

Motives and Considerations of Potential Foreign Fighters from the Netherlands

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Despite the fact that the Netherlands has been confronted for more than three years with the phenomenon of foreign fighters in Syria, we still have little insight into the backgrounds and motivations of these persons. Most knowledge available on this subject comes from journalistic work. Scientific studies into the characteristics and biographies of these foreign fighters are scarce. Also, they are based on only a small number of cases. Knowledge about persons who once indicated they wanted to travel to Syria to take part in the fight against the regime of Bashar al Assad is virtually non-existent. However, the question why people ultimately let go of the idea to travel to Syria is particularly relevant. Maybe their motives and considerations can teach us how others playing with the idea can be convinced or stopped from going to Syria. In order to gain a better insight into this, six so-called “potential foreign fighters” were studied on the basis of interviews with them and/or persons from their immediate circle. As these six persons merely represent a small random number from an unknown population, no general conclusions can be drawn. This Policy Brief is limited to highlighting a number of observations we identified among several potential foreign fighters and the visions of professionals we interviewed, including confidential advisers, lecturers and imams. These observations and visions form the basis of a number of policy suggestions that could contribute to the prevention policy within the framework of the “Comprehensive Action Programme to Combat Jihadism” of the Dutch government.

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1. Introduction

During the past 20 to 25 years, various (mostly young) Dutch persons joined or wanted to join one of the militant groups in foreign conflicts such as those in Bosnia, Afghanistan, Somalia and other Islamic countries. The current conflict in Syria has already attracted approximately 150 Dutch persons and Dutch residents. Some of them take part in the armed combat on the side of a jihadist group such as Jabhat al Nusra, affiliated with al Qaeda, and the “Islamic State” organisation.¹ In addition to these “foreign fighters” or so-called “Syria travellers”, there are “potential foreign fighters”: Dutch Muslims who expressed their ambition (publically at times) to travel to Syria to join the conflict, but who have not done so (yet).² This group of potential foreign fighters also consists of persons who were stopped (at the last moment) by friends, family or the authorities.

1.1. Prevention

Given the potential threat posed by returning foreign fighters, Dutch people should in principle be prevented from travelling to Syria. This is why the Dutch government wants to prevent people from travelling to areas of conflict where they join violent jihadist groups such as the aforementioned militia, which are reputed to be “terrorist”. It is possible for instance - as formulated in the recent Dutch “Comprehensive Action Programme to Combat Jihadism” - to take measures under criminal law when there is a reasonable suspicion that someone will travel to Syria.³ When there are good reasons to suspect someone wants to leave, passports are declared invalid.

The use of these legal means and other preventive measures requires early identification of the wish to leave and preparations that could form the evidence of such a step. It is not easy to recognise such developments and actions in time.

Even family members and friends of leavers are often surprised by the news that the person they thought they knew so well has suddenly left - as demonstrated by a previous study conducted by the Centre for Terrorism and Counterterrorism of Leiden University and Peter Grol on the characteristics of foreign fighters and the process that led to their departure.⁴ Other people involved with a certain distance to the leaver, such as lecturers, social workers and police officers, are also often surprised. Furthermore, various cases have shown that the radicalisation and preparation process for the actual journey can take several months, but there are also cases where it only took a couple of weeks. Also, it is difficult to make a distinction between actual foreign fighters and those who may once have mentioned leaving for Syria, but who eventually decided against it.

Within the framework of the prevention policy, it is vital to gain a better insight into persons who may want to leave for Syria. Who are these people, why do they want to join one of these militant groups and why did some people who may have wanted to go, not go in the end? A better understanding of these questions is vital if we want to take timely and effective action following the suspicion or indication that someone may be planning on leaving for Syria. Tackling or apprehending people who did not actually plan on leaving may have the opposite effect. Also, we simply do not have the capacity to act on all signals and from an ethical and legal point of view we have to be careful with the use of serious legal and administrative measures. The insight into the motivations or specific circumstances that made people decide not to leave is perhaps the most important tool to develop

¹ In this report, we use the term Islamic State (with capitals) in order to indicate the name of the organisation operating under that name. We also use the term Islamic state (without capitals) in order to indicate the state form that is based on the theoretic principles of Islam.

² In addition to the approximately two hundred jihadist foreign fighters, there are a number of non-Muslims who went to Syria and Iraq to join the Kurdish militias that fight IS.

³ Visit www.ntcv.nl for the “Comprehensive Action Programme to Combat Jihadism”.

⁴ This study was converted into two publications: D. Weggemans, E. Bakker and P. Grol, “Who are they and why do they go? The radicalization and preparatory processes of Dutch jihadist foreign fighters”, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, vol. 8, no. 4 (2014); E. Bakker, P. Grol and D. Weggemans, *From “the kid next door” to foreign fighter in Syria. The radicalization and preparation of aspiring foreign fighters and how we can improve the early recognition of such processes* (The Hague: CTC, 2013).

another preventative policy. Perhaps an insight into the motives and considerations of potential leavers offers clues for developing policies and measures that can prevent others from travelling to Syria.

1.2. Study

We only have little knowledge about the motivations of Dutch people who travel to Syria in order to take part in the armed combat.⁵ They provide information about this via the Internet and (social) media in the form of, for instance, interviews, manifests and descriptions of the combat in Syria (and Iraq). This information (or propaganda) provides an image of these persons, their ideas and daily experiences later - after they have arrived in Syria. It does not so much give us an insight into the factors, motives and actions that led up to that step. In order to gain a better insight into the stages before these people leave, the Centre for Terrorism & Counterterrorism and Peter Grol conducted the aforementioned study on leavers between December 2013 and March 2014.⁶ Semi-structured interviews with multiple persons from their immediate circle were used to describe and analyse the biographies/life stories of five leavers. This study provided an insight into the background and motivation of leavers and also hoped to find clues to recognise the radicalisation process and preparations. This study did not include the motives for not travelling to Syria. Given the aforementioned need to reinforce the prevention policy, this (follow-up) study specifically focused on what the study calls potential leavers.

As was the case with the study on the five leavers, this study is also based on semi-structured interviews with people who were close to the potential leaver during the period the latter toyed with the idea of going to Syria. As such, the study is of a primarily empiric and explorative nature. The persons' stories are the key element, not the testing or formulating of possible assumptions about the how and why of radicalisation processes or preparations. We studied six cases for this study. This was done on the basis of interviews with 20 persons from the following categories:

- (Old) friends of the person studied;
- Teachers / lecturers;
- Confidential advisers;
- Municipal officers;
- Imams;
- Members of a Dutch-Syrian opposition group;
- Journalists who spoke to people involved;
- And, in four out of the six cases, the person in question.

