Travelling to Syria / Fighting with ISIS:

Do motivations differ when comparing individuals from different cultures and regions?

Comparing the motivations of Bosnian, Belgian and Dutch foreign fighters.

by Louise Isla Racké

Student number: 2641667
Supervisor: Dr. Elanie Rodermond
2nd reader: Dr. Jantien Stuifbergen
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Abstract

Thousands of individuals from across the globe have travelled to Syria to take part in the ongoing conflict. They are but the latest wave of people to travel to a foreign conflict and take up arms, otherwise known as foreign fighters. Although the definition of ‘foreign fighter’ is not fully agreed upon, the general consensus is that a foreign fighter is an individual who voluntarily takes part in a conflict in a country of which they are not a resident.

Foreign fighters have existed for decades, and yet very little is known about what motivates such individuals to join foreign conflicts. Considering that Islamic terrorism shows no signs of dissipating, it is imperative that the motivations of foreign fighters are understood in order to prevent future generations from leaving Europe to join radical Islamist groups and fight their wars.

The aim of this research was to discern if there were any cultural or regional factors that had an impact on the motivations of European foreign fighters who travelled to Syria to join the terrorist group ISIS. Specifically, this research set out to discover if the foreign fighters all came from a similar cultural background or vastly different cultural backgrounds. Content analysis of newspaper articles was carried out in order to discern any patterns relating to culture. The analysis of the newspaper articles revealed that there are different cultural factors that impact the motivations of foreign fighters. There were also some factors that all the foreign fighters in the research sample had in common, such as the desire for a better life. A desire that was so strong they felt compelled to abandon their home country in favour of a country embroiled in a terrible civil war.

Ultimately, the conclusion is drawn that much more attention and resources need to be channelled into listening and responding to the problems expressed by those who are particularly vulnerable to radicalism.
Introduction

The names Mehdi Nemmouche, Salman Abedi and Bilal Hadfi all gained notoriety and garnered a certain degree of fame following terrorist attacks they had carried out (Brussels Jewish museum murders, the Manchester Arena bombing and the November 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris respectively). However, whilst they are primarily known for carrying out horrific terrorist attacks in Europe, they had also all been foreign fighters prior to carrying out the attacks. The attacks carried out by these individuals are a testament to the dangers posed by foreign fighters who have returned from fighting with ISIS. However, very little is known about what motivated these individuals to travel to a foreign conflict. Perhaps if their motivations had been known they could have been stopped from joining ISIS.

This paper endeavours to find out if there are cultural or regional differences between the motivations of foreign fighters from 3 different European countries. Specifically, the research aims to discover if there are different types of motivations, whether all foreign fighters are motivated by similar things or if motivations differ depending on cultural or regional factors. The motivations of European Muslims who travelled to Syria (with the aim of joining extremist groups such as Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) or Jabhat al-Nusra (JaN)) are the focus of the research. This paper is not focused on the activities these individuals carried out whilst a member of one of these groups but rather why they were motivated to embark on the perilous and illegal journey to take part in a conflict that millions are so desperately trying to escape.

Much is already known about how and why certain individuals become radicalised. However, it is one thing to hold radical beliefs and believe in a radical ideology, but it is another thing to be so vested in a radical ideology that one travels to another country in order to further that ideology, whether that be through violence or not (McCauley and Moskalenko, 2008). What is truly lacking is knowledge of what motivates radicalised individuals to travel to Syria to join radical Islamist groups such as ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra (Sheikh, 2016; Frennett and Silverman, 2016; Tumelty and Moore, 2008; Coolsaet, 2016). Perhaps, if we can understand what motivates a radical to travel abroad to fight and be trained in terrorism then we might be able to prevent them from leaving in the first place.
The definition of a foreign (terrorist) fighter is highly disputed, with NGOs and governments across the world all using different definitions. The definitions outlined below use the same terms as the original source. However, this paper will use the term foreign fighter as the individuals in the research sample adhere to most academic definitions of a foreign fighter. The term foreign fighter is used primarily because the definition of it is clear, unlike the definition of a foreign terrorist fighter. Definitions of foreign terrorist fighters are inherently vague due to the vagueness of the term terrorism. There are no clear factors that differentiate a foreign fighter from a foreign terrorist fighter. Furthermore, in both academic literature and reports, the two terms are used interchangeably, highlighting the vagueness of both terms.

The International Counter Terrorism Centre in the Hague defines foreign fighters as individuals who have travelled abroad to join an armed conflict (ICCT, 2019). Following this definition, a foreign terrorist fighter would be someone who travels abroad in order to take part in terrorist activities. The United Nations Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee, which was set up through resolution 2178, elaborates a definition of foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) (S/RES/2178, 2014). This resolution defines FTFs as; “...individuals who travel to a State other than their States of residence or nationality for the purpose of the perpetration, planning, or preparation of, or participation in, terrorist acts or the providing or receiving of terrorist training, including in connection with armed conflict...” (S/RES/2178, 2014, p.2). The OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights defines FTFs as; “...individuals who have travelled from their home states to other states to participate in, or support terrorist acts, including in the context of armed conflict, especially in Iraq and Syria.” (OSCE/ODIHR, 2018. p. 8). Paulussen and Pitcher (2018) define foreign fighters as individuals who driven by ideology religion or kinship to leave their country of origin or their country of residence to join a group that is engaged in an armed conflict. Paulussen and Pitcher (2018) highlight that not all foreign fighters are foreign terrorist fighters, the difference lies in the type of activity that an individual carries out or takes part in once they reach the conflict. Hegghammer (2010) argues that foreign fighters are individuals who travel outside of their home state to take part in a conflict abroad. He argues that they lack a clear link to the conflict, have no desire to be paid but join the conflict out of commitment to an ideology. Malet (2015) refers to foreign terrorist fighters as transnational insurgents and as transnational volunteer fighters. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crimes highlights that FFs differ from mercenaries or private militaries in that FFs lack a financial motive, whereas mercenaries and private militaries are
bought. FFs volunteer to join the fighting, they do so out of a strong belief in the ideology they are trying to spread (UNODC, 2017). However, there are certainly some FFs who may be motivated to travel abroad to join ISIL by the meagre salaries offered by ISIL (UNODC, 2017). Therefore, from the definitions stated above, one can conclude that there are several criteria which earn an individual the label of foreign (terrorist) fighter. The first is that an individual must leave their country of origin or country of residence to take part in a conflict (i.e. the conflict is happening abroad). Secondly, dedication to a fighting group’s ideology is often included in the definition as an explanation for why an individual travels abroad to fight. Definitions of both foreign fighters and foreign terrorist fighters are included above as the only difference between the two is how the actions, carried out by the individual who travels abroad, are defined. Thus, in accordance with the definition above, the individuals who travel from the West to Syria to join groups such as ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra (groups who are actively engaged in combat against Assad’s army) qualify as foreign fighters.

Statistics on the number of Westerners who have travelled to Syria or Iraq to join ISIS or JaN are very rough estimates. This is due to the covert nature of the act of travelling abroad to fight and the fact that illegal methods of entering the countries are employed, namely smuggling (Briggs and Silverman, 2014). The fact that almost all those who have travelled from the West to Syria or Iraq were smuggled means that they cannot be counted in border statistics, and so they remain invisible, to an extent. Moreover, the lack of agreement on a definition of foreign terrorist fighters means that the numbers are even more unreliable (OSCE/ODIHR, 2018). A recent study by the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation estimates that 5904 individuals travelled to join ISIS from Western Europe and 7252 individuals from Eastern Europe travelled to the Middle East to join ISIS (Cook and Vale, 2019). Homeland security states that 6000 individuals from Western Europe have travelled to Syria and Iraq (2019). These numbers, although only rough estimates, highlight the scale of the foreign fighter phenomenon. Thus, understanding what motivates individuals can help in the creation of targeted approaches to preventing radicalised individuals from travelling to foreign conflicts.

In order to discern the motivations of foreign fighters from different European countries, newspaper articles from a variety of different newspapers shall be analysed in order to determine any patterns. Content analysis shall be carried out on the articles. The research
aims to better answer the research question; to what extent does culture impact the motivations of foreign fighters who travel to Syria to join ISIS.

This thesis is comprised of 9 chapters. The introduction constitutes chapter 1. Chapter 2 will then briefly explain the relevancy of the research that was carried out and will place the research and its findings in the wider context of the topic of foreign terrorist fighters. Chapter 2 consists of two parts. The first part shall outline the gap in the literature on this topic and the second part shall explicate why research on this topic is necessary. This is followed by chapter 2 which consists of a brief overview of the conflict in Syria, including details of some characteristic features of this conflict. Then, chapter 3 reviews the literature pertaining to the topic of foreign terrorist fighters and the processes which lead an individual to radicalise or commit a terrorist attack shall be reviewed. Following on from chapter 3, chapter 4 describes the methodology that was used to carry out the research. Chapter 5 details the findings of the research. Chapter 6 analyses and discusses the findings of the research and aims to place the findings in context. Chapter 6 also outlines some potential solutions to the problems identified earlier in the chapter. The limitations of the research are detailed in chapter 7. The final chapter, chapter 8 concludes the thesis, briefly summarising the main arguments made and sets out potential goals for future research.
Relevancy of the research

There are several reasons for which this research is extremely relevant, and it comes at a rather pivotal time in terms of counter-terrorism and national security.

The first reason for which this research is of importance, is the lack of research in this field. Much is already known about what social processes and economic situations can foster an environment conducive to radicalisation. However, in the vast majority of cases radicalisation does not lead to violence (McCauley and Moskalenko, 2008). For some, radicalisation is both the process and the end result. For others, radicalisation is but one step to carrying out violent acts in the name of the ideology one interprets radically (McCauley and Moskalenko, 2008). Very little is actually known about what motivates an individual to go from simply having radical beliefs, to carrying out violent acts in the name of the radical ideology (Tammikko, 2018). An individual’s motivations for joining ISIS and for fighting in a foreign conflict may be linked to their motivations for carrying out violent acts in the name of ideology. Thus, in understanding the motivations for joining a foreign conflict, we might also be able to understand the motivations for carrying out violence. The motivations for these two actions may well be rather similar as they both have their roots in ideology.

The second reason is the serious security threat that foreign fighters present (S/RES/2178, 2014). As pointed out by numerous scholars and governments officials (Zammit, 2015; Coolsaet, 2016; Awan and Guru, 2017), with the collapse of the caliphate, Europe can expect a massive influx of returning foreign fighters, due to both extradition processes and fighters escaping Kurdish, Syrian and Iraqi forces (who have already apprehended thousands of fighters). Whilst it is certainly possible that some foreign fighters might return home and resume their normal life the best they can (Hegghammer, 2013; van Zuijdewijn, 2014), it is more likely that the majority will continue to hold radical and extreme beliefs. Equipped with the skills they learnt whilst abroad, they might decide to carry out a terrorist attack on Western soil (Zammit, 2015). This certainly seems to be the greatest worry for governments across Europe who experienced a high volume of their citizens travelling to Syria and elsewhere. It is estimated that around 5 000 individuals from Europe travelled to join Islamic State, primarily in Iraq and Syria (Dworkin, 2019).
Finally, this research is pivotal as many of these foreign fighters are attempting to return home to the countries in the West from which they came. These individuals present a variety of dilemmas, in addition to the security dilemma already mentioned above. They pose a political dilemma, as the home states of these returning foreign fighters are often at a loss with what to do with these returnees. In the case when a foreign fighter has dual citizenship, the Western government will more often than not revoke the returnee’s Western citizenship and their residence permit and thus they are forced to return to the country which they had travelled to. However, in some cases, foreign fighters only possess one nationality, that of the Western country. That is the case for Shamima Begum. Begum was born and raised in London, in the United Kingdom. Her parents are of Bangladeshi origin, but she never acquired Bangladeshi citizenship, she held only British citizenship (BBC, 2019). The British government revoked her citizenship in February 2019 (BBC, 2019), leaving her stateless which breaches international human rights law (OHCHR.org, 2019). The right to a nationality is a fundamental human right and States must comply with human rights obligations when deciding whether or not to grant or revoke nationality (OHCHR.org, 2019). The case of Shamima Begum may soon become a trend as more and more foreign fighters attempt to return to their home countries.

Furthermore, with the recent collapse of the caliphate, one might argue that such research may not be as needed as it was previously, as the numbers of foreign fighters will inevitably decrease. Unfortunately, this is not the case. Zammit (2015) and Tammikko (2018) highlight that foreign fighters have existed for decades. With numerous other organisations similar to ISIL, such as Jabhat al-Nusra, it would be safe to assume that despite the collapse of the caliphate, young alienated Muslims will continue to travel abroad to join radical Islamic groups. Thus, the need for such research is still very dire. Furthermore, the increased popularity of far-right ideology has resulted in a new foreign fighter movement. A report by the Soufan Centre (2019) highlights that approximately 17 000 individuals, adhering to far-right and white-supremacist ideology, have travelled from over 50 different countries to Ukraine, to take part in the fighting there.

In addition, Bail, Merhout and Ding (2018) revealed in their research that an increase in radical Islamist internet searches coincides with an increase in far-right internet searches. Thus,
highlighting that as Islamic extremism increases so too does far-right extremism. An increase in far-right extremist violence can be observed across the West; Norwegian Anders Breivik killed 77 people, mostly young adults, in an attack on Utoya Island in 2011. Breivik stated he carried out the attack to prevent the Islamisation of the West. In France, following the Charli Hebdo shooting, six mosques were attacked by individuals with far-right beliefs. In the United Kingdom, politician Jo Cox was murdered in 2016 by Thomas Mair, a far-right extremist who murdered Cox because of her empathy for refugees coming from the conflicts in the Middle East. The above examples show that far-right extremist violence is indeed on the rise, and perhaps, if we can understand what motivates Western Muslims, who have grown up in the same country as the far-right extremists mentioned above, to travel to Syria to join ISIS, then perhaps we can also understand what motivates the recent wave of far-right extremists who have travelled to Ukraine (The Soufan Centre, 2019).

