden next to atheist revolutionary Che Guevara, as his profile picture.⁵¹

⁴⁶ Among others, see Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens and Nick Kaderbhai, “Research Perspectives on Online Radicalisation: A Literature Review, 2006–2016,” *The International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation (ICSR) - VOX-Pol*, May 3, 2017. <http://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/ResearchPerspectivesonOnlineRadicalisation.pdf>

⁴⁷ Marone, “Italy’s Jihadists in the Syrian Civil War”.

⁴⁸ Regarding references on Rome in jihadist propaganda, Francesco Marone and Marco Olimpio. ““Conquisteremo la vostra Roma”. I riferimenti all’Italia e al Vaticano nella propaganda dello Stato Islamico.” *Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale*. February 27, 2017. <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/we-will-conquer-your-rome-italy-and-vatican-islamic-states-propaganda-19748>

⁴⁹ Lorenzo Vidino, “Sharia4: From Confrontational Activism to Militancy,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* no. 9 (April 2015), 2–16.

⁵⁰ Tribunale di Brescia – Sezione Giudice per le indagini preliminari, “Ordinanza di applicazione della misura cautelare di custodia in carcere nei confronti di EL ABBOUBI Anas”, June 10, 2013. [Court of Brescia, Pre-trial detention order]. See Lorenzo Vidino, *Home-Grown Jihadism in Italy: Birth, Development and Radicalization Dynamics*; Francesco Marone, “Italy’s Jihadists in the Syrian Civil War”.

⁵¹ In particular, Matteo Vergani, “Neo-jihadist prosumers and Al Qaeda single narrative: the case study of Giuliano Delnevo,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 37, no. 7 (2014), 604–617.

Another particularly notable case related to online activity, albeit post-departure in this instance, is that of Ahmed Taskour. This Moroccan fighter, who left from the province of Milan with his family in December 2014, appeared, with his son (a minor at the time), in an official video of the Islamic State - *And Verily Our Soldiers Will be Victorious* -, published soon after the November 13, 2015 attacks in Paris, in what appears to be the only case of a foreign fighter linked to Italy appearing in official Islamic State propaganda.



Figure 8: Known online presence of foreign fighters linked to Italy

11. Criminal background

A remarkable proportion of European jihadists have a criminal background, or have been incarcerated at a certain point of their life before becoming involved in extremism and terrorism.⁵² In reference to the criminal backgrounds of jihadists, the terror-crime nexus – meaning a link between the criminal world and terrorism – at an *individual* level, has been heavily discussed by experts. It would be misleading to simply talk about a causal relation between the two, but rather it is important to highlight the connection between the recruitment pools of these two spheres of illegal activities. Factors such as “the need for redemption” of subjects with criminal backgrounds, the receptivity of some of these individuals to jihadist ideology, as well as the potential to transfer operational skills from criminal to terrorist activities have been suggested as key explanatory variables for this nexus.⁵³

With regard to foreign fighters with ties to Italy, the proportion of people who had a criminal record *before* departing for the area of conflict almost equals that of subjects who had a clean record: in 55 cases (equal to 44% of the total) the individuals examined had a criminal record, while in 67 cases (53.6%) individuals had no priors. In 3 cases it was not possible to determine this aspect. The types of criminal records of the foreign fighters are varied: some subjects were already known for terrorist and subversive activities (at least 9), others instead had priors for the production and selling of drugs, theft, robbery, illegally entering the country, domestic violence, etc. At the European level, the data does not appear to be homogeneous for reasons that are still unclear. While in some countries only a limited amount of fighters had a criminal record, in others the phenomenon was more pronounced.⁵⁴

⁵² See Vidino, Marone and Entenmann, "Fear Thy Neighbor. Radicalization and Jihadist Attacks in the West", 57-58.

⁵³ In particular, Rajan Basra and Peter R. Neumann, "Criminal Pasts, Terrorist Futures: European Jihadists and the New Crime-Terror Nexus," *The International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation (ICSR)*, 2016. <http://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Criminal-Pasts-Terrorist-Futures.pdf>

⁵⁴ Van Ginkel and Entenmann. "The Foreign Fighters Phenomenon in the European Union", 52; Federal Criminal Police Office, Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution and the Hesse Information and Competence Centre Against