In addition, we consulted the following secondary sources:

- Interviews in the media with the persons being studied;
- Other news about these persons in the media.

1.3. Choice of cases

It is not possible to give an accurate figure for the number of Dutch people or Dutch residents who travelled to Syria to join the armed combat. According to a press release from the Dutch General Intelligence and Security Service (AIVD), the number of persons who indeed joined the jihad had risen to approximately 130 in June 2014. About 30 of them returned to the Netherlands after a while, while fourteen of them were killed in the period up

⁵ See for instance, P. Grol, D. Weggemans, and E. Bakker "De leefwereld en denkbeelden van Nederlandse & Belgische Syriëgangers: Een analyse van elf Facebook-account's", *International Spectator - Clingendael Magazine voor Internationale Betrekkingen*, vol. 68, no. 12 (2014), pp. 14-19.

⁶ E. Bakker, P. Grol and D. Weggemans, *From "the kid next door" to foreign fighter in Syria. The radicalization and preparation of aspiring foreign fighters and how we can improve the early recognition of such processes* (The Hague: CTC, 2013).

to June 2014. In addition, the AIVD also counts some hundreds of persons among supporters of jihadism, some of whom are willing to join the jihad.⁷ A more accurate figure of persons who at one point expressed the (personal) wish to go to Syria cannot be given. It may be a multiple of the 130 who did actually leave. Not only do we not know how many people considered leaving, neither is it possible to indicate how serious that wish or statement was. In some cases it may have been a boast in front of a larger audience, in other cases a silent wish that was not shared with anyone.

This does of course make it quite difficult to select people for a study on potential foreign fighters. Based on the assumption that the group of potential leavers most closely resembles the group that did actually go to Syria (and Iraq), we have chosen a group of people who together are a reflection of the group of the foreign fighters from the Netherlands in terms of age, ethnic origins, percentage of converts, place of residence, socioeconomic backgrounds, and man/female ratio. However, the final choice for the six cases outlined below was also influenced by the limited possibilities of finding these people and to get close to them and/or their circle. The latter in particular was, as expected, not easy. The shame, sadness or fear for all kinds of repercussions was often a major obstacle for the person or his or her immediate circle, who either did not want to be in the picture or wanted to protect the person. Still, using a couple of go-betweens, we managed to talk to four people who at one point expressed their wish to travel to Syria in order to take part in the armed combat. We also managed to gain access to people close to two other cases of potential leavers, who gave us a good idea of the “story” of their friend, student, client, interviewee, and so forth. The “random test” resulting from that consisted of a woman and five men, one native convert and five immigrants from Islamic families - four of whom were Sunnis and one Shiite.

Given the sensitive nature of the subject matter, we were unable to add a list of persons interviewed and we anonymised the stories of the six cases. We used different names and we also changed or left out place names, the specific names of schools attended, hobbies and so forth, so that the identities of the persons described cannot be traced - probably with the exception of the professionals directly involved in these cases. This will not affect the purport of the stories, which may and will hopefully be recognisable to a larger number of professionals. We have called the persons Ali, Achmed, Enes, Jamila, Jeroen and Rodi.

2. The case studies

2.1. Ali

Ali is 24 years old, was born in Iraq, but he grew up in the Netherlands. He is shy and speaks in a soft voice. When Ali was four, his parents fled from Iraq to the Netherlands where they were granted asylum. Ali’s parents come from Shiite families, but they do not practise their faith in the Netherlands. Ali lives with his parents and helps out around the house, sometimes he cooks for his parents and sisters. They do not talk about current affairs and politics at home. “We don’t talk about politics at home. I do think my parents know my opinions, but they don’t ask about them. They do know we have very different opinions though”, says Ali.

Ali attended primary school and secondary school without any problems, but he failed to finish his applied science degree programme because, in his own words, he is “too lazy”; he started three different programmes but stopped after a year on all three occasions. Ali has been doing unskilled labour since he turned 20. Since the summer of 2014, he has had a permanent job as an engineer at an Internet company. He sets up Internet connections for private customers, he enjoys his job and his boss is happy with him. Ali likes to smoke cigarettes and in his spare time he watches Ajax football matches. He does not have a lot of friends; at secondary school he hung out with a couple of class mates, but at the university of applied science he had no friends and at work he

⁷ AIVD, *Transformatie van het jihadisme in Nederland. Zwermdynamiek en nieuwe slagkracht* (Den Haag: AIVD, June 2014), https://www.aivd.nl/publish/pages/2632/transformatie_jihadisme_in_nederland_juni_2014.pdf.

hardly has any contact with his colleagues either. During the past two years, Ali has been going to Ajax home matches alone, but now he no longer goes to the stadium.

Since he was fourteen, Ali has been independently studying the Sunni form of Islam. The Internet plays an important role in his search for religious knowledge: Ali downloads books, he watches videos and often takes part in forum discussions. The salafist dogma particularly appeals to him and particularly the notion that it is a pure form of Islam. "I've been studying Islam since the murder on Theo van Gogh, really. Since then I've been attending classes at the mosque, but I get most of my knowledge from the Internet. When I was eighteen, I decided to really practise Islam. In those days I mainly read English books about the dogma and biographies of Islamic scholars such as Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Hanbal".

Ali then changed his orientation on his faith. "At first I mainly focused on the spiritual, I mainly thought about what I believed in. But during the past couple of years I've started to take a bigger interest in the political side of Islam. Since 2010 I've been studying lectures by preachers of Islam4UK - Anjem Choudary - and Abdul-Jabbar van der Ven". Ali also finds the ideas of clergymen affiliated with al Qaeda interesting. He likes the idea of physically fighting in the name of Islam, which is why he watches videos of Islamic fighters on the Internet. "It may sound weird, but when I watch these videos of Islamic fighters, I get a warrior feeling: I like the idea of truly fighting for your religion".

Ali describes himself as a "*jihadi-salafi*" - a Muslim who believes armed combat is needed in order to establish the Islamic State and with that Islamic control on earth. Ali seems to be very conversant in the ideology he talks about and he has no problems naming ten "Islamic scholars" from various countries who subscribe to his ideology. At home he reads English translations of their works.