Furthermore, with the collapse of the caliphate, it is predicted that Europe can expect to experience an influx of thousands of foreign fighters returning to their home countries or countries of residence. In understanding what motivates a radicalised individual to travel to Syria, governments will be better equipped to prevent future generations from travelling to foreign conflicts. In addition, some individuals are motivated by negative experiences that they blame on their respective governments, such as discrimination in the employment sector or lack of educational opportunities. If there is sufficient evidence to prove this then perhaps governments across Europe might be inspired to create reintegration programmes that work to tackle these issues.
The war in Syria

In order to better understand why some European Muslims are motivated to travel to Syria to join the insurgency it is important to have some understanding of the conflict in Syria. This chapter shall outline a brief history of the conflict, including how and why it started, some of the defining characteristics of the conflict and the impact of ISIS and its activities. All of which shall allow the reader to better understand the motivations of foreign fighters.

Historical context of the war

The civil war in Syria broke out in 2011 as a result of the Arab Spring; a series of riots and protests that swept across the Middle East (Poirson and Oprisko, 2014). The Arab Spring protests began in Tunisia in 2010, when a street vendor set himself alight in an act of protest against the Tunisian government who for years had been oppressing the poor to the benefit of the wealthier section of the Tunisian population (Poirson and Oprisko, 2014). These feelings of disenfranchisement and oppression resonated across the Middle East, with many feeling disappointed and angry with their respective governments due to the lack of employment and the conditions of the economy (Isakhan, 2015).

The Arab Spring protests in Syria were sparked by the liberation of the economy which allowed the rich to become richer whilst the poor became poorer (Gerges, 2017). In the case of Syria, it was the Alawites, the Druze and the Christians who mostly profited from the liberation of the economy (Carpenter, 2013). This is due to the fact that Assad’s government is Alawite and in order to maintain power over a Sunni majority country he formed a very loose alliance with other ethnic minorities in Syria, namely the Druze and the Christians (Carpenter, 2013). The liberation of the economy had a profound effect on the Sunni Muslims population. Thus, it was mostly Sunni Muslims who took to the streets of Syria to protest their dire economic situation which had been inflicted upon them by Assad’s government (Gerges, 2017). Assad responded with violence against the protestors. Leading to extremely violent clashes between Assad’s government forces and the civilian protesters, thus sparking an all-out civil war (Gerges, 2017).

In addition to violence breaking out due to Assad’s favouring of the ethnic minorities who comprised in his alliance, the Sunnis were also angered by Assad’s coalition of minorities
This explains why the rebels are almost entirely Sunni. This brings us to the second key characteristic of the Syrian Civil War, the sectarian nature of the conflict. The sectarian nature of the conflict, which sees Sunnis fighting against all the other ethnic groups in Syria, paved the way for individuals from all the different ethnic groups to mobilise and defend their ethnic group (Carpenter, 2013). One such example can be seen in Turkey. Turkey’s president Erdogan could not tolerate watching the mostly Alawite and Christian Syrian military massacre Sunni rebels and civilians (Hokayem, 2014). Therefore, Erdogan’s ruling Sunni party provided sanctuaries for Sunnis in Ankara and the Turkish government has funded the Free Syrian Army and other insurgent groups.

The rise of ISIS

In 2012, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who in 2012 was the new leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq (he would later transform the organisation into what is now known as ISIL and then later on ISIS), took advantage of the unrest in Syria to recruit individuals for his new organisation ISIS (Isakhan, 2017). Al-Baghdadi enticed the oppressed Sunni communities of Syria and promised them money and housing if they joined ISIS (Gerges, 2017).

The civil war had exacerbated poverty and unemployment rates in Syria and so many were left with no choice but to accept al-Baghdadi’s offer. Furthermore, it was largely Sunni Muslims who had been excluded from the economic liberalization in Syria and were altogether marginalized by Assad’s government and so they found in ISIS a group that was finally willing to fight for their rights (Gerges, 2017). Thus, ISIS’s power grew as its numbers grew.

Civilian death toll

A particularly horrifying feature of this conflict is the huge civilian death toll, proving that both the government and the rebel groups have absolutely no regard for human life. The Syria Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), a UK-based monitoring group, has estimated that around 560,000 people have been killed since the war started (SOHR, 2019). SOHR further estimates that of the 560,000 killed, 112,623 are civilians, including 21,065 under the age of 18 and 13,173 women (SOHR, 2019). Given the volatile and dangerous situation in Syria it is
extremely difficult to get exact numbers of deaths, therefore these numbers are only
estimates. However, they still demonstrate the atrociously high number of civilian deaths.

Since the war started in 2011, around 5.6 million people have fled Syria and 6.6 million are
internally displaced (UNHCR, 2018). A further 13.1 million people are classified as ‘in need’ by
the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR, 2018). Such figures demonstrate the scale of the conflict
and the devastation caused by it.

Another particularly shocking feature of the civil war in Syria is the rather frequent use of
chemical weapons, supposedly targeted at ISIS but frequently it is innocent civilians who
become the victims (Global Conflict Tracker, 2019). The Syrian government’s use of chemical
weapons resulted in international condemnation in 2013, 2017 and 2018 (Global Conflict
Tracker, 2019). Additionally, internationally banned cluster munitions have been used by the
Syrian-Russian military alliance in order to take back control of various territories (Human
Rights Watch, 2018). Although these cluster munitions are targeted at rebel groups such as
ISIS, civilians are inevitably caught in the firing line.

To summarise, ISIS came to prominence during a period of intense upheaval and
dissatisfaction amongst the Syrian Sunni population. The hostile situation allowed ISIS to
recruit huge swathes of the Sunni population into their ranks thus gaining power. Individuals
were attracted to ISIS for two main reasons; their promise to overthrow Assad and his
minority ethnic alliance which formed the Syrian government, and their promise of protecting
and avenging the Sunni population. ISIS capitalised on the sectarian nature of the conflict to
galvanise Syria’s majority.
Literature review

A review of the literature reveals that there are several factors that are likely to motivate an individual to travel abroad to join a conflict. These different factors are reviewed below and organised into themes and subthemes.

De Bie, De Poot and Van der Leun (2015) state that motivations such as grievances, feelings of revenge, search for identity, thrill seeking, status and money can help explain why some individuals chose to travel to a conflict zone. Noonan and Khalil (2014) argue that there is a very wide variety of different factors that motivate an individual to abandon their life in the to take up arms in Syria. They state that some are motivated by religion, other by humanitarian concerns and some just desire more excitement in their lives that they deem otherwise uneventful and boring.

As mentioned previously, the field of research on foreign fighter motivations is new and emerging. Thus, existing resources are rather scarce. Hence, the numbers of academics mentioned in the literature review below are not high. However, those who have studied the motives of foreign fighters have produced a wide range of differing yet interesting results. The resulting literature review, although lacking a wide variety of academics, covers the main theories on what motivates foreign fighters to travel abroad to join a conflict.

Religion

There are several motivations that can be discerned from the literature that relate to religion and religiosity. However, across the literature, there is much deliberation about just how important a role religion plays. For example, Dawson and Amarasingam (2017) state that religion plays an extremely important role in motivating an individual to travel to Syria to join the fighting (which often entails joining ISIS). Toft and Zhukov (2015) state that religion can frequently mobilise groups of people to join a conflict and religion very frequently shapes the nature of the violence that is perpetrated throughout the conflict. However, Borum and Fein (2017) argue that religion does not motivate individuals to leave for Syria as much as other
factors do, such as the search for belonging or identity, or a sense of duty to protect. Coolsaet (2016) argues that religion is not the main driving force behind those travelling to Syria. He emphasises that the explanation for their decision lies in how they feel and not in how they think. He argues that as time goes on, religion becomes less and less relevant in explaining what motivates young radical Muslims to travel to Syria. Coolsaet (2016) ultimately argues that the perception of having absolutely no future in their home country is what drives the majority of radicalised Muslims to Syria. However, with ISIS’s distinctly pro-Sunni and opposition to all other religions, there is no denying that religion does indeed constitute a motivation.

**Ideology**

This subtheme is characterised by a profound belief and dedication to ISIS’s ideology. ISIS’s ideology is simply a fundamentalist interpretation of Islam, and thus inherently religious (Williams, 2012).

Al-Khatib (2018) argues that it is a given that foreign fighters who travel to Syria or Iraq to join ISIS have a profound faith in the ideology. Khatib highlights that many foreign fighters have left jobs and families behind to embark on the extremely perilous journey to arrive in Syria, they have chosen to join a conflict that millions are desperately trying to escape. Al-Khatib (2018) argues that an individual would not do such things unless they had deep faith ISIS’s ideology.

Frennett and Silverman (2016) note that for those who are deeply committed to the ideology of a particular group, said ideology constitutes the primary motivation for travelling to join a conflict. However, for those who are not so committed to a group’s ideology, the ideology simply plays a supporting role in the decision to go abroad, it does not constitute the primary motivation. Frennett and Silverman (2016) also state that initially the attraction for some may have been to overthrow Assad, but after joining ISIS, individuals will have become further indoctrinated and thus more committed to ISIS’s religious ideology. Dawson and Amarasingam (2017) state that religious ideology was of the utmost importance to individuals who made the decision to travel to a foreign country to partake in the fighting. They argue that religion became the ideology through which they framed every aspect of their life.
However, Borum and Fein (2017) argue that ideology is not a key motivating factor, in fact, they argue that in comparison to the multitude of other factors, the importance of ideology pales in comparison to other motivating factors such as the search for purpose, belonging and identity.

Religious awakening

Religious awakening is a process an individual goes through in which they become more dedicated and increasingly serious with regards to practicing their faith. Amongst those who would later travel to Syria to join ISIS, the religious awakening manifested itself as dressing more strictly and in accordance with a strict interpretation of Islam, quitting drinking and smoking and abandoning friendships with individuals who did not follow a strict interpretation of Islam.

As noted by Borum and Fein (2017) many of those who leave for Syria are either very recent converts to Islam or they have gone through a sort of awakening and have become born again Muslims. In the cases of recent converts or born-again Muslims, a profound dedication and belief in Islam motivates these individuals to travel to Syria (International Crisis Group, 2017). In her research, van San (2018) found that a large portion of her sample consisted of individuals who had converted to Islam, hence undergoing a sort of religious awakening. International Crisis Group (2017) argues that the recent generation of foreign fighters are fundamentally different from previous generations in that the new generation are more passionate about religion and many experienced a sort of religious awakening that inspired them to travel to Syria to fight. In their sample of research participants, Dawson and Amarasingam (2017) note that the majority of them had shown an increased interest in religion shortly prior to leaving for Syria. They also noted that many of them began adhering to a much stricter interpretation of Islam and studying the Quran intensely before travelling to Syria (Dawson and Amarasingam, 2017). Noonan and Khalil (2014) argue that in some instances, those who have recently converted to Islam are at a heightened risk of carrying out violence because they believe that it will earn them a shortcut to heaven. This is particularly the case for converts with a criminal background, who are concerned with being punished in the afterlife.
Jihad

The importance of getting into paradise was a prevalent theme throughout the literature and it appears that jihad is perceived as the best way to enter paradise. In van San’s (2018) research, parents of foreign fighters stated that their children frequently worried about getting in to paradise, and once they believed that carrying out jihad was a guaranteed way of getting into paradise, they set their mind to travelling to Syria in order to carry out jihad. Tammikko (2018) argues that a desire to carry out jihad has become the dominant motivating factor for young Muslims who travel to Syria to join ISIS. Research by Basra and Neumann (2016) revealed that many of young foreign fighters were concerned with getting themselves and their families into paradise. They believed that if they committed jihad they would certainly be accepted into paradise, along with their family (Basra and Neumann, 2016). In Dawson and Amarasingam’s (2017) research, respondents stated that jihad is obligatory in light of Sunni Muslim blood being shed by Assad’s forces. Nilsson (2015) argues that the desire to commit jihad can explain why so many Muslims have travelled to countries such as Syria and Iraq to participate in the conflicts there. The respondents in De Bie, De Poot and Van der Leun’s (2015) research also state that all Muslims have a duty to commit jihad when Islam is perceived as being under threat. De Roy van Zuijdewijn and Bakker (2014) argue that whilst there are certainly myriad reasons for joining the civil war in Syria, the desire to commit jihad is a particularly important motivation. Not only does committing jihad prove your loyalty and faith to Allah, in the context of the Syrian civil war jihad is a suitable means of overthrowing Assad (De Roy van Zuijdewijn and Bakker, 2014).

True Muslim life

This particular theme pertains mostly to those who travel from non-Muslim and Arab countries where Islam is not the dominant religion. However, it is still possible that the appeal of travelling to Syria is that it might be easier to live a true Muslim life there. A motivation for travelling to Syria that was frequently mentioned in the literature was the notion of rejecting the Western way of life in order to be a better Muslim. In research conducted by Dawson and Amarasingam (2017) life in the West was considered to be incompatible with Islam, and that no one could be a good Muslim whilst living in the West. One respondent stated that there are simply too many temptations in the West, such as
drinking and smoking. According to Bakker and de Bont (2016), individuals leave for Syria as a way of breaking from their criminal past that they consider to be a product of their corrupted Western lifestyle. These individuals consider life in the West to be corrupt and immoral and so they must leave in order to better themselves and become better Muslims.

**Islamic Pride**

This theme is based on the desire to reclaim land that was stolen by colonisers and regaining the pride that Muslims had for their religion that was essentially erased during the colonising period when Muslim’s were repressed, and their religion was shunned (Sheikh, 2016). Spreading or restoring Islamic pride was a popular motivation for travelling to Syria. The respondents in a study on Danish foreign fighters by Sheikh (2016) stated that a desire to restore Muslims pride was a key motivation for travelling to Syria. The respondents stated that once upon a time Muslims were extremely proud of their faith but crusades and colonisation damaged Muslims pride and so they travel to Syria to restore it (Sheikh, 2016). Islamic pride was supposedly going to be restored by taking back lands and power that had been stolen by colonisers.

