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Who Goes, Why and With What Effects: The problem of Foreign Fighters from Europe

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Abstract: This article explores the phenomenon of Islamist foreign fighters, more specifically the movement of European Muslims to participate in the insurgencies in Syria and Iraq connected to the Islamic State/Daesh as well as the anti-Assad forces in Syria and the implications for European state stability. Drawing on personal psychology, social psychology and social movement theory the article offers an integrated theoretical framework to analyze the radicalization of Islamist foreign fighters. Building on Danish data of Islamist foreign fighters the article provides a first test of the analytical usefulness of this framework. The article further considers what distinguishes the Islamists that go from those that under similar circumstances stay behind, and whether this is a differences of kind or a difference of degree. Finally we discuss the question of how much of a threat foreign fighter returnees pose to European states.

This article explores the phenomenon of Islamist foreign fighters, more specifically the movement of European Muslims to participate in the insurgencies in Syria and Iraq connected to the Islamic State/Daesh as well as the anti-Assad forces in Syria and the implications for European state stability.

Despite its horrific methods, brutal oppression of the local population, beheading of hostages and planned terror attacks in the West, Islamic State continues to recruit thousands of voluntary fighters from the Muslim population in Western Europe and from Muslim populations across Southwest Asia and North Africa. Denmark is second, after Belgium, on the list of countries within Europe that sends most foreign fighters to Syria as a percentage of their total population. Since the civil war broke out, more than 110 Danish Muslims have gone to Syria to fight – many under Islamic State's banner. At least 17 Danes have perished, several of them as suicide bombers for Islamic State in Iraq, and around 50 foreign fighters have returned from Syria (CTA 2014).

After discussing the methods and data on Danish foreign fighters utilized in the article, the first section examines how these foreign fighters are radicalized and mobilized and what motivates young Danish Muslims to go to war for an ultra-violent, revolutionary movement like Islamic State. Drawing on elements of personal psychology we scrutinizes individual motivation to and risk factors associated with traveling and violent engagement, in particular the significance of personal challenges in everyday life and perceived self-uncertainty. Engaging insights on mobilization and recruitment within social movement theory we next look at how contact to radicalizing milieus is established, highlighting particularly three relational, causal mechanisms: self-selection, social selection and organizational outreach/recruitment. Building on social psychological studies of group polarization, we focus on the interaction in radicalizing milieus and examine how this interaction contributes to radicalization, specifically radicalization of actions, i.e., developing preparedness for violence. We then examine how group dynamics as well as direct and indirect encouragement to action affect the decision to go.

The article's second section asks the much less researched question of who stays behind and why. We know from studies of terrorism and radicalization that the distribution of people with seemingly like demographic and motivational profiles who turn to violence is long. In "long-tailed" distributions a high-frequency or high-amplitude population is followed by a low-frequency or low-amplitude population which gradually "tails off" asymptotically. The events at the far end of the tail – in our case people developing a propensity for political violence - have a very low probability of occurrence. Put differently, we take a look at not only why and how those we know became radicalized and violent, but also why most under similar circumstances do not and what factors may remove the obstacles and inhibitors that help explain why in fact there is such a long tail.

Before the concluding remarks, the third section of the article turns to foreign fighter returnees and the question of how much of a threat they pose to European states. Drawing on unique qualitative data from counseling sessions offered to a number of Danish returnees and their

families (conducted by one of the authors, Preben Bertelsen), we draw psychological profiles of returnees and discuss the risk to European societies by returned foreign fighters compared to 'failed joiners' among those that stay behind.

In the following section the article's methodology and data is outlined. However, before turning to this, let us briefly define the core concepts in the article. "Radicalization" here means to develop a propensity for political violence, to develop a mindset in which political violence is established as an option likely to be taken (Bouhanna & Wikström 2010: 10). We define a "foreign fighter" as a person who travels from a Western to a non-Western country to participate in a conflict via combat action, combat training or logistic support to combat actions (Coolsaet 2015: 3). We focus specifically on foreign fighters whose destination is the Syrian civil war zone and neighboring areas. Note that our definition includes persons whose departure was imminent or failed (they did not enter the conflict zone). Finally, we define a "radicalizing milieu" as a more or less bounded locality or set (mosque, study circle, club, apartment, web forum, etc.) where a relatively closed group of persons with a shared identity meet regularly and where political violence is discussed as an option.

