United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism

Enhancing the Understanding of the Foreign Terrorist Fighters Phenomenon in Syria

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I.   Executive Summary

During the fourth biennial review of the Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy held in September 2014, Member States expressed concern at the growing phenomenon of Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTFs) in Syria. As a result, the Secretary-General announced that the United Nations Centre for Counter-Terrorism (UNCCT) would, in cooperation with those Member States that wished to participate, gather information on the motivation of FTFs through direct interviews of returnees. By analysis of the results, the Secretary-General aimed to provide Member States with a stronger knowledge base from which to understand the phenomenon of FTFs, assess the risks they posed, and develop effective responses.

Accordingly, in November 2014, the Executive Chairman of UNCCT and Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs invited all Member States to facilitate United Nations access to FTFs within their jurisdictions. Despite limited cooperation,[1] UNCCT interviewed 43 individuals between August 2015 and November 2016, representing 12 nationalities. Thirty three (77 per cent) of the interviewees reached Syria but subsequently decided to leave, while the remaining ten (23 per cent) began the journey but were stopped *en route*, either on their own or in a transit country. Two interviewees are of Syrian origin, though they were not living in Syria when they were interviewed, while the rest fulfil the definition of foreign terrorist fighters included in Security Council resolution 2178 (2014).

The responses of the interviewees provide important insights into the motivations of individuals to leave their countries of residence or nationality to join armed groups in Syria. It is important to note that more often than not, individuals do not necessarily select the group they finally join. Rather, once they reach Syrian territory, some seem to join the group that operates closest to their point of arrival. Fighters also seem to be switching groups.

The aim of this report is to expand understanding of the FTF phenomenon in Syria by examining why the interviewees chose to act in the way they did. The report records the reasons individual FTFs have given to explain their decision to leave their countries of residence or nationality to join armed groups. It also records their reasons for leaving these groups and returning to their countries of residence or nationality before achieving the goals and objectives they had set themselves. Finally, the report seeks to draw conclusions as to the threat that returning FTFs may pose in the future.

In order to conduct this study, the United Nations has engaged directly with returned terrorist fighters. It has done so to improve international understanding of a global phenomenon that represents one of the gravest current threats to national, regional and international security. By equipping policy makers with greater knowledge and understanding of the motivations of FTFs

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[1] Ultimately only seven Member States cooperated by facilitating access to returning FTFs.

the United Nations may help them design and implement effective and appropriate responses that can stem the flow of FTFs, redirect the future of returnees, and reintegrate them with minimum risk to public safety.

While the international community has more often been preoccupied with the study of terrorist organizations as a whole, this report focuses on the individuals who join them. The reasons they give for doing so, and the reasons they give for leaving may help to explain the strengths and weaknesses of the appeal of terrorism within the context of the civil war in Syria. The sample group is relatively small compared to the overall number of FTFs,[2] and many of those interviewed found it hard to articulate what led them to take the decisions they made. However, certain patterns are detectable.

1.   Key Findings

There is no one profile for FTFs and this report warns against sweeping generalisations. Some of its findings confirm the results of other, similar studies, while other findings suggest that different samples will prompt different conclusions. For example: most FTFs interviewed in this study are young, male and without an advanced education. Perhaps contrary to general perceptions, the report finds that many FTFs serving as foot soldiers lack opportunity, are disadvantaged economically, lack education and have poor labour prospects, even when they come from Western societies.

Most FTFs in this sample come from large families in urban communities that are rather isolated from mainstream social, economic and political activity. Some of the families from which these particular FTFs come often show signs of internal dysfunction or stress.

FTFs leave their country of residence for different reasons. Push and pull factors intertwine in different ways according to the individual and the internal and external environment each one faces. While this survey suggests that economic factors have become more important as a push factor than was the case in earlier waves of FTFs, for example to Afghanistan in the 1980s, other political and social factors have contributed in varying degrees. The push factors are also inevitably more country-specific than the pull factors. Religious belief seems to have played a minimal role in the motivation of this FTF sample.

Unresolved conflicts that include inter-communal violence appear to be one of the strongest magnets for FTFs. A sense of identity with - and a desire to help - co-religionists who are perceived as victimised and mistreated by other groups has developed into a sense of obligation to act in defence of one's in-group. This was one of the most common reasons that individual FTFs in our sample gave for travelling to Syria. Empathy with the Sunni communities in Syria that are portrayed as being under attack as much for their belief as for any other reason was a common theme. For some, this sense of brotherhood was reinforced by a sense of religious obligation.

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[2] Estimated by the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team established pursuant to resolution 1526 (2004) in March 2015 at more than 25,000 individuals from more than 100 Member States. http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2015/358. P. 7.

Social and personal networks are key mechanisms in the evolution of a FTF. The survey finds that a decision to go to Syria is almost invariably linked to social networks formed in gathering places such as mosques, prisons, schools, universities, neighbourhoods or the workplace. These networks often become stronger in the intensity of the battlefield, but also more exclusive, with weaker members being pushed to the margins over time.

In more general terms, there is inevitably a 'personal' factor that persuades one individual to become a FTF while his neighbour, or even his sibling, although exposed to exactly the same environment and subject to the same conditions conducive to radicalisation and extremism chooses to remain at home. These factors are among the hardest to discover, and although of great importance to the individual, are likely to be the least susceptible to any broad-based intervention at the community level.

The respondents of this survey claimed they did not go to Syria with the intention of becoming a terrorist, nor did they return with that purpose in mind. However, some may remain vulnerable to outside influences, or become unpredictable as a result of the psychological consequences of their experience. Though disillusionment with the gap between the rhetoric of extremist groups and their actions on the ground is a reason for leaving, this may not mean that the ex-FTF has altogether abandoned the ideology and political objectives of the group he or she joined.

However, it appears from this survey that not all individuals who go to Syria undergo intense military training, participate in brutal acts, or are subjected to and accept extensive and religious indoctrination that would lead to their further radicalisation. It also appears from this survey that not all foreign supporters of a group will agree with a call by its leadership for action outside Syria. Nor will their attitude necessarily undergo any significant change as a result of their experience in Syria, or subsequently in prison, where most have ended up.

The respondents of this survey did not intend to return home when they departed for Syria, although overall, a large number have already done so. Many more are expected to return in the future.

The FTFs in this survey were motivated to leave Syria either by their genuine disappointment in and disenfranchisement by the terrorist organization they joined, or were disillusioned by their host's lack of welcome, be it the Syrian people or the terrorist group itself. The screening processes of armed groups tend to weed out the useful from the less useful recruits, leaving the latter with the choice of either remaining undervalued, seeking out another group, or returning to their country of residence. This was a common phenomenon for many of the FTFs represented in this report.

While social networks play a key role in motivating individuals to go to Syria, their influence on the decision to return is less evident. Instead, it is the family network, particularly mothers, that exert the most influential pressure on FTFs to return home, though only once their disillusionment and disappointment has begun to kick in.

2.   Policy Implications

The size of the sample is small, particularly when compared with the number of FTFs who have already gone to Syria, the number of those who have attempted to go but have so far not succeeded, and the number of returnees estimated by some sources at around 35 per cent of the total.[3] The size of the sample clearly prohibits any sophisticated quantitative analysis. Nor are the 43 respondents in this study a truly random sample. The vast majority of them were identified by security officials in a limited range of Member States and agreed to talk to UNCCT experts. There is no control group for comparison, or to determine whether the target group could have been subject to different factors/environment than their peers who did not go to Syria.

Accepting this important caveat, the results of this survey should nevertheless be of interest to academics and policy makers. According to this sample, FTFs are motivated by a diverse range of factors both in deciding to go to Syria and in deciding to return. Idealism and the hope for self-betterment take different forms, as does the disappointment and disillusionment created by group in-fighting, corruption, discrimination, or unmet expectations. It therefore may be important to consider if the criminalization of every returning FTF is necessary. It seems that not all FTFs go to Syria with the objective of becoming fighters there, even less of committing atrocities. In dealing with returnees, it may be important to differentiate between them based on what they actually did in Syria, their initial intention before going and their reasons for return.

Since few of those who go to Syria do so with the intention of training to become a domestic terrorist upon their return, there is a strong case for designing and implementing strategies to prevent violent extremism (PVE) at the national level. Such strategies should aim to expose and undermine the violent extremist messaging that may inspire individuals to join a terrorist group in the first place. As recommended by the United Nations PVE Action Plan, States may wish to focus on those most at risk of becoming FTFs and also facilitate the safe reintegration of returnees and redirection of their future. More broadly, national PVE plans should focus in particular on understanding and addressing both the local and international conditions conducive to the recruitment of FTFs. It is also important to recognise that not all returnees present the same degree of threat; some may be at very low risk of offending further. Without some form of screening and risk assessment, States will be overwhelmed and tend to treat all returnees as high risk, thereby radicalising those who are low threat through unwarranted persecution.

This survey shows that not all returnees would be suitable candidates to counter the narrative of terrorist organizations. Their ability to do so will depend to a large extent on the strength of their character and their reasons for leaving Syria. Many will be inarticulate and unpersuasive; others will want to put their experience behind them; some will be unreliable. Governments will need to screen their returnees to identify the more dangerous among them as well as to select credible and trustworthy individuals who could counter the recruitment narratives of the terrorist organization they joined without presenting their experience in Syria as yet another rejection.

No one country can deal with the phenomenon of FTFs alone. No government possesses all the resources required for such an outcome. For this reason, in its Presidential Statement 2015/11, the United Nations Security Council called on the Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task

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[3] See ICCT, 2016, op cit.

Force (CTITF) Office, in close consultation with "CTED and based on its Counter-Terrorism Committee-approved analyses and reports and taking into account the 1267/1989 Al Qaida Sanctions Committee-approved analytical reports produced by the Monitoring Team to develop a capacity-building Implementation Plan for countering the flow of FTFs through the CTITF FTF Working Group." The CTITF responded and launched a Capacity-Building Implementation Plan with 50 projects addressing the full life-cycle of the FTF phenomenon. The Security Council encouraged "Member States to provide needed financial and other assistance to CTITF and UNCCT" to implement the Plan.

The problem of FTFs will not and cannot be solved through military means alone. A single focus on such a 'hard' approach is more likely to increase the problem by complicating and prolonging the conditions that persuade individuals to become FTFs. This study calls for and suggests action at the national, regional, and international level based on a comprehensive and balanced approach that puts more emphasis on prevention than has been common until now.

There is a need to design and implement programmes to help returning FTFs to reintegrate into society. Clearly their successful reintegration will not only reduce the potential threat they pose as individuals, but will also help Member States to understand what additional measures they could take to reduce any future flow of FTFs. Where reintegration programmes are seen by other FTFs as a possible 'off ramp' from terrorism, they can encourage further defections and provide a boost to the broader counter-extremist effort. Furthermore, FTFs often appear to return home as a result of their disillusionment and disenchantment with the strategies, leadership, and behaviour of the terrorist organization they join; the examples they give may also provide useful and relevant material for the development of effective counter narratives.

Finally, no one study can deal with all aspects of the FTF phenomenon. This survey is no exception. The limitations of this report are acknowledged in the concluding section, as is the need for further research. Only as knowledge of FTFs grows will the international community be better equipped to develop effective prevention policies and programmes, both to stem the flow of FTFs and to facilitate the reintegration of those who have already returned home - or will return in the future - with minimum risk to public safety.

II.   Introduction

There are good reasons why Member States are concerned about the phenomenon of FTFs. By some estimates, over 25,000 foreigners had gone to fight in Syria between the start of the civil war in 2011 and September 2016.[4] This compares with the far lower numbers that participated in conflicts such as the Afghan war (1979-1989), the war in Bosnia (1992-1995), or the war in Iraq (2003-2006). Not only is the number of FTFs far larger and the rate of flow far faster than in these previous wars, but so too is the range of the countries from which they come. In May 2015, the United Nations Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team pursuant to resolutions 1526 (2004) and 2253 (2015) concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and the Taliban and associated individuals and entities reported that FTFs had gone to Syria from over 100 Member States, including some that had never experienced problems with groups associated with Al-Qaida.[5] The unresolved conflict in Syria has therefore placed the FTF phenomenon 'on the international agenda as one of the most pressing transnational security issues of our time.'[6]

The flow of FTFs on such a large scale will inevitably have consequences far beyond the areas of conflict themselves. They will be felt also in countries of origin, countries of return, and in transit countries, as well as across the international community more broadly. The presence of FTFs seems to have contributed to the intensification and prolongation of the conflict in Syria. It has also increased the brutality of the fighting, the frequency of human rights violations, the violent discrimination against minorities, and the increase in transnational organized crime, including the trafficking of people and drugs, which is generally regarded as among the fastest growing and 'most heinous forms of transnational organized crime.'[7]

There is also a particular concern that individuals travelling to war-zones like Syria may become further radicalised while there, and may receive combat training, extremist indoctrination and 'develop intense social associations, generating friendship networks and perceived mutual loyalties that could be the basis of autonomous, transnational terrorist cells in the future.'[8]

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[4] The estimated number of FTFs in Syria/Iraq varies from one source to another. For example, Emman El-Badawy, Milo Comerford, and Peter Welby of the Centre for Religion and Geopolitics (2015), Inside the   Jihadi Mind: *Understanding Ideology and Propaganda,* October 2015, p. 4, argue that: 'After the 9/11 attacks, Osama Bin Laden's al-Qaeda had approximately 300 militants. ISIS alone now has, at a low estimate, 31,000 fighters across Syria and Iraq." http://tonyblairfaithfoundation.org/sites/default/files/Inside%20the%20Jihadi%20Mind.pdf.

[5]. All quotations from United Nations 1267 Al-Qaeda Monitoring team (2015). Analysis and recommendations with regard to the global threat from foreign terrorist fighters, United Nations Security Council, S/2015/358 , 19 May, P. 7.

[6]. Alastair Reed, Jeanine de Roy van Zuijdewijn and Edwin Bakker (2015). Pathways of Foreign Fighters: Policy Options and Their (Un)Intended Consequences, International centre for Counter-Terrorism, ICCT Policy Brief, The Hagur, April, P. i.

[7]. The United Nations (2012). Heinous, Fast-Growing Crimes of Human, Drug Trafficking Will Continue to Ravage World's Economies without Coordinated Global Action, Third Committee Told, UN, New York, October 11. http://www.un.org/press/en/2012/gashc4039.doc.htm

[8]. United Nations Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team (2015). Analysis and recommendations with regard to the global threat from foreign terrorist fighters, 19 May, United Nations Security Council, S/2015/358 pp. 9 and 3, respectively.

In FTFs have imposed special burdens on transit countries, shifted badly needed resources away from more productive areas of government investment, and continue to 'ravage' economies by targeting vulnerable income generating sectors, such as tourism, finance, logistics, and infrastructure.

It is clear that the phenomenon of FTFs represents a major threat to many individual Member States, as well as to international relations and international security. As United Nations Security Council Resolution 2178 (2014) warned: 'foreign terrorist fighters increase the intensity, duration and intractability of conflicts' and by 'using their extremist ideology to promote terrorism', 'may pose a serious threat to their States of origin, the States they transit and the States to which they travel, as well as States neighbouring zones of armed conflict in which foreign terrorist fighters are active and that are affected by serious security burdens'.[9]

However, despite the interest and attention the phenomenon of FTFs has generated and received, as well as the concerns it has raised, research has so far focused primarily on the impact that FTFs may have on the security of their States of nationality or residence or on the conflict they have joined. 'The supply dimension,' the reasons why some individuals join international terrorist groups operating in war zones and why some of them subsequently decide to return home, 'remains poorly understood.'[10] The field of counter-terrorism studies, as one scholar has put it, suffers from 'stagnation,' which 'is partly due to the government strategy of funding research without sharing the necessary primary source information with academia.'[11] Attempts by academics, researchers and research institutions to access information or even interview FTFs have been limited by official reluctance to collaborate. This has led to an 'explosion of speculation with little empirical grounding.'[12]

1.   Background of the FTF Project

In response to the concerns raised by Member States during the Fourth Review of the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Strategy, particularly at the increasing recruitment of outsiders by international terrorist organizations in conflict zones, specifically in Syria, the General Assembly adopted resolution A/RES/68/276. The resolution calls upon all Member States to address the issue of FTFs with the support of the United Nations. This resolution led to the launch of the "Enhancing the Understanding of the Foreign Terrorist Fighter Phenomenon in Syria" project by UNCCT. Since then, significant efforts have been made by the Executive Director of UNCCT and Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs as well as UNCCT's staff and experts, to reach out to Member States in order to mobilize support for the project.

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[9] United Nations Resolution 2178 (2014). Adopted by the Security Council at its 7272nd meeting, United Nations Security Council, 24 September, p. 2. http://www.un.org/en/sc/ctc/docs/2015/SCR%202178_2014_EN.pdf.
[10]. Thomas Hegghammer (2013). Should I Stay or Should I Go? Explaining Variation in Western Jihadists' Choice between Domestic and Foreign Fighting , in American Political Science Review
Vol. 107, No. 1 February 20, P. 2.
[11] Marc Sageman (2014). The Stagnation in Terrorism Research, in Terrorism and Political Violence, 26/4, pp. 565-580.
[12]. Ibid.