**Martyrdom**

The theme of martyrdom appears to be especially prevalent in research that focuses on young foreign fighters. In research conducted by van San (2018) parents of foreign fighters revealed that prior to travelling to Syria, many of their children spoke of their desire to become a martyr, stating that their goal in life was to become a martyr as this would guarantee their entry into paradise. Bakker and de Bont (2016) also argue that the idea of becoming a martyr is particularly enticing for younger foreign fighters. Parents who were interviewed as part of Basra and Neumann’s (2016) research often stated that their son or daughter would speak frequently of martyrdom and their desire to become a martyr. Weggemans, Bakker and Grol (2014) report that for many the appeal of dying and becoming a martyr pulls them towards Syria and ISIS. Coolsaet (2016) states, with reference to his findings, that young Muslim men who have been radicalised consider dying as a martyr to be the purpose of their life. Toft and Zhukov (2015) also suggest that martyrdom and the promise of paradise for becoming a martyr frequently serves to instigate an individual to travel to a foreign conflict. Respondents
in De Bie, De Poot and Van der Leun’s (2015) study also stated that dying for a higher cause and thus becoming a martyr is perceived as the most admired sign of devotion towards Islam which is rewarded with admission into paradise.

**Fight for justice and vengeance**

The subthemes that are encompassed in this theme all pertain to a desire to achieve justice or avenge those who have been killed in Syria as a result of the conflict.

**Opposition to Assad/Outrage**

Frennett and Silverman (2016) found in their research that outrage and anger at what is happening in the country where the conflict is happening is a key motivation to join that conflict. In the case of the civil war in Syria, this outrage is, for the most part, directed towards Assad’s forces and the atrocities they are carrying out (Coolsaet, 2016). Outrage at what was happening was frequently cited as a motivation for traveling to the conflict area. However, Frennett and Silverman do state that anger, although it is certainly an important motivating factor, it is not a primary motivating factor. Furthermore, certain members of their sample stated that one of the reasons they travelled to Syria was to overthrow Assad and were willing to join any group that had the same aim (Frennett and Silverman, 2016). Respondents interviewed by al-Khatib (2018) frequently stated that they hated Assad’s regime because they had various family members who had been imprisoned and tortured by the regime. Al-Khatib (2018) suggested that such hate often provided individuals with the drive to travel to Syria to fight Assad’s forces.

Due to the internet and 24-hour news media, pictures of the atrocities perpetrated against Sunni Muslims by Assad’s forces are spread across the globe minutes after the violence has been carried out (Tyrer, 2013). In research carried out by Bakker and de Bont (2016) seeing images of the horrors committed by Assad’s forces provided motivation for Dutch and Belgian jihadist Muslims to travel to Syria. A desire to avenge the Syrian Sunni Muslims who were killed or tortured by Assad’s forces was also mentioned as a motivator in research carried out by Borum and Fein (2017). Gerges (2017) remarks that a desire to exact revenge against Assad and his forces has motivated some Western Muslims to travel to Syria to join the conflict. In
Nilsson’s (2015) study certain respondents specifically mentioned a duty to help their Muslims brothers and sisters who were being killed and tortured by Assad’s regime. Zelin and Fellow (2015) state that a major motivating factor is the reaction to the extreme brutality and massacres perpetrated by the Assad regime against the Sunni Muslim Syrian population. They argue that the widely disseminated images of the brutality evoke a deep sense of obligation to provide help. The sense of obligation is strengthened due to the fact that Western government’s responses to the tragedies have been extremely limited. Thus, creating feelings of ‘if not me then who?’ De Bie, De Poot and Van der Leun (2015) note that following the eruption of the Arab Spring in 2011, many Muslims from Western countries have sought to assist their fellow Muslims in their struggle against oppressive regimes. Thus, at least initially, the motivation to travel to Syria to partake in the conflict was to overthrow Assad’s regime.

Protect fellow Muslims/Empathy towards fellow Muslims

This desire could also be termed a ‘humanitarian’ motive. In the literature it is sometimes discovered through research that those who travel to Syria do so for humanitarian reasons. Parents of foreign fighters who took part in research conducted by van San (2018) said that what motivated their children to leave for Syria was a desire to help their Muslim brothers and sisters who were being persecuted in Syria. In her interview with an individual who almost travelled to Syria to join ISIS, Ryan (2018) discovered that seeing images of Syrian people suffering and being killed was a strong motivation to travel abroad. Those interviewed by Ryan (2018) stated that they felt that they had ‘to do something’ to help the people in Syria because they believed that no one else was helping and that no one was going to. They had the mentality of ‘if not me, then who?’ (Ryan, 2018). In research carried out by al-Khatib (2018) several respondents stated that what motivated them to travel to Syria was seeing media images that showed the crimes carried out by the Assad regime, crimes such as killing women and children and torturing detainees. Several of al-Khatib’s respondents also stated that they wanted to protect their fellow Sunni Muslims, they wanted to prevent Assad’s regime from killing more innocent Sunni Muslims. Frennett and Silverman (2016) argue that what initially makes an individual consider joining a conflict abroad is seeing images of the victims of said conflict, producing feelings of empathy which drives individuals to go to the conflict to help and protect those who are perceived as being unable to protect themselves. Bakker and de
Bont (2016) also argue that many of those who travelled to Syria did so because they felt that it was the right thing to do. That there was a sense of duty to travel to Syria to help and protect the Sunni Muslims who were being persecuted. The respondents interviewed by Nilsson (2015) repeatedly stated that seeing the injustices perpetrated against Muslims in foreign countries in the media provided them with the incentive to travel to those countries to join the fight against those who were carrying out the injustices. The narrative of ‘we have to help our brothers and sisters’ appeared frequently in Nilsson’s (2015) study. Nilsson (2015) also states that the Muslims who travelled to conflicts in foreign lands were motivated by a belief that all Muslims are required to join the fighting in order to help their fellow Muslims fight off oppression and foreign occupation. Nilsson (2015) highlights that amongst those who have travelled abroad to join conflicts, the majority of them have strong feelings of revenge and have been socialised into a siege mentality. The obligation to help and defend other Muslims in their time of need is cited as a motivation to join the conflict in Syria by the respondents of De Bie, De Poot and Van der Leun’s (2015) study. In addition, the respondents claimed that the pain felt by Muslims in one country is felt by Muslims across the world. They said that they could not enjoy a good and bountiful life when they knew that their fellow Muslims elsewhere were being oppressed and tormented. Other participants in Noonan and Khalil’s (2014) study revealed that they were motivated to travel to Syria after seeing images of the victimization of Syrians on the news and after seeing the way Muslims across the West were being treated in a post 9/11 environment. Another respondent stated that they were motivated to act after he discovered that his tax dollars were being used to fund, what he called, a war on Islam (Noonan and Khalil, 2014). Coolsaet (2016) argues that motivated by the images of Muslims suffering, Muslims across the world volunteered to fight in conflicts in Bosnia, Chechnya, Kashmir and the Philippines.

Structural injustice

Structural injustice can manifest itself as marginalisation, poverty, state neglect, over-policing, police abuse, suppression, creation of suspect communities and low employment rates. A report by International Crisis group highlights that ISIS propaganda emphasizes perceptions of deprivation and injustice that are shared amongst Muslims worldwide (International Crisis Group, 2017). ISIS propaganda states that governmental structures across the globe are built...
against Muslims. According to ISIS, the proof of such structural injustice can be seen in the high volume of poverty amongst Muslim communities everywhere. International Crisis Group (2017) argues that the perception of structural injustice and deprivation can increase the likelihood of a vulnerable individual becoming radicalised and also motivates many young radicalised Muslims to travel to Syria to join ISIS. They believe that ISIS is the one group who can enact fundamental changes and reverse structural injustice. ISIS essentially capitalises on these experiences of structural injustice to appeal to huge swathes of the Muslim population across the globe (ICG, 2017). International Crisis Group (2017) state that for those who feel neglected and marginalised, joining ISIS can be an empowering and emboldening act.

The great search

Perhaps one of the most prevalent themes found in the literature is the notion that many young Muslims who travel to Syria do so because they are in search of something, such as identity, purpose, belonging or meaning. For example, Feddes, Nickolson and Doosje (2015) argue that some radicals are identity seekers and others are meaning seekers. In an analysis carried out by Vidino and Hughes (2015), they discovered that many of their sample were motivated to carry out ISIS related activities by a search for belonging, meaning or identity. Coolsaet’s (2016) overarching argument is that the individuals who choose to travel to Syria are part of the ‘no future subculture’. Individuals who form part of this subculture feel that they have no future, they face personal difficulties regularly, they feel excluded and lack a sense of belonging and they feel that they don’t have anything to contribute to society. Coolsaet (2016) states that persons who feel this way find solace in joining ISIS as it provides them with a sense of belonging and a cause to embrace.

Although the notion of seeking identity, belonging and purpose is mentioned throughout the literature, what constitutes identity, belonging and purpose is never elaborated upon. These are all very vague terms and thus our understanding of these concepts as motivators is rather vague.

Search for purpose/meaning
Ryan (2018) highlights that individuals who lack a sense of purpose in their life may be more inclined to travel abroad to fight in a conflict as they perceive their current life to be devoid of purpose. Not having a job is particularly conducive to feeling that one’s life has no purpose. Boutin, Chauzal, Dorsey, Jegerings, Paulussen, Pohl, Reed and Zavagli, (2016) state that for some, travelling to Syria is a way of escaping a life without prospects and without a future.

Search for belonging

Research conducted by the International Centre for Counter Terrorism found that a high sense of exclusion amongst Moroccan and Turkish Belgians frequently increases the likelihood of someone carrying out violence (van Ostaeyen and van Vlierden, 2018). This is given that the individual already holds radical religious beliefs. In interviews with Irish Imams, Ryan (2018) discovers that feelings of being unwelcome are conducive to becoming radicalised and pushes people to seek a sense of belonging elsewhere. She argues that some believe that they will find a sense of belonging in ISIS, and thus they travel to ISIS held territory where they believe that they will be welcomed (Ryan, 2018). Ryan (2018) further states that lacking a sense of belonging is linked to living in societies that are saturated with Islamophobic rhetoric. Van San’s research revealed that many individuals travel to Syria because they feel that they do not belong in their home country, and that they will be more suited to living in Syria (van San, 2018). From their analysis, Benmelech and Klor (2018) conclude that the difficulties of Muslim immigrants to integrate into non-Muslim societies makes them more vulnerable to becoming radicalised and thus at a heightened risk of travelling to Syria to join ISIS. Thus, they conclude that lacking a sense of belonging increases the likelihood of an individual travelling to Syria to join ISIS. Coolsaet (2016) argues that those who have travelled to Syria to join ISIS do so because they struggle to fit in anywhere else, they attribute their difficulties fitting in to a (perceived) hostile society.

Search for identity

According to Frennett and Silverman, a search for identity is a primary motivating factor in deciding whether or not to travel to a foreign conflict. They highlight that it is mostly teenagers and young adults who travel to Syria and it is around this time that an individual begins to try to define themselves (Frennett and Silverman, 2016). Thus, they argue that this
search for identity can constitute a strong pull factor towards taking part in a conflict. Vidino and Hughes (2015) contend that the search for belonging, meaning and identity is a crucial motivation for Western Muslims in particular. They argue that they travel abroad because they feel that they will belong and that their identity as a Muslim will be accepted and welcomed in Syria. Benmelech and Klor (2018) argue that second and third-generation Muslims, mostly born and raised in the West, experience an identity crisis, torn between their Western identity and their identity as a Muslim. The problem they face is that they are frequently seen as foreigners or feel unwelcome in the West where they were born and raised, instead they are seen as strictly Muslim (Sheehi, 2010). However, they might not necessarily strongly identify with the Islamic part of their heritage, they may not even be a practicing Muslim, and so they feel that their identity is perceived as doubtful or suspicious. Coolsaet (2016) argues that young people have always struggled to find their identity, but society has become increasingly unequal and demanding and for those on the margins of society the struggle to find an identity is particularly difficult. De Pie, de Poot and van der Leun (2015) also state that many young Muslims travel to conflicts abroad in search of identity, amongst other things.

Search for meaning

Frenett and Silverman (2016) also identify a search for meaning and purpose in life as a motivation for travelling to a foreign conflict. They argue that this is a particularly strong motivating factor amongst those who feel that their life currently has no purpose and that they do not have the power to change this. Individuals who travel to foreign conflicts may fear that they are simply throwing their life away doing nothing and so they choose to do something drastic as they feel that all other options have been exhausted (Frenett and Silverman, 2016). Frenett and Silverman (2016) describe this lack of meaning as a void that individuals desperately seek to fill. Respondents in Bakker and de Bont’s research stated that they felt their lives lack meaning before they arrived in Syria (Bakker and de Bont, 2016). Borum and Fein state that seeking meaning constitute a major motivation for travelling abroad. They argue that radicalised individuals are enticed by the idea of participating in something meaningful and belonging to a wider group of individuals with a shared meaning and purpose in life (Borum and Fein, 2017). Finally, research carried out by Coolsaet (2016)
revealed that there are even instances where an individual travels to Syria despite having a good life in Europe, including family and a well-paying job, but travels nonetheless as none of it is considered to have any meaning when there are innocent Muslims being killed.

Other

Peer pressure and idolisation

Peer pressure can come from family members, friends or others who are part of the same extremist group in the individual’s home country. Van San (2018) argues that some young Muslims might travel to Syria in order to follow in the footsteps of a family member who fought in previous insurgencies, such as in Libya or Afghanistan. In this instance, the family member who fought serves as an inspiration. International Crisis Group states that veterans of the insurgency in Afghanistan in the 1980s urge younger generations to travel to the conflicts in Syria and Iraq to fight, as they did in the 1980s. Moreover, International Crisis Group (2017) argues that some foreign fighters do not even make direct contact with these war veterans, but instead they simply hear of their stories and are inspired to travel abroad to fight. Alternatively, they may feel pressured into leaving the West by their friends who have either already travelled to Syria or are planning to (Coolsaet, 2016). Often a group of young Muslims will radicalise at the same time and join the extremist group at the same time, then a few of them might feel inspired to travel abroad to fight and they might pressure other young members in their group to do the same. Bakker and de Bont (2016) state that chain migration can be observed in the foreign fighter phenomenon. Chain migration is often carried out through peer recruitment and peer pressure. A large group of people will leave altogether in part because some members of the group will feel pressured by friends or family to do so (Bakker and de Bont, 2016). Watts (2008) argues that ‘social-familial-religious’ networks can encourage an individual to travel abroad to join an armed conflict. Furthermore, Watts (2008) also argues that former foreign fighters from past conflicts can influence or even inspire new generations of potential foreign fighters to take the leap and travel to the Middle East. Borum and Fein (2017) note that some of those who travel to Syria to fight in the war are encouraged to do so by family members, particularly in cases when a family member or friend has been killed in the war by Assad’s forces.
(Perceived) Discrimination

This subtheme encompasses both genuine discrimination and perceived discrimination that constitute motivation for travelling to other countries to partake in fighting. The concept mentioned above; ‘perceived discrimination’, is not meant to downplay the very real marginalisation experienced by most Muslims across the West. Rather, the notion of the discrimination being perceived is used by academics to highlight the fact that some individuals might distort or manipulate the perception of discrimination in order to encourage individuals to travel abroad or to justify travelling abroad to fight (Frenett and Silverman, 2016).