During the past two years, Ali has been following the civil war in Syria with great interest. In his spare time he continuously reads and takes part in discussions on the Internet about the situation in Syria and Iraq. He has also been invited to attend meetings of Hizb ut-Tahrir. "Since October 2013, I went to the meetings of Hizb ut-Tahrir every week for half a year. We talked about political Islam in groups at someone's home. I'm very interested in the political subjects that Hizb ut-Tahrir talks about. They've given me a specific insight into the legislation of the Islamic state. But after a couple of months I stopped going to their meetings, because Hizb ut-Tahrir's approach led nowhere: they only organise conferences to talk about their ideals, without really doing anything. Hizb ut-Tahrir rejects the armed combat that takes place in Syria and Iraq right now, and in my opinion that will take you nowhere".

Ali is convinced that armed combat is indeed necessary. The developments in Syria and Iraq during the summer of 2014 only strengthened his conviction: "We need armed battle to establish the Islamic state, I've really become convinced about that during the past couple of months. Everyone has been able to see for themselves that the Islamic fighters in Syria and Iraq managed to re-establish the Islamic state through armed battle. And that state only gets bigger thanks to the battle fought by Muslims, there's simply no denying it".

In October 2014, Ali openly voiced his support for the Islamic State organisation led by Abu Bakr al Baghdadi. Ali can only find like-minded people on the Internet - and they are mostly English-speaking contacts - with whom he discusses the political Islam and the objective of the armed Islamic combat. To express this loyalty, he assumes a particular Islamic name (*kunya*) on the Internet, in which he refers to his support for the caliph: "Muhammed Mujahid al Baghdadi". Every day, Ali uses this name to post messages (and messages only) about the Islamic combat in Iraq and Syria - about ten messages per day. "On the Internet, I intentionally defend the acts of Islamic fighters in Syria and Iraq. They have received a lot of negative criticism during the past few months, after the beheadings of Englishmen and Americans, for instance. Still, it's important that Muslims start thinking more positively about the Islamic State, that's why I post those positive messages. Muslims who disapprove of the acts of Muslim fighters in Syria and Iraq are hypocrites, because they don't condemn the crimes in the US and the Middle East". Despite his high level of support for this armed combat, Ali does not necessarily agree with all

statements made by the Islamic State: “It’s a shame that fighters in Iraq and Syria have called people to carry out attacks in the West, because you damage the interests of Muslims in the Netherlands. Also, I think the fight in Syria against the regime of Bashar al Assad is more important. That fight has priority right now”.

During the past few months, Ali’s social media accounts were removed several times, because he posted explicitly violent images of, for instance, beheadings on his accounts. “Of course they delete your accounts when you are positive about the Islamic State and the armed combat. People think it’s provocative, I understand that. But I just create new accounts when others are removed”. Ali does not express his support for the Islamic State and combat everywhere: ‘I realise you can’t say these things at work, so I don’t. I do talk about my ideas at the mosque, but most Muslims at my mosque are not interested in politics. My parents aren’t interested in the Islam and don’t want to talk about it. I find that hard, but that’s the way it is”.

Since October 2014, Ali has openly talked to friends and acquaintances about his ambition to settle in the caliphate of Abu Bakr al Baghdadi. He imagines this society as an ideal, just a society where Muslims can fully practise their faith. “In principle it’s now a religious duty for every Muslim to settle in the Islamic State, because that’s the only place where Muslims can fully practise their faith. Yes, I’m happy in the Netherlands, but I think I’d be happier in the Islamic State”. According to Ali, it are mainly practical matters and considerations that keep him from going. “I haven’t left yet because I haven’t saved enough money for the journey yet, and to be honest with you, I’m scared of being apprehended at the border. Besides, my passport has been invalid for a year now, I know that. So I don’t know when I’ll be leaving, but I’ve made up my mind. Even when I get married here, for instance, I will not change my mind, my wife will come with me. I don’t know if I’m suitable to take part in the armed combat once I’m there, we’ll see. First I need to save money for my journey”.

2.2. Achmed

Achmed and his two brothers grew up in a family living in a deprived area in a big city in the *Randstad* conurbation. He was born in the Netherlands, but both his parents are Moroccan immigrants who moved to the Netherlands at an advanced age. His parents practise traditional Moroccan customs in the Netherlands too. The family’s confidential adviser, Mr Okan, says: “In his youth, Achmed was faced with problems that are very typical for certain Moroccan families. His parents hardly speak any Dutch, which means they can’t attend teacher/parent evenings, for instance. As a result, they’re not involved in certain aspects of their children’s education. Achmed’s mother is illiterate, so she can hardly communicate with social organisations. His father’s never at home and never acted as head of the family. Achmed and his brothers had to bring themselves up. The contacts they made in the neighbourhood were a determining factor in that process”.

When he was sixteen, Achmed gave up on his prevocational secondary education and left without a diploma. Between the ages of sixteen and nineteen, Achmed had no job and he refused to go to school. Once he left school, he started to deal in drugs and earned enough money to buy luxury items. Achmed had a fairly good reputation in the drugs circuit in the neighbourhood where he was active and he was popular with other youngsters. Mr Okan says: “Achmed found it easy to earn money dealing in drugs and his friends respected him. There was no incentive for him to go back to school or find a job. His parents never asked him what he did out in the street and Achmed kept his life in the street secret from them”. Youth workers and municipal officers involved know Achmed as a “serious problem case”.

When Achmed was about nineteen, his parents and Mr Okan detected a notable change in his behaviour. He started to dress differently and he talked pedantically to his parents about their religious ideas. His old friend Youssef also noticed the change in Achmed: “I’ve seen Achmed change in just a couple of months: Suddenly he started to observe Islamic rules stricter. It seems he was getting older and started to have an interest in the Islam. He clearly was very busy with himself, how he had to organise his life. It’s a process I see among other friends too. But I never expected him to travel to Syria, because I don’t know anyone in our circle with such plans”.

In the summer of 2013, Achmed's parents managed to stop him from travelling to Syria following an alarming phone call from a worried uncle. Achmed admitted his plans to his parents, but refused to talk about them with the local police officer. Achmed's parents did manage to convince him to regularly talk to Mr Okan and an imam about his ideas about the jihad in Syria. "During my conversations with Achmed it became clear to me he knew very little about the Islam and that the information he had obtained about the conflict in Syria was very biased. Achmed seemed to be unable to understand the opinions of dissidents. He always angrily walked out of discussions with them. Our dialogue with him didn't have any result either", says the imam. Mr Okan agrees: "Achmed has very little knowledge of Islamic theology. The visual language in particular of videos about Syria was a highly determining factor in Achmed's radicalisation process. When Achmed tried to explain to me why he wanted to go to Syria to fight, he showed me videos of people suffering and of the crimes of the military. His limited future prospective in the Netherlands also played a role: Achmed had nothing to lose and he saw his journey to Syria as an escape, he wanted to start a new life".