Methods and data

We have chosen to focus exclusively on Danish foreign fighters. First, Denmark is a major supplier of foreign fighters, relative to its population, and its program for preventing travel to Syria and after-care for returned fighters is a model for other countries. The city of Aarhus has developed a mentor-based initiative for potential foreign fighters as well as an exit strategy including, among other things, psychological aid for returned fighters (Bertelsen 2015b; Braw 2014). The Danish government's new action plan for prevention of radicalization proposes nationwide implementation of these initiatives (Regeringen 2014). Denmark thus qualifies as a critical case in terms of European foreign fighters. Second, we have chosen Denmark as a case because we have privileged access to data about these foreign fighters. One of the authors, Preben Bertelsen, has trained the Danish anti- and de-radicalization mentors who work with potential foreign fighters, and in connection with the exit strategy for returned foreign fighters in Aarhus, he has personally conducted counseling sessions with returned fighters and their families. Via these initiatives, we have access to unique data for about 15 foreign fighters.

More specifically, the data consist of anonymized and confidential case summaries prepared by the mentors and Preben Bertelsen. We have selected three cases, Mahmoud, Amir and Martin (all pseudonyms), for our analysis. Mahmoud was on his way to Syria when he was assigned a mentor. We chose Mahmoud's case because his development before the mentor initiative in many ways is typical of the other cases – also for those who eventually went to Syria. Amir went to Syria and returned, and the convert Martin went to Syria and perished. The two latter cases have been in the media and the data is thus open-source material (media coverage, essays, reproduced interviews with the fighters, their friends or families). These three cases

make up the core of the data for the analysis and were chosen based on the representativeness of the radicalization process, diversity in terms of non-travel, travel and return, and level of detail in the material. In addition, we draw on restricted data on cases from Aarhus and publicly available material for 7 additional cases. Publicly available case material has been gathered via systematic online searches in the newspaper database Infomedia and supplemented with information from non-classified intelligence reports. In total, the article draws on data on 22 Danish foreign fighters. The analysis of the Danish data is supported by and compared to foreign data and analyses of foreign fighters (Coolsaet 2015; Barret 2014; Weggemans, Bakker & Grol 2014).

Despite privileged access to data, the data upon which our analysis is based has obvious limitations. We have data of varying quality for only 22 Danish foreign fighters out of at least 110 (significantly more if we count those who for different reasons did not depart). Our data may therefore contain biases of which we are unaware. As a consequence, our conclusions are preliminary and their scope limited.

Who Goes and Why?

The search for life embeddedness as leitmotif

Theoretically our point of departure is life psychology. Life psychology is based on two fundamental assumptions, namely that all people aspire to create a solidly embedded life and that perceived life embeddedness – having a firm grasp on life – is achieved by possessing the life competences required to handle everyday life tasks (Bertelsen 2013, 2015a). Life embeddedness requires that the individual possesses the competences to and is capable of (a) participating in intimate communities and society in general; (b) balancing values and practical matters with reality and one's surroundings; and (c) putting their own and others' self-perception and philosophy of life into perspective. Good life embeddedness can be defined as a good match between life tasks (including everyday routines and major life choices) and life competencies. Threatened life embeddedness can thus be defined as a mismatch: Either because the tasks are too overwhelming and/or because the life competencies are under-developed or not fully formed. Threats to basic life embeddedness are experienced when persons for different reasons (exclusion, disregard of knowhow, non-recognition, loss of dear ones, economic crisis, migration, etc.) lose their grip on life and these fundamental life tasks. Threatened life embeddedness is often associated with self-uncertainty, i.e., you are not sure who you are, where you belong, and what direction to follow in life (Hogg 2012, 2014). According to life psychology, people who experience threats to their life embeddedness will strive to (re)establish embeddedness, i.e., a state of flow where life tasks, life competencies and resources are in harmony (Bertelsen 2015a: 3). Likewise, people who experience self-uncertainty will search for new certainty (Hogg 2014). Most people who experience threats to their life embeddedness and perhaps related self-uncertainty manage quite peacefully to

reestablish embeddedness, for example by establishing new or reestablishing old belongings (friends, family, work, school), developing self-knowledge and identity (subcultural, political, religious) or acquiring new life competencies/resources (via education, therapy, coaching, etc.).

In rare cases, the search to (re)establish life embeddedness and reduce uncertainty can lead to political or religious radicalization. Several studies have shown that identification with a group can effectively reduce self-uncertainty (Hogg, Meehan & Farquharson 2010; Hogg & Adelman 2013). This is particularly true for identification with high entitativity groups, i.e., groups that are relatively closed, bounded, unambiguous in terms of action instructions and moral directions and whose members resemble each other and have a shared destiny (Hogg 2012, 2014; McCauley & Moskalenko 2008). These traits are common to many radical groups. The argument is that under certain conditions, identification with radical groups or projects may offer a refuge from perceived threatened life embeddedness and self-uncertainty. Identifying with a radical group or project, like Islamic State and its fight for an Islamic caliphate, offers "easy" answers to complex questions, direction, and belonging.