Research conducted by Noonan and Khalil (2014) revealed that experiences of ethnic and religious discrimination can cause an individual to feel so exasperated with how they are treated in the West that they travel to a country where they feel that they will not be treated so poorly. One individual in Noonan and Khalil’s study expressed that they felt that no matter how they behaved, they would always be considered suspicious. This individual expressed that they just could not win and so they stated that they might as well join the terrorists as it won’t change the West’s perception of them anyway.

Benmelech and Klor (2018) argue that foreign fighters go to Syria because they fail to integrate into their Western country of residence and they come to be cynical about life in the West. These feelings of cynicism are the product of feeling excluded in their Western country of residence. This further leads to feeling marginalized and discriminated against. From there, these vulnerable individuals are more susceptible to fundamentalist interpretations of Islam. Research conducted by the International Centre for Counter Terrorism found that a high sense of exclusion amongst Moroccan and Turkish Belgians frequently increases the likelihood of someone carrying out violence (van Ostaeyen and van Vlierden, 2018). This is given that the individual already holds radical religious beliefs. Bail, Merhout and Ding (2018) argue that individuals are more likely to be radicalised and thus compelled to travel abroad to join a conflict if they experience discrimination from other ethnic groups. In particular, they argue that high levels of Islamophobia in certain communities in the United States can push individuals to travel to conflicts where they will not face such discrimination. Research carried out by Versteegt, Ljujic, El Bouk, Weerman, and van Maanen (2018) discovered that Dutch people of Moroccan descent are far less likely
to get an invitation for a job interview than Dutch people with a criminal record. This is symptomatic of a wider increase in discrimination in the Netherlands. The NSCR report states that such discrimination can motivate individuals to radicalise which in turn makes them more likely to travel abroad to join extremist groups such as ISIS or Jabhat al-Nusra (Versteeg et al., 2018).

Dawson and Amarasingam (2017) conclude that individuals are more likely to travel abroad to join an insurgency when they are unhappy with their place in society. Such individuals feel that their place in society is compromised due to being discriminated against. Boutin, et al., (2016) make a similar argument, stating that these feelings of disenfranchisement and marginalisation lead to young Muslims believing that they have no prospects in the West. Hence, they are inspired to travel to Syria, where they believe that life over there will favour them (Coolsaet, 2016). Van San (2018) argues that these feelings of disenfranchisement are even stronger amongst those who are fully integrated into Western society. She argues that in becoming fully integrated, young Muslims raise their societal expectations, they expect much more from life in the West and when their expectations are not met they perceive themselves as being discriminated against (van San, 2018).

Transnational identity

Malet (2015) argues that ethnic ties do not constitute a strong motivating factor for travelling abroad to join a conflict, however, identifying with a wider community, whether that be a real or imagined community, does constitute a strong motivating factor. He further states that today’s foreign fighters, who travel to conflicts in the Middle East, share the same religious identity. Thus, Malet is arguing that a threat to one’s religious identity can mobilize those who resonate with said identity to fight. Individuals are more likely to travel to join a conflict if they perceive that there is a threat to the transnational community with which they identify (Malet, 2015). Moore and Tumelty (2008) highlight that the importance of the transnational Islamic identity was a motivating factor for past generations to travel abroad to join conflicts in countries such as Afghanistan and Chechnya. Toft and Zhukov (2015) identify a passionate attachment to an ‘imagined community’ as being the cause of mobilizing individuals across the world to join a conflict.
Creation of an Islamic State

De Bie, De Poot and Van der Leun (2015) revealed that many individuals were motivated to travel to Syria by their desire to establish an Islamic state in at least all Muslim countries. The respondents in the study further stated that their efforts to establish an Islamic state are hindered by current Western rulers who threaten Islam and oppress Muslims. A violent uprising against these Western rulers is deemed the only legitimate way of creating an Islamic state governed by Sharia law. Mendelsohn (2011) notes that throughout history, many Muslim foreign fighters have been motivated to join conflicts abroad in order to set up an Islamic caliphate that is governed by Shari’a law. Additionally, many have been motivated by a desire to implement Shari’a law in Muslims across all across the Middle East and beyond. In research conducted by Sheikh (2016) the respondents stated that they were driven to make the perilous journey from Denmark to Syria by their desire to create an Islamic State. Joining the State and playing a part in the running of the State was frequently cited as a driving force by the respondents in Sheikh’s study. The appeal of the Islamic State for these individuals was that it would be a place where all Muslims truly belonged, and their existence would not be threatened or questioned (Sheikh, 2016). The Islamic State was to be a home for those who did not feel at home anywhere else. Many of the respondents stated that ISIS was primarily a state-building project and that in achieving the creation of an Islamic State, Islamic pride would be restored. Gates and Podder (2015) also discovered through their research that many foreign fighters were motivated to travel to Syria to join ISIS to then take part in the creation and the running of the caliphate. The creation of the caliphate was considered as historic and thus many individuals wanted to take part in something that is considered to be a major historical event (Gates and Podder, 2015).

The above literature review highlights the plethora of factors that might motivate an individual to travel to Syria. They range from deeply religious reasons, to reasons fuelled by anger and more human reasons such as peer pressure. Despite the available knowledge on motivations for travelling to foreign conflicts, very little is known about the impact of culture on these motivations and what influences the motivations of a foreign fighter.
Methodology

Content analysis of online newspaper articles was carried out. Although ideally face to face interviews would be conducted with foreign fighters in order to gain a first-hand account of the motivations, this is rather impossible given that all foreign fighters have either been killed in battle, are being held in Kurdish prisons or in prisons in their home countries, are in hiding after having returned or are still living in ISIS held territory. Therefore, newspaper articles were chosen as the next best source of information pertaining to foreign fighter motivations.

The instructions on how to conduct content analysis from Catrien Bijleveld’s book ‘Research Methodology for International Crimes. An Introduction to Research Methods’ (2018) were followed. This was my first-time conducting content analysis and Bijleveld provides clear and easy to follow instructions and advice. Additionally, content analysis was deemed to be the most suitable research method because the content of the newspapers was being analysed.

The Sample

Sample of countries

Belgium, the Netherlands and Bosnia Herzegovina are the countries from which the sample of foreign fighters was chosen. The reasons for which these 3 countries were chosen are outlined below.

Belgium was chosen as it has the highest number of nationals who have travelled to Syria per capita in Europe (McCarthy, 2015). This suggests that Belgium has some sort of special problem with foreign fighters. Van San (2018) states that since 2012, 632 Belgian Muslims have travelled to Syria to join Islamic terror groups. Although the exact numbers of individuals who have travelled to Syria can never be accurately stated (due to the clandestine and illegal nature of travelling to Syria), it is widely agreed upon by academics, NGOs and governmental organisations alike that Belgium is producing a higher than average number of foreign fighters (van San, 2018; Counter Extremism Project, 2019; van Ostaeyen and van Vlierden, 2018; International Crisis Group, 2017; Bakker and de Bont, 2016).
The Netherlands was chosen for a variety of reasons. One of which is that it can be argued that the Netherlands has a rather similar culture to that of Belgium. At the very least it is easy to argue that of all the countries in Europe, the Netherlands is the country most similar to Belgium. Additionally, both the Netherlands and Belgium have a decent sized Middle-Eastern immigrant population, and thus the Muslim population of both countries is rather similar. In both the Netherlands and Belgium, the majority of ethnic migrants come from Morocco and Turkey (worldpopulationreview.com, 2019). However, whilst there have been a few hundred Dutch nationals who have travelled to Syria and Iraq to join militant Islamic groups, the number pales in comparison to the number of Belgians who have left for Syria and Iraq.

Moreover, both the Netherlands and Belgium are home to near identical radical Islamist organisations; Sharia4Holland and Sharia4Belgium, respectively. Sharia4Belgium is credited as being a major driving force for sending young Muslims abroad to join the fighting (Bakker and de Bont, 2016).

Therefore, given the similarities between Belgium and the Netherlands in terms of culture, region, immigrant population and radical groups, it is curious that the number of Belgian foreign fighters is much larger than the number of Dutch foreign fighters. For that reason, the Netherlands was chosen as it serves as a good comparison country for Belgium but is culturally and socially similar enough to Belgium that is also serves as a suitable comparison to Bosnia which enables one to compare Western European culture with Eastern European culture and the influence they both have on motivations.

Bosnia was chosen as the comparison country for a few reasons. Firstly, Bosnia is a Muslim majority country (51% of Bosnia’s population is Muslims (worldpopulationreview.com, 2019)), yet it has not contributed a particularly large volume of foreign fighters compared to other Muslim majority countries. Of the 41,490 individuals who have travelled to Syria and Iraq, around 7,250 came from Eastern Europe (Cook and Vale, 2019). Bosnians represent the largest contingency of foreign fighters from the Western Balkans, and the second-highest number of foreign fighters per capita out of any European country after Belgium (Counter Extremism Project, 2019).
However, it is estimated that only around 270 Bosnians travelled to Syria and Iraq to fight with ISIS (Muslimovic, 2019). Therefore, it would be interesting to discover what motivated those who have travelled to Syria and Iraq and how these motivations compare to those who have travelled from Western countries.

The Yugoslav war lasted from 1991 until 2001 and was political, ethnic and religious in nature. Whilst there were many different parties to the conflict, for the purposes of this thesis it is important to know that throughout the conflict Bosnian Muslims faced constant persecution. The worst act of persecution against Bosnian Muslims was the Srebrenica genocide, in which over 8 000 Bosnian Muslims were murdered. During the Yugoslav war, Muslims from all over the world travelled to Bosnia, to fight in the war in a bid to protect their fellow Muslim brothers and sisters (Innes, 2006). Therefore, it is interesting to include Bosnian ISIS foreign fighters in the sample to see if perhaps they are motivated by a sense of duty or are driven to travel to Syria and Iraq as a means of ‘repaying the favor’, so to speak.

Finally, following a school trip to Bosnia and Herzegovina, which included talks by researchers from Atlantic Initiative, my interest in Bosnia Herzegovina and its culture and recent history peaked and so I was keen to delve into Bosnia’s experience with foreign fighters and discover whether there were any links with the recent conflict that we had learnt so much about during the school trip.

Additionally, aside from the notion of protecting and fighting for the wider Muslim Ummah, it could be argued that Western European Muslims (e.g. Belgium and Dutch Muslims) might not have as much of a vested interest in the conflict the way that other European Muslims might have, such as Bosnian Muslims whose close relatives may have faced persecution during the Yugoslav wars. Therefore, it could be interesting to see if the motivations of Bosniak foreign fighters are strongly linked to a desire to prevent a repeat of the persecution of Muslims that was carried out during the Yugoslav wars or if perhaps their motivations are not so strongly tied to the conflict. In a similar vein, it would be interesting to discover whether there are any similarities at all between the motivations of the Belgium and Dutch foreign fighters and the Bosnian foreign fighters. As there is not one single Muslim experience across Europe (Kundnani, 2014). In particular, the experience of being Muslim in Bosnia
differs significantly from the experience of being Muslim in Belgium and the Netherlands (Kundnani, 2014).

Sample of foreign fighters

Information, including names, of foreign fighters who have travelled from Europe to Syria is extremely limited due to legal and security reasons. Owing to the limited available information, the sample of foreign fighters was drawn from available open source information, mostly newspaper articles. The sample of foreign fighters was drawn from the period 2014-2019. This is because those who travelled before 2014 (before the caliphate was declared) would have been unsure of exactly what was going on. Prior to 2014 not much was known about the activities of ISIS. However, the individuals who left from 2014 onwards will have had a better idea of the situation in Syria. They will have been aware of the atrocities being carried out by ISIS (such as beheadings and mass murder) and yet they still chose to embark on the perilous journey with the aim of joining the murderous group (Coolsaet, 2016). Therefore, the years 2014-2019 are particularly interesting in terms of foreign fighter motivations since an individual must have very strong motives and hold steadfast beliefs to make the decision to join a war and a volatile group.

For the names of all the foreign fighters Google searches were carried out with terms such as ‘Nederlandse Syriëgangers’, ‘Djihadists Belges’, ‘Belgische Syriëgangers’ and ‘Foreign Fighters Bosnia’. Then, dozens upon dozens of newspaper articles were read as they would often provide the names of individuals who travelled to Syria and when they left. For the sake of anonymity and to preserve the integrity of any future criminal trials, government reports tend not to reveal to names of foreign fighters. Therefore, newspaper articles were used to find the names. For the Belgian foreign fighters, both the French and the Dutch translations of ‘Belgian foreign fighters’ were included as only using one translation might have limited the sample to just Flemish Belgians or French Belgians. The foreign fighters that were chosen for the sample were simply chosen based on available information, those who are included in my sample are some of the few individuals whose names are publicly available.
From the available information, the foreign fighters from Belgium that are part of the sample are: Tarik Jadaoun (alias Abu Hamza al-Belgiki), Anouar Haddouchi and Abdelhamid Abaaoud (alias Abu Omar Soussi).

The Dutch foreign fighters in the sample are: Maseh N., Houssaine Z., Yago Riedijk and Oussama A. There was little available information on Maseh N. and Houssaine Z. and so to make up for the lack of available articles on those 2 foreign fighters, another foreign fighter, Oussama A. was added to the sample.

The Bosnian foreign fighters in the sample are: Yasin Rizvic, Muhamed H. and Ibro Cufurovic (alias Abu Kasim al-Bosnia).

Sample of newspapers

To obtain the sample of newspaper articles that would be analysed, NexisUni (formerly LexisNexis) was used. The advanced search option of NexisUni was used to give a more refined search.