On 8th September, 2014 the the Executive Director of UNCCT and Under-Secretary-General sent a note to all Permanent Representatives in New York, outlining the goals of the project, and invited Member States to inform UNCCT of their interest to participate. The initial interest that Member States expressed was encouraging. Close to 50 representatives from 40 delegations attended a meeting in New York on 16th September, 2014 to provide more detail about the project and address questions. Following this briefing, the Secretary-General launched the project during his address to the high-level meeting of the Security Council on 24th September, 2014. This meeting was chaired by the President of the United States and adopted, by consensus the landmark resolution 2178 (2014) on FTFs.

UNCCT then consulted a range of Member States, taking a strategic approach, focusing its efforts mostly on those States that had expressed the greatest interest in the project and/or were most affected by the FTF phenomenon. In January 2015, experts at UNCCT developed a questionnaire especially designed to study the socioeconomic characteristics of FTFs, their reasons for going to Syria, and the reasons that some of them decided to leave and return to their countries of residence, nationality, or citizenship. UNCCT then organized a second meeting with relevant Member States on 29th April, 2015, to brief them on progress made, re-emphasize the significance of the subject, and urge them to collaborate with UNCCT, its experts and staff in order to implement the survey by facilitating access to FTFs, exchange information, and enable UNCCT's experts to generate a comprehensive primary data set.

A second note from the Executive Director of UNCCT and Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs followed this meeting on 19th June, 2016 addressed to the Permanent Missions of the relevant Member States. UNCCT experts and staff continued to reach out to Member States and encourage their participation, including visits to capitals, meetings with state security and other officials, applications seeking access to information on returning or arrested FTFs, and detailed discussions on the terms of reference for the project. Despite these efforts only seven Member States agreed to participate in the survey. They subsequently provided access to 43 FTFs. UNCCT remains deeply grateful for the efforts of these Member States in support of this project.

The general lack of cooperation with regard to the exchange of information and access to FTFs or other extremists is a problem faced by many academics and research institutions, and this lack of cooperation has contributed to the creation of a knowledge-gap in the field of terrorism studies in general and of FTFs in particular. The UNCCT experience is not unusual. However, Member States may have their own good reasons for their hesitancy in participating in such a survey, for example; FTFs are a potential liability and must be treated with great care; outside contact can be disruptive, even where there is no legal impediment, such as might arise from criminal charges; a FTF in custody may raise many issues that are not pertinent to the interview, or make claims as to his or her motivation that the Member State concerned might find hard to deal with; prison governors and security agencies may see significant risk and little direct benefit from unsupervised interviews by outsiders and choose not to take the risk.

It is nevertheless regrettable that a larger number of Member States did not participate in the survey. However, there is plenty more opportunity to add to its findings through further interviews and additional work. The FTF phenomenon is not a static one, and as ISIS comes

under increasing pressure and other extremist groups in Syria continue to morph and merge, an understanding of what drives foreigners to join or leave them will remain of interest and value to both policy makers and practitioners.

Despite these challenges, this report remains a useful tool in the hands of Member States that wish to get to grips with the FTF phenomenon, develop their capacities to deal with it, and design more effective policies and programmes to stem the flow and facilitate the effective reintegration of returnees. Despite the relatively small sample size, the UNCCT survey is currently one of the only publicly available empirical studies of individual FTFs, with its information derived directly from FTFs themselves through face to face interviews.

2.   Goals and Objectives

The Security Council has defined FTFs as 'individuals who travel to a State other than their States 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'.[13]

This survey attempts in particular to fill some part of the knowledge gap related to the motivation of FTFs. The report has three key objectives:

- To enhance understanding of why some individuals decide to travel to a State other than their own that is experiencing armed conflict (in this case Syria) for the purpose of joining a transnational terrorist organization, like ISIS or JFS;
- To enhance understanding of why some of these individuals decide to return to their country of residence or nationality after travelling to a conflict zone (Syria) and joining a transnational terrorist group before fully achieving their goals;
- To enhance understanding of the level of risk returning individuals may pose to themselves, their families, and their societies after returning to their country of nationality or residence.

The report focuses on Syria mainly because it has attracted such a large number of FTFs in recent years.[14]

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[13]. United Nations Security Council Resolution 2178 (2014). Adopted by the Security Council at its 7272nd meeting, on 24 September 2014 . http://www.un.org/en/sc/ctc/docs/2015/SCR%202178_2014_EN.pdf.
[14]. See Thomas Hegghammer (2010). The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters :Islam and the Globalization of Jihad, International Security, Vol. 35, No. 3 (Winter), pp. 53–94.

3. Methodology

Despite its importance, and as alluded to earlier, the study of FTFs in general has suffered from a lack of empirical evidence. This is partly due to the limited exchange of information between security and intelligence agencies on the one hand and academia on the other. In the specific context of FTFs, it is also the result of the reluctance of returning or would-be FTFs to talk to academics and researchers out of fear of punishment or the exposure of their identities, particularly following the tightening of legal measures by most Member States against actual or would-be FTFs within their jurisdictions. Some journalists have managed to secure illuminating interviews with individual FTFs, but the numbers are small, the circumstances and conditions unknown, and the approaches too varied to generalise their findings.

In an attempt to fill the knowledge gap, and encouraged by the initial strong and positive response from Member States, the UNCCT designed and launched its comprehensive survey. The survey targeted in particular two groups of individuals: returnees who went to Syria with the purpose of joining a terrorist organization there, but for some reason decided to return to their country of residence or nationality before achieving their goals or the goals of the organization they intended to join; and people who had been turned back on the way to Syria either by their own security officials or officials of a third country. A questionnaire designed by UNCCT experts sought to standardise interviews and facilitate the collection of primary data about the FTFs and their motivations. It has three specific parts: the first focuses on the biographies and socioeconomic backgrounds of the FTFs; the second focuses on their reasons for going to Syria, while the final part looks at their reasons for leaving Syria and returning to their place of residence or nationality.

Of the seven Member States that agreed to participate in the Survey, three are members of the European Union while the others are in the Middle East and North Africa. The 43 FTFs interviewed for the project represent 12 different nationalities. Of these, 33 (77 per cent) reached Syria, while ten (23 per cent) were either intercepted by their own authorities before departing their country of residence, or stopped by the authorities of a transit country while *en route* to Syria. One was persuaded not to leave by his mother the night before he was due to depart his country of residence.

Of the 33 individuals who went to Syria, seven (21 per cent) were in the Levant before the outbreak of the Syrian conflict in early 2011. They originally travelled to Syria around 2007/08 in order to join an armed group in Syria. Another FTF was arrested in 2011 while attempting to return to his country of residence after being wounded during training in a camp, where he had spent nine months. These individuals are classified as FTFs for the purposes of this report because they left their countries of origin in order to join an international terrorist organization.

The UNCCT experts interviewed 41 of the 43 subjects directly (face to face). A civil society organization involved in the rehabilitation and reintegration of FTF in a major EU Member State interviewed the remaining two under UNCCT direction. Twenty six of the interviews were carried out inside prisons, while the remaining 17 were held in other official premises or public places arranged by, though generally not in the presence of, security officials from the host country.

Given the sensitivity of the information obtained, and in order to protect the rights of the interviewees, this survey has strictly adhered to basic principles of data gathering, i.e., that all interviews should be conducted voluntarily, freely and without any constraint; and, that the United Nations undertakes to protect the identity and confidentiality of each interviewee.

UNCCT experts began each interview by explaining these principles of data gathering and asked the FTFs to sign a form to confirm that they had agreed to the interview without coercion or hope of reward. Each Member State that hosted an interview also provided assurances that no pressure had been exerted on any interviewee to participate, or to provide or not to provide any information. States also gave assurances that the conditions under which the interviewees were held if in prison fully respected their individual rights. The interviewees began by completing a questionnaire providing basic details of their backgrounds and experience before entering a one on one open-ended interview to explore in depth both the answers provided and any other issues that arose. Each interview took, on average, two hours.

The size of the sample is in all respects small, particularly when compared with the number of FTFs who have already gone to Syria, the number of those who have attempted to go but have so far not succeeded, and the number of returnees estimated by some sources at around 35 per cent of the total.[15] This sample size clearly prohibits any sophisticated quantitative analysis. Also, given that not all the interviewees in our sample actually went to Syria, conclusions about the reasons for leaving are tentative and do not reveal strong patterns.[16] Finally, the 43 respondents in this study are not a truly random sample. They have been chosen simply because they were identified by security officials in a limited range of Member States and agreed to talk to UNCCT experts. There is no control group for comparison, or to determine whether the target group could have been subject to different factors/environment than their peers who did not go to Syria.

Nonetheless, these problems are common to all research on FTFs. In fact, and as the next section will demonstrate, the sample represented in this report remains one of the largest samples of face-to-face interviews so far conducted with FTFs. Therefore, the UNCCT believes that this report adds significantly to current research. The hope remains that it will assist Member States to design and implement policies and programmes that discourage those who are about to or are thinking of going to Syria, and reintegrate those who have already returned, or who are about to do so.

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[15]. See ICCT, 2016, op cit.

[16]. It is important at least not to underestimate the motivations and determination of those who failed to make it to Syria. In many ways, they are not dissimilar to the Petitjean — who used the nom de guerre Abu Omar – and who butchered Rev. Jacques Hamel inside a church in late July in the French Normandy town of Saint-Etienne-du-Rouvray, or Michael Zehaf-Bibeau who in October 2014 fatally shot Corporal Nathan Cirillo inside the Canadian Parliament. Both were drawn to ISIS but failed to make it to Syria. (See The Guardian (2016). Powerful tributes at funeral of priest killed in France terrorist attack, August 2, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/aug/02/thousands-expected-funeral-priest-killed-in-france-terror-attack, and CNN (2014). 'Terrorist' murdered soldier 'in cold blood,' Canada's Prime Minister says, October 31. http://edition.cnn.com/2014/10/22/world/americas/canada-ottawa-shooting/.

III. Literature Review

Despite the attention it generates and the concerns it raises, the phenomenon of FTFs remains empirically and theoretically under-researched. As such, there are knowledge gaps that remain to be filled. There are good reasons for the dearth of research. For a start, it is a very difficult subject to investigate. Accessing FTFs in conflict zones like Syria is impossible to do directly and hard to do remotely. It entails risks of disinformation as well as threats to the safety of the interviewer and his or her subjects. Even identifying, locating, and communicating with returning FTFs who may claim to have given up violence and broken their ties with Syria is not easy and is fraught with uncertainty. Given the large increase in legislation that criminalises what is perceived as actual or proximate acts of terrorism in foreign countries, most returning fighters now prefer to be left alone and stay away from the media hype that would all too quickly surround them. Publicity could lead to their exposure, criminal charges, stigmatization, labelling and discrimination both against them and against their communities. Whether in prison or at large, accessing a significant number of FTFs, former or current, requires the consent, collaboration, coordination and approval of security officials, lawyers and families as well as the FTFs themselves. This has rarely been forthcoming, except in some very exceptional circumstances. All of this means that accessing FTFs and conducting empirical research into their backgrounds and motivation is a difficult undertaking.

However, some valuable work has already taken place since 2011. A limited body of literature provides significant knowledge about a small group of FTFs, their biographies, and motivations. This can serve as a baseline against which this survey's findings may be compared, even though some studies may suffer from a "distorted measurements" problem – i.e. confusing Syrians with foreigners who join armed groups.[17] In the following sub-sections, we focus on the most quoted studies on FTFs.

International Centre for Counter Terrorism (ICCT)

One of the first institutions to pay attention to the phenomenon of FTFs was The Hague-based International Centre for Counter Terrorism (ICCT). Since 2013, ICCT has published at least three key reports on FTFs from Europe.[18] While the first two studies were more policy oriented and focused on the possible challenges presented by FTFs, the third report, published in 2016, examined in detail the motivations and biographies of FTFs. The third ICCT report was based on

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[17]. Thomas Hegghammer (2013). Should I Stay or Should I Go? Explaining Variation in Western Jihadists' Choice between Domestic and Foreign Fighting, in American Political Science Review, February, PP.1-15. P. 2

[18]. Edwin Bakker, Christophe Paulussen and Eva Entenmann (2013).Dealing with European Foreign Fighters in Syria: Governance Challenges & Legal Implications, ICCT Research Paper December; Alastair Reed, Jeanine de Roy van Zuijdewijn and Edwin Bakker (2015), *Pathways of Foreign Fighters: Policy Options and Their (Un)Intended Consequences; and* Bibi van Ginkel and Eva Entenmann (Eds) (2016). *The Foreign Fighters Phenomenon in the European Union: Profiles, Threats & Policies, ICCT, The Hague*.

data provided by EU Member States' security officials in response to a questionnaire prepared by the ICCT dated October 2015, as well as on open-source material. These sources 'generated information on the number of FTFs, their characteristics, member state threat assessments, and the policies adopted in response to the phenomenon.'

With regard to the profiles of FTFs, which is the part of the report most relevant to the goals and objectives of this study, the ICCT concluded that:

> Although there is not one typical profile of a European FTF, some key characteristics can be identified. Based on this research, FTFs today are mostly young men between the ages of eighteen and mid-to-late twenties, with some countries reporting that between 4% and 10% of FTFs are under eighteen, whereas in four countries in Eastern and Southern Europe, the FTFs contingent is older, with more than 50% being over 30. The proportion of females in the total FTFs contingent varies between 6% and 30%, with some countries indicating that the number has grown in recent months.[19]

The report also contains important though incomplete information about the marital status of FTFs, noting that 'little data could be found on the marital status of all (i.e. male and female) departed FTFs. However, information from five countries indicates that around half are married, whereas one Southern European country had a majority of unmarried FTFs'.[20]

The report also provided information on the motivation of European FTFs, as perceived by EU Member State officials:

> Based on the information collected through the ICCT questionnaire, FTFs' motivations to depart include a wide variety of push and pull factors: Solidarity with other fellow Muslims abroad (in Syria mostly, and especially during the early stages of FTFs travel), the fight against the Syrian Government, the desire to live in a territory ruled by Islamic law, alienation and social exclusion felt in Europe, as well as the desire to conduct jihad. For some, the search for excitement and adventure play a role, as does peer pressure and the prospects of life in the caliphate, such as marriage and housing. … Some indicate that FTFs motives could also relate to more politically-oriented factors, such as the foreign policy of European Union Member States (past or current military engagement against armed groups close or affiliated to ISIS or al Qaeda) or EU national integration policies allegedly alienating Muslim groups.[21]

The report suggests that religious ideology is not so much a push factor influencing young Muslims within the EU to become FTFs, as it is a post facto justification, ideology being used to legitimise acts of violence rather than to incite them. As the report notes:

> The language of *jihad* [is used]… only [to] legitimise the grievance, offering a designated culprit and a direct justification to fight the wrong, whether that is poor integration, real or perceived marginalisation, relative deprivation, or discrimination. As such, the

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[19]. Bibi van Ginkel and Eva Entenmann, Op cit, p. 49.
[20]. Ibid, p. 51.
[21]. Ibid, p. 53.

decision to make *hijra* to the land of Islam is less of a religious obligation than an emotional response to a feeling of injustice in their home societies.[22]

Drawing on the Dutch experience, the report also states:

> One study by the Dutch Security and Intelligence Service (AIVD) offered various different reasons for returning: being disillusioned, being traumatised, (feelings of) betrayal, realisation of the atrocities, and regret, as well as having plans to recruit others or commit attacks in their countries of departure. … Other returnees emphasised intra-Muslim fighting to justify their desire to leave IS ('Muslims are fighting Muslims – I didn't come for that.')

While an important addition to the literature, the ICCT 2016 report remains a European-focused study therefore excluding the great majority of FTFs in Syria who come from other regions of the world. Much of its evidence is based on the 'perception' of EU security officials, which is an important perception to include. However, official and FTFs' perceptions might not always converge, as most returning FTFs have an incentive to tell their security interrogators a version of the truth that may help them avoid or limit any negative consequences.

International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation (ICSR)

Another institution that has been monitoring FTFs from an early stage of the Syrian conflict is the London-based International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation (ICSR). By October 2015, ICSR had published four reports that 'track the number of foreign jihadist fighters in the Syrian/Iraqi conflict since 2012.' Each report aimed to update the one before.

With regard to the motivations of FTFs who sought to join the conflict, the first ICSR report (April 2013) stated that:

> Furthermore, not everyone who has joined a jihadist group has been motivated by a fully formed jihadist worldview. The most commonly cited reasons for joining rebel forces are the horrific images of the conflict, stories about atrocities committed by government forces, and the perceived lack of support from Western and Arab countries. In many cases, these individuals fully adopt the jihadist doctrine and ideology only when they are on the ground and in contact with hardened fighters.[23]

While noting a big jump in the number of FTFs in Syria, the second ICSR report (December 2013) concluded that 'It is difficult' to explain the motivations behind this sudden and large increase in the number of FTFs in Syria'. However, it suggested that the involvement of foreign groups on the Syrian Government's side could provide the chief explanatory variable.[24] 'This,' the report added, 'may have reinforced and strengthened the perception among some Sunnis that the conflict is fundamentally sectarian, and that Sunnis need to stand together in order to halt the

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[22]. Ibid, p. 54.
[23]. Aaron Y. Zelin (2013), Op cit.
[24]. ICSR, December 2013, Op cit.

