

# **Belgium's Jihadist Fighters: Motivations & Framing. Menace?**

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# I. Sources

## 1. Cases:

- . 6 'male' cases (2 left for Somalia 2011, 4 for Syria 2012-2014) (Brussels)
- . 9 'male' cases and 1 'female' case from (Antwerp + provincial cities)
- . 1 case of someone who decided not to leave just before his departure.
- . 1 'female' case of someone who is preparing departure.
- . 1 'female' case of someone who deradicalized.

Total: 19

## 2. Informants:

- . 3 informants among Police and Security
- . 2 researchers:
  - Jessika Soors (KU Leuven, Vilvoorde), phd research on 'al-wala wa-l-bara' in salafism.
  - Younous Lamghari (GERME ULB, Brussels)
  - Montasser AIDe'emeh (UA, Antwerp)
  - Pieter Van Ostaeyen
- . Other informants:
  - Hans Bonte (Vilvoorde); Peter Calluy (Boom); Alexander van Leuven; Yassine Akalay (iFoundation, Brussels).
  - 4 important anonymous informants

## 3. Materials:

**Daesh materials: Foundation Dabiq media production Islamic State** (an IS p.r. site for Westerners); + **you tube:** Anwar al Awlaaqi; Mohammed Al-Maqdissi ; At-Tibyan Publications; DeWareReligie.nl; <http://muslimmatters.org/2012/02/17/yasir-qadhi-khutbah-o-bilaad-al-shaam-you-are-in-our-hearts/>  
+ some facebook.

## II. Numbers (20 November, 2014; figures change every week; source: Security)

Are concerned: ca **437** young Belgians;  
among them: ca 43 are dead, and ca 80 have  
come back.

Ca **other 150** want to leave Belgium for Syria.  
**Ca. 200 stay in Syria** (- it may be more);  
**80% men and 20% women.**

*Most of them live on the axis Antwerp (currently 65) – Brussels (currently 73) {with also smaller cities in it as Vilvoorde (25), Mechelen (1 à 14?)}*

*Not even 5 Belgian Turks left for Syria.*

- In Vilvoorde: 25 in Syria + 5 died, 7 came back, 1 in hospital,..+ 25 'potential'...
- In Br. Region: ca 80 (all included: dead, returnees a.s.o.);  
Most come from Anderlecht, Schaarbeek, Molenbeek, St Gilles, Bxl-city);
- In Antwerp: ca 80.
- In Maaseik: 3; Genk: 5
- In Namur: 2; Verviers: 3 - Liège: 1 (Chechens,...)
- In Ghent: ?
- In Mechelen: surely 1 case; 8 potential (6-21 y., even more), 3 univ; study, 1 ASO, 2 Technical (Mor.) + 1 BSO + 1 Romanian refugee (muslim).

### III. Case studies: A family story (3.1 and 3.2) and an individual case (3.3.)

#### **3.1. N.A.** (Vilvoorde) (18 y., not married)

son of informant's sister:

Her story about what happened:

-“He was a pleasant, non salafi young man with a future; his father has a brico”.

-“He visited Sharia4Belgium in Antwerp; he frequently met with friends at Vilvoorde train station at 7 p.m.”

-“In 2012, during August holidays with his family in Nador, Hakim E. (Vilvoorde), ‘un garçon très gentil’, visited him at our home in Nador and they met outside with other friends».

-“During the same holidays, at a certain moment, N.A. left his family for Belgium, ‘to work as a job student’ (his decision, his words).”

-“In September 2012, he started normally going again at school; end September he told his parents he had to leave for a 1 week school trip to France”.

-“After 1 week, his family received a phone call from him, telling that he was in Syria”. (- we are begin October 2012).

-“In later fb chats he told me (= his aunt) that he was helping people, in humanitarian actions; he said he had a very nice life, illustrated by nice smartphone pictures, and he invited me to join in Syria.”

Last contact aunt – nephew: 11 May 2013.

End May 2013: an announcement that he is dead.