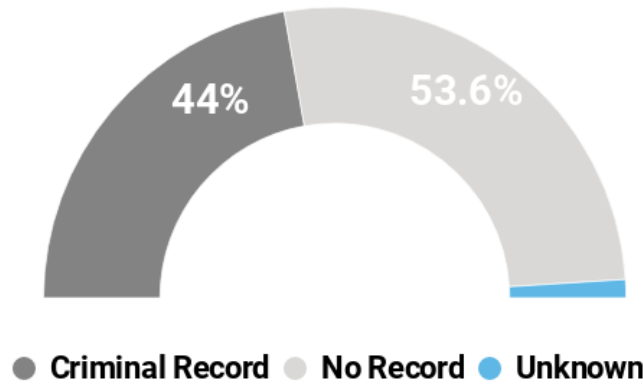


Figure 9: Criminal backgrounds of the foreign fighters linked to Italy

12. Prior incarceration

Another important aspect of the crime-terror nexus is the presence of militants who were former convicts. Several studies that have examined the jihadist phenomenon in the West have highlighted the importance of this aspect. For example, a 2017 report on jihadist terrorist attacks in Europe and North America revealed that approximately one third of the 65 attackers had spent time in prison before committing an attack.⁵⁵

In some cases, prisons can serve as breeding grounds for radicalization and recruitment, where already radicalized subjects can establish or strengthen connections with other extremists, while also spreading jihadist ideology to potential new recruits.⁵⁶ With regard to the foreign fighters with links to Italy, 28 (22.4% of the total) had been incarcerated at some point *prior* to their departure (Figure 10). In 2 cases (1.6%) it was not possible to determine whether the individuals had been incarcerated prior to or following their time as foreign fighters.

A rather noteworthy case is that of a militant named Moez Ben Abdelkader Ben Ahmed al-Fezzani (also known as “Abu Nassim”), a key figure in the Tunisian-Libyan jihadist scene, and known recruiter in Italy. Fezzani first entered Italy in 1989, settling in Milan, where he dealt small quantities of drugs and eventually left in order to go fight in Bosnia. Following his Balkan experience, he briefly returned to Italy before departing once more in 1997 for Pakistan, where he was arrested for falsifying his visa but was released after a brief period of detention. In the early 2000s, he was captured in Afghanistan and was detained for terrorism-related charges in the US detention centres of Bagram (near Kabul) and then later presumably in Guantánamo, after which he was extradited to Italy

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 Extremism, “Analysis of the background and process of radicalization among persons who left Germany to travel to Syria or Iraq based on Islamist motivations,” 2016, 16.

⁵⁵ Vidino, Marone, and Entenmann, “Fear Thy Neighbor. Radicalization and Jihadist Attacks in the West,” 58-59.

⁵⁶ Latest official data indicate that in Italy detainees who are classified as being at risk of radicalization are 506, of whom 242 are labelled as being at the “highest risk level”: see “Relazione sull’amministrazione della giustizia – anno 2017. Inaugurazione dell’Anno Giudiziario 2018.” Relazione del Ministero sull’amministrazione della giustizia - Dipartimento dell’Amministrazione Penitenziaria, January 2018. [Report on the penitentiary administration, Italian Ministry of Justice], 27.

in 2009.⁵⁷ In 2012 Fezzani was acquitted of his charges in Italy, but was deported by Italian authorities to Tunisia for national security reasons. With the start of the Tunisian Revolution, al-Fezzani became a high ranking member of the Salafi-jihadist group Ansar al-Shari’a in Tunisia (AST) and in 2013, he travelled to Syria, where he first joined Jabhat al-Nusra and later the Islamic State. In 2014 he returned to Libya, and is suspected to have been one of the plotters behind the 2015 attacks on the Bardo Museum in Sousse, Tunisia. He was finally arrested in November 2016 in Sudan and was handed over to Tunisian authorities.⁵⁸



Figure 10: Incarceration of foreign fighters linked to Italy

13. Illegal substance abuse

Among the 125 foreign fighters analysed, at least 24 (19.2% of the total) were known for having used illegal substances in the period prior to their departure (Figure 11). The use (and involvement in the selling and trafficking) of drugs among fighters who left Europe to fight in Syria and Iraq, as well as among jihadists who carried out attacks in the West has been observed quite frequently. As an already mentioned 2017 report found, around a fourth of the attackers had a known history of substance abuse.⁵⁹ There are various indications of points of contact between the jihadist extremism in the West and petty-crime, particularly with regards to the use (and dealing) of narcotics. The Islamic State (more so than other groups in the past) aimed at the recruitment of people with a history of substance abuse who may have been looking for an opportunity of “redemption” through a radical change in lifestyle.



Figure 11: Illegal substance abuse by foreign fighter linked to Italy

⁵⁷ The GPSC is considered as a precursor to Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM); it is a group which rose in 1998 out of the ashes of the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) of Algeria.

⁵⁸ The reconstruction of Fezzani’s past was elaborated with information from the ISPI database, judicial documents and other open source information. See also Aaron Y. Zelin, “The Others: Foreign Fighters in Libya,” *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, January 2018.

⁵⁹ Vidino, Marone and Entenmann. "Fear Thy Neighbor. Radicalization and Jihadist Attacks in the West."

