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Radicalisation and travelling to Syria among delinquent youths: A case study from the Netherlands

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Abstract

Although many studies have investigated the backgrounds of people who went to Syria to join jihadist groups, much remains unclear about the underlying radicalisation processes. Many authors have noted that radicalisation and terrorism are associated with involvement in crime (the crime-terror nexus), in particular with membership of delinquent groups. However, it is unclear how this relation can be explained. This study was designed to increase insight into how the actual radicalisation process took place in one specific youth network in the Netherlands with a high prevalence of crime, and what triggered young people from this network to get involved in travelling to Syria. Based on police records, documents and interviews, we conducted a case study in a Dutch city in which twenty people went to Syria to join jihadist groups in early 2013. Most of them were involved in a troublesome youth group in a deprived multi-ethnic neighbourhood. We trace how a subgroup of this youth group radicalised, and how they made a connection with the jihadist network in the larger region. The results suggest that not only experiences of deprivation contributed to the radicalisation process but also the presence of persons with earlier ties to the jihadist network, as well as trigger events that led to existential questions and elevated susceptibility. Marriages with radical young women involved in the sister network also seem to have contributed to an overlap between this local youth group and a wider jihadist network. Furthermore, relatively criminal members gained status in the youth group by getting involved in jihadism. The results suggest that maintaining contact with youths at risk of radicalisation should be central to local prevention efforts. Radicalisation through trigger events and recruitment by jihadist propagandists could be prevented with specifically targeted interventions.

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Introduction

How do people, in particular youths with a history of delinquent behaviour, arrive at the decision to travel to foreign places in order to fight in a war in the name of Islam? This has

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become a pressing question since the civil war in Syria led to relatively large numbers of young people from Western Europe heading out to the conflict area to join jihadist groups. Travelling to Syria has been labelled the 'fourth wave' of jihadist travelling (Coolsaet, 2016), following three earlier waves (Sageman, 2008). The few participants of the first wave were inspired by the *mujahedin* fighting the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, and the second wave has been characterised as 'elite', such as the perpetrators of 9/11, who were mostly well-educated immigrants from the Middle-East. The travellers forming the third wave (following the 2003 Iraq war) and especially the fourth wave after the start of the civil war in Syria (2012) often included young people from deprived neighbourhoods, many of whom had previous criminal experience (Gallagher, 2016). A criminal background as an antecedent of radicalisation became referred to as 'the new crime-terror nexus' (Basra et al., 2016). This stands in contrast to a previous conception of the crime-terror nexus as cooperation between criminal and terrorist organisations or terrorist organisations committing crimes in order to finance their activities.[2]

Based on the profiles of seventy-nine jihadists, Basra et al. (2016) showed that the ISIS version of the jihadist narrative is well-suited to the needs and desires of young criminals. It can be used to curtail as well as to legitimise criminality. For some, it offers redemption, while it also satisfies the personal needs that led them to commit crimes previously. Basra and colleagues note: 'Just like the criminal gangs of which they used to be members, jihadist groups offered power, violence, adventure and adrenaline, a strong identity, and – not least – a sense of rebellion and being anti-establishment' (Basra et al., p. 24). The authors did not find any evidence that terrorist organisations actually try to recruit among criminal groups or gangs.[3] Thus, the new crime-terror nexus is not a matter of cooperation between organisations, but is a consequence of criminals and jihadists sharing the same backgrounds and networks.

[2] A brief overview is given in Ljujic, Van Prooijen & Weerman (2017).
[3] However, according to Lakhani (2018) extremists try to recruit criminals and encourage them to continue their criminality by offering religious and social justifications to reduce moral concerns. The crime-terror nexus '…. is about reconstructing criminals' motivations' (p. 2).

Empirical studies have also shown similarities between youth gangs and terrorist groups. Both have a weak group structure combined with strong bonds between members, and there are similarities in demographic composition, marginalised membership and the role of detention in the growth of the group. Both types of groups offer adventure and excitement, a feeling of power, control and identity (Decker & Pyrooz, 2015; Pyrooz, LaFree, Decker & James, 2018; Valasik & Philips, 2017). Because of these similarities, some authors speculated that overlap between gangs and extremist groups would emerge, both in terms of actual alliances and cooperation, as in terms of common background characteristics.

Pyrooz and colleagues (2018) were the first to study empirically whether this overlap existed or not. They distinguished three theoretical models in the literature about the potential overlap between gangs and terrorist networks. First, in the *independence* model, no overlap is expected and the causes of involvement in gangs vs. terrorist groups are assumed to be different. Second, the *interchangeability* model expects that the causes as well as group membership overlap strongly and that members of both groups come from the same population. Third, the *fundamental cause* model predicts little overlap between groups with respect to membership, while the causes and backgrounds of group membership are comparable. In their study, Pyrooz et al. (2018) found that six percent of a sample of 1473 domestic extremists had gang ties in the past, which is a small number in the context of 850,000 estimated gang members in the US. Therefore, they conclude that the independence model fits their data best, although the existence of common backgrounds (relatively more poverty and unemployment) point to the fundamental cause model as well (Pyrooz et al., 2018).

Although Pyrooz and colleagues took a first step in investigating the links between gangs and involvement in terrorist networks, they did not have access to detailed data on the routes to and content of involvement with extremism in their study. More generally, it is still largely unknown through which processes delinquent youths get radicalised and how they become involved in traveling to foreign regions to join a jihadist group. Much of the existing research on this issue is based on open registers or case studies derived from court records or

media reports, and information about the individual pathways leading to radicalisation is often absent or limited.

