

The image is a composite. The top half shows a soldier in a desert environment, viewed from behind, holding a rifle. In the background, a military vehicle is parked on a dirt road, with another soldier standing nearby. The bottom half of the image shows a close-up of a soldier's legs in camouflage pants and a tan jacket, walking on a dirt path. The overall scene is set in a dry, outdoor environment under a clear sky.

Defected from ISIS or Simply Returned, and for How Long?-- Challenges for the West in Dealing with Returning Foreign Fighters

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Abstract

Many of the 38,000 foreign fighters ISIS has managed to attract to Syria and Iraq will return home. As increasing numbers of ISIS cadres flee the battlefield, some as defectors and others as returnees still aligned with ISIS' goals and ideology, the challenges for the West will be how to identify and sort out true defectors from returnees, and determine if they are at risk to support again or rejoin a terrorist group. In this context, the authors of the article stress that it will be incumbent on Western states to find adequate ways of determining who among returnees is a security risk at present, who may become one in the future, specifically by returning their allegiance to this violent group, and who can be safely reintegrated into society for the long term. The authors also highlight important policy alternatives for dealing with returning foreign fighters who will continue to pose both an immediate security threat and a long-term challenge.

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Introduction

The U.S. Pentagon has reported a considerable drop in the number of foreign fighters flowing to Iraq and Syria, from 2000 to 500 a month according to some estimates.¹ While such numbers are encouraging and offer evidence of foreign fighter attrition from Iraq and Syria, one must not underestimate the rate at which the group continues to replenish itself, which according to some sources, is far greater and faster than that of al-Qaeda at its peak.² The "Islamic State" also continues to suffer significant territorial losses in Iraq and Syria.³ Such setbacks are likely to continue to weaken the group's recruitment campaign and efforts, especially important given that the group also relies on recruits from the territories it controls.⁴

Despite the significant setbacks in the battlefield, ISIS continues to attract followers. During our *ISIS Defector Interview Project*, we interviewed dozens of defectors and foreign fighters from Syria, Europe, Central Asia, and the Balkans who had served in "Islamic State" controlled territories. We found that a vast majority of these were truly defectors, and no longer support or ever intend to go back to the ranks of ISIS in Syria and Iraq, or to serve them at home. However, we also found that some were more accurately viewed as "Islamic State" returnees, but not defectors, having only temporarily disengaged from the battleground—sometimes even being allowed to temporarily return home by the group, or more chillingly, sent home to recruit or otherwise serve the group's goals in the West. These returnees remain aligned with the so-called "Caliphate" and contemplate returning to Syria and Iraq and, in some cases, we learned that they have already returned to the battlefield and rejoined the terrorist group. Some of those who truly defected from ISIS, even risking their lives to do so, also returned to supporting or actually returned to the group. In the

case of some of these defectors, despite having disavowed ISIS for a considerable period of time, the challenges of living back home caused them to flip and return to the group. Some were actually contacted by ISIS, or unable to reintegrate well at home, and again took up the cause. This article relies on a sample of sixty-three ISIS defectors/returnees imprisoned by authorities, collected between May 2014 and August 2017.

The sample of nine out of sixty-three total was collected between May 2014 and February 2017 from returnees of Western European and Balkans countries as well as Syrians fleeing ISIS by escaping into Turkey. One of the returnees was interviewed in a prison setting. He was imprisoned by the authorities following his defection from ISIS and return from Syria. Interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner, allowing the participants to tell their stories of being recruited into the group, serving, and then defecting, followed by detailed questioning involving a series of twenty-five questions and going in depth on topics they had personal experience with inside the group. The defectors were judged to be genuine on the basis of four things: referral from prison authorities and prosecution records, referral from defectors who knew them from inside the group, insightful knowledge about experiences inside the group, and intense post-traumatic responses during the interview evidencing they had been present and taken part in events they were describing. The subjects were contacted via smugglers, other defectors, personal introductions, and via prison authorities, thus the sample is entirely nonrandom. The defectors did not give their real names except for those in prison or already prosecuted.

Before and during the course of the research, the participants were informed about the authors' credentials in the field of counter-radicalization and counter-terrorism so as to secure interviews. The participants were informed that this research is part of a larger research project and is not sponsored or reporting to law enforcement. Informed consent was gained from each participant, with special care taken for those in prison to ensure they were speaking freely and knew that they may be under surveillance that neither they nor we could control. In the case of those interviewed in prison, the authors filed proper applications to gain access to the correctional facilities, and abided fully by the policies and procedures of those facilities. The authors did not pose any questions that could lead to the disclosure and admission of potential crimes or participation in illegal activities. This was important in the sense that it represents an ethical issue and any potential disclosure of incriminating evidence may be utilized against our participants in a court of law. That said, the interviewees were fully aware that in the event they voluntarily disclosed incriminating information, such as information about an impending attack, the principle of confidentiality would no longer apply. Our results cannot be generalized from this non-representative and small sample to apply to all returnees/defectors, yet the issues these interviews raise are deeply important for policy considerations in dealing with ISIS returnees because they describe the pathways into terrorism and back out for some, and how some at least deal with having returned from the conflicts in Syria and Iraq.

Some security experts predict that as ISIS continues to lose territory and its brutal grip on local populations in Syria and Iraq, it will migrate to other territories, with Southeast Asia (Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia), Libya, and even the Balkans being cited as possibilities.⁵ When we interviewed Syrian defectors from June 2015 to February 2017 in the *ISIS Defectors Interviews Project*, many told us that in the event of losing their territory in Syria and Iraq, ISIS cadres plan to shave their beards and blend into normal society in Syria and elsewhere to mount guerilla warfare attacks.⁶ Certainly, of the 38,000 foreign fighters ISIS has managed to attract to Syria and Iraq, many will return home—some disaffected

and defecting from the group, some disillusioned in the short-term but still longing to build an Islamic “Caliphate,” and still others sent back to recruit and attack at home. Already Western consulates in Turkey report an increase in their citizens showing up to report “lost passports” and wishing to return home.⁷

As ISIS continues to lose most or all of its territory, it is important for Western governments, particularly from the Balkans and Western Europe, to prepare for the reality that in this flood of returnees only some will be defectors, while others will simply be returnees who will continue to support the Islamic State. Many of these returnees will be dangerous and may return to Syria and Iraq at some point, or go elsewhere, or act at home on behalf of ISIS or its potential successor organizations. Whether all returnees from ISIS constitute a danger to their homelands is unknown, although those who left ISIS but are not necessarily defectors nor disillusioned with Islamic State’s claim to be able to construct a utopian Islamic Caliphate are likely more easily manipulated to attack at home and return to service. In our interviews, we found the dream of the “Caliphate” was a very potent one, and while many understood that ISIS would never be able to deliver it, that nevertheless remained as a hoped-for ideal.