(Shia) enemy's advance. Indeed, this type of solidarity has driven a number of previous foreign fighter mobilisations involving Sunni militants.'[25]

It is important to note that both the April and December ICSR reports were published before ISIS announced its so-called Islamic Caliphate in the summer of 2014. The ICSR relied on:

> 1,500 open source items, which have been collected since November 2011. They include: media reports about foreign fighters in English, Arabic and several other languages (and from both sides of the conflict); government estimates; and statements about foreign fighters by jihadist groups, typically published in online extremist forums and on social media.[26]

Despite the value of its findings, the ICSR admits that:

> We are under no illusion that the underlying data is incomplete and – in many cases – ambiguous... we have no consistently reliable methodology… but based on the credibility of various sources, our judgement, and feedback we have received since publishing our April estimate, we believe the true figure [of FTFs in Syria] to be above 8,500.[27]

In 2015, the ICSR carried out two further surveys. The January 2015 report focused almost solely on the number of FTFs in Syria, noting a continuation of the steep rise in the number of FTF joining ISIS. The issue of motivations was discussed in the final (September 2015) report, the most valuable ICSR report on the motivations of FTFs thus far. The September report looked at 58 ISIS defectors from 17 different countries. More than a third of the 58 (21 individuals making up 36 per cent of the sample) were Syrian, while 17 (or 29 per cent) were from other parts of the Middle East. The sample also included nine individuals (or 15.5 per cent) from EU Member States and Australia, and seven (12 per cent) from Central, South and Southeast Asia. The nationalities of the remaining two defectors were unknown.[28] As the ICSR said: 'this report offers a first (and very provisional) insight into the stories of the IS defectors… It provides a compilation of the 58 cases of public defection; a summary of what their testimonies tell us about their reasons for joining and leaving IS.'[29]

Three drivers were found to have had particular influence over the decision of these FTFs to go to Syria. The first was 'atrocities that have been carried out by the Syrian Government' against the Sunni population. This finding is consistent with the first finding of the previous report; the FTFs perception of the Syrian conflict in sectarian terms and the belief that Sunni groups are facing genocide from a Shiite-led opposition appear as key factors behind the decision to go to Syria/Iraq. The second most important motivation related to 'faith and ideology…'

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[25]. Ibid.
[26]. Ibid.
[27]. Ibid.
[28]. Ibid, p. 7.
[29]. ICSR (September 2015), Op cit, p. 5.

Many defectors became convinced that IS represented a perfect Islamic state which every Muslim had a duty to support and help succeed. In their view, it offered the opportunity to live in accordance with Sharia law and fight for a holy cause.

This second motivational driver to an extent contradicts a key finding of the 2014 report. While the earlier report noted that 'not everyone who has joined a jihadist group has been motivated by a fully formed jihadist worldview' and that 'these individuals fully adopt the jihadist doctrine and ideology only when they are on the ground and in contact with hardened fighters,' the 2015 report suggests that 'faith' and 'ideology' play a larger role than previously acknowledged in the initial period of attraction.

The final drivers, according to the September 2015 report, are 'personal and material needs. Some of the defectors mentioned promises of food, luxury goods, and cars, and having their debts paid off. Others said they were attracted by notions of adventure, brotherhood, fighting, and the chance to become a hero.'[30]

With regard to the decision to leave Syria, the ICSR report identifies four key reasons. These are:
- The perception that 'IS is more interested in fighting fellow (Sunni) Muslims than the [Government of Syria].'
- The perception that 'IS is involved in brutality and atrocities against (Sunni) Muslims.'
- The perception that 'IS is corrupt and un-Islamic,' with the 'corruption narrative cover[ing] a range of behaviours that defectors considered unjust, selfish, and contrary to the group's ideals and standards of conduct.'
- The perception that 'life under IS' is 'harsh and disappointing.'[31]

This ICSR report was among the first to provide insight into why FTFs went to or left Syria. However, little is known about the 58 individuals represented in the survey apart from the group motivated by 'personal and material needs', who, according to the report, 'were least likely to be religiously literate, and rarely articulated a strong sense of religious obligation or identity.'[32]

Finally, as the report itself notes, the survey relies on public statements by the 58 defectors rather than on direct interviews. As the ICSR recognizes:

Having defected from IS and returned to their home countries, they have an incentive to downplay their ideological commitment, the role they played in crimes and atrocities, and – more generally – say whatever they think will save them from prosecution or worse.[33]

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[30]. All quotations from Ibid, p. 9.
[31]. ICSR (September 2015) Report, Op cit, p. 1.
[32]. Ibid, p. 9.
[33]. Ibid, p. 7.

Another institution that has been monitoring developments with regard to FTFs is the New York-based Soufan Group. Between June 2014 and January 2015, the Group published two reports that monitored trends in FTFs traveling to Syria and Iraq. The first,[34] published in June 2014, counted approximately 12,000 FTFs from 81 countries. The second,[35] published in December 2015, noted that: 'Nearly eighteen months later, despite sustained international effort to contain the Islamic State and stem the flow of militants traveling to Syria, the number of foreign fighters has more than doubled… [to] between 27,000 and 31,000.'[36]

The report also touched upon the issue of motivation and argues that:

> '… the motivation for people to join violent extremist groups in Syria and Iraq remains more personal than political… [ISIS propaganda] appeals to those who seek a new beginning rather than revenge for past acts. A search for belonging, purpose, adventure, and friendship, appear to remain the main reasons for people to join the Islamic State.'[37]

With regard to the motivations for leaving Syria and Iraq, the Soufan Group's report states that:

> … as time has passed, the number of individuals returning to their home countries from the fighting in Syria and Iraq has increased. Their motivation for leaving may vary as much as their motivation for joining; some will have had enough of the violence, some may have become disillusioned with the Islamic State and its leadership, and others may have simply decided to pursue their goals elsewhere. Little is known about them, and for the time being, it is too early to say what this means in terms of the threat to national security.[38]

These reports, the Soufan Group states:

> … have been compiled from official government estimates wherever possible, but also derive from United Nations reports, studies by research bodies, academic sources, and from other sources quoting government officials.[39]

The authors do not claim 'the statistical rigour necessary to support classic academic or predictive analysis.' Most of these estimates are likely based on 'general impressions,' rather than 'rigorous and scientific methodologies'.[40]

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[34] The Soufan Group (2014) Foreign Fighters in Syria, Richard Barrett. http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/TSG-Foreign-Fighters-in-Syria.pdf
[35]. The Soufan Group (2015). Foreign Fighters: An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq, December, p. 4. http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/TSG_ForeignFightersUpdate3.pdf
[36]. Ibid, p.4.
[37]. Ibid, p. 6.
[38]. Ibid, p. 6.
[39]. Ibid, p. 5.
[40]. All quotations from Matt Venhaus (2010). Op cit, p. 4.

United Nations and its agencies

No study of FTFs would be complete without considering the contribution of the United Nations and its agencies. The United Nations has been leading the global work on FTFs in terms of raising awareness of the threats that they could pose, not only in conflict areas, but also to neighbouring States and regions, as well as to the global community as a whole, mainly through the material, human, and logistical consequences of conflict, as well as the new skills and social networks that emerge from individual engagement.

In May 2015 the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED) published a report that focused entirely on FTFs. The report looked at patterns and trends in the number of FTFs rather than their motivation, however one important finding relates to the Internet and the role of social media in encouraging FTFs to travel:

> '… the activities of foreign terrorist fighters are facilitated by rapidly changing Internet and communications technologies… Recruitment is often carried out over the Internet through social networking sites and chatrooms.'

A second finding of the report relates to the age and gender of FTFs. It points out: 'The average recruitment age is also younger, and women, more than ever before, are being drawn in greater numbers into zones of armed conflict as foreign terrorist fighters';[41] a conclusion that is also in accord with the ICCT and ICSR reports.

CTED's analysis is based on information 'acquired during the Committee's visits to States and other forms of dialogue with States, including responses to questions submitted directly to the States' by CTED.

In May 2015 the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team regarding the Taliban and Al Qaida also produced a report on FTFs.[42] The report in general focused on the number of FTFs and documented a large increase in their flow to Syria and Iraq. With regard to who becomes an FTF, the report noted that:

> Member States are endeavouring to develop typologies, but there is no clear profile given the diversity of such fighters. Some are motivated by extremist ideology, as with networks of fighters associated with some extremist preachers …. Some appear more driven by alienation and boredom than by ideology. In some countries…there appears to be a stronger link to prior petty crime[43]

Like CTED, the Monitoring Team report relied on information derived from Member States, not FTFs. As the report stated: 'The analysis here draws primarily on Member State information.'[44]

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[41]. Ibid.

[42]. http://www.un.org/press/en/2015/sc12090.doc.htm

[43]. The 2016 ICCT Report suggests that, among EFFs, there is a relatively large percentage of individuals with various criminal backgrounds.

[44]. Ibid, p.5.

An academic study of ISIL defectors was published in late 2015 by the International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism, authored by Anne Speckhard and Ahmet S. Yayla. This study was part of the Center's so-called 'IS Defectors Interview Project.' The study 'is based on preliminary findings… from thirteen interviews with actual IS defectors.'[45] Unlike others, this study examined the biographies of its defector sample and successfully 'throws light,' in the words of the fighters themselves, 'on their experiences inside IS–including their motivations for joining,' as well as 'highlighting factors that ultimately led to disillusionment and defections.'

They are twelve men and one woman, and all are Arabs. They spent between six and eighteen months as ISIS fighters and defected within one year of the interviews. Three had been in leadership positions and, except for the woman, the rest were 'ordinary fighters'. One had been a prison guard, and one was 'a fourteen-year old child [who] had been groomed to become a suicide bomber.'[46]

All but the minor were married, and except for the youngest adult, who had only married a week before the interview, each had at least one child. The only female among the group was also a mother and was married to an ISIS fighter, which qualified her automatically as an ISIS member. The educational level of this group varies, but generally is not very high. For example, only three of the sample (23 per cent) were college-educated: one was a law student in his last year, another an Arabic language teacher and the third an Arabic literature teacher. Another three were high-school graduates. The rest of the interviewed adults (46 per cent) had not finished high school and one had even dropped out of primary school. 'They were farmers and small business owners. The minor had his middle school education interrupted by the conflict in Syria.'[47]

The authors report five motivations for joining ISIS:

- *Material and personal interests*, such as cash payments in the form of a salary, food, accommodation, furniture, and other rewards given to fighters for 'good work.'
- *Ideological and faith motivation*. This is different from the kind of faith and ideological motivations discussed in the September 2015 ICSR report. Faith and ideology here refer to the desire to learn and study the Sharia and join religious classes run by ISIS for its members because 'they had been largely denied religious education under the [Government of Syria].'
- *ISIS' ability to bring security, reduce crime and achieve equality* in the areas under its control through the embrace of a strict Islamic code.
- *Purification and cleansing*, especially of past sins, and
- *Fear of a worse alternative*.[48]

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[45]. All quotations are from Anne Speckhard and Ahmet S. Yayla (2015). Perspectives on Terrorism, Eyewitness Accounts from Recent Defectors from Islamic State: Why They Joined, What They Saw, Why They Quit, Vol 9, No 6. http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/475/html.

[46]. Ibid.

[47]. Ibid.

[48]. All quotations from Ibid.

With regard to the reasons for leaving ISIS, Speckhard and Yayla find common ground with the September 2015 ICSR report, noting the same four themes:

- *Infighting among Muslims*,
- *Disillusionment and outrage* with the group's brutality, especially toward civilians.
- *Corruption in the group* and special privileges granted to foreign fighters.
- *The harshness of life under the Islamic State*, which turned out to be a disappointment.[49]

The thirteen 'informants,' as the authors prefer to call them are 'all Syrians,' with 'four from Raqqa, two from Aleppo, and one each from Tishrin, al-Hasakah, el-Aziziye, and Deir ez-Zor.'[50]

German FTFs Study

In early 2016, the Government of Germany provided information about the biographies and motivations of its FTF contingent. The study provided information on 677 of 800 individuals who left Germany for Syria or Iraq before June 30, 2015. The analysis is based on data provided by the German police and domestic intelligence agencies, both at federal and state level. It was compiled jointly by the Bundeskriminalamt (the Federal Criminal Police Agency), the Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz (the Federal Domestic Intelligence Service), and the Hessian Centre of Information and Expertise on Extremism.[51]

With regard to the biographies of the FTFs, 79 per cent are male and 21 per cent female. The age range varies between 15 and 62 years, with an arithmetic mean of 25.9 years. However, the mean age of the individuals who left for Syria after the proclamation of the so-called Caliphate in June 2014 is younger than the mean age of those who left earlier (23.7 vs 26.6). Also, the percentage of minors is considerably higher (12 per cent vs. 5 per cent).[52] The majority of the German sample were married. Only 34 per cent of the 628 individuals whose marital status is known were single, while 52 per cent were married under German or Islamic law; 42 per cent (267) are known to have children. Most of these FTFs do not seem to be economically deprived. For example, out of 548 individuals whose living conditions are known, 60 per cent owned a home prior to their departure. Finally, 'close to 90 per cent lived in urban areas,' a finding shared by the ICSR 2016 and Soufan Group studies. Information about the job status of these FTFs is not available, but at least 147 were known to be unemployed while 94 were known to have had a regular job before leaving for Syria.[53]

Similar to the findings of other studies, the educational status of the FTFs in the German report does not seem to be very high. Only 63 are known to have attended a local school, while 115 are

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[49]. Ibid.

[50]. For detailed study on these differences, see Paul Collier (2008). The Bottom Billion, Oxford, Oxford University Press.

[51]. The UNCTITF received direct information about the study from the German Ministry of Interior. The key results of the study however have also been published by the ICSR in 2016. (*Daniel H. Heinke* (2016). ICSR Insight – German Jihadists in Syria and Iraq: An Update, 2 February. 29/02/2016.
http://icsr.info/2016/02/icsr-insight-german-jihadists-syria-iraq-update/

[52]. Ibid.

[53]. Ibid.

known to have begun some sort of vocational training. Of these, only 49 per cent had completed their training prior to their departure, 31 per cent had dropped out beforehand, and 20 per cent were still in training when they left Germany. Although 81 persons are known to have begun university studies, only 14 per cent were graduates; 28 per cent had discontinued their studies, and 59 per cent were still enrolled at the time of their departure.[54]

Two-thirds of these FTFs had been the subject of criminal investigation. Altogether 225 individuals were suspected of or had stood trial for criminal offences 'prior to their Islamist radicalisation, with violent attacks (assault, robbery, etc.) and property crime accounting for 29 per cent each, followed by drug trafficking (16 per cent).'[55] This finding is also consistent with the Soufan Group and ICCT studies, both of which found in some countries a relatively high percentage of individuals who had been involved in criminal activity prior to their departure for Syria. Put differently, a large number of FTFs are known to law enforcement or security services prior to their departure. Some were even 'suspected of or tried for six or more crimes' prior to leaving.[56]

The German study also confirms another common finding regarding the pace of radicalisation: the study noted that 'in many cases the radicalisation process was very quick'. Nearly half (48 per cent) appeared to have left Germany less than one year after the start of the radicalisation process, with close to a quarter (23 per cent) departing within six months.[57]

Another finding of the German study relates to the role of the Internet in the radicalization process and/or the recruitment of FTFs. The study noted that 'The vast majority of departees were radicalised in real life environments,' and that 'in most cases the Internet played no major role. Only a few individuals were purely radicalised online.'

Despite its significant contribution, the German study does not provide information on why these citizens decided to go to or return from Syria and Iraq. It provides some information however on what it calls 'causes of radicalisation'. According to German security officials, the most important contributing factor is 'contacts with extreme Salafi groups:'

> Close social contacts with extremist views were assessed as relevant factors in 96% of the cases investigated … 81% had contacts to extreme Salafi groups….

To sum up the main points in this section, there is no complete coincidence of opinion in the literature with regard to the reasons why individuals elect to go to war zones like Syria or Iraq to join transnational terrorist organizations. The literature still presents an incomplete picture, and despite best efforts, lacks a wide and solid collection of empirical evidence. Insofar as these papers and reports define what they mean by FTFs, their definitions differ and do not always accord with the classification of FTFs provided by the Security Council. Many studies are carried out by security officials, which, as others have pointed out, may be based more on assumptions stemming from their own bias and perceptions than on the actual narrative of

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[54]. Ibid.
[55]. Ibid.
[56]. Ibid.
[57]. Ibid.

FTFs.[58] When a FTF talks to an official, he or she may well have reason to underplay the role of certain motivations and to exaggerate the weight of others. However, given the fact that the literature discussed above is the most relevant and perhaps the only source of information currently available on FTFs, it is useful to validate its findings or otherwise by comparing its results with this survey. It is therefore useful to summarise the main findings of existing studies.

- Most FTFs are male and between the ages of 18 and 29.
- Most FTFs are not highly educated and lack deep knowledge of Islam.
- There is no consistency with regard to the economic status of FTFs. This seems to vary from one country to another. The German FTFs, for example, seem to be better off economically than those from elsewhere.
- A relatively large number of FTFs have a criminal history, including drug dealing and violence.
- FTFs may be single or married, and with or without children.
- A large number of FTFs are either unemployed or have low paid jobs.
- There is no agreement on the exact role of ideology, but the literature seems to favour secular over religious motivations.
- Finally, disillusionment with the strategies, methods, living conditions and corruption of terrorist organizations and their leadership are the most common reasons for leaving.

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[58]. Sageman, 2014, Op cit.