All in all, his old friend Youssef and Mr Okan have a strong suspicion of how Achmed came to his sudden decision. "We're convinced there were one or several persons who had a major influence on Achmed. In a very short period of time he became convinced his future lay in Syria. Achmed refuses to tell us who they are, but he did tell us that he gave his drugs money to them".

As suddenly as Achmed was radicalised, he reverted back to his old lifestyle. In the weeks following his failed attempt to travel to Syria, he regularly said he would go to Syria as soon as he had the opportunity. However, a couple of months after his attempt to travel to Syria, he was back out in the streets. He no longer wore a *djellaba* and his friends saw him dealing drugs again. Mr Okan knows why: "Achmed was scared by all the attention he got. His story appeared in various newspapers and he had a feeling the police and the secret service were following him. Achmed told me he felt intimidated and that made him break off all contact he had established for his planned trip".

More than a year after Achmed's failed attempt to go to Syria, his parents and Mr Okan are extremely worried about his future. Achmed has not lived with his parents for half a year now. "We still don't know who Achmed sees during the day and he doesn't want to tell us where he lives and what he lives on. We know he's involved in drugs dealing, but we don't have the impression he still has any radical ideas. But to be honest with you, we don't know". Youssef is puzzled too: "Honestly, no one in our neighbourhood knows where he is. Sometimes Achmed calls me from a Dutch number, that's why I know he's still in the Netherlands. He lives alone, but he won't tell me what he's doing". An officer who has been following Achmed's development is also worried. "I'm aware of the fact that Achmed's social position hasn't improved since he was stopped from going to Syria. Also, his travel documents were never declared invalid, so he could still travel if he wanted to. Achmed's situation is highly worrying, he could qualify for an intensive counselling process, but they are very expensive and don't always have the desired result. In his case that choice hasn't been made yet, but I'll admit: Achmed is a dubious case".

2.3. Enes

Enes grew up with his mother in a deprived area of a medium-sized city. His father is dead. He has several brothers and sisters and they grew up together. In the neighbourhood, the family was not known as a problem family. Enes' mother was an active member of the Turkish community, helping other families who had financial problems. On those around him, Enes made a positive impression. He finished school without any problems, he often played football and in his spare time he worked in a supermarket. "Enes was a good employee, really a model boy", says the supermarket manager who got on well with Enes.

Other Turkish boys in the neighbourhood, like a number of Moroccan youngsters, had more problems adjusting to society. "The situation in this city is special", says one father who is active in the neighbourhood

where Enes lives. “Muslim boys have an urge to learn about Islam, but there are only two mosques in the entire city and they don’t meet the boys’ wishes. That’s why I started organising discussion evenings with these boys myself, to discuss social issues that interest these Muslim boys, such as the role of women in Islam and topical issues such as the ban on ritual slaughter. Enes’ cousin formed the core of the group of youngsters with whom I had been having discussions about the Islam for some time. These discussions were aimed at finding an answer to the question of how the Islamic identity should be given shape in the Netherlands. Most youngsters who took part in the discussions were searching, but that doesn’t mean they had no role in society: They were in school or had a job. Crime doesn’t play a role in the lives of this group of youngsters. What binds these boys is the feeling of not being accepted by the native community in this city. There’s an invisible divide in this city, prompting young Muslims to get together”.

In the footsteps of a number of other youngsters from his neighbourhood, including his cousin, Enes tried to travel to Syria early 2014. His attempt failed: he was apprehended at the airport and after having been held on remand for a couple of weeks, he got a conditional discharge from prison.

The neighbourhood father was baffled when he heard of Enes’ apprehension for wanting to travel to Syria. “Enes was one of those boys you wouldn’t expect to do something like this. He led a balanced life, he was at school, he worked out and had a job on the side. This was in sharp contrast with other boys who left for Syria, they clearly were searching. When a boy who’s searching leaves for Syria, you can understand it in hindsight, but in Enes’ case I still don’t know why he wanted to go”. One of Enes’ good friends was also amazed. “I regularly spoke to him two or three weeks before he tried to go to Syria. I had no idea he was going to leave. In the months before that I found it hard to get into contact with him and I asked him if he was planning on travelling to Syria, but he denied it and I believed him”.

Half a year after his release, Enes is close to a group of young men, some of whom, like him, were arrested for trying to travel to Syria, others from the group have returned from Syria. Enes regularly visits the mosque with this group and they meet up at home in the evening. Most people in the neighbourhood are anxious about this group.

Enes’ good friend and the neighbourhood father have grown distrustful after Enes’ arrest. “Enes pulled the wool over our eyes, or at least, that’s how it feels. All that time he posed as someone he wasn’t and we resent that. He has hardly shown his face in the neighbourhood since his release, we never see him play football anymore and he no longer works at the supermarket. He hangs out with a group of boys who would all leave for Syria, given the chance. You can tell those boys have given up on a future in the Netherlands. They don’t accept any help from others”.

Enes’ neighbour has also become distrustful after everything that has happened with Enes. “I’m disappointed in Enes’ mother, because I found out she knew about her son’s plans all along. My contact with Enes and his mother was always good, but now I don’t know what to think of them anymore. And when I see who he hangs out with now, I don’t understand the police allows it. Something’s brewing in that new group of friends of Enes and I wouldn’t be surprised if Enes and his mother suddenly leave for Syria soon. I’ve avoided contact with him since he got arrested”.

Not everyone distrusts Enes. A former fellow team member with whom Enes has been in contact *after* his arrest says: “Enes knows people no longer trust him and he finds it difficult to deal with. But I think he’s still a good guy. Enes told me the whole thing: he didn’t want to go to Syria to fight, but to visit his friends and family. A lot of other people from our neighbourhood travelled up and down to Syria to visit their loved ones, but Enes was stopped and now a lot of people think he went to Syria to fight. Enes told me he wants to resume his life in the Netherlands now. He’ll be getting support from a social organisation”. Enes’ football trainer also never lost trust in Enes: “Enes isn’t suddenly someone else just because he got arrested. If he wants to join us for training, he’s

more than welcome. But I understand that he's got other things on his mind, looking at what's happening to him right now".

