

Italy's Jihadists in the Syrian Civil War

This ICCT Research Paper examines the current extent of Italy's Sunni jihadists in Syria. Italy presents interesting particularities, including a relatively small number of foreign fighters compared to other European countries (around one hundred, and only a small minority with Italian passports, according to recent estimates), the scant presence of domestic recruitment networks operating within the country and the prevalence of individual pathways of radicalisation over group mechanisms. However, the Italian case has not been extensively investigated. This exploratory paper, based on a case study-driven approach, first examines the scale of the problem and then focuses on the individual cases of four Italian nationals who differ in terms of both sex and origin. It also takes into account the different reactions of their families.

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Introduction¹

As is well-known, today the danger of so-called “foreign fighters”² is high on the agenda. These individuals can access militant groups, acquire weapons training and combat experience, and develop radical anti-Western positions. The phenomenon of foreign fighters is not novel but the flow of jihadist foreign fighters into Syria and Iraq is unprecedented.³ According to recent estimates, more than 29,000 foreign fighters have joined the fight against the Assad regime since 2011. Nearly one fifth of these individuals have come from the West. In fact, by 2015, foreign fighters from Europe and other Western democracies who departed for Syria reached between 5,000 and 7,000.⁴ According to a recent in-depth ICCT report, the EU-wide estimate lies between 3,922 and 4,294 foreign fighters and an average of 30% have returned to their countries of departure.⁵

Clearly, in addition to their role in conflict areas,⁶ the fear is that some of the survivors return to their home countries or to a third country and can carry out or support terrorist attacks. In fact, a number of serious terrorist attacks in Europe have involved returned foreign fighters: from Mohammed Merah’s shootings in Montauban and Toulouse in March 2012 to the devastating attacks in Paris on 13 November 2015 and beyond. Furthermore, according to some experts, jihadist foreign fighters have often played the crucial role of active “entrepreneurs” of terrorist cells in Europe.⁷ Additionally, the foreign fighters phenomenon may have a significant impact on social cohesion within European societies.⁸

This Research Paper explores the extent of the problem in Italy. This national case presents interesting particularities that both conform with, but also distinguish it from other European countries. The contingent of Italy’s jihadists who have travelled to Syria and Iraq appears to be fairly small, with around 100 individuals having left the country. On the other hand, Italy represents an important transit country for foreign fighters headed to Syria and Iraq.⁹ In this regard, it is worth recalling that the country has been considered an important logistical basis for Islamist militants since the early 1990s.¹⁰

¹ The author would like to thank the peer-reviewers for their helpful comments on an earlier version of this Research Paper. Any remaining failings are of course his responsibility.

² On the concept of “foreign fighter” see, in particular, A. P. Schmid and J. Tinnes, “Foreign (Terrorist) Fighters with IS: A European Perspective”, *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague* 6, no. 8 (2015), <http://icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/ICCT-Schmid-Foreign-Terrorist-Fighters-with-IS-A-European-Perspective-December2015.pdf>. In general, there is no common and agreed-upon definition of this term.

³ Cf. T. Hegghammer, “The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters: Islam and the Globalization of Jihad”, *International Security*, 35 (3), 2010, pp. 53-94.

⁴ A. P. Schmid and J. Tinnes, “*Foreign (Terrorist) Fighters with IS*”, pp. 7, 27.

⁵ B. Van Ginkel and E. Entenmann (Eds.), “The Foreign Fighters Phenomenon in the European Union. Profiles, Threats & Policies”, *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague* 7, no. 2 (2016), pp. 3, 49, <https://www.icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/ICCT-Report-Foreign-Fighters-Phenomenon-in-the-EU-1-April-2016-including-AnnexesLinks.pdf>.

⁶ See K. M. Bakke, “Help wanted? The mixed record of foreign fighters in domestic insurgencies”, *International Security*, 38 (4), 2014, pp. 150-187.

⁷ In particular, P. Nesser, *Islamist Terrorism in Europe: A History* (London: Hurst & Company, 2015).

⁸ See E. Bakker and J. de Roy van Zuijdewijn, “Jihadist Foreign Fighter Phenomenon in Western Europe: A Low-Probability, High-Impact Threat”, *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague* 6, no. 9 (2015), <https://www.icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/ICCT-Bakker-DeRoyvanZuijdewijn-Jihadist-Foreign-Fighter-Phenomenon-in-Western-Europe-October2015.pdf>.

⁹ For example, the latest annual report of the Italian police confirms that: “[i]n relation to the conflict in Syria it should be pointed out that the Italian territory has turned out to be a transit “hub” for foreign fighters who left from other European countries and travelled to the abovementioned theatre of conflict”, *Relazione al Parlamento sull’attività delle forze di polizia, sullo stato dell’ordine e della sicurezza pubblica e sulla criminalità organizzata – Anno 2014, 2015*, p. 12 (in Italian).

¹⁰ E.g., C. Björkman, “Salafi-Jihadi terrorism in Italy”, in M. Ranstorp (Ed.), *Understanding Violent Radicalisation: Terrorist and Jihadist Movements in Europe* (London - New York: Routledge, 2010), pp. 231-255.

This paper explores the current extent of Italy's Sunni jihadists who have joined armed groups in Syria.¹¹ In fact, after the outbreak of the civil war, Syria has become the main destination of European – and Italian – foreign fighters. Unlike other Western countries, the Italian case has not so far been extensively investigated.¹² This paper aims to help fill this gap. The analysis draws on both primary sources (in particular, interviews with experts¹³ and original jihadist material) and secondary sources (scientific works, journalistic pieces, official reports).

This paper is organised into five parts. The first chapter examines the scale of the problem. The second analyses the backgrounds, motivations and activities of four Italian jihadists on whom open-source information is available. The third chapter discusses these four individual cases, underlining points of similarity and difference. The fourth examines the different reactions of their families of origin. The conclusions recapitulate the most important findings presented in the paper.

1. The Foreign Fighters Problem in Italy

1.1. Size of the Italian Contingent

Official estimates of the Italian contingent date back to the end of 2015. In September 2015, Defence Minister Roberta Pinotti said that 87 foreign fighters had travelled from Italy. Only 12 individuals had Italian passports; in her words, “six were Italian nationals and another six had dual nationality”.¹⁴ The Defence Minister did not add other information, including names or ethnicities, on the grounds of secrecy. In addition, according to Italian media, in October 2015, Giampiero Massolo, then Director of the Security Intelligence Department (*Dipartimento delle informazioni per la sicurezza*, DIS), that is coordinator of Italy's intelligence system, referred to “around 90 foreign fighters” linked to Italy. In his words, “the Italians, sons of Italian parents, are fewer than 10”.¹⁵ According to the Italian Ministry of Interior, by October 2015, 57 out of the 87 foreign fighters were allegedly in the conflict zone, while 18 had died. The authorities also

¹¹ It is clear that not all foreign fighters are *jihadist*. For example, at least one Italian citizen, Karim Franceschi (born in 1989), went to Iraq, in January 2016, to fight in Kobani, alongside the YPG (Kurdish acronym of the People's Protection Units) and against IS. He returned home three months later and has not been tried. See, e.g., his newspaper interview in F. Tonacci, “Karim Franceschi: ‘Io, l'italiano di Kobane. Così ho combattuto l'Is nel nome di mio padre che sconfisse i fascisti’”, *La Repubblica*, 14 April 2015, http://www.repubblica.it/cronaca/2015/04/14/news/_io_l_italiano_di_kobane_cosi_ho_combattuto_l_is_nel_nome_di_mio_padre_che_sconfisse_i_fascisti_-111891706/?refresh_ce.

¹² For a first exploration see F. Marone, “Italian Jihadists in Syria and Iraq”, in *Journal of Terrorism Research*, 7 (1), 2016, pp. 20-35. The present ICCT Research Paper draws in part on this article. Moreover, references to Italian foreign fighters and jihadists in Syria can be found, among others, in L. Vidino, *Home-Grown Jihadism in Italy: Birth, Development and Radicalization Dynamics*, Foreword by S. Dambrosio (Milan: ISPI and European Foundation for Democracy, 2014); M. Vergani, “Neojihadist Prosumers and Al Qaeda Single Narrative: The Case Study of Giuliano Delnevo”, in *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 37 (7), 2014, pp. 604-617; M. Lombardi, “Violent Radicalization Concerns in the Euro-Mediterranean Region”, in M. Lombardi et al. (Eds.), *Countering Radicalisation and Violent Extremism Among Youth to Prevent Terrorism* (Amsterdam: IOS Press, 2015), pp. 83-100; R. Guolo, *L'ultima utopia. Gli jihadisti europei* (Milano: Guerini e Associati, 2015), chapter 8; A. Boncio, “Italian Foreign Terrorist Fighters: Numbers, Features, and Case Studies”, *International Security Observer*, 16 November 2015, <http://securityobserver.org/italian-foreign-terrorist-fighters-numbers-features-and-case-studies/>; M. Lombardi, *Il terrorismo nel nuovo millennio* (Milan: Vita e Pensiero, 2016).

¹³ The list of experts is given at the end of the text.

¹⁴ “Pinotti: nelle file dell'Isis 87 foreign fighters passati dall'Italia”, *Il Sole 24 Ore*, 20 September 2015, <http://www.ilssole24ore.com/art/notizie/2015-09-20/pinotti-file-dell-isis-87-foreign-fighters-passati-dall-italia-170441.shtml?uuid=AC51QL1>.

¹⁵ “Secondo i servizi segreti i foreign fighters italiani sono circa 90”, *Il Foglio quotidiano*, 20 October 2015, http://www.ilfoglio.it/cronache/2015/10/20/secondo-i-servizi-segreti-italiani-i-foreign-fighters-italiani-sono-circa-90-1-v-134047-rubriche_c285.htm

indicated that 15 foreign fighters had joined the so-called “Islamic State” (IS), two had joined Jabhat al Nusra, and seven had joined other opposition forces.¹⁶ According to recent reports, the returned foreign fighters, not necessarily all dangerous, would number ten (i.e., 11% of the total).¹⁷ Moreover, according to estimates presented by analyst Alessandro Boncio, “[t]he age of the Italian foreign terrorist fighters ranges from 18 to 42 years, with a majority of youngsters (18-26 years); the [sic] 29% of the fighters are converts and the percentage of women makes up around 7% of the total”.¹⁸

It is worth stressing that in the Italian case, official estimates are generally high because they include individuals who are linked to the country in various forms, in a broad sense (not only citizens and residents). For example, according to some sources, the 87 foreign fighters belong to three different categories: Italian citizens, both converts and “second-generation immigrants” (12 individuals, as indicated by Minister Pinotti); foreign nationals who resided in Italy for medium-long periods (11); foreign nationals who passed through the country and stayed there for short periods (64).¹⁹

According to Italian media, more recently, at the end of April 2016, the then Chief of Police, Alessandro Pansa, is said to have mentioned 98 foreign fighters linked to Italy.²⁰ Thus, it can be estimated that the number of jihadist foreign fighters linked to Italy – Italian citizens or not – is around 100 individuals. Actually, only a minority have Italian passports. After all, this is a modest figure, compared to recent estimates²¹ for other large European countries, such as France (1,700 fighters), the UK (760) and Germany (760); and low even compared to less populous countries such as Belgium (470), Austria (300), Sweden (300) and the Netherlands (250).²² In the European context, Italy’s number of foreign fighters can be described as medium/low in absolute terms and very low in relation to the general population (around 1 foreign fighter per million, compared to 41 per million in Belgium).²³ On the other hand, these figures are still on the increase: for example, the contingent of foreign fighters linked to Italy was officially estimated at 59 individuals back in January 2015, representing a 47% increase in eight months.

1.2. National Context

Some of these foreign fighters are connected with the local home-grown jihadist milieu, made up of converts and “second-generation immigrants”, with or without Italian passports.²⁴ This home-grown jihadist scene has only recently emerged in the country

¹⁶ ICCT questionnaire completed by the Public Security Department of the Italian Ministry of Interior in October 2015, quoted in Van Ginkel and Entenmann (Eds.), *The Foreign Fighters Phenomenon in the European Union*, p. 45.

¹⁷ G. Buccini, “I musulmani sono 1 milione e mezzo. In mille «sotto osservazione»”, *Corriere della Sera*, 27 November 2015, http://www.corriere.it/cronache/15_novembre_27/i-musulmani-sono-1-milione-mezzo-mille-sotto-osservazione-b67381da-94cb-11e5-b54c-257f4e9e995d.shtml; *Foreign Fighters. An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq*, New York: The Soufan Group, December 2015, p. 8, http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/TSG_ForeignFightersUpdate3.pdf.

¹⁸ Boncio, “Italian Foreign Terrorist Fighters”.

¹⁹ R. Pepicelli, “Italia, il jihadismo di terza generazione”, *AffarInternazionali*, 21 April 2016, <http://www.affarinternazionali.it/articolo.asp?ID=3421>.

²⁰ The then Chief of Police reported this figure in a closed-door hearing before the Parliamentary Committee which surveys and oversees the activities of the Italian intelligence system (*Comitato parlamentare per la sicurezza della Repubblica*, COPASIR) on 26 April 2016. “Terrorismo, Pansa: “Sono 98 i ‘foreign fighters’ italiani””, *Quotidiano Nazionale*, 26 April 2016, <http://www.quotidiano.net/terrorismo-foreign-fighters-1.2100450>.

²¹ In particular, Schmid and Tinnes, “*Foreign (Terrorist) Fighters with IS*”, p. 25.

²² In particular, Schmid and Tinnes, “*Foreign (Terrorist) Fighters with IS*”; Van Ginkel and Entenmann (Eds.), *The Foreign Fighters Phenomenon in the European Union*.

²³ Cf. Van Ginkel and Entenmann (Eds.), *The Foreign Fighters Phenomenon in the European Union*, pp. 49-51.

²⁴ See L. Vidino, *Home-Grown Jihadism in Italy*.

and it is still relatively small in size,²⁵ especially in comparison with other Western European countries. Within this radical milieu, which is heterogeneous and unstructured within the country, the percentage of converts appears to be over-represented in comparison with their ratio among the broader Islamic community (see below). As for “second-generation immigrants”, the relatively limited scope of this threat is, to some extent, the result of a simple demographic factor: unlike other Western European countries, large-scale Muslim immigration to Italy began only in the late 1980s and early 1990s and therefore the first wave of “second-generation Muslims” has only recently entered adulthood.²⁶

Obviously, jihadists represent only a tiny minority of the Islamic presence. Unfortunately, there is no official information on the size and the composition of the Muslim community in Italy.²⁷ Different rough estimates are available on this subject. However, relatively recent estimates from reputable sources set the number of Muslim individuals at about 1.6 million,²⁸ out of nearly 61 million residents (2,6%), with a significant growth in recent years. Today, Islam is the second most widespread religion after Roman Catholicism. The overwhelming majority of these Muslim residents are Sunni. They are predominantly first-generation immigrants. According to rough estimates, converts would be in the range of 70,000 (around 4% of the Muslim community).²⁹ In short, in Italy Islam is still, to a large extent, a “religion of immigrants” and is even more widely perceived in this way by the population (actually, only about one third of all immigrants are Muslim).