IX. Who becomes an FTF?

This section is divided into three subsections that follow the format of the questionnaire that the UNCCT asked FTFs to complete at the start of each interview: biographical details; motivations for going to Syria; and motivations for leaving.
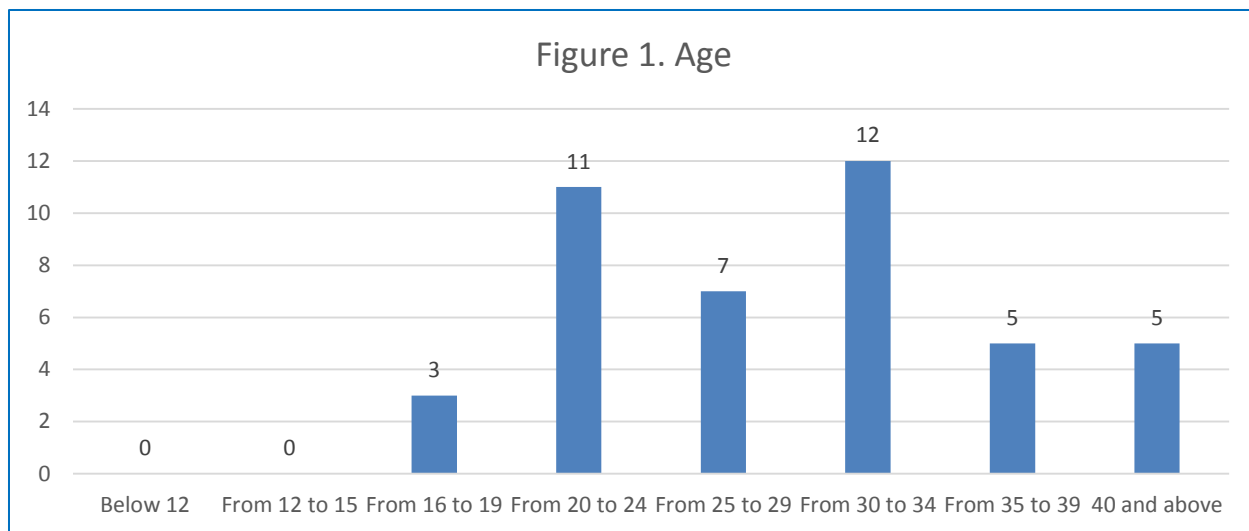
1.   Biographies of FTFs

The figures below and the table in the appendix provide information on the FTF sample, including their gender, date of departure for Syria, date of return, age, time spent in Syria, and other information. With regard to age, figure 1 shows a high proportion (21 of the 43, or approximately 49 per cent) aged between 16 and 29, with another 12 (28 per cent) in the 30 - 34 age group. However, this age structure reflects the age at the time of interview, not on the date of departure for Syria. When based on the date each individual left for Syria 70 per cent of the sample falls into the 16-29 age group.

Also, 24 interviewees went to Syria before 2014 when ISIS declared a Caliphate. Seven individuals left for Syria after that point, one later in 2014 and six in 2015. There are also seven respondents who went to Syria before the Syrian civil war broke out, while one interviewee went to Afghanistan in 2010. The time spent in Syria ranged from a minimum of two weeks to a maximum of 24 months. The same figure also shows that most of the older FTFs (over 30) in this sample departed for Syria before 2013. This is again consistent with the findings of most other studies, which suggest a younger age of FTFs leaving for Syria after the announcement of the Caliphate.

Ten individuals (23 per cent) were older than 34 when they left for Syria; five of them were between 35 and 39 while the rest were over 40. Three individuals interviewed in 2015 were by then over 40; one was 42, another 43 and the third 52 years old. A fourth respondent interviewed in late 2016 was 42.

It appears from this sample that from the start, the conflict in Syria has attracted individuals who are young, and younger than those attracted to other war zones in the past. This, to re-emphasise the point, seems to be a common finding of most other recent studies on FTFs. The typical FTF is a male between 18 and 29 years old,[59] but that does not mean that FTFs cannot be above the age of 30 or even 35.

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[59]. See ICCT, (2016), ICSR ICSR (2015), and ICSR Insight: German foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq, London, King's College, January 22. http://icsr.info/2015/01/icsr-insight-german-foreign-fighters-syria-iraq/.

Figure 1. Age

Below 12: 0, From 12 to 15: 0, From 16 to 19: 3, From 20 to 24: 11, From 25 to 29: 7, From 30 to 34: 12, From 35 to 39: 5, 40 and above: 5

1.1. Marital and Family Status

Figure 2. Marital Status

Single: 27, Married: 15, Divorced: 1
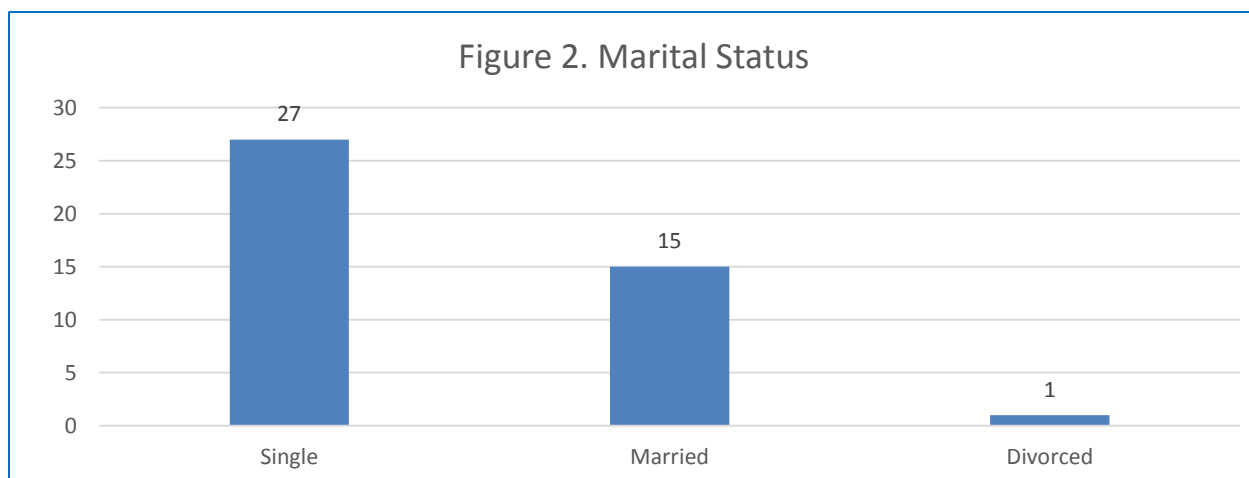
There is a large number of single individuals in our sample. In fact, the majority - 27 of the 43 (63 per cent) - were single when they went to Syria, while 15 were married (Figure 2).[60] The only female in the sample was married when she went to Syria with her husband but later divorced him, by her account, and left him in al-Raqqa. None of the male interviewees had more than one wife when they went to Syria, although one male interviewee was divorced but had remarried and was still with his second wife at the time of the interview.

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[60] Information on marital status is based on the date of departure to Syria, not the date of the interview.

Figure 3. Number of children
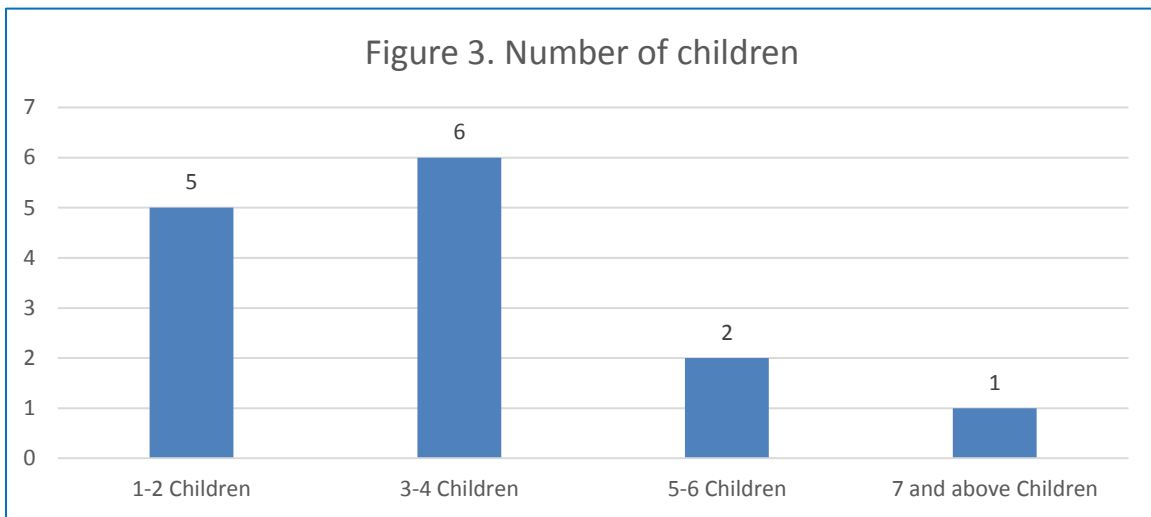
All but one of the 15 interviewees who declared that they were married at the time of the interview had children. Five had 1-2 children, six had between 3-4 children, two had between 5-6 children and only one had more than six children at the time of the interview (Figure 3).

Although the number of wives and size of the family can be indicators of the level of religiosity in a conservative society, age, economic conditions, and levels of education inevitably also play a part. Most of the interviewees were not well off economically and did not possess high levels of education. Furthermore, as several were in prison and others had spent a considerable time in jail before being released, they had had less chance to get married or have a large family. The relatively large number of FTFs in the sample who were single when they left for Syria, also evident in other studies, may suggest that many individuals are motivated by the prospect of marriage when they make the decision to travel to Syria. The possibility of marriage is well advertised in ISIS propaganda, and there is no need for the male partner to demonstrate that he has the financial resources often required elsewhere before securing a bride. In fact, several interviewees specifically stated that marriage was among the factors that motivated them to consider travelling to Syria.

Figure 4. Number of Siblings

■ 1-2 Siblings   ■ 3-4 Siblings   ■ 5-6 Siblings   ■ 7 and above Siblings
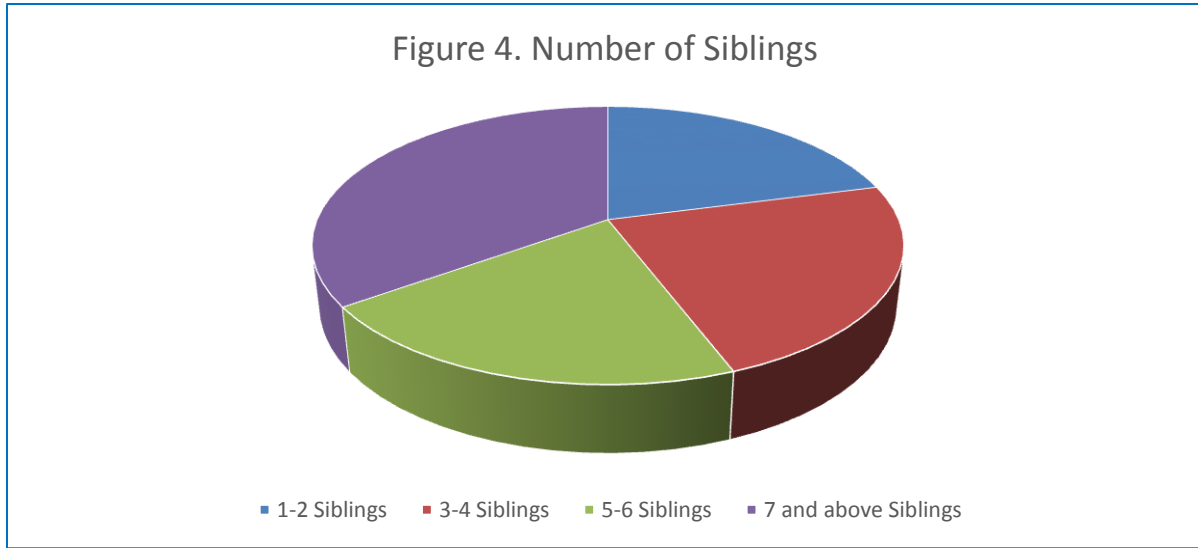
Most of the FTFs in the sample come from relatively large families (Figure 4). Fifteen individuals (35 per cent) have seven siblings or more, while another nine have between five and six siblings. Other studies suggest that the larger the family, the more likely that a member may become radicalized and even join a violent extremist group.[61]

Indeed, some reports have noted that several FTFs are known 'to have (had) mental problems.'[62] This is not to say that they have some major psychological or psychotic disorder, and there is clear evidence that FTFs are 'not crazy,' although their 'actions may appear utterly insane and irrational to an outside observer.'[63] But an accumulation of such factors as family size and lack of role models may intensify the 'emotional struggle for purpose, direction, and identity … common in adolescent development in most cultures.[64] Some individuals with emotional problems may see joining a group of violent extremists as a way to find guidance, self-respect and identity. Such a decision however appears most often to be the function of a complicated mix of internal and external factors, including psychological and environmental conditions related to where and how an individual lives.

Even in this sample of FTFs, there is strong evidence of family dysfunction. For example, eight of the FTFs who tried to go there after 2013 were raised by a single parent. Some openly stated that their dysfunctional familial relationship was a key factor in motivating them to leave home.
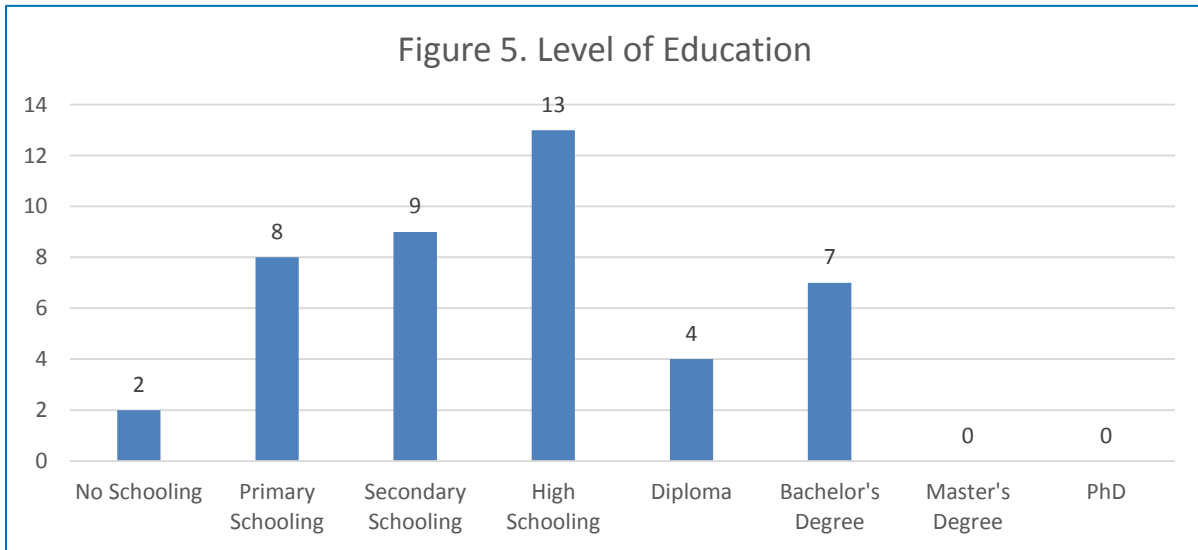
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[61]. See El-Said and Harrigan (2013). Deradicalising Violent Extremists, London, Palgrave.
[62]. ICCT, 2016, Op cit, pp. 9 and Annex 2.
[63]. "Matt" Venhaus, 2010, p. 4.
[64]. Ibid.

1.2.   Level of Education

Figure 5. Level of Education

The typical FTF is often perceived 'as young, well-educated but with only basic knowledge of Islamic law.'[65] But while they are young and might lack religious knowledge, FTFs in this sample are not necessarily well educated. Only seven, or 16 per cent, have a bachelor's degree, and 73 per cent did not progress beyond high school. Forty four per cent had secondary education or less (Figure 5). Only 11 of the total 43 interviewees had progressed beyond high school at the time of the interview, with four having a diploma in addition to the seven with a bachelor's degree. These FTFs can read and write, but do not seem more educated than the average citizen. Nor do they seem to have more advanced mental skills that might help them to make better-informed decisions; and of the seven individuals with a bachelor's degree, four studied Islamic law, while two studied engineering.

The low level of education among FTF foot soldiers is in contrast with the levels attained by their leaders, who are not only better educated but also economically better off. As a recent study on the 100 most 'eminent' FTFs by the Centre on Religion and Geopolitics noted:

> *Prominent [FTF] jihadis are often well educated. Forty-six per cent of our sample went to university. Of these, 57 per cent graduated with STEMM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics and medicine) degrees. This was double the number of jihadis taking Islamic studies.* [66]

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[65]. The Independent (2016). Isis documents leak reveals profile of average militant as young, well-educated but with only 'basic' knowledge of Islamic law Military analysts in the US said the importance of insight gained using the documents 'cannot be overstated,' 21 April. http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-documents-leak-reveals-profile-of-average-militant-as-young-well-educated-but-with-only-basic-a6995111.html

[66]. Centre on Religion and Geopolitics (2016). MILESTONES TO MILITANCY; *What the lives of 100 jihadis tell us about a global movement, Londin, CRG, p. 6.* http://tonyblairfaithfoundation.org/sites/default/files/Milestones-to-Militancy.pdf

Such statements reflecting a relatively high level of education among the FTF leadership are often generalized and may give a misleading impression that most FTFs are also well educated with university degrees.