2.4. Jamila

Jamila and her little brother grew up with her parents in a medium-sized city. Her parents are from North Africa and they divorced a number of years ago. One of her parents was using drugs, which led to problems. When she was fourteen, Jamila and her mother therefore moved to a big city in the *Randstad* conurbation. Due to the problems in the family she never finished school, but after the divorce she started senior secondary vocation education. Jamila built a bond of trust with her Dutch lecturer, Maha.

Maha noticed that Jamila was very much into Islam. "Jamila asked me practical questions about Islam, how to pray for instance and how to wear a headscarf. She was very curious. But at school, Jamila didn't behave like a practising Muslim: she smoked, drank alcohol and didn't wear a headscarf. I could see she was struggling with herself. She was constantly thinking about where she belonged and how she had to deal with her Islamic identity. But she wasn't much different from other students. Her results were good and she didn't stand out in class".

"Before the summer of 2014, Jamila suddenly came to see me and said: I'm going to Syria, I'm going to start all over again over there. I was stunned", says Maha. "Initially, I didn't think she was serious, but then I noticed that she was. She came to see me to say goodbye. She told me she knew a boy who had already travelled to Syria. She and the boy had agreed that she would go to Syria and that they would get married over there. When she said goodbye to me, she had already booked her ticket and prepared her entire journey. She said: I can't go back. I and my manager then called the police".

Maha thinks the boy to whom Jamila wanted to get married played a determining role in her decision to travel to Syria. "A couple of years ago, this boy joined an armed Islamic organisation and painted her a romantic picture of the situation in Syria and Iraq. He had a big influence on her, because she never showed any interest in the developments over there before. He convinced her that it was possible to start a new future in Syria".

The day before Jamila wanted to travel to Syria, she was arrested by the police. Jamila's passport was declared invalid and she spent a couple of days in custody. Her arrest left a deep impression on Jamila. "I'm so shocked by the arrest and I can't really talk about this period, because I'm still under supervision by the probation service and I may be prosecuted by the court. Everything that has happened during the past few months has left me very stressful. I think the police are still investigating me, I've got a feeling they're still watching me closely".

After her release, Jamila responded angrily, because during her questioning she was confronted with the fact that it were her lecturers who reported her. Maha looks back: "Jamila was furious when she returned to school, she felt betrayed by us. In the days after her release, my colleagues and I were worried about our own safety, because Jamila really threatened us. I'm highly disappointed in the police, because when they questioned her, they told Jamila it was us who reported her. At the time, it really damaged my bond with Jamila".

After Jamila's arrest, her mother spoke to the police a couple of times. She was scared by what happened to her daughter and promised to talk to her more and to keep an eye on her. Shortly after her arrest, Jamila returned to school. Most lecturers and students were unaware of the situation. In the weeks after Jamila's arrest, her anger towards her lecturers waned. Maha tried to regain Jamila's trust: "I told her: you know I wanted to help you and I still do. Despite being very angry and sad at first, she slowly started to accept my concern. I think Jamila has let go of her plans of travelling to Syria. She largely confirmed my suspicions about the role of the boy with whom she was in contact before her planned trip".

Jamila has faith in the future. "After my arrest, I started thinking about what I'd done. I came to the conclusion I'd made a mistake. That's why I broke off contact with the people I was hanging out with shortly before my arrest. My future's in the Netherlands. I'm doing better in school again these days, I'm always in time

for class and I told my class mates what I've been through the past couple of months. They've shown an understanding for my situation. Contact with my lecturers and mother has also improved, they give me a lot of support. I want to get my driving licence in the next couple of months, I'm already having lessons. And in a couple of years I want to train to become a social worker. In time everything will turn out right, I'm sure of it".

Maha still worries about Jamila's situation though, she says. "Jamila doesn't really have any goals in her life, she has no hobbies or job on the side and her career opportunities are limited because of her low educational level. I think it's very important for Jamila to be positively stimulated at school and for people to approach her positively. It will give her an opportunity to go in an alternative direction. Her parents could also support her better. Her mother looks out for her more now, but she never contacted us to talk about Jamila's situation. Apart from a lack of concern from her parents, I also miss concern from the authorities for Jamila's case. We, the lecturers, did talk to the parties involved to analyse what had happened to Jamila. The question of how to recognise and prevent these types of cases of radicalisation was never answered though".

2.5. Jeroen

Jeroen was born in a small village in the centre of the Netherlands, with a lot of the villagers being Dutch reformed. Compared to other families in the village, Jeroen's family didn't focus on religion that much, although Jeroen did attend a Christian primary school. After primary school, Jeroen attended a school for senior general secondary education in a nearby town. At school, he became friends with a Muslim, introducing him to Islam, a religion that immediately fascinated him.

After having completed his general secondary education, Jeroen joined the army. He thoroughly enjoyed himself in the army; he very much liked the daily routine. However, due to cuts in the army, Jeroen's appointment as a soldier suddenly came to an end. He found it difficult to deal with at the time. "I liked the structure and transparency provided by the army, it gave me stability. After my time in the army I became a fitness fanatic. I even took part in a competition for bodybuilders. That life offered me renewed structure".

For his applied sciences degree programme to become a nurse, Jeroen decided to move to Rotterdam, where he again became friends with a practising Muslim. According to himself, Jeroen was attracted by Islam because of its apparent simplicity and the social aspects of the religion: "In my opinion, the rules of Islam were and still are very logical. I'm particularly attracted by the idea that when everyone sticks to the rules of Islam, you'll have an ideal society". Jeroen was also very much attracted by the notion of brotherhood in Islam. After his conversion in 2012, Jeroen enjoyed the warm contact with his fellow Muslims: "I loved the fact that I ended up in a new community of Muslims, it was fantastic to get a heartfelt hug from a brother".

During the first year after his conversion, Jeroen focused on a wide range of things; he visited a lot of different mosques and attended lectures. The lectures of Abdul-Jabbar van de Ven particularly inspired him. During this first year after his conversion, Jeroen built up a large network in various cities. He knew someone with an interest in Islam everywhere. He came into contact with a group of Muslims in the as-Soenna mosque in The Hague, for instance, where he followed classes with al Yaqeen. Together they held a lot of discussions about Islam, online and when they met during lectures and classes.

In the spring of 2013, the conflict in Syria became one of the regular subjects of discussion in Jeroen's network. During this period, the conflict in Syria became more and more violent, and Jabhat al Nusra in particular became increasingly decisive. At the time, Jeroen regularly held discussions about the conflict in Syria. These discussions were mainly about whether or not taking part in the armed combat was compulsory from an Islamic perspective.