In contrast, a large body of literature exist about terrorism and foreign fighting in general. Becoming involved in a terrorist network has been described as '…a complex process of accommodation and assimilation across incrementally experienced stages…' (Horgan, 2008, p. 92). Only a small minority of those who adhere to violent jihad on social media actually join a jihadist group (Van San, 2015a). The vast empirical literature identifies several risk factors, such as demographics, social economic status, personality, and perceived discrimination and group threats (Feddes, Nickolson & Doosje, 2015; Bergema & Van San, 2017; Ljujic, Van Prooijen & Weerman, 2017; Paulussen, Nijman & Lismont, 2017; Schulten, Doosje, Spaaij & Kamphuis, 2019; Thijs, Rodermond & Weerman, 2018; Van den Bos, 2018; Versteegt, Ljujic, El Bouk, Weerman & Van Maanen, 2018; Weenink, 2015, 2019; Wolfowicz et al., 2019).[4] These risk factors may lead to radicalisation into jihadism when certain situational factors are present as well[5]. For instance, contacts with radicalized others are an important situational risk factor as well as the presence of 'radicalisation hubs', such as the presence of militant Salafist networks or radical mosques (Vidino, Marone & Entenmann, 2017). We also know from the literature that radicalisation and involvement is often a stepwise process in which various 'trigger events' can play a role (Doosje et al., 2016; Moghaddam, 2005; Weggemans, Bakker & Grol, 2014). However, it remains unclear through which pathways these risk factors and 'trigger events' have lead delinquent youths to become involved in travelling to Syria, and why there is such a close resemblance in the characteristics of gangs and jihadist groups.

[4] A brief international overview of risk factors is provided by the Radicalisation Awareness Network (Ranstorp, 2016).
[5] Agnew (2006) proposed the concept 'storyline' in order to overcome the temporal distance between relatively 'stable' risk factors, and situational factors occuring at a particular moment. A similar aproach is the 'criminal event' perspective, which analyses the particular environmental and behavioural contexts leading to a criminal event (Sacco & Kennedy, 2002).

Current Study

This study aims to delve deeper into the crime-terror nexus through a retrospective analysis of the backgrounds and radicalisation history of twenty young people who travelled to Syria to join jihadist groups. They came from a deprived neighbourhood in a mid-sized city in the Netherlands, and most of them had been involved in a local 'troublesome youth group'. We used police records, documents and interviews with local professionals to reconstruct the events and processes that led to the radicalisation of part of the group, to their connection with the jihadist network and to their efforts to travel to Syria.

We expanded the models of Pyrooz and colleagues, and distinguished six possible scenarios for a link between troublesome youth groups and radicalisation:

1. Specific personal and environmental characteristics enhance radicalisation at the individual level, during or after membership of a youth group
2. The youth group or part of it radicalise together, eventually transforming the group or subgroup into a jihadist network or a subgroup within one.
3. Individuals or subgroups within the youth group radicalise, and merge with the jihadist network
4. Individuals radicalise after quitting the group and continue to use the skills and networks acquired in the group
5. Radicalised young people or returnees form a new troublesome youth group
6. Common factors account for membership of a troublesome youth group as well as for radicalisation, and membership of delinquent and terrorist groups overlaps.

Our analysis enabled us to identify risk factors, trigger events and processes underlying radicalisation within this youth group and underlying the travelling to Syria by some of its members. Based on the results, we discuss which of the six scenarios are most applicable for the Netherlands.

Research Method

For the central case study, we performed semi-structured interviews with eleven professionals working in the neighbourhood in which the youth group was active and who had direct knowledge of the history of this group or its members. These included four community police officers, a police analyst, a member of the National Crime Squad, two social workers, one secondary school teacher and one municipal employee. Most interviewees were suggested by the leadership of the local police and by the municipality department of Public Order and Security, who were asked by researchers to mention the professionals most directly involved with the youth group. For the social workers, management permission for the interview was obtained. The interviewees were approached directly by a researcher, referring to the permission of their local management and the Minister. A few were found through the police information system, where they appeared as authors of relevant registrations. Personal data were shared only in interviews with police officers held by the first author. All interviews with police officers are subject to the WPG.

Informed consent was obtained for all interviews. Interviewees were informed about the purpose of the study and the confidential and anonymous processing of the results. Those who were interviewed by the first author (also working within the police organization) were contacted by e-mail containing all relevant information about the study before agreeing to take part in the interview. Others who spoke with NSCR-interviewers were informed during the interview and signed an informed consent form. Interviews lasted between one and two hours and were recorded with the permission of the interviewee (except one refusal). Reports (not verbatim) of between four and eight pages were sent to the interviewees to check for errors and misunderstandings, which led to a few changes.

To put the findings from our case study in perspective, we also held an inventory to find indications of radicalisation in other troublesome youth groups known to the Dutch authorities. This inventory was based on a national police registration system of ‘troublesome youth groups’, associated with nuisance and crime, with data at the group and individual

level[6]. We had access to data from 2017, which contained information about 4691 individuals connected to 479 youth groups. Older data were not available, as retention of these police data, often on minors, is tightly restricted.

Data from the registration system of troublesome youth groups were linked to a police database on signs of radicalisation, extremism and terrorism at the individual level. Groups with hits were further scrutinised, which resulted in selection of groups for which substantial evidence exist that group members became radicalised. The process of selecting the groups for further scrutiny was performed entirely within the police context, under the conditions of the Ministerial approval for the study. No results were returned into the police registration systems that were used, and these remained unchanged.

For the groups with substantial signs of radicalisation, we also conducted exploratory case studies that were less extensive than the case study for the main group under investigation. In these smaller case studies, we held two to five interviews per group, with the same conditions as in the core case study. Next to this, we also studied two comparison groups with no signs of radicalisation. These groups were matched to the core case study group with respect to neighbourhood characteristics as well as criminal records of their members.

In our interviews and analyses, we looked at environmental characteristics, such as the neighbourhoods in which the group operated, as well as circumstances, events and people that may have played a role in the development of the youth groups and in the radicalisation of their members. At the group level, we gathered information on demographic composition and structure of the group, and how the radicalisation process had taken place within the context of the group. We also tried to collect information about the extent to which radicalisation took place in the group, in subgroups or in specific individuals. The roles that different individuals from within and outside the group played in the process was scrutinised and we asked about the religious or ideological content of the interactions. On the individual level we gathered

[6] The registration system distinguishes three types of troublesome youth groups: ‘hinderlijk’ (annoying), ‘overlastgevend’ (causing nuisance) and ‘crimineel’ (criminal).

background information on educational level, income, work status and family composition, psychosocial problems, and criminal careers, as far as this was available in the police information that we could use.

Results

The central case study was based on events that had received much attention in the Dutch media and the political arena. In early 2013, twenty people from one neighbourhood in a mid-sized city in the Netherlands went to Syria, where ISIS was gaining importance and later on, in 2014, proclaimed the 'caliphate'. In this results section, we first present background information on the structural and group level. Then we go into the details on the individual travellers and the timeline of their radicalisation and travelling to Syria.