In general, this religious community, scattered throughout the territory, is heterogeneous and stratified along ethno-national and cultural lines, unlike other European countries. In addition, it lacks a unified leadership.³⁰ A variety of Islamic organisations, with divergent orientations and positions, are active in the country. All of them have officially condemned jihadist violence.³¹ It is worth mentioning that, despite repeated efforts, no official bilateral agreement (*Intesa*) has yet been signed between the Italian State and representative bodies of the Muslim community in the country. Furthermore, it can be argued that the country has not adopted a clear model of pluralism or integration.³²

As has been noted, the public visibility of Islam in Italy is seldom due to Muslims' activism but is mainly the product of the cultural and political mobilisation of which

²⁵ It is difficult to provide precise estimates. In a thorough analysis from 2014, Lorenzo Vidino, a prominent expert in this field, wrote: “It can be argued that the number of individuals actively involved in this new home-grown jihadist scene [in Italy] is about 40 or 50, and that those with varying degrees of sympathy with it number somewhere in the lower hundreds” (p. 77). The order of magnitude of these estimates was confirmed by Lorenzo Vidino in an interview with the author in May 2016.

²⁶ In particular, Vidino, *Home-Grown Jihadism in Italy*, p. 8.

²⁷ For a broad overview see C. Saint-Blancat, “Italy”, in J. Cesari (Ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of European Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 265-310.

²⁸ In particular, the 2015 internal report of the Italian Ministry of the Interior, updated to 31 December 2014, cited in V. Polchi, “L’Islam in Italia e le ‘moschee in garage’. Il Viminale le ha censite: sono trenta soltanto a Roma”, *La Repubblica*, 27 November 2015,

http://www.repubblica.it/solidarieta/immigrazione/2015/11/27/news/islam_in_italia_moschee_in_garage_dati_viminal_e-128274233/; see also G. Galeazzi and I. Lombardo, “Making Space for Islam in Catholic Italy”, *La Stampa*, 30 May 2016, <http://www.lastampa.it/2016/05/30/esteri/lastampa-in-english/making-space-for-islam-in-catholic-italy-c9wShtisWlyPP8NKbi21jN/pagina.html> (English version).

²⁹ V. Polchi, “L’Islam in Italia e le ‘moschee in garage’”; Galeazzi and Lombardo, “Making Space for Islam in Catholic Italy”.

³⁰ E. g., L. Vidino, “Islam, Islamism and Jihadism in Italy” in *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, 7, 2008, pp. 7-27.

³¹ S. Cogliervina and V. Premazzi, “L’Islam in Italia di fronte al fondamentalismo violento”, in A. Plebani and M. Diez (Eds.), *La galassia fondamentalista tra jihad armato e partecipazione politica* (Padova: Marsilio, 2015) (e-book).

³² S. Allievi “Immigration, religious diversity and recognition of differences: The Italian way to multiculturalism”, in *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power*, 21 (6), 2014, pp. 724-737.

Islam has been made the target.³³ In particular, Italy has not been immune to the Islamophobic attitudes which have pervaded European societies in the last 15 years. For example, a comparative study conducted by the Pew Research Center after the Charlie Hebdo massacre in January 2015 found that as many as 61% of Italian adults expressed a negative view of Muslims in their country.³⁴ Furthermore, today, fear of immigration, fear of terrorism and fear of Islam are in danger of overlapping among the population, especially after the strong growth of irregular migration flows from Libya by boat and the sequence of terrorists attacks carried out by jihadist militants in Europe and in other regions.

As mentioned earlier, only a minority of the jihadist foreign fighters linked to the country have Italian passports: arguably a few tens at most. However, these individuals deserve attention because they are particularly difficult to detect and stop. In fact, full-fledged Italian citizens – and especially Italian-born converts – may arouse less suspicion because in the country Islamist extremism is still often associated with immigrants. Furthermore, Italian nationals cannot be expelled. By contrast, many home-grown jihadists who were born or grew up in the country may not have citizenship, because of Italy's strict naturalisation laws,³⁵ and could therefore be subject to deportation.³⁶

It is important to stress that Italy has made extensive use of administrative expulsions of foreign suspects for reasons of State security, without prior trials. For example, from 2015 to May 2016, 88 individuals were deported.³⁷ According to some experts, fast-track deportations can help prevent the creation and stabilisation of extremist networks on national territory.³⁸ This original tool represents a key element of the national counter-terrorism policy.³⁹ The limited number of jihadists, in turn, makes the monitoring and surveillance of suspects easier compared to other European countries. Overall, according to many observers, the Italian system has proved to be effective against the jihadist threat.⁴⁰ In any case, it is a fact that Italy has, to date, avoided major attacks on home soil.

³³ Saint-Blancat, "Italy", p. 274.

³⁴ 2015 Pew Research Center survey, <http://www.pewglobal.org/2015/06/02/chapter-3-anti-minority-sentiment-not-rising/#jews-seen-favorably>.

³⁵ Italy has one of the lowest rates of naturalisation in Europe. Nationality law is largely based on the principle of *jus sanguinis*. However, a new, less restrictive, law is currently under discussion in Parliament. See, for example, S. Pasta, "Riforma della cittadinanza: forse mai così vicina ora che il Senato sta per discuterne", *La Repubblica*, 13 April 2016, http://www.repubblica.it/solidarieta/diritti-umani/2016/04/13/news/riforma_della_cittadinanza_mai_cosi_vicina_va_approvata_subito_anche_dal_senato_-137540854/.

³⁶ Vidino, *Home-Grown Jihadism in Italy*, pp. 9, 77, 104; see also F. Marone, "Italian Jihadists in Syria and Iraq", p. 21.

³⁷ "Terrorismo, espulsi coniugi marocchini nel Varesotto. Alfano: 'Potenzialmente pericolosi'", *La Repubblica*, 20 May 2016, http://milano.repubblica.it/cronaca/2016/05/20/news/terrorismo_espulsi_coniugi_marocchini_nel_varesotto_1_annunci_o_di_alfano_pericolosi_-140209901/.

³⁸ Interview by the author with Lorenzo Vidino, May 2016. For a positive view of Italy's approach see also E. N. Luttwak, "Doing counterterrorism right", *Nikkei Asian Review*, 30 November 2015, <http://asia.nikkei.com/Viewpoints/Viewpoints/Doing-counterterrorism-right?page=1>.

³⁹ See F. Marone, "Italy", in S. N. Romaniuk *et al.* (Eds), *Palgrave Handbook of Global Counterterrorism Policy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming).

⁴⁰ As confirmed by interviews by the author with prominent experts, including Marco Lombardi and Lorenzo Vidino, May 2016.

2. Four Individual Case Studies

Although, in general, there is little public information on Italy's foreign fighters and other jihadists who left for Syria, four cases are relatively well-known. They concern (in chronological order of their departure for Syria):

1. Giuliano Delnevo, the first Italian foreign fighter, who left in November 2012 and died in combat in the Aleppo area in June 2013;
2. Anas el Abboubi, a second-generation "born-again" Muslim who joined the ranks of IS in September 2013;
3. Maria Giulia Sergio, a female convert who, after her departure in September 2014, settled in the self-proclaimed "caliphate", where she has received some weapons training;
4. Meriam Rehaily, a young "second-generation immigrant" who left for Syria in July 2015.

The two men, Delnevo and el Abboubi, served as foreign fighters alongside an al Qaeda-linked group and IS, respectively. By contrast, Sergio and Rehaily, as women, have so far not been allowed to engage in combat for IS. However, Sergio explicitly expressed her desire to fight. In general, we know that women, with or without children, form a minority of jihadists who have left for Syria and Iraq. Nevertheless, the problem of European *muhajirat* (female "emigrants") is on the rise and has been receiving increasing attention.⁴¹

Like many foreign fighters in Europe, these four individuals are either second-generation children of Muslim immigrants or recent converts to Islam. Thus, in a simple table that combines the basic characteristics of sex and origin, each individual case in our sample occupies a different cell (Table 1).

Individual cases of foreign fighters by category		Sex	
		Male	Female
Origin	Descendant of immigrant parents	Anas el Abboubi	Meriam Rehaily
	Convert of Italian descent	Giuliano Delnevo	Maria Giulia Sergio

Table 1: Individual cases of Italian foreign fighters by category

This chapter reconstructs the backgrounds, motivations, and activities of these four jihadists, on the basis of currently available knowledge. The information on the cases

⁴¹ E.g., E. Bakker and S. de Leede, "European Female Jihadists in Syria: Exploring an Under-Researched Topic", The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague (ICCT), April 2015, <http://icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/ICCT-Bakker-de-Leede-European-Female-Jihadists-In-Syria-Exploring-An-Under-Researched-Topic-April2015.pdf>.

of Delnevo, el Abboubi and Sergio, based to a considerable extent on crime investigation material, are very solid, while in the more recent case of Rehaily important, at times even striking, aspects have not yet been confirmed and still require to be treated with caution. While this is a small sample, it is drawn from a relatively small population (especially as regards Italian nationals: only a dozen, according to the latest official estimates by Italian authorities) and can contribute to a better understanding of the foreign fighter threat in Italy.

2.1. Giuliano Delnevo⁴²

Giuliano Delnevo was born in February 1989 in the north-western port city of Genoa (Liguria region) to a Catholic middle-class family. His parents separated when he was a child. He grew up in the historic centre of the city, one of Italy's most ethnically diverse areas.⁴³ He was a quite introverted and sensitive person and experienced socialisation problems and difficulties at school in his teenage years. He went to a nautical technical high school. The closest among his few friends was an older schoolmate of Moroccan descent, Naim, who had failed his exams several times.⁴⁴

Once turned 18 years of age, Delnevo and his friend spent some months in the port city of Ancona, in central Italy, where Giuliano's older brother worked as a nautical engineer.⁴⁵ There Delnevo got a job as a handyman in a shipyard and met a group of fellow workers, probably from Bangladesh, who reportedly were members of Tablighi Jamaat, the Islamic missionary movement established in India in the 1920s, devoted to proselytism (*da'wah*). In 2008, Delnevo converted to Islam and took the name Ibrahim.⁴⁶

Once back in Genoa, Delnevo obtained his high-school diploma and enrolled in university (degree in History) but preferred to devote most of his time to Islam. He stopped wearing Western style clothing and started wearing the *djellaba* (the traditional robe of middle-eastern origin) and grew a beard. Moreover, he befriended Umar Andrea Lazzaro, another Genoese convert who was known for his previous militancy in the local far-right scene and his strong anti-American sentiments.⁴⁷ Lazzaro and Delnevo were the driving force of a small group of converts operating in the city of Genoa, inspired mainly by the Deobandi school, the Indo-Pakistan revivalist movement established in 1867. According to the information available, most local mosques shunned these converts. Thus, the small group started to seek contact with more established Islamist circles in other European countries. Following a trip to the UK, Delnevo was investigated in Genoa on suspicion of enlistment for the purposes of terrorism. According to unconfirmed reports, he is also alleged to have visited Chechnya.⁴⁸

⁴² See also Vidino, *Home-Grown Jihadism in Italy*; Marone, "Italian Jihadists in Syria and Iraq".

⁴³ A. Pieracci, "Dal Marocco alla Cecenia. L'orizzonte del male di Ibrahim". *La Stampa*, 19 June 2013, <http://www.lastampa.it/2013/06/19/esteri/dal-marocco-alla-cecenia-lorizzonte-del-male-di-ibrahim-1vFfa7WdB2JoYBPOkEbU3N/pagina.html>; Vidino, *Home-Grown Jihadism in Italy*, pp. 69-74.

⁴⁴ According to Delnevo's father, Carlo, this boy "has no desire to study and, what is worse, he obstinately tries to drag Giuliano, too, into his juvenile nihilism". C. Delnevo, *Il figlio musulmano* (Tricase: Youcanprint, 2015) (e-book).

⁴⁵ G. Piccardo, "Giuliano Ibrahim Delnevo: l'amico Umberto Marozzi: 'Mi scrisse che in Siria i martiri profumano...'", *L'Huffington Post*, 18 June 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.it/2013/06/18/giuliano-ibrahim-delnevo_n_3459366.html; Delnevo, *Il figlio musulmano*.

⁴⁶ C. Delnevo, *Vi racconto Giuliano* [I'll tell you about Giuliano], YouTube video, 2 September 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8B8NLaHS4HA> (in Italian); Vidino, *Home-Grown Jihadism in Italy*, pp. 69-70.

⁴⁷ Marone, "Italian Jihadists in Syria and Iraq", p. 33.

⁴⁸ Pieracci, "Dal Marocco alla Cecenia. L'orizzonte del male di Ibrahim". Marone, "Italian Jihadists in Syria and Iraq", p. 22.

Delnevo was active on the internet. He created a Facebook profile and a YouTube channel which he called LiguristanTV (Liguria being the Italian region of which Genoa is the capital).⁴⁹ In his online production, the Genoese convert created an original hybrid, mixing the usual narrative of jihadism with Western and Italian themes, such as leftist anti-imperialist symbols and even celebratory references to the Italian nation.⁵⁰ He also showed a contradictory fascination for motives of violence and criminality, coming from Western popular culture (in particular, movies) as a form of youth rebellion from society.⁵¹

From 2008, Delnevo did not study or work and all his life resolved around Islamic activism. He became increasingly militant. Online he met a Moroccan woman 13 years his senior and married her soon after. He moved to Tangier, presumably around 2011, but returned without her after a few months.⁵² She remained in Morocco with her family. In Genoa, Delnevo separated from his small group of converts and broke with his friend Lazzaro, a reflective person seemingly more interested in his studies than in action.⁵³

Delnevo began looking for connections that would allow him to join a field of *jihad* abroad. In the summer of 2012, he travelled to Turkey and from there sought to cross into Syria but his attempt failed and he returned to Italy. He tried again a few months later, with more success. First, he shaved his long beard and started wearing Western style clothes again, probably in order to arouse less suspicion. Then, on 27 November 2012, he went to Turkey by plane and reached Syria. After a few weeks, he called his father, telling him he had travelled to Syria and joined a group of foreign fighters led by Chechen militants; namely, the *Katibat al-Muhajirin* (Brigade of the Emigrants).⁵⁴

He appeared to be enthusiastic about his experience and optimistic about the final outcome of the conflict against the Assad regime.⁵⁵ At times his account from Syria reflected an almost mystical religiosity. For example, he wrote to an Italian convert: "*Insha'Allah*, we will win. Do you know that here miracles happen? Martyrs smell nice. Airplanes are brought down with prayers".⁵⁶ In a dramatic Skype conversation on 11 June 2013, Delnevo told his father that the enemy was only 100 metres away and to pray for him. On the next day, his father received a call from a man named Zamza, possibly a Chechen commander, using Delnevo's cell phone, telling him in English that his son Giuliano/Ibrahim had died the night before while trying to help a fellow fighter of Somali origin who had been shot.⁵⁷ The Genoese foreign fighter lost his life near the village of Kafr Hamrah, in the north-west of Syria, at the age of 24.⁵⁸ He was the first

⁴⁹ See: <https://www.youtube.com/user/liguristanTV>. Delnevo uploaded nine low-quality videos.

⁵⁰ Vergani, "Neojihadist Prosumers and Al Qaeda Single Narrative".

⁵¹ It is worth mentioning that the online production of other Italian jihadists includes motifs and symbols which are not in line with orthodox jihadist narratives and even refers to practices which are usually considered as *haram* (forbidden), especially for radical Islamists. Interview by the author with Marco Lombardi, May 2016.

