

## Suburban Bliss or Disillusionment - Why Do Terrorists Quit?

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### Abstract

This study explores the explanatory value of two theories of *desistance* – the cessation of criminal behavior – in explaining why 27 individuals left the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq (ISIS). The article focuses specifically on jihadists that turned away from ISIS after March 2011, asking why individuals desist from ISIS and choose to leave the caliphate. A dataset of 27 narratives of desistance was analysed to answer the question to what extent *desistance* from ISIS by jihadists can be explained by the Laub & Sampson's *life course theory* and by Altier, Thorogughood & Horgan's model of *push and pull factors*. The primary pathways for desistance are coded according to the two theories. The results show that of the 27 individuals, the majority desisted from the caliphate because of their perception of the excessive use of force by ISIS and their inability to cope with the effects. A minority desisted because of their perception of alternative options outside the terrorist group or because of important life events that happened 'at home'. Thus, the article concludes that the *push and pull factors* model is valid in the explanation of *desistance* from the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq whereas *life course theory* does not hold explanatory value (yet).

### Keywords

*Desistance, Disengagement, Deradicalization, Terrorism, Extremism, Islamic State, Life Course theory, Narratives*

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## Introduction

Ten years ago Bakker (2006, p. 3) stated that jihadi terrorism is perceived as a global phenomenon, despite the fact that its fighters and targets are mainly located in the Muslim world. As of now, we can conclude that what has changed over the past decade, is both fighters and targets are now also very clearly located outside of the Muslim world, as evident in the terrorist attacks in Paris and Brussels in 2015 and 2016 (Werber, 2015; Witte, Mekhennet, & Birnbaum, 2016). It was the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) that claimed responsibility for these attacks, and the terror group still threatens Western countries by training foreign fighters in the ISIS caliphate in Iraq and Syria and then tasking them to commit attacks in their home countries upon return (Callimachi, 2016). In line with this, recent research shows that an average of 30 percent of jihadists (from the European Union) have returned to their home country and are perceived as a potential security threat (Van Ginkel & Entenmann, 2016, p. 3). Thus, the question that ranks highest on many political agendas worldwide is: how to rehabilitate these terrorists?

However, several scholars (e.g. Neumann, 2015; Speckhard & Yayla, 2015) have noted that not every ISIS-returnee comes back (further) radicalized or with a specific task. In fact, a number of individuals defected or returned from ISIS disappointed or frustrated with the terrorist organization. Thus, to answer the question of how to rehabilitate terrorists, a potentially promising venue might be to find out why these ISIS defectors chose to leave the terrorist organization; a process that can be perceived as a form of stopping criminal behavior. The literature on why terrorists stop being terrorists has come up with different answers and thus, different models or theories, with the model of *push and pull factors*, described by Altier, Thoroughgood, & Horgan (2014) being the most prominent model. At the same time, the discipline of criminology has – over the past decades – also produced a number of theories on why people stop their criminal behavior. In that field of study, the *life course theory* of Laub and Sampson is widely regarded as an authoritative model with high explanatory power.

This article, taking individual ISIS-defectors' narratives as case studies, seeks to answer the question: *to what extent can desistance from ISIS be explained by the life course theory and a model of push and pull factors?* The research entails an inductive narrative analysis, an approach that will be further outlined in the methodology section. The personal

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narratives of fighters that fought with ISIS in Syria or Iraq are examined and codified. Next, these codes are compared to the two theories of desistance to test the explanatory value and see which theory holds up in explaining desistance from ISIS.

Several earlier studies have looked at specific traumatic events that lead to a transition in behavior (Fink & Hearne, 2008; Garfinkel, 2007). This is important in light of the current topic; as such events in general might cause a cognitive opening for intervention. Of specific relevance here is the question whether these traumatic events differ from the ‘turning points’ in the context of desistance. Fink & Hearne (2008, p. 3) argue that a fundamental change in understanding is needed for individuals to understand that what they are doing is cognitively ‘not normal’. This cognitive shift can be triggered by traumatic happenings; which can challenge the coherence of someone’s worldview (Garfinkel, 2007, p.11). According to Garfinkel, traumatic events are characteristically sudden, unexpected and uncontrollable. That is why particular events have lifelong effects and, as a result, social and law enforcement services face the challenge of opening up a dialogue with the individual and persuade him or her of the error of their previous (violent) ways (Fink & Hearne, 2008, p. 3). Such interventions could follow after desistance from a terrorist group, and might provide general lessons for rehabilitation since the particular events that provided a turning point for individuals in this study leading them to defect from ISIS could also be inherently traumatic.