**3.2. M.EF** (Molenbeek, 24 y., not married, son of brother of informant on N.A.)

Her story about what happened:

- “Where N.A. was not problematic at all as a young man, M.EF had some minor antecedents with police”.
- “The family feared that he should leave for Syria. He let his beard grow, and at the end he shaved it”.
- “He was not influenced by Jean-Louis Denys, who is much too ‘strange’ for our young men, but he met with some friends in closed meetings at Molenbeek, not in the mosques... Yes, they may make some appointments visiting a mosque, but they never will meet at the mosques for their discussions”.
- “At Thursday before he left, there was a police control at home. They clearly knew he was a candidate for Syria. And see, the following Saturday in the evening, he left for Syria, taking a train till Greece.”

My informant is the only one in her family who is in regular contact with M. EF..

Her thesis is that it is important to remain in contact with such young men.

## Questions to informant, and her answers:

a. JL: Do they feel **hatred** when they leave ?

A: “Yes they hate, but they are not dangerous, their hatred is not against Belgium.

I think their friends show them a lot of pictures about the massacres of Muslims by Bashar Assad in Syria and they see that the West does not intervene.”

(I come back to this point when discussing current ‘menace’...)

b.

JL: Will they **come back** one day?

A: “Absolutely not, Belgium is not longer part for the projection of their future; they are jihadists, and after Syria, they want to go elsewhere for their jihad, e.g. Palestine.”

c.

JL: How do you try to convince them to come **back to their family** in Belgium?

A: “That is what I ask them: ‘What did you do to your mother? To your family? Leaving without a farewell... to go to die in another place.’ But their answer is: ‘**We will go to Paradise, and thanks to our Martyrdom we are sure that also our mother and our family will get a better place in Paradise**’.”

### **3.3. Individual case (Anderlecht, not married)**

He is the nephew of my informant, who is a salafi.

“He was a soccer player, minifoot, normal guy.  
He was even offered a job as mannequin (model)  
His brothers have bookshops.  
At a certain moment he leaves home to  
follow Quranic courses in Morocco.  
He let his beard grow, dressed as a salafi, just as me.  
He came back to Belgium and shaved his beard,  
till 3-4 millimeter... He changed way of dressing.”

Seeing the changes in his friend's look, my informant, a pietist salafi,  
proposed an appointment to discuss Islam and its interpretation,  
but it was too late. The guy left for Syria.

In Syria he first was involved in humanitarian help,  
after 1 month he said he will surely not come back to Belgium.

After a few months he has become a fighter.

After Syria, he will go to Iraq or Palestine, he says.  
From time to time he still takes contact with his family  
through skype, but it has become more difficult now.”

## **My questions to salafi informant, and his answers:**

a.

J.L.: How do you see **the family** of your nephew?

A.: “It is a very traditionalist, even authoritarian family, with a very incomplete practice of Islam, only Ramadan, and from time to time going to a mosque, and that is it.”

b.

J.L.: **What happened** in your view?

A: “At a certain moment my nephew converted as a Muslim to a more intense Islam, just as I did. But, you know, this is a dangerous moment...

The risk is that at the very beginning of your conversion, you see everywhere infidels, *kufar*, and at such a moment it is very important who is your guide.

I was lucky, the people who opened the door to Islam for me, convinced me not to condemn other people and to become simply a good Muslim; but my nephew was not lucky... the ones he met did not learn him that you need historical insights when reading the Quran. What did the Prophet say, at which moment, and why?”

J.L. Once guided by an ‘extremist’, are you definitively lost?

A. “No, I know friends who had become extremists, but became again more moderate after some time.”

### **3.4. Case of young 18 y. old radicalized woman (Vilvoorde) preparing departure (December 2014)**

. a broken family, already from 2012 on.

Mother (psychologically labile), the concerned young woman is the older one among 4 children (among whom 2 brothers) who are quite problematic; no contacts with father of whom the mother was his fifth wife.