⁵² L. Vidino, *Home-Grown Jihadism in Italy*, p. 72.

⁵³ M. Imarisio, "L'italiano ucciso in Siria reclutava altri guerriglieri". *Corriere della Sera*, 20 June 2013; M. Grasso and M. Indicere, "Il genovese 'Umar' e la morte di Delnevo: 'È inutile, tanto voi non capite'", *Il Secolo XIX*, 28 August 2014: http://www.ilsecoloxix.it/p/genova/2014/08/28/ARZiFhmB-inutile_genovese_delnevo.shtml.

⁵⁴ In March 2013, this brigade merged with two other jihadist groups and became *Jaish al-Muhajirin wal-Ansar* (Army of Emigrants and Helpers).

⁵⁵ Vidino, *Home-Grown Jihadism in Italy*, pp. 73-74.

⁵⁶ Piccardo, "Giuliano Ibrahim Delnevo".

⁵⁷ C. Delnevo, *Vi racconto Giuliano*; C. Delnevo, *Il figlio musulmano*; B. Persano, "Il padre di Giuliano Delnevo: 'Mio figlio è morto da eroe per salvare un amico'", *La Repubblica*, 19 June 2013,

http://www.repubblica.it/esteri/2013/06/19/news/il_padre_di_giuliano_delnevo_mio_figlio_morto_da_eroe_per_salvar_e_un_amico-61412780/. This account, difficult to prove, reproduces the jihadist narrative of the heroic militant who sacrifices his life for his "brothers".

⁵⁸ Delnevo, *Il figlio musulmano*.

Italian foreign fighter to fall in battle. His eulogistic obituary, which referred to him as Abu Musa, was featured on various jihadist websites.⁵⁹

From December 2012 to March 2013, Delnevo's mother, Eva Guerriero, had travelled along the border between Turkey and Syria in her search of her son, but she did not succeed in finding him.⁶⁰ In a visit to Syria in the autumn of 2013, after his death, she managed to find Giuliano/Ibrahim's diary.⁶¹ This document was consigned to the public prosecutor's office of Genoa and, at the time of writing, apart from few passages, its content has not been made available.⁶² Delnevo's body has not been found. In December 2015, the Italian judiciary concluded that there was no evidence that the Genoese convert had been committed to recruit other people or to participate in terrorist acts in Italy.⁶³

Interestingly, Delnevo's father, Carlo, has repeatedly described his son as a brave "hero",⁶⁴ even though he explicitly does not share his extremist ideas.⁶⁵ His statements caused controversy in the country.⁶⁶ In early 2014, Carlo Delnevo, in his own words a "practising Catholic", decided, accepting his son's wish, to convert to Islam.⁶⁷

2.2. Anas el Abboubi⁶⁸

Anas el Abboubi was born in Marrakech, Morocco, on 17 October 1992, but moved to Italy when he was seven. He lived with his well-integrated Muslim family (father, mother, and a younger brother) in Vobarno, a small rural town near Brescia (Lombardy region), in northern Italy.⁶⁹ In high school, el Abboubi developed a passion for rap and was active in the Brescia Hip Hop scene under the name of Mckhalifh. In March 2012, this energetic teenager appeared in an MTV report on young Muslim musicians in Italy.

⁵⁹ Vidino, *Home-Grown Jihadism in Italy*, p. 74.

⁶⁰ M. Calandri, "Tre mesi di odissea a un passo dal fronte, volevo salvare mio figlio ma ho fallito". *La Repubblica*, Genoa local edition, 20 June 2013, http://genova.repubblica.it/cronaca/2013/06/20/news/tre_mesi_di_odissea_a_un_passo_dal_frente_volevo_salvare_mio_figlio_ma_ho_fallito-61477598/.

⁶¹ M. Preve, "Trovato il diario del genovese ucciso in Siria per la Jihad", *La Repubblica*, Genoa local edition, 23 August 2014, http://genova.repubblica.it/cronaca/2014/08/23/news/trovato_il_diario_del_genovese_ucciso_in_siria_per_la_jihad-94312122/.

⁶² These passages include an ill-concealed dissatisfaction with the difficult conditions of the ordinary fighters on the ground. In particular, Delnevo complained that "we live hard", while "the leaders" are well-settled "in houses" or even in comfortable "hotels". One again, this young man is upset by an alleged injustice. E. Dellacasa, "Il diario di 'Ibrahim', jihadista genovese: capi in hotel, noi in tenda", *Corriere della Sera*, 24 August 2014, http://www.corriere.it/esteri/14_agosto_24/diario-di-ibrahim-jihadista-genovese-capi-hotel-noi-tenda-e654d982-2b61-11e4-9f19-fba1b3d7cb6f.shtml.

⁶³ "Delnevo non era reclutatore", archiviata inchiesta sul genovese morto in Siria", *La Repubblica*, Genoa local edition, 2 December 2015, http://genova.repubblica.it/cronaca/2015/12/02/news/del_nevo_non_era_reclutatore_archiviata_inchiesta_sul_genovese_morto_in_siria-128638551/.

⁶⁴ B. Persano, "Il padre di Giuliano Delnevo".

⁶⁵ "Jihad, il padre del ragazzo ucciso: 'Ragazzi non partite'". *La Repubblica*, Genoa local edition, 28 August 2014, http://genova.repubblica.it/cronaca/2014/08/28/news/jihad_il_padre_del_ragazzo_ucciso_ragazzi_non_partite-94609127/.

⁶⁶ Even Italy's Head of Government, Matteo Renzi, intervened to criticise Carlo Delnevo's words. "Renzi, chi uccide in nome dio non è eroe, no indulgenza", *Ansa*, 15 January 2015, http://www.ansa.it/liguria/notizie/2015/01/14/renzi-chi-uccide-in-nome-dio-non-e-eroe-no-indulgenza_7da562da-4b5d-4d57-a299-9ab8d68753a6.html.

⁶⁷ Delnevo, *Il figlio musulmano*.

⁶⁸ See also Vidino, *Home-Grown Jihadism in Italy*; Marone, "Italian Jihadists in Syria and Iraq".

⁶⁹ Interestingly, Mohamed Lahlaoui (born in 1987), a suspected jihadist of Moroccan origin with criminal records, lived just a few kilometres away, in the same valley, from 2007 to 2014, before he was expelled from the country. Lahlaoui was in contact with Khalid el Bakraoui, one of the suicide bombers of the 22 March 2016 attacks in Brussels. He was arrested in Germany a few days after the attacks. P. Biondani, "Bruxelles, arrestato terrorista legato all'Italia", *L'Espresso*, 25 March 2016, <http://espresso.repubblica.it/internazionale/2016/03/25/news/bruxelles-arrestato-terrorista-legato-all-italia-1.255807>. However, there are currently no indications of ties between Lahlaoui and el Abboubi.

In this mini-documentary, he expressed ambivalent, albeit not hostile, feelings toward Italians and described with satisfaction his “return” to Islam a year and a half before the interview.⁷⁰

Nevertheless, in a few months, el Abboubi “went from being a restless teenager using alcohol and light drugs to a rapper motivated by Islam and, finally, a committed jihadist militant”.⁷¹ Tellingly, he changed the content of the YouTube channel he had held since his rap days to bring it more in line with his new religious zeal.⁷² In the summer of 2012, he began to follow and produce Islamist material on the internet, under the name of Anas Abu Shakur. In particular, he lashed out at the values and institutions of Western civilisation (including individualism and sexual promiscuity, man-made legal systems, global capitalism and the banking system⁷³) and denounced the “crusade against Islam of the new world order” led by the US. He also displayed anti-Jewish sentiments. Furthermore, he openly expressed his desire to travel for *jihad*.⁷⁴

El Abboubi soon got in touch with other jihadist activists, especially in central and northern Europe (the UK, Belgium, Germany). He was also in contact with Giuliano/Ibrahim Delnevo. Moreover, he tried to open the Italian branch of the radical Sharia4 franchise,⁷⁵ Sharia4Italy,⁷⁶ although without much success. Italian authorities have monitored his activities at least since September 2012. On 12 June 2013 (on the very day when Delnevo was killed in Syria), they decided to arrest el Abboubi after becoming concerned by the increased militancy of his online activities and, above all, by the fact that he had used the internet to research various iconic sites in Brescia (Operation “Screen Shot”).⁷⁷ The worry was that he could be planning attacks in the city. He was charged with providing training and instructions for purposes of terrorism.⁷⁸ However, on 28 June 2013, he was released, as the court did not deem his behaviour a violation of the law.⁷⁹

On 14 September 2013, Abboubi travelled to Syria, via Turkey, where he became a fighter of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (now IS). If the charge of preparing terrorist attacks in Brescia turned out to be well founded, el Abboubi’s story would represent an interesting and quite unusual case of a jihadist who attempted to carry out attacks in the West and *later* travelled to the Syrian battlefield.⁸⁰ In order to arrange his travel, el Abboubi contacted a small group of Albanian jihadist facilitators who operated between the Balkans and Italy. Two Albanian citizens (Alban Haki Elezi, 38, and his nephew Idris Elvis Elezi, 20), were arrested on these grounds by Italian

⁷⁰ MTV Italia, *Nel ritmo di Allah* [In the Rhythm of Allah], 2012; a trailer of this mini-documentary is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EObUCoujN0o&feature=youtu.be>. The video about el Abboubi (*La storia di McKhalifh*, “The Story of McKhalifh”) is no longer available online. See Vidino, *Home-Grown Jihadism in Italy*, pp. 61-62.

⁷¹ Vidino, *Home-Grown Jihadism in Italy*, p. 62.

⁷² See: <https://www.youtube.com/user/MCKHALIF>. El Abboubi uploaded four videos.

⁷³ See his blog: <http://banca-islamica.blogspot.it/>. El Abboubi wrote only one post, on August 18, 2012.

⁷⁴ In particular, Vidino, *Home-Grown Jihadism in Italy*, pp. 63-64.

⁷⁵ Sharia4 is a transnational movement with autonomous branches in various European countries. It is well-known for its provocative rhetoric and deliberately confrontational protests. In some cases, local branches, especially Sharia4Belgium, also facilitated the passage of jihadists to Iraq and Syria. See, among others, L. Vidino, “Sharia4: From Confrontational Activism to Militancy”, in *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 9 (2), 2015, 2-16.

⁷⁶ El Abboubi started a dedicated blog: <http://sharia4italy.blogspot.it/>. There are only two posts, both written on May 19, 2012.

⁷⁷ Italian State Police, “Operazione Scen Shot”, Press release, Brescia, 20 June 2013, <http://questure.poliziadistato.it/Brescia/articolo-6-91-56067-1.htm>; W. Petenzi, “Nel mirino dello studente pure questore e piazza Loggia”, *Corriere della Sera*, 13 June 2013.

⁷⁸ Art. 270 *quinqies* of the Italian penal code, introduced in July 2005, soon after the terrorist attacks in London.

⁷⁹ M. Rodella, “Il ‘terrorista’ di Vobarno torna a casa”, *Corriere della Sera*, 29 June 2013.

⁸⁰ T. Hegghammer, “Should I Stay or Should I Go? Explaining Variation in Western Jihadists’ Choice between Domestic and Foreign Fighting”, in *American Political Science Review*, 107 (1), 2013, pp. 1-15.

authorities in March 2015, respectively in Albania and Italy (Operation “Balkan Connection”).⁸¹ The Elezis were already known in Albania for their family link to Idajet Balliu, a jihadist who was killed in Syria in August 2014; Alban Elezi reportedly had helped him leave for the battlefield. Both uncle and nephew were released by July 2015, against the opinion of the prosecution, for lack of evidence on their genuine activity of recruitment in direct support of IS.⁸²

In August 2013, el Abboubi had created a new Facebook profile, under the name Anas al-Italy and indicated his job as “jihad”. However, this profile has not been available online since January 2014. The last phone call with his mother was on 28 January 2014.⁸³

As is well-known, in March 2016 an alleged IS staff list was leaked. This document includes the names of 122 people who were willing to become “martyrs” for the armed group. One of them, named Rawaha al Itali, from Brescia, is likely to be Anas el Abboubi. He would have registered in September 2013 in Aleppo, presenting an Italian identity card.⁸⁴ To this day, the fate of Anas is not clear. However, in March 2016, his father said in an interview that he was dead.⁸⁵

2.3. Maria Giulia Sergio⁸⁶

Maria Giulia Sergio, a 28-year-old woman, was born in Torre del Greco, near Naples, to a Catholic family (father, mother and an older sister). Her parents came from a humble background and had economic problems. The family decided to move to northern Italy around 2000; they settled in Inzago, a town between Milan and Bergamo (Lombardy region). There her sister Marianna (born in 1985) married a Muslim immigrant of Algerian origin.

After high-school, Sergio studied biotechnology at the State University of Milan. She also worked in part-time jobs to pay for her studies. In 2007, she converted to Islam on her own initiative and took a new name, Fatima az Zahra.⁸⁷ In her own words, the internet facilitated a sudden conversion experience. In particular, she followed the online videos of Yusuf Estes, a controversial Muslim preacher from Texas who converted to Islam in the 1990s.⁸⁸ Sergio declared the *Shahada* (the Islamic profession

⁸¹ The two Albanians also approached an Italian-born teenager of Tunisian descent, Mahmoud Ben Ammar, who lived in Como, not far from Milan. In the end, the boy backed out. See G. Bianconi, “Le conversazioni via Facebook. ‘Reclutati quaranta italiani’”, *Corriere della Sera*, 26 March 2015, http://roma.corriere.it/notizie/cronaca/15_marzo_26/conversazioni-via-facebook-reclutati-quaranta-italiani-bc5ffc26-d393-11e4-9231-aa2c4d8b5ec3.shtml; M. Rodella, “Jihad, era ‘pronto ad arruolarsi’: resterà sotto sorveglianza per 5 anni”, *Corriere della Sera*, Brescia local edition, 25 April 2015, http://brescia.corriere.it/notizie/cronaca/15_aprile_25/jihad-era-pronto-ad-arruolarsi-restera-sotto-sorveglianza-5-anni-como-brescia-16a79652-eb41-11e4-aaae-29597682dafd.shtml.

⁸² See M. Rodella, “Terrorismo: il reclutatore di jihadisti resta libero: «Mancano indizi»”, *Corriere della Sera*, Brescia local edition, 31 March 2016, http://brescia.corriere.it/notizie/cronaca/16_marzo_31/terrorismo-reclutatore-jihad-alban-elezi-anas-libero-tribunale-brescia-mara-rodella-a3614f16-f70c-11e5-bb62-9cf2392b520a.shtml.

⁸³ Marone, “Italian Jihadists in Syria and Iraq”, p. 24.

⁸⁴ See M. Serafini, “Isis, un pentito consegna database con 22 mila nomi di miliziani”, *Corriere della Sera*, 10 March 2016, http://www.corriere.it/esteri/16_marzo_10/isis-disertore-consegna-database-22-mila-nomi-miliziani-481416ca-e6ae-11e5-a161-91a3543ec2c9.shtml.

⁸⁵ In his words, “he’s dead, we got confirmation”. The man did not add further information. “Il papà di Anas El Abboubi: «So che è morto ma non lo perdono»”, *Giornale di Brescia*, 29 March 2016, <http://www.giornaledibrescia.it/valsabbia/il-pap%C3%A0-di-anas-el-abboubi-so-che-%C3%A8-morto-ma-non-lo-perdono-1.3075726>.