As increasing numbers of ISIS cadres flee the battlefield, some as defectors and others as returnees still aligned with ISIS’ goals and ideology, the challenges for the West will be how to identify and sort out true defectors from returnees and determine if they are at risk to flip back again to supporting or rejoining the group. It will be incumbent on Western states to find ways of determining who among returnees is a security risk at present, who may become one in the future (e.g. by returning their allegiance to the group), and who can be safely reintegrated into society for the long-term. The questions for those handling the likely flood of ISIS returnees include identifying the variables that can be manipulated potentially to lessen the possibilities of return to the group. This article offers a small insight into those returnees who have not entirely renounced ISIS, or who have re-connected with the group over time, identifying what appeared to be the causes.

Sample

This analysis is based on nine cases chosen from a total of sixty-three ISIS defectors/returnees imprisoned by authorities (See Chart 1). The sample of sixty-three was identified by the smuggler who had brought them to Turkey, via a defector network, by virtue of their cases being public and having gone through prosecution, or because of the fact that they were imprisoned as ISIS (or in the case of the two Central Asians as ISIS affiliate) members.

Table 1 ISIS Cadres Interviewed

Total # of ISIS Cadres Interviewed	63
Countries Interviewed	Syrians in Turkey (33) Western Europe (3) Central Asians (2) Balkans (7)(1 Prison) Iraq (18) (18 Prison) Total: 63
# ISIS defectors reversing their decision or continuing their loyalty to ISIS (also subjects of this paper).	9

Nine Cases Discussed

The age of the participants at the time of the interview ranged from fifteen to forty-nine, with the majority being under thirty. Their professions before joining ISIS included farming, trade, and professional jobs, with the majority being blue collar, farm workers, or unemployed. All but one of the nine cases were men. Of the nine cases culled for this analysis, one was female, one was a minor, and the rest were adult males. These nine cases (the returnee or the defector representing all geographic areas of the sample) were specifically selected from the rest of the total sample because, unlike others, they: 1) expressed conflicting feelings about having left ISIS; 2) expressed the potential desire to return to the group; 3) expressed outright, continued affiliation and support for ISIS, and/or; 4) we learned that the person actually returned to fighting with ISIS.

Methods

All of the nine defectors were interviewed in-depth using a semi-structured interview instrument (with open-ended questions included) between May 2014 and February 2017. One of the interviews took place in a prison setting. The person had defected, but was arrested by the authorities upon his return. Most interviewees did not give their names and real names are used only for those whose cases are public and already in the press. The interviews served to develop an understanding of their motivations for joining ISIS, what attracted them, what they found positive, how they were trained and ideologically indoctrinated into the group, what they witnessed inside ISIS, and what disturbed them enough to defect or to leave for those who did so.

For the forty-five out of sixty-three interviewees who were true defectors, their main reasons for leaving included the brutality and corruption of ISIS (including its hypocritical and un-Islamic nature), being coerced into actions they found morally or otherwise repellant, and sheer terror for their own or family members' lives.⁸ Note that Speckhard and Shajkovci interviewed sixteen ISIS cadres imprisoned in Iraq, and with the exception of one prisoner, they could not determine their current level of support or loyalty for ISIS.

With the exception of the nine who continued or clearly returned their allegiance or who physically returned to ISIS, we could not determine if the remaining sample of interviewed ISIS defectors/returnees who denounced ISIS at the time of their interview ever returned to ISIS or expressed allegiance once again to the group. The nine who continued or clearly returned to their allegiance, or who actually physically returned to ISIS, are the subject of this analysis with the focus being on their motivations for doing so and the potential factors regarding their decisions to continue or return to supporting ISIS.

Results

Out of the sixty-three interviewed ISIS cadres, we found nine of them to have either reversed their defection by returning to the battlefield or to have continued their ideological commitment to ISIS. Among the nine subjects who, despite having left the group, were conflicted about ISIS and continued or returned to supporting the group (physically or

ideologically), one was Belgian, three were Albanians from Kosovo, two were Bosniaks, and three were Syrians in Turkey. We know that four of these physically returned to the group, and one who was jailed in Kosovo had come and gone previously and flipped again back to ISIS in prison.

Reasons cited for leaving ISIS included homesickness, battle fatigue, fear of ISIS leadership, disillusionment with ISIS living up to its utopian ideals, problems that needed attending to at home, anger over ISIS hypocrisy and/or mendacity, and the prospect for females of being forced to remarry. Yet despite this, upon return to their home countries, or in the case of Syrian defectors fleeing to Turkey, they expressed allegiance to the group, with nearly half returning to it. While our research ethic was never to ask our respondents to directly incriminate themselves, including asking them directly if they still wanted to return to ISIS, it became clear to us from what they voluntarily offered that of these nine subjects, all of them either continued or returned their allegiance to ISIS at some point after leaving the group and that half of them actually returned to the ISIS battlefield.

Discussion

After interviewing more than five hundred terrorists (or their family members and close associates when they are already dead) between us, it is clear that the individual vulnerabilities and motivations for joining terrorist groups are always contextual and vary even by neighborhood, even within the same city.⁹ The same is true for this sample.

