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Jordanian foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq: how did they become radicalized and how they can be de-radicalized?

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## Jordanian foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq: how did they become radicalized and how they can be de-radicalized?

### Abstract:

This analysis tries to shortly answer the questions of how Jordanian fighters became radicalized, i.e. what process they went through before interacting with recruiters, and how they can be de-radicalized, i.e. what programs may moderate their ideology, correct their behaviour and re-integrate them into society. On the one hand, it is argued that most of the fighters were primarily motivated by people close to them such as relatives and friends who considered that waging Jihad in Syria was a duty for all Muslims. On the other, de-radicalization programs should focus both on the ideology and behaviour of the youngest individuals from a multi-lateral approach where the key players of the Jordanian society help them to become again part of it.

### Resumen:

*Este análisis trata de responder brevemente a las preguntas de cómo los combatientes extranjeros jordanos se radicalizaron, es decir, qué procesos atravesaron antes de interactuar con reclutadores, y cómo se pueden 'des-radicalizar' o, en otras palabras, qué programas pueden moderar su ideología, corregir sus comportamiento y re-integrarles en la sociedad. Por un lado, se argumenta que la mayoría de los combatientes fueron principalmente motivados por gente cercana a ellos tales como familiares y amigos que consideraron que hacer la Yihad en Siria era un deber para todos los musulmanes. Por otro lado, los programas de 'des-radicalización' se deben enfocar tanto en la ideología como en el comportamiento de los individuos más jóvenes desde un acercamiento multilateral en el que las figuras clave de la sociedad jordana les ayuden a volver a formar parte de ella.*

**Key words:** Foreign fighters, de-radicalization, returnees, Salafi-jihadist, Daesh.

**Palabras clave:** Combatientes extranjeros, 'des-radicalización', retornados, salafi-yihadista, Daesh.

**\*NOTA:** Las ideas contenidas en los **Documentos de Opinión** son de responsabilidad de sus autores, sin que reflejen, necesariamente, el pensamiento del IEEE o del Ministerio de Defensa.

## Introduction

The issue of the foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq does not only concern the Jordanian Government because Jordan is the second country in the world (as Saudi Arabia) with the largest number of citizens fighting in the Syrian war, but also because it has the highest ratio of fighters per capita.<sup>1</sup> The problem becomes worse by considering that the proximity of Jordan to Syria facilitates the movement of fighters between both countries: the lesser number of countries they have to cross and transports to use, the fewer possibilities exist to arrest them. Last estimations point out that around 2,500 Jordanians have travelled to Syria, at least 500 have been killed and 500 returned, which apparently leaves a total of 1,500 still abroad [See figure 1 to compare Jordan with other countries]<sup>2</sup>. Nonetheless, the Government hardly provides official data, hence it is likely that the actual figures are higher than the ones previously mentioned. At the beginning of the conflict Jordanians used to join Jabhat al-Nusra. The first wave of fighters arrived to Syria in 2012 when the terrorist group started to be more efficient than any other insurgent force in the battlefield.<sup>3</sup> In 2013, some fighters probably went to Syria after theologians such as Yusuf al-Qaradawi, who is one of the most influential Sunni clerics in the world, called to fight against al-Assad regime. Nowadays, most of the Jordanians belong to Daesh. The second wave of fighters (smaller than the previous one due to the measures taken) was likely to arrive after Daesh captured the second largest city of Iraq, i.e. Mosul, and proclaimed itself a 'caliphate' in June 2014. Critics have stressed the facts that the Jordanian Government called on Assad to resign and it also allowed the flow of fighters to Syria during the early stages of the conflict.<sup>4</sup> In any case, the Government eventually closed the border and it appears that only a minority (16%) of the total number of Jordanian fighters travelled to Syria after Daesh claimed to be a caliphate.

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<sup>1</sup> Mercy Corps (2015) 'From Jordan to Jihad: The Lure of Syria's Violent Extremist Groups'.