It is remarkable how much narratives about exclusion from intimate communities (friends, school, work, housing) and society in general (in terms of values, politically) stand out in the individual stories in our data; so do accounts about being at odds with social morals and laws (crime, street violence, gang activity) and feeling uncertain about one self, the future and one's role in life. Many informants describe feelings of emptiness, frustration, anger and apathy. We interpret this empirical pattern as an expression that the vast majority of the foreign fighters in our sample have experienced some form of threatened life embeddedness with an imbalanced existence – non-flow between life tasks and opportunities for and life competencies to solve these tasks (Bertelsen 2015a). The result is an urge to reconstruct life embeddedness and reduce uncertainty.

In Mahmoud's case (enters mentor project, does not go to Syria), a key factor of change appears to be when he moves with his family from a predominantly ethnic Danish, middle-class neighborhood to an area with a majority of Danes with immigrant background. Religion suddenly becomes an accessible and constant element in the form of religious symbols and in people's conversations. Mahmoud explains that after being separated from his familiar circle of friends and everyday life, he finds renewed peace, direction and reference points in Islam. In his own words, he falls in love with his religion, which engulfs him and his interest more and more. His life becomes exclusively focused on religion – it becomes a monomaniac project (Bertelsen 2015a: 9). Shortly after, Mahmoud encounters a group that works actively to recruit young people to go to Syria. Mahmoud quickly bonds with the group and expresses great joy with the fellowship (experiences renewed life embeddedness).

In Amir's case (goes to Syria, returns to Denmark), there are no sudden threats to his life embeddedness; his life was never really embedded (for personal reasons and due to the "little" everyday exclusions he perceived). Amir had a relatively normal childhood in subsidized housing in Copenhagen with a Pakistani father and a Danish mother. From the age of 12-13 he

hangs out with a group involved in petty crime (Sheikh 2014). When he is 17, his parents divorce and he has a falling out with his brother. Amir feels empty and looks for comfort elsewhere. He starts attending a moderate mosque and soon makes contact with a small, radical group, which guides Amir through religious preaching. Amir's identity complexity shrinks to the role of Muslim as he distances himself from non-believers (family, friends, etc.). Like Mahmoud, Amir explains how the group gives him a sense of fellowship, pride and the feeling that he can unfold his life competences in a meaningful way (experiences life embeddedness and uncertainty reduction). He also describes his time in Syria as happy and as a time when everything fell into place and made sense (see also Weggemans, Bakker & Grol 2014).

The young convert Martin's story is in many ways parallel (goes to Syria, perishes). Martin's life embeddedness has been challenged since his childhood by Asperger's and ADHD diagnoses (Sheikh 2014). Martin has a hard time in school and growing up he feels restless and rootless, he runs away from home several times, hangs out in the streets and becomes involved in petty crime at a young age. In Islam, Martin finds peace for the first time in his life. Religion puts order in his everyday life and he gives up petty crime. However, religion quickly becomes an all-engulfing project, and Martin loses the ability to put his own and others' philosophy of life into perspective. He avoids contact with non-Muslims and tries to convince his mother to convert (compare with life story 1 in Weggemans, Bakker & Grol 2014). Just as in Amir's case, his identity complexity shrinks to the role of Muslim (no room for the role of son, etc.), and he develops ambiguity intolerance (Bertelsen 2015a: 10).

The three cases have several things in common. The pivotal point in all three stories is a craving for life embeddedness. All three experience immediate uncertainty reduction when they join a religious community, and they quickly encounter radicalizing milieus where they are introduced to new religious interpretations and demands, where travel to Syria is established as a duty and Syria is established as the place where dreams about meaning, solidarity, marriage, heroic deeds, etc. come true. Going to Syria as a foreign fighter becomes a way to (re)construct life embeddedness – a way to cement a relatively newfound religious identity and live the dream about a new life, a fresh start and an everyday life that is easy to understand (life/death, friend/enemy, right/wrong, etc.).

This pattern reappears – partly or completely – in almost all the cases for which we have data. The search for life embeddedness, rather than religion and political convictions as such, is a leitmotif for many foreign fighters beyond Denmark as Rik Coolsaet's analysis of Belgian foreign fighters in Syria demonstrates (Coolsaet 2015: 17).

Self-selection, social selection and recruitment to radicalizing Islamist milieus

It is far from certain that a person who experiences threatened life embeddedness and is exposed to several other risk factors will become radicalized. And even if that person does become radicalized, a propensity to see political violence as an option is not necessarily acted

upon. This often requires a form of contact with a radicalizing milieu with which the person identifies and that pushes actual action preparedness (Lindekilde 2014). Foreign fighters thus rarely travel to Syria without discussing it with others first.

Building primarily on social movement theory about mobilization and recruitment, we next highlight three mechanisms that may facilitate encounters with radicalizing milieus: social selection, organizational outreach/recruitment and self-selection.