Jeroen struggled with the question of what he should do for the Syrian population. "I was particularly touched by the suffering of the Syrian population. I served the army because I wanted to fight for the good cause. Now, as a Muslim, I saw Muslims suffering and I wanted to do something. I thought: I've got a strong faith and

good fighting experience, so I've got to do my bit. There was an emergency situation in Syria at the time and thought would be noble to go over there to fight. For months I thought about going to Syria, it almost felt hypocritical to stay put and do nothing while I saw Muslims suffer”.

Jeroen presented his questions about taking part in the conflict to various Islamic clergymen. They advised against taking part in the conflict. Jeroen was convinced by various arguments they came up with. For instance, they argued there had to be a leader to lead fighters and that in principle, there had to be an Islamic state from where an Islamic battle was fought. These clergymen also argued that Muslims in surrounding countries were the first ones who should join an armed combat. Finally, an imam argued that the Netherlands also needed Muslims to serve the community and go on a mission.

One group of friends Jeroen regularly hung out with was convinced participation in the battle was allowed. Some of them even saw it as a duty. They encouraged each other to travel to Syria. Some in this group had already travelled to Syria, where they joined jihadist groups that were pursuing an armed battle against the regime of Bashar al Assad.

The group of friends that were still in the Netherlands included a native Dutchman, Michael, who had converted to Islam at a later age, just like Jeroen. He too came from a small village in the north of the country. In March 2013, Michael travelled to Syria to fight. Whilst there, Michael stayed in contact with Jeroen, they often sent each other text messages. Jeroen asked Michael questions in order to get a better idea of the combat in Syria and was impressed by Michael's answers. Jeroen then started to express his appreciation for the Dutch fighters in Syria on social media. “At the time, I thought that the media had completely misrepresented these young men. Dutchmen who had travelled to Syria were portrayed as extremists, but towards me, they were well-studied and reasonable. That's why I expressed my admiration for the self-confident attitude of these young men on social media, with the objective of compensating for the one-sided reporting in the media”.

The loyalty that Jeroen had at the time for his Dutch friend fighting in Syria was detached from his own ambition to travel to Syria and take part in the conflict. That ambition disappeared in 2013, when Jeroen realised the war in Syria was turning into a sectarian battle among Muslims, with Islamic groups fighting each other. “It's complete *fitna* (chaos) in Syria now. No one knows who's fighting who”, says Jeroen. In his eyes, the combat can no longer be justified, because Islamic groups seem to be fighting each other, instead of the regime of Bashar al Assad.

Jeroen is frustrated by the discord in the Dutch Muslim community with regard to the conflict in Syria. The Muslims in the Netherlands are having a heated debate on social media about whether participation in the armed battle in Syria is permitted. There are strong supporters and opponents who strongly criticise each other. “To the outside world, the Dutch Muslim community seems more divided than it appears from the inside, while it should be the other way round”, Jeroen sighs.

Looking back at the days when Jeroen was thinking about going to Syria, he concludes that he made the right choice by asking various Muslims about the conflict. “If at the time I'd only listened to the people around me, who were in favour of the armed combat in Syria, I may well have been in Syria right now. But I didn't go, because I was always open to different arguments from supporters and opponents of participating in the armed battle”.

In 2014, Jeroen started to focus on other activities to support Syrian Muslims, namely giving financial support and, via social media and discussions with third parties, improving what he calls awareness. “I now think my main duty is to contribute to a balanced and truthful picture of the conflict in Syria, and the same goes for Gaza. I often disagree with the way in which the Dutch media report about these conflicts. By distributing correct reports on social media for instance, I contribute to a better picture in the Netherlands of these conflicts. During the past few months, I often thought about going to Gaza, if only to make video recordings to show the world what's going on there”.

Jeroen is not sure whether he will travel to an area of conflict in the future in order to serve Muslims in need. “If ever there’s going to be a legitimate Islamic battle somewhere in the future, I can’t rule out not taking part in it. But I will only join an armed battle when Muslims fight side by side and when scholars off the battlefield broadly agree on the legitimacy of that battle”.

His willingness to take part in the action with regard to the conflicts in Syria and Gaza for instance, does not stop Jeroen from developing himself in various areas in the Netherlands. He nominally completed his university of applied sciences degree programme and got married in 2014. He also has the ambition of studying Islamic science abroad for a number of years sometime in the future; knowledge he wants to use for Islamic missionary activities in the Netherlands. All in all, Jeroen’s search in terms of religion has waned during the past couple of months, as a result of which he is less inclined to take part in discussions on social media. Every now and then he replies to messages on social media, but he prefers to focus on his study, his job on the side and his personal beliefs.

He lost contact with Michael, but hopes he is doing well.

2.6. Rodi

Rodi is a Syrian Kurd who fled from Syria to the Netherlands in the early 2000s. When he left Syria aged eighteen, he was not politically active. For personal reasons, he no longer felt he had a future in Syria. Rodi’s religious ideas are not extraordinary: he practises Islam in the same way as his family and fellow villagers. Since moving to the Netherlands he no longer is a practising Muslim. In the Netherlands, Rodi completed a university of applied sciences degree programme, after which he found a job as a director at various Dutch and international media companies. He is adventurous by nature and was involved in various artistic projects, such as an Arabic arts exhibition. He was single, but had a large network among native Dutch people and Arabic Dutchmen. He visited museums and visited friends living elsewhere in Europe.

Rodi was very excited in March 2011, when the first demonstrations against the regime of Bashar al Assad took place in Syria. “I thought: this is it, it has to happen now. I formed part of the group of people who thought al Assad’s regime would soon collapse. From the moment of the first demonstrations in Syria being organised, I fully focused on the developments in Syria. I thought: this revolution has to succeed”.

In a short space of time, Rodi contacted a lot of Syrians in the diaspora. He also contacted activists in Syria through social media such as Facebook. As a director he was highly fascinated by the videos of demonstrations and other news distributed by “information activists” in Syria. Soon, Rodi was involved in a network of information activists of Syrians in Syria and Syrians in the diaspora. Rodi regularly travelled to Berlin and London, home to activists with whom he set up initiatives to support the information activists in Syria. In addition, Rodi travelled to Syria and Turkey to establish contact with local information activists. In the Netherlands, Rodi was involved with the formation of a Syrian opposition group, the first one to openly support the peaceful revolution in Syria. The group organised discussions and debates in which government officials also took part.