14. Mental Disorders

The possibility of a nexus between mental disorders and jihadist terrorism or militancy has also received considerable attention recently.⁶⁰ It remains a complex and delicate topic, in part because clear and detailed information regarding the mental health of these subjects as collected and analysed first-hand by specialists is usually not available.⁶¹

Among the foreign fighters with ties to Italy, only one individual appears to have had a known history of psychological disorders at the moment of departure. It is not possible, however, to exclude with certainty that there may have been other similar, unrecorded cases. The subject in question is Francesco Cascio, born in Erice, Sicily, in 1980. Cascio, who converted to Islam along with his wife Lara Bombonati, was admitted to a facility specialized in neuropsychiatry and neurology in Palermo in 2010, and in 2011 to the Department of mental health in the town of Alcamo, Sicily. In 2013, upon finishing his treatment, Cascio moved to London in search of a job but ultimately failed to find one. The following year he moved to Turkey, where he remained until 2016, before eventually crossing the border with Syria and joining the group Hay'at Tahrir al Sham, where he died later that year.

15. Local Networks

Empirical research has demonstrated that levels of radicalization often vary within a particular territory. Firstly, some countries experienced a degree of mobilization that was greater than others; secondly, the level of mobilization often differed within individual countries as some cities or areas were more affected than others.⁶² Furthermore, such differences of radicalisation levels are not necessarily due to varying structural-level factors such as socio-economic conditions. In order to explain these differences among geographical areas, it can be useful to look at the presence or absence of so-called radicalization hubs.⁶³

Numerous studies have confirmed that the process of radicalisation is often a result of direct, offline, interpersonal relationships, combined with links crafted in the virtual online sphere.⁶⁴

⁶⁰ See, among others, Paul Gill and Emily Corner, "There and back again: The study of mental disorder and terrorist involvement." *American Psychologist*, Vol. 72, No. 3, April, 2017, 231-241.

⁶¹ See Christophe Paulussen, Janne Nijman and Karlien Lismont, "Mental Health and the Foreign Fighter Phenomenon: A Case Study from the Netherlands," *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism - The Hague (ICCT)*. March 2017. <https://icct.nl/publication/mental-health-and-the-foreign-fighter-phenomenon-a-case-study-from-the-netherlands/>

⁶² For references on jihadist foreign fighters see, among others Bakker and De Bont, "Belgian and Dutch Jihadist Foreign Fighters (2012–2015): Characteristics, Motivations, and Roles in the War in Syria and Iraq.;" Gustafsson and Ranstorp, "Swedish Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq.;" Arturo Varvelli, (ed.) *Jihadist Hotbeds: Understanding Local Radicalisation Processes*, Italian Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI) & European Foundation for Democracy, 2016.

⁶³ Radicalization hubs refer to clusters, based on offline interactions within social groups or networks of radicals, which are physically concentrated in a particular area: Vidino, Marone and Entenmann, "Fear Thy Neighbor. Radicalization and Jihadist Attacks in the West."

⁶⁴ Vidino, Marone and Entenmann, "Fear Thy Neighbor. Radicalization and Jihadist Attacks in the West". See also, among others, Anja Dalgaard-Nielsen, "Violent Radicalization in Europe: What We Know and What We Do Not Know," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Vol. 33, No. 9, (16 August, 2010): 797-814; Sean Reynolds and Mohammed M. Hafez, "Social Network Analysis of German Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq," *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 14 February 2017, 1-26;

In particular, radicalisation is often a social phenomenon characterized by a strong group element, which evolves within small networks of individuals who influence and support each other. The evolution of these small “cells” can either be centred around organized networks (such as militant Salafi groups, radical mosques) or charismatic figures. However, they can also occur in social groups which lack a formal structure, and are made up of friends, family members or acquaintances.⁶⁵

In general, information regarding the presence of local offline networks tends to be incomplete and partial, making it difficult to reconstruct the activities of the cells and carry out quantitative analyses. However, also through the use of open source information, it was possible to track and study some local offline networks, which were composed of foreign fighters and other militants.

One of the most interesting cases is that of a network that was active in northern Lombardy, and which also had links with the Canton of Ticino, Switzerland.⁶⁶ The dual Italian-Moroccan citizen Mohamed Koraichi, who left Lombardy with his family in February 2015, was in contact with two jihadist sympathizers in his area: Abderrahim Moutaharrik and Abderrahmane Khacia. Koraichi had attempted to help the two men reach Syria before they were arrested in April 2016. Khachia and Moutaharrik were respectively the friend and brother of Oussama Khachia, a foreign fighter who resided in the province of Varese and who had left in 2015 after being deported from Italy. Oussama, who died in Syria in 2015, had established contacts with a group led by an imam from Como, who was tied to a recruitment network based in the Canton of Ticino, which had aided his departure to Syria. Furthermore, the parents of the Khachia brothers were also deported for national security reasons in May 2016.