One of the most solid conclusions in the study of social movements is that everybody who knows somebody who already participates in political protest and activism is far more likely to become active than people without such relations (Schussman & Soule 2005). The costs of participation are reduced via existing social relations and the benefits increase because you get to spend time with people about whom you care. Social relations with friends or family who are involved in radicalizing milieus may predispose an individual to follow this path to (re)establish life embeddedness. Persons with this type of "privileged" access to radicalizing milieus are thus more vulnerable. Several studies have shown that social selection is the primary form of mobilization to high risk activism, including violent groups (Wiktorovitz 2005; della Porta 1995; Sageman 2008).

Martin's case underlines these insights. Martin converts to Islam via friends and begins to attend the mosque where he is later introduced to a radical group. When Martin decides to run away from the institution where he lives, he moves in with three men from the radical group. In Amir's case, his friendship with Fadi plays an important role. Amir and Fadi frequent the same radicalizing milieu, and Fadi leads the way by going to Syria before Amir. Our material also offers examples of how family relations bring persons into contact with radicalizing milieus. In two cases one brother and then the other brother leave for Syria via Islamist milieus.

Radicalizing milieus also sometimes use direct recruiting outreach, i.e., radicalizing entrepreneurs make contact with young, often searching individuals via different recruitment strategies. Studies of radical Islamist milieus in Europe demonstrate use of front organizations like language courses or standard Quran lessons (Lindekilde & Kühle 2009). Others point to the role of charismatic leaders, often imams or self-appointed sheiks in recruitment (Wiktorovitz 2005). Social movement theory theorizes this outreach between activist groups and potential supporters under the heading "framing". Framing theory claims that for mobilization to turn into activism, activism must be framed as both necessary and possible. A frame typically consists of a diagnosis (what's the problem), a prognosis (what has to be done), and a motivation (a register of motivation for action). "Framing" is thus about creating resonance (recognition and sympathy) among potential supporters and motivating them to participate (Snow et al. 1986; Noakes & Johnston 2005).

The relevance of this perspective is shown in both Mahmoud's and Amir's cases. Mahmoud is contacted in the street by a group that is actively recruiting for Syria. Amir is spotted in a moderate mosque and invited to a home where he receives religious material that shows the

"real" interpretation of the messages he hears at the mosque. In both cases recruiters exploit their existential and religious search to make contact and offer some of what they are looking for: fellowship, clear answers and direction.

Finally, there is the mechanism of self-selection, i.e., individuals reaching out to radicalizing milieus. Self-selection is often triggered by framing activities, general references or specific activities (social events, speeches, study circles, etc.). Media coverage of certain milieus plays an important role in this context as it informs searching individuals about radicalizing milieus and their framing. The general mobilization level and political climate also affect self-selection. Studies of social movements thus demonstrate that when mobilization has reached a certain level – critical mass – other participants often join on their own initiative (Tarrow 1994). The point is that self-selection to activism is more likely in a highly politicized situation (high on the political agenda) in which many have already shown the way to action. We argue below that this describes the situation with potential foreign fighters in Europe today.

Our detailed cases do not offer direct examples of self-selection to radicalizing milieus. All three actively sought out religious milieus, but were "guided" from there by others towards radical Islam. However, there are examples of direct self-selection to radicalizing milieus in our broader material, among them a high school student who on his own initiative begins to attend the Grimhøjvej mosque in Aarhus, although he is from a city 50 miles away. Our data does not explain why he chooses to join this milieu, but it is hard to imagine, given media coverage, that he was unaware of Grimhøjvej mosque's controversial status within Denmark.

Enclave deliberation: Establishing and Channeling Action Preparedness

It is a very clear pattern in our data that Danish foreign fighters before departure participate in intense interaction in radicalizing groups. Online interaction often plays a supplementary role, but face-to-face interaction with likeminded in small groups is dominant (see also Weggemans, Bakker & Grol 2014: 7). In all three detailed cases, interaction in the group becomes an all-important activity and project that makes it difficult to maintain old relations (friends, family, work, school, etc.). Still, they are happy. As the interaction intensifies, our case individuals express increasingly unambiguous opinions and their relations to others become more one-sided.

It is our assertion that this empirical pattern matches expectations based on social-psychological theory on group identification and group polarization. Research has shown that deliberation among persons who fundamentally identify with each other, share a series of key convictions, and are generally alike, tends to lead to group polarization, i.e., the opinions of the group become more extreme than the pre-deliberative starting point (Myers 1975; Isenberg 1986).

Fellowship in and identification with a group gives the young people a sense of belonging, reduced uncertainty (Hogg 2012, 2014) and thus renewed life embeddedness (Bertelsen 2015a). In the group they acquire a worldview that is simple and clear in terms of conduct, a manageable lifestyle framed as the only way to live, as God's will. Their search is given direction and meaning via fellowship with likeminded. That explains the perceived joy. Over time, the group members become increasingly sure about the truth of their convictions, and they share arguments, literature, videos, etc., which only confirm this (attitude confirmation and increasing attitude certainty). Deliberation in the group becomes closed, the pool of arguments shrinks to arguments that find corroboration in the Quran, and meaningful communication and relations with people outside the group become difficult. In all three cases, the young men's relations with family and friends deteriorate as interaction in the group intensifies. Martin's mother attempts discussions with her son, but is forced to recognize that his opinions are locked and his mind closed to counterarguments. Polarization and groupthink appears to be absolute.