The local context

The neighbourhood (which we call N1 after the pseudonym Neighbourhood 1) in which the youth group operated, consists of nearly 3000 households, of which 40% live in apartments built in the 1960s and 1970s. Many of the houses are owned by public housing associations or the municipality. The socio-economic status of the inhabitants is mostly low. Over 40% of the inhabitants have a migrant background, with the largest groups having roots in Indonesia, Iraq, Morocco, Turkey, as well as the former Netherlands Antilles and Surinam. The presence of a large asylum seekers facility nearby accounts in part for the relatively high presence in N1 of 'status holders', people who have been granted asylum. According to a 2017 report, governmental budget cuts have reduced facilities that already were scarce, such as meeting places for the youth. The open spaces of the built environment, such as freely accessible flat galleries, lead to low levels of social control. Criminality is high in N1 and the inhabitants feel unsafe, especially in the evenings. There are many social problems in N1: debts, psychological and parenting problems (especially among the large number of single parent families), addictions and social isolation. Tensions between different ethnic groups

occur in the public spaces of N1 (Uyterlinden & Van der Velden, 2017). Relatively many young people in the neighbourhood leave school without qualifications that would enable them to enter the labour market. Especially the older youths have bleak future prospects and experience discrimination. A large part of the youths spend most of their time on the streets. In short, general risk or susceptibility factors for radicalisation known from the literature, such as unemployment, lack of perspective, and personal and psychological problems, abound in N1.

A local youth centre was the central point in the life of many young people in the neighbourhood with a migration background. A period of turmoil started when it was discovered in 2009 that criminal activities were being plotted inside the youth centre. The municipality tried to intervene by implementing a pass system in order to prevent older people and youth from outside N1 from attending the youth centre. However, the result of this intervention was that also many younger visitors joined the growing street scene outside the youth centre. Social workers, the municipality as well as police officers lost contact with the young people on the streets. Crime escalated (in the words of officials involved at the time), but the development of new crime prevention measures was slow due to a lack of cooperation between agencies. Repressive actions by the police led to further loss of trust among the young people, decreased contact with them, and it strengthened feelings of not being part of society.[7]

History and background of the youth group

The youth group has a history going back to the early 2000s, according to official sources and accounts of municipality and police personnel. Large families living in small flats, as well as the low accessibility of the youth centre, led many young people to spend a large amount of time on the street. The ethnic composition of the group is diverse, although a majority had parents with origins in Muslim countries, especially Morocco. Others have

[7] A new approach was developed after 2014 when part of the local youth group had departed to Syria.

Turkish, Afghan, Iraqi, and Caribbean backgrounds. Many youths from the group dropped out of school and are unemployed.

Although the term ‘group’ suggests cohesion, the troublesome youth group was sooner a fluid network, without clear leadership and membership boundaries. Because of this, it is difficult to determine membership and group size. In 2014, the group size was estimated at 160 in a police analysis report aimed at prioritising interventions with respect to growing criminality in the years 2013 and 2014. Small subgroups with varying membership were involved in burglaries or mugging, whereas other subgroups were mainly known for nuisance. Although the group was fluid in its membership, it was clearly visible and recognisable on the streets. Police officers and social workers had difficulty staying in contact with group members because of the large group size and because all community police officers were white while most young people in the group had a migrant background.

Within the group, loyalty towards each other was an important value. Apart from the common Muslim background, respondents connected to each other by their multiple experiences of discrimination. When going out at the weekend, they were regularly refused admission to bars, and it was difficult to find a job or even an internship. The idea that they were not allowed to be part of society prompted an uncommunicative attitude towards professionals.

Because crimes such as violence, burglaries and mugging have had the most emphasis in the activities of professionals as well as the police registration of members of the group, little is known about the role of girls. Police analysts acknowledged this in a 2014 internal report, and called it a blind spot in their knowledge about the youth network.

Acquiring status, street credibility, a tough image, and possession of money and luxury goods were all considered important within the group. As shown in video recordings made within the group, daring behaviours such as 'pulling wheelies’ with a scooter were highly valued. Having served time in prison increased street credibility as well. When young perpetrators received community service as a penalty, they enhanced their status in the group by avoiding most of the work (or pretending to). As will be discussed later, respondents also

believe that knowledge of the salafi-jihadist ideology and connection with the jihadist network in the larger region was considered as an asset in the street culture of the group, which possibly made it easier to convince fellow group members to join.

Another aspect of street culture that was important for the group was the emergence during the early 2000s of rap crews and rap culture. These emerged in the neighbourhood, as well as in several other multi-ethnic neighbourhoods in the Netherlands (De Jong, 2010; Kooymans, 2017). Rap videos on the internet that are related to the group date back to 2007.[8] Lyrics expressed how the young people deal with their deprived position in society and with bad situations at home, such as '… mama is broke, so for the time being I'll be pushing drugs'. Apart from the performance, videos include impression management behaviour, such as wearing balaclavas to highlight the delinquent nature of the street culture. Discrimination is mentioned often, as well as rejection of the dominant white culture. In later video recordings, lyrics referred to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the war in Syria, where at that time members of the group were present. As is common in rap lyrics, they exaggerated the extent of the problems, as in 'half the hood is locked up, the other half fights Assad'.

Travelling to Syria in early 2013

Table 1 gives an overview of travellers to Syria in the first three months of 2013 (the names are pseudonyms). It contains information on 20 people who travelled to Syria, ordered chronologically with regard to the time of departure (the lowest three rows provide information on people who have been instrumental in the travelling of others). The columns show information on gender and age, status in 2019 (presumed dead, returned or remains in the Middle East), criminal records before 2013, and criminal records after return, for those who returned. The criminal records were categorised as none, 'low', which indicates older and minor offenses, such as shoplifting as a teenager, and 'serious', indicating recent and more serious offenses, such as burglary.

