



In Their Own Words: Religiosity and the Islamic State Foreign Fighters

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27 April 2018

Many studies on the motivations of Islamic State foreign fighters emphasise the role of low socio-economic prospects. But interviews with fighters suggest greater attention should be given to the role of religiosity.

A great deal has been written about the motivations of thousands of largely young men and women who left Europe, the UK, US, Canada, Australia, and elsewhere in the “West,” to fight in Syria and Iraq. As is so often the case in terrorism studies, most of the efforts to understand why people have joined this unprecedented wave of foreign fighters are speculative. Much is inferred from limited and usually secondary sources about the backgrounds and behaviors of those who left, and a handful of interviews with returned fighters reported in the news. Primary data from research interviews with fighters, or even those closest to them (friends and family members), is at a premium.

Out of the hundred or so research publications I have read about foreign fighters, I am aware of seven based on primary data ([for example](#)). Three of these studies involve interviews with returnees from the conflict, and overwhelmingly with individuals facing prosecution or incarcerated ([for example](#)); two involve interviews with individuals who had entertained going, but didn't; and three involve interviews with people who knew individuals who either became foreign fighters or wanted to be one ([for example](#)).

In most cases, multiple sources of information are used, and in every case, the sample sizes are small and not statistically representative. Amarnath Amarasingam and I published one of [these studies](#), involving interviews with

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foreign fighters, combatants in fact, in Syria and Iraq. Our sample is small and statistically inconsequential as well (we reported on twenty or thirty-five fighters interviewed). But it stands alone because it involves talking to active foreign fighters, and offers the single largest sample of fighter interviews so far. Our study inquired about the fighters' backgrounds, the process by which they radicalized and left, and their perceptions and beliefs about their new lives as jihadists.

The observations and claims made by the fighters are subject to all kinds of conscious and unconscious interpretive biases. They must be treated with great caution. In principle, however, the biases are not dissimilar to those researchers encounter when working with other samples, such as criminals, or even police officers. So the primary data acquired warrants being given considerable significance in investigating what is happening and why, especially when there is a dearth of other reliable data.

Most of the primary data studies of fighters and aspiring fighters focus on the situation in Europe. Our sample includes people from Canada, the US, UK, Europe, and a few from Africa, the Middle East, and India. Reading the European studies creates the impression that we are dealing with young people, from immigrant families, who have limited socio-economic prospects, are relatively unhappy with what is happening in their lives, are looking for some greater meaning and sense of belonging and are heavily influenced by the small groups they come into contact with in seeking to be fighters. As such, they paint a picture reminiscent of the classic relative deprivation explanation of the motivation of extremists – a view that conforms to popular perceptions circulated in the media. These youth are coming largely from immigrant enclaves characterized by high, multi-generational unemployment, and they

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have done poorly in school themselves. In turning to extremism they are lashing out at a society that they perceive is failing to provide them and their people with the rewards they expect.

In these studies, the role of religion as a motivator for becoming a jihadist is simply not given much consideration, apart from rather prosaically noting that those who left showed an increased interest in religion before going. Curiously, however, in study after study the turn to religion – in fact to an extreme preoccupation with religious practice and identity – is one of the two constants detected in cases of jihadist radicalization. The other constant is the role of social factors: people join jihadist groups predominantly through pre-existing social networks, and their radicalization is consolidated by small group dynamics. The networks, the groups, and the dynamics, though, are framed religiously. The overarching preoccupation is to determine who is authentically a Muslim, and hence worthy of companionship, protection, and emulation, and who is a sellout or enemy, and to be avoided, denigrated, and perhaps attacked. In our interviews with family members and friends of foreign fighters, these surges of religiosity loom large.

The religiosity factor

The minimization of religious motivations in studies of foreign fighters warrants more comment than can be accommodated here. As I have argued elsewhere, close examination of [these studies](#), and others, reveals the data will not support the discounting of religious motivations. While as the language employed in these studies indicates, they are operating with assumptions about religion rooted in the recent hegemony of secular worldviews, more than a full and critical assessment of the comparative significance of religious and political commitments in the course of history.

Summarizing the findings from our interviews with active fighters, three things stand out: (1) the prominence of religious discourse and concerns in explaining why they radicalized; (2) the preoccupation with the moral and not socio-economic limitations in their accounts of their past lives and turn to extremism; and (3) the personal nature of the choice to become a fighter – it is understood as being more about self-fulfillment than political action. This is the dominant impression left from countless hours of contact spread over many months with multiple individuals. It is hard to capture in any one quote, but one of the fighters we interviewed quite typically said:

“ Before this jihad, I liked the idea of shahada. The idea of no accountability in the grave and on the day of judgement, but I wasn’t ready to leave the confines of my life in UK. In 2011, it was announced that a local brother was Shaheed [martyr] in Syria – that’s when it started. I started thinking and asking to myself – ‘you know what, if he can do it, why can’t I? He’s in Jannah [paradise] now while you are sitting here living a mundane life of simply university, work, making money. ”

None of the fighters in our sample pointed to experiences of social and economic marginalization in accounting for their radicalization. Many claimed to come from “comfy” backgrounds, and 30% had university degrees.