Among the thirty-three Syrians interviewed in our sample of sixty-three, the desire to join the uprising against Assad, alongside heavy coercion from ISIS, was a huge factor for joining the group. Some of the fighters from other militias joined the “Islamic State” only when they were captured and offered a choiceless choice: die or join the group. Other Syrian militia members joined ISIS voluntarily, citing it as more Islamic, more successful in battles, and better financed in terms of weapons and providing better salaries than their group—reasons they gave for switching allegiances. Likewise, the Syrian respondents told us that Syrian youth easily believed the lies of ISIS preachers who promised youth unheard-of salaries, marriages, and even cars if they joined. This happened despite the fact that many of the *Cubs of the Caliphate* were actually groomed for vehicular suicide missions and received only some of these rewards. Local Syrian civilians who joined ISIS also referenced the fact that when ISIS overtook their areas, “Islamic State” took over all the means of employment and sustenance in the territories they controlled, and that to fail to join meant suffering, possible targeting for punishments, and potential starvation. Female Syrians told us, and male Syrians confirmed, that local Syrian women also often married into ISIS as a means of feeding themselves and their families.

European foreign fighters, by contrast, were repeatedly referenced by the Syrians as already indoctrinated into Salafi militant jihadi ideas before coming to Syria, and were seen as the “true believers” who had come for “jihad.”¹⁰ Western foreign fighters, male and female, enjoyed exalted status above the Syrians in the “Islamic State” and were given many perks including free housing, arranged marriages, sometimes cars—and for the men, sex slaves.¹¹ Our interviews in Europe and the Balkans point to a completely different set of motivations for joining ISIS than many of the Syrians had. High unemployment in the Balkans and in Muslim enclaves in Europe, alongside the marginalization and discrimination of first and second-generation Muslim minorities in many Western European countries, played an important

role in these recruits finding ISIS attractive. Offers of a real salary, arranged marriages, sex slaves for men, traditional living for women, free housing and other amenities, along with the honors bestowed by ISIS on foreign fighters who come to Syria and Iraq, attracted many who also felt their lives to be lacking dignity, purpose, significance, and honor.

More importantly, however, our total sample of interviews revealed that the significance of the ISIS captured territory and what appeared to be the real possibility of establishing a utopian Islamic “Caliphate”—given the oil wealth and battlefield successes of ISIS—were strong motivating factors for joining. The dream of the “Caliphate” was important to them.

Those from the Balkans who went early on to join the uprising against Assad and later found themselves in the ranks of ISIS also referenced their own personal experience of war as children and youth, and the duty they felt for Muslims to defend one another from tyrannical and violent leaders and unjust attack.¹² In fact, all of those interviewed in Kosovo by Speckhard (n=6), referenced the fact that others, including Americans, had come to save them from killings and rapes decades ago, and that now it was their Islamic duty to help Syrians defend themselves from Assad’s atrocities—events they had viewed on video and found extremely disturbing. However, once in Syria, they discovered the unexpected complexities of multiple actors with differing goals and the various militias warring with each other. Those we interviewed left while others who stayed in Syria became enamored of what became the Islamic State.

Likewise, many foreign fighters from Central Asia, Europe, and the Balkans were recruited into “Islamic State” by friends and family members, or with offers of marriage—creating and deepening already existing friendship and familial bonds—making it harder to exit the group. Some of the reasons we identified that seem to draw foreign fighters back to the group include: the friendships and camaraderie that also arose between foreign fighters, along with their deepened Islamic identities, sense of purpose, significance, heroism and dignity forged in ISIS; the material as well as spiritual rewards of participation; the potential of dying for a greater purpose with the religious promises of “martyrdom,” versus living a life of ennui; and the manner in which the group promoted its brand as representing an ultimate quest for Muslim dignity, self-rule, and justice. Whereas Syrians were more aware of the brutalities of ISIS toward other Sunnis (e. g. the decimation of the Sunni al-Sheitaat tribe) and their hypocritical lies, the Syrians in our sample also expressed vulnerabilities to returning to ISIS, such as longing for “true” Islamic living and Syrian freedom with the overthrow of Assad, as well as having become invested in the possibility of a real Islamic Caliphate.

Alongside the motivations for joining, the problems facing foreign fighters back home—factors that played in their decisions to join such as high unemployment, underemployment, discrimination, marginalization, difficulty living a conservative Salafi lifestyle in the West, messy and unsatisfying family relationships that they had fled—all still existed as problems once they returned home. And these problems continued on without new or satisfying solutions. In addition, having lived in a conflict zone and having witnessed and taken part in extreme brutality also took a heavy psychological toll upon returned ISIS cadres, who now in safety told us of enduring symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Their high arousal states in particular—feeling jumpy, fidgety, and on high alert—do not match the calm, bored ennui of being back home, or of hiding in Syria without a clear purpose. Equally important, they are lacking good psychological treatment along with the ability to safely admit the disturbing things in which they took part. Many returnees long again for the

clarity of purpose and experiences of the battleground with the potential rewards of death by “martyrdom.” Only one returnee in our sample received psychological assistance—an Albanian from Kosovo who was offered psychological help in France for the traumas of having served in “Islamic State.” He stated that before taking the offered therapy he suffered nightmares and what sounded like symptoms of PTSD, but that the treatment greatly helped him to reintegrate. Some of the aforementioned factors also serve to explain why some foreign fighters seem to overlook the group’s limitations and territorial setbacks, dismissing reality while hoping for the best upon return.

Case Examples

ISIS, like al-Qaeda before it, has been adept at convincing adherents that to die killing enemies of the group is to die a “martyr’s” death with all the Islamic rewards of “martyrdom” conveyed to the suicide terrorist. Of course, most Muslims would not recognize this terrorist ideology as their Islam. Yet, during the course of our interviews we have learned how the group has managed to hijack Islamic scripture by promising fighters that suicide terrorism is an act of “martyrdom” that wipes away sins, gains the adherent immediate entry to Paradise, and grants family members Paradise upon their deaths as well. Our defectors told us of many Arabs and some Westerners who joined ISIS for the express purpose of gaining a “martyr’s” death—even volunteering for suicide missions. When one is faced with a seemingly insignificant and purposeless life, and problems of rampant unemployment, or if one is carrying guilt over “sins,” a significant death with an immediately improved afterlife can become an important allure to returning to ISIS, as one of our Balkan defectors told us:

I am thinking about it [returning to Syria]. There is a possibility. There is a bigger purpose in dying than staying here. Here is worse than you think. The cause I was fighting for, the brotherhood, and the life I had in Syria was powerful. I had a reason both to live and to die. I had a reason to live because I had income and food on the table every day. I also did not mind dying because I believe in God and justice. What I mean is that I don't have to worry about starving, like here [in Kosovo]. I have stability, and I don't mind dying because it is for a greater purpose: to free innocent Muslim brothers and sisters who are being killed every day. (D.K, age thirty-five, interviewed in June 2015, Kosovo)¹³

A thirty-four year old Albanian Kosovar explained how he had found purpose and meaning in ISIS and only returned for a short time to Kosovo—for a break from the battlefield, “I am temporarily disengaged. I will return. I have established my life in the Islamic State. This [Syria] is my new home.” He denied defecting saying,

Defecting means switching allegiance and commitment. I have not abandoned my brothers and sisters in Syria. I will be there for as long as I need to. I will help my brothers and sisters in Syria. It is my new career and my new life. Even though I love my family in Kosovo, I have found a new purpose in life (R.B., age thirty-four, interviewed in March 2016, Kosovo).

Two middle-aged men who went to join ISIS from Bosnia but had returned to be with their families stated, “Our families are in Bosnia. The war is not over yet. We hope to bring our families to live with us in the Islamic State.” (M.S., age forty-seven and B.I, age forty-nine, interviewed between May and September 2014, Bosnia and Herzegovina)

Another thirty-five-year-old Albanian Kosovar explained that it is hard to reintegrate into a society that labels those who went to assist in the uprising in Syria as terrorists and that he intends to return to ISIS, “[There is] no reason to live here, stigmatized by Kosovars. Difficult to return when people call you a terrorist.” (A.K., age thirty-five, interviewed in June 2015, Kosovo)

Syrian defectors in Turkey also told us about languishing in refugee camps and looking impatiently back to ISIS, idealizing what they had defected from and hoping still that ISIS could liberate their country from Assad. One defector stated :

I complain to my friends here in Turkey [about ISIS atrocities]. I always complain to them. I tried to convince them, at a time when they tried to convince me to go back. “Let’s go back. We will have money and pay.” I told them, “Money is not everything. You need to be patient here. Inshallah, you will feel relieved soon. It won’t be long. It won’t be long. They [ISIS] are not righteous.” They didn’t believe me. A lot of my friends went back and they are still there. The others were convinced because I told them about the reality of things. (Abu Yousef, age twenty-nine, interviewed in November 2015, Turkey)

Syrian Tahir, age fifteen when we interviewed him, returned to ISIS despite having become disaffected with ISIS cadres tricking small children into suicide missions and also pushing him to take one during his time inside Islamic State. He returned after ISIS fighters came and told him that they could take his town back from the Kurds but needed his help as a guide. Homesick and desperate to return home, he was easily manipulated by them. Tahir, we later learned through those who knew him, was killed on a landmine as he tried to guide the fighters in their unsuccessful bid to overtake his village. (Tahir, age fifteen, interviewed in November 2015, Turkey).

Umm Rasheed, a twenty-one-year-old Syrian woman who had been indoctrinated by ISIS after being orphaned as a teen and married into the group, was forced by circumstances into three serial marriages (after each husband died in battle). The single mother of a small child had been living in a Turkish refugee camp for nine months but still expressed deep confusion about ISIS when we spoke to her in Turkey. Her case made it clear to us that those who escape from terrorist groups need supportive therapy and remain deeply vulnerable to the ideologies they have been forced to live under, especially if they fell under ISIS rule as youth, as she did.

Despite having run from them when she believed they would force her into yet a fourth ISIS marriage, Umm Rasheed appeared completely disoriented in her life in Turkey, telling us, “I would do the same thing again if given the opportunity. I escaped because I have a small child, but I want to go back after the baby is grown. I want to go back. When my son is three or four years old, if ISIS still exists, I will go back and fight with them.”

Having known poverty in her family home and then repeated tragedy in her late teens as her parents and three husbands were all killed and then knowing poverty again as a refugee, she idealized the prosperity and powerful position she had briefly held in ISIS, married to a Saudi foreign fighter and being herself a member of the ISIS *hisbah*. She claimed, “ISIS is a really good group, I have to help them. If they allow me to keep my son, I would marry [again] but I don’t know yet. They are not as bad as people tell. ISIS is good. Woman are covered over there.”

Like many who had fallen under the total indoctrination of ISIS, she still believed that “Islamic State” represented the true Islam and all others were enemies. She also had personal experience to back up some of her beliefs. She had been relatively rich in ISIS until each of her husbands were killed in battle. Likewise, she had seen the civilian killings caused by Coalition bombings that made her conclude that the West was an enemy to Syrian civilians, “Those coalition forces are not killing us, our soldiers, but they are attacking civilians, and everyone sees that.” She claimed to have seen dead women and children killed by Coalition airstrikes as well.

While she had risked her life to escape ISIS and was clearly relieved to be away from the battlefield and not forced to remarry yet a fourth time, she still idealized the “Islamic State” and was unclear about what to believe, “They lie about us and create negative propaganda,” she said of the West. Also having so many of her close family killed in battle and having been taught by ISIS that they were “martyrs,” it may have been hard for her to let go of this idea. When asked about others joining the group, she said,

Advise them to come and join ISIS. Go! Die in the road of Allah. When you die for the religion you save yourself. I want my child to be an ISIS fighter and martyr. That son must go through the way of his father, follow his path, I wish I was a ‘martyr’ as well. I can die when he’s ten. Martyrdom is the most important rank you can reach.

When asked if she would take other Syrian refugees back to ISIS with her, she answered,

Of course if someone wants to go I will take them. I invited a lot of women in Raqqa to become ISIS members. Inshallah, ISIS will become the real state of the region and I will become the martyr for them. What you hear here is all lies. You think they won’t last but if you go to Raqqa you see everyone is living peacefully there.

Having lost her girlhood dream of becoming a doctor, her parents having been killed by regime bombings, and having to marry young and repeatedly with little chance to grieve and then having been trained by ISIS as a young woman to be sadistic in torturing other women who infringed upon their strict rules, it is likely this widowed single mother was so traumatized by all she had seen that she could not clearly work through ISIS claims of being righteous (Umm Rasheed, age twenty-one, interviewed in May 2016, Turkey).