A similar cell was active in the rural provinces of Belluno and, to a lesser extent, of Pordenone (in north-eastern Italy). Among the members of the network were at least three foreign fighters from the database: the Macedonian Munifer Karamaleski, the Bosnian Ismar Mesinovic and the Slovenian R.Z. The network was in contact with notorious Bosnian radical imam Bilal Bosnic, who was arrested in his home country in 2014.

Interestingly, at least 4 foreign fighters with ties to Italy had attended the mosque of San Donà di Piave (a town of less than 50,000 inhabitants, near Venice) prior to their departure.

Despite its smaller scale in the country, the presence of (offline) radicalization hubs in certain areas can explain the uneven geographical distribution of the phenomenon in Italy, as well.

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 Francesco Marone, "Ties That Bind: Dynamics of Group Radicalisation in Italy's Jihadists Headed for Syria and Iraq," *The International Spectator*, Vol. 52, no. 3 (June 2017): 48-63.

⁶⁵ Vidino, Marone and Entenmann, "Fear Thy Neighbor. Radicalization and Jihadist Attacks in the West."

⁶⁶ Tribunale di Milano – Sezione Giudice per le indagini preliminari, "Ordinanza di applicazione della misura cautelare di custodia in carcere nei confronti di KORAICHI Mohamed, BRIGNOLI Alice, KORAICHI Wafa, MOUTAHARRIK Abderrahim, BENCHARKI Salma, KHACHIA Abderrahmane", 19 April 2016 [Court of Milan, Pre-trial detention order].

16. Ties between foreign fighters from Italy

According to available information (Figure 12), at least 53 individuals (equal to 42.2% of the total) had some sort of known connection to other foreign fighters within our sample. In many cases, these ties between foreign fighters can be traced back to personal relationships that existed prior to the individuals' jihadist militancy, and that were established in informal small group settings.⁶⁷

Some were tied by friendship, as was the case of Monsef El Mkhayar and Tarik Aboulala, who met in a shelter for unaccompanied minors in the Province of Milan. After having engaged in jihadist proselytism inside their shelter, the two teens left Italy on January 17th 2015, to join the Islamic State. Aboulala died in combat in April 2016, while the current whereabouts of El Mkhayar are unknown; however, towards the end of 2016 he reportedly had expressed willingness to return to Europe.

In other cases, connections between foreign fighters were based on family or marital ties. The couple Lara Bombonati and Francesco Cascio left for Syria in the first months of 2015, in order to join Jabhat al-Nusra. There were also entire family units. For example, Mohamed Koraichi and his wife Alice Brignoli, an Italian convert, moved to Syria from the Province of Lecco (not far from Milan) in February 2015, with their three young children. In other instances, the relationships were between father and son. For example, in one case, a Tunisian man, F.B., left for Libya with his two sixteen-year-old sons. F.B. was already considered a key figure of the Mosque of Varese (near Milan). In the past, F.B. had participated in armed conflicts in Bosnia and Afghanistan, and had been charged with terrorism-related offenses.

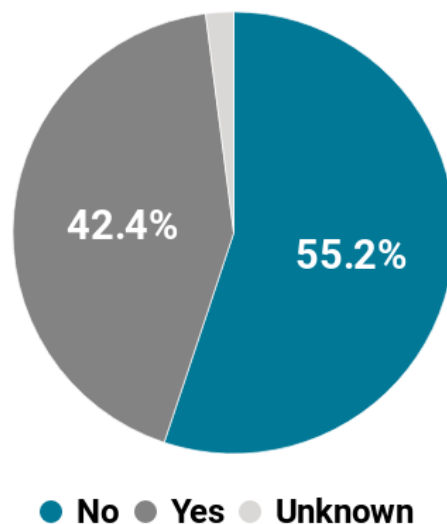


Figure 12: Ties to other foreign fighters from Italy

⁶⁷ In particular, Francesco Marone, "Ties That Bind: Dynamics of Group Radicalisation in Italy's Jihadists Headed for Syria and Iraq," See also Reynolds and Hafez, "Social Network Analysis of German Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq."

17. Connections to extremist groups in Italy and Europe

Along with the links to other foreign fighters, at least 30 individuals (equal to 24% of the total) had some sort of known connection to other extremist groups in Italy and Europe (Figure 13). When analysing this variable, a certain degree of caution is required, as it is at times difficult to come across accurate and verified information.

Some of these foreign fighters held key positions in jihadist organizations - none of them being Italian citizens, however. For example, F.B., the Tunisian citizen born in 1964, held different positions (fighter, recruiter, logistical facilitator) on a national and European scale, as well as in war zones where jihadist armed groups were active. Another noteworthy case is that of a vast transnational network named *Rawti Shax* or *Didi Nwe* (in Kurdish “towards the mountain” and “new course”, respectively) which was dismantled in South Tyrol / Alto Adige (Northern Italy) in November 2015. The cell was led by Najmaddin Faraj Ahmad, also known as “Mullah Krekar”, founder of the radical Islamist group Ansar al-Islam, who is currently serving time in a Norwegian prison. The group included at least one foreign fighter with ties to Italy: a Kosovar man named Eldin Hodza.

