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# JOURNEY MAPPING OF SELECTED JORDANIAN FOREIGN FIGHTERS



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## Executive Summary

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Despite significant knowledge around the drivers of radicalisation, little is known about the motivations, influences and/or stressors in play when someone harbouring radical ideology decides to join an extremist group or use violence to express their ideological convictions. Building understanding around this pre-violence stage has largely been thwarted by the fact that the vast majority of fighters either remain in, or were killed in, theatre. The few who have returned are considered high-value security assets and their testimony is closely guarded and/or of questionable authenticity.

This research provides unique insight into the mindset, actions, and behaviours of five fighters from Ma'an and Zarqa who joined Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (formerly known as Jabhat Fateh al-Sham and before that as Al Nusra Front), covering both their pre-departure and operational phases. The evidence was gleaned through interviews conducted in 2017 with returnee fighters, their parents, spouses, siblings, extended family, friends, and teachers.

While there is no consistent 'missing link' that explains why some individuals decide or are coerced into joining a violent extremist group, there are important contextual factors and behavioural trends that may guide more effective interventions. These observations are set out in this report as a series of policy recommendations targeting government (both at the local and central levels), civil society organisations (CSOs), and the donors that support them.

The research presents a strong case that Preventing/Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE) efforts need to be expanded beyond conventional security-centric approaches to focus more on empowering community-level stakeholders, such as parents, spouses, siblings, CSOs, teachers, and Imams as key agents in the fight against extremism.<sup>1</sup> The radicalisation-extremism transition is rapid, unpredictable, and difficult to reverse. Building resilience to resist radicalisation and interrupting transitional processes at early stages, is far more likely to be effective and broad-reaching. Equally, the current focus on 'key drivers' — under-employment, lack of civic agency, and corruption — may not be the most expedient means of deterring recruitment into an extremist group. While these factors provide strong motivation to young radicals, eliminating such deficits, requires long-term and complicated processes — challenges that government and development agencies have been battling with for decades. Likewise, the geopolitics that have incited Arab frustration and inculcated radical ideologies can neither be reversed nor easily ameliorated. Instead, more targeted and strategic approaches are required. Examples include the:

- Interruption of key nexus drivers, including through quick impact economic empowerment projects, counter-narratives, and modalities for individuals to express their concerns over the situation in Syria and the role of religion in state affairs in constructive and non-violent ways.

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<sup>1</sup> Existing P-CVE methods are largely limited to two categories of strategies and actors: 'hard' strategies that include military operations, law enforcement, and diplomacy, and 'soft' strategies that include research, awareness-raising, and rehabilitation programs.

- Empowerment of key influencers, particularly parents, with skills and tools to build resilience to, detect, and respond to the early signs of radicalisation.
- Establishment of safe and transparent channels for reporting and case managing persons at risk of violent extremism.
- Development of frameworks to manage returnees so as to minimise the potential for group re-attachment or the radicalisation of others.



## 1. Introduction

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Despite the increasing attention focused on radicalisation, the scholarship and policy analysis is almost exclusively limited to drivers (‘push’ and ‘pull’ factors), recruitment patterns and gender variations. Less information is available on the in-group dynamics of violent extremist groups, battlefield strategy, or how powerholders maintain their influence in an increasingly chaotic and dynamic theatre.

A critical knowledge deficit concerns the transitional relationship between radicalisation and violent extremism. More specifically, the processes, drivers and/or enabling conditions at play when a person harbouring radical ideas decides to join an armed extremist group, or commit a violent extremist act.

It is important to underscore that the WANA Institute understands radicalisation as a *process* — triggered in response to contextual grievances and marked by a personal crisis in search of a role and meaning — that eventually leads to the individual supporting the use of violence against state actors and civilians to bring about an ideologically-defined social and political order. A distinction is therefore made between radical ideology and violent behaviour; a radicalised individual may not be directly engaged in violence, but supports its use for this purpose, whereas someone who perpetrates a violent extremist act is assumed to be ideologically radicalised.<sup>2</sup>

It is well-established that contextual circumstances, and push and pull factors, influence individuals to both embrace radical ideology, and, in some cases, take the decision to join armed radical groups. What is less understood, are the circumstances, drivers, and influences that facilitate the transition from a non-violent state to a violent one.

The reasons behind this knowledge deficit scarcely need spelling out. The numbers, whereabouts, and handling of returnees is a highly sensitive matter, closely connected to state security imperatives. Individuals being detained, imprisoned, in rehabilitation or reintegrated into their communities constitute both vital assets for intelligence purposes and risks to the safety and security of society. The reliability of returnee testimony is also questionable; ‘staged defection’ is a known ISIS strategy and it is possible that returnees are operating with pre-formulated, non-benign agendas.<sup>3</sup> All of these factors have limited the ‘space’ for practitioners and policy-makers to learn from these individuals.

Despite the risks of engaging returnee fighters and defectors, the importance of better understanding the end stage on the radicalisation-violent extremism continuum should not be understated. Details on how fighters enter Syria, the conditions and events they are exposed to, and available modalities of return, provide the foundational learning to design more effective

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<sup>2</sup> For a review of definitions, see Neven Bondokji, Kim Wilkinson, and Leen Aghabi, *Understanding Radicalisation: A Literature Review of Models and Drivers* (Amman: The WANA Institute, 2016), 4-6.

<http://wanainstitute.org/en/publication/understanding-radicalisation-literature-review-models-and-drivers>

<sup>3</sup> Wolfgang Mühlberger and Olli Ruohomäki, “Middle Eastern Terror in Flux: Mosul after Daesh, Daesh after Raqqa,” Finnish Institute of International Affairs (FIIA), January 24, 2017, <http://www.css.ethz.ch/en/services/digital-library/articles/article.html/844d8c73-c3b7-490e-aad7-2d01a6c6b961>; Brian Michael Jenkins, *When Jihadis Come Marching Home The Terrorist Threat Posed by Westerners Returning from Syria and Iraq*. RAND Perspective Series (California: RAND Corporation, 2014).

resilience strategies in countries of origin, as well as sustainable rehabilitation and reintegration programs. Indeed, a lingering and troublesome question is why — when the key drivers of unemployment, lack of opportunity, and weak governance are so pervasive — the majority *do not* act upon their radical ideas. Insight into the characteristics and end-stage tipping points of those who make the final transition, may unlock the answers to these difficult questions. Finally, from a psychological perspective, unless the levels and combination of battlefield trauma, ideological indoctrination, and coping strategies adopted by combatants are understood, it is very difficult to assess the risks that returnees pose.

This report seeks to shed light on some of these questions, through a journey mapping of individual Jordanians who joined a violent extremist group in Syria. The research mapped, not only their radicalisation, but their recruitment, through to their return to Jordan and current ideology. It then draws conclusions that may guide policy-makers in designing and implementing CVE-PVE interventions and in the reintegration of returnees.

The data collected was drawn from interviews pertaining to five fighters who left Jordan to join Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (formerly known as Al Nusra Front) in Syria. Three of these fighters have returned to Jordan, one was killed, and the other remains in theatre. The interviews were conducted in Arabic in Ma'an and Zarqa in May 2017, and included the three returnees, parents, siblings, other relatives, friends, neighbours, and teachers.

Journey Mapping is a methodology commonly used in market research to identify the values and attitudes that influence the decision of consumers to acquire certain products or services.<sup>4</sup> In the first application of this methodology to radicalisation research, we seek to explain how important perceptions and beliefs influenced the fighters' decision to join an armed group, and subsequently to return to Jordan. Indeed, triangulating different insights and perspectives relating to the research subjects revealed important insights, including differences in how those connected to the fighters assessed their radicalisation, the motivations surrounding their return, and the current risk and vulnerability of returnees.

The number and geographic diversity of fighters interviewed was limited by security restrictions in place on the interviewing of returnees and their families in Jordan following the Karak attacks in December 2016.<sup>5</sup> Despite these restrictions, the individual returnees interviewed were not determined by the authorities. Instead, they were selected by the research team.

To summarise the key findings of the research, the journey pathways of the fighters highlight the vulnerability of two types of youth: those who are ideologically-oriented towards violent extremist behaviours, and those who empathise with the female and child victims of the conflict in Syria. While the signs and speed of fighters' radicalisation diverged in many ways, they shared

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<sup>4</sup> Bruce D. Temkin, *Mapping the Customer Journey*, Forrester Research, Inc., February 5, 2010.