“I was highly optimistic during the first months of the revolution. The demonstrations in Syria were extending and more and more people from Syria and beyond seemed to support the ideals of the revolution. But after half a year I realised the revolution wouldn’t hold, the turning point never came. We also failed to secure funds for various initiatives, such as starting an opposition newspaper in Syria. Western NGOs were afraid of investing in projects of Syrian opposition groups. Therefore, I and other activists didn’t have the financial means needed to professionalise our campaigns”.

In the spring of 2012, Rodi noticed that the conflict in Syria started to escalate more and more. Every week he received news from Syria of activist friends being killed. He even saw images on which a cameraman friend was shot dead by a sniper. “That’s when I thought: good thing I didn’t go out there. But I was in two minds about it”. Rodi saw videos on the Internet showing that the opposition in Syria armed itself and also on the

Internet forums discussions about the revolution got increasingly violent. “Everyone gradually became convinced that the regime of al Assad would never fall if the opposition wouldn’t arm itself. Me too”.

Rodi had enough after a mass murder on the residents of the Syrian village of Houla in May 2012. Sad and angry, he sent everyone in his address book an e-mail about this mass killing in which a lot of children died too. “Adults killing each other, okay, I could understand that, but killing children, that really hit me”. During this period, Rodi became convinced that the regime of al Assad had to be given a taste of its own medicine. “During discussions on social media and with friends, I said that the opposition would have to kill Alevites out of revenge, because that would be the only way to force Assad’s regime to negotiate. Massacres such as in Houla had to be repaid in kind. I really was convinced of that back then and I did say I would help out myself if I had to”.

Midway 2012, Rodi noticed that a lot of Syrians in his network reached out for their weapons and joined armed groups. For months, Rodi felt helpless and his frustration about the revolution failing grew. “I wanted to go to Syria to fight, but the trip to Syria never materialised. I didn’t go, because the threshold in the Netherlands was relatively high for me. There are quite a lot of times that you think to yourself whether fighting is indeed the right option. Even in the days that I wanted to join the battle, there were moments of reflection. My circle also played an important role: I did have the ambition to go to Syria, but no one in my circle gave me that final push. If people in my circle had encouraged me, I would have gone to Syria, I think. But the Syrian opposition movement in the Netherlands never mentioned taking part in the armed battle. I did have contact with networks of fighters via my online networks, but I thought these groups were too extreme. By now, some guys I initially tried to develop journalistic projects with had joined Jabhat al Nusra. Suddenly, they had beards and were carrying guns. But I’m not comfortable with those types of Islamic groups, I don’t share their ambitions”.

In 2013, a period of disillusion started: in the eyes of Rodi, the Syrian revolution he so passionately believed in and which he devoted all his time and energy to for nearly two years, had been lost. At the same time, Rodi lost a lot of his clients during the period he was so focused on the Syrian revolution. That means that as a freelancer, he has little work. “I lost on all fronts”, Rodi infers, “I no longer have the energy to take part in activities of the opposition and I no longer closely follow the developments in Syria. If I’m honest, I’m no longer affected by seeing dead people on TV either, but I don’t know why. Most networks I used to be part of have fallen apart. The Syrian opposition movement in the Netherlands is also completely divided”.

Today, in 2014, Rodi is working hard to revitalise his professional life in the Netherlands. He is taking part in a municipal programme that helps self-employed people who have professional problems and he is working on a new business plan. He has also managed to secure a number of jobs as a freelancer.

Rodi is not sure if and how he will be involved in the Syrian conflict in the future. He is currently particularly interested in the Kurdish issue, as in his eyes, the Kurds are marginalised by all other parties in the conflict. Still, Rodi thinks he will not be active as a fighter in Syria in the future. “I will consider returning only when something happens to my family, although I realise I’m better off arming myself with a video camera”.

3. Conclusions

Of course, no general conclusions can be drawn from the six biographies or stories of the potential foreign fighters that were interviewed. After all, we do not know which population (both in terms of size and nature) this random test relates to. The only thing we can do, is highlight a number of common observations that may serve as an initial conservative assumption with regard to the motivations for travelling to Syria (or not). In addition, we also give the answers from a number of professionals and experiential experts involved who were interviewed for this study to our question about what or which approach may stop people from travelling to Syria in order to take

part in the armed battle in that country. Based on these observations we will formulate a number of suggestions for a policy that may respond better to the motives and considerations.

3.1. Observations

The six cases studied are rather different. The diversity is therefore much more obvious than issues that are more or less comparable among at least three or more persons. The big disadvantage of this “random test” is that it includes both people who were stopped from travelling and those who called off or at least postponed a trip to Syria by themselves or with the aid of others. It is a particular shame that not more persons in that latter category were willing to take part in this study. Taking these restrictions into account, below we present some observations that occurred at least twice or more.

Characteristics of persons

- Most persons have limited chances on the labour market and of a social career. They have no diplomas or are (very) low-skilled, they are exposed to crime and drug abuse (in their immediate circle).
- Some persons no longer felt they had a future in the Netherlands, or no possibilities to improve their situation.
- Most of them have had intensive contact (via the Internet, social media) for longer or shorter periods of time with ideologically like-minded people who - most probably - managed to strongly influence the person in question and encouraged him or her to leave, people who were often referred to as inspiring figures or “recruiters” by the circle of that person.
- In a number of cases, there are close friendly, relational or family ties with people in Syria.
- There is a strong - often persistent - conviction that travelling to Syria is necessary or may become necessary again, now or in the future. This conviction can be based on ideals or on specific personal arguments and it is often a mixture of both.
- To some extent, a lot of the interviewees have a utopian or “romantic” idea of the caliphate and the jihadist battle. None of them mentioned martyrdom for that matter.
- Most persons have few friends and/or limited contact with their families. Some of them can be classified as loners or lonely.

Motives and considerations against leaving

- Religious (and other ideological) arguments for not going are *fitna* (the political division in Syria) and the changing (and increasingly tougher) battle. The result is that a number of persons can no longer identify with the battle fought in Syria.
- Some now have found other ways of supporting Syria / Muslims in need. This does not apply to those who were stopped against their will, thanks to an intervention.
- A lot of persons lack support from their circle. Friends, family members and others from their immediate circle had a restraining influence on the intentions of potential leavers. No one in his/her circle left for Syria or encouraged a journey to Syria. Or, as a potential foreign fighters said: “No one gave me that final push”.
- In addition, some people experienced practical problems with their journey. For instance, they did not have the means (money, documents) to realise their trip to Syria.
- They were also in fear of being arrested during their attempt to travel to Syria.
- In a number of cases there was even some self-reflection on their own initiative *or* after having been stopped and/or after receiving help. As a result, they felt they had a future or better perspective in the Netherlands again (not all leavers were in a “desperate” situation).