[8] See, for example: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DWeu3Cg3ucg

Table 1. Overview of Syria travellers from N1

*Pseudo-nym**	*Origin Parent***	*Gender /Age 2013*	*Depart 2013*	*Status/ Month of return*	*Crime Record end 2012****	*Crime Record 2013-2018****
Mohamad A	Moroccan	M23	Jan	Presumed dead	Low	-
Ahmed A	Moroccan	M21	Jan	Presumed dead	Low	-
Hassan B	Moroccan	M26	Jan	Presumed dead	Low	-
Sahir B	Moroccan	M20	Jan	Presumed dead	Serious	-
Khalid	Moroccan	M29	Jan	Aug 13	No	Serious
Terek	Turkish/Kurdish	M24	Feb	Syria	Serious	-
Abdul	Turkish /Kurdish	M24	Feb	Syria	No	-
Rashid	Iraqi	M25	Feb	Jun 13	Low	No
Ali	Iraqi	M24	Feb	Presumed dead	Serious	-
Mario	Europe	M22	Feb	Presumed dead	Low	-
Hidaya (x Mario)	Moroccan	F21	Feb	Syria	No	-
Hamza	Somali	M20	Feb	Aug 13	Serious	Serious
Mateo	Caribean	M19	Feb	Aug 13	Serious	Serious
Björn	Europe	M18	Feb	May 13	No	No

Adam	Moroccan	M22	Feb	Jul 13	Serious	Serious
Kaoutar (x Björn)	Caribean	F20	Mrt	Attempt	No	No
Adel C	Moroccan	M25	Mar	Presumed dead	Low	-
Anwar C	Moroccan	M24	Mar	Presumed dead	Low	-
Salman C	Moroccan	M19	Mar	Syria	No	-
Samira C	Moroccan	F22	Mar	Syria	No	-
Fadwa C	Moroccan	F43	Mar	Syria	No	-
Kamal	Arab	M24	Fac	Facilitator	Low	No
Sanjar	Turkish	M28	Fac	Facilitator	No	No
Yusuf	Arab	M53	Fac	Facilitator	Serious (old)	No

* Letter A, B, C indicate a family relationship, x indicates an Islamic marriage.
** Based on country of birth of parents and info from interviews.
*** Categories are no, low (old and lighter antecedents) and serious (recent and serious offenses , such a burglary, assault).

Most of the travellers had a Moroccan background, and all except the converts Mario, Mateo, Björn and Kaoutar originate from Muslim cultures. Mario is not from N1 but did marry a local woman and is included because of his important role in the group (as will be explained later).

A preliminary but important observation is that only a small part of the youth group was involved in travelling, as the group as a whole was estimated to be about 160 people at the time. All males in the table were involved in the troublesome youth group, except Mario, Björn and Khalid. The latter became involved in serious crime with Hamza and Mateo after their return. Only Terek, Hamza and Mateo were considered 'priority subjects' by local

police, whereas 60% of the entire youth group had this label. Thus, most of the travellers were not regarded as particularly criminal members of the group.

Roughly three small 'waves' of Syria travelling from N1 have been identified in the interviews. A brief overview is given before we discuss a timeline of the events preceding the travels.

The first travellers, in January, had a relatively strong religious and ideological motivation. Most of them belonged to a group of six around the brothers Mohamad and Ahmed, who held meetings the year before. Three of them died within months, and Sahir died in 2015, reportedly.

The February travellers were more mixed in background. Those with criminal records soon returned and some of them immediately resumed their criminal careers. It was a great surprise that these highly active criminal youths, who were not involved in the group around Ahmed and Mohamad, went to Syria. Converts Björn and Mario left in February too, and both their wives followed a little later. Kaoutar's attempt failed, however.

The March travellers were all members of a Moroccan family (three young men, their sister and their mother) except the father, who drove them to the airport 'for a holiday'. The males were involved in the youth group but had minor criminal records. Shortly before departure, they stole money from the account of a student association at the college[9] of which two of them were on the board. These people were not active in the early radical group. Two of the men died, the other brother is in a Kurdish camp (November 2019), the sister currently lives in Turkey, and the mother's fate is unknown.

Timeline of the radicalisation process

Table 2 shows summaries of timelines that were made for the group in general and for selected individuals that we consider having exemplary pathways toward travelling to Syria within the youth group of N1.

[9] Hogeschool or University of Applied Sciences, the highest level of education after the general universities.

In the first row, the general timeline for the neighbourhood and group as a whole covers a few crucial events and developments. These include the activities (mentioned in all interviews) of an older former criminal who turned Salafist (we call him Yusuf). His earliest religious activity was an attempt to find a location to organise Quran lessons for children in 2004. He is reportedly involved, possibly financially, in the Umrah[10] of a group of young people from N1 in 2009. He was prominently present at a jihadist demonstration in Amsterdam in 2012, with Mario and Hassan. Another development was that the street culture in the group grew strongly, in particular after restrictions on access to the youth centre were imposed.

An important event in 2010 was a failed assault on a supermarket, where the owners defended themselves fiercely, leading to the death of a young offender who fell down a staircase. He was a member of the youth group and this event raised profound questions about life, death and religion among friends of the deceased group member such as Mohamad and Ahmed. These existential questions were not answered satisfactorily by the local mosque nor by other agencies.

[10] Umrah is the 'small pilgrimage' to Mecca, relative to the Hadj.

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Table 2 Timelines of the N1 group in general and selected Syria travellers

Pseudonym	Before 2010	2010-2011	2012	2013	2014-2015	After 2015
N1/ Group	- Crackdown on youth crime - Growing street culture - Rap crew since 2007 - Older Salafist Yusuf, former criminal, active in N1 since 2004 - 2009: Umrah from group	- End 2010: group member dies in failed assault	- Several persons take part in jihadist demonstration Amsterdam - Group members involved in religion as well as in crime - Social workers note Syria resonates	- 20 persons travel to Syria, all involved in youth group except 2 converts and 3 women. 9 die, 6 return, 5 remain. Two more women prevented.	- Incidental contacts with travellers by youth and family, some inform the police	- Street culture and size of youth group diminish - Signs of new generation of radicalised youth - Several members visit SA for religion
Mario	- Lives in nearby town - Convert since 2003, devotes life to Islam, explores fundamentalist preachers	- Marries strict Muslim girl from N1 - Involved in growing S4B	- In jihadi demonstration in Amsterdam with Yusuf and fellow traveller Hassan - Active in connecting jihadist network in the region - Is acquainted to Ahmed and others - Board member of Salafist foundation with Björn	- Travels to Syria and joins Jabath al Nusra, later ISIS, starts successful career. - Soon followed by his pregnant wife	- Burns passport in video	- Dies in defence of Baghouz - Wife and kids in Kurdish camp