⁸⁶ See also M. Serafini, *Maria Giulia che divenne Fatima. Storia della donna che ha lasciato l’Italia per l’Isis* (Milan: Corriere della Sera, 2015); Marone, “Italian Jihadists in Syria and Iraq”.

⁸⁷ Fatimah, known as az Zahra (“the Shining One” in Arabic), was the youngest daughter of the Prophet Muhammad and Khadijah and the wife of Ali.

⁸⁸ A. Assumma, “Vi racconto perché ho scelto l’Islam”, *L’Espresso*, 30 October 2013, <http://espresso.repubblica.it/visioni/societa/2013/10/30/news/vi-racconto-perche-ho-scelto-l-islam-1.139529>; M.

of faith) on 14 September 2007 in her room, alone. Initially Sergio's parents did not approve of her decision.⁸⁹ Nevertheless, in the following years they converted to Islam, too.

She started to frequent the Islamic communities of the hinterland of Milan. On 29 September 2009, she officially declared the *Shahada* before an *imam*. She also studied the Quran. The conversion represents a crucial experience in Sergio's life. In her words, "I don't want to speak of conversion, but rather of reversion. It was like finding a lost way [...] It is like I received a calling". Islam soon became "what fills my life".⁹⁰ In the same month, Maria Giulia/Fatima married Jamal, a local pizza maker of Moroccan origin, in an Islamic ceremony. She wore a white *niqab* (the veil that covers the entire face with only a slit for the eyes) as wedding dress. For this unusual event she agreed to give an interview, with photographs, to a national magazine.⁹¹ However, in 2011 she filed for divorce, possibly disappointed by her husband's lack of religious fervour.

On 5 October 2009, she participated in a popular TV show (*Pomeriggio 5*) where she argued for the use of the headscarf (*hijab*) for Muslim women and supported the idea of a "pluralist system" in society. However, around that time, she adopted the *niqab*, after an "enlightening" trip with a few Muslim friends to Slovenia, where he met some completely veiled women (*munaqabbat*).⁹² In addition, on 16 September 2011, she subscribed to a petition in favour of the *niqab*, along with her sister and her mother. The petition was signed by Delnevo and his friend Lazzaro, too, and was reportedly written by the latter.⁹³

Sergio felt she was a victim of religious discrimination.⁹⁴ For example, according to her, one of her employers tried to tear out her veil and sent her away. On another occasion, a driver put her off a bus because of her *niqab*. In October 2009, her refusal to lift the veil of the *niqab* in a post office, together with her sister, caused a public quarrel. On the other hand, she was well aware that her lifestyle and habits were regarded with suspicion or even hostility in some places she went in everyday life. Furthermore, it can be assumed that she even wanted to mark a difference and seek a confrontation.⁹⁵ Over time, her positions became increasingly radical. She also expressed her ideas on Facebook, at least until November 2013, when her online public communications stopped.

2014 was a breakthrough year in her radicalisation process. On 17 September, in the mosque of Treviglio, near Bergamo, she married an Albanian citizen, Aldo "Said" Kobuzi,⁹⁶ in an apparent marriage of convenience, facilitated by a mutual acquaintance

Sarfatti, "Maria Giulia Sergio, alias Fatima: 'Grazie al Corano ho capito cosa vuol dire sentirsi una donna'. Incontro con lady Jihad", *L'Huffington Post*, 13 January 2015, http://www.huffingtonpost.it/2015/01/13/lady-jihad_n_6462874.html.

⁸⁹ Serafini, *Maria Giulia che divenne Fatima*, pp. 36, 39.

⁹⁰ Quoted from Sergio's newspaper interview in Sarfatti, "Maria Giulia Sergio, alias Fatima".

⁹¹ Assumma, "Vi racconto perché ho scelto l'Islam".

⁹² Assumma, "Vi racconto perché ho scelto l'Islam".

⁹³ Marone, "Italian Jihadists in Syria and Iraq".

⁹⁴ Serafini, *Maria Giulia che divenne Fatima*; Assumma, "Vi racconto perché ho scelto l'Islam"; Sarfatti, "Maria Giulia Sergio, alias Fatima".

⁹⁵ Interview by the author with Marta Serafini, June 2016.

⁹⁶ Aldo Kobuzi was born in northwestern Albania in 1991; he worked as a mechanic. His younger sister Serjola (born in 1996) had already left for Syria in 2013 together with her husband, Mariglen Dervishllari, and their child, Hataab. Kobuzi's brother-in-law died of leukemia in Syria. Dervishllari's travel was funded by Bujar Hysa, a well-known radical preacher and a leading figure within a major recruiting network in Albania. Aldo Kobuzi, too, was in contact with Hysa, through his son-in-law. See, in particular, F. Biloslavo, "L'allegria famiglia (italo-albanese) che combatte con il Califfo", *Panorama*, 11 March 2015, <http://www.faustobiloslavo.eu/articoli/30814.pdf>. In May 2016 Bujar Hysa was sentenced in Tirana to 18 years in prison for "incitement to terrorism" and "recruitment to terrorism".

of Albanian origin, Lubjana Gjeczaj; Gjeczaj, related to Kobuzi, met Sergio at an Islamic book fair near Bergamo, in June 2014. After the wedding, Maria Giulia Sergio moved to the house of Kobuzi's uncles near Grosseto, in Tuscany. Unlike other "IS brides", Sergio wanted to marry a man she met through personal contacts *before* her departure, so as not to be compelled to marry a total stranger in Syria in circumstances that were out of her control.⁹⁷

Just four days after the marriage, Sergio and her new husband took an airplane from Rome to Istanbul and then reached Syria from Gaziantep, where they joined IS. They took up residence near the Tishrin Dam on the Euphrates, in the Aleppo Governorate, where they were reunited with Kobuzi's sister and mother.⁹⁸ They joined the Albanian contingent that had settled in the area.

In her eyes, Maria Giulia/Fatima fulfilled the duty of the "journey" (*Hijra*)⁹⁹ to the newly-claimed "caliphate", responding to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's call; in this way, she became a *muhajira* (female "emigrant", from the same root of *Hijra*).¹⁰⁰ In Syria, Sergio took up firearms training, waiting to take part in combat someday. She explicitly expressed her desire to fight.¹⁰¹ Thus, strictly speaking, Maria Giulia/Fatima is not a genuine fighter, but only because at the moment IS, basing its activity on a rigid interpretation of *Sharia* law, normally prefers not to use women in military combat.¹⁰² However, this does not preclude the possibility that she could conduct acts of violence in the self-proclaimed "caliphate" or in other countries. For his part, Aldo Kobuzi went to an IS training camp in Iraq in November 2014. However, he was exempted from fighting because he had to take care of his widowed sister Serjola who was pregnant. For this reason, he was entrusted with religious policing tasks.¹⁰³

Sergio's story became public in January 2015. Then, from Syria, via the internet, the woman, now nicknamed "Lady Jihad" by Italian media, recommended that her parents did not talk on the phone, said that they did not know anything and avoided journalists.¹⁰⁴ In the meantime, one by one, all family members of Sergio had converted to a very strict form of Islam. On 1 July 2015, Italian police arrested Sergio's father, mother and sister¹⁰⁵ in their house in Inzago, on charges of travel for the purposes of international terrorism and criminal association:¹⁰⁶ they had been preparing to go to Syria and join the self-proclaimed "caliphate", convinced by the young woman's pressing requests. On the same day, two Albanian relatives of Aldo Kobuzi (his uncle

⁹⁷ Interview by the author with Marta Serafini, June 2016.

⁹⁸ Serafini, *Maria Giulia che divenne Fatima*, pp. 86-87, 97.

⁹⁹ As is well-known, the *Hijra* is the migration of the Prophet Muhammad and his Companions from hostile Mecca to Yathrib (Medina) in 622 CE.

¹⁰⁰ See, among others, A. Perešin, "Fatal Attraction: Western Muslimas and ISIS", in *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 9 (3), 2015, pp. 21-38; A. Perešin and A. Cervone, "The Western *Muhajirat* of ISIS", in *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 38 (7), 2015, pp. 495-509.

¹⁰¹ For example, in some 2015 intercepted conversations, Sergio told her family that in Syria she had already used a handgun and a Kalashnikov. Furthermore, she said: "I make *du'a* [supplication in Islam] everyday that Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi confirms *jihad* for women (...) because I can't wait to die as a *shahid*". Serafini, *Maria Giulia che divenne Fatima*, pp. 132-133.

¹⁰² Cf. D. Cook, "Women Fighting in *Jihad*?", in *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 28 (5), 2005, pp. 375-384; N. Lahoud, "The Neglected Sex: The Jihadis' Exclusion of Women from *Jihad*", in *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 26 (5), 2014, pp. 780-802.

¹⁰³ For example, in an intercepted conversation with her Italian family, Sergio said that her husband Kobuzi went to stone an adulterer "with other brothers". Her sister and mother endorsed this action. Quoted in Serafini, *Maria Giulia che divenne Fatima*, pp. 96-98.

¹⁰⁴ Serafini, *Maria Giulia che divenne Fatima*, pp. 30-31.

¹⁰⁵ Marianna Sergio divorced in February 2015 and returned home to live with her parents.

¹⁰⁶ Specifically, Sergio's father and mother were charged only with the crime of "transfers" for the purposes of international terrorism. This type of crime was introduced by an antiterrorism law passed in April 2015 (Law No. 43 of 17 April 2015) (see below). By contrast, Maria Giulia's sister was also charged with the more serious crime of "association" for the purposes of international terrorism.

Baki Coku and his aunt Arta, alias Anila, Kacabuni) were arrested. Five arrest warrants were also issued for the Kobuzi-Sergio couple, two other Kobuzi-Coku relatives (his sister Serjola and his mother Donika Coku) and an Italian-born woman with a Canadian passport, Bushra Haik. At the time of writing, they are still at large. The police operation took place simultaneously in Italy and Albania and was tellingly called “Martese”, the word for “marriage” in Albanian.

The figure of Bushra Haik is noteworthy. She allegedly is an IS supporter and had an important role in indoctrinating Maria Giulia/Fatima, her sister Marianna and other women via the internet.¹⁰⁷ In particular, she apparently accelerated Maria Giulia’s radicalisation process. Haik was born into a Syrian family with Canadian passports in 1985 in Bologna and lived in Italy for many years, before she moved to Riyadh, married to an imam. She managed different internet forums and online communities. At first glance it appeared that she only offered lessons on Islam and the Quran, but actually she also spread jihadist messages. For example, she justified the killing of “unbelievers”, including women and children. More importantly, she is accused of encouraging and preparing women to travel to the self-proclaimed “caliphate” and, additionally, to turn them into new “recruiters”.

In this sense, Maria Giulia Sergio proved to be a good disciple of Haik. In particular, in March 2015, Sergio said that she was very busy with the study of the Quran and Arabic and she was prepared to give lessons to “Albanian women”. Additionally, Sergio’s sister Marianna, too, started to participate actively in Bushra Haik’s Skype groups. Marianna defended IS and its actions and did not spare references to her own country; tellingly, in a conversation to another woman, Marianna exclaimed: “ISIS [...] said that it will arrive in Italy, too, understood?”.¹⁰⁸

The Italian judiciary issued an international warrant for Haik’s arrest, but received no reply from Saudi Arabia. It is unclear whether she has continued her propaganda activity on the internet.¹⁰⁹ Italian authorities had intercepted Sergio’s internet and SMS communications with her relatives in Italy. Apparently, the woman thought that she could not be intercepted via these channels. These wiretaps give a valuable insight into Sergio’s activities and motivations. Among other things, in these conversations (actually, almost monologues), this assertive woman endorsed the duty to “destroy the unbelievers” and expressed a strong desire to “die as a martyr”. Moreover, she referred, generically, to the presence of “*mujahidin* in Italy who have connections”. She also envisaged the progressive expansion of the self-proclaimed “caliphate” to Rome itself, repeating IS’s watchwords: in her words, “towards the end, *Insha’Allah*, we will go to Rome, too, as the Prophet said (...) In Rome there will be a great battle”.¹¹⁰

According to Italian investigators, these wiretaps led to the Turkish phone number of an “important IS member”, Ahmed Abu al-Harith, who coordinated the arrival in Syria of foreign fighters from different countries, even if they did not speak Arabic at all. In particular, he provided practical information regarding the clandestine journey to Syria:

¹⁰⁷ In particular, Serafini, *Maria Giulia che divenne Fatima*, pp. 59-63.

¹⁰⁸ Serafini, *Maria Giulia che divenne Fatima*, pp. 101, 106-112.

¹⁰⁹ See F. Caferri, “Da Bologna a Riad, la rete di Bushra “Così il Califfo recluta ragazze italiane””, *La Repubblica*, 12 April 2016, <http://ricerca.repubblica.it/repubblica/archivio/repubblica/2016/04/12/da-bologna-a-riad-la-rete-di-bushra-cosi-il-italiane17.html>.

¹¹⁰ See M. G. Sergio, “Terrorismo, le intercettazioni della jihadista italiana”, YouTube video, 3 July 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dQuber1xcZo> (in Italian). This YouTube video presents the original audio of some intercepted conversations between Sergio and her Italian family, while she was in Syria.

for example, where to go along the border with Turkey and how to use the phone.¹¹¹ Unfortunately, further details are not publicly available on this person.

Sergio has peculiarly contrasting views about the role of women. On one hand, she appears to be a strong-minded woman and certainly represents the driving force in her family, despite being the youngest; but, on the other hand, she maintains that women should recognise the superiority of men. Tellingly, in an intercepted Skype conversation, Maria Giulia/Fatima paradoxically *demand*ed that her father impose his (actually, *her*) will on her mother, by saying: “you are in charge (...) you decide, you are the man of the house and then grab mum by her hair and come here [to Syria] and make *Hijra*! She doesn’t need to have any opinion about it”.¹¹²

On 5 July 2015, following the police operation, Sergio gave a striking interview to Marta Serafini, a journalist from Italy’s major newspaper.¹¹³ She agreed to speak in exchange for information about the conditions of her relatives in prison. During the entire interview she displayed a self-confident, doctrinaire tone. In this Skype conversation, Maria Giulia/Fatima denounced her relatives’ arrests as “illogical and irrational”. Furthermore, she glorified IS as a “perfect state” based on *Sharia* law. She denied the accusation of human rights violations or tortures in the newly-proclaimed “caliphate” but at the same time defended the use of beheadings and other forms of corporal punishment. In her words, “here tortures are not used [...] the Islamic State does not torture any prisoner but it acts in accordance with *Sharia*, according to the law of Allah The Most High. When we behead someone – and I say ‘we’ because I too belong to the Islamic State, ok? - , when we make an action of this kind, we make it on the basis of *Sharia*. Those who are beheaded are thieves, are spies who pass information on the unbelievers to attack us. You know – don’t you [...]? – that all the world attacks us, you know that?”¹¹⁴ Thus, she justified beheadings and other acts of violence, in value-based terms, on the basis of a fundamentalist and a-historical interpretation of *Sharia* law, but at the same time she also seemed to refer to utilitarian reasons, in the context of an apparent siege.