. in 2012, the girl is 16 y. old; she is changing drastically kind of headscarf and way of dressing; today she is completely dressed in black and says openly she wants to marry a Jihadist fighter in Syria.

. she does not leave home, even if mother insists for it; she sleeps in the morning till noon, and is at the internet, alone in her room, at night.

. mother took her passport, but now that daughter is 18 y. old, she gave her the passport; mother is sure that her daughter will leave for Syria. Police says that one can do nothing...

. The 18 y. old girl is completely isolated. No one, not the mother, not the brothers can speak with her. She does not hide her intentions. For her, Syria is paradise and marrying there with a Jihadist means that she will go to Paradise later.

## **Concluding from the case studies:** **Some general characteristics**

- 1. 40% are younger than 18.**
- 2. Most have a weak economic position, but don't feel financially responsible for their family.** (cf. Mohssin El Ghabri & Soufian Gharbaouin (2014). Qui sont les Belges partis combattre en Syrie ? Etopia, April 2014.)
- 3. Most of them have no contacts with a mosque, or if they go to a mosque it is to make appointments outside of it. In most cases their knowledge about Islam is very limited.**
- 4. 1/3 have “antecedents with the police” (surely among the guys who left between 2012 and 2013)...**
- 5. Most of them don't see their future in Belgium.**  
*3 have a good future before them;*  
*14 are quite marginal young people, without job: “you have no future here; there, if you die, you go directly to Paradise and your family also; and in the meantime, life there is very beautiful, you find all you need.”*
- 6. Before leaving it is current practice among Syria fighters to change address. It seems that there are instructions in this sense. Today many take their instructions simply through direct fb contacts.**

## IV. Profiling: 7 steps to become a (Salafiyya Jihadist)

In the process among the 17 candidates we see 7 steps and the following characteristics:

4.1. They have not the same profile, but what they have in common is some identitarian confusion, and/or *questions about where they have to project their future, lack of 'trust in own status', lack of sense of honour, and most of the time being not well informed about Islam... (not known by mosques)*

4.2. They are **deeply traumatized by pictures about massacres of Muslims** by Bashar Assad in Syria. (you tube) (c.q. Western countries did not support Syrian Spring...).

4.3. They don't feel bound by strong material and financial responsibilities vis-à-vis their family. (There is however recently a tendency that also more young women start leaving, with focus on making a future family 'there'...)

#### 4.4. They think **they have found something new.**

The door to their newly experienced Muslim identity is opened by minority people among the salafists: the Salafiyya Jihadiyya, (supported by closed ‘small group’ meetings + you tube films).

They enter in a Takfiri discourse. The Takfiri logic has as a consequence that one loses multiple identifications and that one assimilates with only 1 very reductive identity, dividing the world among ‘good ones’ and ‘bad ones’.  
(Takfir: declaring another Muslim an ‘infidel’).

*(For an excursion on Salafiyya Jihadiyya and its link with the war in Syria, see V., p. 18-23)*

**4.5. There starts a process of mental (and physical) self-isolation, meaning: des-affiliation (vis-à-vis family and friends) with a new affiliation (i.e. with new friends and imaginary identifications: see you tube + other internet).**

(2 months to 2 years)

**4.5.1. *the internet: (it is a twitter and fb war)***

--- preachers (“savants”) on the net:

--- short recruitment films on the net, very professionally made:

. they show Muslims who dominate and even have the successful courage to provoke the existing powers;

. they show (a Western) welfare for who lives in the caliphate, something that the guys and their families should never have found when remaining in the West.

**4.5.2. ‘*very repetitive*’ meetings outside the mosques**, promoted by fb invitations, “watching continuously you tube films”, discussing “being a good Muslim” and the others (mostly Muslims) as *kufar*, seeing their ideas conformed in reality.

**4.5.3. *contact with recruiters***: stimulating further self-isolation and offering a model for preparation of departure to Syria (or earlier Somalia); the candidates receive messages on-line not to take contact anymore with ‘others’.