Ahmed	Minor offences Turns to Islam after dead father in 2009	- Leads radical group with his brother - cultivate image of Islam connoisseur - guards jihadi demo's e.g. prevents journalists talking to women - marries African convert girl he knows thru Björn	- Radical group around Ahmed merges into jihadi network in larger region. - Visits meetings of jihadist preacher who goes to Syria too	- Leaves first with his brother. Both die within months. - Most of the radical group follow soon - Involved in Assad soldiers' massacre, says obituary - Child is born. Widow at home behind his choice	- Widow marries another jihadist and has a second child with him	
Terek	- Commits property crimes	- Is suspect in a home assault with two others; acquitted in appeal	- Receive large amount of money from prosecution office - Had psychological problems says family - Involved in 'group Ahmed' and visits jihadi preacher who went to Syria too - Also involved in crime	- Travels to Syria with other Kurdish young man from N1	- Meets mother in border town, where he arrives from the front - Joins ISIS - Marries young Syrian girl	- Remains in ME

Rashid	- Commits minor crimes - Violence 2008	- Gives up crime and is interested in religion	- Involved in group Ahmed	Travels to Syria and returns	- Involved in Salafist network - Unemployed, depressed	- Marries woman from another part of the country who was stopped in Turkey in 2015 - Involved in Salafist network - Arrested in jihadi case, released for minor role
Hamza	- Involved in rap scene - Crimes since 2007, age 14	- Ambitious criminal	- Commits crimes - Last months interested in religion	- Travels to Syria with Caribbean friend. Both return in August and resume crime career - Photo shows the friends with AK47s	- Involved in serious property crime and fraud - Prison term - Great status on street	- Leads group of 10 from N1 in pilgrimage to SA 2019 - Remains active in property crime and fraud - Performs as musician
Björn	- Converts to Islam when meeting Muslim friends in youth care centre - Not involved in crime	- Marries strict Muslim girl and they have a child	- Goes on pilgrimage - Board member of Salafist foundation with Mario	- Travels to Syria and comes back in three months - Wife is prevented from travel	- Does prison time and tries to take op life	- Tries to find job and live a Salafist life. - Wife active in 'sister network'

In 2012, the year before departure of twenty people from N1 to Syria, several members of the youth group were involved in a radicalised subgroup (taking part in a national jihadist demonstration) as well as in crime. Social workers noted that the call to defend the Muslims in the Middle East resonated among these young men. The police were informed by mosque board members that the radical group was causing trouble, and were trying to include other believers in their activities. The police had no answer, however, mostly because of a lack of knowledge about the phenomenon of radicalisation, at that time a relatively new phenomenon to the police officers, although a former wave of radicalisation was not long ago at the time (AIVD, 2009).

In 2014 and 2015 the returnees among the travellers developed in different directions: some resumed their criminal careers, others tried to live a truly Salafist pious life, and some tried to do both at the same time or switch between them. Those surviving in Syria occasionally had contact with home.

Mario was a convert of European origin who lives in a nearby town. He converted to Islam when he had a Muslim girlfriend as a teenager, whom he soon married. He made Muslim friends and increasingly devoted his life to his new religion. Soon he became much stricter than his friends and his girlfriend and the relationship ended. He visited several preachers and became involved in Sharia 4 Belgium, a group inspired by the UK based Al Muhajiroun movement, also known as Islam 4 UK. This group played a crucial role in the development of the jihadist movement in the region and in the Netherlands. Mario and another radicalised person played an important role in building a stable network among the jihadists, including a radical group around Ahmed and his brother.[11] With Björn, he was a board member of a foundation that played a role in recruitment (dissolved after the departure to Syria). In 2010, Mario married a strict Muslim girl from N1, Hidaya. She was already radicalised when she met Mario and was active in the *sister network* of jihadi Salafist women of which few people were aware at the time. In 2010, Mario also became acquainted with

[11] The development of this network has also been described in Bakker & Grol (2016).

Ahmed and his friends. He was also closely befriended with a jihadist preacher who later travelled to Syria. Mario left in February 2013, somewhat later than Ahmed and his group. His pregnant wife Hidaya followed soon afterwards. Mario had a career in Jabath el Nusra and ISIS before he was reportedly killed in Bagousz, the last territory of ISIS that fell in 2019. He became notorious for burning his Dutch passport in a video in 2014, declaring that he was happy to have nothing more to do with the country.

Ahmed was the younger of two brothers who had a leading role in the radicalising group. Both were enrolled in higher education at the time. After the death of their father, the brothers turned to radical religion. When a friend from the youth group died in the failed robbery mentioned above, the group around Ahmed developed in an even more radical direction and joined the group led by the jihadist preacher with Mario. Before that, they caused trouble in several local mosques, but the police had little idea how to respond. Ahmed acted as a security guard at jihadist demonstrations, such as one against the niqab ban in 2011. In 2011, he married an African convert girl he knew through Björns wife. Ahmed became a father just before he left for Syria with his brother and his friends in the early days of 2013. Both brothers died within a few months and obituaries appeared online, one of which was written by Hassan. Ahmed's widow, who stayed at home, later married another important jihadi.

Terek was a Turkish/Kurdish young man who was among the more criminal group members, committing property crimes until he left for Syria in February 2013. One of his first arrests was for stealing a car at the age of 16. In 2012 he was acquitted on appeal for a home robbery and received some tens of thousands of euros from the public prosecution service as compensation for unjust detention. According to his family, interviewed after his departure, he spent the money quickly. Later, he had psychological problems. He and a Kurdish friend joined the radical religious group around Ahmed, but remained criminally active as well. The two friends travelled to Syria in mid-January. Occasionally, Terek had contacts with home and he met his mother near the Turkish border. He joined ISIS in 2014 and married a young Syrian girl, with whom he reportedly has children and lives in Turkey.

Rachid has an Iraqi background and was involved in petty crime before 2010, when he became interested in Islam and had no further police contacts related to crime. In 2012, he became involved in the group around Ahmed, Terek and others, who were also acquainted to Mario. In February he travelled to Syria with another young Iraqi man. He returned in the summer and seemed to have problems adapting in N1. He unsuccessfully looked for a job, and seemed depressed at times. He is still involved in the Salafist network and has been seen with relevant people on several occasions across the country. In 2015 he married a woman from another part of the country, who had been prevented from travelling to Syria and is active in the sister network. In 2017 he was arrested in a terrorism investigation, but soon released because of his marginal role.