### *Desistance*

Where terrorist scholars focus either on de-radicalisation or disengagement, in criminological literature, the main focus lies on the concept of desistance. According to Laub and Sampson (2001), desistance is the long-term or permanent ending of criminal behavior. In other words, it refers to the physical decision of people to ‘go straight’ after a psychological transition (Maruna, 1999). Within the criminological literature on desistance one can distinguish three main schools that attempt to predict why someone will or will not desist. The first perspective is the age-crime curve that states there is an increase from late childhood with a peak in individual engagement in violent behavior from 16-19 years, followed by a decline in violent behavior (Farrington, 1986; Tremblay and Nagin, 2005). The underlying idea is that people

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stop offending because of biological ageing, a theory that is replicable as it can be tested cross-culturally and over time.

The second perspective argues that desistance from criminal (violent) behavior is a consequence of cognitive change (Maruna, 2001; Giordano, Cernkovich and Rudolph, 2002). The premise is that this shift in thinking follows a pattern. In phase one an individual becomes aware that his/her life cannot continue in this way. In phase two a low point is reached, which provides a 'hook' for change. This hook can be anything but it is often related to another person in the individuals' environment (for example the loss of a significant other or a new person the individual met at an AA-meeting). This hook for change signifies a moment of reflection and provides a starting point for changing one's behavior. This change has to become persistent in the sense that it influences all areas of life so that in the end the individual is inherently changed and sees the past as something that represents who they were, not who they are anymore. A difference in interpretation within this perspective is that where Giordano focuses mainly on the subsequent phases, Maruna primarily zooms in on the result – something he labels a '*redemption script*'. This redemption script consists of three elements: (1) the idea of a good self (and the corresponding belief in a good self); (2) the idea of *pseudo-altruism* or giving back to the community; according to Giordano this is a reciprocal process because the perpetrator role becomes an active narrative: the individual is now a *former*, something that provides him or her with credibility while at the same time reinforcing his/her new identity; and (3) the sense of agency and control over one's life. The changed individual is now in control over what (s)he can do and achieve; the future is in his or her own hands.

A third school of thought revolves around the idea of life course transitions, or the idea that factors that contribute to a certain lifestyle are responsible for desistance from criminal (violent) behavior (Laub & Sampson, 2001). These factors can be anything from owning a house, having a stable job, signing up for military service, having pro-social and stable relationships with others who lead a non-delinquent life to having a spouse and having children. These life-changing factors come with responsibility and thus often lead to the actual decision to 'go straight', including a reorientation of the costs and benefits of crime. This reorientation refers to the process of a cost-benefit analysis, where the current situation is

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appraised in light of the future. The outcome of that appraisal will lead to an individual decision either to remain part of the criminal environment (persistence) or let go of the criminal behavior (desistance). The authors also note a positive correlation between strong family ties and a decrease in criminal behavior. Overall, the analysis of Laub and Sampson shows that desistance of criminal behavior is the result of a combination of individual acts and the situational context, where a life event leads to a certain decision in the light of criminality (2001, p. 48). These life events do not have to be of direct personal concern to a delinquent per se, but could also be an event happening in their immediate (social) environment.

These three theories all say something about general delinquents such as bank robbers, pickpocket and those involved in petty crime. However, little is known about the applicability of these perspectives to specific offender groups such as violent extremist offenders. That could be due to the fact that the numbers of violent extremist offenders in prison are much smaller. Or because they generally serve longer prison sentences under different regimes compared to ‘regular criminal offenders’, which makes it a difficult research-group. Is their life cycle similar to that of regular offenders? We do not quite know.

### *Push and pull factors*

It was Horgan who addressed the question “why do people leave terrorism?” – thereby indicating a gap in the academic literature on desistance from terrorist criminal activity. Horgan distinguishes between psychological and physical disengagement (2009b, p. 21), where the psychological factor leads to the desire to desist from a terrorist group and the physical factor ensures the eventual departure. This distinction has become more prominent in the field in the de-radicalization (cognitive change) versus disengagement (behavioral change) debate. It is the question if de-radicalization and disengagement go hand in hand and whether one can ensure people’s departure from a terrorist group without the other. In other words, would it be possible to leave for ISIS due to a behavioral transition without a change in cognition? And if you need both, does one necessarily precede the other? In the present study, it will be made clear what the underlying aspects of desistance from ISIS as terrorist group are. The corresponding conclusion gives an insight in what effect for instance disillusion has on the (non-terrorism) future. In this case, disillusion (in relation to specific group behavior)

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functions as a positive indicator for recidivism, potentially leading to secondary desistance (Horgan, 2014, p. 148).