In July 2015, Sergio’s family members were imprisoned in Milan. The health condition of her mother, Assunta Buonfiglio (born in 1955), deteriorated rapidly. On 5 October 2015, the woman was granted house arrest, together with her husband Sergio Sergio (born in 1954), following surgery for intestinal obstruction.¹¹⁵ However, she died the next day.¹¹⁶

After preliminary investigation, on 23 February 2016, the court of Milan indicted Maria Giulia Sergio: the case went to trial (*rinvio a giudizio*). The same applied to Sergio’s father, her Albanian husband Aldo Kobuzi, her mother-in-law Donika Coku, her sister-in-law Serjola and Haik Bushra. The trial began on 13 April 2016. On 23 February 2016,

¹¹¹ G. Santucci, “Cosi il colonnello del Califfo reclutava i combattenti in Italia”, *Corriere della Sera*, 2 July 2015; Serafini, *Maria Giulia che divenne Fatima*, pp. 76-82.

¹¹² Marone, “Italian Jihadists in Syria and Iraq”, pp. 25-26.

¹¹³ M. Serafini, “Italian Woman Jihadist Speaks”, *Corriere della Sera*, 7 July 2015, http://www.corriere.it/english/15_luglio_07/italian-woman-jihadist-speaks-48fe78aa-248a-11e5-8714-c38f22f7c1da.shtml (English version); Serafini, *Maria Giulia che divenne Fatima*, pp. 9-15.

¹¹⁴ Quoted in Serafini, *Maria Giulia che divenne Fatima*, p. 13.

¹¹⁵ M. Serafini, “Maria Giulia Sergio alias Fatima, concessi i domiciliari ai genitori”, *Corriere della Sera*, 5 October 2015, http://www.corriere.it/cronache/15_ottobre_05/maria-giulia-sergio-alias-fatima-concessi-domiciliari-genitori-960dc804-6b74-11e5-9423-d78dd1862fd7.shtml.

¹¹⁶ M. Serafini, “Morta la mamma di Maria Giulia Sergio, la ragazza che si unì all’Isis”, *Corriere della Sera*, 6 October 2015, http://www.corriere.it/esteri/15_ottobre_06/morta-mamma-maria-giulia-sergio-ragazza-che-si-uni-all-isis-58a22490-6c07-11e5-bbf5-2aef67553e86.shtml.

Sergio's sister, Marianna, who had asked for a "fast-track procedure" (*rito abbreviato*) in December 2015, was sentenced to five years and four months in prison. She showed no repentance. Among other things, the motivation report of this sentence stressed that after Maria Giulia's departure Marianna became a "point of reference in the activity of proselytism for other women".¹¹⁷ Similarly, Arta Kacabuni and Baki (Coku, Kobuzi's uncles) were sentenced to three years and eight months and two years and eight months, respectively. Lubjana Gjeczaj, the woman who introduced Aldo Kobuzi to Maria Giulia Sergio, was given three years of imprisonment, while her husband Dritan Gjeczaj was acquitted.¹¹⁸

2.4. Meriem Rehaily

The case of Meriem Rehaily is the most recent and in many respects the least clear and linear in our sample. Her story presents striking details, described by reliable sources, but currently not all of them have been officially confirmed. Thus, the case is extremely interesting but still requires caution with regard to some facts.

Meriem Rehaily, a 19-year-old girl of Moroccan descent, arrived in Italy when she was nine. Her Muslim family (father, mother, four younger brothers) does not have radical attitudes. They settled in Arzergrande, a rural town near the north-eastern city of Padua, not far from Venice (Veneto region). The father, Roudani Rehaily, works in a factory and is described as a hard worker.¹¹⁹ Meriem was a teenager with a strong personality and had some quarrels with her family, although these did not seem to be dramatic.¹²⁰ Rehaily attended high school in Piove di Sacco, a nearby town. According to media reports, her teachers noticed something worrying in her compositions (in particular, references to a "war" of the West against Islam)¹²¹ and reported it to the authorities at the beginning of 2015.

The stages of her radicalisation pathway are still unclear. According to an anonymous school friend, a girl from Campolongo Maggiore had "brainwashed" Meriem about IS,¹²² but further information on such an eventuality is presently not available. On the other hand, Rehaily spent a lot of time on the internet. According to friends, she has very good computer skills.¹²³ Meriem had a Facebook account where she expressed jihadist and pro-IS messages. She closed the account shortly before she left for Syria in July 2015. One of her last posts reads, in Italian: "Stop stand by and watch, fight in Syria against the Western oppressors! It's up to you Muslim brothers". She was also active on

¹¹⁷ Terrorismo: "Da sorella di Fatima propaganda per l'isis", *Il Giorno*, 13 May 2016, <http://www.ilgiorno.it/milano/fatima-isis-1.2154678>.

¹¹⁸ "Milano, Fatima a processo per terrorismo: la sorella condannata a 5 anni e 4 mesi", *La Repubblica*, Milan local edition, 23 February 2016, http://milano.repubblica.it/cronaca/2016/02/23/news/milano_fatima_a_processo_per_terrorismo_la_sorella_condannata_a_5_anni_e_4_mesi-134058616/#gallery-slider=118080024.

¹¹⁹ P. Berizzi, "Meriem, a 19 anni dai selfie alla Jihad: 'È ora di combattere'", *La Repubblica*, 28 July 2015, http://www.repubblica.it/cronaca/2015/07/28/news/meriem_a_19_anni_dai_selfie_alla_jihad_e_ora_di_combattere_-119982290/; M. Nicolussi Moro, "Meriem, 19 anni, e la pista della jihad il padre: «Chi le ha pagato il viaggio?»", *Corriere del Veneto*, 24 July 2015, <http://corrieredelveneto.corriere.it/veneto/notizie/cronaca/2015/23-luglio-2015/ragazza-marocchina-sparita-forse-viaggio-l-isis-2301694821243.shtml>.

¹²⁰ However, according to Italian media, on one occasion her father contacted the authorities because Meriem had run away from her home after a quarrel; she came back two days later. Berizzi, "Meriem, a 19 anni dai selfie alla Jihad: 'È ora di combattere'".

¹²¹ Buccini, "I musulmani sono 1 milione e mezzo. In mille «sotto osservazione»".

¹²² P. Berizzi, "Meriem, a 19 anni dai selfie alla Jihad: 'È ora di combattere'".

¹²³ C. Giudici, "Storia della prima foreign fighter pentita ora pronta a tornare in Italia", *Il Foglio quotidiano*, 24 April 2016, http://www.ilfoglio.it/cronache/2016/04/24/italia-prima-foreign-fighter-meriem-rehaily_1-v-141072-rubriche_c142.htm.

Twitter where she called herself “Sister Rim”. Furthermore, in May 2015, Meriem allegedly spread on the internet, perhaps with an accomplice, an anonymous blacklist of ten Italian police officers,¹²⁴ with their biographical data and addresses (often not accurate), inviting “the brothers resident in Italy” to attack these targets.¹²⁵

On 14 July 2015, Rehaily ran away from her hometown. She told her family she was heading for a seaside holiday to spend some days with her friends. Instead she went to Bologna, in north-central Italy, where she took a plane to Istanbul on 15 July.¹²⁶ Then she crossed into Syria. Before her departure, Rehaily’s smartphone was reportedly modified in such a way that her outgoing and incoming calls passed through a repeater. Thus, interception would have become more complicated. According to media reports, Italian authorities believe that the girl was helped and supported by someone in the country.¹²⁷

Soon after Rehaily’s departure, two of her female friends of Moroccan descent received a message via WhatsApp from a Turkish phone with a general invitation to move to IS-controlled territory. It can be assumed that these contacts were pointed out by Meriem herself, in an apparent attempt to recruit other girls in the area. In October 2015 Rehaily reportedly sent a message to a friend in Italy, writing: “I’m okay, here I’m useful, I’m dealing with logistics”.¹²⁸

Interestingly, according to Italian media, in January 2016 Rehaily is alleged to have called a relative on the phone and said that she regretted her decision, was “afraid” and wanted to “return home”.¹²⁹ Rehaily’s father, Roudani, soon publicly denied these reports.¹³⁰ On other occasions, he seemingly preferred to skirt the issue and expressed the fear that the news could endanger the life of Meriem and her family members.¹³¹

¹²⁴ F. Musacchio, “L’isis vuole eliminare 10 ufficiali italiani”, *Il Tempo*, 31 May 2015,

<http://www.iltempo.it/esteri/2015/05/31/l-isis-vuole-eliminare-10-ufficiali-italiani-comandante-carabinieri-dolo-provincia-di-veneziana-comandante-municipale-adria-provincia-di-rovigo-comandante-municipale-fiesole-questore-di-firenze-comandante-municipale-laigueglia-prov-savona-comandante-municipale-di-palermo-ex-comandante-generale-dei-carabinieri-generale-dei-carabinieri-comandante-generale-guardia-di-finanza-1.1420931>.

¹²⁵ E. Ferro, “Meriem stilò la lista dei bersagli Is in Italia”, *Il Mattino di Padova*, 21 August 2015,

<http://mattinopadova.gelocal.it/regione/2015/08/21/news/meriem-stilo-la-lista-dei-bersagli-is-in-italia-1.11964363>.

¹²⁶ Rehaily bought the plane ticket in a travel agency in Piove di Sacco. She opted for a round-trip ticket, presumably to arouse less suspicion at border controls. A. Zorzi and A. Priante, “L’Antiterrorismo apre un’inchiesta link sospetti nel computer di Meriem”, *Corriere del Veneto*, 25 July 2015,

<http://corrieredelveneto.corriere.it/veneto/notizie/cronaca/2015/25-luglio-2015/antiterrorismo-apre-un-inchiesta-link-sospetti-computer-meriem-2301704991208.shtml>; A. Zorzi, “Merieme, biglietto di andata e ritorno per ingannare gli agenti di frontiera”, *Corriere del Veneto*, 27 July 2015,

<http://corrieredelveneto.corriere.it/veneto/notizie/cronaca/2015/27-luglio-2015/merieme-biglietto-andata-ritorno-ingannare-agenti-frontiera-2301709982258.shtml>.

¹²⁷ E. Ferro, “Così hanno preparato la fuga di Meriem arruolata nell’Is”, *Il Mattino di Padova*, 2 December 2015,

<http://mattinopadova.gelocal.it/padova/cronaca/2015/12/02/news/cosi-hanno-preparato-la-fuga-di-meriem-1.12547472>.

¹²⁸ Buccini, “I musulmani sono 1 milione e mezzo. In mille «sotto osservazione»”. See also A. Priante, “Merieme scrive all’amica dal Califfato «Faccio logistica, qui mi sento utile»”, *Corriere del Veneto*, 28 November 2015,

<http://corrieredelveneto.corriere.it/veneto/notizie/cronaca/2015/28-novembre-2015/merieme-scrive-all-amica-califfato-faccio-logistica-qui-mi-sento-utile-2302252768244.shtml>.

¹²⁹ M. Aldighieri, “La ragazza padovana nell’Is: «Sono pentita ora ho paura»”, *Il Gazzettino*, 21 February 2016,

<http://www.ilgazzettino.it/nordest/padova/la-ragazza-padovana-nell-isis-pentita-ho-paura-padova-meriem-1565571.html>. See also P. Berizzi, “Meriem, pentita dell’Is ‘Vi prego, aiutatemi voglio tornare a casa’”, *La Repubblica*, 22 February 2016, <http://ricerca.repubblica.it/repubblica/archivio/repubblica/2016/02/22/meriem-pentita-dellis-vi-prego-aiutatemi-voglio-tornare-a-casa15.html?ref=search>

¹³⁰ “Papà Meriem, non ha telefonato in Italia”, *Ansa*, 22 February 2016,

http://www.ansa.it/veneto/notizie/2016/02/22/papa-meriem-non-ha-telefonato-in-italia_31a50354-a953-4e2c-a0d7-4e04e54eaea3.html. See also E. Randon, “Il giallo del pentimento di Meriem. Il padre giura: «Nessun contatto»”, *Corriere del Veneto*, 23 February 2016, <http://corrieredelveneto.corriere.it/veneto/notizie/cronaca/2016/23-febbraio-2016/giallo-pentimento-meriem-padre-giura-nessun-contatto-24085063820.shtml>.

¹³¹ See E. Livieri, “«Mia figlia plagiata ma sono sicuro che tornerà da noi»”, *Il Mattino di Padova*, 12 June 2016, <http://mattinopadova.gelocal.it/regione/2016/06/12/news/mia-figlia-plagiata-ma-sono-sicuro-che-tornera-da-noi-1.13651394>.

In any case, the real reasons for Meriem's alleged reverse are not clear. There are no indications to suppose genuine repentance above other possible motives.¹³² In June 2016, an international warrant was officially issued for her arrest on charges of enlistment for the purposes of terrorism.¹³³

3. Pathways to Radicalisation

3.1. Individual Profiles

These four stories present similarities but also important differences. With regard to socio-demographic characteristics, like the vast majority of foreign fighters, all protagonists were young or very young: Delnevo was born in 1989, el Abboubi in 1992, Sergio in 1987 and Rehaily in 1995. None had started a family in Italy. El Abboubi and Rehaily were not in a relationship, Delnevo married a Moroccan woman in Morocco but he did not live with her, while Sergio married a man she barely knew and only few days before her departure for Syria.

The level of education was not very different. The two younger jihadists, el Abboubi and Rehaily, attended high school (in particular, technical schools), while Delnevo and Sergio attended high school and, in addition, went to university but did not graduate. None had profound knowledge and extensive expertise in Islamic and Arabic studies. Nevertheless, the two Italian-born converts, Delnevo and especially Sergio, showed interest in learning about these issues, outside formal educational paths. In particular, Sergio's dogmatic and proud insistence on doctrinal questions was evident. After all, the commitment to study can be an important factor of social recognition and legitimacy for a woman like Maria Giulia who cannot aspire to take combat roles within armed groups such as IS.¹³⁴

None suffered conditions of poverty or social exclusion. Sergio's family of origin had experienced some economic difficulties, like other Italian families, but they did not live in conditions of serious deprivation in run-down areas. Besides, unlike other foreign fighters,¹³⁵ none had a dramatic family history. They all, like other Muslim residents, lived in northern Italy (in the regions of Lombardy, Liguria and Veneto), in the richest and most dynamic part of the country. In general, we know that the majority of European foreign fighters originate from large metropolitan areas or peripheral suburbs.¹³⁶ Interestingly, like many other Italian jihadists,¹³⁷ el Abboubi, Sergio and Rehaily lived in rural towns. On closer inspection, this is not particularly surprising to the extent that in Italy many Muslim families live in small provincial towns, where the

¹³² On IS defectors' motivations, see, among others, P. R. Neumann, "Victims, Perpetrators, Assets: The Narratives of Islamic State Defectors", Report, The International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (ICSR), 2015, <http://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/ICSR-Report-Victims-Perpetrators-Assets-The-Narratives-of-Islamic-State-Defectors.pdf>.

¹³³ A. Priante, "«Meriem è una terrorista». Il giudice ordina il suo arresto", *Corriere della Sera*, Veneto local edition, 11 June 2016, <http://corrieredelveneto.corriere.it/veneto/notizie/cronaca/2016/11-giugno-2016/meriem-terrorista-giudice-ordina-suo-arresto-240543925572.shtml>.

¹³⁴ Interview by the author with Marta Serafini, June 2016.

¹³⁵ For example, M. van San, "Lost Souls Searching for Answers? Belgian and Dutch Converts Joining the Islamic State", *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 9, (5), 2015, pp. 47-56.