1.3.   Economic Status

Previous studies have been ambiguous and often contradictory about the role that economic circumstances play as a driver of terrorism in general and for FTFs in particular. Most research suggests that economics have a minor role in this respect, and that terrorism 'like hate crimes is largely independent of economic conditions.'[67] This view is largely based on the perception that 'most terrorists come from middle-class, and often college-educated, backgrounds.'[68] Some of the literature on FTFs adopts a similar point of view.[69]

Terrorism and FTFs, however, are dynamic and should not be seen as static phenomena. According to some observers, the international community is currently experiencing the fourth 'wave' of FTFs.[70] Each previous wave has differed in the socio-economic characteristics of its members, their motivations, and the strategies of the groups that attract them.[71] This wave is no exception.

Figure 6. Employment Status Before Traveling

■ Yes ■ No
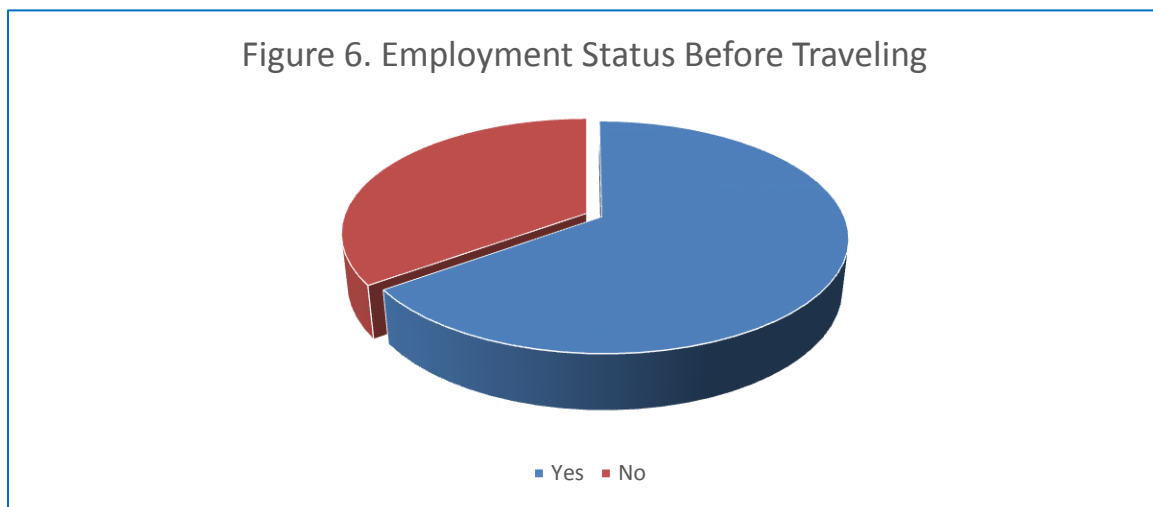
Figure 6 shows that the FTFs in this survey have relatively high levels of unemployment. Almost 33 per cent were unemployed before they went or tried to go to Syria. As important, most of the 67 per cent who were employed had menial or low paid jobs.

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[67]. Alan B. Krueger, Jitka Maleckova (2002). Education, Poverty, Political Violence and Terrorism: Is There a Causal Connection? NBER Working Paper No. 9074, Issued in July 2002, NBER Program. http://www.nber.org/papers/w9074.

[68]. Alan B. Krueger (2007). What Makes a Terrorist: Economics and the Roots of Terrorism, Princeton, Princeton University Press.

[69]. See Mercy Corps (2015). Policy Brief: From Jordan to Jihad: The Lure of Syria's Violent Extremist Groups. Research and Recommendations.

[70]. ICCT, 2016, Op cit, p. 54.

[71]. David C. Rapoport (2002). The Four Waves of Rebel Terror and September 11. Anthropoetics 8, no. 1 (Spring / Summer). http://www.anthropoetics.ucla.edu/ap0801/terror.htm.
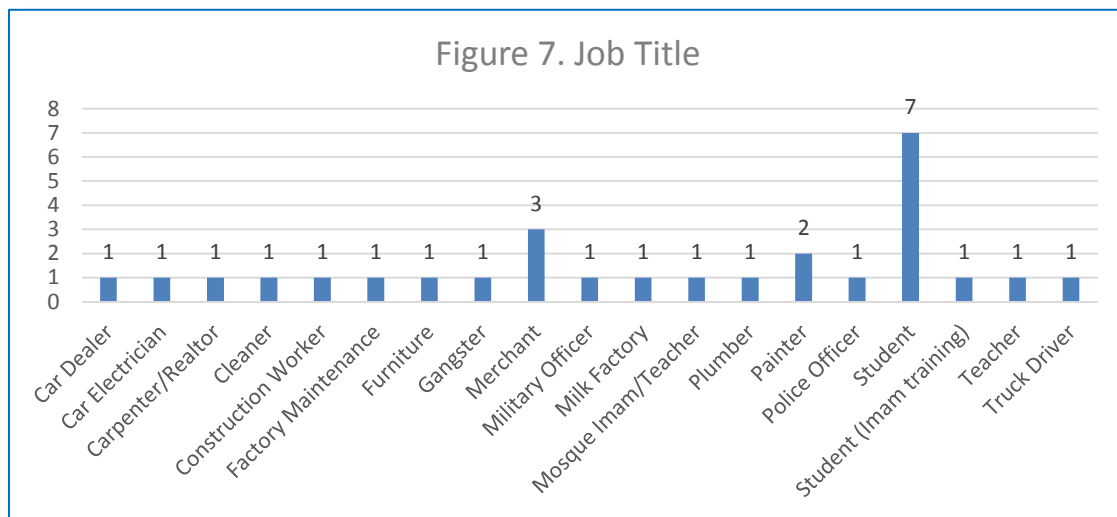
Figure 7. Job Title

Figure 7 shows the job title of the 29 FTFs in the sample who stated that they were engaged in some kind of work before leaving or attempting to leave for Syria. Seven of them were students when they left, working as street vendors after finishing their studies; three were merchants involved in minor trade (mainly selling used clothes), and two were painters. Apart from a teacher, a police officer, and a military officer, most lacked professional, decently paid jobs. This finding is consistent with recent evidence on the economic status of FTFs in other studies.[72]

Figure 8. Income Level
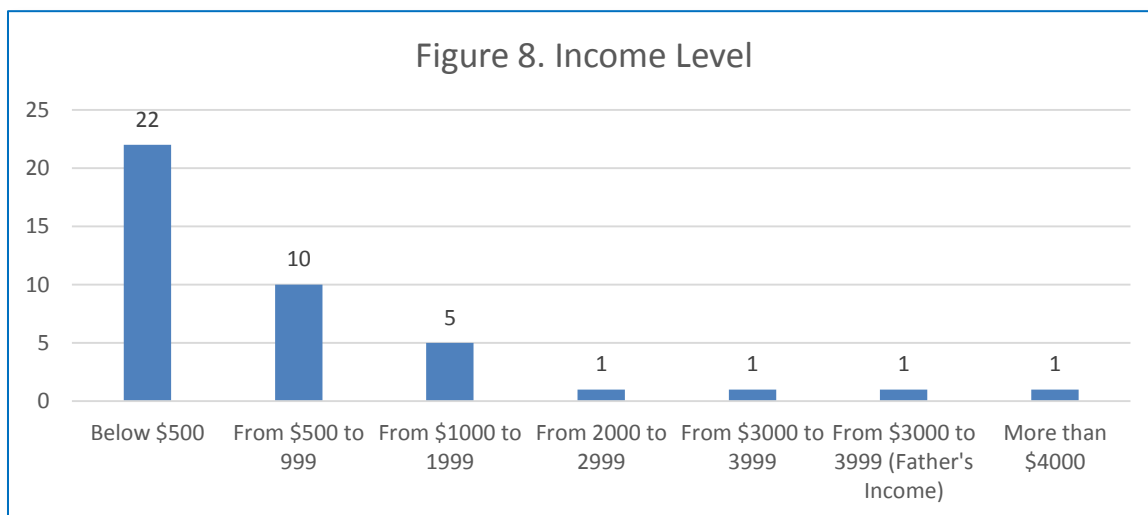
Figure 8 demonstrates a key finding of this survey that FTFs often have very low incomes and come from disadvantaged economic backgrounds. Twenty two individuals, or 51 per cent of the sample, earned less than $500 a month before leaving or attempting to leave for Syria. Another ten individuals, 23 per cent, made between $500 and $1,000 a month, while five interviewees, 12

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[72]. For more information, see the Independent, 2016, Op cit.

per cent, made between $1000 and $2,000 per month. Only one interviewee made more than $4,000 a month, but he was a criminal gang leader who made his money illegally.

In other words, the socio-economic characteristics of our sample do not support the view that most FTFs come from middle-class, well-educated, and professional backgrounds. On the contrary, the members of this sample seem to be relatively disadvantaged economically, educationally, and in the labour market. Almost 75 per cent of our sample made less than $1000 at the time of their departure for Syria. This may support theories that the modern radicalization process relies more on the lack of prospects at home than previously thought. As one study on FTF has noted:

> *"… among these transnational groups, the most receptive members of the audience are individuals… who tend to be marginalized within their broader polities, often because they are part of some minor community group."[73]*

It is important to note here that it is not the presence or lack of material resources per se that influences an individual's decision to become a FTF. Rather, it is the lack of a more general opportunity for self-betterment. This finding is supported by another recent research paper, which concluded:

> *Our results suggest that it is not so much the lack of material resources that is important for terrorism but rather the lack of economic opportunities: Countries that restrict economic freedom experience more terrorism.[74]*

Therefore, some in this dataset may have been motivated by 'frustration over failure to achieve expected success in the job market,' compounded by a lack of advanced educational qualifications and/or discriminatory policies in their home country's labour market. As the short examples cited in boxes 1, 2 and 3 demonstrate, although the lack of economic opportunity may not be the sole factor that pushes an individual to become a FTF, it is likely to increase the vulnerability of individuals to become FTFs. Indeed, 'relative deprivation is a well-covered theory of political violence.'[75]

A recent study by the Brookings Institute also supports the key finding of this report: that it is the lack of opportunity that has the most consistent impact on individual radicalisation processes, and, perhaps, on the decision to travel to a conflict zone. Using survey data from eight Arab countries to analyze how education and unemployment affect support for violent extremism, the study concludes that:

> *"while it seems to be true that unemployment on its own does not impact radicalization, unemployment… leads to a greater probability of radicalization. Hence, our work provides empirical support to the view that relative deprivation is an important driver of*

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[73] David Malet (2013). Foreign Fighters, Oxford, Oxford University Press, p. 5.
[74] . Martin Gassebner · Simon Luechinger (2011). Lock, stock, and barrel: a comprehensive assessment of the determinants of terror, In Public Choice (2011), 149: 235-261, Accepted: 10 August.
[75] . All quotations from the Independent, 2016, Op cit.

support for violent extremism. Individuals whose expectations for economic improvement and social mobility are frustrated are at a greater risk of radicalization."[76]

If this argument concerning the impact of economic deprivation and lack of opportunity on the process of radicalization is confirmed more widely, it will have important implications for community cohesion and integration policies, particularly in Western countries. Successful integration may need to build on effective community outreach programmes that also create opportunities for the economic and social development of the more disadvantaged members of society.

"Following the war, we lost everything. Our region was destroyed and was never rebuilt again. We lost our businesses and we became poor after being rich. They also arrested my father and accused him of being a terrorist. They [the authorities] shot my brother and killed him too."

FTF interviewee (Box 1)

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[76]. GLOBAL ECONOMY & DEVELOPMENT at Brookings, HOW DO EDUCATION AND UNEMPLOYMENT AFFECT SUPPORT FOR VIOLENT EXTREMISM? EVIDENCE FROM EIGHT ARAB COUNTRIES, WORKING PAPER 103, March 2017, p.1. https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/global_20170322_violent-extremism.pdf.

2.   Motivations to Join Transnational Terrorist Organizations

Generally, there is a lack of solid empirical evidence and consensus on what motivates an individual to leave his or her country of residence to join a terrorist organization in a foreign country. 'Why do people travel abroad to take part in somebody else's violent conflict?'[77] is a question that has many answers. A growing body of research, some of which is discussed above, believes that secular issues, particularly the hope of economic and financial reward now play a larger role than in the past. Other studies focus more on the role of ideology. A third group stresses the role of political factors, particularly the violation of human rights and the lack of democratic forums as key push-factors.[78]

2.1   Self-radicalization and the role of social networks

Almost a third of our interviewees (14 individuals) said that self-motivation (meaning no compelling, direct influence from an external source) lay at the heart of their decision to go to Syria. It was based primarily on a personal desire to 'do the right thing'.[79] (Figure 10). For three of those respondents, self-motivation was 'very important,' while for 11, it was 'extremely important.' This does not necessarily translate into an ideological approach. In fact, only a small number of those interviewed seemed to have strong religious beliefs, and very few come from extremely religious family backgrounds. Interestingly, most of those who claimed an ideological motivation are religious novices, only starting to pray and go to the mosque after the 2011 Arab Spring had taken off, a phase that they describe as the *sahwa* (awakening). Yet, the majority of FTFs in this sample felt a duty to go to Syria in order to defend what they perceived as their in-group. In other words, pull factors combined with push factors to influence their decision, with pull factors predominating in the motivation of a third of the sample.
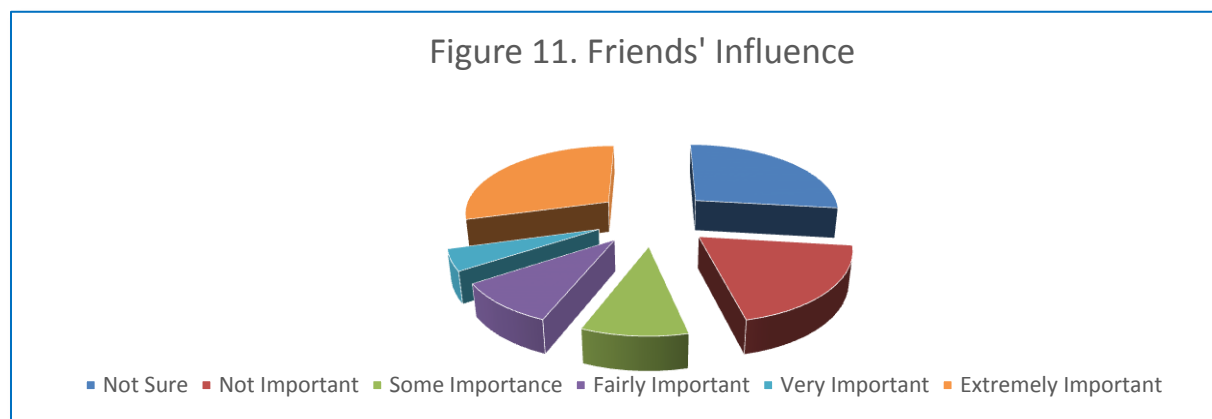

Figure 10. Self motivation

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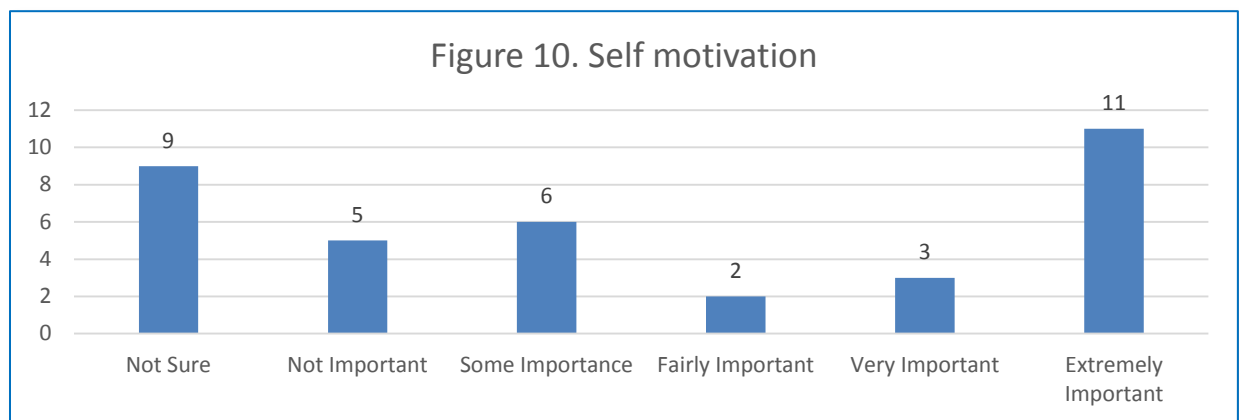
[77]. Jessica Stern and J.N Berger (2015). ISIS and the Foreign-Fighter Phenomenon, in The

[78]. For a comprehensive paper on the push factors, see Martin Gassebner and Simon Luechinger (2013), Op cit.

[79]. Only 26 individuals answered this question, not 33.