[http://crowdsynergy.wdfiles.com/local--files/customer-journey-mapping/mapping\\_customer\\_journey.pdf](http://crowdsynergy.wdfiles.com/local--files/customer-journey-mapping/mapping_customer_journey.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> The findings, however, are consistent with and provide explanations to observations garnered through prior research conducted by the WANA Institute on radicalisation in Jordan. See, for example, Neven Bondokji, Kim Wilkinson and Leen Aghabi, *Trapped Between Destructive Choices: Radicalisation Drivers Affecting Youth in Jordan*, (Amman: The WANA Institute, 2017), <http://wanainstitute.org/en/publication/trapped-between-destructive-choices-radicalisation-drivers-affecting-youth-jordan>; and two unpublished research reports in 2016 and 2017 on radicalisation drivers in Jordan and on policy gaps and policy recommendations based on key expert interviews conducted.



three commonalities: each was influenced by sensationalist media coverage, they were all recruited face-to-face and went to Syria with friends, and, despite their desperate economic circumstances, each fighter paid significant amounts of money to smugglers to reach Syria.

Of those who returned, each lamented their decision to join the extremist group soon after arriving in Syria. The oppression they observed, the Muslim-against-Muslim nature of the conflict, and the realisation that they had been misled into participating in the conflict, shaped this regret. Family members encouraged their repatriation, but returnees were particularly influenced by their mothers.

Today the returnees are each practising Muslims — although some are more conservative than others. They are active in deterring others from joining the conflict in Syria and refute the narratives of recruiters. Weak reintegration and rehabilitation measures have led to their isolation in the community, as well as having contributed to their economic marginalisation, which casts some doubt on the sustainability of their ideological positioning.

## 2. Understanding the Journey

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Despite variation in the profiles of the fighters and their decisions upon arriving to Syria, the journeys mapped share key commonalities. All identified fighters went to Syria when they were in their twenties. They were also economically marginalised. Although each was employed, their jobs were menial and seasonal, and/or their salaries were low (the highest reported monthly salary was JOD200 (USD282)). In most cases, they were their family's principal breadwinner. While the educational backgrounds of the fighters varied — some were educated while others had not completed high school — none had an advanced graduate degree.

Equally important, the ideological orientation of the fighters before their radicalisation differed widely. At one extreme sits the fighter who was particularly conservative. With encouragement from a teacher, he was engaged in preaching about Islam and good morals to his peers at school. At the other extreme is the fighter who was irreligious and reportedly had never prayed before. He worked in the public sector and by night would dance and sing in a *dabka* band. The remaining fighters were not fastidiously religious, nor were they irreligious.

### 2.1 Radicalisation Drivers

Five factors appear to have influenced the fighters' radicalisation. First, each was influenced by **sensationalist media coverage** that aroused the second factor which is **empathy and *hameyyeh* or *faz'a*** — norms of protecting the weak and fighting against injustice. These are important Bedouin values that are deeply rooted in the Arab cultural fabric. One fighter from Ma'an elaborated:

I was provoked by watching satellite news channels. The most important channel for me was Orient TV because it was focusing on the crimes of the Syrian army especially the kidnapping of women and raiding houses. Till today I cannot forget the coverage of how the Syrian army attacked one woman and killed her.<sup>6</sup>

While he knew that he would most likely be killed, and if he did, he would be a 'martyr', he viewed himself principally as an agent of justice and regarded his decision-making to be a product of his duty according to tribal values to protect the weak.<sup>7</sup> Further research is needed to better explain the psyche of male fighters that are driven by such values and not influenced by religious ideology.

A second factor was **peer influence**. One fighter left Ma'an with five of his friends and ten of his friends had already left for Syria.<sup>8</sup> "I went because of the influence of my friends," he

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<sup>6</sup> Interview with anonymous fighter, Ma'an, 22 May, 2017.

<sup>7</sup> Interview with anonymous fighter, Ma'an, 22 May, 2017.

<sup>8</sup> Interview with anonymous father of a fighter, Ma'an, 29 May, 2017.

confirmed.<sup>9</sup> Another fighter left with two of his friends (he returned, one was killed, and the other remains in Syria).<sup>10</sup>

A third factor was **ideological indoctrination**. One paramedic-turned-fighter recalled that he had been grappling with questions about his religious duty as a Muslim male towards the civilians of Syria since the start of the conflict. Recruiters told him that there were no hospitals or clinics to offer medical care to fighters; as such, his '*jihad*' would be effected by providing medical services. He thus went to Syria on the belief that he was performing '*jihad*'.<sup>11</sup> Another fighter had ascribed to conservative religious beliefs since childhood, and was described by his neighbours as a 'Salafi'.<sup>12</sup> He and his family recalled his preoccupation with ideas around '*jihad*' and martyrdom from an early age.<sup>13</sup> According to his parents, he was later 'brainwashed' by *sheikhs* and recruiters to travel to Syria.<sup>14</sup>

A final factor influencing individuals' decision to leave for Syria was **desperation**. Fighters, their relatives, and their friends all drew attention to their difficult living conditions, financial constraints, and weak prospects for a better future or improved social status in Jordan. Each interviewee referred specifically to unemployment and/or low salaries and irregular employment as main factors driving their despondency, and that against such challenges, Syria presented itself an attractive alternative.

**Whether singularly or in combination, these factors outweighed fighters' responsibilities and emotional ties to their communities and families.** One left his wife and daughter and another left his new bride, while the rest, who were single, left their families without alternate financial support. One woman described her husband's decision as selfish: "All what he cared about was meeting his goals according to his convictions, even if these were wrong."<sup>15</sup> Interestingly, one fighter applied for leave without pay from his public sector job. Whether this was to avoid detection, to keep his options open, or because he intended to fulfill his *hameyyeh* duty and then return, is unclear.

## 2.2 Radicalisation Signs

Fighters' radicalisation **ranged from 1-6 months**. The length of time appears to correlate with fighters' existing orientation; **the more conservative an individual was, the longer the decision-making process took**. This is consistent with the findings of other radicalisation research that ignorance about Islamic values and principles can facilitate radicalisation.<sup>16</sup> The

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<sup>9</sup> Interview with anonymous fighter, Ma'an, 28 May, 2017.

<sup>10</sup> Interview with anonymous fighter, Ma'an, 22 May, 2017.

<sup>11</sup> Interview with anonymous fighter, Zarqa, 27 May, 2017.

<sup>12</sup> It is unclear how people distinguish between *Salfis* and *Jihadi Salfis*. The term was used here as derogatory one, referring to the latter. Interview with anonymous neighbour of a fighter, Ma'an, 30 May, 2017.

<sup>13</sup> Interview with anonymous fighter, Ma'an, 28 May, 2017; Interview with anonymous father of a fighter, Ma'an, 29 May, 2017.

<sup>14</sup> Interview with anonymous mother of a fighter, Ma'an, 28 May, 2017; Interview with anonymous father of a fighter, Ma'an, 29 May, 2017.

<sup>15</sup> Interview with anonymous wife of a fighter, Ma'an, 7 June, 2017.

<sup>16</sup> For example, Ruth Manning and Courtney La Bau, *In and Out of Extremism: How Quilliam Helped 10 Former Far-Right and Islamists Change*. (London: Quilliam Foundation, August 2015).

argument is that it is easy to convince someone to subscribe to radical ideas if they are ignorant about religious rules and precepts, while those more learned take longer to take on radical ideas because they have to first shed specific doctrinal learnings. Indeed, the fighter whose radicalisation took place over the course of one month had no previous religious background; “I can confirm he knew nothing about religion or *jihad* before he left,” a neighbour clarified.<sup>17</sup>

**While radicalisation signs are generally case-specific, some general trends in the research subjects can be identified.** All fighters showed an interest in regular prayer and in reading religious texts provided by recruiters. One explained: “I started praying regularly because I was going for *jihad* and I might die there.”<sup>18</sup>

**Religious conservatives, however, seemed to display different signs from those who were irreligious.** Conservatives became short-tempered, rigid in their ideas, unopen to dialogue, and isolated;<sup>19</sup> “I did not like talking to anyone except my friends that I was going with.”<sup>20</sup> In some cases, they adopted aggressive behaviour and changed their appearance by growing their beards and wearing long, flowing dresses.<sup>21</sup> The irreligious did not display any signs of rigidity or self-isolation. Importantly, the changes observed in the irreligious were generally perceived positively by their families and as signals of maturation, for example, engaging in prayer, quitting smoking, avoiding loitering with friends, and returning home early.<sup>22</sup>

A further critical observation is that **parents were either oblivious to their sons’ radicalisation, or lacked the tools to mount a sufficient response** to prevent them from leaving. In some cases, those close to the fighter claim to have observed no signs of radicalisation. In other cases, parents/siblings/friends failed to connect their behavioural changes with the potential consequences. One mother explained:

His convictions about *jihad* were increasing daily before going to Syria for about two months. He was brainwashed about *jihad*, defending Syrian sisters, afterlife, heaven, and the virgins! ... I thought it was just ideas that he talks about, I never thought he would actually go to Syria.<sup>23</sup>

Others acted in non-constructive ways. The sister of one fighter explained that her parents decided to get him married to divert his attention from joining the fight.<sup>24</sup> There was no intra-familial discussion around his radical ideas, and no external help was sought. Two months later

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[https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Ruth\\_Manning2/publication/282611461\\_In\\_and\\_Out\\_of\\_Extremism/links/5613ef6208ae4ce3cc635f19/In-and-Out-of-Extremism.pdf](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Ruth_Manning2/publication/282611461_In_and_Out_of_Extremism/links/5613ef6208ae4ce3cc635f19/In-and-Out-of-Extremism.pdf)

<sup>17</sup> Interview with anonymous neighbour of a fighter, Ma’an, 25 May, 2017.