<sup>2</sup> The Soufan Group (2015) 'Foreign Fighters: An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq'.

<sup>3</sup> Sowell, Kirk (2015) 'Jordanian Salafism and the Jihad in Syria'. *Hudson Institute*.

<sup>4</sup> Philip Ma'ayeh, Suha (2013) 'Jordanian Jihadists Active in Syria'. *CTC Sentinel*.

COUNTRY	FIGHTERS	PER MILLION	RETURNEES
Tunisia	7,000	280	625
Jordan	2,500	315	500
Saudi Arabia	2,500	107	-
Russia	2,400	12	-
Turkey	2,200	6	600
France	1,700	18	250
Morocco	1,500	-	-
Egypt	1,000	4	-
Belgium	470	46	118

Figure 1 - Countries by number of foreign fighters and returnees

### How did they become radicalized?

Zarqa, whose population is mostly Palestinian, is the main region where the fighters are from (one-third), followed by Ma'an and Salt.<sup>5</sup> A recent study conducted by MercyCorps points out that the socioeconomic profile of fighters is diverse and poverty or lack of employment were not the reasons why they travelled to Syria.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, the lowest rate of unemployment in Jordan was recorded in Zarqa Governorate in 2013, 2014 and 2015 according to the Department of Statistics. However, the fact that the largest number of fighters are from Zarqa is not coincidence. Mustafa Abdul Latif, from Zarqa, was in charge of the southern front in Jabhat al-Nusra after 2012 and played a key role in attracting as well as recruiting fighters for the organization.<sup>7</sup> That being said, it is necessary to stress that the most important reasons why the majority of fighters joined the insurgency in Syria were to wage an 'obligatory' and 'legitimate' Jihad for the sake of 'justice', to find a sense of meaning, belonging and identity, or a combination of both goals. On the one hand, many fighters wanted to defend the Sunni community from the Alawite regime of Bashar al-Assad. Most of the first-wave fighters had already fought in Iraq or Afghanistan, hence participating in the Syrian conflict was not a difficult decision for them. This pattern of

<sup>5</sup>Huffington Post (2015) 'Jordan Has a Huge Foreign Fighter Problem'.

<sup>6</sup> Mercy Corps (2015) 'From Jordan to Jihad: The Lure of Syria's Violent Extremist Groups'.

<sup>7</sup> Philip Ma'ayeh, Suha (2013) 'Jordanian Jihadists Active in Syria'. *CTC Sentinel*.

behavior can be explained with the theory of transnational identity whereby foreign fighters are driven to civil conflicts by the sense of Muslim community.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, some fighters felt frustrated, little valued or lost in life and they thought that joining a terrorist organization would make them important or it would be their right place to be. In both cases fighters probably approached recruiters after being encouraged by relatives or friends who were in favor of Jihad, went to fight or due to the effectiveness of propaganda such as the 'al-Minara al-Bayda' media outlet produced by al-Nusra. In addition, a reduced number of fighters may have been directly attracted by recruiters through small groups disguised as normal clubs or associations within their communities, universities or even in prisons.

Refugee camps are also becoming breeding ground-areas of radicalization. Jordan is the country with the second highest refugee rate of Syrians in the world, although figures are probably higher when counting those refugees who did not registered and, more worryingly, around 86% of them live in poverty conditions.<sup>9</sup> Young Syrians are especially susceptible to be recruited by the terrorist organizations operating in their country, groups which are also composed by Syrians for the most part. More than half of the refugees are minors, only about half of them are attending school at the camps, and 45% are economically active.<sup>10</sup> Despite it seems that most of the children and teenagers are either studying or working, the fact that Syrian refugees are not allowed to work in the formal market together with the harsh conditions of the camps may lead some of them to feel discriminated and bad treated. Furthermore, refugees who have lost everything, i.e. family, friends and home, are more likely to get depressed easily and even suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder. All these problems do not precisely help to prevent them from becoming radicalized. Indeed, in 2013, the UN estimated that each week around 100 under-aged refugees from the Zaatari camp returned to Syria in order to fight there, most of them for the FSA (Free Syrian Army).<sup>11</sup> This group is not terrorist, but thousands of its fighters are likely to have already joined Al-Nusra and Daesh since the war started.