In Belgium, 27-year-old Younes Delefortrie (his real name) told of being raised by an alcoholic and violent mother and feeling that the Catholic Church he regularly worshipped in as a child had failed to protect him. When introduced to Islam by second-generation North African Belgians who have strong extended family ties, he was captivated by a religion that bans alcohol and immediately converted. He gave up drugs and alcohol and over time moved beyond those Muslim friends to an extremist version of Islam and eventually went to Syria in 2013. Delefortrie spent only five weeks in Syria in a group composed of al-Nusra and ISIS cadres and returned to Europe when the groups started fighting each other, giving as his reasons that he wanted to make a better living, reunite with his wife, and escape the battleground.

Yet, when he returned to Europe, he was returning to a troubled marriage, a conviction on terrorism charges, release on a travel ban, and overall failure. After having tried to restart his life, he had his business shut down by Gert Wilders, who complained that his bakery loaves “have blood on them.” Disillusioned with life in Belgium, Delefortrie expressed in

his interview his wish to return to ISIS. Idealizing their “Caliphate”, he justified the 2015 Bataclan Paris attacks as retaliation for Coalition bombings and said he hoped for the ISIS “Caliphate” to extend to Brussels. Journalists who have interviewed him at home report an ISIS flag hanging in his bedroom and Delefortrie dressed in a hoodie adorned with the ISIS flag. The judge who decided Delefortrie’s case saw him as not enough of a danger to society to lock him up; however, there are clear signs of his vulnerability to rejoin old comrades and his continued adherence to an ideology that addresses his childhood traumas and that supports terrorist attacks on European soil. His case would seem to support an argument for providing remedial therapy for ISIS returnees (Younes Delefortrie, age twenty-seven, interviewed February 2016, Belgium).

Fitim Lladrovci (his real name), a twenty-five-year-old Albanian Kosovar interviewed in prison in Kosovo, raises many of the war-related issues associated with others from the Balkans who went to Syria. As a young boy, Lladrovci had witnessed his own family attacked by Serbs and vividly recalled that an American woman had saved their village. He, like many of the other Albanians who initially went to fight against the Assad regime, recalled how traumatized and helpless they felt during their war. As a result, he felt that it was his Islamic duty to help. He, like the others interviewed, felt that the Kosovo government had supported Albanians going to help with the uprising in Syria, but later hypocritically condemned him as a terrorist. Lladrovci travelled first to Syria in 2013 and joined the Free Syrian Army for four months. Like many Albanians in the conflict zone, he became disenchanted when the militias started turning on each other and returned home. Recalling that time, he stated, “I joined the FSA. [When they] started fighting al-Nusra, I decided to return to Kosovo.” Despite trying to return to his normal life, he kept abreast of developments in Syria, particularly the rise of ISIS, as he became enamored of their claim for an Islamic “Caliphate.”

Lladrovci had, during his brief time in Syria, met many of the Albanian foreign fighters who later became leaders in ISIS, so he knew he could play an important role if he joined. Recalling how he tried to settle back into normal life in Kosovo, Lladrovci stated, “I got back and tried to move away from those kind of things, go back to my own life, but it was impossible. When I saw ISIS created, my desire [to return] was so great. The second trip in ISIS was totally exciting. The first time was boring, just guard duty.”

Like many of the Albanian foreign fighters from Kosovo, Lladrovci expressed extreme disappointment with the Kosovo government for criminalizing his initial acts of fighting with the Free Syrian Army to assist in the Syrian uprising and equating it to joining a terrorist group, more specifically,

Once I came back in 2014, arrests started to happen in Kosovo and police took me in to question me. ... They came and arrested me, took my computers and phones. They found evidence. It wasn't like I didn't admit it. I told them I went to [Syria to] help the people. It shouldn't be a surprise. Even the Kosovo Islamic community made a call for going [to Syria] and helping, so it wasn't like I ever denied it.

Yet, despite there being no law on the books in Kosovo for joining the uprising in Syria at the time he served the Free Syrian Army, his act of helping the Syrians was criminalized as terrorism. “[I was] put on the potential terrorist list. Arrested for nine hours. At the time, we didn't have a law,” Lladrovci recalled, obviously angry about what he saw as hypocrisy on the part of the state. Lladrovci, however, also had a criminal streak—with a history of stealing and petty criminality in his early life (according to those who knew him)—and he easily lied

to the government, “In front of prosecutor I said that I regret and have no intentions of going back. He believed me. I went home and the first thing I did was contact the people in Syria.”

As ISIS declared its “Caliphate”, Lladrovci became excited by the idea of joining and getting in on the ground floor. The first time in Syria he had left his wife behind, but this time he recalled, “It was at that period, people were taking their wives, wives were joining their husbands. Why not? I can do that too. So, I got in touch with Lavdrim Muhaxheri and Ridvan Haqifi, [They were] big shots at the time. I made some very good connections since my first time.” Material considerations played a part as well. Lladrovci told his ISIS friends that he wanted to bring his wife and asked them, “Can I get a house?” The answer back, “Yes conditions here are excellent for you. We are just waiting.”

Lladrovci continued to misrepresent himself to the authorities, recalling,

I started searching for ways how to get there. I decided to go from Montenegro. I took a bus with my wife, flew from Podgorica. I was on the [potential terrorist] list so once I got to the border of Kosovo, I didn't need a passport to cross to Montenegro, I showed my ID—they saw the name and questioned me. “Yes, I've been to Syria but now we are going to Ulcinj and taking my wife. We are going to work. My wife shouldn't be punished, for a stupid decision, why should she suffer?”

Lladrovci lied charmingly to the authorities and passed into Montenegro unstopped.

Once inside ISIS, Lladrovci recalled fighting for ISIS on an almost daily basis and had no regrets whatsoever about ISIS killing civilians, taking sex slaves, beheading so-called spies and enemies of the “Islamic State,” and killing other Sunnis—most notably decimating the al-Sheitaat tribe in a genocidal battle where thousands of men, women, and children were killed by ISIS. He had so completely drunk the ISIS poisonous ideology of believing the “Islamic State” was righteous that he rarely questioned their brutalities or corruption.