However, radicalization of attitudes does not necessarily imply radicalization of actions. Establishing political violence as an option does not necessarily mean that an individual will participate in political violence. Departure to Syria as an option is established via different mechanisms in the group interaction, and religiously motivated action encouragement from scholars in the milieu plays a special role. Going to Syria is portrayed as a religious duty, a message that is repeated and shared in the group so often that it is established as a definitive truth that cannot be questioned. As Amir says: "If I just stay home, God will punish me." In contrast, Mahmoud says that his relation with his anti-radicalization mentor created an alternative space, a free space where, for instance, this truth could be discussed again. Congruent with other studies (Lindekilde & Kühle 2009; Hegghammer 2013: 8), our material indicates that departure to conflict zones in general is legitimated in terms of religion in these milieus, whereas legitimation of terrorism against civilians in the West is contested.

Group interaction reinforces the relation between opinions (the caliphate is good, and I have a duty to help) and relevant high-risk action (travel to Syria) via development and cementing of strong feelings: political indignation, compassion and hatred. Such strong feelings help liberate action possibilities that are otherwise morally sanctioned (Abelson 1972). However, it is typical for our cases that the foreign fighters before departure carry out some preparatory, attitude-relevant actions (cf. Weggemans, Bakker & Grol 2014): Martin collects money for fighters in Syria; Mahmoud participates in dawa activities, a type of missionary outreach; and Amir reads and distributes violent manifestos and watches online videos of suicide actions on a daily basis. They all feel joy in doing something, in seeing themselves as doers. During these preparatory actions, they encounter additional action encouragements via direct contact with veterans. For example, Amir Skypes several times with his friend Fadi in Syria. Witnessing such exemplary behavior and hearing about life in the caliphate increases the likelihood that potential recruits will go. Both Mahmoud and Amir say that contact with veterans gives them respect for men of action and makes them feel shameful about their own petty actions, which pale in comparison

and provoke even more radical action preparedness (cf. social comparison effect, Myers et al. 1980). Once the decision to go to Syria is made, the necessary knowhow and resources are available in the young men's immediate environment. The distance from decision to departure is therefore often quite short in our material.

Who Stays Behind and Why?

Of course, the explanation proposed above cannot account for all cases of voluntary departure to Syria or Iraq – there is not just one radicalization process, but many different pathways (Schmid 2013; McCauley and Moskalenko 2011). Our point is rather that the highlighted elements of radicalization in different ways and in multiple combinations are present in an overwhelming number of cases. They are robust across contexts.

As compelling as this type of explanation for going might be it is quiet about the individuals from the same radicalizing milieus, with similar personal life stories, who end up staying behind. In most cases this group form the majority. In the following we discuss what, if anything, that sets these two groups a part. We do so pointing to two different explanations. On the one hand, the decision to stay behind can be explained as *a difference of degree*; those that stay behind are less radicalized and exhibit fewer risk factors and more protective factors (less disembedded; better life competences; more social ties outside the radicalizing milieu; fewer preparatory actions; more resilient to group dynamics etc.). On the other hand, it might also be the case that those who stay behind are qualitatively different – *a difference of kind* – in terms of e.g. family background, perception of historical grievances, self-perception, their paths into radicalizing milieus etc.

A Difference in Degree?

Two interesting findings from the social movement literature might provide insight into the drop off in size from radical to extremist movements and transitions to the use of violence and perhaps offer insight into radicals who stay in organizations vs. radicals who join terrorists. One source of the difference between members is suggested by McAdam (1996) who noted that participation in Freedom Summer in 1964 "was not correlated with individual attitudes but rather with three factors: the number of organizations individuals were members of, especially the political ones, the amount of previous experiences of collective action; and the links to other people who were involved with the campaign (see Della Porta and Diani (2006:117). Thus, it would seem that people who are most active in political and social movements, people in Putnam's (2000) words who are less likely to Bowl Alone, are potentially least likely to be marginalized or to feel marginalized by their activity. Their overlapping networks continually provide avenues for collective action.