<sup>18</sup> Interview with anonymous fighter, Ma’an, 22 May, 2017.

<sup>19</sup> Interview with anonymous neighbour of a fighter, Ma’an, 25 May, 2017; Interview with anonymous sister of a fighter, Ma’an, 25 May, 2017; Interview with anonymous friend of a fighter, Ma’an, 30 May, 2017.

<sup>20</sup> Interview with anonymous fighter, Ma’an, 28 May, 2017.

<sup>21</sup> Interview with anonymous sister of a fighter, Ma’an, 29 May, 2017.

<sup>22</sup> Interview with anonymous mother of a fighter, Ma’an, 23 May, 2017; Interview with anonymous neighbour of a fighter, Ma’an, 25 May, 2017.

<sup>23</sup> Interview with anonymous mother of a fighter, Ma’an, 28 May, 2017.

<sup>24</sup> Interview with anonymous sister of a fighter, Ma’an, 25 May, 2017.

he departed for Syria. It was reported that two other sets of parents had observed their sons' radicalisation, but did not do enough to stop them.<sup>25</sup>

A critical takeaway is that parents appear to have lacked the skills and tools to identify their sons' radicalisation and act accordingly. It is certainly the case that in 2011 and 2012, there was **no clarity around safe channels to inform authorities about such plans**. Today, while parents and others may still lack confidence regarding official modalities of assistance, the level of awareness among the general public is higher, and there is more help available within the local context, including from community and tribal elders.<sup>26</sup>

## 2.3 Recruitment

Some interviewees considered the fighters to be victims of recruiters,<sup>27</sup> while others assessed them as active agents in their own radicalisation.<sup>28</sup> Certainly, **recruiters, particularly in Ma'an, were well-known within their communities**, some referring to "known big names" who were ringleaders for recruitment.<sup>29</sup> In some cases, parents and friends observed that the fighter-to-be was spending time with a recruiter or being driven home regularly by one.<sup>30</sup> It is worth highlighting that, while the local context has changed significantly, at that time, local authorities were unable to stop these known figures from smuggling fighters into Syria:

The government had serious shortfalls in monitoring the Jordan-Syria border. There were children as young as 16 years old who crossed the borders as well.<sup>31</sup>

**Importantly, fighters expended significant amounts of money to be smuggled into Syria.** One fighter paid around JOD400 (USD563) to enter Syria, and another paid JOD300 (USD422). This challenges the accepted narrative that extremist groups are 'all facilitating'. Indeed, given that the subjects of this research each faced extreme financial hardship, the transactional nature of their recruitment implies a large amount of agency on their part. It also suggests that, but for the difficulty of accessing large financial resources, many more might be travelling to Syria to join violent extremist groups.

**Interviewees also suggested a profit dimension to the recruitment.** According to one fighter, those recruited would pay a smuggler to get to Syria. Separately, recruiters were also paid between JOD500-1000 (USD704-1408) by radical groups.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Interview with anonymous brother of a fighter, Ma'an, 23 May, 2017; Interview with anonymous neighbour of a fighter, Ma'an, 25 May, 2017.

<sup>26</sup> As observed in 18 Focus Group Discussions for an unpublished study conducted by the WANA Institute in October 2016-February, 2017.

<sup>27</sup> Interview with anonymous friend of a fighter, Ma'an, 31 May, 2017 ; Interview with anonymous mother of a fighter, Ma'an, 23 May, 2017; Interview with anonymous mother of a fighter, Ma'an, 28 May, 2017.

<sup>28</sup> Interview with anonymous wife of a fighter, Ma'an, 29 May, 2017 ; Interview with anonymous wife of a fighter, Ma'an, 7 June, 2017; Interview with anonymous neighbour of a fighter, Ma'an, 30 May, 2017; Interview with anonymous sister of a fighter, Ma'an, 29 May, 2017; Interview with anonymous brother of a fighter, Ma'an, 23 May, 2017.

<sup>29</sup> Interview with anonymous teacher of a fighter, Ma'an, 31 May, 2017.

<sup>30</sup> Interview with anonymous sister of a fighter, Ma'an, 29 May, 2017.

<sup>31</sup> Interview with anonymous fighter, Ma'an, 28 May, 2017.

<sup>32</sup> Interview with anonymous fighter, Ma'an, 22 May, 2017.

We did not go with the help of *sheikhs*, but instead via smugglers that I met through my friends. The smuggler who took us to the borders was new to us. There were a very large number of smugglers who did this. They were coordinated by one big man. *It was a trade*. They will take money from everyone who went to join the fight. Good people, bad people, everyone went. Unfortunately, I realised this truth later and for this reason did not want to stay in Syria.<sup>33</sup>

Another contested narrative is the extent to which families in the country of origin are compensated for a fighters' participation in the conflict. One fighter stated that financial incentives were paid only to the families of the first three fighters to ever leave Ma'an for Syria. This money was paid by "*Salafis*"<sup>34</sup> who would gather JOD10 (USD14) from each of their members. These families received this monthly compensation only for a short period of time, however.<sup>35</sup> On the contrary, in most cases families sent money to their sons in Syria.<sup>36</sup>

## 2.4 Arrival in Syria

**The fighters participating in this research remained in Syria between three to seven months.** Each narrated their shock upon arrival regarding the conditions, and their near-immediate regret. Such compunction was confirmed and reiterated by family members and others interviewed who had been in direct contact with the fighters during their time in Syria. The most unexpected factor for the fighters was the **Muslim-Muslim and Sunni-Sunni nature of the conflict**. One recalled:

We killed people who said the *shahada* [Muslim declaration of faith] before they were killed... I felt this cannot be right ... Some co-fighters attacked others and killed them unfairly and for pity reasons. I felt we did not go to Syria to defend the Syrians but to oppress them.<sup>37</sup>

The paramedic who had been convinced by recruiters that there were no medical services in Syria, connected his regret to his realisation that he had been drawn to Syria under false pretences. He recalled that he immediately observed a number of clinics, a hospital, and several medical professionals: "I realised at that moment that they fooled me, and started thinking immediately of how I will go back to Jordan."<sup>38</sup>

Another fighter was disillusioned by **the irreligious behaviour and double standards adopted by his group's leaders**. He explained that the *amir* (leader) was strict on minor religious matters,

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<sup>33</sup> Interview with anonymous fighter, Ma'an, 28 May, 2017.

<sup>34</sup> Again, there is a general confusion among interviewees about *Salfis* and *Jihadi Salafis*. This refers to *Jihadi Salafis* who were advocating for joining the fight in Syria.

<sup>35</sup> Interview with anonymous fighter, Ma'an, 28 May, 2017.

<sup>36</sup> According to research data collected by the WANA Institute for an unpublished study in Ma'an and Zarqa in 2016.

<sup>37</sup> Interview with anonymous fighter, Ma'an, 28 May, 2017.