However, when he began to witness discrepancies that reflected his own life and values as they were played out upon insiders, he became upset with the leaders of ISIS. Lladrovci, whose father died when he was young, was raised by his mother and perhaps easily felt sympathy for widows. Likewise, he had vivid recollection of himself, his mother and an older brother being attacked by Serbs when he was only eight—an age that he would also relate to during his time in ISIS.

Lladrovci recalled, “When wives got sick they [ISIS] wouldn't take them to the hospital. They can't travel alone. [According to ISIS] wives are only there to cook and take care. For me that was a huge sign something is wrong.” Lladrovci's wife fell ill and was not cared for by ISIS. He continued, “There was not only my case, there was another person's wife. She was sick with cancer, had four kids. They didn't take care of her or allow her to go back [home for medical treatment].” He also became upset seeing that ISIS was only paying a widow's pension for the first month then refusing to pay further payments and not helping the women to get out to buy necessities, effectively forcing these women to remarry in order to survive.

As is the case with many who join ISIS, part of the attraction to the group is its promise to deliver justice and dignity to all Muslims. Lladrovci was no different in this regard. He became enraged when he saw hypocrisies and injustice as it applied to ISIS members. His refusal to simply follow the group motto of “hear and obey,” and his tendency to speak out about these injustices did not endear him to the ISIS leadership. He recalled, “I told you

I cannot tolerate injustice, so I always confronted them [the ISIS leaders] and argued. At some point, we even went to the *shariah* court. Because of that they started distancing themselves from me.”

The final straw for Lladrovci was an eight-year-old child who probably represented for him, his own fatherless, boyhood, unprotected-self during war. “So, there was this eight-years-old kid,” Lladrovci recalled, whose father had brought him to Syria against the wishes of his mother.

His mother was in Kosovo. They didn't allow him to use the Internet. Imagine this kid not being able to speak with his mother! His father went to Iraq to fight, so he left his kid with some Arabs. He told the Arabs, "Please send my kid to the Albanian group." He got wounded. From the hospital he wouldn't call his son or anything. At some point the hospital was bombarded. We thought he was dead. This boy had no food to eat and no one was taking care of him. Within the [ISIS] law he was supposed to get money, but other Albanian kids were mocking him. So, he came to me one day, "Abu Musab brother, sorry to bother you, I don't have anything." He had ten cents in his pocket while the other kids had 10 Euros.

Lladrovci got upset and complained to the Albanian leaders,

I got very distant with Muhaxheri, but with Lavdrim, I spoke to him, "He is being mistreated, you have to help him." The answer, "You have to mind your own business." But for me it was very important. I loved that boy and you have to help him somehow. There was one night during bombings around the house of Lavdrim Muhaxheri. He [Muhaxheri] was scared and took his wife and left this kid all alone, knowing they were bombing and aiming at the house. I couldn't tolerate it. The Coalition, I think, was bombing and aiming at his house specifically. Later he recalls that the boy was also beaten, "Ramadani and Astrajevi, beat him very badly." (Lladrovci denied that the child was raped.)

Unable to help the boy, Lladrovci started risking his life by taking the boy daily on the back of his motorcycle to an Internet café to talk with his mother. Ultimately, Lladrovci decided to defect with his wife and take the boy back to his mother, probably because he truly cared for and identified with the boy's plight, and quite possibly because he also saw it as an insurance policy to avoid a prison sentence upon his return to Kosovo.

Again, Lladrovci spoke cavalierly about the details of his escape, saying he paid smugglers \$3000 to get the three of them out of Syria—the money he freely admitted to stealing from homes ISIS cadres pillaged. Nowhere in his interview did Lladrovci express concern for the homes that were taken from Shia to house ISIS cadres, nor for looting homes, the genocidal killings and enslavement of Sunnis, Shia, and Yazidis, rapes of Yazidi women, or ISIS beheadings. Nevertheless, he did feel bad for ISIS widows who were not paid their widow's pensions and were forced to remarry in order to survive, and for this boy whom ISIS mistreated. Thus, he decided to risk everything and defect from the group.

To an experienced psychotherapist speaking with Lladrovci (Speckhard), his personality in regard to his time in ISIS appears naïve, undeveloped, and somewhat psychopathic. Expressing no regret for serious war crimes, combined with total surprise that he was imprisoned upon his return from ISIS to Kosovo, Lladrovci stated, “The court gave me the letter that when I came here [to Kosovo], I'll be free.” Yet the Kosovo courts did not honor

the arrangement that Lladrovci claims to have negotiated. He was initially sentenced to five years for “participating with terrorist organization and for illegal possession of weapons,” but his sentence was later reduced to three and a half years. Lladrovci was serving his time in prison at the time we interviewed him.

“I’m threatened inside the prison,” Lladrovci complained. “There are people who are praying all the night to kill people in Kosovo. They are on first barrier [in the prison]. They are going to kill me for sure.” As a defector, Lladrovci knew that other ISIS inmates would like to kill him, but he did not blame ISIS at all for that—he blamed Kosovo.

Suffering alone in prison, he also got very angry at the state for not keeping the bargain he claimed they had made for rescuing the boy, and Lladrovci began returning in his mind to freedom all the while idealizing his time in ISIS and their so-called “Caliphate” where he again believed justice would be served, “The things that the IS has done, I’m willing to forgive them for everything. Compared to what they have done in Kosovo [to me]. It is way worse, I will never forgive them,” Lladrovci complained from prison.

Lladrovci acknowledged that he had indeed defected from ISIS and would have been killed had he been caught, but now in prison he was again enamored with ISIS, “[y]es it was a time when I decided ad- Dawlah [the Islamic State] was not for me. But when I came here to this *kufir* [unbelieving] state and institutions, they made me think I am for ad-Dawlah.” Discussing how hard prison can be, Lladrovci rationalized,

I was trying to help my country. Being alone in the jail for sixteen hours by myself [he is in solitary for his own protection] everyday, of course I’m going to think to kill. I never used to hate persons like you—civilians. Now I’m hating institutions, courts, because these are the people who put me in this position. They are the reason. They put me in the problems with ISIS. They are the reason why I was arrested and I’m leaving my family. The way I’m standing in the jail. The “Caliphate” is quite better than where I am treated by Albanians.