Looking at the context of that activity and the society in which it occurs can provide further insight. Della Porta and Diani (2006:118) point out that "Available evidence suggests that the more costly and dangerous the collective action, the stronger and more numerous the ties required for individuals to participate." That can lead us to two paths. First let us consider the relatively obvious. It is less dangerous in open democratic systems to organize and participate in radical social and political movements than in closed societies whether they have efficient and predictable or sporadic repressive machinery. It is also less dangerous to organize and participate in radical social and political movements if your demographic group is not a proscribed group. White South Africans more easily participated in anti-apartheid activities than black South Africans, white Americans in the civil rights movement in the South etc. The second is that because of the danger, those who move directly from no group or organizational participation to activity with extremists are likely to be higher if participation in any group is dangerous. If we consider the difference in participation rates across nations some explanations for the differences might emerge through the combination of integration into embedded societies, participation in civic social movement organizations and marginalization and eventual movement to extremist organizations.

A Difference in Kind?

Our data does not indicate that there are significant differences in family backgrounds or historical grievances between those that stay or go. Both the ones that go and the ones that stay seem to come from all kinds of backgrounds – work migrants, refugees, converts. No pattern in terms of nationality – it is not just the ones with direct grievances related to the conflict in Syria that go and the ones without that stay behind. Perhaps the risk of ending up going abroad is greater for the 'lone seeker' who either seek out radicalizing milieus on his own or who is recruited individually as compared to the ones that join through social ties? Our data does not seem to support that this distinction matters. There is some indication in our data that there is a different self-perception among some of the ones that stay behind: they see themselves less as 'doers' and more as 'ideologues' or 'recruiters'. But this only accounts for the choice of some leading members. Age is clearly a factor in the recruitment of foreign fighters. But, interestingly, while the young are most inclined to action they still are not automatically ready to carry out violent acts for whatever cause. And here we find another possible explanation for the long tail. While Shakespeare's Henry V extolled the few, the band of brothers that were willing to sheds their blood with and for him and England, researchers since the publication of the American Soldier in 1949 have found that in most circumstances, most of the time, most persons won't easily shed that of others (or their own) except under particular circumstances and most importantly not until after some rigorous training. The necessary training is as much about the removal of inhibitions to do harm and why as it is about the techniques of the violence itself. Stouffer et al. (1949) found that only 15-25% of American Soldiers in World War II were able to discharge their weapons in battle. Stouffer's studies indicated that soldiers had to be trained to fire their weapons and that broader calls to defend "mom and apple pie" were not as useful as stressing the individual's relationship with, and

dependence on the band of brothers in the platoon. Men were willing to engage and shoot to defend each other to increase their chances of survival. Stouffer's analyses became the basis of U.S. military basic training soon thereafter. That this is true beyond government military organizations is asserted more recently by Scott Atran (2008:13) in his analysis of religiously motivated terrorists "Maybe people don't kill and die simply for a cause, they do it for friends…action pals who share a cause." And yet we know that while most persons won't commit acts of violence voluntarily, those who commit to doing so are, of course, the subject of our inquiry.

Kelman provides some insight into the mechanisms which are probably at work in helping to ease the movement of recruits needed to move beyond the normal inhibitions and down the path to go and fight. These insights perhaps also offer some insight as to differences in both the numbers of "violent perpetrators" in different types of groups. Kelman's 1973 argument in "Violence without moral restraint," is that three factors: dehumanization, routinization and authorization; which he employs to understand what he later referred to as crimes of obedience underlie the transition of individuals who would not "normally" act as agents of violence into organizational weapons. Jones (2008:15) cites Bandura (1998) who building upon Kelman, argues further that "some of the mechanisms by which a human being's tendencies toward empathy and compassion are disengaged are the "redefinition of harmful conduct as morally justified,," "sanitizing language," "diffusion of responsibility within a group," minimizing the harm done," and "dehumanizing the victims and blaming them for the harm done to them." Bandura (2002) adds that strangers can be more easily depersonalized than acquaintances because of a lack of moral obligation to try and comprehend a stranger.   Examination of the relevance of these factors awaits comparisons of the training and information received by potential recruits and the differences which exist between those that stay and those that go.

How much of a Threat is Posed by the ones that Return?

Primo 2015 the picture of foreign fighters and homecomings from selected Europeans countries looked like depicted in table **.

Primo 2015	Foreign Fighters	Returnees
United Kingdom	700	200
Germany	650	200
Belgium	438	122
The Netherlands	190	35
Denmark	130	***

Source: RAN 2015

Of the young men (and women) who have been traveling to the combat zones of the Middle East the last years roughly only between 20%-30% have come home again. Most of these are not imprisoned and not participating in any exit programs. Maybe the term "foreign fighters"

should be taken with a grain of salt. In fact most returnees have not been engaged in combat at all. There are no clear-cut typologies neither regarding motives of becoming foreign fighters nor regarding the personal state, conviction, attitude and behavior of the homecoming foreign fighter.