¹³⁶ Van Ginkel and Entenmann (Eds.), "The Foreign Fighters Phenomenon in the European Union", p. 52.

¹³⁷ See, for example, D. Milosa, "Foreign fighters, in Italia i jihadisti nascono nelle zone rurali del Nord. 'Pronti al martirio, ma ancora isolati'", *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, 24 March 2016, <http://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2016/03/24/foreign-fighters-in-italia-i-jihadisti-nascono-nelle-zone-rurali-del-nord-pronti-al-martirio-ma-ancora-isolati/2578093/>.

composition of neighbourhoods and school classes do not reflect a strong concentration of migrants. Furthermore, this scattered habitat tends to prevent forms of ghettoisation.¹³⁸ High-risk neighbourhoods or suburbs, like Molenbeek in Belgium, are not present in Italy.¹³⁹

As for psychological factors, none showed signs of mental illness. On the other hand, they differed markedly in their personality traits: in particular, Delnevo was a troubled young man, while Sergio is a strong-minded, self-confident woman and Rehaily, too, is described as a fiery and energetic teenager.

Apart from a few similarities, there are no indications of a specific profile. This conclusion is in line with the findings of the current literature on radicalisation. In fact, earlier attempts to draw conclusions from socio-demographic variables and to identify the “terrorist personality” have been largely abandoned. Rather, today there is a general tendency to “shift the focus away from profiling extremists to profiling the radicalization pathways they take”.¹⁴⁰ The same applies to the foreign fighters phenomenon, in Italy as well.¹⁴¹ Incidentally, this heterogeneity can have important consequences for the possible planning of de-radicalisation initiatives.¹⁴²

3.2. Radicalisation Pathways

Like most Italian home-grown jihadists in recent years,¹⁴³ their radicalisation pathways did not take place in traditional settings, such as radical mosques or prisons. On the one hand, el Abboubi had no strong connections with Islamic places of worship or cultural centres; Delnevo went to the mosque from time to time and, for a short time, frequented a mosque with “known militant ties” near Imperia, not far from Genoa;¹⁴⁴ Sergio attended a few mosques quite regularly; while Rehaily “never went to the mosque”, according to her family. In any case, mosque attendance did not play a crucial role in their decision to join jihadist groups in Syria.

El Abboubi and Delnevo were certainly known to the Italian authorities before their departures for Syria. Nevertheless, unlike other foreign fighters, none of the four Italian jihadists had criminal records nor they had ever been to prison, with the exception of el Abboubi’s very short detention in June 2013; in any case, he was not influenced by fellow inmates. In addition, all four did not have violent friends, did not belong to criminal gangs and were not involved in drug use or dealing.

Delnevo, el Abboubi and Sergio exhibited outward “signs of radicalisation”, broadly speaking, in terms of changes in lifestyle, habits and social relationships.¹⁴⁵ For example, by the summer of 2012 el Abboubi suddenly “abandoned rap, describing music as *haram* (forbidden by Islam), wearing long white robes and cutting many of his

¹³⁸ Saint-Blancat, “Italy”, p. 270.

¹³⁹ E.g., M. Groppi, “Da noi nessuna Molenbeek, ma il futuro non è garantito”, *Limes - Rivista italiana di geopolitica*, 4, 2016, pp. 37-45.

¹⁴⁰ M. Hafez and C. Mullins, “The Radicalization Puzzle: A Theoretical Synthesis of Empirical Approaches to Homegrown Extremism”, in *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 38 (11), 2015, pp. 958-975 (p. 959). See also Marone, “Italian Jihadists in Syria and Iraq”.

¹⁴¹ Exchange with Italian security officials, Rome, October 2015.

¹⁴² Interview by the author with Antonio Mutti, March 2016.

¹⁴³ In particular, Vidino, *Home-Grown Jihadism in Italy*.

¹⁴⁴ Vidino, *Home-Grown Jihadism in Italy*, p. 73.

¹⁴⁵ See Schmid and Tinnes, “Foreign (Terrorist) Fighters with IS”, pp. 38-39.

previous social ties”.¹⁴⁶ As mentioned earlier, the change of clothing was evident in Delnevo and Sergio, too. By contrast, Rehaily did not wear a veil or other Islamic traditional garments and never significantly changed the way she dressed.

According to Rik Coolsaet,¹⁴⁷ the current generation of foreign fighters can be split up in two main groups. The first group “comprises pre-existing kinship and friendship gangs” and their travel is “another form of deviant behaviour, next to membership of street gangs, rioting, drug trafficking and juvenile delinquency”. The second group is made up of youngsters who show no previous deviant behaviour, or specific distinction from their peers. Key features of this group is the absence of a future and feelings of exclusion, and their “search for belonging and a cause to embrace”. In general, the four individuals of our sample are clearly closer to the second group.

3.3. Native Converts and “Second-Generation Immigrants”

As said, like many foreign fighters in Europe, the four jihadists in our sample are either converts to Islam or second-generation children of Muslim immigrants. On the one hand, both native converts, Delnevo and Sergio, soon became “total converts” who demonstrated overriding interest and involvement in (an increasingly radical version of) Islam.¹⁴⁸ The conversion process was quite abrupt and was not focused on reflections on theological matters. Both tried to reshape their entire lives in the light of this new cause, unconcerned with the resistance and the pressure of their social environment (including their families), even more so in a country where the Catholic heritage is still influential. This strenuous difference from the context could have further reinforced the perception of being “true believers”. Among other things, they immediately adopted an Arabic name (Ibrahim and Fatima) in order to mark a turning point and demonstrate their commitment to the new religion.

Their conversion was an individual decision for intimately personal reasons, taken in the context of an individualistic society, but at the same time it implied a need for community¹⁴⁹ and was also linked to a presence in the public arena. For example, both Delnevo and Sergio subscribed to a public petition in favour of the *niqab*, expressing collective grievances. If their conversion to Islam appeared to be rapid, the subsequent radicalisation pathway was relatively gradual. In particular, in Sergio’s case, the process was clearly longer than that of many young European girls who decide to leave for the self-proclaimed “caliphate”.

In general, converts appear to be overrepresented among Italy’s foreign fighters, as in other Western countries.¹⁵⁰ According to recent estimates by analyst Boncio, they

¹⁴⁶ Vidino, *Home-Grown Jihadism in Italy*, pp. 62-63.

¹⁴⁷ R. Coolsaet, *Facing the fourth foreign fighters wave: what drives Europeans to Syria, and to IS? Insights from the Belgian case*, Egmont Paper 81, Egmont - The Royal Institute for International Relations, p. 3, http://www.egmontinstitute.be/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/egmont.papers.81_online-versie.pdf. This passage is also cited in Van Ginkel and Entenmann (Eds.), *The Foreign Fighters Phenomenon in the European Union*, p. 53-54.

¹⁴⁸ The distinction between “verbal” and “total” converts comes from J. Lofland and R. Stark, “Becoming a world-saver: A theory of conversion to a deviant perspective”, in *American Sociological Review*, 30 (6), 1965, pp. 862-875. It is also cited in E. Karagiannis, “European converts to Islam: Mechanisms of radicalization”, in *Politics, Religion & Ideology*, 13 (1), 2012, pp. 99-113 (pp. 100ff).

¹⁴⁹ See C. Roggero, “Parabole di conversione. Viaggio insolito attraverso la secolarizzazione”, in G. Salmeri (Ed.), *Troppa religione o troppa poca? Cristiani e musulmani alla prova della secolarizzazione* (Venezia: Marsilio, 2016) (e-book).

¹⁵⁰ See B. Schuurman, P. Grol and S. Flower. “Converts and Islamist Terrorism: An Introduction”, The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague 7, no. 3 (2016) <http://icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/ICCT-Schuurman-Grol-Flower-Converts-June-2016.pdf>.

would make up as many as 29% of the total.¹⁵¹ However, further analysis is needed on this subject.

On the other hand, “second-generation immigrants” usually represent the backbone of current home-grown jihadism in the West. They may feel trapped in a sort of limbo: neither strangers nor full-fledged citizens, they do not belong to the community of their parents, but at the same time they do not participate fully in the society in which they have grown up, particularly in the Italian case. Interestingly, both el Abboubi and Rehaily arrived in Italy when they were children (at seven and nine years of age, respectively)¹⁵² and therefore had memories of their life in Morocco, furthermore with the strong emotional ties that are typical of childhood. Thus, this perception of a dual identity could be more marked than in Italian-born individuals of immigrant descent.¹⁵³

This ambivalence is explicitly recognised in the case of el Abboubi: in March 2012, in the MTV mini-documentary, he stated: “When I go to Morocco I represent Italy” [...] “When I am here they call me Moroccan”. However, at the time he apparently cherished this dual identity. In fact he added: “I like it like this, it’s OK, it’s not a problem”.¹⁵⁴ Later on, the rapid radicalisation process turned a possible opportunity into a problem to be solved with a drastic choice.

As scholars have noted, many “second-generation immigrants” do not interpret Islam as the reproduction of religious practices of their parents’ country of origin in a new context; rather, their religious affiliation constitutes a life-style, based on a free choice.¹⁵⁵ In particular, ethnic characterisations are few or absent. This is also true of the tiny minority of “second-generation immigrants” who embraced an extremist violent interpretation of Islam.

Moreover, there may be a divergence, if not a clash, between generations. The case of el Abboubi seems to be quite interesting in this respect. His father was on the board of the local mosque, but the boy never actively attended that place and, after his radicalisation, he ended up thinking that the interpretation of Islam practised in Italian mosques had nothing to do with his view. In some respects, el Abboubi’s rebellion might have a generational element, too.

3.4. “Cognitive” Radicalisation

All four jihadists made the leap from a “cognitive” form of radicalisation, based on the acquisition of radical attitudes, values and beliefs, to a “behavioural” form, associated with actual participation in a range of radical activities, including illegal and clandestine ones, which can culminate in violent extremism and terrorism.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵¹ Boncio, “Italian Foreign Terrorist Fighters”.

¹⁵² Specialists use the expression “1.5 Generation” (1.5G) to describe people who arrived in the country of residence as children, in particular between the ages of 6 and 12. The term was probably coined by sociologist Rubén G. Rumbaut. See, e.g., R. G. Rumbaut, “Ages, Life Stages, and Generational Cohorts: Decomposing the Immigrant First and Second Generations in the United States”, in *International Migration Review*, 38 (3), 2004, pp. 1160-1205.

¹⁵³ Interview by the author with Viviana Premazzi, May 2016.

¹⁵⁴ Quoted in Vidino, *Home-Grown Jihadism in Italy*, p. 62.

¹⁵⁵ E.g., V. Premazzi, “Secolarizzazione e nuove forme di protagonismo e religiosità della seconda generazione musulmana in Italia”, in G. Salmeri (Ed.), *Troppo religione o troppo poca? Cristiani e musulmani alla prova della secolarizzazione* (Venezia: Marsilio, 2016) (e-book).

¹⁵⁶ E.g., P. R. Neumann, “The trouble with radicalization”, in *International Affairs*, 89(4), 2013, pp. 873-893. See also Marone, “Italian Jihadists in Syria and Iraq”.

For el Abboubi and Rehaily, the radicalisation process was particularly rapid. Importantly, unlike in other individual cases, they were not radicalised by partners, friends or relatives. By contrast, Sergio was the one who radicalised her family members. Moreover, unlike other cases, according to the information available, their radicalisation pathways were not significantly influenced by face-to-face interactions with inspirational extremist preachers.

In relation to “cognitive” radicalisation, all four expressed serious grievances. Some complaints seem to be of a political nature. In particular, as mentioned above, el Abboubi criticised the alleged vices of the Western style of life.¹⁵⁷ Delnevo expressed strong disagreements with Italy's foreign policy toward Muslim-majority nations.¹⁵⁸ These foreign fighters saw themselves as part of a broader Muslim community on worldwide scale, interpreted in militant terms. Delnevo, in particular, apparently found a new mission in life, a sort of divine duty to fight against injustice and exploitation in the name of this sort of “imagined community”.¹⁵⁹

On a personal level, at times el Abboubi and Sergio complained about intolerance, discrimination and Islamophobic attitudes in the country.¹⁶⁰ Sergio believed she was victimised only because she was a Muslim woman who, in her view, wanted to respect strictly Islamic precepts and rules. In el Abboubi the concern was more ambiguous and was perhaps connected to his ambivalent status as “second-generation immigrant” of North African descent. Clearly, the sense of discrimination could give rise to negative feelings of frustration, resentment and anger. Additionally, Italy's strict naturalisation laws, based on the *jus sanguinis* principle, could potentially have the effect of exacerbating these feeling in some individuals of immigrant origin.¹⁶¹ In any case, Delnevo and Sergio did not explicitly express a clear willingness to take revenge personally on their own country by means of violence.

Actually, some of the grievances are not uncommon in sections of Europe's Muslim communities. However, the four Italian radicals framed problems and solutions in the perspective of jihadist ideology, with its principles, narratives, and symbols.¹⁶² Unlike other foreign fighters, they did not display apocalyptic end-of-the days views, frequent in IS discourse.

All four jihadists proudly displayed their religious commitment. Clearly, there was no *taqiyya* (dissimulation of the Islamic faith). Furthermore, they did not hesitate to publicly advance their radical ideas, at least to a certain degree. For instance, in September 2012, el Abboubi asked the police if he could obtain the permit necessary to organise a public protest in Brescia aimed at protesting the anti-Islamic movie trailer *The Innocence of Muslim*, even adding that he planned to publicly burn Israeli flags during the event and display banners containing offensive material targeting US President Barack Obama. A peaceful demonstration eventually took place in front of a mall on 6 October

¹⁵⁷ Vidino, *Home-Grown Jihadism in Italy*, pp. 63-66.

¹⁵⁸ In particular, in a video uploaded on his YouTube channel on April 29, 2012, Delnevo addressed “the President of the Italian Republic Mario Monti and his government” (actually, President of the Council of Ministers, that is head of government, not head of state) and asked for the unconditional withdrawal of the Italian army from Afghanistan, particularly in a period of economic crisis, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wdM9x8oN778>. In another video uploaded on October 3, 2012, he denounced the “invasion of Somalia” by the *Kuffar* (unbelievers), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ONH_mhQIBY4.

¹⁵⁹ See Karagiannis, “European converts to Islam”.

¹⁶⁰ Vidino, *Home-Grown Jihadism in Italy*, pp. 61-62; Serafini, *Maria Giulia che divenne Fatima*, pp. 42, 46-47.

¹⁶¹ Interview by the author with Viviana Premazzi, May 2016.

¹⁶² Marone, “Italian Jihadists in Syria and Iraq”, p. 27.

2012; reportedly fewer than a dozen people attended it.¹⁶³ Delnevo and Sergio subscribed to a public petition in favour of the *niqab*. Sergio participated in a national TV show and gave various newspaper interviews.

In particular, these jihadists were active on social media, where they expressed extremist positions, including incitement to hatred, in the Italian language. Each of them had at least one Facebook profile; in the meantime, these have been removed. El Abboubi and Delnevo created their own YouTube channel. El Abboubi and particularly Rehaily were active on Twitter. El Abboubi also started two blogs, *Sharia4Italy* and *Banca Islamica*.