Several authors have contributed to the theoretical debate on the push and pull factor phenomenon. According to Dalgaard-Nielsen (2013, p. 111), the focus should be on (push) factors that are connected with an extremist lifestyle as these might provide the necessary cognitive opening for counter-narratives. In 2015 (p. 208), Barrelle further analyzed the process of rehabilitation and concluded that re-engagement is about pro-integration into mainstream society and (in the context of foreign terrorist fighters) travelling to one's next (non-terrorism) destination. However, Hwang (2015, p. 16) noted in a study of Indonesian reintegration experiences there is no evidence that disengaged jihadi's find it important to completely break with their former (terrorist) friends. In his study, the formers also had new relationships with people outside the jihadi circle, which served to counterbalance the old networks.

Experiences function as a catalyst event and can speed up the desistance process. Based on earlier studies by Bjorgo (1997) and Reinares (2011), Altier, Thoroughgood, & Horgan created a model of desistance for violent extremists (2014), focusing specifically on the process of disengagement from a terrorist group and the push and pull factors that play a role in that process. Push factors refer to factors that make individuals want to leave the terrorist group or environment. For example, in the case of ISIS-defectors this concerns aspects that push jihadists away from the caliphate, such as bad experiences during their time within ISIS. Pull factors on the other hand, refer to external factors that provide a reason for jihadists to leave, for example the prospect of a better situation in their own home country. Overall, the structure of the push and pull factors model is similar to Laub and Sampson's life course theory but where life course theory focuses on desistance from 'normal' crime, Altier, Thoroughgood and Horgan focus on desistance from a group within the context of terrorism.

To what extent are these criminological theories able to explain behavioral change among violent extremist offenders? Applying both the life course theory and the model of push and pull factors on the narratives ISIS-returnees, the question becomes: to what extent are the theories able to explain desistance from ISIS? So far, the literature suggests that the motives for leaving are often mirrored by the reasons for joining the group in the first place,

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for example because individuals end up disillusioned as a result of the mismatch between the words (promises) and deeds (reality) of ISIS (Speckhard & Yayla, 2015, p. 114). Tactical, religious and humanitarian motivations may initially form the basis of joining ISIS for foreign terrorist fighters. However, these expectations are often not met upon arrival in the caliphate.

### **The present study**

In this study, the narratives of desistance of 27 ISIS fighters are analyzed. The cases were selected using open source information such as media reports, government documents and think tank or NGO reports. These open sources describe the disengagement process of those individuals that defected from ISIS and returned to their home countries. Through the creation of a dataset of desistance narratives, the factors that played a role in the decision to leave ISIS can be coded. The codes that are derived from life course theory and the model of push and pull factors, to allow for a comparison between the theories. Table 1 describes the codification process based on the two models of desistance. From the model of Altier et al. (2014, p. 649), the push factors that are codified are: unmet expectations (a), disillusionment with strategy/actions of terrorist group (b), disillusionment with personnel (c), difficulty adapting to clandestine lifestyle (d), inability to cope with physiological/psychological effects of violence (e), loss of faith in ideology (f), burnout (g). Next, the pull factors are: competing loyalties (h), positive interactions with moderates (i), employment/educational demands or opportunities (j), desire to marry/establish a family or family demands (k), financial incentives (l), amnesty in the home country (m). From life course theory, the following life events are codified (Laub & Sampson, 2001): important event within family with whom a person has a strong bond (n), a good marriage (o), legal and stable work (p), decision to go straight (q).

**Table 1 – Codification of Push & Pull Factors and Life Course Theory**

| Push & Pull Model  |  | Life Course Theory                            |
|--|--|---|
| Push factors   | Pull factors   |   |
| Unmet expectations   | Competing loyalties                                  | Important event within close family relations |
| Disillusionment with strategy/actions of group                           | Positive interactions with moderates                 | Good marriage                                 |
| Disillusionment with personnel   | Employment/educational demands or opportunities      | Legal and stable work environment             |
| Difficulty adapting to clandestine lifestyle                             | Desire to marry/establish a family or family demands | Decision to go straight                       |
| Inability to cope with physiological / psychological effects of violence | Financial incentives                                 |   |
| Loss of faith in ideology  | Amnesty in the home country                          |   |
| Burnout  |  |   |

The cases are derived from an ICSR-report by Peter Neumann (2015), which contains a study of 57 ISIS-defectors. The report describes life in the ISIS' caliphate, as well as the practical obstacles to actually leaving the group. The latter refers to problems of getting out the area, reprisals of other members, and potential prosecution back home (Neumann, 2015, p. 12). In the annex, the author includes a list of public defections from ISIS, containing specific information such as the nationality and gender of the defectors as well as sources and dates. The sources and dates explain the where and when an individual announced his/her disengagement from the caliphate. The majority of interviews were conducted in a place not far from ISIS-area, thus not long after their exit. Due to the availability of information about the desistance of *formers*, the study of Neumann (2015) has formed the basis of this article.