The profiles (not clear-cut but rather interwoven) of the homecomings can roughly be divided into (a) *Disillusioned:* They may have left as foreign fighters with romantic and/or fundamentalist ideas of and hope for a better world and being part of heroic battles, comradeship and with clear ideas of good and bad, but what they found was evilness, cruelty, corruption, perverted misuse of Islam, moral disengagement and unreliable change of loyalties on *their* side of the front. Some of the homecomings also report boredom, not being part of the activities and excitements hoped for, but rather being stationed at unimportant (lonely) outpost, doing trivial routine jobs, and receiving endless tedious and dull religious lessons. (b) *Mental health issues*: Some have mental health problems when coming home. These can partly be due to worsening of problems prior to leaving for the combat zones, e.g. due to dysfunctional families, disordered relations and attachment, but also identity problems, personality disorders, and disorders such as ADHD. Partly the mental health issues can be the result of traumas (not necessarily due to experienced battle, but also due to intern cruelties in one's battle group or toward civilians) resulting in PTDS. Especially we should be aware of cases of moral injury (Litz et al. 2009), i.e. a personality disorder caused by having witnessed or have been forced to cruelties and inhuman actions one would not have thought possible, resulting in lost faith in own and fellow human's ability to act as moral beings. Without faith in fundamental human values and without a moral compass (i.e. total moral disengagement) these homecoming young men (and women) can be extremely dangerous ticking bombs. (c) *Further radicalized:* Last but not least some of the homecomings may have been even further radicalized. That, however, seems to be the (of course dangerous) exception rather than the rule (see also Hemmingsen 2013).

However, we lack international cross-country studies of the different personal states of the homecomings and their ability and need of help to be re-included in society. This is even more important because we are in need of developing effective exit programs. There is no (political sane) way that Europe can prosecute or jail every homecoming foreign fighter. Think of it this way: When ISIS has been defeated there will still be thousands of Northwestern foreign fighters in the area and where should they go? If we cannot or for political reasons don't want to find ways to genuinely re-include them into societies we will end up with an alarmingly large army of radicalized young nomads drifting around searching for the next and possible even worse terror organization to crystalize.

While much awareness and much political debate has been directed at homecoming foreign fighters it has proven extremely important to be aware of those radicalized who have not yet become foreign fighters. Again there are no clear-cut profiles, but two important groups seem to stand out. (a) *Young people being radicalized in jail*: They can be political radicalized and

religious radicalized e.g. into extremist Islamism. Obviously not all in-jail trajectories into Islam are directed at violent Jihad, on the contrary some forms of studying Islam can in fact have de-radicalizing effects because the individual is coming to a deeper and peaceful understanding of human conditions, ethics and politics. Another type of in-jail radicalization is pseudo Islamism which has little do with genuine fate or political Islam. These people use selected Islamist catchphrases as a sort of narrative legitimation of a counter-identity which is not rooted in political or religious agendas, but rather in (social and psychological disordered) general distancing to everything else: other groups in jail, society, culture etc. (b) *Young people "dying to belong"* (paraphrasing the 1997 hit movie): The Copenhagen terrorist attack in February 2015, carried out by Omar Abdel Hamid El-Hussain, may very well be a tragic example of a syndrome of socio-psychological breakdown, youth crime, and what may be termed "dying to belong": A young man just released from jail, but tragically (and unwisely) left on his own. Furthermore Omar was multi-excluded, i.e. excluded not only from his social networks and from society but even excluded from radicalized groups and criminal gangs, but nevertheless with the human need of embeddedness (see above). Omar turned into a copycat looking for what may give him some street credit hoping thereby to be accepted somewhere. He looked to Paris and found his desperate inspiration in the Charlie Hebdo terrorist attack. The phrase "dying to belong" does not indicate any form of suicidal project, but rather that he, and others like him, willing to "go all the way" without clear ideas of what that would mean.

The conclusion here is that we are very much in need of more solid scientific knowledge combined with political willingness to invest in proper exit strategies coping both with the radicalization processes in jail as well as among desperate multi-excluded youngsters. Without this the ones that stay behind may very well pose a greater threat than those who actually become foreign fighters and return.

Concluding remarks

In this article we have argued that in contrast to the common impression in media portrayals, most foreign fighters who go to Syria are not driven primarily by ideology or hatred of the West. Of course, a sense of exclusion may have nourished an us vs. them feeling. However, the underlying and the central driving force in our cases is a feeling of threatened life embeddedness, which triggers self-uncertainty and a subsequent search for embeddedness and uncertainty reduction. The young people feel excluded, alienated and lack existential meaning – for different reasons. They do not have competences and resources to manage their lives and life tasks, and many of them harbor reinforcing risk factors like ambiguity intolerance, aggression and absence of critical reflection. Their search for belonging and meaning brings them into contact with radicalizing milieus. They seek them out or are channeled in that direction via friends and acquaintances, and in some cases they are actively recruited by radical milieus. Via one-sided, closed deliberation, the young people's opinions become polarized, they develop a monomaniac interest in the radical project and isolate themselves from previous

relations. Us/them experiences and critical opinions about life in the West have earlier been parts of a shared experience in line with other possible self-narratives. However, it is with polarization, monomania and low identity complexity that hatred of the West is articulated purely and as the main legitimation of foreign fighting.