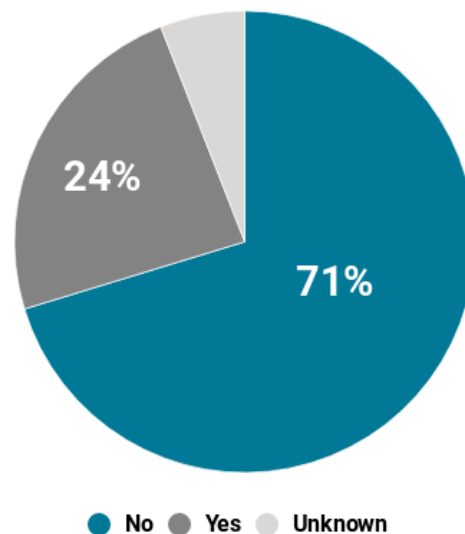


Figure 13: Connection of foreign fighters linked to Italy with extremist groups in Italy and Europe

18. Destinations and Departure Period

Foreign fighters with ties to Italy travelled to three different countries in which armed groups were active. The most “popular” (initial) destination was Syria, where 111 people (equal to 88.8% of the total) went. A smaller contingent, made up of at least seven individuals made its way to Libya, while at least three people went directly to Iraq (Figure 14). Information regarding 4 individuals is unavailable. With regards to the departure period (Figure 15), the peak was registered between 2013 and 2014, during which 31 people left per year. In particular, the semester between July 1st and December 31st 2013 – before the proclamation of the Caliphate (June 29th, 2014) – registered 17 departures.

It is also important to note that not all 125 foreign fighters with ties to Italy left for the areas of conflict directly from Italy. While at least 44 departed from the country, information regarding the country of departure for 55 fighters is unavailable.