Hamza has an East-African background and was arrested for the first time in 2007 at the age of 14. Many arrests followed. Later he became active in a local rap crew. He was also still active as a criminal. When he left for Syria in January 2013 with Mateo, everyone in N1 was very surprised. However, his family reported that he had been more religious for some months before departure and that he liked to wear a djellaba, which he had never done before. He returned from Syria in August and resumed his criminal career. He has been convicted for arms trafficking and an attempted robbery. Although a conversation was intercepted in which financial support for 'the brothers' was mentioned, a terrorist motive was rejected in court. He is still involved in crime; he performs and records as a musician and in 2019 led a group of about ten in a pilgrimage trip to Saudi Arabia as well.

Björn became acquainted with young Muslims when he lived in a youth care facility after the divorce of his parents, and soon converted to Islam. Earlier, he had been interested in the Christian religion. He had never been involved in crime. He lived in N1 and there he married a strict Muslim girl who was affiliated to the jihadist sister network, just like Mario's wife. He visited radical mosques and preachers and was a board member of the foundation with Mario. He went to Syria for three months and after coming back spent some time in prison. Since then, he has lived a Salafist life and is trying to find a job. His Caribbean wife remains active in the sister network.

The next section further elaborates crucial elements of the radicalisation process that came to the fore in the timelines of the group and the individual members.

Connecting with the jihadist network

Although everyone in N1, including social workers and police, was taken completely by surprise when a number of young people left for Syria in early 2013, it later emerged that the radicalisation process had already been going on for some years. Several young people connected to the troublesome youth group became more involved in the Islamic religion from 2009 onwards. Apart from the Internet, which since 2010 facilitated orientation on radical Islam, personal contacts seem to have played an important role in this. Some members of the group became acquainted with people involved in the jihadist network in the wider area.

When people from N1 left for Syria in 2013, little attention was paid to the role of women in the jihadist movement.[12] More recently, the AIVD (Dutch Intelligence and Security Service) has described how women do play an important role in connecting and consolidating the jihadist movement. Once they become part of the movement, women find a community in which they can find friends and marriage candidates. Some become very active propagandists for the jihadist cause (AIVD, 2017).[13] These characteristics also emerge from our case study. For example, several Islamic marriages took place between radical young men from the youth group and women connected to the sister network in the Netherlands. Mario, Björn, and Ahmed married before 2013. The woman that married Ahmed met him through Björn, whose wife she knew. A sister of Hassan and Sahir married a radicalised young man connected to a youth group in another part of the country. Ahmed's widow married another jihadist and finally, in 2015, Rachid married a woman who had tried to travel to Syria from another part of the country. No firm conclusions on the role of women can be drawn from this case study, but given that the sister network has been active for a number of years (Groen & Kranenberg

[12] Although journalists Groen & Kranenberg (2006) published a book on the women related to the Hofstad network, which included the jihadist that killed filmmaker Theo van Gogh in 2004.
[13] Manrique et al, (2016) showed with Social Network Analysis that women in US extremist networks may play a role in connecting subgroups and thereby consolidate the movement.

already mentioned their Islamic fashion shows in 2006), further research in its role in the jihadist movement seems warranted.[14]

It was mentioned in the interviews several times that 'recruiters' were allegedly active in N1, especially around the mosques. Although Yusuf clearly had intensive contact with members of the Salafi-jihadist network in the Netherlands, a specific role as a 'recruiter' was never proven. Respondents maintain that there must have been recruiters active in N1, although there was no concrete evidence against specific people. The only indication that recruiters had been active was that young people who stayed when others travelled to Syria received anonymous phone calls, asking them to come too. Most likely, the recruiters were in fact the group around Ahmed and Mohamad, the first travellers to Syria that connected to the jihadist network through friends such as Mario.

Trigger events and religious development

Trigger events played an important role for the first group of travellers around Ahmed and Mohamad. When their father died in 2009, the eldest son took over his role in the family. Soon he turned to religion and in the process became convinced that the sermons of the local imam were deviating from 'true' Islam. An even more important trigger event for this first group of travellers was the failed armed robbery in 2010 in which a friend died. After this event, the brothers focused more on religion and gave up behaviours they considered incompatible with it, such as smoking cannabis.[15] From that moment onwards, the group of friends started wearing djellaba's on the street. These observations are in line with findings from previous research that death and the confrontation with one's own mortality can be a trigger factor for radicalisation (Feddes et al., 2015; Kruglanski, Chen, Dechesne, Fishman & Orehek, 2009; Thijs et al., 2018).

[14] This would build on Van San (2018) who studied the motivation of women who travelled to Syria by interviewing family members directly and the women themselves through internet.
[15] The possibility that the brothers used the death of the friend consciously to involve others in their already ongoing radicalisation process was not confirmed by interviewees.

The two brothers and a handful of friends, all involved in the youth group, turned their back on the regular mosque and started meeting together in other places, first within the mosque building. When they were turned away by mosque elders, they started gathering in other places and finally found refuge in a mosque that a jihadist preacher and his friends had taken over, in a nearby town. They became acquainted with Mario, although it is unclear whether this was before or during the episode in 2011/2012 that they regularly met this preacher. The core group grew to about ten, mostly in their early twenties.

More generally, all Syria travellers seem to have gone through religious change before 2013, although the degree to which this was the case varied. In particular the group around Ahmed and Mohamad searched for a more strict and radical form of Islam, which they finally found with the jihadist preacher who later left for Syria too. But also the more criminal travellers, who committed crimes even shortly before leaving for Syria, had started praying and visiting mosques in the months preceding departure. However, they were not involved with the group visiting the jihadist preacher.

The first group of travellers (in particular Mohamad and Ahmed) was peripheral to the criminal part of the youth group, but seemed to acquire status and credibility because of their alleged 'knowledge of Islam' and their connections with the jihadist network in the larger region. People related to this network had become notorious for their provocative actions that attracted media attention. It seems likely that the more criminal group members that left for Syria later on were also inspired by the status of the first group's knowledge and connections than by the radical religion per se.[16] The fact that returnees were often seen surrounded by younger group members, who seemed to admire them, supports this idea.