**4.6. The 'new friends' ask a commitment:  
'go to Syria'  
+ and they refer to a new identity for the next future  
(i.e. living in an Islamic caliphate).**

**4.7. The candidate Jihadists cut their emotions away and leave for Syria. In their eyes, the Shariah asks them not to be influenced by human emotions.**

Did some of them receive **instructions in hidden way** on the road they will have to follow and on the persons they will meet? And do others simply receive instructions quite openly through their fb contacts?...

There is a variety of routes:

e.g. first to Dusseldorf or Switzerland, and then to Turkey (e.g. with train over Greece, or directly with airplane),

and there someone expects them e.g. outside the airport.

And then some may be oriented e.g. to a training camp in Turkey where they will stay for 3 months.

And then they may leave for Syria. The routes change very often.

## **And then, 4.8. : What happens once in Syria?**

### ***4.8.1. Period of control after arrival (anchorage or not)***

- in some cases imprisonment (when there are doubts)
- insertion in humanitarian actions

### ***4.8.2. Further commitment, depending of the qualities of the Jihadist:***

- in humanitarian support
- in support activities for the fighters (e.g. as a driver) in combat

### **4.8.3. Consequences**

- deception in some cases in the mind of the candidate (and, in some cases, return if possible)
- remaining there as a fighter because of lack of alternatives and with a still stronger identification with being a jihadi fighter. Such a jihadist enters in an apocalyptic perspective.

**4.8.4. *unknown*:** What will be the coming objectives of the 'emirs' and of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in Syria????

# **V. What is Salafiyya Jihadiyya and what is its link with the war in Syria?**

## **5.1. Where situate Salafiyya Jihadism?**

1---- institutions, at 3 levels:

- a. mosques and islamic foundations;
- b. associations, street, school, shops,...
- c. **virtual (fb – you tube)**

2--- doctrine, 2 important categories:

- a. classic Islam
- b. Salafism (= only Quran and Sunna),

4 important sub-categories in Salafism:

- a. Salafiyya in general
- b. “*al firqatou l-annajia*” Salafism (“the saved group”)
- c. Salafism connected with *ikhwan* (Muslim brotherhood)
- d. **Salafiyya Jihadiyya.**

## **5.2. The debate on Takfir in different Salafi tendencies:** (i.e. : declaring another person an infidel, practiced vis-à-vis other Muslims).

### **Pacifist:**

a. *Salafiyya* as most commonly practiced (majority) is not Takfirist, i.e. they don't give themselves the right to judge other Muslims as being *kufar* , and violence is not accepted.

b. The “*al firqatou l-annajia*” Salafism (“the saved group”): accepts only a very limited number of Islamic mostly Saudi scholars. They are very selective and critical to the other imams. They have some small centres (e.g. *el Furqan*), but aren't interested in politics. They are not Takfirist, cf. a, but more regulated.

c. The group connected to the *ikhwan* (Muslim brotherhood), i.e. connected with political islam. (Both tendencies, the Takfirist and non-Takfirist one exist; introduction also of the concept of ‘Divine Law’ c.q. Caliphate as model for society.)

### **Non-Pacifist:**

d. Salafiyya Jihadiyya. (They are Takfirist and give themselves the right to use violence vis-à-vis *kufar* and ‘others’ + concept of ‘Divine Law’ c.q. Caliphate).

*Remark: some scholars will put b, c and d in 1 bucket; others not.*

### 5.3. Two important inner-Salafiyya debates, to understand Jihadism in Syria war

#### 1. The interpretation of the *al-wala wa-l-bara* doctrine:

It is about the interpretation of “love and rejection”.

Difference in the interpretation between the pacifists (non-Takfirist) and the Jihadists (Takfirist):

Pacifists: “what God loves (*al-wala*) and what He doesn't love (*al-bara*), is something that you should study hard, but without taking a decision/judgment/consequences in behavior for the others.”