Firstly, the name of each foreign fighter was typed into the ‘all of these terms’ bar. Secondly, the words ‘Jihad’ and ‘Syrië’ (for the Dutch and Belgian foreign fighters), ‘Syrie’ (for the Belgian foreign fighters) and ‘Syria’ (for the Bosnia foreign fighters) were typed into the ‘any of these terms’ bar, which meant that only articles relevant to this study were shown. Originally, extra terms, such as ‘motivatie/motivations’ and ‘terrorist’ were included, but this search produced no results leading me to conclude that the search had become too lengthy and convoluted. In some instances, including the words ‘jihad’ and ‘Syrie’ gave no results, in this case the term ‘jihad’ was removed so the final search would be ‘(Anouar Haddouchi) and Syrië’.

But for almost all of the foreign fighters the final search was, for example; Syrië and Jihad and (Houssaine Z). Some foreign fighters in my sample had converted to Islam and subsequently adopted a ‘Muslim’ name, in this instance, both the Western and the Muslim name were included in the search. For example; Syrie and Syrië and Jihad and (Tarik Jadaoun) and (Abu Hamza al Belgiki).
After searching with these terms and parameters, the results were further filtered to remove the articles from smaller regional newspapers as they mostly just reiterate what the bigger, more popular newspapers have already said and so are very repetitive. Press releases and court verdict articles were also excluded from the sample as they often just consist of one or two short sentences stating information relevant to the prosecution of foreign fighters and do not reveal anything about what motivated the individual to travel to Syria. For Bosnia and Herzegovina, due to my inability to speak Bosnian, Serbian or Croatian, I only included newspaper articles written in English in the sample. This means that for the sample of newspapers for the Bosniak foreign fighters, some international newspapers, from countries such as Australia and the United States were included. However, only reputable sources were included in the sample.

In instances when the search terms had to be simplified, thus often producing a mass of results (upwards of 100 results), the most popular and trusted newspapers of the country of origin of the foreign fighter were taken in to consideration. For example, the NexisUni search on ‘Anouar Haddouchi”, a Belgian foreign fighter, showed newspaper articles from Vietnamese newspapers and Spanish newspapers. Such articles were excluded from the sample as they were not considered to be as reliable as the newspapers from Belgian sources.

Female foreign fighters were omitted from the sample because as van San (2018) points out, many women who travel to Syria or Iraq do so in order to marry an ISIL fighter who is there. Although that is evidently not the only reason that women travel, the desire to become a jihadi bride has been reported in several instances (van San, 2018) and so this research focuses on men as it is fair to say that, given ISIS’s stance on sexuality and gender fluidity, male foreign fighters are not travelling to Syria to become jihadi brides.

Conducting the research

As highlighted in the literature review, there are several key themes that frequently recur in the research on radicalisation and foreign fighters. The themes that were discerned from the literature constitute the codes that shall be used to carry out the content analysis. The codes
were identified and subsequently assigned to over-arching themes, as can be seen in the codebook/table below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religion</th>
<th>Injustices/Anger</th>
<th>Great Search</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jihad</td>
<td>Anti-Assad</td>
<td>Search for identity</td>
<td>Peer Pressure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martyrdom</td>
<td>Protect Muslims/Islam</td>
<td>Search for belonging</td>
<td>Transnational identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious awakening</td>
<td>Structural injustices</td>
<td>Search for meaning</td>
<td>(Perceived discrimination)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>True Muslim life/reject the West</td>
<td>Revenge against the West</td>
<td>Search for purpose</td>
<td>Criminal past</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Islamic pride</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Creation of caliphate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideology/Faith in ISIS</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wahhabism</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The first articles to be analysed were the Dutch articles. During the analysis of these articles, several themes that were not included in the codebook (thus not frequently found in the literature) appeared in the articles quite frequently. Therefore, in instances when a new theme was prevalent, invivo coding was carried out (Bijleveld, 2018). Invivo coding is when one adds codes as one carries out the analysis. The codes that were added invivo are: ‘new gang’, ‘money’, ‘excitement’ and ‘sharia’. Additionally, the newspaper articles pertaining to the Bosnian foreign fighters revealed the code of ‘Wahhabism’, as the theme of Wahhabism crept up very frequently. For the rest of the newspaper articles, no further invivo coding was carried out as no new themes appeared that hadn’t already been revealed in the Dutch newspaper articles.

The programme Atlas TI was used in order to group together the different passages of the same code.
Findings

The Netherlands

Religious awakening

The analysis of the newspaper articles revealed that almost all of those in the sample of Dutch foreign fighters underwent a religious awakening in which they started to adhere to a stricter interpretation of Islam as their faith strengthened.

“Begin 2015 merkte de naaste omgeving van N. dat hij sterk aan het veranderen was en zich steeds intensiever bezighield met zijn geloof”

“At the start of 2015, those around him notices that N. dramatically changed and focused more intensively on his faith”

“…met vrienden sprak hij veel over het islamitische geloof en zelf deed hij diepgaand onderzoek naar de islam.”

“…he spoke often about Islam with his friends and he carried out in-depth research on Islam.”

Living in the Caliphate

Another recurring theme discerned through the analysis of the news articles was the desire to live in the caliphate. All of the individuals in the Dutch sample expressed a desire to live in the caliphate. What appealed to them in particular was the opportunity to live in a place where they would not be judged as Muslims.

“Zijn doel was echter om ‘slechts als burger te leven in het kalifaat.”

“His goal was to live as a citizen in the caliphate.”
The caliphate seemed to have some sort of mythical, paradisiacal status which attracted young disenfranchised Dutch Muslims.

**“Hier trouwen, broer, goede leven, paradijs Inchallah.”**

**“Here you can marry brother, a good life, paradise Inshallah”**

**“Ik kreeg het utopische beeld van een paradijs. De berichten over gruwelijkheden geloofde ik niet echt.”**

**“I had a utopian image of a paradise. I didn’t really believe the reports of atrocities.”**

Better life

Many of the foreign fighters in the sample stated that they were disappointed with their life in the Netherlands. They felt that there was nothing keeping them in the Netherlands, that there were no opportunities for them and that they didn’t fit in. Therefore, they made the decision to travel to Syria in search for a better life that they believed that ISIS could provide. It was believed amongst the Dutch foreign fighters that the caliphate was rife with opportunity.

**“Voordat A. naar Syrië vertrok, leidde hij een zwervend bestaan en lukte het hem niet om werk te vinden of op een opleiding te komen.”**

**“Before A. left for Syria, he lived an aimless life, unable to find a job or continue his education”**

**“Die kwam erop neer dat zijn leven in Nederland een ramp was (geen werk, geen opleiding, dakloos, drugs) en dat hij opnieuw wilde beginnen in Syrië”**

**“His life in the Netherlands was a disaster (no work, no education, homeless, drugs) and he wanted to start anew in Syria”**
The individuals in the sample often alluded to searching for something that they felt was missing in their lives. Mostly it was a sense of belonging and brotherhood that they were searching for, but some were also searching for a purpose to their life.

Martyrdom

Lastly, the theme of martyrdom appeared throughout the articles with relative frequency. The individuals in the sample stated that to die as a martyr was the most honourable achievement they could wish for. Dying as a martyr was considered to be a sure-fire method of getting into paradise and would also ensure that the individual’s family members would be granted access into paradise.

>“Hij was toen veel bezig met zijn geloof en zou gezegd hebben dat hij wilde deelnemen aan de jihad en martelaar wilde zijn”

>“At the time he was focused on his belief and he supposedly said that he wanted to take part in jihad and wanted to become a martyr”

Belgium

Ideology

A firm belief in ISIS ideology was frequently expressed by the Belgian foreign fighters. Particularly, a desire to spread Sharia law and punish non-believers was expressed by some of the Belgian foreign fighters.

>“Jadaoun neemt deel aan de verdediging van Deir ez-Zor en wil meedoen aan het vestigen van de sharia en het kalifaat, zegt hij tegen VG. Hij wijst elke kritiek af op de gewelddadige methoden van IS.”

>“Jadaoun took part in the defense of Deir ez-Zor and wants to participate in the establishing of Sharia and the caliphate, he tells VG. He rejects any criticism of the violent methods of IS”

>“Le premier avait appelé, dans une vidéo diffusée en novembre 2014, ses ‘frères’ musulmans à rejoindre la Syrie ou, le cas échéant, à ‘tuer des mécréants’ en France.”

>“The first one had called for, in a video broadcast in November 2014, his Muslim brothers to join him in Syria, or if not, to ‘kill non-believers’ in France.”
Hatred towards Assad and a desire to protect

Almost all of the individuals in the Belgian foreign fighter sample expressed their disdain and hatred towards Assad’s regime and a desire to overthrow Assad was frequently expressed as a motivation for travelling to Syria.

“A desire or even a duty to protect and help their fellow Muslims was frequently stated as a reason for travelling to Syria. The foreign fighters stated that upon seeing videos on the news of the horrors perpetrated by Assad’s forces they felt compelled to travel to Syria to protect and fight for those who could not fight for themselves.

Belonging (in the Caliphate)
Just like the Dutch foreign fighters, the Belgian foreign fighters also expressed a desire to live in the caliphate. For the foreign fighters in the sample, the caliphate was a place in which their Muslim identity would be unquestionably accepted. The caliphate was seen as a place where they would truly belong and could live a successful and happy life.

“J’ai été dans un premier temps séduit par l’efficacité de l’État islamique en Irak, puis en Syrie. Ce qu’ils arrivent à faire avec seulement 30000 hommes, c’est incroyable.”

“At first I was drawn in by the efficiency of Islamic State in Iraq and then in Syria. What they managed to achieve with just 30000 men is incredible.”

“Abu Omar voerde een nieuw soort revolutie, hij streefde voor een denkbeeldig islamistisch kalifaat.”

“Abu Omar led a new kind of revolution, he fought for an imaginary Islamic caliphate”.

In a similar vein to the Dutch foreign fighters, the Belgian foreign fighters stated that they desired to die as a martyr as such an act would bring honour to themselves and their family and would grant them and their family access to paradise. The notion of dying a martyr appeared to give purpose to their life, a purpose they felt was lacking.

“Il m’a précisé que le mieux, après, c’était d’attendre les forces d’intervention sur place et de mourir en combattant avec des otages”

“He told me that the best thing was to wait for the intervention forces on the spot and die fighting with hostages”

“Pas begin dit jaar, na het telefoontje uit Deir-ez-Zor, dat ze verheugd mocht zijn omdat haar zoon nu een martelaar was.”

“"Only at the beginning of this year, after the phone call from Deir-ez-Zor, she could be pleased because her son was now a martyr."
Bosnia and Herzegovina

Wahhabism

A reoccurring theme in the newspaper articles detailing the lives of Bosniak foreign fighters was that of Wahhabism. All of the individuals in the sample were in contact with Wahhabist Imams and were encouraged to travel by these Imams. The findings therefore suggest that the content of the Wahhabist preaching encouraged and motivated the Bosniak foreign fighters to travel to Syria.

Although the notion of Wahhabism doesn’t necessarily constitute a motivation per se, the frequency with which it was mentioned in relation to Bosniak foreign fighters cannot be overlooked and thus it has been included in the findings.

“These are mostly young people aged between 24 and 35, who have become part of operations in Syria through the Wahabi Movement based in Novi Pazar and Sarajevo.”

“I read what Ibric’s mother said, and I believe that it is true, that the local Wahhabis instructed her son to kill police officers. He was regularly with them in the mosque, and I am sure they were behind the attack.”

“Prior to departing for Syria, Hodzic frequently attended Wahhabi lectures at one of Sarajevo’s para dzemats [congregations that operate outside the Islamic Community’s jurisdiction].”

Religious Awakening

The analysis of the newspaper articles revealed that individuals who travelled to Syria from Bosnia often underwent a religious awakening in which they started to adhere to a stricter interpretation of Islam and began shunning or reprimanding those who they considered to be bad Muslims. The physical manifestation of this religious awakening came in the form of quitting alcohol and smoking, growing a beard an in one instance, destroying all pictures of themselves as vanity is considered haram, or bad.

“Before Ibro left Bosnia to join Islamic State (IS) in 2014, he tore up all the images of himself he could find. His interpretation of Sharia included the belief that images of people were haram -- forbidden.”
A desire to carry out jihad was frequently mentioned as a reason for leaving for Syria. This desire to carry out jihad also suggests a strong religious devotion and a devotion to ISIS ideology as ISIS have called for all Muslims to carry out jihad.

“He is a former frontman with Bosnian heavy metal band called Black Lady who gave up alcohol and the rock and roll lifestyle to devote himself to Islam - although he rejects the terms Salafist or Wahhabi.”

“Those who upon Imamovic's initiative went to the jihad in Syria include Senad Hasanovic and Armen Dzelko from Hadzici…”

“Another area where Wahhabis set up is the region in the far north, next to the Croatian border, which was home to Ibro Cufurovic before he set forth on the road to jihad.”

Deprivation, discrimination and a better life

Unlike the foreign fighters in the Belgium and Dutch sample, a large portion of Bosniak fighters took their whole family with them to Syria. This may be suggestive of a desire for a better life. The villages from which the foreign fighters in the sample are characterised by extreme unemployment and poverty. Therefore, it is highly possible that they left in order to start a better life for them and their family.

“The area around Velika Kladusa, located directly across the border from EU-member state Croatia, is considered a hotspot for jihadist fighters, not least because of its economic struggles.”

“Even now, 20 years after the end of the war, unemployment among young Bosnians stands at 60 percent.”
The findings outlined above shall be analysed in the next chapter in order to discern what influenced the motivations of the foreign fighters.

“Insight into their dossiers suggests that they mainly tried to replace the unfavorable reality with anticipated changes for the better that were supposed to come with their moving there.”
Discussion

The analysis of the newspaper articles made clear that there is no uniform profile with regards to what motivates foreign fighters. However, there are a few discernible patterns, some of which appear to be unique to certain countries, others that transcend borders.

This chapter is split into two parts. The first part will examine the motivations that were unique to each country in the sample and will attempt to gauge what influenced these motivations. The second part is a comparison between the 3 countries and will examine the similarities and differences between them and shall attempt to explain what processes influence these similarities and differences.