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The 27 ISIS fighters included in the study are selected based on the following criteria. First, it needs to be evident that the individual has supported ISIS and second, it must be clear from the narrative that the individual has desisted (rather than returned with the aim of committing attacks on behalf of ISIS). Third, since the Arab Spring is taken as a starting point, the sources must contain information about *formers* that have left ISIS after March 2011. Due to language constraints, only sources from English, German or Dutch news sites were selected. Based on the selection criteria the research population was narrowed down to 46 people. However, the narratives of ten individuals could not be traced back on the basis of open sources. Of the remaining 36 people, in nine cases, it was unclear whether desistance had actually taken place (for example only the departure from ISIS was mentioned rather than a description of the process of - or motivations for leaving. Thus, the final selection of *formers* included in the study is 27.

The used methodology involves a risk of bias. First, the fact that the formers included in the dataset came out publicly against ISIS might indicate that doing so is in their own interest, something that could lead to exaggeration and dishonesty. There is an opportunity that these public defections are part of an individual's defence strategy if they think that might further their cause and improve their well-being. In our case-selection, this is a very real risk as the individuals who spoke out in the media could still be involved in judicial proceedings, or might be monitored because they are perceived as a potential risk. Hence, all respondents have a clear incentive to distance themselves from ISIS. At the same time, there are also risks involved in speaking out against ISIS publicly, e.g. the risk of retribution by ISIS-supporters and the risk that fellow citizens will recognize the name and face of these individuals, leading to stigmatization and discrimination.

A second bias is confirmation bias, or the danger to look for the answers you want. Since most sources used in the study are media reports, there is a chance that the formers are explicitly asked about life in the caliphate – which is often already assumed to be a terrible living situation under the strict rules of ISIS. As a consequence, this might paint a less nuanced picture about the potential pull factors that played a role, because implicitly the questions were directed more towards the plausible push factors that drove individuals away. These two biases are likely to influence the outcomes of this study, yet the expectation

is that the authors' critical evaluation of the data will ensure a reliable answer to the research question.

#### *Description of case selection*

Before describing and analyzing the findings, the demographic characteristics will be discussed to clarify the background of the formers in the dataset. The cases include five women and 22 men, of whom the underlying motives for leaving ISIS are known. The majority of formers are from the Middle-East and a small part is from Europe. More than half of the individuals have Syrian nationality, so the vast majority of the dataset does not consist of 'foreign terrorist fighters' but rather of jihadists from 'the region'. When taking a closer look at the Europeans nationality group, the dataset contains a man from Belgium, two men from Germany, a man from Switzerland and a woman from the United-Kingdom. From a third of the formers, the age is unknown. From the other two thirds, the majority is between 20 and 30 years old. Table 2 summarizes both the demographic as well as the motives for desistance from ISIS and the corresponding codes.

Before analyzing the narratives of desistance, the reasons for joining ISIS in the first place will be shortly discussed. Here, an overall categorization can be made of personal and religious motives. One of the personal arguments mentioned in the narratives to join ISIS was fighting the regime of president Assad, because of its inhumane treatment of its civilians. They felt that Syrian civilians could not live a normal life under Assad. Because ISIS officially announced their goal to overthrow the regime, this provided enough motivation for some jihadists to join the group. Next, some formers decided to join ISIS because of the 'call of Islam' and the justification ISIS provided for waging war in the name of that religion. They indicate they were either recruited or decided to join ISIS themselves to fight for the Ummah and prevent fellow Muslims from being killed. In line with, some formers argued participating in the jihad in Syria and Iraq is generally considered a good deed that has the ability to erase past wrongs. Another motive that was mentioned to join ISIS was the willingness or even moral prerogative to provide humanitarian aid. Some formers felt called to take care of wounded fighters in the battlefield or civilians in other areas.

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*Analysis of desistance narratives*

After analyzing the motivations for joining ISIS, we will now take a look at why the 27 formers defected from the terrorist group. Overall, the number one reason listed for leaving is that life under ISIS – whether it refers to fighting the Assad regime, helping fellow Muslims or the general life conditions – turned out to be very different from what the formers expected in advance. The results of the narrative analysis demonstrate that most individuals defected because according to them, the principles that ISIS adheres to in practice are not in line with Islam. Through an analysis of the narratives the question to what extent the two theories of desistance – life course theory and push and pull factor model – are applicable to the *formers*. The analysis will start by discussing the most common reason for departure.