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<sup>8</sup> David Malet (2009) Why Foreign Fighters?: Historical Perspectives and Solutions. ' *Orbis Journal of Foreign Affairs*'.

<sup>9</sup> Schenker, David (2016) 'Jordan Reaches the Refugee Saturation Point'. *The Washington Institute*.

<sup>10</sup> Erik Stave, Svein (2015) 'Impact of Syrian refugees on the Jordanian labour market'.

<sup>11</sup> Sommerfelt, Tone (2015) 'The big dilemma of small soldiers: recruiting children to the war in Syria'. *Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre*.

Those FSA fighters probably had most of the risk factors that expert on terrorism John Horgan establishes for radicalization: having an emotional vulnerability, disaffection or disillusionment, personal victimization and the conviction that violence is legitimate together with the search for rewards as well as ties with other defectors, being these last two the reasons why they pledged allegiance to terrorist groups.<sup>12</sup> Thus, the red line between military resistance and terrorism is thin, especially for the youngest.

Foreign fighters, as jihadists in general, usually experiment a process of radicalization before joining a terrorist group. A model presented by the expert on terrorism Quintan Wiktorowicz is used here to explain how a 20-year old Jordanian called Jihad Ghaban, who is one of the best documented cases, became radicalized. Wiktorowicz argues that the radicalization process consists of four stages that are not necessarily consecutive, may overlap or be skipped: cognitive opening, religious seeking, frame alignment and socialisation.<sup>13</sup> Firstly, the would-be fighter goes through a cognitive opening whereby he or she starts seeing the reality from different perspectives. Ghaban belonged to Herak, the largest youth-activist organization in Jordan, and used to participate in demonstrations.<sup>14</sup> He considered to join the Brotherhood and leftist-wing parties but, at some point, became disillusioned and found the Salafist-jihadi movement as the right one to follow. Secondly, the potential fighter initiates a religious seeking of meaning to find a solution to the discontent previously mentioned. Ghaban used to attend a Salafi-jihadi mosque, which means that he began to interpret Quran, including the concept of Jihad, in a literal manner.<sup>15</sup> Thirdly, frame alignment entails to become interested in the terrorist organization after agreeing with its propaganda. The Jordanian fighter discussed with his friends on possible options to help in Syria and seriously thought about travelling there in order to fight with al-Nusra. Finally, individuals experience socialisation by learning about the ideology of the terrorist group and this, at the same time, makes them more susceptible to adopt its identity. In this line, Ghaban eventually went on pilgrimage with

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<sup>12</sup> Horgan, John (2008) 'From Profiles to Pathways and Roots to Routes: Perspectives from Psychology on Radicalization into Terrorism'. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*.

<sup>13</sup> Quintan Wiktorowicz (2004) 'Joining the cause'.

<sup>14</sup> The New Arab (2014) 'Young Jordanians find purpose fighting in Syria'.

<sup>15</sup> The Atlantic (2015) 'The Boy Named Jihad: From the Ashes of the Arab Spring to the Battlefields of Syria'.

his mosque, then probably made the decision of joining al-Nusra, returned to Jordan and subsequently travelled to Syria.