- Some of the interviewees have lost interest in the conflict. They can no longer bring themselves to studying the conflict or they focus (more) on activities in the Netherlands.
- What does deserve a mention is that in the case of those who were stopped, there may have been desired answers in terms of the arguments and motives *against* travelling to Syria.

Motives and considerations in favour of leaving

- In several cases, they had the idea of creating a “new beginning”. Some regarded the fight itself and/or the migration to the caliphate of the Islamic State as a (utopian) place where this new beginning had to take place.
- Several persons had religious arguments: “Emigration to the caliphate is an individual duty”, or they referred to their duty to help out Muslims in need.
- Others had the same idea for non-religious reasons: their sense of duty to help their own families or people in need.
- In addition, some persons admired the (jihadist) battle against the regime of Assad.

The effects of (government) intervention:

- With a number of persons, we noticed a tendency to reject society after the intervention and welcome the jihadist scene (even more). As a result of distrust and rejection from their circle, the person increasingly focuses on people who have had to deal with similar reactions - a “returner” and other “forced stayers”, for instance. There may also be a breach of trust: they were arrested after a lecturer had notified the police.
- The opposite can also be seen: shocked by the reactions from the person’s immediate circle after an attempt to travel, contact with the scene is broken off (or the scene breaks off contact). Attention from the media and (implied) attention from the authorities such as the police, the Public Prosecutor and the AIVD held back potential foreign fighters. They were stopped from making a new attempt to travel to Syria and to maintain contact with like-minded people in their circle.
- Also, in a number of cases, the intervention was accompanied by support in making future plans in the Netherlands.

3.2. The vision of the professionals involved

The conversations with professionals who are in contact with potential leavers were not just about these persons, but also about what or which approach may stop people from travelling to Syria in order to take part in the armed battle in that country. Although this question did not directly relate to the aforementioned persons, we do want to include the most important insights of this small group of experiential experts in this report.

- ❖ One mosque leader knows various foreign fighters and various people who openly spoke about their intentions of travelling to Syria. “A lot of these youngsters never finished school, are unable to find jobs and live of benefits. They are often hostile to Dutch society and have negative ideas about their opportunities. I explain to them that caring for your own life and the lives of the people close to you is a duty of every Muslim and that a negative attitude towards the society that has received their parents as guests is wrong. Some young men are open to this message. During the past few months, I have seen various people around me pick up their lives in the Netherlands, after they had earlier told me they wanted to travel to Syria. These young men found jobs or work placements and this caused their desire to go to Syria to wane. However, other young men are not open to my arguments, because they have already isolated themselves too much, they don’t take me seriously. All I can do is tell them of my interpretation of Islam and emphasise that it is a duty, as a good Muslim, to assume a responsible and independent position in this society. The youngsters who see

the error of their ways are also often hanging in the balance, because they continue to be vulnerable to setbacks”.

- ❖ Two imams, one from The Hague and one from Rotterdam, both argue that people they spoke to about their plans to travel to Syria were particularly susceptible to the counter-argument that the Netherlands also need Muslims to serve the Islamic society.
- ❖ A youth worker had regular conversations with Muslim youngsters for years, with the aim of improving their participation in society. “All you can do is try and stay in contact with youngsters, even if it means witnessing some of them leaving for Syria. Still, I think some youngsters are less prone to radicalise when you keep talking to them. Expressing an opposing view prevents them from being obsessed by certain ideas”.
- ❖ Two lecturers both deal with students who intended to travel to Syria. “The cases we’ve seen show that youngsters are not easily convinced by well-founded arguments or that they are easily recognisable by their appearance. We feel that training about radicalisation has little effect. You can prevent radicalisation by staying in contact with youngsters and by encouraging them positively. A lot of youngsters, immigrants mainly, are constantly faced with negative reactions about their behaviour, causing them to feel rejected and susceptible to radical ideas. We, as lecturers, have to break through this negative spiral by seeking contact with them and by keeping the dialogue with them going. As a lecturer you always have to tell them: son, I’m on your side, I want to help you. Lecturers shouldn’t judge, but show them the right ways, the ones that lead to participation in society”.
- ❖ A confidential adviser who is in contact with various families of leavers says: “Rigorous interventions are often the only solution. A youngster has to be placed into care, away from the environment in which he was radicalising. A completely new start”.

3.3. Policy suggestions

Based on the above observations and visions of professionals and experiential experts, this report concludes with a number of suggestions for a policy that may respond better to the motives and considerations.

- The importance of a story or counter-story (“narratives”) that counterbalances propagandist messages that offer a utopian, “romantic” picture of the Islamic battle and the caliphate of the Islamic State, seems to have been underlined by this study. We should be looking for an appropriate counter-reply to the jihadist propaganda, one that could have a “sobering” effect.
- The social debate about the leavers issue in the Muslim community and beyond should be reinforced in order to increase knowledge and awareness of the nature of this problem.
- The desire to help out people in need is big. It is therefore important to identify or offer alternatives to support the Syrian population. Support from the Netherlands to Syria can be increased or should at least be made more visible.
- Stopping seems a temporary - i.e. not a permanent - measure if it is not accompanied by offering future perspectives in the Netherlands, such as increasing chances on the labour market and strengthening ties with Dutch society. In addition, it is important that the “stayer’s” circle is made aware of the - often permanent - desire or willingness of the stayer to travel to Syria at a later time after all. It is important for the person in question not to feel distrusted or rejected, as this may only strengthen the ties with the jihadist scene.

- We could add to this that tackling/arresting the inspiring figures or “recruiters” means that the potential foreign fighters may not be given that famous “final push”. At the same time, we should invest in people who could have a positive effect on potential foreign fighters, such as confidential advisers and family coaches. The latter could ensure that the ties between potential foreign fighters and their immediate circle are strengthened, so that “recruiters” and jihadist propaganda have a smaller chance of inspiring youngsters to take part in the armed jihad.

As noted at the start of this report, this study merely concerns a small “random test”, which means no general conclusions can be drawn and all observations and suggestions should be regarded as tentative first pictures and ideas with regard to the phenomenon of “potential foreign fighter”. More case studies are needed in order to get a better insight into the motives and considerations of these persons not to travel to Syria (for now) to take part in the conflict. In addition, this insight may be increased by finding out to what extent the Dutch cases correspond with or differ from similar cases abroad.

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