<sup>38</sup> Interview with anonymous fighter, Zarqa, 27 May, 2017.



such as how to stand during prayer, but would badmouth other leaders and embezzle funds. He stated his realisation that these groups were only using Islam to mislead new recruits.<sup>39</sup>

**Fighters were isolated from their peers upon arrival**, and then sent to different battalions and groups. “It was difficult to trust anyone there because every day you meet new people.”<sup>40</sup> While this tactic was presumably set in place to isolate fighters from any negative peer influence, in fact, it intensified their feelings of alienation and shock, and manifested in self-regret.<sup>41</sup>

**Two fighters “made the mistake”<sup>42</sup> of informing their group of their desire to return to Jordan.** One group reacted by exerting intense pressure on the fighter, combined with temptation through reward: “This included money, a new house, authority, and women. All combined.”<sup>43</sup> The other group exerted similar pressure, but coupled this with relocating the fighter to Ghouta, away from the Jordanian border.<sup>44</sup>

## 2.5 Returning to Jordan

**The fighters who returned, availed of different strategies.** The paramedic formed ties with a Syrian man who he had saved. He escaped to the home of this man’s brother, in another area in Syria, and remained there for two weeks in hiding. During this time, he communicated with his family in Jordan who arranged with the General Intelligence Directorate for his return. He paid smugglers to take him to the border.<sup>45</sup>

The second fighter formed ties with a Syrian man who hosted new recruits upon their arrival in Syria on behalf of the extremist group. During this time, the man had asked why the fighter had joined the conflict. The fighter explained his religious duty to fight for justice, to protect Syrian women, and his despair with life in Jordan. This man had advised him to go back to Jordan telling him the conflict in Syria had nothing to do with such causes. After participating in the battle theatre and deciding he wanted to return, he escaped back to this man, and then re-entered Jordan with the assistance of smugglers.<sup>46</sup>

A third fighter was tasked with driving some injured people to the Red Crescent. Upon his arrival, he considered himself as being presented with two choices: surrendering himself to the Jordanian authorities or to the Syrian army. He chose the former, noting that the Jordanian authorities treated him well and offered him food.<sup>47</sup> It remains unclear whether his return was opportunistic or self-orchestrated.

**It is noteworthy that all fighters were in regular communication with their families during their time in Syria.** Such communication was instrumental in their decision to return.

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<sup>39</sup> Interview with anonymous fighter, Zarqa, 27 May, 2017.

<sup>40</sup> Interview with anonymous fighter, Ma’an, 22 May, 2017.

<sup>41</sup> Interview with anonymous fighter, Zarqa, 27 May, 2017.

<sup>42</sup> Interview with anonymous fighter, Zarqa, 27 May, 2017; Interview with anonymous fighter, Ma’an, 22 May, 2017.

<sup>43</sup> Interview with anonymous fighter, Ma’an, 22 May, 2017.

<sup>44</sup> Interview with anonymous fighter, Ma’an, 22 May, 2017.

<sup>45</sup> Interview with anonymous fighter, Zarqa, 27 May, 2017.

<sup>46</sup> Interview with anonymous fighter, Ma’an, 28 May, 2017.

<sup>47</sup> Interview with anonymous fighter, Ma’an, 22 May, 2017.

All fighters commented on their **strong attachment to their mothers** before leaving and following their repatriation. Mothers explained that each time the fighters called they pressured them to return and counselled that their actions were not *jihad*.

Honestly the most important reason behind my return is my mother.<sup>48</sup>

Fathers likewise asserted pressure, but usually by expressing anger at their sons' choices. Spouses and siblings levelled additional forms of **emotional pressure**. One wife encouraged her husband to return, falsely telling him that she was pregnant with a male child;<sup>49</sup> a brother repeatedly referenced their father's deteriorating health;<sup>50</sup> and a mother blamed her son for his father's hypertension and diabetes that she said had started after he had left for Syria.<sup>51</sup>

The strong influence of mothers over their sons' return is consistent with other research findings highlighting the potential role of mothers in de-radicalisation.<sup>52</sup> It also underscores the **significant value Islam places on parents' approval and satisfaction with the conduct of sons and daughters**. This is an important and broadly understood norm in Islam whereby a parent's anger and dismissal of a son or daughter counts as God's anger, and can decide one's fate in the afterlife.

Upon arrival in Jordan, **all fighters were interrogated for a period between one week and three months**. While those who returned in 2012 were not imprisoned, those who returned in or after 2014 were detained for between three to five months, contingent upon them not having been engaged in military activities in Syria. Only one interviewee had attended a rehabilitation program run by Preventive Security Unit, and no details were shared regarding the curricula, number of participants, or techniques being applied.

## 2.6 Rehabilitation and Reintegration

**Today, the returnees feel largely ostracised within their local communities.** Their social engagement is limited to family relations, since friends and neighbours want to avoid security 'hassles'. Some, including former friends, are highly suspicious: "He [a returnee] has to prove to the government and to society that he has indeed changed to be able to live his life normally now."<sup>53</sup> A teacher added: "the government does not trust returnees and considers them a huge burden on society."<sup>54</sup>

**Returnees are considered by family and associates to be conservative, but no longer radical.** Of those who were always religious conservatives, they now consider themselves traditional *Salafis*, but not *Jihadi Salafis*, and in fact they strongly contest the validity of

<sup>48</sup> Interview with anonymous fighter, Ma'an, 22 May, 2017; note that a similar statement was made by another returnee; Interview with anonymous fighter, Ma'an, 28 May, 2017.

<sup>49</sup> Interview with anonymous wife of a fighter, Ma'an, 7 June, 2017.

<sup>50</sup> Interview with anonymous brother of a fighter, Ma'an, 23 May, 2017.

<sup>51</sup> Interview with anonymous mother of a fighter, Ma'an, 28 May, 2017.

<sup>52</sup> For example, Edit Schlaffer and Ulrich Kropp, "A New Security Architecture: Mothers Included!" in *A Man's World? Exploring the Roles of Women in Countering Terrorism and Violent Extremism*, eds. Naureen Chowdhury Fink, Sara Zeiger, and Rafia Bhulai (Abu Dhabi, UAE: Hedayah and The Global Center on Cooperative Security, 2016).

<sup>53</sup> Interview with anonymous friend of a fighter, Ma'an, 30 May, 2017.

<sup>54</sup> Interview with anonymous teacher of a fighter, Ma'an, 31 May, 2017.

recruitment narratives.<sup>55</sup> One interviewee assessed the current ideological convictions of his returnee friend as follows:

I don't think my friend is a [*jihadi*] *Salafi*, because [*jihadis*] *Salafis* believe that the state and anyone working in a security force is a *kafir* [non-Muslim] that should be killed. I work in this field and I have never felt anything but care and love from him. ... I feel safe in our friendship.<sup>56</sup>

The returnee who was originally irreligious is today a practicing Muslim who observes religious rituals of praying and fasting etc. He refuses to return to *dabka* dancing (which is generally associated with drinking, late nights, and smoking), because he believes this is against Islam.<sup>57</sup> His wife is supportive of this decision; she explained that his *dabka* band friends are irreligious and she dislikes their influence over him.<sup>58</sup>

The wives and mothers of the three returnees believe **that their principal concern now is their families' well-being**. One wife commented: "he is a very understanding husband. I work and he encourages me to attend training courses. He is a wonderful husband. The other day, my daughter asked him to bring her makeup and I was shocked that he did!"<sup>59</sup> All interviewees stated that they do not believe that the returnees would go back to Syria. One, however, remains in contact with the *sheikhs* that influenced his decision to go to Syria, and his wife expressed fears that they may influence him again.<sup>60</sup>

**The returnees actively deter anyone planning to go to Syria.** They engage in conversations with individuals planning to go, or who express support for armed groups fighting in Syria.<sup>61</sup> One succeeded in stopping two friends from leaving to join a violent extremist group while he was still in theatre. He also tried to convince a fighter from Ma'an, who he met at the border as he was being smuggled back, to return with him. While the fighter insisted on leaving to Syria, they remained in contact and he subsequently communicated his regret and returned to Jordan a few months later.<sup>62</sup>

**Security restrictions on returnees limit their reintegration and impact their financial well-being.** They are subject to enhanced security assessment and protocols at check points when traveling inside Jordan, which deters friends both from travelling with them or inviting them on trips.<sup>63</sup> "Every time we go to Aqaba to buy clothes for our daughters, he is questioned for a long

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<sup>55</sup> More specifically, of the six schools of Salafism, they are understood to be traditional *Salafis* — persons who prioritize religious text over reason, and who are strict in their approach to religious rituals. *Salafism* includes six schools, one of which is *Jihadi Salafism* that gave rise to armed radical groups like al-Qaeda, al-Nusra and ISIS. For details, see Mohammad Abu Rumman, *I am a Salafi: A Study of the Actual and Imagined Identities of Salafis* (in Arabic). (Amman: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2014), 33-50.

<sup>56</sup> Interview with anonymous friend of a fighter, Ma'an, 31 May, 2017.

<sup>57</sup> Interview with anonymous fighter, Ma'an, 22 May, 2017.

<sup>58</sup> Interview with anonymous wife of a fighter, Ma'an, 29 May, 2017.

<sup>59</sup> Interview with anonymous wife of a fighter, Ma'an, 29 May, 2017.

<sup>60</sup> Interview with anonymous wife of a fighter, Ma'an, 7 June, 2017.