First of all, the data shows that *formers* mostly leave ISIS because of the use of violence by the group. Added together, nine of the 27 *formers* indicate that they could not cope with the physiological or psychological effects of violence. In these cases this inability was the reasons to defect from ISIS. Within the individual narratives different events are mentioned that triggered the desire to leave, but after coding them according to the theoretical framework, this factor is the most frequent. From the analysis it can be concluded that violent events form an obstacle to carry out further tasks for the terrorist organization. In other words, the exorbitant use of force leads to psychological effects that some people cannot cope with. An example is the cases of Abu Ibrahim, a 22 year old Syrian (Mironova, Mhida, & Whitt, 2015). This *former* saw how a friend of his was hanged by ISIS and after this event he knew he had to leave the group. In one of the other cases, physiological effects played a role in the desistance process. The *former* Areeb Majeed from India was wounded during his time with ISIS and was left unattended (Press Trust of India [PTI], 2014). As result of his injuries, the 24 year old man wanted to leave caliphate.

The second theme that is taken from the analysis is disillusionment with the strategy or actions of the terrorist group. Eight times the strategy or a specific action caused an individual experience of disillusionment. This means that the observed actions or the overall strategy did not correspond with the principles of the formers. As a result of this push factor these people left ISIS, since they decided to no longer participate in activities they do not agree with. An example whereby the rejected strategy played a role is the case of former Abu Ammara

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(Cable News Network [CNN], 2014). This Syrian man expected to be fighting president Assad's regime with ISIS. But after joining the group he concluded that in practice, other armed groups were the main target; groups that were also fighting the regime. Ammara could not live with this strategy and left ISIS disillusioned. In the case of the British woman Shukee Begum other actions led to disillusion with the group (Clarke-Billings, 2015). She points at the 'gangster mentality' of other women she met in the caliphate and the associated negative behavior. In her own words she disagreed with it and this was the reason for her to flee the group.

In five cases the push factor of unmet expectations is indicated as a reason to desist from ISIS. The narratives show that many people travelled to Syria and Iraq with the aim to take part in the jihad through joining ISIS. Where the individual expectations may differ between individuals before arrival, a common denominator was unfulfilled expectations upon joining the group. On the level of the formers, it becomes clear that ISIS' idea of jihad is not in line with their own principles. An example is the Tunisian man Ghaith (age unknown), who joined ISIS to take part in jihad. But in his own words the reality under ISIS was totally different from what he had been told in advance (The Associated Press [AP], 2015). This played a decisive role in his decision to leave the group. The Australian former Adam Brookman is another example where unmet expectations led to his choice to defect from ISIS. This 39 year old male had the goal to provide humanitarian aid in Syria. But upon arrival it turned out that under ISIS, no humanitarian aid would be provided to others. Because his expectations were unfulfilled, Brookman felt he could no longer stay away from his family and so he chose to leave the caliphate.

Further analysis of the narratives shows that four formers left ISIS because they lost faith in the ideology of the group. This fourth theme means that people start to doubt the motives and corresponding actions of the terrorist organization. According to the ideology of ISIS the teachings of Islam are at the heart of their mission to establish a worldwide caliphate. Hence, religion is used by the group as a justification of their behavior. As part of their overall goal, expelling the Assad regime was a central objective, as well as the protection of fellow Muslims in their territory in Syria. However, according to the Syrian Maher Abu Ubaida, ISIS deviated from these goals and that is why he lost faith in the ideology (Halabi, 2014). In

addition, the German Ebrahim B. said that ISIS' actions have nothing to do with Islam and are not permitted by the religion (Von der Heide & Baars, 2015). That is why he desisted from ISIS and decided to return to Germany.

The fifth theme, competing loyalties, refers to conflicting motivations where one feels being pulled away from the terror group. Within the dataset, this was the case for two *formers* who decided to defect from ISIS. An example is a Syrian man (name/age unknown) who indicates that as a result of beheadings it was clear to him that he had different allegiances. First he was loyal to ISIS, but he knew that he could not stay loyal to a group adhering to such a doctrine. A sixth theme, the importance of family, becomes evident in the case of the Belgian foreign fighter Jejoen Bontinck. He said that he felt homesick when he found out that this father (with whom he has a strong bond) was looking for him (Back, 2015). His family played such an important role in his life that they were the reason for him to leave ISIS and return to Belgium.