Response of the direct environment

Whereas the municipality and the police were completely taken by surprise when twenty people from the neighbourhood left for Syria in early 2013, some families and

[16] See Ilan and Sandberg (2019) for a discussion of 'street capital' that can be 'earned' through jihadist as well as criminal connections.

neighbours did observe already that something was going on. Some families tried to reach out to the social work sector, the municipality authorities or the police with signals that something was going wrong. According to the interviewees, a lack of knowledge and experience was the reason that very little happened with these signals. For example, when one of the group members died in a robbery, there were signals that existential questions emerged among some group members, but no one knew how to deal with them, including social workers, the imam, and elders of the local mosque. A lack of motivation to do something may have played a role as well: these youths were seen as criminals who deserved little compassion, according to some of the professionals involved. When the radical group became a real nuisance to the local mosques, police officers still felt unable to intervene, as no law was broken directly. Further, in the early months of 2013, agencies that were involved in the troublesome youth group in N1 were unable to share information and to collaborate in their reaction when it became clear that several youths had radicalised and travelled to Syria. One teacher noticed the radicalisation of a few of his students, but had no idea how to respond.

Since 2013, the cooperation between agencies has improved, as is most clearly expressed in the new 'person-oriented approach'. People exhibiting signs of radicalisation are discussed in case consultation meetings. More generally, agencies involved in these meetings, such as the municipal authority, youth care, social work and the police try to facilitate a normal life for an individual. That is, they exchange information on the developments with respect to housing, schooling, jobs, relationships and childcare. Interventions are directed at influencing these aspects of life rather than deradicalisation per se.

Development of the group as a whole

Ultimately, only a small number of all the people involved in the troublesome youth group (mostly young males) joined the radical subgroup that left for Syria, with some of them returning. Some of those involved in the radical subgroup remained criminally active until shortly before travelling to Syria, but most of the initial travellers were not serious criminals and had only minor or older offences in their criminal records. They belonged to the youth

group in a more social way; they were part of the street culture. According to our interviewees, many of the other members of the youth group took some distance from the radical group when the radicalisation process became serious. Some youth group members also kept their distance when travellers returned and in some cases resumed their criminal careers. On the other hand, they all continued seeing each other in N1. Some of the radical subgroup members finally found a job or started a business, whereas others developed a more serious criminal career. Some people involved in the group remained interested in Islam and went on a pilgrimage with Hamza and others in 2019.

As travelling to Syria and the preceding radicalisation coincided with the presence of crime in the youth group, the case of N1 can be seen as an example of the 'new crime-terror nexus'. However, there seemed to be no direct path from earlier crime to radicalisation, and most of the travellers belonged to the less criminal part of the group. Some committed crimes just before leaving whereas others had long ago given up crime or had never been involved in it. Although several members of the youth group had been incarcerated in the years preceding departure, we found no evidence that anyone became radicalised in prison. There have been signals suggesting that returnees committed crimes in order to finance jihad, but such charges were cleared in court and prosecutors appeared to be convinced that the suspects were primarily motivated by financial gain.

Radicalisation in other troublesome youth groups in the Netherlands

In our inventory to find signs of radicalisation in other troublesome youth groups known to the Dutch authorities, we found 360 hits on an individual level within a database of 4691 individuals connected to 479 youth groups. 'Hits' imply that a person is present in one or more records of radicalisation and terrorism, ranging from a single contact with a known suspect to involvement in terrorist activities and travelling to Syria. Therefore, we scrutinised these data carefully and considered whether there were any indications that radicalisation was also substantially prevalent in the troublesome youth groups to which the individuals

belonged. For thirty youth groups (out of 144 with at least one hit) we found that there were five or more members with records in the radicalisation and terrorism database. For these groups, the local police were contacted in order to acquire more information about the radicalisation in the youth groups they had been in contact with. In the end, it appeared that there were only four youth groups where radicalisation was serious and connected in some way to the group as a whole. This leads us to conclude that radicalisation and travelling to Syria are relatively rare in troublesome youth groups the Netherlands.

All four groups selected from the inventory were active in deprived neighbourhoods, mostly older working-class areas in which the population had become ethnically diverse in recent decades. This aspect differs from N1, which is a 1970s flats area mostly. Other neighbourhood characteristics were quite similar, such as high levels of poverty and unemployment and low schooling. As in N1, young people complain about discrimination and not being allowed to take part in society.

The interviews with professionals connected to the four other youth groups suggested that the radicalisation process in these youth groups was less intense than in our case study, and we found only one group that included travellers. In all these groups, persons with longer lasting ties to the jihadist networks were around and made contact with some young people. However, merging of part of the group with the jihadist network was seen only in the group from which young men had travelled to Syria. Some professionals we interviewed observed that youths from the four groups believed that many crimes were not really serious if their victims were *kafirs*, unbelievers. Further, it appeared that conspiracy theories such as about the *Illuminati* are rather popular among youth group members. Although this has been linked to further radicalisation in previous literature (e.g. Bartlett & Miller, 2010), the professionals we interviewed did not observe any serious consequences of these beliefs.

For two groups, interviewees noted that members had developed a renewed interest in Islam, the religion of most of their parents. They visited several mosques and preachers in their search and professionals worried that they might fall in the hands of recruiters, but find it difficult to enhance the resilience of young people in this respect. In our core case study,

specific events played a role in religious and ideological development, while this appeared to be less the case in the four other groups.

In the two comparison groups with no signs of radicalisation, no people with connections to jihadist networks were identified, and no visiting of radical mosques or radical preachers was observed. Other circumstances and characteristics of the group and its involvement in crime were similar.

Conclusion and Discussion

The events leading to radicalisation travelling to Syria in the troublesome youth group in N1 appeared to be relatively unique, since no other youth group with comparable developments was found in the Netherlands. Risk factors for increased susceptibility to radicalisation are present in many deprived neighbourhoods in the Netherlands, whereas actual travelling to Syria took place in only a few. In our central case study and in the four other groups with signs of radicalisation, people with longer lasting ties with the jihadist movement had a connection to some group members. In our case study, the presence of converts[17] as well as young women with connections with the jihadist network has had a catalyst effect on radicalisation in the youth group. Thus, it seems that the onset of radicalisation takes place through network contacts. We also found in our case study that particular trigger events played a role in the religious development of members of the youth group. Internal group dynamics and street culture added to the attractiveness of travelling, while authorities and youth workers seemed to have lost contact with the group and government institutions did not have a satisfactory response to the radicalisation process within the group.