<sup>61</sup> Interview with anonymous fighter, Zarqa, 27 May, 2017.

<sup>62</sup> Interview with anonymous fighter, Ma'an, 28 May, 2017.

<sup>63</sup> Interview with anonymous fighter, Zarqa, 27 May, 2017.

time. Once it took them two hours... I started hating going with him because of these measures,” said one wife.<sup>64</sup>

One returnee who needs to travel regularly to Aqaba to obtain supplies for the perfume and accessories shop where he works, lamented the security questioning he faces and the disruptive impact this has on their lives.<sup>65</sup> “They do so in Aqaba because of the hotels,” commented one returnee’s wife. She also noted that such restrictions have increased following the Karak attacks that took place in December 2016.<sup>66</sup>

A final returnee noted that he was prevented from taking up employment opportunities (one in Bahrain and another in UAE) because of the travel restrictions imposed upon him by the government.<sup>67</sup> These restrictions apply to returnees’ travel, not only for employment, but also for recreation and religious purposes such as pilgrimage.<sup>68</sup>

**Security restrictions prevent returnees from being employed** in the public sector,<sup>69</sup> as they cannot obtain the Certificate of Good Conduct required for most job opportunities in Jordan.<sup>70</sup> This leaves returnees with few options apart from the informal job market, limits their social and economic integration, and contributes to their frustrations.

**All returnees** agree it was a mistake to join an armed radical group in Syria, but they differ in how they view their current life and prospects. One stated: “I regret coming back to Jordan because I have no dignity here due to security restrictions.”<sup>71</sup> The others are equally frustrated with their economic conditions and social stigma, but appear to be more accepting of their fate.

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<sup>64</sup> Interview with anonymous wife of a fighter, Ma’an, 29 May, 2017.

<sup>65</sup> Interview with anonymous fighter, Ma’an, 28 May, 2017.

<sup>66</sup> Interview with anonymous fighter, Ma’an, 28 May, 2017.

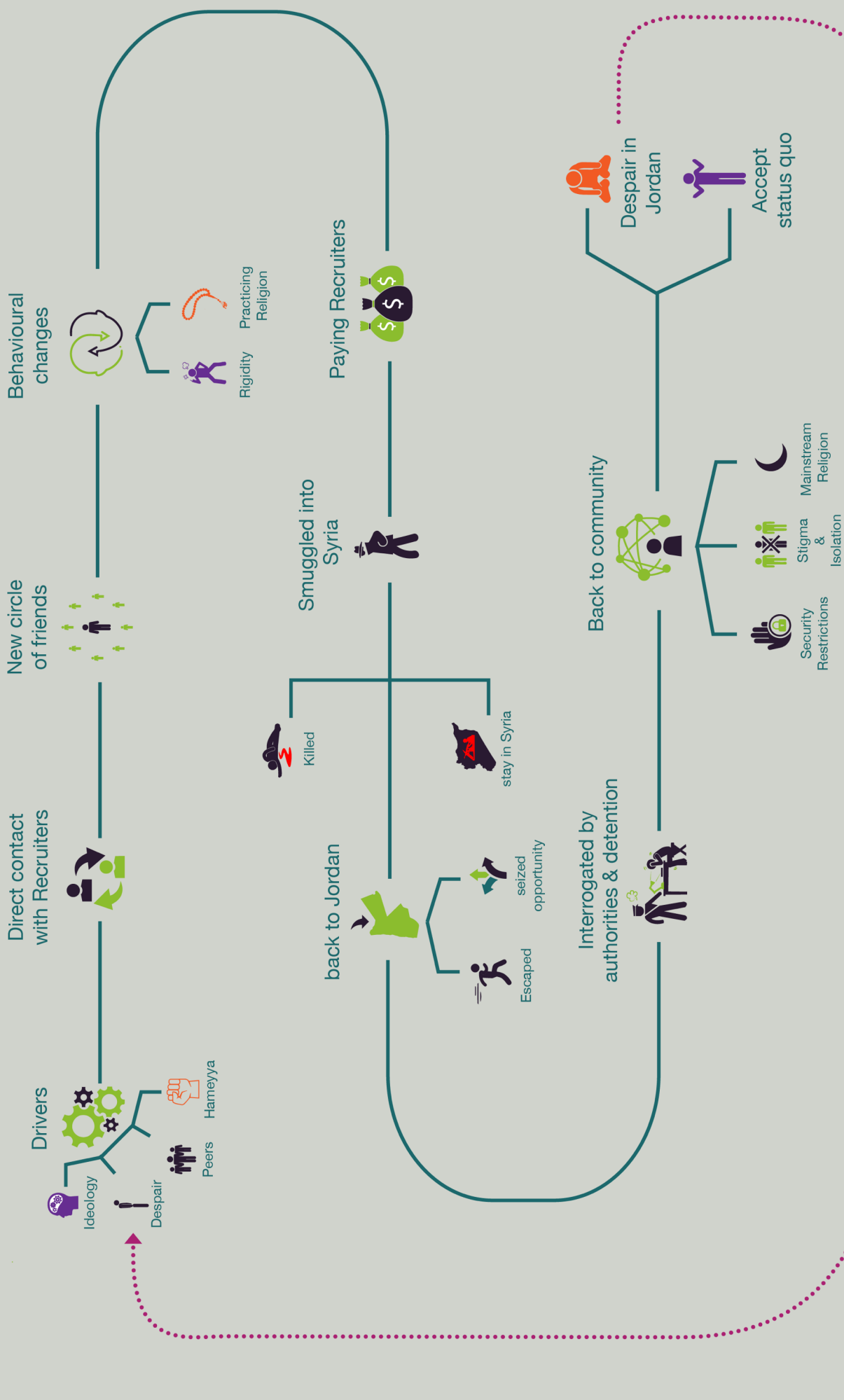
<sup>67</sup> Interview with anonymous fighter, Ma’an, 22 May, 2017.

<sup>68</sup> Interview with anonymous fighter, Ma’an, 28 May, 2017; Interview with anonymous wife of a fighter, Ma’an, 29 May, 2017.

<sup>69</sup> Interview with anonymous father of a fighter, Ma’an, 29 May, 2017.

<sup>70</sup> Interview with anonymous fighter, Ma’an, 22 May, 2017.

<sup>71</sup> Interview with anonymous fighter, Ma’an, 22 May, 2017.



# VISUALISING THE JOURNEY OF SELECT JORDANIAN FIGHTERS

## 3. Key Findings

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The accounts presented by the fighters and other interviewees draw attention to key factors with regard to the typologies of fighters and returnees, influential actors, and important values that influenced the direction of the journeys in question. The main trends are summarised below.

### 3.1 Types of Fighters

Fighters fall into two categories: the ideologically-motivated and the *hameyya*-motivated.

- The ideologically-motivated were influenced by their religious duty to correct injustice and to take part in *jihad* through military and non-military means. This ideology was influenced by developments in Syria in 2011-2012, but questions about the religious duty of individuals affected their lives earlier. They showed signs of radicalisation and talked openly about *jihad* and the situation in Syria.
- The *hameyya*-motivated sought to defend Syrian women and children suffering from Assad regime attacks. Their actions drew upon Arab norms and values. Their decision was sudden and they did not show any prior signs of radicalisation.

### 3.2 Key Values

Two values influenced the fighters' decision:

- A desire to act as agents of justice, an extension of either *hameyya* or *jihad* (as the religious duty to correct injustice).
- Despair resulting from weak prospects for economic or social progression in Jordan.

### 3.3 Key Actors

Two sets of actors influenced different stages of the journey:

- In the radicalisation stage, peers (and in some cases *sheikhs*) influenced fighters' decision-making. Fighters left in groups either with peers or with other fighters who were brought together by recruiters. Peers had a larger influence than *sheikhs*, but for the ideologically-motivated, the role of *sheiks* who sanctioned and approved their choices was crucial.
- The decision to return to Jordan was influenced by female relatives (mothers and wives), and to a lesser extent by fathers. They used emotional pressure and religious values that prioritise caring for parents over *jihad*. These methods were likely only successful, however, because fighters already regretted their decision.

### 3.4 Types of Returnees

All returnees regret the decision to go to Syria, but isolation and stigma in local communities as well as their socio-economic position and security restrictions have resulted in two types of returnees:



## Journey Mapping of Select Jordanian Foreign Fighters

- The *Salafi*-oriented who powerlessly accept the status quo with its limitations and frustrations, as the will of God.
- Those who regret their return due to restrictions they face. This group, while not ideologically radical, may be inclined to engage in anti-social and anti-government behaviour.