The role of friends and social networks in radicalizing individuals and pulling them into extremism and foreign fighting has been stressed repeatedly in other studies. According to the anthropologist Scott Attran, 'about three out of every four people who join Al Qaeda or ISIS do so through friends, most of the rest through family or fellow travellers in search of a meaningful path in life.'[80]

Figure 11. Friends' Influence

■ Not Sure ■ Not Important ■ Some Importance ■ Fairly Important ■ Very Important ■ Extremely Important

This survey appears to confirm that social networks play an important role in motivating individuals to travel to Syria. A third of our sample (14 individuals) stated that they were motivated to leave for Syria through a friend or relative. For two respondents, the influence of friends was 'very important' and for another 12 it was 'extremely important' (Figure 11). This is not as high as 'three out of four' as suggested by Attran, but the influence of social networks and peer pressure in the process of becoming a FTF is clear.

The role of social networks as a motivating factor appears to be more evident in Europe than it is in the Middle East or North Africa. For example, if only one North African country with a relatively high representation of individuals in this sample is excluded, the number of FTFs quoting the influence of social networks as a motivating factor rises from 33 to 68 per cent. This may be because geographical proximity and better knowledge of the Syrian culture and language makes Arab FTFs less dependent on others to reach the conflict zone, or because Arab FTFs are more motivated by domestic and regional factors than their European counterparts, who are more inclined to be influenced by group-think, inspired by one or more individual within their network.

The validation of the influence of friendship in motivating individuals to become FTFs supports the 'bunch of guys' theory of terrorism put forward by the psychologist Marc Sageman,[81] who argues that the decision to join a terrorist group 'was based on pre-existing friendship' ties and 'that the evolving group of future perpetrators seemed more akin to' such networks 'than a formal terrorist cell, with well-defined hierarchy and division of labour.'[82] This theory has led some observers to call for a 'social network approach to terrorism'; one that analyses, identifies

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[80] Quoted in The Atlantic, MAR 8. file:///Volumes/SILVER/Deradicalisation/Atlantic/ISIS-FF-Phenomenon.webarchive.
[81] See Sageman Leaderless Jihad University of Pennsylvania Press 2008.
[82]. Sageman, 2014, Op cit, p. 567.

and targets the social networks of vulnerable communities and regions, although the full ramifications of this approach have not yet been more broadly developed and elaborated.[83]

The role of families in the decision to go to Syria was less significant for this sample. Only five respondents, or 12 per cent, stated that the role of the family was an 'extremely important' influence on their motivation. None stated that it was 'very important' or even 'fairly important.' This fits well with other research, which has found that 'It is rare, though, that parents are ever aware that their children desire to join the movement.' Most children who leave home to go to Syria simply call their parents from there to tell them where they have gone.[84]

2.2 The role of ideology

When asked about the role of 'jihad' in influencing their decision to travel to Syria, only 15 (35 per cent) of the sample stated that it was 'extremely important,'[85] and one stated it was 'very important.' This should be assessed, however, in the context that the majority of respondents seemed to have little knowledge of religion. When asked about this, one respondent stated that 'we know jihad by intuition. Every Muslim knows it by intuition. You don't need to study it.' Hence, there is a tendency among some to explain their decision to go to Syria as a form of Jihad, although very few seemed aware of the conditions and stipulations of Jihad in Islam.

The notion of 'Jihad intuition' also emerged from answers to a question about ideology. When directly asked about the influence of ideology (*Aqedah* in Arabic) over their decision to go to Syria, only ten respondents (23 per cent),[86] stated that ideology was 'extremely important,' with one more saying that it was 'very important'. This is less than the number of respondents (16) who stated that jihad played a significant role in their decision

As stated by Sageman, 'ideology, including global neo-jihadi ideology, is an important part of any explanation of the turn to political violence, but we still do not understand how.'[87] Although a very small number of respondents showed any sign of being highly ideological, the majority appeared to equate ideology with defending other Sunni Muslims, or members of their in-group.

For example, almost 40 per cent of the sample stated that their motivation to go to Syria arose from an obligation to defend their fellow Sunnis from the Syrian Government and its allies by force. This confirms that many Muslim youth, regardless of where they come from, perceive the conflict in Syria in community more than in religious terms. ISIS and other factions fighting the Syrian regime have succeeded in portraying the conflict as a sectarian one, combining a religious obligation with a social one. Clearly, no strategy to stem the flow of FTFs can ignore the role of inter-communal conflict in Syria, Iraq or elsewhere.

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[83]. See Martin Bouchard (Ed.) (2015). Social Networks, Terrorism, and Counter-terrorism, London, Routledge, and Steve Ressler (2006). Social Network Analysis as an Approach to Combat Terrorism: Past, Present, and Future Research Homeland Security. https://www.hsaj.org/articles/171.
[84]. Attran, Op cit.
[85] Only 26 individuals answered this question.
[86] Only 25 individuals answered this question.
[87]. Sageman, 2014, Op cit, p. 567.

The perception of a duty to defend one's in-group during a war is an important element in understanding what may motivate an individual to become a FTF. The reality or perception of an attack upon one's community, particularly by a foreign or different group, can create 'moral outrage at some salient major injustice,' thus facilitating 'mobilization by an already…active [terrorist] network.'[88]

Other responses to the survey confirm the lack of ideology as a motivator to become a FTF. For example, very few of this sample believe in the idea of an Islamic State or of establishing a Caliphate in the Levant. Only seven respondents stated that at least in part they were motivated to go to Syria to help establish the Caliphate. This meant little though, compared for example, with the notion of defending the Sunni community. This suggests that Muslim youth, as represented by this sample, are not buying into the notion of an Islamic State such as ISIS seeks to promote and exploit to acquire recruits. FTFs have many different motives for joining armed groups, but the idea of establishing a Caliphate does not appear to be prominent among them.

The notion that ideology plays a less significant role than is generally believed in the decision to go to Syria, does not mean that it cannot become a powerful reason for staying there. Clearly, armed groups can only hold their members together by promoting a shared cause. Their specific interpretation of religion, however distorted, provides the necessary glue. It also has the added advantage of increasing the commitment of those who are looking in particular for a sense of purpose and/or redemption. But this does not contradict a key finding of this report regarding the socio-economic characteristics of this sample of leavers for whom ideological factors were insufficient to bind them to their terrorist group. As already demonstrated previously in this report, most of our interlocutors lack rigorous education, come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds and have poor employment prospects. Ideologically motivated individuals, as empirical research elsewhere has shown, are often better off economically, more highly educated, and do better in the labour market.[89]

2.3   The role of financial incentives and material rewards

With regard to financial incentives, only three respondents stated that the expectation of immediate financial reward influenced their decision to go to Syria. The overwhelming majority of FTFs in this survey claimed to have financed their travel to Syria from their own resources. Again, this is consistent with the findings of other research on this point.[90]

However, the influence of material reward as an element of FTFs motivation deserves some attention, given evidence of its existence in other studies and the lack of consensus over its real weight. It is likely that very few FTFs would openly admit that material gain was a motivator behind their decision to go to Syria. This would make them look more like mercenaries than noble defenders of their community. The fact that most met their own travel costs may not mean that the hope of material gain was totally irrelevant. It is possible to sacrifice little in the present

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[88]. Sageman, 2014, Op cit, p. 568.

[89]. See Marc Sagemna (2008). Leaderless Jihad, Pennsylvania, Pennsylvania University Press, Op cit, and Centre on Religion & Geopolitics, 2016, Op cit.

[90]. See ICSR 2014 and 2015, Op cits.

(the immediate cost of travel) in order to gain more in the future (higher salary, large financial compensation or better job opportunities once in Syria).

In fact, and unlike earlier foreign fighter "recruiters [who] rarely promise foreign fighters material incentives,"[91] ISIS propaganda does not exclude material reward, which has always been an important part of its attempt to motivate youth to join it in Syria.

> *"From the beginning I did not go to Syria to fight. I wanted to be an Islamic teacher. I left because I wanted to build a minaret in my mosque but I was not allowed to do so. My children also started being hassled by other school kids because they were Muslims. Therefore I thought being in Syria as a Muslim teacher would improve life for my family and me. But it did not."*

FTF interviewee (Box 2)

For example, while most interviewees claimed that monetary reward had little or no impact on their decision to depart for Syria, more than ten respondents admitted to having taken a regular salary from their host organization. This varied between $50 and $500, depending on the role performed and the organization joined. Moreover, the individuals over the age of 35 in the sample are likely to have had different reasons for going to Syria than the younger FTFs. They perhaps sought to play a larger role in the establishment of the Islamic State as paid bureaucrats and administrators rather than as fighters. Indeed, after the declaration of the Caliphate in June 2014, ISIS focused on building a state as much as on conquering territory,[92] and therefore needed engineers, doctors, teachers, judges, imams, technicians, and administrators of all types. These opportunities are likely to have attracted more experienced FTFs, even though the majority of the youth in our sample did not seem to have bought into the idea of an Islamic State. The example in Box 2 demonstrates that the expectation of older FTFs goes beyond the hope of spiritual benefit to include material reward as well, and the sense of participating in a new and exciting venture. But whatever their motivation to join, the lack of such rewards caused both of the older interviewees in the survey, according to their own account, to abandon the group.

> *I went to Syria to see whether the promises ISIS talks about are actually true. But they are not true. ISIS does not give what they promise. There is no salary, no house, no furniture, and no jobs even. This is why I decided to leave*

FTF interviewee (Box 3)

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[91]. Malet, 2013, Op cit, p. 3.
[92]. For more information on ISIS Propaganda, see Huffpost (2016). 4 Things To Know About Dabiq, ISIS' Slick Propaganda Magazine, October 2.
http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/isis-dabiq-magazine_us_56a7e6cfe4b04936c0e8938a.

As stated earlier, most of the sample (at least the foot soldiers) come from disadvantaged economic and educational backgrounds and had poor job prospects. Despite being in their prime, insofar as their productive capacity is concerned, they were unemployed or had low-paid jobs. Their choice to join ISIS, widely advertised as 'the most powerful... and well-funded terrorist group in recent history,'[93] may therefore reflect their hope of material self-betterment. It is possible therefore for a FTF to come from a country with a high or relatively high GDP per capita but where the prospect of engagement in the domestic economy is low than from a country with a smaller GDP per capita and where the chances of employment and advancement might be higher. Ten of the interviewees in this sample openly admitted that they went to Syria because they lacked opportunity at home.

Sometimes political factors have been responsible for marginalization and economic deprivation, leading to the creation of conditions conducive to the kind of radicalization that could lead individuals to leave for Syria or Iraq in search of better opportunities. For example, political discrimination against certain groups or individuals in some states has reduced their social and political mobility, and has resulted in deprivation. Such measures include confiscation of, or refusal to renew a passport, unnecessary security harassment, biases in the distribution of state benefits, or discriminatory labour market practices.

Such push factors are reflected in the comments in Box 3, which derive from an interview with one of the respondents. Similar factors were mentioned by other interviewees as drivers leading to their radicalization and eventual departure for Syria. The notion of 'social injustice' and 'unfair access to opportunity' was a common theme among several interviewees when describing the environmental conditions that had influenced their decision to become a FTF.

> *"I was not thinking about leaving for Syria or anywhere really. But when I went to renew my passport, they told me I couldn't renew it for security reasons. No one would tell me what those reasons were. But without a passport here you are doomed. For example, you cannot get a job because nobody will give you a letter of good conduct, which is needed to get a job. Without a passport, you also cannot buy property, open a business, borrow money, or even get married; you are nobody without a passport. What other options were left for me? I was prepared to put my hands in the hands of the devil. This is why I left for Syria, to see whether life there was better. If it had been, I would have brought my family. But life there was not better."*

FTF interviewee (Box 4)

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[93]. Anne Speckhard and Ahmet S. Yayla (2015). Eyewitness Accounts from Recent Defectors from Islamic State: Why They Joined, What They Saw, Why They Quit, in Perspectives in Terrorism, 9(6), p.1. 1.http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/475/html.

2.4   The role of the Internet

The roles of the Internet and social media have received, and continue to receive much attention in the discussion of FTFs. The general view is that 'recruitment… has been mostly reliant on social media, particularly in the initial phases of the process. Potential recruits initially connect with Islamic State sympathizers or members via social media, with subsequent follow up by online peer-to-peer interaction.'[94]

Such an assertion is only partially supported by this survey. Figure 12 shows that 11 of our respondents seemed unsure about the role of the Internet, while nine others said it was not important. Another eight respondents, however, stated that the Internet was 'extremely important' in the process that led them to become FTFs, with three more stating that it was 'very important.' In other words, 11 of our respondents stated that the Internet had a strong influence on their decision to depart for Syria.

However, when pressed on this question, even some of these respondents said that they first developed the idea of going to Syria in the real world before turning to the Internet to search for more information about the conflict, particularly to follow news and watch videos on what was happening in Syria. During this stage, the would-be FTFs appeared to turn to the Internet to confirm and strengthen ideas, perceptions and narratives that they had already developed or were beginning to develop. The Internet then played a key role in reinforcing a decision that had in part been taken already. This seemed particularly true when the process was also associated with friendship or network ties. This is also confirmed by the 2016 report from the German Government referred to above, which noted 'the internet does not replace the real world influences but reinforces them.'[95]

Figure 12. The Role of The Internet

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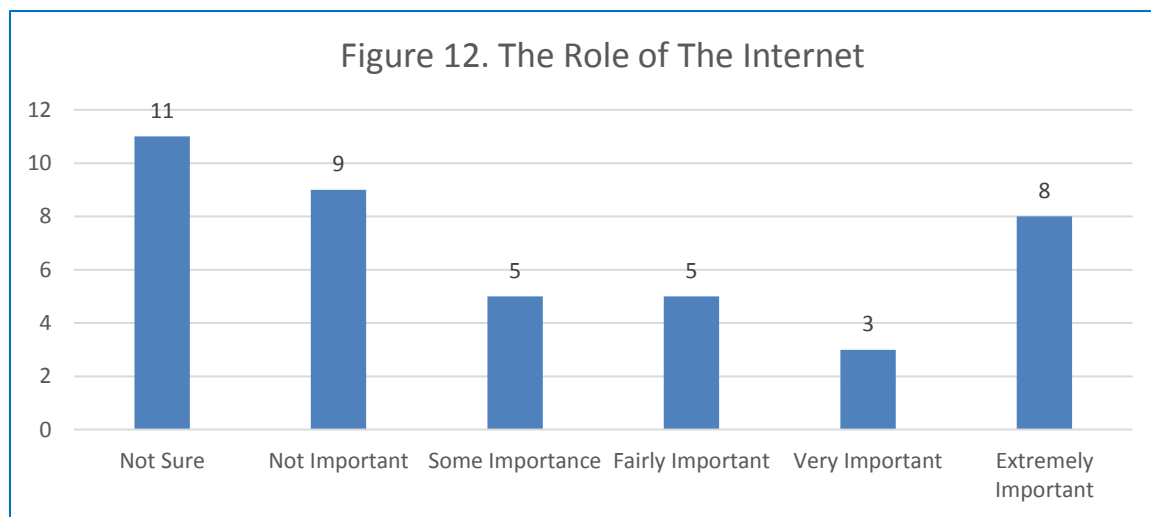
[94]. The Soufan Group (2015). FOREIGN FIGHTERS: An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq, DECEMBER, p. 20.
http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/TSG_ForeignFightersUpdate3.pdf
[95]. Interviews with German officials in Berlin, April 2016.

To sum up the main points in this sub-section, a typical FTF, as reflected in this survey, is most likely to be male, young and disadvantaged economically, educationally, and in terms of the labour market. He is also more likely than not to come from a marginalized background, both socially and politically. Most were unemployed, or underemployed, and/or said that their life lacked meaning. Beyond that, it is difficult to generalize. The decision to go to Syria is the result of a mix of factors that form a complex set of motivations. What is certain is that social networks often seem to play a key role as a mechanism channelling the energies of youth towards departure for Syria. This process is carried out in real life through face-to-face encounters rather than through the Internet. What is equally important is the role and identity of the recruiters, who are not necessarily members of armed groups. They are more likely to be sympathizers who are well known, well connected and even well established in their communities, according to most interviews in this survey. The individual determination (self-motivation) to leave home more often than not results from the influence of these social networks, coupled with poor prospects for political, social and economic advancement.

Ultimately, the radicalization process and the decision to become a FTF follow a highly individualized path. Some personal experience such as the failure to find a job, stigmatization at school, discrimination in the labour market, trouble at home, a dysfunctional family background, the experience of prison, violation of personal rights, or a multitude of other factors, can facilitate a process of empathy and identity with the suffering and pain of an in-group elsewhere. Narratives found on the Internet and images available in the media reinforce this resonance and make the suffering of the distant group both intimate and local. The change in the political environment of the Arab World since 2011 has also proved conducive to the unprecedented transfer of fighters to Syria and Iraq. Downward economic and political trends have encouraged the 'adventurous,' the 'ideological, and the manipulated to find their way to Syria/Iraq'.[96]

Whatever the mix, the motivations of the FTFs in this sample seem more emotional than ideological. This is particularly the case with the younger fighters. The belief that it is one's duty to defend members of the in-group is often confused in their minds with ideas of 'jihad' and other tenets of religious ideology. Yet few of these FTFs claimed to be motivated purely by ideology or religion. The notion of injustice, such as the perception of crimes being committed against fellow Sunnis, overlaps with the notion of jihad, which they understand to be justified in their faith when Muslims are under attack, but it also intersects, on the individual level, with the idea of opportunity for self-betterment in material rather than spiritual terms.