With respect to the six possible scenarios for the link between troublesome youth groups and radicalisation that we formulated at the outset, we conclude that the third fits our results best: there was a subgroup within the youth group that radicalised and merged with a

[17] See Van San, 2015b on Belgian and Dutch converts who joined the jihadist movement.

larger jihadist network. Scenario six, largely congruent with Pyrooz et al.'s 'interchangeability model', fits to some extent. The backgrounds of radicalised and criminal youths in our study are quite similar, and some have in fact moved from crime to radicalisation and back again. However, several others have moved away from crime and taken up a Salafist lifestyle.

The presence of the youth group seems to have strengthened the radicalisation process, as it provided an infrastructure in which ideas could be dispersed easily. Rewards in terms of status and prestige also seemed to have played a role. Many travellers come from neighbourhoods with a concentration of young people with migrant backgrounds, in which poor schooling and housing, unemployment and discrimination lead to a criminogenic street culture where young people turn their back on society. Here, becoming someone, or the 'quest for significance' (Kruglanski et al., 2013), can be achieved through crime, but knowledge of jihadist ideology and connections in the wider jihadist network seem to offer an alternative.

With respect to the 'crime-terror nexus' in youth groups, it can be concluded that the connection between crime and radicalisation is not straightforward or linear. On the contrary, only a minority of the criminal part of the youth group radicalised, and they were less criminal than most other members of the youth group. Although some of the more criminal travellers returned quickly, they were not the only ones. Among those who fought in Syria, some were criminals even on the eve of their departure, or when they already visited preachers' gatherings.

Basra et al. suggested that the radical ideology can bring legitimation as well as redemption to criminal youth. The redemption aspect was reflected in the focus on religion after the trigger events that led to the first group of radicalising youth. The legitimation aspect was found among youths stating that crime with *kafirs* as victims could not be that bad. The concept of the unbeliever (kafir) is sometimes extended to mainstream Muslims who do not adhere to radical Islam (*takfir*). This was also found in other youth groups, and social workers have concerns that this might be a forerunner of radicalisation.

Limitations of the study and suggestions for further research

Because of the focus on troublesome youth *groups*, a considerable amount of the (former and present) criminality among jihadists was beyond the scope of this study. Many foreign fighters have criminal records, without being a member of a youth group. In order to fully understand the crime-terror nexus, data should be gathered for a larger and representative group of individual jihadists and Syria travellers in order to get a more complete image. Reconstructing their 'story-lines', as recommended by Agnew (2006), which closely resembles the approach in the present study, would importantly add to our insights in the crime-terror nexus.

Another consequence of the focus on youth groups is that we cannot explain the concentration of travelling from certain neighbourhoods in the Netherlands. In several neighbourhoods from which much jihadist travelling to Syria occurred, no strong connection was found to the local youth groups. This suggests that future research might also consist of case studies with clusters of travellers as the unit of investigation. The overlap of the troublesome youth group with the jihadist network seems to be a special case rather than an explanatory factor.

At the time of the study, some criminal investigations were still ongoing, which meant that we were unable to conduct any interviews with returnees and young people related to the radical group. It would be worthwhile to attempt conducting such interviews in this and other neighbourhoods at a later stage.

Finally, the role of young women became apparent in the course of the study, supporting the idea that they may play an important role in the consolidation of the jihadist movement by connecting different sections with their own *sister network* and through Islamic marriages with male jihadists. Data available to this study focused strongly on the criminal behaviour of youth groups, leading to a 'male' bias. Our findings suggest that further study on the sister network could lead to insights that can help in countering jihadism.

Lessons from this study

The youth groups we studied are all active in neighbourhoods that are often seen as a breeding ground for radicalisation since risk or 'susceptibility' factors known from the literature abound: poor housing conditions and high levels of child raising problems, concentrations of young people with bleak future prospects who experience discrimination, and a feeling of not being allowed to take part in society. People with earlier connections with the jihadist network were present in these neighbourhoods. In the core case study in neighbourhood 'N1', trigger events played an important role in the development of a radical group that was able to influence a number of others, finally leading to a large number of Syria travellers.

A striking finding is that the direct social environment of the radicalising youth seemed to remain passive, apparently seeing no options for action, although some noticed signs that something was going on with their friend, brother or son. Parents, teachers and people involved in the mosques showed a reluctance to act, partly because they did not know how to do so, and partly because they feared unintended consequences.[18]

Although this study concerns travelling to Syria, possible strategies for prevention that follow from our findings may be relevant for radicalisation into violent jihadism in a broader sense. Such radicalisation may occur in connection with international developments, such as new jihadist hotspots after Syria, as well as more local developments, such as tensions in society related to the rise of populism and extreme anti-muslim political movements. First, it seems to be key to keep in contact with youths that are at risk and give them the feeling that they belong to society. In our core case study, we observed repressive police action and restrictions on admission to the youth centre, which led to loss of contact with the youth group. Alternative methods to maintain contact, such as outreach youth work or 'street corner work', might have led to an earlier insight into the development of a radical group. Second, it appears to be important to offer psychological support for youth at risk who experience

[18] The Dutch word 'handelingsverlegenheid', literally 'embarrassment to act' was used in several interviews.

dramatic events. In our case, when a member of the group died in a failed robbery, his friends clearly developed existential questions after their confrontation with death and dying, that were not answered by the local mosque or by other professionals. The group turned to a nearby jihadist preacher, which eventually seems to have contributed to their travels to Syria. Finally, it is important to provide alternatives for jihadist and other extremist networks that may come into contact with or even reach out to youths at risk. The presence in neighbourhoods of people involved in a larger jihadi network seems to have been an important factor in the development of radicalisation. Although this was partly known to the authorities, it proved difficult to intervene. Preventing potentially radicalising people from having contact with youth in a neighbourhood is often difficult from a legal point of view. Apart from promoting resilience among young people at risk, a possibility worth developing further could be to arrange alternatives for young people, for instance by engaging positive role models such as rappers, and by training imams able not only to reach them, but also to keep them on a moderate and non-violent path.

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