In two cases of the dataset, the actual decision to 'go straight' emerges as a seventh theme leading individuals to turn their back on ISIS. An example of this motive to leave the caliphate is former Khadja (Damon & Tuysuz, 2014). On a particular moment this Syrian woman began to doubt her own behavior and concluded she was not like the other people at ISIS. She did not want to belong to the group anymore and chose to leave. An eighth theme, disillusion with others working for ISIS was in one case the reason to leave ISIS. This push factor plays a role when individuals feel that their 'colleagues' do not work according the guidelines that should be followed, leading to disappointment about certain behaviors of others. An example in this context is perceived failed leadership, where ISIS-members feel there are individuals that have been given leadership roles who are not in the right position in the organization. This was mentioned by the former Majd al-Din, a man with the Swiss nationality. He indicates that there is no clear guidance or responsibility at the leadership level. Also, corrupted personnel played a role in his defection (Nimr, 2015). These issues led to his disillusionment (with the personnel) and that is why he disengaged from the group.

The following table provides an overview of the motivations for leaving ISIS. It lists the names of the formers, their nationality, age, gender and the individual reasons for desistance, as well as the corresponding codes based on the two theories.

**Table 2 - Dataset Formers**

| <b>Name</b>         | <b>Nationality</b> | <b>Age</b> | <b>Gender</b> | <b>Main reason for leaving ISIS (code)</b>                          |
|---------------------|--------------------|------------|---------------|---|
| 1) Abu Abdullah     | Syrian             | Unknown    | Male          | Cruel behaviour boss (e)  |
| 2) Abu al-Mouthanna | Syrian             | 27 years   | Male          | Killing of other jihadists (b)                                      |
| 3) Abu Ammara       | Syrian             | Unknown    | Male          | Other groups that fight Assad are targeted (b)                      |
| 4) Abu Muthena      | Syrian             | Unknown    | Male          | Group corruption and fellow Muslims being killed (b)                |
| 5) Abu Ibrahim      | Syrian             | 22 years   | Male          | Hanging of a friend (e)   |
| 6) Adam Brookman    | Australian         | 39 years   | Male          | Not providing humanitarian aid (a)                                  |
| 7) Abu Omar         | Syrian             | 26 years   | Male          | Family members killed by ISIS (n)                                   |
| 8) Ahmad Junaedi    | Indonesian         | 31 years   | Male          | Executed tasks different than expected in advance (a)               |
| 9) Ali              | Tunisian           | Unknown    | Male          | Shocked by own actions, felt himself a terrorist (q)                |
| 10) Areeb Majeed    | Indian             | 24 years   | Male          | Not allowed to fight (a + e)  |
| 11) Ayoub B.        | German             | 27 years   | Male          | Fear of death after witnessing violence (e)                         |
| 12) Dua             | Syrian             | Unknown    | Female        | Brutality of the group (e)  |
| Table 1 continued   |                    |            |               |   |
| 13) Ebrahim B.      | German             | 26 years   | Male          | Group behaviour nothing to do with Islam + barbaric methods (f + b) |
| 14) Ghaith          | Tunisian           | Unknown    | Male          | Reality under ISIS different from teaching Jihad (a)                |

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|                      |            |          |        |   |
|----------------------|------------|----------|--------|---|
| 15) Hamza            | Iraqi      | 33 years | Male   | Having to conduct executions and rape, illegal marriages between fighters (e + b)   |
| 16) Jejoen Bontinck  | Belgian    | 20 years | Male   | Homesick and witnessing violence (n + e)  |
| 17) Khadja           | Syrian     | 25 years | Female | Unwilling to be member of group that is capable of using exorbitant violence while using war as justification for behaviour (q + h) |
| 18) Majd al-Din      | Swiss      | 27 years | Male   | Corruption and bad leadership within group (b + c)  |
| 19) Mazlan           | Indonesian | 32 years | Male   | Disappointed because reality on ground did not match expectations (a)   |
| 20) Maher Abu Ubaida | Syrian     | Unknown  | Male   | Group deviated from fundamental goal (f)  |
| 21) Murad            | Syrian     | Unknown  | Male   | Fighting other Syrian (Muslim) rebels (b)   |
| 22) Onbekend         | Turkish    | Unknown  | Male   | Drastic change of attitude of the group (f)   |
| 23) Onbekend         | Syrian     | 26 years | Male   | Competing loyalties (h)   |
| 24) Shukee Begum     | British    | 33 years | Female | Gangster mentality other women (b)  |
| Table 1 continued    |            |          |        |   |
| 25) Umm Asma(h)      | Syrian     | 22 years | Female | Brutality of the group (e)  |
| 26) Umm Ous          | Syrian     | Unknown  | Female | Brutality of the group (e)  |
| 27) Usaid Barho      | Syrian     | 14 years | Male   | Experiences different from what Islam prescribes (f)  |

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The results show that a few themes are not mentioned by the formers, such as the push factors of difficulty adapting to a clandestine lifestyle and burnout. Pull factors that did not play a role in were positive interactions with moderates, employment/educational demands or opportunities, financial incentives, and amnesty in the home country. Finally, on the basis of the data it can be concluded that aging, a good marriage and legal or stable work are not named as reasons for defecting from ISIS.