Once any fighter is integrated in a terrorist group, he or she is likely to radicalize further. This phenomenon can be explained by the Differential Association Theory, whereby the techniques and motives of criminal behavior are learned in interaction with other persons in intimate personal groups.<sup>16</sup> Some of the fighters that desert, the less radical or suggestible, do not usually tolerate the war crimes and leave the group, whereas others, the more extremist or easily influenced, tend to stay and interiorize a criminal behavior. Moreover, those who join Daesh instead of al-Nusra become more aggressive after taking part in episodes of extreme violence such as mass executions, beheadings, tortures and rapes. The new members are frequently ordered to see the crimes as part of the indoctrination or way of intimidating them. Indeed, the terrorist group assassinated 116 foreign fighters between November and December 2014 for trying to return home.<sup>17</sup> It is important to stress that violence, the more serious, repetitive, rewarded or unpunished, and experienced at any early age, the more negative consequences it has on people. Around 60% of the Jordanian fighters are still believed to be fighting in Syria or Iraq and a longer time spent within the group also implies a deepest radicalization. Those who remain there after several years fighting do not probably have the intention of returning, but to live under the strict application of their own Sharia, become martyrs or move to another region where the group also operates. Unfortunately, Daesh have successfully brainwashed them with the ideas of defending the 'caliphate' they created and expanding their control to other countries. At this point of the radicalization process, there is no turning back in most of the cases.

### **How they can be de-radicalized or prevented from becoming radicalized?**

Moving now to the preventive measures launched by the Jordanian Government, they especially aim at combating the jihadist ideology. The Ministry of Religious Affairs is running workshops to promote moderate Islam in cities such as Zarqa, but the Minister has recognized that around \$70 million are needed to fund effective anti-radicalization

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<sup>16</sup> Lanier, Mark (2014) 'Essential Criminology'. Westview Press.

<sup>17</sup> Al Jazeera (2014) 'ISIL killed foreign fighters in its ranks.'

programs.<sup>18</sup> The ideal solution could be to establish a telephone hotline and counseling program to enable the families of potential fighters to warn the authorities and receive advice, something that it would only work if relatives are guaranteed that no charges will be brought against their sons and a mentor will be assigned to them instead. Another measure the Government has undertaken is to stop the construction of illegal mosques and assign preachers to those already built as a manner of avoiding radical speeches and condemning extremism.<sup>19</sup> This measure does not only seem difficult to accomplish, but also inefficient because most of the fighters are not radicalized or recruited in mosques. Moreover, the Jordanian security services have arrested Salafist leaders and imams who were supporting jihadist groups active in Syria. Unlike the previous measure, this one appears to be going in the right direction because in spite of the fact that salafism is not widely spread in Jordan, one third consists of salafi-jihadists.<sup>20</sup> In fact, a recent survey has shown that around 40% of the Jordanian population believes that al-Nusra is not a terrorist group [See figure 2].<sup>21</sup> In addition to all the measures mentioned, the Government has released from prison the radical clerics Abu Qatada al-Filistini and Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi on the condition that they have to publicly criticize Daesh.<sup>22</sup> Leaving aside their radicalism, the problem is that these two clerics have been supporting al-Nusra for years, and using them as a mean to undermine Daesh's popularity may turn counterproductive in the long term.

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<sup>18</sup> The Wall Street Journal (2014) 'Jordan Plans Crackdown on Unauthorized Mosques to Combat Radical Islam'.

<sup>19</sup> Alrababa'h Ala (2014) 'Fighting Fire with Fire: Jordan's Risky Strategy Against the Islamic State'. *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*.

<sup>20</sup> Alami, Mona (2014) 'The New Generation of Jordanian Jihadi Fighters'. *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*.

<sup>21</sup> The Atlantic (2015) 'The Boy Named Jihad: From the Ashes of the Arab Spring to the Battlefields of Syria'.

<sup>22</sup> Sowell, Kirk (2015) 'Jordanian Salafism and the Jihad in Syria'. *Hudson Institute*.