Most of our sample of twenty fighters were from Muslim families, but five were converts. Most were single, but several were married and a few had children. With the exception of one middle-aged man, they ranged in age from 22-28, and half of them had some formal religious education in their childhood (Quranic studies and Islamic schooling). Most were students, unemployed, or working at more or less temporary jobs when they left to become fighters, but it appears this was not their priority, since most of the sample say they either underwent their conversion or became much more fervently religious in their teenage years. Accordingly, when asked why he had undertaken jihad, one member of ISIS quite characteristically asserted:

“ We are motivated by our religion, by our Qur’an and Sunnah and we are not ashamed of that. We left the convenient world to establish khilafah on the path of Prophethood so I really don’t see what is the issue with some hypocrites who cave down to the kuffar. We are not motivated by politics, wealth, the love of this world. We are willing to die as shudada in the path of Allah and that is to establish shariah in the land of the khilafah. We have declared it clearly and loudly that Islam will dominate the world. We know this from the Sunnah and hadith of our Prophet, prayers be upon him. ”

Recognizing the role of religious commitments does not fully explain radicalization, but it helps to explain why so few of the many who feel the sting of low socio-economic prospects choose to become foreign fighters and accept the risk of making the ultimate sacrifice.

Compensation may be involved in becoming a foreign fighter, but it is not compensation for mere material deprivation – real or perceived – or simply release from anger, frustration, or even boredom. At least this is not the case, I

suspect, for most foreign fighters from the West. The lure of participating in something existentially more rewarding is what that drives and sustains this transformation. The “need for meaning” is more than a cliché, as we recognize when we exploit it to encourage sacrifices for the causes we support.

That is what I see in the data, but more interviews with fighters are required. Now, regrettably, these conversations will have to be largely with returnees – with their more patent reasons to distort their accounts. The opportunity has passed for speaking with fighters when they felt more free and safe to express their views.

Conclusion

In making this argument, I am not offering support for the simplistic and prejudicial notion that Islam is somehow responsible for terrorism, or even the broader notion that religion is particularly culpable in fomenting mass violence. Neither point will stand up to scrutiny, nor are they pertinent. I am suggesting we need to hold our contemporary secular prejudices in check and pay more attention to the role “religiosity” (i.e., the degree of personal commitment to a religious worldview) plays in influencing how quite ordinary people do extraordinary things. If we listen to what the jihadists keep saying, and give their claims some motivational credence, we will come to a fuller understanding of what we are up against and how we might better counter it.

Contrary to the claims of many, the relative orthodoxy or even depth of religious knowledge is not that relevant. The beliefs held by these youth may be erroneous and display a poor grasp of theology – but it is the sincerity of their religious commitment that matters. If attempts to prevent or counter radicalization dwell on reactions to economic and social marginalization, and

personal psychological issues, they will deflect some youth from the path of extremism. But not, in the case of jihadism, those we most urgently need to deter, those with the potential to cause the most grief. To detect these budding terrorists early, and so have a better chance of diverting them, we need to exploit the fact that one of the first, most consistent, and consequential signs of radicalization is the expression of an intensified and intolerant religiosity.

Accordingly, we need programs that provide safe spaces for angry youth to engage in open and critical dialogue about their political, social, and moral-spiritual concerns and the related shortcomings of our societies. Otherwise they will do so online and in so-called “garage mosques” with like-minded people who will aggravate, rather ameliorate, the situation. I am skeptical of those who would sideline tackling ideology in seeking to counter violent extremism – because it is politically sensitive or they don’t think it is secondary. Rather, with some others, I think we need to develop and implement methods for encountering and undermining the ideological worldview of these nascent terrorists (for example). This needs to be done in the context of providing the kind of engaged mentorship which can guide these youth to the realization of other ways of living a significant life – one of virtue, service to one’s community, and some excitement. This approach entails risks, but so does ignoring the obvious role of religiosity in becoming a foreign fighter or domestic jihadist.

Image credit: [Wikimedia Commons](#).

About the Author

Dr. Lorne Dawson is a Full Professor in the Department of Sociology and Legal Studies and the Department of Religious Studies. He has served as the Chair of

both departments. He has published three books, four edited books, and sixty-nine academic articles and book chapters. Until 2008 most of his research was in the sociology of religion, in particular the study of new religious movements. Since then terrorism has become the primary focus of his research, in particular the process of radicalization leading to violence. In 2012 he co-founded the Canadian Network for Research on Terrorism, Security and Society (TSAS). He is the current Project Director (see <http://www.tsas.ca>) of this partnership. TSAS operates with funds competitively awarded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), Public Safety Canada, Defence Research and Development Canada, and other organizations. Dr. Dawson regularly makes invited presentations to a wide variety of government, academic, and public groups about various aspects of terrorism and counter-terrorism, and is frequently interviewed by the media on these topics.

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