The overall analysis indicates that a third of the formers in the dataset left ISIS because of the group's exorbitant use of violence. As a result of the inability to cope with the physiological or psychological effects of this, these individuals decided to flee the terrorist group. In this context it is interesting to note that this is mainly the case for jihadists from Syria and Iraq. The majority of foreign terrorist fighters on the other hand, desist from ISIS because of unmet expectations. In total, 33 different motivations with 33 corresponding codes are represented in the dataset, which means that a number of the 27 formers have experienced more than one decisive moment or trigger event for desistance. This is interesting because it raises the question why the first experience was not 'enough' to lead to desistance. Altogether, it can be concluded that in particular push factors are responsible for the desistance of the individuals who defected from ISIS, whereas pull factors as well as specific life events play a less decisive role in their choice to defect.

## **Discussion**

The goal of this study was to test to what extent desistance from ISIS as terrorist group can be (better) explained by life course theory or a model of push and pull factors? On the basis of the two theoretical approaches outlined in the introduction the issue of why people choose to leave terrorism behind has been investigated based on 27 individual desistance narratives from ISIS defectors. Looking at the dataset, we see that most formers have Syrian nationality. While the European countries, to varying degrees, also have a number of returnees who travelled to the caliphate and joined ISIS, relatively few Europeans openly defected from the group. This could have different explanations, one of them being the distribution of tasks between foreign fighters and natives within ISIS' ranks. Several formers have indicated that the fighters who do not originate from the region are more likely to be placed at the frontlines

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to be used as cannon fodder (Neumann, 2015, p. 11). Thus, it is more likely that these foreign fighters will die during battle, hence depriving them of the opportunity to desist. According to the narratives in the dataset, the majority of fighters from the Syria and Iraq are assigned roles in ISIS that foster a closer connection to the group, while at the same time providing them with a better image of what ISIS really is.

A number of dominant themes emerge from the overall analysis of the coded narratives. First of all, in 27 cases, a push factor played a decisive role in a former's desistance from ISIS, compared to three cases where a pull factor was mentioned and three cases where an aspect from the life course perspective was perceived as the main reason. Taking a closer look at the push factors, the most common factor that former ISIS-members note as their reason for defection (9) is the inability to cope with the physiological (eight former) or psychological (one former) effects of violence. Second, life in the caliphate often led to disillusion with ISIS' strategy or with the actions carried out by the terrorist group. In five cases the expectations that the former established beforehand (bias) were not met, and four times former lost faith in the ideology of ISIS. The last push factor that played a role in the dataset is disillusion with other ISIS-members; one person was so disappointed in the fellow members of the organization that he decided to leave.

When it comes to the pull factors, only the factor of competing loyalties is mentioned in the narratives. In two cases, this factor led to a former's decision to desist from ISIS, more specifically because the individuals it concerned could not cope with the dissonance between their personal values and ISIS' principles, leading to feelings of internal conflict. From the factors described in life course theory, the analysis shows that strong family ties played a role in one individual's desistance from ISIS and two former fled from the caliphate after the conscious decision to 'go straight'. Summarizing, in 22 per cent of the cases a pull factor or a life course-related event was the dominant reason to defect, which means that in the vast majority of cases, the former desisted as a result of push factors, such as shocking first hand experiences in the caliphate that did not correspond with their worldview or unmet expectations about what they thought ISIS is or ought to be.

The results shed light on a number of issues. First of all, the turning points that form the starting point of individual desistance are mostly trigger events or experiences on the