Individual assessment

Belgium

Although the motivations of the Dutch and Belgian foreign fighters appear to be rather similar, there is one important distinction that sets the Belgian foreign fighters apart from the Dutch ones. Unlike the Dutch foreign fighters, the Belgian foreign fighters in the sample were very vocal about their animosity towards Assad and his forces. The Dutch foreign fighters in the sample rarely mentioned, if ever, that they travelled to Syria to defend their fellow Muslims against Assad’s forces. However, such a statement was rather common amongst the Belgian foreign fighters in the sample. There are two possible explanations for why this is. The first relates to the influence of Sharia4Belgium. The second potential explanation is that for some reason, Belgian Muslims feel a stronger connection to the wider Muslim ummah, and thus they feel a duty to protect and help the ummah. However, if this is the case, the question then becomes why do radicalised Belgian Muslims feel a stronger connection to the ummah? Again, this might be linked to Sharia4Belgium and the narratives that are used during radicalisation. Or it may be linked to other cultural factors, including the immigrant make-up of Belgium and the socio-economic situation of immigrants in Belgium.

Firstly, it is important to understand what Sharia4Belgium is. Sharia4Belgium was a radical Salafist group that wished to see Belgium converted into an Islamic State (Moniquet, 2010).
The organisation was inspired by pan-Islamic group *Hizb ut-Tahrir* and also *Al-Muhajiroun* (Moniquet, 2010). The organisation was declared a terrorist organisation by the Antwerp Correctional Tribunal in February 2015.

Furthermore, it is widely noted that the majority of Belgian foreign fighters who left for Syria, particularly in the years 2012-2015, had ties with Sharia4Belgium. The Counter-Extremism Project (2019) states that of the 46 Belgian foreign fighters prosecuted as of October 2014, all 46 of them belonged to Sharia4Belgium. Bakker and de Bont (2016) and Boutin, et al. (2016) also highlight that in the earlier years, Belgians who left for Syria were almost all members of pre-existing networks, primarily Sharia4Belgium. Coolsaet (2016) states that peer pressure can explain the strong correlation between Belgian foreign fighters and membership of Sharia4Belgium. Once in the group they will experience ample peer pressure to prove one’s loyalty to the group and the wider cause (Frennet and Silverman, 2016). Such peer pressure from within the group, particularly from veteran members, might encourage a vulnerable individual to embark on the perilous journey to Syria (Frennett and Silverman, 2016).

Group threat theory (Dawson and Amarasingam, 2017) or integrated threat theory (Stephan, Diaz-Loving and Duran, 2000) and group-based identity theories (Malet, 2015) can perhaps explain why Belgian foreign fighters are so preoccupied with putting an end to Assad’s regime. Stephan, Diaz-Loving and Duran’s (2000) integrated threat theory posits that the in group and the out group are in competition for resources and thus every effort must be made to preserve the resources of one group to the detriment of the other group. This results in both groups (in and out groups) believing that their group is under siege (Stephan, Diaz-Loving and Duran, 2000). Such feelings result in increased identification with one’s group. One’s identity becomes intertwined and dependent on the group identity. In the case of foreign fighters, the ‘in-group’ is mostly Sunni Muslims and the ‘out-group’ is any group that might try to do harm to the ‘in-group’, such as Assad and his forces. There are a number of processes that solidify an individual’s commitment to their group. These processes will mostly occur during radicalisation and will be strengthened by an individual’s life experiences (Akhtar, 2005). During radicalisation an individual may start to feel a strong connection to the transnational Muslim identity (Malet, 2015). Malet (2015) highlights that during radicalisation distant conflicts are framed as threatening the transnational identity group which the individual feels they are a part of. Research carried out by Coolsaet (2016) revealed that Belgian foreign
fighters did indeed feel compelled to travel to Syria to fight Assad’s forces because they had a duty to help and protect the others in the transnational identity group, frequently described as ‘brothers’ and ‘sisters’. Thus, the fact that the Belgian foreign fighters in the sample felt compelled to travel to Syria to fight Assad can be explained through a strong connection to a transnational identity, the Muslim *ummah*. This connection is most likely reinforced when the individuals come into contact with Sharia4Belgium. Sharia4Belgium relentlessly propagated the narrative of Bashar al-Assad’s regime constituting an infidel sect that violently represses the Sunni population (Bakker and de Bont, 2016). Thus, reinforcing the notion that the ‘in-group’ is under threat and must be protected. Finally, in disseminating ‘us’ versus ‘them’ narratives (in which the ‘us’ is Muslims and ‘them’ is Assad and the West), Sharia4Belgium isolates its followers from all identities other than their Muslim identity, essentially forcing the individual to abandon their other identities and fully commit themselves to their Muslim identity (Benmelech and Klor, 2018). The result is that the individuals will lose all loyalty to their home country (Versteegt et al., 2018) and become more motivated to leave their home country in favour of a Muslim identity-based country, such as Syria.

The motivations of the Belgian foreign fighters appear to be intrinsically linked to identity and Sharia4Belgium. As the Belgian foreign fighters came into contact with Sharia4Belgium their identity became increasingly linked to a wider transnational Muslim identity. Such identification with a transnational identity served as a motivation to join the conflict in Syria as the transnational identity was perceived as being under threat.

**The Netherlands**

The motivations expressed by the Dutch foreign fighters were much the same as the motivations expressed by the Belgian foreign fighters. With one exception. Amongst the Dutch foreign fighters included in the sample, what stood out in particular was the fact that almost all of the foreign fighters experienced some sort of religious awakening in which their faith was strengthened and their devotion to Islam drastically increased. Kundnani (2014) suggests that when an individual goes through a religious awakening it is often because they are unhappy with their life and find solace in Islam which promises a happier future. This perhaps suggests that Dutch foreign fighters were particularly unhappy with their life in the
Netherlands. A profound unhappiness can perhaps explain the religious awakening but undergoing a religious awakening will not automatically result in an individual travelling abroad to join a conflict. There are many very religiously devout individuals across the world who do not feel compelled by religion to travel to foreign conflicts. Thus, it may not be a strengthened faith which encourages an individual to travel to Syria, but rather the experiences they had that set off the religious awakening may have motivated their departure. There is no contesting that ethnic minorities across Europe face particular hardships and discrimination simply due to their ethnicity. A report by the Versteeg et al. (2018) found that the job market is particularly difficult for Dutch people of Moroccan descent. In fact, the report by Versteeg et al. found that ethnic minorities in the Netherlands are less likely to get an invitation for a job interview than white Dutch people with a criminal record, even if the profile of the individual of Moroccan descent is a better fit for the job (Versteeg et al., 2018). Additionally, in the years post 9/11, mosques in the Netherlands increasingly became subject to threats, vandalism, and religiously targeted abuse (such as dead pigs being left at the front door of the mosque) (Versteeg et al., 2018). Lastly, according to a 2018 study by the European Agency for Fundamental Rights, 42% of Muslims in the Netherlands stated that they felt they had been discriminated against due to their ethnicity. 42% is alarmingly high considering the average percentage in the EU was 27% (EAFR, 2017). All of these factors prove that the moral panic surrounding Islamic terrorism has had a detrimental effect on the experience of Muslims living in the Netherlands. However, these experiences are most certainly not exclusive to Dutch Muslims, given the heightened security threat from ISIS and thus the heightened level of fear amongst the general population, such experiences are common amongst Muslims across Europe and the West more generally (Sheehi, 2010). Yet, it appears that these experiences have a particular impact on radicalised Dutch Muslims as they provide a core motivation for travelling to Syria.

Conversely, the employment situation of ethnic minorities in the Netherlands is near identical to the situation of ethnic minorities in Belgium (and the rest of the West actually). For example, in Molenbeek, the borough from which a large portion of Belgian foreign fighters originate from, the unemployment rate was almost 4 times higher than the rest of Belgium (Counter Extremism Project, 2019). Molenbeek also housed more than twice as many residents with an immigrant background per 100 000 people than the rest of Belgium (Counter Extremism Project, 2019). A survey commissioned by the Flemish government
revealed that Belgian Moroccans experience high levels of discrimination, including not being invited for a job interview despite fitting the profile listed in the job application (Versteeg et al., 2018). In addition, although discrimination and deprivation are key factors in the lives of terrorists, not all those who face discrimination and deprivation resort to ideological and militant radicalisation (McCauley and Moskalenko, 2008). Therefore, discrimination and deprivation cannot be the only factor that motivates them, there must be some other factor or factors at play.

As was suggested above, that the Belgian foreign fighters went through a process during radicalisation in which they progressively identified with their ‘in-group’ which was being oppressed by the ‘out-group’, it is likely that a stronger affiliation and commitment to the ‘in-group’ was also experienced by the Dutch foreign fighters. It is possible that as discrimination targeted against Muslims in the Netherlands increased after each terrorist attack, so too did the foreign fighters’ commitment to their group. There may perhaps be some sort of correlation between an increasing disdain for the ‘out-group’ (Dutch non-Muslims and the West more generally) and rates of hate crimes perpetrated against Muslims and Muslim communities in the Netherlands. The religious awakening experienced by each of the Dutch foreign fighters in the sample may have been triggered by feelings of discrimination and oppression caused by the actions of the ‘out-group’. The acts of hate perpetrated against Muslim communities might have strengthened the Dutch foreign fighters’ commitment to their Muslim identity. Thus, the religious awakening may well have been a product of a stronger identification with their Muslim identity, which was caused by experiencing acts of hate.

Analysing the motivations of the Dutch foreign fighters revealed a few interesting factors. Firstly, that the Dutch foreign fighters are largely motivated by the same things as the Belgian foreign fighters. Secondly, the frequent occurrence of a religious awakening amongst the Dutch foreign fighters suggests that they were deeply unhappy with their life and found solace in Islam. In undergoing their religious awakening, it is entirely possible that during the process they came into contact with a radical preacher, thus enabling their radicalisation which will have been conducive to their leaving the Netherlands in favour of Syria.
Bosnia and Herzegovina

The first finding of particular interest is the influence of Wahhabism amongst the Bosniak foreign fighter sample. Wahhabism is an ultraconservative, austere religious movement, born in Saudi Arabia. It is sometimes described as a Saudi Arabian form of Salafism (Yemelianova, 2015). Wahhabism preaches hostility towards all other religions, even towards Muslims who do not adhere to Wahhabism (Schlesinger, 2011). It is already a common known fact that almost all foreign fighters, across the world, adhere to a Salafist interpretation of Islam. However, what is noteworthy is that Bosniak foreign fighters appear to adhere to a very specific form of Salafism, Arabian Salafism. The question is; why is Arabian Salafism, or Wahhabism so influential amongst Bosniak foreign fighters (Yemelianova, 2015). Wahhabism has existed in Bosnia Herzegovina for a few decades now but drastically increased in popularity following the Yugoslav war (Rakic and Jurisic, 2012). This is partly due to the fact that Saudi Arabia, with its Wahhabist monarchy, was instrumental in the rebuilding of Bosnia Herzegovina following the end of the war. Saudi Arabian elites spent millions to help build mosques and Islamic cultural centres (Choksy and Choksy, 2015). These mosques and centres were then run by Wahhabist preachers, chosen by Saudi Arabians, thus furthering their goal of spreading Wahhabism (Choksy and Choksy, 2015). Wahhabism gained popularity in Bosnia Herzegovina as during the conflict hundreds of foreign fighters coming predominantly from Afghanistan arrived in Bosnia Herzegovina to help their fellow Muslims (Rakic and Jurisic, 2012). After the end of the war, a few hundred of these Afghan foreign fighters, who had come to be known as mujahideen stayed in Bosnia Herzegovina. These mujahideen have benefitted from the support and protection of individuals who occupy some of the highest ranks of Bosniak political establishments, despite many of them having links to al-Qaeda (Azinovic, 2007). Along with weapons and fighting skills, the mujahideen brought Wahhabism with them to Bosnia Herzegovina (Rakic and Jurisic, 2012). Azinovic (2007) posits that Wahhabism has been able to gain popularity in Bosnia Herzegovina so quickly as it appeals to disenfranchised and marginalised populations. There is no shortage of such populations in post-war Bosnia. Following the war, a variety of Wahhabi groups started to emerge and appealed to individuals trying to make sense of their lives after the atrocities of the war (Rakic and Jurisic, 2012).
The existence of Wahhabism and its recent surge of followers in Bosnia Herzegovina can also explain why the Bosniak foreign fighters in the sample were particularly motivated to join the Syrian conflict by a desire to carry out jihad. Wahhabism strongly advocates jihad as it is considered a valuable tool in the fight to wipe out all religions other than Wahhabism, including less austere and conservative readings of Islam (Azinovic, 2007). According to Wahhabism, jihad will set Islam’s opponents on the right track, the right track being the Wahhabist reading of Islam.

It is important to note that although only a very small portion of Bosniak Muslims adhere to Wahhabism, those who do pose a severe threat (Rakic and Jurisic, 2012). Especially considering that all the individuals in the sample followed a Wahhabist interpretation of Islam. Additionally, past terrorist attacks in Bosnia Herzegovina, prior to the existence of ISIS, were also carried out by Wahhabists (Schlesinger, 2011). Such as the murder of a Catholic Croat in 1996 and the bombing of a police station in Bugojno in 2010 (Schlesinger, 2011).

Secondly, the preoccupation with Jihad amongst the Bosnian foreign fighter sample could potentially be linked to the fact that Bosnia is a Muslim majority country, and in general, Muslims are frequently encouraged to carry out jihad (although Muslims across the world are encouraged to conduct personal jihad which involves strengthening one’s faith and simply becoming the best version of yourself (Sheehi, 2010)). However, given that since its inception ISIS has called for all Muslims to carry out violent jihad against its enemies (namely Europe and the United States), it is likely that the Bosniak foreign fighters were not motivated to embark on a personal jihad, but rather, given that they mostly left in 2014-2015, they were answering the call for global jihad. Furthermore, the fact that they left in 2014 and 2015 suggests that they were motivated by a desire to commit violence as by that point the actions of ISIS were known around the world due to the media. Therefore, there was little ambiguity as to what ISIS meant when they called for all Muslims to carry out global jihad.