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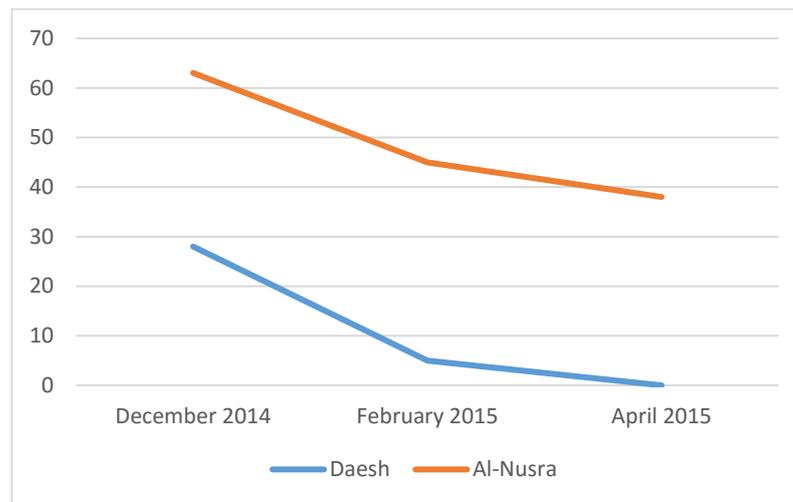


Figure 2 - Citizens who consider that Daesh and Al-Nusra are not terrorist groups (%)

During the last years, the Salafi-jihadist current in Jordan has been characterized by a tug-of-war with the Government. The founder and leader is the Palestinian-born al-Maqdisi, an advocate of al Qaeda who was the mentor of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in the late 1990s and has been imprisoned several times.<sup>23</sup> Both eventually separated and decided to take different paths: Zarqawi created Jama'at al-Tawhid wal-Jihad, led Al Qaeda in Iraq and carried out attacks such as the 2005 Amman bombings, whereas Maqdisi preferred to employ peaceful means for the sake of his cause. The only reason why there has been no more attacks in Jordan is because Maqdisi and his successors decided to support Jihad just abroad. After Maqdisi was arrested in 2010 for Taliban recruitment, Salafists such as Abu Qatada, who was the spiritual guide of Al Qaeda in Europe, and especially Abu Sayyaf, the most prominent Salafist in Maan, followed Maqdisi's line and took over the leadership of the Salafi-jihadism in Jordan.<sup>24</sup> Despite at the beginning of the conflict Salafists only demanded rule by Sharia and the release of prisoners within the context of the Arab Spring, most of the leaders later started to subtly support al-Nusra through statements that were at the edge of legality. That support became increasingly direct as the terrorist group gained power in Syria. Moreover, just the fact that Salafi-jihadists such as Maqdisi, Qatada and Sayyaf were on the side of al-Nusra probably helped many Jordanians in their decision of travelling to Syria and joining

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> Al-Shishani, Murad Batal (2011) 'Jordan's Abu Sayyaf: The Key Islamist Actor in Ma'an'. *The Jamestown Foundation*.

the organization. Some individuals whose families or friends had gone to the war-torn country or were simply attracted by al-Nusra could have found in those 'authorities' a sense of legitimacy they were waiting for.

Regardless the cause why fighters go to Syria, the policy adopted by the Jordanian Government to deal with returnees is repressive. The Criminal Code punishes Jordanians for joining or seeking to join terrorist groups inside or outside the country, receiving military training by those groups, and recruiting or supporting them.<sup>25</sup> As a consequence, most of the fighters who return are arrested and sentenced to prison. The problem resides in the fact that sentences are excessively high in terms of de-radicalization of the prisoners and their re-integration into society. Leaving aside that the amendments of the 2006 Anti-terrorism Law approved in 2014 require the death penalty for acts that does not have to cause even a single fatality, the modification also stipulates a sentence of at least ten years in prison for acts such as using the media to support terrorist groups.<sup>26</sup> In comparison, for the same crime, the 2015 Counter-jihadist agreement signed in Spain extended the sentence to three years in prison. It is necessary to stress that prisoners who spend more than 14 years in jail usually become unable of re-integrating into society when they are released. Moreover, the Jordanian amendment broadened the definition of terrorism to include acts such as disturbing the public order or causing harm to properties, forming a group with the intention of robbing, and damaging the Kingdom's relation with foreign states.<sup>27</sup> All these acts are indeed of a serious nature but frequently associated with demonstrations or offenses that do not have anything to do with terrorism. Therefore, their consideration as terrorist acts leads to unfair sentences and the stigmatization of convicts, with the negative consequences that this entails.