## 4. Lessons Learnt

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### 4.1 No 'Radical-Turned-Extremist' Typology

The findings of this research support the notion that there is no set 'radical-turned-extremist' typology. The subjects included Salafis and those who were — until the time of their radicalisation — completely irreligious; some were motivated by ideology or notions of *jihad*, whereas others left out of a sense of duty (*hameyyeh* or *faz'a*) towards fellow Muslims suffering repression.

The absence of a set of characteristics that can identify those vulnerable to radicalisation and extremism is indeed problematic from a security and programming perspective. Quite the contrary, the pervasiveness of lack of opportunity, fragmented social identity, and exposure to social injustice, typecast the vast majority of youth in the region as vulnerable to extremism.

As complicated as it might be, it is most likely that patterns of push factors within specific cultural and political contexts, coupled with a vulnerable person, who is then exposed to an extremist group, its ideology, and social support, is behind the making of a violent extremist. That vulnerabilities and motivations often align to form synergies may be particularly important. The most potent mix seems to be a level of achievement and resulting expectation, which is then frustrated, preventing the attainment of higher life ambitions: for example, an individual who is properly educated and motivated, but cannot find employment due to nepotism, weak governance, or a flailing economy. This is very much in line with the academic scholarship linking radicalisation to 'relative deprivation'.<sup>72</sup> Relative deprivation is the tension that develops from a discrepancy between what one feels entitled to and what one is actually capable of acquiring and maintaining.<sup>73</sup> In the case of the research subjects, the intersection of their aspirations and frustrations certainly pushed them towards the alternatives on offer to them.

Another virulent nexus is the impact of chronic lack of opportunity, pessimism about a better future, and the overall perception that the government had failed them. Many research subjects articulated this situation as one of 'despair' or 'hopelessness'. Indeed, young men from rural and peri-urban areas, with no family connections, see no dividends being paid from higher education, no possibility of a career, and — by extension — few possibilities for marriage.<sup>74</sup> The humiliation of being trapped in adolescent limbo, symbolised by the economic burden they represent to their families, should not be underestimated. Many youth regard martyrdom — and

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<sup>72</sup> For example, see Ömer Taspınar, "Fighting Radicalism, not 'Terrorism': Root Causes of an International Actor Redefined" *SAIS Review International Affairs* XXIX, no. 2, (Summer–Fall 2009): 77-79, [http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/articles/2009/9/summer%20fall%20radicalism%20taspinar/summer\\_fa ll\\_radicalism\\_taspinar.pdf](http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/articles/2009/9/summer%20fall%20radicalism%20taspinar/summer_fa ll_radicalism_taspinar.pdf); Diego Gambetta and Steffen Hertog, "Why are there so many Engineers among Islamic Radicals?" *European Journal of Sociology* 50, no. 2, (August 2009): 201–230, [http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/29836/1/Why\\_are\\_there\\_so\\_many\\_Engineers\\_among\\_Islamic\\_radicals\\_\(publisher\).pdf](http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/29836/1/Why_are_there_so_many_Engineers_among_Islamic_radicals_(publisher).pdf)

<sup>73</sup> Ted Robert Gurr, *Why Men Rebel* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1970), 23.

<sup>74</sup> Neven Bonokji, Kim Wilkinson, Leen Aghabi, *Trapped Between Destructive Choices: Radicalisation Drivers Affecting Youth in Jordan*, (Amman: The WANA Institute, 2017), 9-17, [http://wanainstitute.org/sites/default/files/publications/Trapped%20Between%20Destructive%20Choices%20-%20Final%20English\\_0.pdf](http://wanainstitute.org/sites/default/files/publications/Trapped%20Between%20Destructive%20Choices%20-%20Final%20English_0.pdf)

the heroism embedded in ISIS narratives — as preferable to the shame and dishonour of being unable to fulfil their core responsibilities as an Arab male.<sup>75</sup> This sense of entrapment triggers youths' psychological search for purpose in life, thus activating (perhaps dormant) religious, ideological and duty push factors.

## 4.2 The Agency of Recruits

This picture of fighters as active agents in their own radicalisation has several implications for policy-makers.<sup>76</sup> First, the dominant narrative of violent extremist groups being all-accommodating is far from universal. These groups are selling a sought-after product, that they outsource to recruiters and smugglers, who then use sophisticated marketing techniques to 'close deals'. As mentioned earlier, fighters paid smugglers working in association with recruiters, who are compensated by the extremist group in question. And the money changing hands is sizeable; with overall profits of up to JOD1000 (USD1408) per fighter, recruiters and smugglers have much to gain by becoming active players in this budding industry.<sup>77</sup> This profit-making or business element should not be ignored when crafting response strategies.

Second, these decision-making pathways should not imply that recruits have been 'brainwashed'; some are rational agents. The fighters studied, both mobilised the smuggler fee, and balanced competing Arab and religious norms — *jihad*, *hameyyeh* or *faz'a* and family responsibility — before deciding to join an extremist group. It also seems to be widely known that the families of fighters are not remunerated by the extremist group while they are in theatre. That the 'pull of the fight' outweighed fighters' responsibilities and emotional commitments, must be factored into the design of resilience building and counter-radicalisation strategies. Principally, for individuals who are determined to 'do something', neither enhanced securitisation nor emotional pressure is likely to be persuasive. Instead the risk-return assessment they make needs to be adjusted in favour of non-radical options. A clear entry point is to enhance the availability of alternatives that are non-violent, but perceived by individuals as equally constructive.

Third, the sacrifices that fighters are required to make to leave for Syria, imply that there may be many more individuals who are inclined to go to Syria, but cannot mobilise the money or whose family commitments are too great. This is a potential blind spot that policy-makers need to be aware of. Currently, it appears that the supply of fighters to extremist groups outweighs demand. However, if this changes in the future, groups may reduce or eliminate the burdens currently in place or add new incentives such as payments to families of fighters. Alternately, extremist groups may attempt to use these ideologically inclined and 'would-be' fighters used in-country. As the political-military situation evolves, this potential should be monitored carefully.

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid; Guilain Denoeux with Lynn Carter, "Guide to the Drivers of Violent Extremism," USAID, February 2009, 8-26, [http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf\\_docs/Pnadt978.pdf](http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/Pnadt978.pdf)

<sup>76</sup> Interview with anonymous wife of a fighter, Ma'an, 29 May, 2017; Interview with anonymous wife of a fighter, Ma'an, 7 June, 2017; Interview with anonymous neighbour of a fighter, Ma'an, 30 May, 2017; Interview with anonymous sister of a fighter, Ma'an, 29 May, 2017; Interview with anonymous brother of a fighter, Ma'an, 23 May, 2017.

<sup>77</sup> Interview with anonymous fighter, Ma'an, 22 May, 2017.

### 4.3 Peer Influence and ‘Groupthink’

This research confirms findings in other studies on the enormous impact peer group dynamics have on the decision to join a violent extremist group.<sup>78</sup> Each fighter was recruited face-to-face, in groups, and departed for Syria in such groups.

A better understanding of these trends may lie in an examination of the ‘groupthink’ hypothesis. Groupthink is a concept borrowed from military psychology. It is a well-documented form of dysfunctional decision-making in which group members make decisions based on their affiliative needs rather than a logical analysis of the situation. When groupthink is operating, the decision made by the group is not the decision that the majority of the individuals would have made if they had been allowed to consider the issues free from the influence of peer pressures.<sup>79</sup> The result is an entrenched ethic of group-based, leader-driven decision making when dealing with issues pertaining to justice or life direction, and a consequent minimisation of the importance attached to other imperatives or realities.

The groupthink concept is particularly applicable due to some of the characteristics of Middle East youth and culture. Structural marginalisation (the ‘haves’ versus the ‘have nots’ and the West versus Muslim community dichotomy), and duty-based, cultural obligations to take action, are both scenarios that promote groupthink-type responses. In such cases, fighters’ decisions are not based solely upon fact, but also upon shared emotions such as vengeance, fear, or domination. Another enabler is youths’ respect for Islam, coupled with weak critical thinking skills, and limited options for authenticating messages; this combination provides a solid foundation for influences of groupthink to permeate a group, leaving members vulnerable to charismatic recruiters who purport religious authority and can knowledgeably quote scriptures.

Interrupting professional recruiters — who are strategically playing into groupthink influences — is thus key to the transition from radical ideology to membership of a violent extremist group. As this research demonstrates, recruitment takes place in secret or through highly discreet networks, and is thus very difficult to monitor or prevent. Instead, youth need to be taught practical skills to resist such influences, including critical thinking, constructive debate and analysis, along with values such as tolerance and peaceful conflict resolution. Importantly, such reforms need to go beyond curriculum to include pedagogical techniques. Authoritarianism in the classroom and in homes, which tends to inculcate obedience and replicative thinking, need to be replaced with environments that promote creative debate, safe idea experimentation, and mutually respectful dialogue.