For many, therefore, going to Syria is akin to performing jihad as an added bonus to seeking a better life. When asked about the justification for jihad in Syria, 16 (or 37 per cent) of the survey cited the need to defend the people of Syria from aggression as a key motivator. However, a large number, over 50 per cent, appeared to be religious novices, lacking any basic understanding of the true meaning of Jihad or even the Islamic faith; many did not even know how to pray according to the Islamic tradition. Most saw their religion in terms of justice and injustice rather than in terms of piety and spirituality. This has significant policy implications. If Muslim youth around the world perceive attacks against their in-group in Syria and Iraq as unjust, aggressive, and part of a wider conspiracy to eliminate their community, then any

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[96]. Georhe Joffe, (2016). Global Jihad and Foreign Fighters, in Small Wars and Insurgencies, Issue 5, Vo. 27.

military operation against violent extremist groups may encourage more FTFs rather than stem the flow.

But equally important is what has led some, and may lead other FTFs to turn their back on the conflict in Syria and return to their place of residence or nationality. This is the subject of the following section.

3. Motivations to abandon transnational terrorist organizations

As discussed earlier, existing studies suggest that the most common reason for FTFs to leave Syria is a sense of 'disappointment' and disillusionment' with what armed groups are doing there. Many FTFs find the reality to be quite different from what they expected before their arrival. This makes them 'ready to defect, and/or willing to go public' after leaving or returning from Syria.[97] 'Defections,' another observer has noted, 'were the result of exposure to extreme brutality, disgust over the slave trade, observations of deep hypocrisy – a total mismatch between the words and deeds of IS.'[98]

However, these explanations do not cover all defections, which, like the decision to join armed groups, often result from a complicated mix of factors. If one of the key motivations for going to Syria is to defend one's in-group from external aggression, then new arrivals must expect and accept a certain amount of violence and brutality, so long as it is directed against the 'enemy.' After all, FTFs go to Syria to join a war. As pointed out by ICSR in its 2015 report, there is an element of hypocrisy in the claim that the brutality of ISIS is a reason for leaving the group.

3.1   The role of social networks and family

While social networks seem critical in motivating individuals to go to Syria, particularly circles of friends, they seem less relevant when it comes to motivating the same individuals to leave (Figure 13). It is of course inherently unlikely that those 'friends' who convinced a FTF to go to Syria would later persuade him to return home. Only two individuals in the survey stated that pressure from their peers was 'extremely important' in motivating them to leave; for most defectors this factor was not important. Perhaps inevitably, those friends who exerted pressure on the two FTFs to return home were not the same ones who motivated them to go to Syria in the first place.

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[97]. Peter R. Neumann (2015). Victims, Perpetrators, Assets: The Narratives of Islamic State Defectors, ICSR, King's College, London, p. 7.

[98]. Anne Speckhard and Ahmet S. Yayla (2015). Perspectives on Terrorism, Eyewitness Accounts from Recent Defectors from Islamic State: Why They Joined, What They Saw, Why They Quit, in Perspectives in Terrorism, Vol 9, No 6, p. 118. (PP. 95-118). http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/475/html.

Figure 13: Friends' Pressure

■ Not Sure ■ Not Important ■ Some Importance ■ Fairly Important ■ Very Important ■ Extremely Important
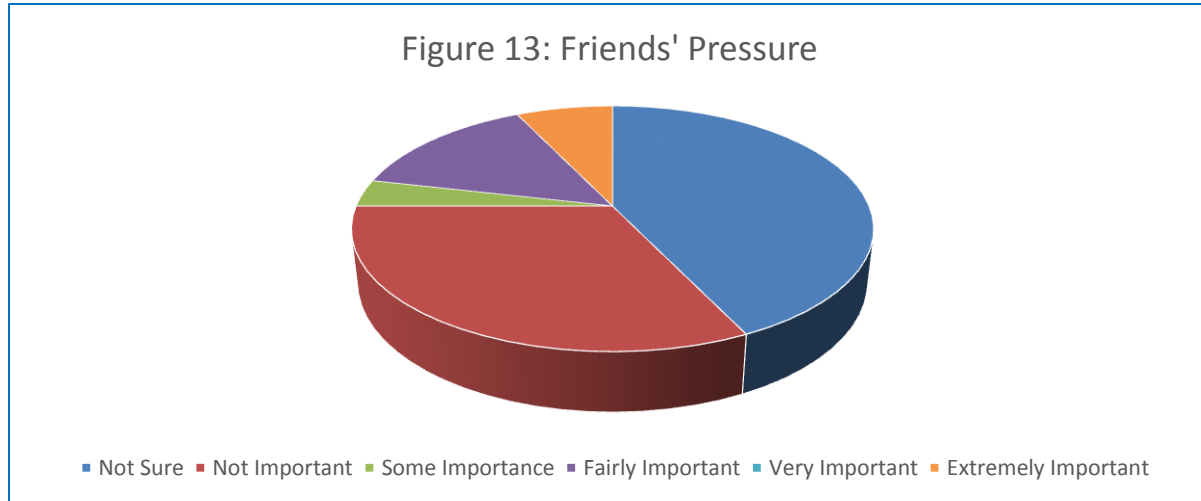
For this sample, friends who played a significant role in motivating them to go to Syria were more radical than the FTF themselves. Although most of these 'friends' were not senior members of terrorist organizations, they were sufficiently trusted by the groups to vouch for the new arrivals. Nonetheless, according to their own accounts, it was not often the case that members of this sample met their 'friends' or 'sponsors' when they arrived in Syria. Armed groups typically will confiscate telephones and other communication equipment brought in by new recruits. This made contacting the group of 'friends' difficult. Furthermore, it was often the case for this sample that their sponsor had already died in battle or simply disappeared in Syria or Iraq. In fact, the death of a 'sponsor' played a large role in convincing many FTFs to return home, since it brought into stark reality the risks attached to joining the conflict.

Families had a powerful influence on this group of FTFs in convincing them to leave Syria once they had made contact. Of the 30 interviewees who answered the question about the role of the family in motivating them to defect, ten stated that it was 'extremely important,' while another four stated that it was 'very important' or 'fairly important.' This tends to confirm that most families were unlikely to have been aware of their son's decision to go to Syria in advance. FTFs often contact family members soon after arrival and maintain contact thereafter, and if lonely, without friends, and unprepared mentally and physically for the hardships of war, which is the case with most FTFs, this can prove a turning point. 'The sound of my mother or father crying over the phone made me break down and immediately led to my decision to leave Syria' was the most common response given by this sample. Empowering, guiding and developing the capacity of families to address and deal with their child's motivation to go to Syria can thus play a key role in persuading them to return.

3.2   The reality of war

The lack of psychological and physical preparedness for life and war in Syria is also a factor in the decision of FTFs to defect. Thirty two of the 41 respondents who answered a question on military background and who made it to Syria, or 78 per cent, stated that they had had no military experience of any sort before arriving in Syria. Nor had they visited any other country where armed groups were active, such as Afghanistan, Iraq or Yemen. They were, in other

words, first time FTFs, with no previous links to armed groups. Again, this is clearly in marked contrast to the leaders of ISIS and JFS.

Once in Syria, as most FTFs confirmed, the only military experience most of this sample received was a simple course on how to shoot with no bullets being fired, as shooting draws the attention of the enemy. The course usually lasts for no more than two weeks and is organized by the host group. Most respondents assessed that 'frankly the course prepares you for nothing.' While most of the defectors saw jet fighters flying overhead and heard explosions and other sounds of war, only five admitted to participating in real fighting while in Syria. Most also received some religious indoctrination or a religious course while in Syria. Such a course would also last for a week or two, but most interviewees said that these courses were simple, taught by 'immature' teachers who seemed to be not too well versed in religious matters. In fact, the simplicity of the courses and the lack of rigorous knowledge displayed by the teachers, most of whom were masked to hide their faces, was a reason that some gave for starting down the path to defection. One said:

> 'I began to think about leaving Syria as soon as I arrived. I started to think, could the armed group, with its reputation and might, provide a kind of teaching and teachers as simple as that? I started immediately to question the reputation of the armed group altogether: its purpose; its teachers; its philosophy; everything.'[99]

3.3.   The Role of the Internet and Social Media

The Internet and social media appear to play a negligible role in motivating FTFs to defect. Not one FTF in this sample said that the Internet had had a strong influence on his decision to leave his organization, and only two respondents stated that the role of the Internet was 'fairly important'. Given the fact that their communications equipment was often confiscated and that their Internet sessions were in shared spaces, it is not surprising that there was little opportunity for external deradicalisation or disengagement via the Internet or social media. Clearly, what FTFs see and experience in real life in Syria has a far more powerful influence on their decision to leave and return home. It seems that frequent use of the Internet in Syria is the privilege of a trusted circle and members of this group are the least likely to defect since they are likely to be more ideologically committed and vested in the success of the terrorist organization.

3.4.   Disappointment and Disillusionment

Among this sample of FTF defectors, 'disillusionment' and 'disappointment' arose most commonly from failures of leadership (44 per cent); disagreement with strategy (67 per cent); perceptions of unfair treatment or discrimination (50 per cent), and evidence of corruption (58 per cent). Although armed groups aim to recruit and motivate FTFs in part by offering some material reward, it seems that it does not live up to its promises. Very few stated that they received the kinds of benefit that armed groups say they provide their members when they arrive in Syria, including regular salaries, houses, furniture, full time jobs (even if as a fighter waiting

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[99]. Personal interview with a returning FTF, September 2015.

to be killed), or even wives. The failure of armed groups to deliver on their promises directly contributed to the decision to leave Syria for six interviewees.

Psychological and physical hardships motivated 42 per cent and 38 per cent respectively of our interviewees to defect from their group and return to their country of origin or residence. This was mainly the case with FTFs under 19 years of age, and with those who did not go to Syria in order to fight but once there, found themselves sent to the front line. Some members of this group developed serious psychological problems requiring special care, while others were physically injured and also required medical treatment.

It is worth noting that the overwhelming majority of individuals in our sample claimed to have taken little or no part in the fighting; they also spoke of the disappointing welcome they received from both local Syrians and the groups they joined. They felt rejected, particularly those who joined ISIS, especially if they had no active 'sponsor' or were not recommended by a close friend who was already well known in the group.[100]

There is plenty of evidence that some armed groups keep records of FTFs as they arrive, with their names, age and country of origin, as well as many other personal details, including the name of their sponsor.[101] Recruits must also say what skills they possess and whether they wish to be a fighter, an *istishhadi* (suicide bomber), or *inghimasi* (suicide fighter).[102] The groups are therefore quickly able to weed out the best recruits from the least useful. At this stage and during subsequent ideological and military training courses, they are also able to get an idea of other characteristics, including their motivation, level of radicalization, and initial commitment. Those deemed of little value are treated accordingly and in these cases FTFs may be more likely to defect, and even in some cases may be encouraged by the armed groups to leave if they refuse to perform menial tasks.

Such defectors would be unlikely to pose much of a threat to their countries of origin or residence if they returned, but nor would they have much potential to become effective voices against whatever violent extremist group they had left. They would have limited credibility and quite possibly limited capacity to speak forcefully and persuasively. Policy designed to undermine the appeal and cohesion of groups like ISIS is better informed by defectors who have been at the heart of the action, even though their reliability and predictability may be in greater question.

Nonetheless, prompting defections is a worthwhile objective and families can play a leading role in this, playing as appropriate on the unpreparedness of the FTFs for the physical and psychological strains of life in Syria, and the failure to find the sustained welcome and sense of belonging that they sought. These seem to be the most influential factors in persuading FTFs to return home.

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[100]. Quotations from interviews with the 'defectors.'

[101]. Interestingly, all the questions which ISIS' form contained were also included in the UNCTITF Survey.

[102]. Dearden, 2016, Op cit.

V. Conclusion and Recommendations

Terrorism, whether domestic or transnational, has substantial economic, political, social, and psychological costs. Transnational terrorism has additional regional and international consequences. Armed groups that recruit FTFs prolong conflict and increase its destructive force, as well as possibly compounding the terrorist threat in the countries to which FTFs may return. But although the FTF issue has risen to the top of the political agenda in many Member States, policy responses are hampered by a lack of detailed knowledge of why people choose to become a FTF, and why some return.

This report has sought to help bridge the current knowledge gap on the phenomenon of FTFs. Based on a small sample, it has focused on the socioeconomic characteristics of FTFs, their motivation to go to Syria, and the motivation of some of them to leave and return to their place of residence or nationality.

While there is no single profile of a FTF, some findings in this report are consistent with and confirm results found in other studies. There is broad agreement on the age, and gender of FTFs. For example, most FTFs are young males, though evidence suggests that the flow of women, especially from Western countries has increased since early 2016, while the flow of men has declined. Also, most of this sample are neither well educated nor well off economically. This perhaps contradicts other findings in the literature, which often conclude that FTFs are both better educated and better off economically than the average of their peers. In addition, about half of the FTFs in our sample were already married by the time they went to Syria, with or without children of their own, and a significant percentage come from large families, often where there was a history of domestic violence, single parenthood or other family problems.[103]

Most FTFs in this sample also come from communities in poor urban areas or on the periphery of cities that are somewhat removed from the main centres of commercial activity. These areas, where youth share similarly low educational levels, poor job prospects, little hope for change, and limited opportunity for social or economic mobility, appear to produce and/or attract social networks that facilitate recruitment to both national and transnational terrorist groups. In line with other studies, this survey also suggests that friendship circles and social networks are the most dynamic and powerful mechanism through which recruitment occurs, with the Internet playing a far less significant role as an independent source of radicalisation than is generally assumed, and certainly a far less significant role than real life contact.

The survey also suggests that economic factors, particularly the opportunity for economic self-betterment, are more relevant to the recruitment of FTFs as a push factor than was the case in previous years. In this regard, as ISIS declined through 2016, so did its ability to attract recruits who might have considered moving to Syria as a way out of their economic malaise.

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[103]. Six interviewees revealed that their family backgrounds were characterized by violence, drug use and other dysfunction.

Economic, social, and political analyses of this sample group all suggest that marginalization creates vulnerabilities and those vulnerabilities facilitate recruitment by transnational terrorist organizations. Political and social factors often intertwine with economic factors to undermine the opportunity for advancement, not just for individuals, but also for their community as a whole. Bad governance, especially disregard for the rule of law, discriminatory social policies, political exclusion of certain communities, inadequate courts, corruption, particularly in the distribution of state benefits, harassment by the security authorities, and confiscation of passports or other identity documents, all contribute to feelings of despair, resentment, and animosity towards the government and provide fertile ground for the terrorist recruiter, especially when the vision of a new life is presented as almost effortlessly attainable.

In addition to push factors, there are also pull factors, most notably the empathy felt by would-be FTFs towards a perceived in-group suffering from violence and aggression in a conflict zone. Such suffering resonates well with the personal experience of some marginalized and disadvantaged youth, further facilitating recruitment by transnational terrorist organizations that seek human and other resources from communities with little direct interest in the outcome of the conflict.

The armed groups in Syria ultimately provide no positive outcomes to the youth they recruit. They hardly deliver on any of their promises, except the promise of death and destruction, both for its recruits and for the Muslim communities it claims to defend. It is this failure to deliver, coupled with its extreme, violent ideology and brutal tactics, its in-fighting and the corruption of some of its leaders, that, according to this survey, most often gives rise to the disappointment and sense of disenfranchisement and exclusion that leads FTFs to defect.

The responses also suggest that few individuals go to Syria with any thought or intention of becoming a domestic terrorist on their return home. The FTFs in this sample acquired basic military skills and underwent some form of ideological indoctrination, but this did not lead them to embrace the worldview of violent extremism. Their future trajectory of course, is unknown, and the experience of other FTFs, especially, those who became more deeply committed to the group they joined, may make them a far more significant long-term risk. It is also true that disillusioned foot soldiers, who are unlikely to find better prospects upon their return from when they first left, may remain susceptible to recruitment by another group. There is little room for complacency, but while the risk presented by returning FTFs is a real one, it should not be exaggerated. A practical, effective and proportionate response should start from a sound understanding of the root causes of the problem.

VI. Policy implications

There is no simple solution to the problem of FTFs. As stated in United Nations Security Council Resolution 2178 (2014), 'terrorism will not be defeated by military force, law enforcement measures, and intelligence operations alone.' The resolution also underlined 'the need to address the conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism,' including the recruitment of FTFs, 'as outlined in Pillar I of the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy (A/RES/60/288),' This understanding also lies at the heart of the United Nations PVE Action Plan, which calls for a fundamental shift of focus from countering terrorism towards preventing it by addressing the conditions conducive to its rise.

1. At the national level

National governments are better equipped than the international community to deal with the kind of push factors that facilitate the recruitment of FTFs by transnational terrorist organizations. From education to economic opportunity; from marginalization to labour market discrimination; from stigmatization to labelling, national and local governments can introduce comprehensive remedial measures and ensure their implementation. Within this context, the United Nations PVE Action Plan has called on all Member States to design and implement national PVE plans to deal with conditions conducive to the spread of violent extremism and terrorism according to local priorities, needs, resources, legal systems, and challenges. In drawing up a PVE action plan at the national level, Member States will benefit from a close analysis of the drivers of FTF recruitment, in particular, but not solely, the social, economic, and political push factors.