Various public statements, together with other sources (in particular, testimonies of family members, friends, acquaintances and other relevant actors), make it possible to dig into their lives. However, it is not easy to reconstruct their original motivations. In general, their decisions to embrace jihadism and travel to Syria was driven by similar, but not identical reasons. In any case, none left for purely materialistic reasons (money, sexual rewards, etc.).

Apparently, el Abboubi became disgusted by the values and institutions of Western society and wanted to rebel against them. In this regard, he appears to be close to the perennial figure of the angry young rebel. In some respects, el Abboubi jumped from the counter-culture of rap to the (militant) counter-culture of jihadism.¹⁶⁴ Furthermore, it could be argued that Anas's extreme decision was also motivated by a search for excitement and adventure. These feelings, for example, seem to be confirmed in some photos he uploaded on the internet after he arrived in Syria, where he posed camouflaged, holding a rifle, with a defiant look, as if he were a sort of war hero.¹⁶⁵ Additionally, a sort of "slippery slope" mechanism¹⁶⁶ may have been at play: it can be assumed that the (short) detention on suspicion of terrorism-related offences in mid-2013 led him to take the drastic decision to leave for Syria. In this perspective, the arrest could represent an important step in el Abboubi's criminal career¹⁶⁷ in the field of jihadism.

Delnevo was fascinated by the mission of fighting for an alleged good cause, in solidarity with suffering (Sunni) Muslim populations, and by the idea of sacrificing his life for Islam.¹⁶⁸ In many respects, Delnevo's profile is in line with that of other radicals who left early in 2012 and 2013 for Syria out of an altruistic impulse to assist Muslims in need. The "humanitarian" motive appears to have declined since the self-proclamation of the "caliphate" in mid-2014.¹⁶⁹ Additionally, Delnevo appeared to be a troubled soul who was searching for meaning and purpose in life; militant Salafism, with its rigid precepts, may have supplied reassuring responses, especially on good and

¹⁶³ Vidino, *Home-Grown Jihadism in Italy*, p. 60.

¹⁶⁴ However, el Abboubi did not completely forget his experience as a rapper. After his fast-paced radicalisation process, he delivered a video speaking in front of a camera with "a cadence reminiscent of his rap days". Vidino, *Home-Grown Jihadism in Italy*, p. 68.

¹⁶⁵ See M. Rodella, "Anas, l'elettricista prestato alla Jihad è sparito nell'inferno della Siria", *Corriere della Sera*, Brescia local edition, 9 May 2014, http://brescia.corriere.it/notizie/cronaca/14_maggio_09/anas-el-abboubi-elettricista-prestato-jihad-sparito-nell-inferno-siria-a64d2fb6-d79b-11e3-bbb4-071d29de8b1e.shtml.

¹⁶⁶ Cf. C. McCauley and S. Moskalenko, "Mechanisms of political radicalization: Pathways toward terrorism", in *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 20 (3), 2008, pp. 415-433; D. Hellmuth, "Of Alienation, Association, and Adventure: Why German Fighters Join ISIL", in *Journal for Deradicalization*, 6, 2016, pp. 24-50.

¹⁶⁷ On the sociological concept of "deviant career" see, among others, A. Groenemeyer, "Deviant Careers", in G. Ritzer (Ed.) *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), pp. 1142-1145).

¹⁶⁸ See, in particular, the account of Giuliano's father, in Delnevo, *Vi racconto Giuliano*; C. Delnevo, *Il figlio musulmano*.

¹⁶⁹ Schmid and Tinnes, "Foreign (Terrorist) Fighters with IS", p. 36.

evil, on duties and the figure of the enemy.¹⁷⁰ It is interesting to note that, according to some reports (and his own father), Delnevo had held neo-fascist sympathies in his youth, like his friend Lazzaro.¹⁷¹

Both Italian male foreign fighters showed an unwillingness to fit into Italian and Western society. The two young men struggled to find an identity and flirted with alternative subcultures, although different ones: as just mentioned, Delnevo had a fascination with neo-fascism and el Abboubi with Hip Hop, before embracing jihadism. In particular, Delnevo's ideological references are somehow baffling. As noted earlier, he had held neo-fascist sympathies in his teens. On the other hand, in his online production, he did not hesitate to use leftist symbols. However, in the end, he embraced jihadism. Tellingly, his Facebook page showed in the timeline that he used a graffiti of Osama bin Laden beside (atheist) Che Guevara as a cover photo for his profile.¹⁷² Ultimately, the few commonalities among these completely different ideologies are mainly based on a radical *denial* of the dominant culture (i.e., liberal, individualistic, capitalist, etc.).

Maria Giulia Sergio was apparently obsessed with the idea of purity, based on a fundamentalist and militant interpretation of the religion,¹⁷³ and was attracted by the cause of the newly-proclaimed "caliphate". Like many other jihadist emigrants, she wants to live in what she was made to believe is a "perfect state" and she wished to assist in being part of a great Islamic revival, based on an extremist interpretation.

According to some scholars, such as Olivier Roy, the phenomenon of jihadist extremism in Europe is more the result of a process of "Islamization of radicalism" than of a process of "radicalization of Islam". It would represent a generational rebellion of a nihilist nature.¹⁷⁴ This interesting interpretation could help understand the radicalisation pathways of people such as el Abboubi and perhaps Rehaily, young rebels who in our times can find in (a militant version of) Islam a justification for a generational opposition to the system. In this way, anti-system radicalism leads to militant Islam. In fact, in our largely post-ideological age, a radical version of Islam can represent the last available "grand narrative" against the dominant culture,¹⁷⁵ especially after 9/11. Nevertheless, for people such as Delnevo and especially Sergio arguably it is the adherence to a fundamentalist version of Islam (in these cases, through a conversion) that eventually leads to political radicalism. Thus, once again, the pathways are manifold.

3.5. "Behavioural" Radicalisation

At some point, these four radicals decided to take action and leave for Syria. They moved on to a "behavioural" form of radicalisation in the form of joining jihadist armed groups. It is worth stressing that their decision to leave for jihad occurred in different

¹⁷⁰ Guolo, *L'ultima utopia*, p. 19. Cf. M. Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the mind of God: The global rise of religious violence* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2000).

¹⁷¹ In particular, Vidino, *Home-Grown Jihadism in Italy*, p. 70.

¹⁷² Vergani, "Neojihadist Prosumers and Al Qaeda Single Narrative", pp. 609-610.

¹⁷³ Tellingly, before she left for Syria, Sergio told an acquaintance: "I was Catholic but I embraced Islam because it is a *cleaner* religion" (emphasis added), quoted in F. Biloslavo, "Dal trucco al velo, vi racconto la svolta del clan femminile guidato da Lady Jihad", *Il Giornale*, 3 July 2015, <http://www.ilgiornale.it/news/politica/trucco-velo-vi-racconto-svolta-clan-femminile-guidato-lady-j-1147919.html>.

¹⁷⁴ In particular, O. Roy, "France's Oedipal Islamist Complex", *Foreign Policy*, 7 January 2016, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/01/07/frances-oedipal-islamist-complex-charlie-hebdo-islamic-state-isis/>.

¹⁷⁵ Guolo, *L'ultima utopia*, pp. 16-18.

periods. Delnevo reached Syria in November 2012 before IS moved into Syria (around April 2013), while el Abboubi reached the country after this advance, in September 2013. On the other hand, both Sergio and Rehaily arrived after the self-proclamation of the “caliphate” in mid-2014, attracted by al-Baghdadi’s call.

In addition to general “preconditions”, specific “precipitants”¹⁷⁶ or trigger events may have motivated this serious decision. In Delnevo’s case, according to an Italian friend, a “decisive push” might be represented by the Houla massacre, in the context of the Syrian civil war: on 25 May 2012, 108 civilians, including 49 children, were killed in a deliberate attack, probably carried out by pro-government militia, in the town of Taldou. In el Abboubi’s case, the choice to leave the country was possibly encouraged by his arrest in June 2013. For Sergio, the self-proclamation of IS’s “caliphate” in June 2014 represented a crucial event. After that, she planned to find a devout man and make *Hijra* to Syria with him. When her acquaintance Lubjana Gjecaj told her about a radical “Muslim brother who is looking to marry” and was content to leave (namely, Aldo Kobuzi), she was enthusiastic about this opportunity. In an intercepted conversation, Gjecaj said to a friend that Maria Giulia/Fatima “went crazy” with happiness.¹⁷⁷ With respect to Rehaily’s pathway, at the moment it is more difficult to identify an immediate catalyst.

However, unlike other foreign fighters, none of these four jihadists experienced a sudden crisis that led to loss or “unfreezing” of social attachments and everyday commitments (e.g., the loss of a loved one or other shocking events).¹⁷⁸ As mentioned, a partial exception could perhaps be el Abboubi’s short penitentiary detention in mid-2013.

Interestingly, according to one reputable source,¹⁷⁹ Maria Giulia Sergio suffers from Arnold-Chiari malformation, a structural defect in the cerebellum, the part of the brain that controls balance. In her case, the disorder does not require particular therapies, but only preventive care (e.g., administration of analgesics). Nevertheless, this malformation does not affect mental faculties in any way. This shadow has carried some weight in Sergio’s life; among other things, it inspired her to study biotechnology at university. However, it is difficult to say whether and how this pathology could have any effect on her decision to embrace jihadism and leave for Syria.¹⁸⁰

None of the four jihadists had familial or ethnic ties with Syria. Like many aspiring jihadists, they were not particularly focused on one specific country. In particular, Delnevo and el Abboubi were interested in reaching different places where, in their view, a *jihad* was being fought. Before opting for Syria, Delnevo made some inquiries about travelling to Afghanistan, and el Abboubi seemed fascinated with the conflict in Mali.¹⁸¹ Besides, none of them had military training or experience in Italy or in other countries.

¹⁷⁶ In particular, M. Crenshaw, “The causes of terrorism”, in *Comparative Politics*, 13 (4), 1981, pp. 379-399 (pp. 381ff.).

¹⁷⁷ Serafini, *Maria Giulia che divenne Fatima*, pp. 66-67.

¹⁷⁸ Hellmuth, “Of Alienation, Association, and Adventure”, p. 41.

¹⁷⁹ Serafini, *Maria Giulia che divenne Fatima*, pp. 64-65.

¹⁸⁰ It could be recalled that the Terror Management Theory (TMT) has suggested that death anxiety (Mortality Saliency) can increase out-group aggression and potentially provide support for extremism and violence. However, further research is needed on this subject. Cf. M. Vergani, “La paura della morte rende estremisti?”, in *Sicurezza, Terrorismo e Società*, 1 (1), 2015, pp. 43-53.

¹⁸¹ Vidino, *Home-Grown Jihadism in Italy*, p. 93.

Unfortunately, there is little open-source information about the ways in which these Italian citizens travelled to Syria, via Turkey. With the possible exception of Rehaily, these jihadists did not take particular caution in the preparation of their travel to Syria. For example, they did not assume a new identity and used their own passports. According to the information currently available, they were not directly recruited by militant organisations through a traditional top-down process of recruitment, but rather actively sought contacts with various facilitators, on the basis of a bottom-up process.

However, available evidence on the el Abboubi case suggests that he was assisted by Albanian facilitators who acted to the advantage of IS, without formally being part of the armed group. In this case the facilitation dynamic was seemingly based more on a relatively generalised mechanism that relies on organisational ties that are potentially open and accessible to different would-be foreign fighters, rather than a particularistic mechanism that relies heavily on relational ties for access (family, friendship or other dense social networks).¹⁸²

On the other hand, in the Sergio-Kobuzi case, personal and, in particular, family ties probably played a significant role. As mentioned earlier, Kobuzi's sister and mother were already in the self-proclaimed "caliphate". Moreover, it is possible that the couple was helped in a first step by a sophisticated Albanian recruiting network led by radical imam Bujar Hysa, mentor of Kobuzi's son-in-law (Mariglen Dervishllari). However, their arrival in Syria was then coordinated by a specialised facilitator, Ahmed Abu al-Harith, who is considered to be an "IS member".

In general, the foreign fighters phenomenon in Italy has so far been characterised, to a large extent, by the presence of *foreign* recruitment networks operating within the country.¹⁸³ In particular, both el Abboubi and Sergio had connections, in different ways, with Albanian jihadists. Moreover, Sergio joined the Albanian contingent, once she arrived in Syria with her Albanian husband. These facts confirm the influence of Balkan extremists in Italy.¹⁸⁴ However, other details are still vague, unknown or not publicly available. For example, the role of Abu al-Harith still needs to be clarified.

Importantly, it can be argued that overall in Italy the local rooting of extremist organisations and groups that are able to connect demand and supply of foreign fighters (like Sharia4Belgium in Belgium in past years, for example)¹⁸⁵ is currently weaker than in other European countries. We know that the decision to leave for Syria or Iraq is often a small group decision rather than an individual one. These small groups are generally based on friendship relations or family ties. For example, "bunches of guys"¹⁸⁶ of three or five young males may be formed in a neighbourhood, a mosque, a school, a sports club, or a prison.¹⁸⁷ By contrast, the four Italian jihadists left the country alone (Delnevo, el Abboubi, Rehaily) or, at most, with people they just met personally

¹⁸² See T. Holman, "Gonna Get Myself Connected: The Role of Facilitation in Foreign Fighter Mobilizations". *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 10 (2), 2016, pp. 2-23.

¹⁸³ It is worth adding that these networks have not displayed strong connections with Italy's historic mafia organisations.

¹⁸⁴ See G. Giacalone, "Islamic extremism from the Balkans emerges in Italy", in *Sicurezza, Terrorismo e Società*, 1 (2), 2015, pp. 87-92. Furthermore, arguably a significant, but still unspecified, number of the 87 foreign fighters who officially travelled to Syria from Italy are of Balkan origin. Interestingly, they are over-represented in comparison with the general presence of Balkan Muslims in the country. See also Boncio, "Italian Foreign Terrorist Fighters"; Pepicelli, "Italia, il jihadismo di terza generazione".

¹⁸⁵ See, in particular, Coolsaet, *Facing the fourth foreign fighters wave*, pp. 41-42.

¹⁸⁶ M. Sageman, *Leaderless jihad: Terror networks in the twenty-first century* (Philadelphia, Penn.: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).

¹⁸⁷ Schmid and Tinnes, "Foreign (Terrorist) Fighters with IS", p. 35.

(Sergio with her new Albanian husband). Peer pressure did not play a salient role. Unlike many other Western European countries, individual radicalisation has played a major part in Italy. This important particularity is perhaps due to the traditional dispersion and fragmentation of the small home-grown jihadist scene. In such a context, each potential foreign fighter can be led to take action on his/her own.¹⁸⁸

All four were dedicated to the cause of jihadist armed groups in Syria, but only some committed to recruit other people. On one hand, there is no evidence that Delnevo acted as a recruiter or facilitator for other radicals. On the other hand, as said earlier, Sergio was able to skilfully recruit all her family and, in addition, helped indoctrinate other women from Syria via the internet. It is important to observe that, with the possible exception of el Abboubi in 2013, there are no indications that these four home-grown jihadists were interested in preparing attacks on Italian territory.¹⁸⁹

4. Reactions of the Families

Another noteworthy aspect of these four cases concerns their families of origin. Clearly, it is important to stress that, in general, the examination of the families' behaviours and reactions, often excruciating, is a delicate task that requires great caution. At least three (Delnevo, el Abboubi and Sergio) of the four jihadists certainly remained in touch with their family members back home. No household had a past involvement in extremism. Interestingly, the reactions of their families of origin were divergent. Some relatives, such as Delnevo's and Rehaily's fathers, went public, while others preferred silence. More importantly, they showed different attitudes. A recent study on the reactions of IS foreign fighters' families, for example, distinguishes four general "themes": "pain", "confusion", "anger" and "shame".¹⁹⁰ All these different feelings are present in our sample.