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<sup>78</sup> Scott Atran and Richard Davis, “Executive Summary.” In *Theoretical Frames on Pathways to Violent Radicalization*, (Washington DC, U.S.A: ARTIS, 2009), 5-12, [http://www.artisresearch.com/articles/ARTIS\\_Theoretical\\_Frames\\_August\\_2009.pdf](http://www.artisresearch.com/articles/ARTIS_Theoretical_Frames_August_2009.pdf) ; “Expert: Friends Recruit Most Islamic State Fighters,” *Associated Press*, November 25, 2015, <http://www.voanews.com/content/ap-experts-friends-recruit-most-islamic-state-fighters/3073485.html>

<sup>79</sup> Charles V. Ford *Lies lies lies: The Psychology of Deceit* (Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Press Inc 1996) 258-260.

## 4.4 Parental Awareness

Radicalisation signs were case-specific, however, some general trends included greater interest in prayer, studying religious texts, isolation, and rigidity. Importantly, in some cases, the changes observed by others were interpreted positively as signs of maturation like a husband spending more time at home, or a parent observing their son avoiding behaviours such as smoking.<sup>80</sup>

A further disturbing trend was that close relatives (parents, spouses, and siblings) who did observe and interpret signs correctly, either took non-constructive action, or feelings of fear and helplessness resulted in inaction. The case of one fighter whose parents got him married to divert his attention from ideas about *jihad* and the fight in Syria illustrates this.

Awareness-raising and skills-building must cover the ideologies and extremist recruitment techniques that youth may be exposed to, as well as the early signs of radicalisation, and tools to identify signs of radicalisation that may mask as positive behavioural changes. Critically, stakeholders must be provided with incentives, or at minimum reassurances, to seek assistance. It must be accepted that parents will be naturally predisposed to protecting their children. The aim should thus be an environment where diverse forms of assistance are available, from state intervention, to confidential telephone or SMS help lines, and early intervention networks composed of psychologists, Imams, social workers, and radicalisation experts. Such teams should be locally accessible, able to mobilise rapidly, integrate safeguards to protect the individual and their family, and have clearly articulated and transparent protocols for when and how the state may become involved in a case.

Unless people are confident that discussion of violent extremism and early intervention will be dealt with in a proportionate and assistance-oriented way, the requisite relationship between individuals and authorities will not evolve. It should be highlighted that regardless of government efforts in this regard, the *perception* of people on the ground is that the channels to inform authorities of persons who are members or extremist groups or planning to leave for Syria are both unclear and high risk.

## 4.5 In-theatre Communication Channels

The research findings challenge the idea that once fighters leave for Syria, they enter a communication void. All fighters were in regular communication with their families during their time in Syria, including parents, siblings, spouses and friends. In these cases, it was these open channels of communication that facilitated their return — either through the levelling of family pressure or a negotiated agreement with the Jordanian authorities.

It is natural for families to aim towards the safe return of their sons through arrangements with the authorities. This option requires serious and continuous efforts from authorities, however. First, to assess the potential risk of having trained individuals who have participated in military operations or criminal activities back in the country. Second, their return places a burden on

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<sup>80</sup> Interview with anonymous mother of a fighter, Ma'an, 23 May, 2017; Interview with anonymous neighbour of a fighter, Ma'an, 25 May, 2017.

various social actors in terms of determining the priorities of how to deal with returnees, understanding and meeting their material and psychological needs, and facilitating their reintegration.

Setting aside these challenges, the communication channels between fighters and contacts in Jordan are valuable. Very little is known about the battle theatre, including the strategies of violent extremist groups, evolving spheres of influence and plans for expanding the conflict across territorial borders. A further use may be in the development of counter-narratives. Each fighter lamented their decision to leave for Syria, citing the hypocrisy of the conflict — specifically its Sunni-upon-Sunni nature — and that recruiters had manipulated and misused religious doctrine to deceive them. These are powerful narratives that could be capitalised upon to interrupt the marketing prowess of extremist groups.

## 4.6 Mothers in Radicalisation-Extremism Prevention

Much has been written on the prominent role of mothers in repatriation and de-radicalisation.<sup>81</sup> Indeed all fighters commented on their strong attachment to their mothers before going to Syria and now after their return. The mothers interviewed also explained the emotional tools and arguments they used to convince their sons to return.

Again, the disconnect between the interests of mothers — as well as fathers and spouses — and that of authorities, must be acknowledged. The reality is that it will be difficult to garner much policy attention or resources to advance parents' aim of repatriating fighters. However, this is not to say that the mother-son relationship is not important or of utility. Perhaps the most valuable takeaway — and one that is in the interests of both relatives and government — is the role that mothers can play in the pre-radicalisation and resilience-building phase.

Mothers can use their traditional roles within families to inculcate norms of peaceful relations, non-violent conflict resolution, and resilience to indoctrination. Later, mothers of radicalised youth are strategically placed — both physically within the home and through their emotional influence — to assist their children to navigate their way through adolescence while staying away from extremist groups. To exercise this “dual capacity to both pre-empt and respond to radical influences,”<sup>82</sup> mothers need to be empowered with the proper tools and knowledge. The value Islam places on parents' approval with respect to their children's conduct could also be more strategically leveraged. One example is norm of *ghadab 'ala* — whereby a parent's anger and dismissal of a son or daughter counts as God's anger, and can decide one's fate in afterlife. These are powerful tools for a group that already has strong interests in preventing their children from becoming radicalised.

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<sup>81</sup> For example, Edit Schlaffer and Ulrich Kropiunigg, “A New Security Architecture: Mothers Included!” in *A Man's World? Exploring the Roles of Women in Countering Terrorism and Violent Extremism*, eds. Naureen Chowdhury Fink, Sara Zeiger, and Rafia Bhulai (AbuDhabi, UAE: Hedayah and The Global Center on Cooperative Security, 2016).

<sup>82</sup> Naureen Chowdhury Fink, Sara Zeiger and Rafia Bhulai (eds.), *A Man's World: Exploring the Roles of Women in Counter Terrorism and Violent Extremism*. (Abu Dhabi, UAE: Hedayah and The Global Center on Cooperative Security, 2016), 55, [http://wiisglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/AMansWorld\\_FULL.pdf](http://wiisglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/AMansWorld_FULL.pdf)



## 4.7 Counter-Narratives

Fighters interviewed were influenced by sensationalist media coverage, which is designed to attract the attention of vulnerable individuals. Other research findings point to how those who ‘retweet’, ‘like’, or otherwise endorse radical messages are promptly targeted, usually with messages that directly respond to an assessment of their individual vulnerabilities — something made easier today with the accessibility provided by Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram.<sup>83</sup>

It is noteworthy that very little has been done locally that rivals the attractiveness, sophistication, or pace of extremist groups’ media networks. In this regard, the fact that interviewed returnees each regretted their decision soon after their arrival in Syria, is material and important. Specifically, the oppression they observed, the Muslim-Muslim fight, and the realisation that they had been misled, are powerful narratives that could be harnessed to deter others from joining the fight in Syria and refute recruiter propaganda. Using the voices of returnees and defectors also avoids messaging that might be perceived as attacking Islam or Islamists — a move which may have a reverse impact by polarising population groups, who are weary of government-sponsored official Islam.

## 4.8 Risks Presented by Returnees

Current policy analysis is that, as the political situation changes, countries of origin may need to prepare for a spike in the return of weapons-trained individuals. A key concern is that most countries of origin do not have the capacity, nor the extraordinary legal mechanisms, required to detain, investigate, prosecute, and rehabilitate large numbers of returnees. Even with such capacity, there are no risk-free options. Experience suggests that returnees bring with them schools of violence-endorsing ideologies that are difficult to neutralise.<sup>84</sup> The ‘seeding’ potential associated with incarcerating heavily indoctrinated individuals is high, as is releasing returnees who have been unsuccessfully rehabilitated. Moreover, countries of origin need to develop mechanisms to address the concern over staged defection.

The journey mapping presented here is too small a caseload to make any conclusions regarding the actual risks that former fighters pose. Some general comments, however, can be made. First, all returnees are religious conservatives, some of whom would self-describe as traditional *Salafis*, but not *Jihadi Salafis* (the school practiced by groups like al-Qaeda, al-Nusra and ISIS).<sup>85</sup> Second, the factors that drove fighters’ radicalisation remain largely unchanged. In addition, current security restrictions imposed on returnees mean that they continue to be economically marginalised as discussed above. Third, poor reintegration measures have led to social isolation.