Lladrovci never admitted that in this victim stance he takes no responsibility for his own actions and simply blames others.

Lladrovci’s case also argues for in-prison rehabilitation treatment for those in Europe who will not be serving long sentences, as he becomes more violently committed to ISIS each passing day in prison, “[w]hen I stay in my cell, I don’t want to watch Turkish TV. I read Koran and reflect. There is no doubt that life in the Caliphate was better.”

When confronted with the fact that he is comparing apples and oranges—freedom to imprisonment, and is being contradictory, given that when a male ISIS defector is caught he is beheaded—Lladrovci stated, “Be honest, death is easier. When you die, you go to hell or heaven. To be alive and mistreated it really hurts. I’m losing the hope; I can’t stand myself like this.”

Over years of interviewing terrorists, we have often heard them say that prison is psychologically untenable and that they would rather take a suicide mission than return to a prison cell. Indeed, Chechen suicide bombers were overrepresented by those who had fugitive status within Russia. They would rather take a “martyrdom” mission than risk arrest, torture, and prison. Some Palestinians also said they would rather die fighting than return to prison.¹⁴ Belgians involved in the 2016 airport attacks also said they wanted to avoid arrest and prison and preferred “martyrdom.” This is a chilling thought: if the person

emerging from prison is not fully disengaged from the terror group, he or she may be more than willing to be sent on a suicide mission rather than get re-arrested. This is something Western nations will have to think over when they begin to imprison ISIS returnees. Holding the returnees in cages and not offering useful rehabilitation, including not helping them to admit what they are indeed responsible for, may keep society safe while they are locked up, but may make even more of a monster out of those already strongly indoctrinated by ISIS—and increase societal danger upon their release.

After being totally disillusioned by his imprisonment, Lladrovci explained that he flipped from being an ISIS defector to a full supporter and encouraged others to go to ISIS, “[a]fter I came back from Syria and Iraq, two persons came and I said, ‘Don’t go there,’ and I made them promise not to. But since I’m arrested, I’m going to say go there.”

He also idealized depending on God for everything, despite ISIS currently losing in Syria and Iraq, “Yes things have gotten worse. They’ve lost territory, weapons, and money. They don’t have good military tactics. They are not doing very well, but the point is, we only depend on Allah’s will and that is what is important.”

Having learned to view the world through the lens of Islamic State and the claim that they alone are representing Islam correctly, Lladrovci also fails to distinguish terrorist acts against innocent civilians from collateral damage during acts of war. When asked about the airport, restaurant, and nightclub terror attacks carried out by ISIS cadres in Brussels and Paris he answered,

Alhamdulillah [praise be to God], they [the Coalition] are bombing in Syria and Iraq! Restaurants! They bomb children all the time in Syria and they complain after... That’s why they [ISIS] bombed in the [Brussels] airport. It’s almost the same. They have tortured in Syria, now they have the same in their cities.” He added, “I am not like the Islamic Community of Kosovo to put a candle and say I’m crying for them.”

Having been taught well by ISIS, he also now judges people’s worth by asking, “But do they follow *shariah*?” Lladrovci, consumed with issues of social justice, also asked important questions about controversial interrogation practices, like, “Do you know what Americans did to the Muslims in the jails, especially jails in the Middle East?”

When calmed a bit, Lladrovci stated, “If you love justice you should work both sides, not leave only one,” and admits, “I know it’s not good to do terror in Europe or Kosovo.” However, the difficulty of being in solitary confinement in prison continues to eat at his soul. He admitted, “But then you have the pressure like this, put in jail, and you are dirty in everywhere—then of course you will be a terrorist.”

His case profoundly illustrates the challenges faced by Western governments that are unwilling to lock individuals like him up for a lifetime—shifting views and the idealizing of ISIS that may occur when faced with the challenges of prison as well as simply the return to “normal” life. (Fitim Lladrovci, age twenty-five, interviewed in June 28, 2016, Kosovo).

Policy Implications

This original, field-based research reflects our sixty-three interviewed ISIS cadres worldwide. Out of sixty-three interviewed, we found nine of them to have either reversed their defection and returned to the battlefield or continued their ideological commitment to ISIS. In this paper, we examined all nine cases using a psycho-social, case study methodology. While we cannot know the entire sample of ISIS returnees, nor what percentage is likely to reverse or continue their loyalty to ISIS, we believe that our sample gives the reader important insights into the factors that lead to discontinuing their loyalties toward the terrorist group, and then later in some cases reversing that position. This field-based research helps to develop an understanding of factors that may play into terrorists' recidivism, particularly in the case of returning ISIS foreign fighters.

These nine examples raise issues of enduring ideological indoctrination to groups like ISIS, strong ties with ISIS that persist even upon return from the battlefield, and the glum depression of having returned from the excitement of ISIS to a life of frustrated boredom, seeming insignificance, and economic challenges. Given that those who lived under ISIS are often initially attracted to join it as a result of childhood traumas, current challenges and deprivations, possible psychopathic traits as well as failures in relationships and life—all problems they initially believed the terrorist group could ameliorate or at the minimum distract them from—we can expect that they also return to the same issues that have not disappeared during their stint with the terrorist group. As a result, returnees, even those who claim to have deradicalized or disengaged from the terrorist group, may continue to be vulnerable to further involvement in terrorism. For that reason, all returnees and those suspected of having traveled to terrorist groups should be carefully assessed by qualified mental health workers and possibly religious leaders (e.g. qualified imams in the case of ISIS, al-Qaeda, and al-Shabaab, for instance). Moreover, those who have these psycho-social vulnerabilities should receive supportive therapy to ensure they do not involve themselves in terrorism again.