Of particular interest is the fact that there was little to no mention of Assad. When the motivations or desires of the foreign fighters were discussed in the newspaper articles, it was (almost) never suggested that they wanted to travel to Syria to overthrow Assad’s regime. Given Bosnia and Herzegovina’s recent history of Muslim oppression and genocide, one
would not be out of bounds to anticipate that Bosnian foreign fighters might be compelled to take part in the Syrian conflict in order to prevent a reoccurrence of the atrocities that took place in Bosnia some 26 years ago. Almost all of the foreign fighters in the sample were alive during the war, with one of the foreign fighters having been born just after the war ended. They will all surely have witnessed and experienced the aftermath of the conflict. Yet, there did not appear to be a particular preoccupation with preventing what happened in Bosnia from happening in Syria.

In conclusion, for the most part the Belgian and Dutch foreign fighters were motivated to join the conflict in Syria for similar reasons. However, there were a few discrepancies between the two. Given that Belgium and the Netherlands have rather similar cultures, one could conclude that culture does indeed have an influence on the motivations. Furthermore, the motivations of the Bosniak foreign fighters were considerably different from the motivations of the Belgian and Dutch foreign fighters. This reinforces the idea that culture does indeed play an important role in influencing motivations. Bosnia Herzegovina certainly has a very different culture to that of Belgium and the Netherlands, thus partly explaining the dissimilarity of the Bosniak foreign fighters as compared with the Belgian and Dutch foreign fighters.

Comparison

With the exception of Bosnia, it does not appear that a desire to commit mass murder or wipe out all non-Muslims constitutes the motivation to travel to Syria, despite what is commonly believed. Moreover, the Bosniak foreign fighters were motivated to carry out jihad and yet they took their entire family with them to Syria, suggesting that violence was not the sole motivation. Therefore, violent motivations do not appear to be a significant motivating factor. This statement is not intended to downplay the danger posed by ISIS and those who follow and praise them. But rather it suggests that perhaps the violence carried out by foreign fighters is a result of ISIS brainwashing and propaganda, rather than an innate violent nature or disdain for Europe. Belgians and Dutch are perhaps leaving for more ‘selfish’ or personal
reasons, they are travelling for themselves, because they want a different life. Not necessarily answering the call to jihad the way the Bosniak foreign fighters in the sample did.

The sections below detail the similarities and differences between the motivations of the foreign fighters from all 3 countries. Potential explanations for these similarities and differences are also given.

**Islamophobic culture**

It has been widely recognised that since the events of 9/11 and the moving into the 4th wave of terrorism (Islamic terrorism) (Rappaport, 2011), the West has adopted widespread Islamophobia as a result of a moral panic concerning religiously motivated terrorism (Cohen, 2006; Kundnani, 2014; Tyrer, 2013; Sheehi, 2010; Awan and Guru, 2017; Ryan, 2018). The moral panic concerning Islamic terrorism and Islam more generally is consistently perpetuated by politicians and the media who use scare tactics to reinforce the notion that the West is under attack and that the intense threat level coming from Islamic terrorism warrants the highest level on the security threat meter (Kundnani, 2014). Such fearmongering has led to the demonization of Islam and those who follow it. And thus, has led Europe into a culture in which Islamophobia has been, to a large extent, normalised.

Islamophobia is not a typical phobia, as people do not necessarily react to seeing Muslims the same way that an arachnophobe reacts to seeing a spider. Instead, Islamophobia has been described as a new form of racial hate or racism (Tyrer, 2013 and Massari, 2006). Yet what is unique about this form of racism is that it has no race (Massari, 2006). This means that even those who are not actually Muslim might still be subjected to Islamophobia simply because they are perceived as being Muslim. Furthermore, Islamophobia has also been described as an expression of Muslims simply not belonging in Europe and the West more generally (Moors, 2010). Additionally, the declaration of the ‘War on Terror’ by US President George W. Bush shortly after the events of 9/11 spread the message that all Muslims are potential enemies (Birt, 2010).

Massari (2006) states that Islamophobia is based on cultural difference and distinguishes people based on culture. Following this line of argument, cultural difference can have an isolating effect which in turn can impact how a person feels they belong in certain spaces and
may encourage them to seek out alternative spaces in which their culture is accepted and thus where they would belong.

In fact, Nicholas Sarkozy the then president of France, stated that Islam was simply incompatible with Western values and that Muslims living in Europe would never be able to fully integrate (Tyrer, 2013). One can easily imagine that such beliefs, expressed and put forth by people in power, might isolate and alienate an individual and cause them to lose any and all attachment to a European country that does not consider the individual to be one of their own.

Khan (2010) argues that Islamophobia is based on opposing dichotomies of good and evil, with us or against us. Walklate and Mythen (2006) suggest that Muslims in Europe have been involuntarily thrown into the spotlight and their every move is scrutinised. They are constantly having to prove that they do not agree with the acts of Islamic terror groups such as ISIS, they must be seen to be making effort to integrate and follow a moderate interpretation of Islam (Awan and Guru, 2017). In other words, they are being forced to prove their loyalty to Europe and in doing so are being pressured into abandoning their Muslim identity (Benmelech and Klor, 2018). Therefore, following Awan and Guru’s (2017) and Kundnani’s (2014) line of argument, Muslims in Europe are being forced to choose between their European identity and their Muslims identity, unwittingly throwing them into an identity crisis. This follows the line of argument put forward by Frennett and Silverman (2016) and Moore and Tumelty (2008) that foreign fighters travel to conflicts in search of their identity. Such emphasis placed on abandoning the Muslim identity in favour of a Western identity is reminiscent of colonial practices (Borum, 2011). Such practices were based on the assumed superiority of Western culture and social norms and framed all non-Western cultures as violent and atavistic. This is replicated in today’s society where one can observe that Muslims in the West feel pressured to adopt a more moderate reading of Islam and are scrutinised for speaking languages such as Arabic, Kurdish or Turkish.

To summarise, Islamophobia in Europe has become increasingly normalised thus isolating European Muslims from their European identity, driving them into the arms of radicalisers who manipulate their feelings of alienation in order to radicalise them (Entenmann, van der Heide, Weggemans and Dorsey, 2015).
Identity and Belonging

The notion of identity is arguably linked to belonging, our identity is frequently tied to where we feel we belong. Someone born and raised in France will most likely identify as French, someone who regularly attends catholic church would identify as Christian. But it is not only what you yourself identify as that impacts your identity in social, economic, cultural and political landscapes, but also how others identify you. For example, if I were to speak French in Amsterdam, a local might identify me as French, despite the fact that I am not French. Yet how I identify myself does not impact how someone else defines me. If this is then applied to the context of an individual with two different identities (something that many of us have), there will always be an identity that is more prevalent, particularly in the minds of others (Tyrer, 2013). As stated above, how one acts can impact how one is identified by others. In the case of European Muslims, being outwardly Muslim (speaking Arabic, visiting a Mosque, abstaining from alcohol and cigarettes) will earn an individual the identity of Muslim. In Europe, to be a Muslim is to be perceived as a foreigner (Kundnani, 2014). Therefore, a Muslim identity infringes on one’s ability to truly belong in Europe. One can imagine that this is extremely frustrating for Muslims who live in European countries in which Islam is not the majority religion. For example, Oussama A. expressed frustration and anger at not fully being accepted into Dutch society despite being born and raised there. Such frustration and feelings of powerlessness to change this situation could lead a radicalised individual to make a rash decision to travel to another country where they are promised they will belong and be accepted. It is important to note that this is a very irrational decision, as Al-Qadri (2018) points out that the recent generation of foreign fighters are extremely vulnerable (Al-Qadri in Ryan, 2018). Therefore, although one can certainly argue that the issues described above are experienced by thousands of individuals who do not chose to join a foreign conflict, one must keep in mind that those who do travel are particularly vulnerable individuals (Noonan and Khalil, 2015).

The Bosniak foreign fighters in the sample were particularly interested in carrying out jihad, which in the context of ISIS is most definitely a violent act. However, the Belgian and Dutch foreign fighters were predominantly motivated to travel to Syria by the notion of living and
belonging in the caliphate and helping to run the caliphate. This finding reinforces the idea that foreign fighters who come from non-Muslim majority countries are simply searching for a place in which they belong. They believe that the caliphate is a place in which they truly belong and will not be made to feel like a foreigner.

The notion that these individuals are not motivated to travel to Syria by a desire to carry out violent acts suggests that these individuals themselves are not inherently violent but rather the brain-washing they go through once they come into contact with ISIS can explain the turn towards a more violent attitude. It is often noted that some foreign fighters travel for humanitarian reasons (wanting to help in hospitals or help with evacuations) or they travel for more violent, conflict related reasons (Entenmann, van der Heide, Weggemans and Dorsey, 2015). However, from the findings, one could suggest that the Belgian and Dutch foreign fighters do not really fit into either category. They did not express many humanitarian motivations and expressed very little if any outwardly violent, anti-Western motivations. Although they certainly did express some violent beliefs and particular hatred towards far-right politicians such as Geert Wilders, it did not appear that these were the main motivations for travelling to Syria. Their motivations could primarily be characterised as deeply personal and focused on finding their place in the world. That being said, all the individuals in the sample travelled between 2014-2016 and thus they were certainly aware of the atrocious and violent acts being carried out by ISIS. Thus, even if they were predominantly motivated to join ISIS for non-violent reasons, they still knowingly pledged allegiance to a fanatical and barbaric terrorist group. Moreover, after undergoing ISIS brainwashing and regularly being subjected to ISIS propaganda which heavily focuses on the ‘us vs. them’ narrative, it is not outside the realms of possibility that the foreign fighters adopt a more violent nature. Furthermore, Zammit (2015) argues that if the conflict is then framed as part of a broader international war that the West is waging against Islam the foreign fighter becomes more inclined to leave the West and upon returning is more likely to carry out violence, in a bid to win the ‘global war’. Therefore, following this line of argument it would seem that the extent to which an individual feels they belong to a transnational identity (Malet, 2015) will impact to what extent protecting this identity becomes a motivating factor. Given the extent of Western involvement in a range of conflicts in the Middle East (in addition to creating some conflicts),
it is not outside the realms of possibility that the conflict in Syria will increasingly be perceived as part of a broader war between the West and Islam.

Finally, the concept of the caliphate and living in the caliphate proved to be an extremely important reason for travelling to Syria. This can partly be explained through a resurgence in pan-Islamist narratives (Hegghammer, 2010). Pan-Islamism is an ideology that calls for the socio-political solidarity and unification of all Muslims (Oxford Islamic Studies Online, 2019). Pan-Islamism has fluctuated in popularity throughout the centuries, gaining momentum and followers during several historical time periods. Such as during the 1860s and 1870s at the zenith of European colonialism (Oxford Islamic Studies Online, 2019). Turkish intellectuals attempted to use pan-Islamism to save the Ottoman Empire, aiming to present a united Muslim front against European colonialists. Ultimately it failed, resulting in the defeat of the Ottoman Empire after World War I. Then, following World War II, pan-Islamism experienced yet another resurgence with several different organisations such as the Muslim World League (a group seeking to coordinate Muslim political and economic solidarity) adopting pan-Islamist narratives (Oxford Islamic Studies Online, 2019). Pan-Islamism also strongly advocates for the creation of an Islamic State or caliphate under which all Muslims can live together and thrive. The fact that ISIS did indeed declare a caliphate in 2014 proves the influence of pan-Islamic ideology. Furthermore, van San (2018) highlights that many of the foreign fighters from Belgium and the Netherlands had connections with Sharia4Belgium and Sharia4Holland respectively. Both these groups draw on pan-Islamist narratives (van San, 2018). In addition, Frenett and Silverman (2016) argue that foreign fighters are not so likely to adhere to a specific group and its ideology, but rather they are more inclined to adhere to a broader identity, such as a pan-Islamic identity.

Thus, the notion of belonging proved to be a popular motivation, particularly amongst the Belgian and Dutch foreign fighters. The idea of truly belonging was very strongly linked to the caliphate. It would appear that the cultural factor of not feeling they truly belonged led the individuals to believe that the only place they could belong was in the caliphate.
**Better life**

The desire to find and live a better life was a common theme amongst the foreign fighters from all 3 countries in the research sample. This is not surprising as the foreign fighters in the sample were all described as having come from rougher areas, rife with unemployment and poverty (Counter-extremism project Belgium, 2019; Versteegt et al., 2018 and Mayr, 2016).

Interestingly, all of the foreign fighters in the sample expressed a desire to live a better life that they believed they would find in the caliphate. However, they did not all expect their lives to improve in the same way. The Bosniak foreign fighters were motivated to travel to Syria due to poverty and severe unemployment in their villages. Thus, they travelled to Syria, in many cases (both inside and outside of the sample) taking their entire family with them, because they believed there would be more opportunities for them in the caliphate (BBC, 2014). However, both the Belgian and Dutch foreign fighters came from villages similar to the Bosniak fighters in terms of deprivation and unemployment and yet from the analysis of the newspaper articles, it appears that the Belgian and Dutch foreign fighters are not simply driven to Syria because they believe that having a job will improve their quality of life. Rather, they wished to join the caliphate as they believed that life in the caliphate would have meaning and purpose and that they would finally be doing something worthwhile, in a place where they truly belong (Frennett and Silverman, 2016).

This different perception of what will bring a better life can partly be explained by the fact that Bosniaks live in a Muslim majority country and so their Muslim identity is more readily accepted compared to a Muslim identity in Belgium and the Netherlands. Furthermore, living in a country in which Islamophobia has become the new normal would certainly impede on a Muslim individual’s quality of life and sense of belonging, and so they may be trying to escape such a culture.

A concern with regard to foreign fighters is that once the conflict in Syria is resolved and has ended, the foreign fighters will simply move on to another conflict elsewhere (Zammit, 2015). One need only look to previous conflicts such as the conflict in Afghanistan in the 1980s and the conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo that started in 1997. For both the conflicts, individuals who had travelled from abroad to join said conflicts simply moved on to the next
conflict (Coolsaet, 2016; Nilsson, 2015; Tammikko, 2018). The motivations for doing so primarily relate to the desire to make use of the new skills they had gained and because of the monetary rewards they would receive (Hegghammer, 2010). As Hegghammer (2010) argues, foreign fighters can be extremely dangerous as they tend to increase instability and volatility of a conflict. Therefore, having foreign fighters bounce from conflict to conflict is hugely undesirable. However, if one considers the arguments made above, that the foreign fighters are mostly seeking belonging and a better life, then the chances of the foreign fighters travelling to a different conflict in a different country is very small. Unless the site of the new conflict had been declared a caliphate, the chances are probably quite slim that once the conflict in Syria has been resolved, the foreign fighters will simply move onto the next conflict, simply by virtue of wanting to be in a conflict zone.