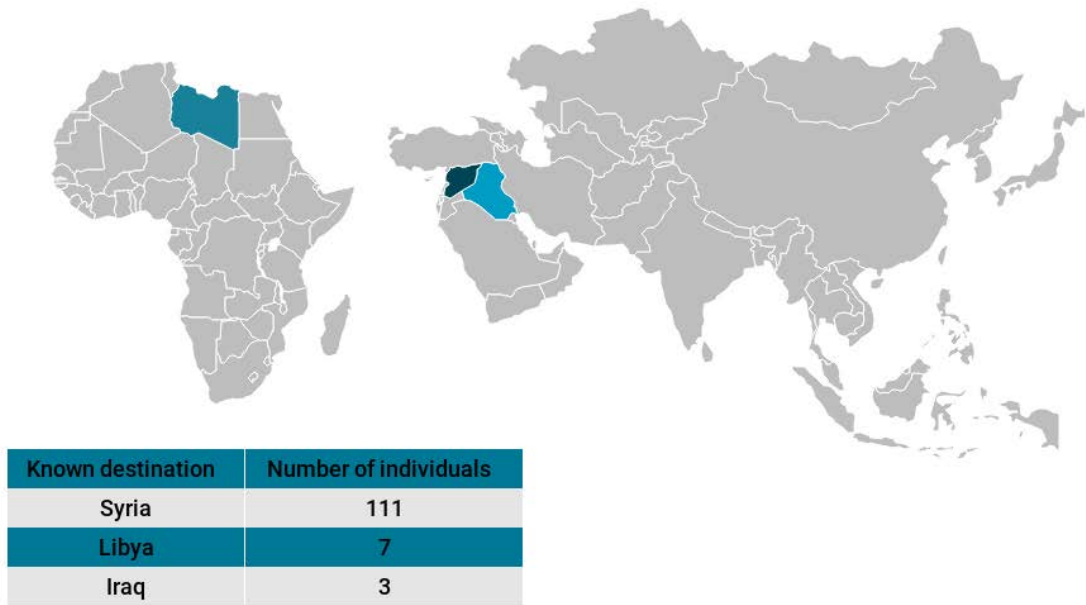


Figure 14: Known destinations of foreign fighters linked to Italy

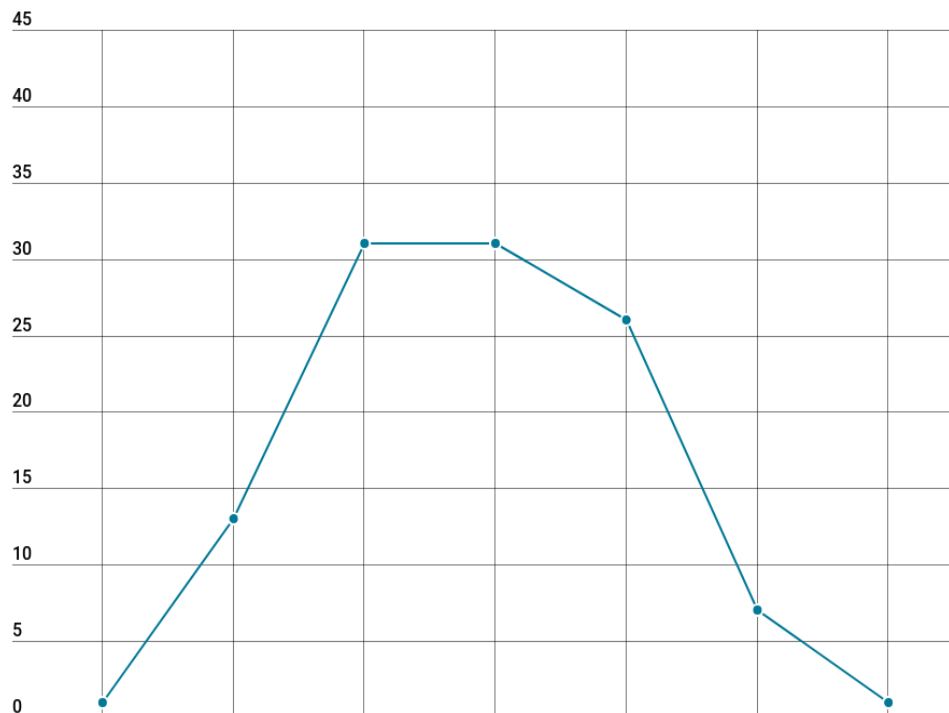


Figure 15: Known year of departure of foreign fighters linked to Italy

19. Role in the conflict area

Most studies regarding foreign fighters do not provide much information regarding the roles of each militant in the conflict area. The database used for this study, however, provides details regarding the roles of all the 125 foreign fighters with ties to Italy, albeit with some possible limits due to the obvious difficulty in finding information in the context of complex civil wars.

According to available information, the majority of foreign fighters with ties to Italy (96, equal to 76.8% of the total) assumed combat roles within the ranks of an armed group. Of these subjects, 6 also assumed recruitment, logistical and training roles. Not surprisingly, these 96 fighters were all males, as traditionally jihadist groups have not allowed women to take part in combat. As was previously mentioned, some *muhajirat* were nonetheless employed in important positions in their respective armed groups: for example, it is believed that Lara Bombonati was involved in logistical activity as a runner/courier.

Some male fighters also assumed important organizational positions in the area of conflict. For example, according to evidence collected by Italian authorities (updated until October 2017), the Tunisian N.C., who resided in Italy between 1997 and 2010, covered a key role within the Islamic State. Prior to his trip to Syria in the first months of 2014, he had already served as a military guide and recruiter in the cities of Tunis and Bizerte, in his home country, succeeding in convincing people to follow him to Syria. In another instance, O.D., a Macedonian citizen who resided in the province of Aquila (Central Italy), became a key figure in the Islamic State and was reportedly part of the headquarters staff of a well-known Georgian militant.

20. Affiliation in the area of conflict

Determining the affiliation of each individual in the area of conflict is a difficult task, especially when considering the complexity of the Syrian theatre, in which a myriad of groups and factions are in a constant flux, following splinters and mergers and the creation and dissolution of sometimes fleeting alliances.

Despite the complexity and fluidity of the scenario, it is nonetheless possible to attempt to outline some traits which characterize the Italy-linked contingent. In some instances, multiple affiliations were registered, indicating a change in affiliation of the fighter. Overall, the vast majority of the individuals in the database joined jihadist groups.⁶⁸ More precisely, 76 individuals were, at least for a certain period, affiliated to the Islamic State (IS), while 18 joined Jabhat al-Nusra (JAN) / Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) (and other designations).⁶⁹ Another 5 individuals joined the Free Syrian Army (FSA), while 31 foreign

⁶⁸ At least ten subjects had multiple affiliations to different armed groups.

⁶⁹ "Jabhat al-Nusra" (JAN) was the Syrian offshoot of al-Qaeda. However, in the past two years, the group transformed, switching its name and undergoing some changes: first in July 2016, when it assumed the name "Jabhat Fateh al-Sham" (JFS) and formally cut its ties with the core al-Qaeda leadership, and later in January 2017 it started operating under the name "Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham" (HTS). While taking these developments into consideration, in counting the affiliations of the foreign fighters, this study put together JAN and its successors into a single bloc (without differentiating between

fighters operated in other groups (such as Jaysh al-Islam, Suleiman Fighting Company and others).⁷⁰ Finally, there is no information available regarding the affiliation of 6 individuals (Figure 16).

A particularly interesting case is that of the previously mentioned a family of Tunisian nationals, resident in the province of Varese. Both the father, F.B., and his two sons travelled to Libya in respectively November 2015 and the first months of 2016. The men were affiliated with the Islamic State, although the father also had a second affiliation with the Libyan Islamic Combat Group. Furthermore, the father had previous jihadist experience as he had participated in the Bosnian and Afghan conflicts, and had acted as a recruiter with a logistical role. The man was later arrested by Tunisian authorities in November 2016, while his two sons reportedly died in Libya.

