



Waging #Eurojihad: foreign fighters in ISIL

by Florence Gaub

Roughly 5,000 EU citizens currently live in the territory controlled by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) – a figure which is constantly in flux due to individuals joining, leaving or dying. This cohort makes up 25% of the organisation's non-Syrian and non-Iraqi contingent now known as 'foreign fighters', and around 12.5% of ISIL's total adherents.

Europe is not the main source of volunteers (Tunisia and Saudi Arabia together have more) and Europeans are not known to hold high-ranking positions in ISIL's hierarchy. However, the jihadist group continues to attract a steady stream of people from across the continent who, regardless of their country of origin, often share a number of characteristics.

The recruitment

Most of ISIL's recruitment in Europe is done through social media, with online fora replacing mosques as the main location for establishing first contact. Social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter allow ISIL's recruiters to identify and observe those who openly express sympathy for Muslim causes around the world and engage them in conversation. These 'headhunters' cleverly identify individuals estranged from society, and progressively promote the idea that the target's life will have greater meaning under ISIL rule alongside like-minded people.

The jihadist group may also assist with the logistics of the trip to Syria, offering anything from financial

support to tips on how to slip under the radar of European or Turkish authorities. Men are usually persuaded to join by other men, whereas women are known to be either recruited by other women or men posing as potential love interests – in either case, the recruiter is usually already in Syria.

Europeans tend to join ISIL out of a combination of political and personal reasons rather than theological ones. While these range from escaping the mundane to wanting to fight for a 'just cause' and eliminate oppression, more often than not, it seems to be to satisfy a thirst for adventure and to give life meaning and purpose. Men and women in ISIL share these motivations, though females are not (usually) involved in direct combat. This however, does not mean they reject the use of violence: a British female jihadist recently boasted on her social media accounts that she wanted to become the first female to behead a Western hostage, for instance.

The average age of Europeans in ISIL is 27 for men and 24 for women, while the average number of converts to Islam hovers between 20%-25% – or up to 30% for women. The majority of Europeans joining ISIL are male, but there are proportionally more women in the European group than elsewhere in the organisation. The main reasons for this are that European women enjoy greater freedom of movement and are more financially independent than their Arab counterparts. It is also worth noting that more than half of the women leaving Europe for the

so-called caliphate are mothers, whereas fathers are less common.

There is, however, no coherence in terms of levels of education or socio-economic backgrounds: Europeans in ISIL range from those possessing basic state education to PhDs, and come from relatively secular, as well as highly pious families.

Most Europeans arrive via Turkey, although they do not necessarily take a direct flight. Instead, the 'broken travel' technique is used whereby flights with different destinations are booked simultaneously in order to cloak the true destination. Fighters usually pose as tourists to enter Turkey, and in more than half of the cases they travel with friends or family.

Once in Turkey, they are met by their 'handler' or another ISIL representative who then organises the trip by bus into Syria. Although there are more than 15 border crossings, many are held by rebel groups hostile to ISIL. It is therefore preferred to cross into Syria through ISIL-controlled towns such as Jarabulus.

The reality

European men and women in ISIL are highly involved in the production and dissemination of propaganda designed for European audiences, and are especially active on social media. Their strong virtual presence, however, belies the reality of their role within the organisation. Upon arrival in ISIL-held territory, Europeans discover a reality which is very much at odds with the glossy portrayal of life propagated online. Although they generally receive privileged treatment – relatively speaking – and access to better housing and food, life in a warzone under ISIL's authoritarian rule is unpleasant and difficult.

Male recruits are usually drafted, and, after undergoing training and indoctrination programmes, assigned to a fighting unit. In cases where they have no prior military experience and/or poor Arabic skills, they often end up as low-ranking foot soldiers or policemen fulfilling mostly support roles. As the battle rhythm of ISIL fighters is particularly intense, it is common for men to spend weeks on end at the front.

Alternatively, men are tasked with suicide missions. The share of foreign fighters undertaking such operations is high: often isolated from their families, they are easier to indoctrinate. Moreover, they are not a drain on ISIL's coffers as their relatives, unlike those of locals, are not paid compensation for their act of 'martyrdom'. The dangers for male recruits

are real: between 10%-20% of European recruits have died in combat in Syria and Iraq.

Meanwhile, women are relegated to a strictly conservative domestic role which largely confines them to the house. They cannot move freely outside without a male chaperone and are subject to numerous restrictions which govern everything from appearance to pastimes. Unmarried women live in an all-female residence until a suitable husband is found, and it is worth noting that Europeans generally, but especially blondes and converts, are highly coveted as wives. Disturbingly, European females have also joined ISIL's all-female units in large numbers, especially the al-Khansaa brigade which serves as a 'moral police force' in Raqqa and runs the group's sex slavery networks.

The return

The number of returnees is difficult to accurately estimate. However, of those known to European intelligence services, some 30% (1,500) are believed to have returned to Europe. The number of men is more than double the amount of women, because it is more difficult for women to leave. In addition, individuals who originally left accompanied by family or friends are less likely to return – something which again applies to women more than men.

ISIL punishes defection severely: an escape attempt is thought to have recently led to the execution of an Austrian teenage volunteer. There are consequently two ways to leave ISIL territory: one is to depart with permission – either for rest and recuperation or with a mission – and the other is to flee. Evading ISIL and successfully escaping is almost impossible for women to achieve alone. Instead, they inevitably have to rely either on smuggling networks (and risk kidnapping) or on someone within the organisation. In this sense, it is slightly easier for men to defect as they are freer to move back and forth – unchaperoned – across the Turkish border.

Although hard to quantify, the number of potentially violent returnees is estimated to be around one in nine; the majority will either have been disillusioned by their experience or, though radicalised, will not resort to violence. Others will simply not have acquired the necessary knowledge to perpetrate a terrorist attack. Yet given the total number of Europeans in ISIL, this would still amount to over 500 people who are willing and able to perpetrate atrocities – a critical mass which, albeit scattered across the EU, has severe disruptive potential.

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