To ensure worthwhile outcomes, the United Nations PVE Action Plan also calls for the involvement of all national stakeholders in relevant activities and programmes; this is also referred to as an 'all of Government' and 'all of society' approach. Only through such a comprehensive approach are Member States likely to be able to combine their resources with the energies of their youth and community leaders, and the range of capabilities of their institutions. It will take such a joint effort to identify and deal with the range of conditions conducive to the recruitment of FTFs that exist within individual jurisdictions

2. At the regional level

Unresolved and extended conflicts provide both a cause and a base for transnational terrorist organizations. These areas then serve as indoctrination and training grounds, as launching pads for international terrorist activity, and as safe havens for terrorist groups and individuals. Both UNSCR 2178 and the PVE Action Plan express concern at the continuation of, and increase in, the number of conflicts around the world. They call upon Member States to affirm their determination to continue to do all they can to resolve conflict and to deny terrorist groups the

ability to put down roots and establish safe havens in order to better address the growing threat posed by terrorism.

Solving longstanding - as well as more recent - regional conflicts, and denying terrorist organizations other opportunities to put down roots, requires effective action at the regional rather than the national level. It requires strong regional collaboration and coordination across a range of activities, not just improved border security and better intelligence exchange, but also increased economic cooperation, a mutually supportive approach to improving the rule of law, and a common approach to transnational threats.

The outbreak of conflict in Syria and Libya, for example, and the resulting refugee crises, demonstrate clearly the damaging spill over effects of civil and regional warfare, and the need for stronger regional cooperation and institutions. Failure to provide lasting solutions through regional collaboration can have grave security consequences for the broader international community. An example of a potentially effective regional cooperation agreement can be found in the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) established to defeat Boko Haram, an affiliate of ISIS, in the Lake Chad Basin.

3. At the international level

No one country, or even one region, has all the resources or the capacity required to deal with the problem of FTFs alone. International cooperation is sometimes more effective in dealing with transnational phenomena. In this context, the United Nations Security Council has taken action to counter the threat posed by FTFs at the international level by adopting resolution 2178 (2014) in September 2014 and resolution 2253 (2015) in December 2015, both under Chapter VII of the United Nations Charter.

In addition to 'expressing grave concern' at the phenomenon of FTFs in these resolutions, the Security Council in its Presidential Statement 2015/11, called on the Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force (CTITF) Office, in close consultation with its member organizations, to develop a capacity building Implementation Plan for countering the flow of FTFs, and to make recommendations to meet the needs of the most affected Member States. It also called upon the CTITF to set out a prioritized list of capacity building and technical assistance measures.

The CTITF has responded by establishing an *ad-hoc* inter-agency Working Group on FTFs comprising all 38 CTITF entities, to design and develop projects that could make an impact on the "life cycle" of FTFs, including their radicalization, travel to conflict zones, operationalization, financing, fighting, potential return, and re-activation, as well as their reintegration and rehabilitation.

In order to improve coordination among its members and prevent overlap between their programmes directed against FTFs, the CTITF has taken an "All of UN" approach to the development of the Capacity Building Implementation Plan in close collaboration with all United Nations agencies. This has resulted in the development of 37 project proposals linked to capacity building and technical assistance for Member States, available upon their request. A list of these

projects is attached as an Annex. Member States may use this opportunity to request assistance from the CTITF in order to augment their resources and capacity to tackle the FTF phenomenon and to exchange knowledge and information and share lessons learnt with partners to improve capacity building to stem the flow of FTFs.

There is no single solution to the threat from FTFs, but by working together at the national, regional, and international levels, as envisioned in the PVE Action Plan, Member States are more likely to act effectively and successfully in tackling the problem of FTFs and so create a safer environment for all. While UNSCR 2178 establishes the legal obligation for collective collaboration, the PVE Plan of Action and the CTITF FTF Capacity Building Implementation Plan provide a framework within which Member States may design and implement policies and programmes to address the FTF phenomenon, and find help in doing so.

VII.   Limitations of the Report

This survey and analysis is hampered by the relatively small size of its sample. Limited cooperation from Member States prevented access to a larger and more representative number of FTFs. Increased cooperation on information generation, access to data, dissemination of research and exchange of analysis is vital if the international community is to tackle the problem of terrorism in general and of FTFs in particular. The more that is known about why people become FTFs, and why some FTFs decide to return home, the more likely the international community is to design and implement effective policies and programmes to address the threat.

Another shortcoming of this survey is the small number of women and minors interviewed, only one in each category. This is regrettable given the number of women attracted to join armed groups and the greater role of minors in atrocities committed by armed groups. A better understanding of both categories will be important when it comes to effecting their rehabilitation and reintegration into society.[104]

Another drawback of this survey is the limited geographical distribution of its sample. Although Europe and the Middle East and North Africa are among the most important sources of FTFs, they come also from many other areas of the world and it would be useful to compare motivating factors for joining and leaving armed groups and similar groups across a broader range of nationalities. Another linked limitation is the impossibility of establishing a targeted control group of FTFs in order to help answer, with more confidence, questions about who becomes a FTF and why.

The final drawback of the survey is also its primary contribution. The survey focuses on the rank and file of transnational terrorist organizations in Syria. The value of the survey lies therefore in improving knowledge of the general recruits without whom the leadership could not survive. As shown earlier, most of the foot solders interviewed in this survey come from economically and educationally disadvantaged backgrounds and are seeking self-betterment. The better-educated leadership can exploit and manipulate them only to a certain extent. If the pull and push factors that draw them to Syria change, then their loyalty to the cause may prove short-lived. Although – as repeated throughout this report - it is important to avoid sweeping generalizations based on a small sample, the findings of the report suggest that most members of violent extremist groups in Syria can be peeled away.

There is still too little known about FTFs to suggest restricting further research to particular topics, but it would be of particular value to know of any specific features that characterise FTFs or would-be FTFs in different regions, or by gender, or by age group. One thing seems certain

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[104] For a study of female motivation, see (*inter alia*): 'Women and Violent Radicalisation', Conseil du statut de la femme. Quebec (2016)
https://www.csf.gouv.qc.ca/wp-content/uploads/radicalisation_recherche_anglais.pdf

though, the subject of why some people become FTFs while others who live under almost identical circumstances do not, will be of consuming interest – and importance – for many years to come.

One further issue for discussion is the question of what to do with returning FTFs. Official estimates from several Member States suggest that over 35 per cent of all FTFs have now returned home or have otherwise left Syria and Iraq. Many more are expected to do so, especially as armed groups decline. There is a pressing need therefore to design and implement tailored programmes to facilitate the reintegration of returning FTFs. Such programmes must aim to provide a way for former FTFs to leave violent extremism behind them. The benefits for Member States are obvious; but however necessary such programmes may be, many Member States still regard long-term imprisonment or even death as a preferable solution to the threat that FTFs may pose. The danger inherent in these more punitive measures is that they may promote radicalization among a new set of potential FTFs, and discourage others from believing a non-violent future is possible within their own communities. These FTFs may then become nomadic extremists, moving from one conflict to the next in search of new bases from which to recruit, train, and launch terrorist attacks against their own or other countries.

APPENDIX 1: Details about the Survey and Sample

No of FTF	Date Arrested	Date Interviewed	Age at time of interview	Time spent in Syria (months)	Date Went to Syria/Other	Gender
FTF1	Jan 2013	August 2015	(20-24)	18	2011	M
FTF2	August 2014	August 2015	(30-34)	24	2012	M
FTF3*	Oct. 2012	August 2015	(30-34)	0	-	M
FTF4	NA	August 2015	(25-29)	2 weeks	-	M
FTF5*	June 2007	August 2015	(25-29)	3 (in 2007)	2007*	M
FTF6	August 2013	August 2015	(20-24)	13	2012	M
FTF7*	August 2007	August 2015	(25-29)	4 (in 2006)	2007*	M
FTF8	Jan 2014	August 2015	(35-39)	30	2012	M
FTF9*	August 2011	August 2015	(25-29)	9	2010	M
FTF10*	August 2008	August 2015	(Above 40)	0	2008	M
FTF11*	February 2007	August 2015	(30-34)	0	2007*	M
FTF12*	August 2007	August 2015	(25-29)	1	2007*	M
FTF13*	August 2007	August 2015	(Above 40)	2	2007*	M
FTF14*	August 2007	August 2015	(30-34)	2	2007*	M
FTF15 (1)	December 2012	September 2015	(30-34)	3-4	2012	M
FTF16 (2)	-	Sept. 2015	(35-39)	7	2012	M
FTF17 (3)	2013	Sep. 2015	(35-39)	0	-	M
FTF18 (4)	August 2013	Sep. 2015	-	0	-	M

No of FTF	Date Arrested	Date Interviewed	Age at time of interview	Time spent in Syria (months)	Date Went to Syria/Other	Gender
FTF19 (5)	August 2013	Sep. 2015	-	0	-	M
FTF20 (6)	August 2013	Sep. 2015	-	0	-	M
FTF21 (7)	March 2013	Oct. 2015	(30-34)	3 (weeks)	2013	M
FTF22 (8)	August 2013	October 2015	(30-34)	4	2013	M
FTF23 (9)	February 2014	March 2015	(20-24)	2	2013	M
FTF24 (10	February 2014	March 2016	(20-24)	2	2013	M
FTF25 **	Jan 2015	February 2016	(20-24)	0	2014	M
FF26***	-	February 2016	(25-29)	0	-	M
FTF27	Nov. 2015	November 2015	(30-34)	10	2015	F
FTF28	August 2015	Nov. 2015	(20-24)	3	2015	M
FTF29	NA	Nov 2015	(Above 40)	2 (weeks)	2015	M
FTF30	NA	Nov. 2015	(Above 40)	8	2015	M
FTF31	October 2012	October 2015	(16-19)	3	2012	M
FTF32	-	-	(20-24)	0	2015	M
FTF33	-	-	(20-24)	0	2015	M
FTF34	March 2015	Dec. 2016	(30-34)	6 months	Nov. 2014	M
FTF35	March 2015	Dec 2016	(30-34)	6 months	October 2013	M
FTF36		Dec 2016	(30-34)	4 months	June 2012	M
FTF37	Feb. 2014	Dec. 2016	(35-39)	4 months		M
FTF38	Jan 2014	Dec. 2016	(20-24)			M

No of FTF	Date Arrested	Date Interviewed	Age at time of interview	Time spent in Syria (months)	Date Went to Syria/Other	Gender
FTF39	June 2014	Dec. 2016	(25-29)	4 months	March/April 2014	M
FTF40	December 2013	Dec. 2016	(30-34)	18 months		M
FTF41	Oct. 2016	Dec. 2016	(25-29)	2 years	Nov. 2012	M
FTF42	October 2014.	Dec. 2016	(20-24)	5 months	Sep. 2012	M
FTF43	February 2016	Dec 2016	(35-39).	15 days	April 2013	M

** Flew to a third country but was arrested by local authorities and sent back to his country of residence in January 2015.

*** This interviewee is very well known to the police as a gang leader who had been to jail several times. After being radicalized and just one night before departing to Syria, his mother stopped him.

ANS stands for al-Nusra
AS stands for Ansar al-Sham

APPENDIX 2
Table: FTF Implementation Plan Submitted Projects

#	Project	Entities	Budget USD	% Funded
1	Raising Awareness of Priority States on Advanced Passenger Information (ongoing)	UNCCT	1,115,698	100%
2	Enhancing the Understanding of the 'FTF Phenomenon' in Syria (ongoing)	UNCCT	400,000	100%
n/a	PVE + returnee projects to be developed	UNCCT		
3	Workshop(s) on "Strengthening Community Engagement in Implementing Security Council resolutions 1624 (2005) and 2178 (2014) and the Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy	UNCCT/ CTED	150,000	100%
4	Addressing FTFs through Criminal Justice Measures: Compendium of good practices	CTED/ UNODC	400,000	0%
4a	Addressing FTFs through Criminal Justice Measures: Two "Deep Dives"	CTED/ UNODC	1,000,000	0%
4b	Addressing FTFs through Strengthening Border Control Regional Cooperation through Intelligence, Police, and Customs Networks	CTED	80,000	0%
5	Human Rights-Compliant Response to the Threat Posed by FTFs	OHCHR	40,000	100%
6	Strengthening the legal regime against FTF in Middle Eastern, North African and Balkan countries (= UNODC FTF Initiative)	CTED/UNODC	6,409,345	100%
6 (a)	Strengthening international cooperation in criminal matters against FTFs in the MENA Region (under the umbrella of the UNODC FTF Initiative, see project 6 above)	UNODC	1,905,738	25%
7	Strengthening the Legal Regime against Emerging Terrorist Threats, including FTF in Southeast Europe, development of a FTF training tool for Southeast Europe	UNODC	550,000	64%

#	Project	Entities	Budget USD	% Funded
8	Supporting Criminal Justice Capacity Building Against Emerging Terrorist Threats, Including FTFs, in Central Asia	UNODC	900,000	50%
9	Cross-regional assistance to develop approaches and exchange good practices on prosecution, rehabilitation and reintegration of FTF returnees, with a focus on South Eastern Europe	UNODC	750,000	0%
10	Enhancing the Operational Capability of Member States to Counter the Financing of Terrorism in 5 MENA Countries (jointly by UNODC/TPB and UNODC/GMPL	UNODC	7,500,000	0%
11	Strengthening Bangladesh's capacity to implement rule of law based responses to terrorism, violent extremism and FTFs	UNODC	1,500,000	33%
12	Supporting Lake Chad Basin Countries to Prosecute, Rehabilitate and Reintegrate Boko Haram-Associated Persons	UNODC and CTED	1,870,263	0%
13	Strengthening the Capacity of South and South East Asian Countries to Prevent and Counter Violent Extremism and FTFs through Effective Criminal Justice Responses	UNODC	994,000	100%
14	AIRCOP	UNODC	7,000,000	35%
15	Technical assistance on the Supporting the management of violent extremist prisoners and the prevention of radicalization to violence in prisons	UNCCT/UNODC	8,770,000	100%
15 (a)	Development of a UNODC Handbook on the Management of Violent Extremist Prisoners (VEPs) and the Prevention of Radicalization to Violence in Prisons	UNODC	640,000	100%
16	Capacity Building for States in Africa to prevent the acquisition of arms and ammunition by non-State actors	UNCCT/UNODA	1,900,349	19%
17	ICAO Training Package (ITP) in travel document examination: training of instructors and course deliveries	ICAO	2,846,200	0%

#	Project	Entities	Budget USD	% Funded
18	Enhanced identification management, passport security, and border controls in 37 African States	ICAO	2,582,445	0%
19	"Female Foreign Fighters": Understanding root causes and developing evidence based responses	UN Women	800,000	0%
20	Interdicting FTFs travelling to conflict zones from Central Asia through project KALKAN	INTERPOL	1,047,722	38%
21	Enhancing MS capacities to exploit social media in relation to foreign terrorist fighters	UNCCT/ INTERPOL	922,349	51%
22	Interdicting FTFs travelling to conflict zones (MENA, Sahel, HoA).	INTERPOL	600,000	0%
23	Interdicting FTFs travelling to conflict zones in Central Asia	INTERPOL	600,000	0%
24	Border security projects in support of SCR 2178	INTERPOL	26,400,000	0%
25	INTERPOL Border Management Operation Against FTFs in Africa - East and West Africa, Sahel, Southern Africa	INTERPOL	360,000	17%
26	INTERPOL Border Management operation against Foreign Fighters in Southeast Asia	INTERPOL	462,281	100%
27	Enhancing information sharing in FTFs among Member States	UNCCT/ INTERPOL	1,434,866	77%
28	Capacity building support for migration management in Puntland and South Central Somalia	IOM	1,183,036	100%
29	Strengthening security at the borders of the region of Diffa, Niger - SEDINI IBM	IOM	1,748,634	100%
30	Support to improvement of Nigeria immigration service land border data systems - Nigeria	IOM	85,466	100%
31	Capacity building to improve border security and address potential terrorist threats-South Sudan	IOM	1,500,000	100%
32	Countering terrorism by enhancing land border control in Nigeria - Nigeria	IOM	910,000	100%

#	Project	Entities	Budget USD	% Funded
34	Enhancing the Capacity of National Authorities in Selected Asian Countries to identify and interdict FTFs through Improved Information Management	UNODC and INTERPOL	1,744,080	100%
35	Capacity Building of religious leaders to prevent incitement to violence that could lead to atrocity crimes	O/SAPG	200,000	25%
36	Tracking Hatred: An International Dialogue on Hate Speech in the Media	AOC	120,000	0%
37	Kenya: improving capacities to manage borders and combat terrorism -Kenya	IOM	2,700,000	100%
38	Strengthening border management in Uganda - Uganda	IOM	1,800,000	100%
39	Rural community engagement in border security and management-Senegal	IOM	725,621	100%
40	Reinforcement of capacity to deal with irregular migration, organized crime and terrorism-Mauritania	IOM	500,000	100%
41	Cross border community engagement on border management mechanism enforcement in Niger	IOM	990,000	100%
42	Assisting Sahel and neighbouring countries to strengthen the RoL-based criminal justice responses related to FTFs	UNODC	4,700,000	5%
43	Institutional and Capacity Support to the National Programme in Somalia	DPKO	90,000	0%
44	Strengthening Sahel Countries Capacity to Address Threats posed by FTFs through prevention, identification, investigation, prosecution and adjudication of FTF activity	UNODC	1,500,000	0%
45	UNCCT border management projects towards preventing the travel of FTFs	UNCCT	2,500,000	100%
	Totals		**106,928,093**	**41%**