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<sup>83</sup> Imran Awan, “Cyber-Extremism: Isis and the Power of Social Media,” *Society* 54, no. 2 (April 2017): 138 – 149.

<sup>84</sup> As evident in the case of the Arab *mujahedin* in Afghanistan who returned to their home countries in the Middle East with violent ideologies and later moved to Syria and Iraq to join armed radical groups there.

<sup>85</sup> More specifically, of the six schools of Salafism, they are understood to be traditional *Salafis* — persons who prioritize religious text over reason, and who are strict in their approach to religious rituals. *Salafism* includes six schools, one of which is *Jihadi Salafism* that gave rise to armed radical groups like al-Qaeda, al-Nusra and ISIS. For details, see Mohammad Abu Rumman, *I am a Salafi: A Study of the Actual and Imagined Identities of Salafis* (in Arabic). (Amman: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2014), 33-50.

Returnees are largely confined to family relations, as friends and neighbours fear increased scrutiny from security forces. Indeed, returnees are subject to enhanced security assessment at check points when traveling inside Jordan, which deters friends both from travelling with them or inviting them on trips.<sup>86</sup>

In terms of policy implications, it must be reiterated that this research uncovered no evidence that the returnees remained radicalised or pose a risk in terms of group reattachment or returning to Syria. Only one remained in touch with the *sheikhs* that might have influenced his decision to go to Syria.<sup>87</sup> But the fact that they remain vulnerable, frustrated, and marginalised, and at the same time have been exposed to dangerous and impulsive behaviours, is cause for concern. Some expressed this frustration openly.<sup>88</sup> The characteristic shared by all, however, was their sense of powerlessness. The potential consequences with respect to this group are mitigated by how closely they are monitored by authorities. The question is how such trends might manifest in a situation where frustrated and disempowered returnees number in the thousands, opposed to the few hundreds that are believed to have returned so far.

### 4.9 Post-Traumatic Stress Disorders

Little is known about the mental health status of returnees both immediately following their repatriation and today. One mother noted that her son had nightmares and screaming attacks for a few months following his return<sup>89</sup> — symptoms consistent with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Given that PTSD presents most consistently in combatants inexperienced in battlefield, the likelihood that the phenomena will be widespread is high. How returnees fare, is connected both to their pre-existing mental health status and their re-entry into society. Those who have the space to tell their stories and feel welcomed fare better than those that do not.<sup>90</sup> However, more research is needed to understand the impact that PTSD and other mental health disorders might have for group reattachment and other types of anti-social behaviour, as well as the types of coping mechanisms and psychological rehabilitation techniques most applicable to the Jordan context.

### 4.10 Rehabilitation and Resilience

A final point is that there are clear knowledge gaps concerning the type of rehabilitation that will prevent group-reattachment. Only one interviewee had attended a rehabilitation program run by Preventive Security Unit. It would be advisable for the government to work with psychologists, sociologists, and security officials, to develop a strategy for the successful social and economic rehabilitation of returnees. Local authorities, who often enjoy more trust than the central government, and civil society organisations, who often enjoy more trust than the local

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<sup>86</sup> Interview with anonymous fighter, Zarqa, 27 May, 2017.

<sup>87</sup> Interview with anonymous wife of a fighter, Ma'an, 7 June, 2017.

<sup>88</sup> Interview with anonymous fighter, Ma'an, 22 May, 2017.

<sup>89</sup> Interview with anonymous mother of a fighter, Ma'an, 23 May, 2017.

<sup>90</sup> Bart Schuurman and Liesbeth van der Heide, *Foreign Fighter Returnees & the Reintegration Challenge*. RAN Issue Paper, November 2016. [https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation\\_awareness\\_network/ran-papers/docs/issue\\_paper\\_foreign\\_fighter\\_returnees\\_reintegration\\_challenge\\_112016\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/ran-papers/docs/issue_paper_foreign_fighter_returnees_reintegration_challenge_112016_en.pdf)

authorities, should also be involved in rehabilitation efforts, and be given a lead role where they are best placed to do so.

At the same time, the risks posed by returnees, especially if numbers grow, mean that authorities must prioritise bolstering the resilience of those individuals most vulnerable to radicalisation at their influence. There is insufficient knowledge about what such resilience strategies should look like. A particularly important question is what — given the same driver exposure — insulates some people from radicalisation, and likewise, prevents the vast majority of radicals from acting on their ideas in a violent way. Only when policymakers understand what characteristics, assets or circumstances protect youth in terms of the radicalisation-extremism transition, can effective methods for tackling extremism be introduced.

## 5. Policy Recommendations

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- 1. Peer influence and ‘groupthink’ as pivotal factors in the transition from radicalism to violent extremism:** To resist negative peer influence, youth need skills for living in and contributing to a cohesive and context-rich society, including critical thinking, constructive debate, tolerance, and non-violent conflict resolution.
- 2. No ‘radical-turned-extremist’ typology:** Nexuses of drivers, particularly the combination of lack of opportunity, relative deprivation, and the sense of fatalism and humiliation this creates, need to be at the center of policy-making and preventative programming. Authorities need to enable alternate means of fulfilling life objectives such as marriage, financial independence, and starting a family.
- 3. The agency of recruits:** Fighters, who leave for Syria based on a rational risk-return assessment (as opposed to ideological indoctrination), need to be provided with non-violent options to address their needs and express their discontent. Such approaches may also work to neutralise the large numbers of ‘would-be’ fighters who are unable to mobilise the required resources or abandon family commitments to fight in Syria.
- 4. Parental awareness:** Key stakeholders need better awareness of the signs of radicalisation and pre-departure planning, coupled with safe channels to seek advice or report cases where an individual is showing signs of radicalisation. Moreover, the notion of ‘key stakeholders’ needs to be understood more broadly; parents, siblings, spouses, children, teachers, Imams and neighbours, are all important resources for observing and acting upon radicalisation indicators.
- 5. In-theatre communication channels:** In-theatre communication can provide important information for security planning, as well as the development of counter-narratives. For authorities to harness this information, they need to forge relationships with the recipients of such information, by providing safe channels and modalities to reconcile state security interests with the interests of families wishing to repatriate those in theatre.
- 6. Mothers in radicalisation-extremism prevention:** The strong influence of mothers over their sons should be more effectively harnessed. The most effective entry points will be where the interests of authorities and parents align, such as the role of in building resilience against radicalisation from an early age. To do this mothers need to be empowered with the proper tools and knowledge, including religious scriptures that can be strategically leveraged.
- 7. Counter-narratives:** Defector voices that denounce violent groups can offer cautionary tales and should be harnessed as a means of refuting recruiter propaganda.
- 8. The risks presented by returnees:** It is critically important that a space is crafted out in society for religious conservatives, including non-violent Salafis. This space should be flexible enough to include discourse and action around the issues that drove

fighters to join an extremist group, including Muslim oppression and social injustices.

Opportunities need to be made available for returnees to counter feelings of marginalisation and hopelessness. The nature of such opportunities should be crafted in a way not to drive perceptions of preferential treatment in the wider population. A better option is to enlist them in the fight against extremism. As noted above, returnees' narratives are powerful tools of dissuasion. Moreover, they seem keen to engage in this role. Returnees are vocal dissenters of recruiter rhetoric and actively engage in conversations with individuals planning to go, or who express support for armed groups fighting in Syria.

Returnees, 'would-be' fighters, and ideological radicals need pathways to constructively, but non-violently, address their concerns. It should be recalled that the fighters examined in this research fell into two categories: (i) the ideologically-motivated who were acting on their religious duty to take part in *jihad* through military and non-military means; (ii) the *hameyya*-motivated, acting on Arab norms and tribal values, who were attempting to defend the women and children of Syria suffering from regime repression. Policy makers and civil society organisations should work to identify mechanisms for individuals to fight against perceived injustices in tangible and constructive ways, providing them with both purpose and a common rallying point.

9. **Mental health:** More research is needed to understand the impact that PTSD and other mental health disorders might have for group reattachment and other types of anti-social behaviour, as well as the types of coping mechanisms and psychological rehabilitation most applicable to the Jordan context.
10. **Rehabilitation and resilience:** Policymakers should work in partnership with psychologists, sociologists, CSOs, and security officials to develop returnee rehabilitation strategies. Simultaneously, the risks posed by returnees, especially if numbers grow, mean that authorities must prioritise bolstering the resilience of those individuals most vulnerable to radicalisation at their influence







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