Non-Pacifists: “there are consequences for your behaviour vis-à-vis the others: you have the right and even the duty to destroy what and whom God doesn't love.” (That's what we clearly see happening now in Syria-Iraq.)

## 2. The interpretation of the *Hadith* about Sham:

Sham: Syria, Palestine, Jordan, Iraq.

There is a *Hadith*: “many signs of the end of the world will be found there (= in Sham), signs of *Fitna*, disorder, troubles (..). it is there that *Shaitan*’s horn will appear.”

(Here start a lot of interpretations, today:

What is meant with:

- *Shaitan*’s horn = missiles? wars?...
  - What should be Muslims’ behaviour vis-à-vis Sham today?
- Isn’t it the moment and place what the Prophet meant in the Hadith?

## 5.4. Examples of Salafiyya Jihadism

See you tube:

- Anwar al Awlaaqi;

- Mohammed Al-Maqdissi ;

- Rachid Abou Houdeyfa :

« Silence on tue. On massacre en Syrie. »

- Abu Qatada al-Filistini

- At-Tibyan Publications (on line)

- DeWareReligie.nl

With the Ikhwan and the Salafiyya Jihadiyya, we see the dream of a State under divine Law ( a caliphate), (and an ***al-wala wa-l-bara*** discourse), but the caliphate can not be realised here in the West; it should be realised elsewhere, in a Muslim Arab country.

And if you add the discussion on **Sham** to that, you may understand that there is an important tendency that cultivates the idea of the “country of the Sham” as the place where a decisive fight will be fought for the glory of Islam: the current fight In Syria-Iraq.

See internet:

<http://muslimmatters.org/2012/02/17/>

[yasir-qadhi-khutbah-o-bilaad-al-shaam-you-are-in-our-hearts/](http://muslimmatters.org/2012/02/17/yasir-qadhi-khutbah-o-bilaad-al-shaam-you-are-in-our-hearts/)

# **VI. Organisation: What is behind it?**

## **6.1. Facts**

### **3 periods until now**

- I. The Malika El Aroud period (with cheikh Ayachi Bassam), and Trabelsi... ('nine eleven', murder of Massood, *Afghanistan*): central command (Al Qaida); ca 2001. From 2003 – 2013 Trabelsi worked at radicalisation in Belgian prisons + menaced counsellors opposing to it.**
- II. The Somalia recruitment (before Daesh); central command, ca 2007-10.**
- III. The Syria-Iraq recruitment (Daesh); ca 2011 -... : from central command to a 'glocal approach'???: 2 generations (2012- July 2013; July 2013 - .....**

### **Questions:**

#### **Is there a link between periods I-II-III?**

##### **a. Is there a link between I and II?**

**At least in one court case (Bouyabaren, 2014, a Somalia Shebab case), one sees that the sister of the wife of a recruiter in Molenbeek for Shebab in Somalia (in 2011), has become Nizar Trabelsi's (2003 case) last spouse. (link between I and II?)**

##### **b. Is there a link between II and III?**

**One knows that already from 2004 on, there were regular contacts in Fouad Belkacem's apartment in Boom, with militants from different countries (France, Netherlands, UK). FB had excellent relations with imam Salam in Tilburg. He also had good relations with Anjem Choudary of Sharia4UK and with Bakhri in Libanon. At least 4 times, he went to Saoudi Arabia.**

**c. Today, 'leaving for Syria' happens through a variety of 'niches', a plurality of small structures: Internet; friends in the country of provenance (e.g. Al Hoceima, Oujda or Nador,...) or in the same district here; small well organized groups; family relations; direct invitations through fb or Skype from Syria;**  
**- it seems all very loosely coupled. (Flemish & Dutch; French speaking & France).**

**3 generations:**

- (a) The 'older' Sharia4Belgium guys (often 'small' criminals) (2011-2012)**
- (b) The ones who look for an adventure (2013), no doctrine, only "you will be important there", "you will have a future there, what is lacking here". Did the mediatization 2013 have an impact?**
- (c) Boys and girls ) (2014-...): in search of a life in a caliphate.. (see case 3.4).**