As for the other armed groups, a Syrian cell that was active in Lombardy mainly fought with the Free Syrian Army and the Suleiman Fighting Company (and in the case of A.C., Jabhat al-Nusra as well).

Another noteworthy profile is that of E.W., who lived in Milan and left for Syria in the first few months of 2012, where he reportedly joined the Salafi group Afnad al-Sham.⁷¹ According to available information, E.W. was active both as a combatant, as a propaganda producer and as a sorter of funds arriving from Italy.

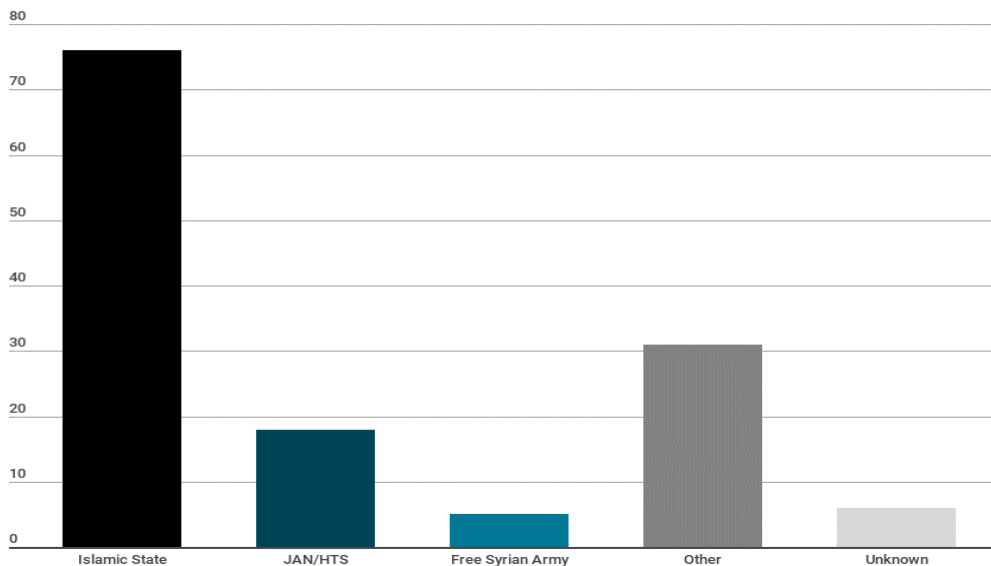


Figure 16: Affiliation of the foreign fighters linked to Italy in the areas of conflict (including multiple affiliations)

21. Current situation

JAN, JFS and HTS), for the sake of simplicity. Similarly, the Islamic State (officially proclaimed on June 29, 2014) and its “predecessors” – The Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) – were all grouped under a single category (“Islamic State”).

⁷⁰ Some of these groups, categorized under “other groups” may have converged (either completely or in part) with other organizations (such as JAN and its successors), however these developments will not be taken into consideration as they would present various methodological problems. In analyzing the affiliations of the foreign fighters, the group joined at the moment of arrival in the areas of conflict (and its relative name) is taken into consideration. The only (partial) exception to this rule is relative to the coding of two main organizations, the Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra, since as previously mentioned, their “evolution” was relatively linear.

⁷¹ Aaron Lund, “The Afnad Al-Sham Islamic Union,” *Carnegie Middle East Center* (March 4, 2014). <http://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/54750?lang=en>

The territorial collapse of the Islamic State over the past two years greatly affected the outflow of foreign fighters. As a result, departures towards Syria and Iraq decreased drastically, while the number of returning fighters increased. In Europe, it is estimated that out of the 5,000-6,000 foreign fighters who left the continent, around 1,500 have returned.⁷² For example, while keeping in mind all the methodological limits of the case, recent estimates indicate that in France, 300 of the 1,900 foreign fighters have returned; in the United Kingdom 425 out of the 850; in Germany 300 out of 900; in Belgium 123 out of 500.⁷³

The Italian contingent experienced a similar trend, albeit with lower figures in absolute and relative terms. It is estimated that by October 2017, out of 125 foreign fighters, at least 42 (equal to 33.6% of the total) had died; by April 2018, it appeared that 24 (19.2% of the total) had returned to Europe, with 12 of those individuals (9.6%) resettling in Italy.⁷⁴ Furthermore, it is estimated that, by the end of 2017, at least 30 subjects (24%), were still active in conflict areas, however the information regarding these individuals is rather uncertain. For other individuals there is no available information.⁷⁵

Among the deceased foreign fighters is Nouredine Chouchane, a Tunisian national who resided in the Province of Ancona, in Central Italy, and was connected to Fezzani.⁷⁶ According to his brother, in 2003 Chouchane had attempted to join the group led by Al-Zarqawi in Iraq but had been arrested in Syria. In 2012, he travelled to Tunisia, joining Ansar al-Sharia, becoming a fighter, trainer and recruiter of other militants. Furthermore, it is believed that he may have taken part in the planning of the attacks on the Bardo Museum and in Sousse. He was killed in the first few months of 2016 in Sabratha, Libya, following a US air strike on an Islamic State training camp.⁷⁷

According to the data supplied by Italian authorities (as of April 2018), no foreign fighters from the official list had actively participated in the support or execution of terrorist attacks in the West.