Rise of the far right

Another cultural and political phenomenon that may explain why individuals feel motivated to join a foreign conflict, is the recent rise of the far-right. This resurgence was aided and enabled by certain political events such as Brexit (in which the ‘Leave’ campaign used an abundance of anti-immigrant rhetoric) and the election of Donald Trump, who amongst other terrible things implemented the Muslim travel ban, if only for a short period of time. Many scholars have pointed out that in recent years far-right politics has turned towards a predominantly anti-Muslim and xenophobic narrative (Hafez, 2014; Tyrer, 2013; Goodwin, 2013). Far right politics increasingly frames the presence of Muslims in Europe as an invasion or a plague (Benveniste and Pingaud, 2016). Additionally, far-right rhetoric is increasingly framed not as hatred for Islam and those who follow it, but rather as a duty and a desire to protect the national identity (in other words, a white identity) (Benveniste and Pingaud, 2016). Far-right terrorist Anders Breivik described himself as a ‘cultural conservationist’. Such narratives ultimately reinforce two concepts that push an already vulnerable individual to radicalise and potentially travel to a foreign conflict; that Muslims are unwelcome in Europe and that a war is indeed being waged by the West against Islam (Birt 2010; Noonan and Khalil, 2015; Zammit (2015). An increase in anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim rhetoric only fuels the idea that the West is at war with Islam and thus gives the impression that sides must be chosen. Although none of the foreign fighters in the sample expressed a desire to commit
attacks in the West, the combination of ISIS brainwashing and propaganda which is based on anti-Western rhetoric and increasingly accepted and normalised far-right narratives, could lead already radicalised and ISIS indoctrinated individuals to believe that there is indeed a war being fought between Islam and the West. A war in which they must take part in in order to defend themselves and their families.

Research conducted by Bail, Merhout and Ding (2018) proved that increased anti-Muslim internet searches coincided with increased pro-ISIS internet searches. The authors conclude that minorities are more vulnerable to radicalisation and extremist narratives if they have experienced discrimination. Bail, Merhout and Ding (2018) found that their finding was particularly true in communities with high levels of ethnic homogeneity and plagued by high levels of poverty. As has already previously been established, all the foreign fighters included in the sample of this research paper came from communities rife with poverty and feelings of discrimination. Bail, Merhout and Ding (2018) ultimately suggest that in both Europe and the United States, home-grown terrorism increases as anti-Muslim sentiment increases, suggesting that there is indeed a clear link between the two.

Moreover, Zammit (2015) argues that how an individual perceives a conflict politically and whether or not they draw parallels with their own socio-economic circumstances can impact how they frame their place in said conflict. Zammit (2015) essentially states that if the oppression and violence is perpetrated against a group that the foreign fighter identifies with and feels they belong to, then they will feel a duty to protect.

Therefore, as far-right rhetoric gains momentum and popularity it is possible that the perception of a war against Islam will gain in popularity. Thus, potentially mobilising radicalised Muslims to travel to Syria to take part in this global war.

**Religious awakening**

What could be described as a religious awakening was frequently experienced by individuals in the Bosniak sample and the Dutch sample. Evidence of a religious awakening includes giving
up alcohol and smoking, praying more frequently, visiting mosques regularly and in one instance a Bosniak foreign fighter, prior to his departure, destroyed all photographs of himself because he believed that a good Muslim should not be vain (Mulholland, 2016). To a lesser extent, some Belgian individuals also experienced a religious awakening in which their faith strengthened prior to their departure.

One explanation for this religious awakening of sorts is the fact that Islam states that those who are fully devoted to Islam will live a better and happier life (Kundnani, 2014). As previously stated, all of the foreign fighters appeared to be motivated to travel to Syria to join the caliphate where they believed their quality of life would drastically improve. Therefore, strengthening their devotion to Islam might have been considered a logical step to improving one’s life. Furthermore, Toft and Zhukov (2015) and International Crisis Group (2017) argue that Salafism (the Islamic sect that almost all foreign fighters adhere to) encourages individuals to reject the corrupt and materialistic West. Thus, it is conceivable that following their religious awakening they concluded that in order to truly devote themselves to Islam, they had to leave the West, which is sometimes considered incompatible with Islam and the ability to be a good Muslim (Bakker and de Bont, 2016). Additionally, research carried out by Basra and Neumann (2016) shows that a large portion of foreign fighters who have travelled to Syria, spent some time in prison for a variety of different crimes. They argue that the recent generation of Muslims with a criminal past increasingly chose jihadism and fighting in Syria as a path towards redemption. Therefore, it is possible that undergoing a religious awakening is a common feature amongst foreign fighters, who according to Basra and Neumann (2016) are seeking redemption and want to turn over a new leaf. The notion of a religious awakening thus ties in with a desire for a better life, which some believe requires them to leave Europe, which is corrupting and hinders one from being happy.

**Solutions**

Although to some it may appear that with the collapse of the caliphate, the killing of Abu-Bakr al-Baghdadi and the loss of territory, ISIS no longer poses much of a threat and thus we need not concern ourselves with studying foreign fighters as soon there will be no group for them to join. This is however, false. Foreign fighters are not unique to the Syrian conflict, nor are
they unique to Islamic extremism. They have existed for centuries and will most definitely exists for decades to come (Bakker and de Bont, 2016). Furthermore, although one might be tempted to argue that with the imminent defeat of ISIS, radical Islamism will soon be a thing of the past, that is sadly also not true. Radical interpretations of a variety of ideologies will always exist, and there will certainly be a group that shall rise up out of the ashes of ISIS, much like how ISIS rose from the ashes of al-Qaeda. Thus, one can anticipate yet another wave of individuals leaving Europe, spurred by radical Islamist ideologies and perhaps other radical ideologies. Therefore, studies such as this one are important. Because once we have even the vaguest idea of what is causing the problem, we will be able to build solutions, to try to prevent even more young Muslims from travelling to war zones.

An obvious solution to tackle the root problem of radicalisation and thus foreign fighting is to increase the political willingness and capacity of government authorities to address the various grievances that have been expressed by many radicalised Muslims and by those who have travelled to Syria. Perhaps if more effort was made to listen the issues plaguing those who occupy the lower rungs of society (in Europe it is almost always ethnic minorities who occupy this position and the majority, if not all of Bosniak foreign fighters, also dominate the lower rungs of Bosniak society) feelings of disenfranchisement and marginalisation wouldn’t be so rife amongst those most at risk of radicalisation. Furthermore, as it is mostly young Muslim men who travel to Syria, in part motivated by feelings of no future in Europe, perhaps governments could set up employment schemes for individuals who live in communities with extremely low employment rates. Perhaps if the individuals who travelled to Syria had a decent job in Europe they might have felt that they had more of a stake in European society and so would have been reluctant to leave.

Additionally, caution must be taken when implementing new counter-extremism and counter-terrorism policies as historically such policies have only succeeded in doing one thing; alienating and isolating vulnerable individuals and the communities in which they live (International Crisis Group, 2017; Birt, 2010; Tyrer, 2010). Instead, a policy of community-based policing, in which the community aid the police in their counter-extremism operations and in turn the police help the community with the issues they are facing. Key to community policing is the building of rapport and trust between both parties, as well as both parties sticking to the agreement. However, caution must be taken when implementing such
counter-extremism strategies as community-based policing is notorious for having an isolating effect on the communities being policed (Choudhury and Fenwick, 2011).

Entenmann, van der Heide, Weggemans and Dorsey (2015) highlight that increasing attention is being given to re-integrating returned foreign fighters and to rehabilitating radicalised individuals. Entenmann et al. (2015) point to the UN Security Council Resolution 2178 which calls for the development and implementation of rehabilitation and reintegration strategies for returning foreign fighters. Additionally, the EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator, Gilles de Kerchove has emphasised the importance of exploring rehabilitation and reintegration programmes as alternatives to bringing individuals to court. An example of a rehabilitation and reintegration programme currently carried out is the Aarhus model, used in Denmark (Awan and Guru, 2017). From 2012 onwards, police in Aarhus discovered that young Muslim men were travelling to Syria. Upon their return from Syria, the foreign fighters met with Police Superintendent Allan Aarslev who was running a programme which saw the individuals get the help they needed in order to eliminate their radical thoughts and help them reintegrate back into Danish Society (Awan and Guru, 2017). This programme was hugely successful but was reliant on the individuals wanting to change their lives around. Aarslev reported that almost all of the individuals he had worked with reported feelings of marginalisation and discrimination in addition to very strong feelings of not belonging in Denmark (Awan and Guru, 2017). Thus, the words of Gilles de Kerchove and the success of the Aarhus model highlight the importance and effectiveness of counter-extremism strategies that focus on rehabilitation rather than punishment. Foreign fighters coming from Europe are facing issues of marginalisation and discrimination that are pushing them to join ISIS. The foreign fighter phenomenon can be diminished if more effort is put into trying to fix problems that are indeed fixable.
Limitations

As with any research paper, there are some limitations to this study. Future studies on the topic of foreign fighter motivations should avoid these limitations in order to achieve more accurate and generalisable results.

The first limitation concerns the sample of foreign fighters. Of the 5000 individuals who have left from all over the world to join the conflict in Syria (Coolsaet and Renard, 2018), only 10 were studied for this paper. This is due to limited time and financial resources. Future studies would benefit from including a much larger sample of foreign fighters to increase the generalisability of findings. That being said, due to a variety of reasons (lack of publicly available information due to confidentiality reasons and lack of information being released in order to maintain the integrity of the criminal justice process), information on those who have travelled to Syria is exceptionally limited. Finding the names of the 10 foreign fighters included in this study took days of sifting through countless newspaper articles and government reports. Therefore, although finding the names of individuals who have travelled is a challenging task, with more researchers, time and financial resources, it would be possible to obtain a larger sample of foreign fighters which would improve the results of any future studies on the subject.

Additionally, many of the reasons for travelling to Syria given by foreign fighters were only divulged after they had returned back to their home country and were subsequently charged and put on trial. Therefore, it is entirely possible that the reasons they have given are not the real reasons for which they left. They may simply be changing their reasons for leaving in order to get a more lenient sentence or they may be attempting to gain the sympathy of the jury. There is no way of knowing whether or not they are telling the truth, as only the individuals themselves know the true reasons for which they left. Perhaps the best way to circumvent this issue would be to host interviews with returned foreign fighters and ask them directly why they decided to travel to Syria. However, that would be an exceptionally difficult task to undertake considering that the very few foreign fighters who have returned are arrested upon their arrival back in Europe and are subsequently embroiled in trials.
Lastly, newspaper reporting is famously unreliable (at times). In the age of 24-hour news media, mis-reporting of events and statements is an everyday occurrence. Therefore, the statements given by foreign fighters on why they left for Syria might not necessarily be entirely accurate. In order to achieve the highest degree of accuracy with regards to the motivations, interviews with the foreign fighters would be carried out. However, that would be near impossible given that the foreign fighters are either in Syria, detained in Kurdish prisons or still living in ISIS occupied territory, or they have travelled back to Europe and are being held in prison in their respective countries. However, for the analysis of newspaper articles undertaken as part of this research paper, every effort was made to only select reliable news sources and articles deemed unreliable were excluded from the sample. Research was conducted in order to establish which newspapers from each country were reliable and the articles were then chosen from these reputable sources.

**Conclusion**

This paper has hopefully added an insightful analysis of the motivations of foreign fighters, an under researched area but one that is extremely important. It would appear that foreign fighters travelling from Europe are primarily driven by a desire for a better life, which they believe they will attain once they reach Syria and join the caliphate. Although there are certainly a plethora of different reasons that motivate foreign fighters from across the globe, as detailed in the literature review, the research conducted for this thesis found a desire for belonging and a better life to be a primary motivation. It would thus appear that a culture of wanting more was common amongst all the foreign fighters. That being said, there were also a few motivations unique to the foreign fighters from each country. The Bosniak foreign
fighters were particularly motivated to carry out jihad, the Belgian foreign fighters desired an end to Assad’s regime and the Dutch foreign fighters appeared to be encouraged by religion, with many of the individuals experiencing a religious awakening. And so, this suggests that there is not one distinct foreign fighter culture. This is especially true considering Belgium and the Netherlands have rather similar cultures, and yet the motivations of the Dutch and Belgian foreign fighters were not identical. Therefore, the conclusion of this thesis is that particular attention should be paid to individuals who are living in impoverished and deprived areas who express a desire for a better life, as these individuals are particularly vulnerable to radicalisation and thus might be encouraged to travel to foreign conflicts in search of a better life.

It is certain that much more research must be undertaken on this topic as Islamic extremism shows no signs of abating any time soon. Future research should endeavour to use a much larger sample of foreign fighters and where possible interviews with the foreign fighters themselves or their family members would be a useful method of discerning their motivations for travelling to Syria. That being said, content analysis proved to be an exceptionally useful tool in analysing the news articles to reveal motivations.

Ultimately, this thesis has enabled a better understanding of what drives a radicalised individual to join an insurgency abroad. Although there is no denying that individuals who actively seek to join ISIS pose a threat, this thesis has shown that a desire to carry out violence is not what pulls these individuals to a conflict but rather their reasons for joining the insurgency appear to be somewhat human.
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Appendix

List of Belgian news articles analysed


Van Langendonck, G., Huygen, M. (2019). ‘Plots ontfermt Irak zich over Franse IS-strijders; Na het kalifaat’. NRC.NEXT. Available at: https://advance-lexis-com.vu-


List of Dutch news articles analysed


De Bruijn, L. (2019). ‘OM eist zes jaar cel voor Maseh N.: Ik was naïef, dacht dat Syrië het paradijs was’. AD/Algemeen Dagblad.nl. Available at: https://advance-lexis-com.vu-nl.idm.oclc.org/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:5WG3-W7S1-DYOX91HK-00000-00&context=1516831.


List of Bosnian news articles analysed


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