**Other observations:**

**a. Some recruiters are very well paid (money coming from people living in countries as Saudi Arabia).**

**b. The movies at the internet are professionally very well made.**

**c. End September 2014: Baghdadi published a fatwa, saying that if people can not come to Syria, they can take a personal initiative for an attempt in their country of provenance, without waiting for a command from Syria. Is it a turning point????**

**However, informants say me that the impact of Belgium's participation in the War against Daesh is much higher than the impact of Baghdadi's Fatwa.**

## 6.2. Is Daesh an Islamic organisation?

- **Is it Islamic?** Is the Ku-Klux Klan a Christian organisation related at the Bible?

- **Which kind of organisation?**

I hesitate between 2 interpretations about what is happening:

My arguments for the hesitation:

a. Interesting to see is, that “Abu Bakhr” is a surname, already for the first caliph, whose real name was Abdullah. Also, “al-Baghdadi” (= not real name). No one knows who is the real name of al-Baghdadi. Where is he coming from? Who is behind him? Who financed Daesh with more than 2,000,000,000 dollars as it is supposed to possess? (+ 1.000.000 dollars/daily: oil, smuggling,...). The (Sunni) Golf countries opposing ‘overall’ neighboring successful (Shia) Iran?

b. Is a political-mafia like structure using (= manipulating?) cultural elements from the Islam world: Salafiyya Jihadiyya + Takfirization? Or is it the Takfirization in the Salafiyya Jihadiyya that integrates mafia-like structures?

Most probably, we assist at a desperate Jihadisation that started with the trauma about Palestine, and continued afterwards in Afghanistan

a.s.o.

## **VII. Last question: Are they a menace?**

7.1. The question for Belgium is: Will one day someone come with a mission? And what will be the effect of the September 2014 Baghdadi Fatwa?

Other point: is a person who came back and killed already many persons a person who can repeat it here? Because of psychological disturbs...

Last point: The restrictive and repressive measures decided by Belgian government for Syria fighters who will come back have their effect on new candidate fighters. Without these measures, many others should have left. However, it does not mean that these people changed their ideas. If one day they will receive a 'coded' instruction from Syria, they may become a danger.

*(Personally, I think an attempt somewhere in the EU belongs to the realities we may expect... In the whole E.U. there are indeed some more than 3,000 'jihadists', and there is Schengen...info Gilles de Kerchove, 11.12.2014)*

**7.2.** Most returnees will not be a danger... and the important thing will be to avoid that returnees become completely isolated. What we will need is a huge investment in realistic re-socialisation and re-affiliation, combined with a perfect preventive intelligence system.

**7.3.** One should avoid the marginalization c.q. culpabilization of the parents of the 'fighters'; they should become important partners in the re-socialisation strategies.

**7.4.** If **Takfirization** is the problem, than, the following may be a good advice:

- a. Don't put all Salafism in 1 bucket;
- b. If Takfirization is a reduction of multiple identifications in one's life to 1 identification + making it an absolute truth, than good strategy may be: offering real opportunities for multiple identifications + stimulate discourse.

**You can find this powerpoint presentation at [www.foyer.be](http://www.foyer.be) ;  
blog Johan Leman:**

+ + +

On '**Current issues in Islam**' in general,  
See:

1. Toguslu, E., Leman, J. & I.M. Sezgin (eds.).  
***New Multicultural Identities in Europe.***  
Leuven University Press. 2014.

2. Toguslu, E. & J. Leman (eds.).  
***Modern Islamic Thinking and Activism.  
Dynamics in the West and in the Middle East.***  
Leuven University Press. 2014.

+ + +

See also Lectures Series 'Current issues in Islam' in 2nd Semester.

***Thank you! J.L., 28.10.2014***

Literature to be followed:

Amy Jane Gielen:

Comparing extreme right and radicalised Muslims:

The concept of cognitive opening to demand and offer.

See also Abdullah X (UK) for programmes  
of deradicalisation