

**Title: Talking to Foreign Fighters: Socio-Economic Push versus Existential Pull Factors**

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**Research Question:**

The research acquired primary data through interviews with foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq, the families and friends of such fighters, and other online supporters of jihadism, to better understand the process by which these fighters radicalized and their motivations for travelling to Syria or Iraq. Between mid-2014 and early 2016 130 interviews were completed with 40 foreign fighters, 60 family members and friends, and 30 online fans, recruiters, and potential fighters.

**Importance:**

Primary data from “talking to terrorists” is very rare, and to date no scholar has published a report on interviews with actual fighters. This report discusses the results of the initial analysis of a first sample of 20 such interviews. The report also summarizes what is known about Canadians who have left to fight, largely in clusters from Calgary, Edmonton, Toronto, Ottawa, and Montreal.

**Research Findings:**

The findings from the “interviews” with the fighters are somewhat fragmentary since they are derived from extended social media dialogues with fighters in the zones of conflict. But considerable data was acquired about their backgrounds, their radicalization, thoughts and perceptions. This data is placed in the interpretive context of four other recent studies of foreign fighters and wannabe fighters in The Netherlands, Belgium, and the United States. While the demographics of the fighters is similar, as is the description of how they radicalize, we found that our sample points to a different explanation about why they became foreign fighters. Socio-economic marginalization and frustrations did not play a significant motivational role; rather the emphasis falls on a combination of sincere “religiosity” (which is not orthodox belief and practice) and existential quests for meaning.

**Implications:**

The study of radicalization, and hence also the design of programs to counter it, are constantly struggling with the specificity problem: most explanations encompass a much larger set of individuals than those who become terrorists. Using the largest sample of foreign fighters reported on to date, this study indicates that to ameliorate the specificity problem we need to complement the dominant tendency to stress socio-economic push factors with a more refined grasp of the deeper existential and religious/ideological pull factors involved in the decision to become a foreign fighter.