⁷² Thomas Renard and Rik Coolsaet (eds), "Returnees: Who Are They, Why Are They (not) Coming Back and How Should We Deal with Them?" *Egmont Royal Institute for International Relations* (February 6, 2018): 3; Europol, "European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2018 (TESAT 2018)", 26.

⁷³ Barrett, "Beyond the Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Returnees," 12-13.

⁷⁴ This figure on returnees is updated to 18 April 2018.

⁷⁵ It should be noted that more recently, in August 2018, the Italian Ministry of the Interior announced that out of 135 foreign fighters 48 had died and 26 had returned to Europe: "Dossier Viminale Ferragosto 2018." Italian Ministry of the Interior, August 15, 2018. <http://www.interno.gov.it/it/sala-stampa/dati-e-statistiche/dossier-viminale-ferragosto-2018>.

⁷⁶ Amir, Rostami, "The Swedish *Mujahideen*: An exploratory study of 41 Swedish foreign fighters deceased in Iraq and Syria," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 9 May 2018.

⁷⁷ Francesco Semprini and Barbara Cottavoz. "La mente del bardo arrivò a Novara dopo la radicalizzazione in Siria." *La Stampa*, March 9, 2016. <https://www.lastampa.it/2016/03/09/esteri/la-mente-del-bardo-arriv-a-novara-dopo-la-radicalizzazione-in-siria-xg80HbKh9MndwQJxL13mpj/pagina.html>. "Libia: raid Usa contro covo dell'Is, decine di morti." *La Repubblica* (February 19, 2016).

https://www.repubblica.it/esteri/2016/02/19/news/libia_raid_usa_contro_covo_dell_is_decine_di_morti-133763300/

Conclusions

This research had the objective of conducting the first systematic examination of the entire contingent of foreign fighters with links to Italy. Apart from the total number of subjects indicated by the Ministry of Interior, very little was known about these individuals prior to the release of this study. The general public and scholars only knew the details of a small number of cases that usually emerged following trials or newspaper articles. It would have been impossible to reconstruct common profiles and identify trends with the partial and fragmented (at times even contradicting) information available.

This study aimed at providing an original and relevant contribution in this field, examining the individual profiles of the foreign fighters with ties to Italy, on the basis of exclusive information that was kindly supplied by the Ministry of Interior, in a positive example of collaboration between public authorities and researchers. It was thus possible to reconstruct the characteristics and trajectories of each subject, identifying trends and overall patterns, and compare the Italian case to that of other Western countries. Along with original data and information, the report sought to offer interpretations and indications that could serve as points of reflection for the general public. It also aimed to provide an impartial study for policy makers and counterterrorism operatives.

As previously stated, the overall number of foreign fighters with ties to Italy can be considered low in absolute terms and very low in relation to the entire population (a ratio of around 2 foreign fighters per million people, compared to the 46 per million people in Belgium, or even the 33 in Austria, 30 in Sweden, and 28 in France). Furthermore, not all of the foreign fighters included by the authorities were actually Italian citizens and/or resided on Italian territory. As already mentioned, out of the 125 subject analysed in this study, only 24 were Italian citizens (10 of whom had dual citizenship).

This empirical study has reaffirmed the notion that a single profile for foreign fighters does not exist, just like a single profile for jihadist militants does not exist in general. Nevertheless, this research has demonstrated a few characteristics that appear among the Italy-related foreign fighters with greater frequency than in other Western European countries. These differences include a higher average age, a larger presence of first-generation immigrants who were born abroad and held foreign citizenship (in particular, from North Africa), a small quantity of individuals who resided in metropolitan areas and large cities, weak and unstructured ties with other militants and extremist organization, and a (so far) relatively small proportion of returnees.

In many respects, this picture mirrors the main characteristics of the overall jihadist scene in Italy. It remains quite small in size, relatively unstructured and unsophisticated, at least in part as a result of an effective counter-terrorism system, and it includes a

significant number of first-generation immigrants, mainly due to a simple demographic lag.

Despite the smaller size of the national contingent compared to other Western countries, the problem of foreign fighters is still relevant in Italy. In fact, following the major loss of territory held by the “Caliphate” of the Islamic State, surviving fighters could be driven to return to their home countries where they could continue to practice their extremist and violent activities.

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