Giuliano Delnevo's family was not aware of his decision to leave for *jihad*. However, after his departure in November 2012, they kept in touch with him. As mentioned, his parents are divorced. His father Carlo felt a sense of anger at first, considering that decision as a sort of "mischief"; then he repeatedly asked him on the phone to return to Italy; in the end, he resigned himself to this choice and came to "respect" it.¹⁹¹ As mentioned earlier, after his departure, his mother Eva did not hesitate to travel alone to Syria to find Giuliano/Ibrahim. Unsurprisingly, even when several media portrayed the young man as a fanatical "terrorist", their parents continued to see him as a beloved son. Furthermore, after his tragic death in Syria in June 2013, his father Carlo, although not sharing Giuliano/Ibrahim's extremist ideas, described his son as an idealistic "hero". As mentioned earlier, Carlo, a practising Catholic,¹⁹² converted to Islam after the tragic

¹⁸⁸ Nevertheless, in recent times cases of group radicalisation have emerged as well. In particular, a small network of aspiring foreign fighters of Moroccan origin was identified in April 2016 in north-west Italy. "Progettavano attentati in Italia, sei arresti. Anche coppia con figli", *Corriere della Sera*, Milan local edition, 28 April 2016, http://milano.corriere.it/notizie/cronaca/16_aprile_28/volevano-partire-la-jihad-coppia-lecco-figli-sei-fermati-1960e700-0d22-11e6-9053-86a90bf524d0.shtml.

¹⁸⁹ Cf. Hegghammer, "Should I Stay or Should I Go?".

¹⁹⁰ S. Maher and P. R. Neumann, *Pain, Confusion, Anger, and Shame: The Stories of Islamic State Families*, Report, The International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (ICSR), <http://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/ICSR-Report-Pain-Confusion-Anger-and-Shame-The-Stories-of-Islamic-State-Families1.pdf>.

¹⁹¹ Interview with Carlo Delnevo, in L. Mantelli, "Delnevo: «Foreign fighter non vuol dire terrorista»", *Lettera 43*, 29 November 2015, http://www.lettera43.it/esclusiva/delnevo-foreign-fighter-non-vuol-dire-terrorista_43675225101.htm.

¹⁹² Tellingly, Carlo Delnevo, a learned man, reported that he participated in a pilgrim to the Sanctuary of Lourdes to ask for the Madonna's help for his son in Syria and prayed for "his return to the Catholic faith". Delnevo, *Il figlio musulmano*.

loss of his son; perhaps a way to maintain an intimate connection with his loved one even after death.

Meriem Rehaily's family was painfully surprised by her sudden departure in July 2015.¹⁹³ Her father Roudani appeared to be in denial, at least at first. In various interviews he claimed that Meriem was a "good kid". Her action was described as out of character. In the father's view, she was "brainwashed" by someone. Besides, Roudani's condemnation of the so-called Islamic State has been clear; he described IS as "horrible, pure evil".¹⁹⁴ In this case, pain is seemingly combined with a considerable level of confusion and consternation. Moreover, the reference to brainwashing might show hints of "anger", in an apparent attempt to externalise the pain by blaming outsiders.¹⁹⁵ However, seemingly hope is not lost. When a warrant was issued for Meriem's arrest in June 2016, her father Roudani stated that he accepted that measure but, on the other hand, he feared that it could diminish the possibility of a return to Italy. He was apparently convinced that the girl was just waiting for a chance to flee IS and go home.¹⁹⁶

Anas el Abboubi's family apparently presented somehow more ambiguous positions. For example, his mother expressed partial reservations; in an intercepted conversation, she told him: "When they conquer Syria and enter Palestine, I'll let you go. It is a war against Israel and you don't fight Arabs". Moreover, the woman reportedly said to a friend: "He went for the honour of *jihad*". According to prosecuting authorities, el Abboubi's "family never let him lack support and understanding".¹⁹⁷

On the other hand, in March 2016, el Abboubi's father, Abdel Karim, revealed in a newspaper interview that Anas had died in Syria and said that he could not forgive him for his extreme decision. In particular, the father said: "I can't forgive him, even before God on the day of judgement" and added: "I don't want to be the father of a terrorist". These words appear to express feelings of anger and shame, respectively, in addition to pain.¹⁹⁸

In contrast, all of Maria Giulia Sergio's family members converted to a very strict form of Islam, approved of her decision to leave for Syria and, following her constant requests, even agreed to move to the territory under the control of the self-proclaimed "caliphate", before being arrested. Eventually Maria Giulia/Fatima was able to recruit her whole family, using both carrot and stick approaches. In particular, she did not hesitate to resort to emotional blackmail.

However, Sergio's relatives presented different attitudes and motivations. Her older sister, Marianna, was easily persuaded to leave for Syria: she was already showing sympathies for the cause of IS and, in addition, was apparently interested in finding a new husband, after her divorce. Soon she backed Maria Giulia. In contrast, her father Sergio Sergio and especially her mother Assunta Buonfiglio were more sceptical and hesitant. In the end, apart from the emotional attachment to their daughter, they were also convinced by the promise of a better social position in IS-controlled territory.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹³ A. Priante, "Merieme scrive all'amica dal Califfato «Faccio logistica, qui mi sento utile»".

¹⁹⁴ Randon, "Il giallo del pentimento di Meriem. Il padre giura: «Nessun contatto»"

¹⁹⁵ Cf. Maher and Neumann, *Pain, Confusion, Anger, and Shame*, p. 11.

¹⁹⁶ Livieri, "«Mia figlia plagiata ma sono sicuro che tornerà da noi»".

¹⁹⁷ Statements quoted in Marone, "Italian Jihadists in Syria and Iraq", p. 28.

¹⁹⁸ Statements quoted in "Il papà di Anas El Abboubi: «So che è morto ma non lo perdono»".

¹⁹⁹ In particular, Serafini, *Maria Giulia che divenne Fatima*, pp. 118ff.

In particular, Sergio urged her father, a labourer in debt, to quit his job and use the severance pay (EUR 25,000) to move to Syria with the whole family. In her words, “you go to work for these wretched unbelievers who kill our brothers [...] They are the ones who must be our slaves, not us”. In addition, in various intercepted conversations that have almost farcical overtones, Maria Giulia promised that in Syria her family members will have various possessions and comforts such as a big house with a washing machine, a piece of land, and a car. Maria Giulia, in her heart, was not a materialist girl, but was also willing to tickle her parents’ imagination.²⁰⁰

After their arrest, Sergio’s parents apparently changed their mind in an interesting way. Following the death of the mother Assunta Buonfiglio on 6 October 2015, the father Sergio Sergio, a fragile person, maintained, under house arrest, that he was manipulated by his daughter Maria Giulia. Seemingly, his previous acquiescence turned into anger and shame. Furthermore, he stated that he wanted to return to Roman Catholicism. He cut his beard, and started to eat pork and drink wine again. He also requested that his wife’s funeral was conducted in accordance with Catholic rites. Eventually this claim was not accepted by the local diocese because there was no certainty about the woman’s willingness to abjure Islam. Notably, the oldest daughter Marianna, from prison, had asked for an Islamic funeral.²⁰¹

Seemingly, Delnevo’s, el Abboubi’s and Rehaily’s families have, in different ways, painfully tried to balance their original non-militant attitudes and ideas with attachment and consideration for their loved one. Like other families of foreign fighters, they have handled this in their own way. In general, working with families can be an important tool in preventing violent extremism. Thus, it is worth stressing that at present, unlike other countries,²⁰² Italy does not have actual support initiatives for the parents and relatives of foreign fighters and, more generally, it has not developed full-fledged counter-radicalisation and de-radicalisation programmes.²⁰³

On the contrary, Italy has given priority to a criminal justice approach, based on the prosecution of foreign fighters. After the *Charlie Hebdo* massacre, these repressive measures were reinforced and extended by the introduction of an anti-terrorism decree law, subsequently converted into law with some changes in April 2015 (Law No. 43 of 17 April 2015). Among other things, this law modified provisions of the penal code in order to punish each participant involved in terrorism-related activities, including the individual who simply joins an international terrorist group/entity (i.e., the foreign fighter), punished by imprisonment of between five and eight years, and the individual who organises, finances or advocates transfers to other countries with the purpose of terrorism, punished by imprisonment of the same duration (Art. 270-*quater* and art. 270-*quater*.1 of the penal code).²⁰⁴

²⁰⁰ Serafini, *Maria Giulia che divenne Fatima*, pp. 118-137.

²⁰¹ Serafini, “Il padre di Fatima la jihadista italiana: «Voglio tornare cattolico: mia figlia mi ha manipolato»”, *Corriere della Sera*, 19 November 2016, http://www.corriere.it/cronache/15_novembre_18/padre-fatima-voglio-tornare-cattolico-mia-figlia-mi-ha-manipolato-0dfd6e5a-8e20-11e5-ae73-6fe562d02c8a.shtml; L. Romano, “Funerale cattolico per la mamma di Fatima? La Curia non è d’accordo”, *Il Giornale*, 9 October 2015, <http://www.ilgiornale.it/news/cronache/funerale-rito-cattolico-mamma-fatima-1180741.html>.

²⁰² E.g., A.-J. Gielen, “Supporting Families of Foreign Fighters. A Realistic Approach for Measuring the Effectiveness”, in *Journal for Deradicalization*, 2, 2015, pp. 21-48.

²⁰³ See L. Vidino (Ed.), *L’Italia e il terrorismo in casa. Che fare?* (Milan: ISPI, 2015).

²⁰⁴ The official text of the law is available at: <http://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2015/04/20/15G00060/sg> (in Italian).

The criminal justice approach has its advantages and disadvantages.²⁰⁵ For example, in some conversations with their parents from Syria, both el Abboubi and Delnevo explicitly mentioned the fear of being arrested and convicted in Italy as a reason not to return home. On the other hand, family members and friends were discouraged from passing on information to authorities.

Nevertheless, Italy's approach could change in the future. In particular, a bipartisan draft law on "measures for the prevention of jihadist radicalisation and extremism" was already submitted to Italian Parliament in January 2016. This important provision intends to complement the repressive measures which had been reinforced in April 2015.²⁰⁶ The draft law presents guidelines regarding: 1) the planning of specialist training for the police forces, 2) the creation of a centralised information system on individuals involved in jihadist radicalism, 3) the launch of preventive initiatives in schools, 4) the development of measures related to active labour market policies for individuals at risk of radicalisation, 5) the creation of an information portal on radicalisation and extremism, 6) the preparation of a national plan for detainees.²⁰⁷

5. Conclusions

This paper has explored the current extent of Italy's Sunni jihadists in the Syrian civil war. It has sought to fill a gap that exists on the Italian case. Clearly, further research is needed on this topic.²⁰⁸ Overall, the number of foreign fighters connected with Italy appears to be limited, especially when compared to other European countries. In particular, today very few Italian citizens are publicly known to have joined armed groups in Syria or Iraq (presumably a few tens at most). However, these individuals deserve attention because they are particularly difficult to detect and stop.

Another interesting feature of the Italian case is the prevalence of individual pathways of radicalisation over group mechanisms, at least so far. Unlike other Western countries, peer pressure or other group dynamics within small "bunches of guys" did not play a crucial role.

In addition, it can be argued that overall the local rooting of extremist organisations that are able to connect demand and supply of travellers to Syria is currently weaker than in other European countries.

However, in the European context, Italy appears to be a "latecomer" country as for various conditions that are directly or indirectly related to the risk of home-grown jihadism and foreign fighting (for example, just indirectly and potentially, the number of "second-generation immigrants"). Thus, it is possible that in the future the differences with other European countries diminish.

²⁰⁵ Cf. A. Reed, J. de Roy van Zuijdewijn and E. Bakker, *Pathways of Foreign Fighters: Policy Options and Their (Un)Intended Consequences*, ICCT Policy Brief, The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague (ICCT), <http://icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/ICCT-Reed-De-Roy-Van-Zuijdewijn-Bakker-Pathways-Of-Foreign-Fighters-Policy-Options-And-Their-Un-Intended-Consequences-April2015.pdf>.

²⁰⁶ Interview by the author with Stefano Dambrosio, MP, first signatory of the draft law, June 2016.

²⁰⁷ The official text of the draft law is available at <http://www.camera.it/leg17/126?leg=17&idDocumento=3558> (in Italian).

²⁰⁸ Cf. Marone, "Italian Jihadists in Syria and Iraq".

This contribution has examined the stories of four Italian nationals: Giuliano (alias “Ibrahim”) Delnevo, a convert who died in combat in the Aleppo area in June 2013; Anas el Abboubi (alias “Anas Abu Shaku” or “Anas al-Italy”), a second-generation immigrant of Moroccan descent who joined the ranks of IS in Syria in September 2013; Maria Giulia Sergio (alias “Fatima az Zahra”), a convert who is now in the self-proclaimed “caliphate”; Meriem Rehaily (alias “Sister Rim”), a second-generation immigrant who left in July 2015. Delnevo and el Abboubi served as foreign fighters, while Sergio received firearms training, but, as a woman, has not allowed to take combat roles for IS. According to the information available, Rehaily has not explicitly expressed a willingness to engage in combat and, according to some unconfirmed reports, she would have regretted her decision to join the self-proclaimed “caliphate”.

These four individual case studies present interesting similarities but also important differences and they do not permit the identification of a common profile of an Italian foreign fighter. This fact confirms the widely held assumption that the radicalisation process is based on individual pathways that differ from one person to another.²⁰⁹ In conclusion, as Italian authorities have recognised,²¹⁰ foreign fighters and other *muhajirin* (“emigrants”) in Syria, though relatively few in number, potentially pose a significant and complex security threat.

²⁰⁹ Among others, M. Hafez and C. Mullins, “The Radicalization Puzzle”.

²¹⁰ In particular, ICCT questionnaire completed by the Public Security Department of the Italian Ministry of Interior in October 2015, quoted in Van Ginkel and Entenmann (Eds.), “The Foreign Fighters Phenomenon in the European Union”. According to this source, “[f]oreign fighters and returnees represent a threat to national security due to their complete acceptance of extremist ideology and the experience they acquired in conflict zones. These factors may lead these people, once back in their countries of habitual residence, to continue their jihad by either taking action, or by radicalizing other militants, or by establishing recruitment networks for the Syria/Iraq battlefield” (p. 30).

Interviews

Interview with Honourable Stefano Dambruoso (antiterrorism judge and currently member of Italian Parliament), June 2016;

Interview with Professor Marco Lombardi (Catholic University of the Sacred Heart and ITSTIME – Italian Team for Security, Terroristic Issues & Managing Emergencies, Milan), May 2016;

Interviews with Professor Antonio Mutti (University of Pavia), February and June 2016;
Interview with Dr. Viviana Premazzi (Oasis Center), May 2016;

Interview with Marta Serafini (Corriere della Sera), June 2016;

Interview with Professor Lorenzo Vidino (George Washington University), May 2016;
Exchange with Italian security officials, Rome, October 2015.

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Italy's Jihadists in the Syrian Civil War

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