Some of the fighters eventually return after realizing that what they see in Syria does not have anything to do with their initial expectations when they left Jordan. In many cases they are disappointed with the fact that their respective terrorist groups are fighting each other, against other organizations or just attacking civilians instead of trying to defeat the

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<sup>25</sup> US Department of State (2015) 'Country Reports 2014: Middle East and North Africa Overview.'

<sup>26</sup> Jordanian Government (2014) 'Law number () for the year 2014 - Law Amendment to the Anti-Terrorism Law as Approved by the Parliament.'

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

Assad regime. However, refraining from violence and leaving the group do not necessarily entail to become de-radicalized. The problem is that returnees are usually given a sentence of five years for joining jihadist groups, whereas those who fail to join them receive the same sentence and neither committed an attack nor experienced violence that radicalized them further. In any case, low-risk returnees are offered to participate in a de-radicalization program within prison.<sup>28</sup> The program is conducted in a facility called the 'Community Peace Centre' where clerics appointed by the Government refute the Salafi-jihadi ideology and the rhetoric of the groups that returnees belonged to. Here it is important to use credible voices to dialogue. In 2008 the Jordanian authorities sent university scholars to prisons in order to lecture jihadists, but these considered them as mere instruments of the Government, were seeking to have a debate instead of listening to a speech and, therefore, rejected to attend the sessions.<sup>29</sup> All in all, an effective de-radicalization program should not only moderate the beliefs of the individuals and enable them to develop a new identity, but also address the relationship they have with their families and subsequently provide them with job opportunities. Once they are fully integrated into society, the probability of recidivism is low.

## Conclusions

It is necessary to remember that most of the fighters travelled to Syria thinking that jihad was obligatory as well as legitimate and the Government is attempting to eradicate this ideology, but treating their behaviour should not be left aside. Some fighters gained the sense of legitimacy to join al-Nusra when the leaders of the Salafi-jihadi movement in Jordan somehow sided with the terrorist group. Nonetheless, the majority of the jihadists were probably encouraged to join the insurgency by relatives or friends who were advocates of Jihad or had already gone to Syria. In a similar way, fighters that initially joined the FSA could move to al-Nusra or Daesh after having contact with the most radical members of their group or just being attracted by power. Both situations may especially affect young people, as they are more easily persuaded than adults. For this reason, the approach of the Government to the issue of the returnees should be more flexible and

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<sup>28</sup> The Counter Extremism Project (2016) 'Jordan: Extremism & Counter-Extremism'.

<sup>29</sup> El-Said, Hamed (2012) 'De-Radicalising Islamists: Programmes and their Impact in Muslim Majority States'. *ICSR, King's College London*.

examine each case individually taking into account whether or not the detainee joined a terrorist group and how old is him or her. Other aspects such as knowing the organization and the duration of the membership are also relevant because fighting with Daesh during a prolonged period of time increases the likelihood of becoming even more radicalized, although detainees may lie about both issues. In any case, Jordan does not have a de-radicalization program outside prisons and for those individuals who failed to join a group, staying imprisoned decreases their chances of becoming de-radicalized. It therefore seems that measures such as confiscating passports and offering to attend a de-radicalization program as an alternative to serve a sentence could be the best options for the youngest individuals who did not join any terrorist organization. The program to de-radicalize them or even prevent others from becoming radicalized could be done through community engagement, i.e. local authorities and police working together with families, mosques, schools and social services in those areas with the highest levels of individuals leaving for Syria.

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