We must also keep in mind that many who traveled to join ISIS will return even further handicapped by additional traumas experienced in ISIS that may manifest as symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). This requires careful assessment and treatment. One Albanian interviewed in Kosovo who had spent time fighting in Syria stated that he greatly benefited from a French treatment program that helped him come to terms with the atrocities in which he had taken part. Feelings of guilt, fear, shame, nightmares, flashbacks, bodily arousal, and avoidance are all symptoms of post-traumatic stress that may occur from having been involved in ISIS. Those who were involved during their development also need supportive therapy to help them recover from shattered world assumptions (e.g. the world is predictable, safe, human beings are caring, etc.) and from loss of childhood dreams and innocence. Umm Rasheed, for instance, who wanted to be a doctor as a teen girl and put considerable effort into her dream was turned into a sadistic torturer by ISIS: a group that provided her security when she had lost everything as a young woman. She will need supportive therapy to overcome her identification with a brutal group and to overcome her feelings of shame once she begins to admit that what she participated in was morally wrong.

Prison, or the threat of it, also appears to be a major stressor driving some back into the arms of ISIS. There is a tension in all societies between repressive measures against those involved in terrorism and rehabilitative measures that may put society at increased risk.

Policy makers need to assess the risk of radicalized individuals being imprisoned without treatment—that is, whether they will seed their terrorist ideas throughout the prison. Likewise, short prison sentences risk returning would-be terrorists back into society, but long ones may make choosing to die as a terrorist seem like a good choice.

The direct effects of imprisonment on cognitive changes or cognitive aspects of radicalization are poorly understood,¹⁵ yet it is well known that prisons often represent potentially fertile recruiting grounds for those representing groups like ISIS.¹⁶ The stressors of being in prison are many, and it is often necessary to join a group to gain protection and camaraderie, and feelings of resentment for the government can easily be exploited in prison. However, the prison environment also may provide a venue and opportunity for those disengaged from groups like ISIS to receive treatment and interact with others who could have a positive effect if they are placed in a controlled environment where they may have access to more progressive or liberal religious literature¹⁷ and contacts and treatments that could challenge their existing radical worldviews.¹⁸ Such programs need to be individualized, highly specialized, and carried out by highly skilled professionals. They must also include prisoner dispersion¹⁹ to isolate those who are vulnerable from terrorist recruiters and leaders to minimize group control over prisoners in isolated conditions and the immediate undoing of any prison treatment program that could potentially encourage prisoners to rethink their support for terrorism and, most importantly, ensure their reintegration into society once out of prison. Whether imprisoned upon their return, or free, it appears ISIS returnees and defectors harbor many vulnerabilities for return to the group, to recruit for it, and to offer it support, and they would benefit from well-thought-out treatment plans that effectively address both their original reasons for joining and the challenges they face upon return.

Given that most of the defectors we spoke to were truly repulsed by ISIS and harbored no positive feelings for the group at the time of our interviews (n=43), we must also stress that most of those who we spoke to did not remain aligned to ISIS, nor appear easily vulnerable to return. This does not mean, however, that they never will flip. Likewise, while Syrian ISIS cadres with whom we spoke cited Westerners as the “true believers,” not all were. A European woman who returned pregnant via an extremely perilous escape after her ISIS husband was killed, for instance, never really endorsed the group, and only followed her husband to Syria to remain married. She had no illusions about ISIS after having been pressured to leave her baby behind in order to leave with their blessings. Many of the Albanians who went to Syria early in the conflicts also said they went for humanitarian reasons to help in the uprising against Assad, but quickly returned upon seeing the factions turning upon each other. They also held no interest in the ISIS “Caliphate,” either while in Syria or upon their return.

All of these cases demonstrate that it will be important for governments, when dealing with ISIS returnees, to look carefully into the motivations and vulnerabilities of each individual for having traveled to Syria and Iraq and for having fallen into the ranks of ISIS. Those who appear as truly defected must be given a chance to prove themselves through the justice systems of their countries while being monitored by their governments to ensure that they do not continue to have ties with ISIS, intentions of going back, or intentions to carry out attacks in the name of ISIS in their countries. Such policies will be important as governments consider the impact on those who have been deceived into joining terrorist organizations in Iraq and Syria and now have second thoughts. This is especially crucial considering that not all who have joined ISIS were religious or ideological fanatics. As evidenced in our research, some joined for what they believed to be humanitarian reasons and quickly backed away from ISIS when they saw its extreme brutality.

During the course of our interviews with government officials and religious and civil society figures, some stressed the importance of introducing amnesty in the case of those who wish to return but have not committed crimes. The issue of granting amnesty remains contentious and open to debate and it is very difficult to distinguish between those who committed crimes and who have not. Already one ISIS defector imprisoned in Germany who claims not to have killed anyone while there was denounced by ISIS themselves as a killer.²⁰ However, providing adequate legal tools and venues for the returnees to prove their innocence is necessary to fight the narratives of alienation and victimization that groups like ISIS seek to exploit. That said, new policy initiatives must strike a delicate balance between ensuring security, including imprisoning those who might threaten society, while encouraging full rehabilitation of those who really have defected.

On the government side, it is difficult to prove which groups a returnee was in and produce evidence strong enough for courts to indict them on terrorism charges. Yet, it is important to remember what ISIS cadres told us about their one to three-week long *shariah* indoctrination classes (occurring after the ISIS Caliphate was declared and functioning as a “State” of sorts)—that these classes ended with sworn *bayats* and demonstrations of loyalty being carried out by each cadre beheading an ISIS prisoner. If true for returnees who joined ISIS once it was a “State,” they have committed war crimes and truly have blood on their hands, and psychologically have crossed a barrier from which it may be hard to return.

Conclusion

Arguably, the group’s battlefield losses due to aerial bombardments and ground combat, alongside the recent introduction of laws that criminalize material support and travel to combat zones with the purpose of joining terrorist organizations in Iraq and Syria, will continue to slow, if not completely halt, the flow of foreign fighters to Syria and Iraq. Equally important, the group’s aura and appeal are likely to continue to dwindle in light of accounts and narratives that depict the extreme violence and brutality of life under the “Islamic State” and ISIS-controlled territories, as is also evidenced in our recent research in Syria, Europe, and the Balkans. Some, however, will continue to fall prey to the group’s slick recruitment strategy, the promise of a “righteous” Islamic life, and the allure of successes that resulted in the creation of the “Islamic State.” However, as foreign fighters begin to stream home, a whole new set of challenges will begin. Now is the time to start planning how best to respond.

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