At the same time, the young people experience a new sense of fellowship and pride in "doing something". For many Danish foreign fighters, the interaction in radicalizing milieus normalizes violence and establishes departure to Syria as an option. Direct and indirect encouragements to go to Syria (for example when friends go or religious scholars portray the war as a religious duty) make attitudes and action preparedness fuse.

This account of why Danish Muslims end up participating in the insurgencies in Syria and Iraq connected to the Islamic State as well as the anti-Assad forces in Syria, we argue, is transferable to other European contexts. Our answer to the question 'who goes and why' will not account for all cases of European foreign fighters, but we contend that the explanatory ingredients highlighted by the article will be present in different combinations in the majority of cases.

Regarding the question of 'who stays behind and why' much more research is necessary. In this article we have limited ourselves to some first reflections on potential differentiations between those who go and those who under similar circumstances and with similar characteristics stay behind. One question for future research to address more thoroughly is whether to consider this a difference of degree or a difference of kind. Building on our limited data and research in neighboring areas we are inclined to point towards a difference of degree. There is little to suggest that those who stay behind are qualitatively different in terms of ethno-national background, experienced historical grievances or family situation than those who go. In stead it seems like those who go experience more sever lack of embeddedness, have fewer protective social ties, grow more dependent on radicalizing milieus and, thus, are exposed to more enclave deliberation than those who stay. One potential interesting hypothesis to investigate further highlights the importance of the mechanism by which individuals enter into radicalizing milieus. Building on our data and extant knowledge, it could be hypothesized that the risk of taking the full step and go abroad as a foreign fighter is larger for those who seek out or are recruited to radicalizing milieus alone as compared to those who enter into the milieu via pre-established social ties to friends or relatives. Those who experience an overlap between friends and the radicalizing milieu might more easily find a sense of belonging, meaning and embeddedness in the milieu at home and experience less of a need to make the radicalizing milieu a stepping stone to communities of fighters abroad perceived to be even more rewarding. Paradoxically good friends in the radicalizing milieu could in this case be considered a protective factor – not from radicalization as such, but from engaging in attitude corresponding risky action (going abroad). In contrast, if long-term friends chose to go (like Fadi in the case of Amir) this would increase the propensity to go.

Addressing the question of 'how much a threat is posed by the ones that return' we found that at least among the returnees in our study further radicalization was a relatively rare outcome.

More often then not the returnees expressed disappointment and disillusionment with what they had experienced abroad or they were marked by these experiences psychologically, boosting new or old mental health issues in a way that sidetracked and made less important any political motivations or radical projects. Obviously, if left alone and not attended to such mental health issues may become a risk factor in combination with prior radicalization and acquired know-how. This would especially be the case if returnees were left to re-integrate into radicalized milieus where they are often received as stars.

However, as proposed in the article, maybe there is a need, in terms of building long-term security, to focus not just on returned foreign fighters, but also more on some of the groups of vulnerable youngsters who stay behind. Looking at the involvement by returned Islamist fighters in the last wave of terrorist attacks in Europe would suggest such a refocusing of attention. Special attention should be paid to the radicalization in jails and the group of youngsters who are 'dying to belong', but who for different reasons do not get involved with radicalizing milieus, and instead proceed towards violence as a lone actor - often inspired by other successful attacks. The offender of the Copenhagen attack in February 2015 is an example in question. Omar Abdel Hamid El-Hussain was radicalized in jail (serving a two-year sentence for stabbing) to a degree that prison guards made no less then three reports to the Danish Prison and Probation Service about his behavior and attitudes, including a report on Omar expressing a desire to go to Syria and fight when he was released. This last report was passed on to the Danish Security and Intelligence Service. Nevertheless, when Omar was released no further steps were taken. Omar did not go to Syria or got involved with any radicalizing milieus. Two weeks after his release he instead carried out the Copenhagen attack alone inspired, it seems, by the Paris attacks a month earlier.

Omar's story reminds us of the potential risk posed by those who share the experience of lack of embeddedness with many foreign fighters as well as individuals in radicalizing milieus who do not go abroad (Omar's life story is in many ways similar to that of Amir), but who for different reasons radicalize primarily alone and stay at the very fringes of radicalizing milieus - if in contact with them at all. Attacks by lone actor extremist is, as acknowledged by authorities and experts, extremely difficult to prevent and interdict. However, Omar's story also shows that it is not impossible (several 'red alerts' sounded before the attack), but that it takes effective communication between different authorities as well as political willingness to invest, not just in exit programs for returned foreign fighters, but also for certain types of released prisoners.

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