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ground that the formers come to loathe, and mainly refer to dissatisfaction with certain behaviors, the strategy or the ideology. Second, in line with this, the inability to cope with the physiological or psychological effects of violence was the most prominent and influential reason for people to not want to be affiliated with ISIS anymore. This does not necessarily imply the fatigue of being exposed to violence over a longer period of time; some specific events such as the beheadings and hangings alone also led to the decision to leave terrorism behind. Third, the results show that aspects from the life course theory (aging, family, work, marriage, the possibility to go lawful) play a minor role in the choice of leaving the terrorist group. Apparently, these aspects have little impact on an eventual reorientation of the formers in the dataset, which could mean that they are not that affected emotionally by someone close to them like family or close friends. There are a number of potential explanations for this: these types of events might simply be less likely to occur in the life of the jihadist, although we know from several studies that marriage and family form a central part of ISIS' strategy; hence many fighters marry and have children in the caliphate. Work as a factor for desistance is also less likely to play a role because once an individual joins ISIS, he or she will be assigned a job and position within the terrorist group so there is often no 'outside of ISIS' work opportunity available to its members. Finally, the decision to leave a legitimate life is not an easy one to make as ISIS is known to punish defectors by publicly hanging, shooting or crucifying them as a deterrence strategy for others who might want to do the same. Finally, life events in their closer networks like their family and friends back home probably play less of a role for the simple reason that they are far away and often not able to communicate with their family members who travelled abroad as foreign fighters. Thus, ISIS-members are often desensitized from the events that might occur in their personal family or friend networks further away. The above indicates that in the process of desistance from ISIS, other turning points than the life course events play a role. The consequences of these differences are an important point to consider.

Even though the analysis in this article focuses on explaining desistance from ISIS, it is nonetheless interesting to compare the motivations for defecting from ISIS to the initial reasons for joining the terrorist organization. In that respect, it is interesting to note that the reasons for defection are usually strongly connected to the foreign terrorist fighters' original

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reasons for traveling to Syria or Iraq. First, many formers said they joined ISIS to fight the Assad regime. Their expectation was that this regime would be challenged and fellow Muslims would be protected. But the reality on the ground, where war was often waged with other groups who fought the Assad regime, led these individuals to leave ISIS. Other individual initially joined the group because they felt a moral call of Islam and the corresponding jihad; however, their narratives show that for them, live under ISIS was often in conflict with Islamic teachings, leading them to flee the caliphate. In addition, the need to give humanitarian aid was mentioned as a motive for joining ISIS but when that expectation was unmet, individuals wanted to leave the terrorist group. The above reasons to join ISIS in the first place are also confirmed by Hellmuth (2016), who studied German fighters going to Syria or Iraq. According to her, the motivations for travel range from wanting to join jihad, engage in combat, offer humanitarian assistance, get married, and live in the caliphate (p. 44).

The analysis shows that the research question can be answered as follows. Taking the model of push and pull factors (Altier et al., 2014) in consideration, it can be stated that it is mainly push factors that are responsible for formers defecting from ISIS. This is highlighted by the coded narratives in the dataset. Within the push factors category, we can conclude that the use of violence by the group (in this study) is the most dominant factor leading to the decision of jihadists to flee the caliphate. In line with this, the study shows that pull factors are of no explanatory value for desistance from ISIS. Since events in the life course are rarely mentioned in the individual narratives, we can also conclude that life course theory as such cannot explain desistance from ISIS in this study either. This could be due to a number of external factors, including the fact that it is more difficult for those who are emotionally close to the jihadists, to have an influence on a behavioral transition, given the geographical distance between them. To the contrary, the main conclusion from this study is that the immediate circumstances in the caliphate, or 'life under ISIS' as such, forms the most important context where turning points occur and formers are pushed away from the terrorist group. While the push factors do provide sufficient explanation for desistance from ISIS, the pull factors and life course aspects do not explain this process.

Why do life course theory and pull factors not provide an explanation for desistance from this terrorist group? The main reason both life course theory and pull factors do not

seem to explain desistance in this research is the very specific environment provided by ISIS. Three factors that play a very restrictive role for life course theory and pull factors to have an effect are: (1) a strong focus on the in-group (both life course theory or pull factor events like marriage and having children do take place but mainly within the terrorist group); (2) the state-like organization of ISIS (other life course theory elements and pull factors including a stable work environment or social relationships are provided by and within the organization itself); and (3) the war-zone environment (prohibiting pull factors such as individuals having regular and intimate contact with their families/friends in their home countries). These factors bring along barriers for disengagement that could affect the desistance process.

All in all, the study shows that local events in Syria and Iraq are the determining factors for desisting from ISIS - or, from a broader perspective, for leaving terrorism behind. The mismatch between expectations or moral principles and the reality on the ground leads to psychological and physical disengagement. Based on this conclusion, the most important policy recommendation is to use formers as an alternative - and above all credible - voice in deterring those that are vulnerable to radicalization and might want to travel abroad to join ISIS. Because potential ISIS-members (in any country) make the decision to join the group at home, in their immediate environment, these people have to be *socially* deterred in a preventative way, in the context of their respective countries. Formers sharing their personal experiences and their reasons to leave the caliphate can provide a very powerful antidote to terrorist propaganda and recruitment. By publicly talking about ISIS' exorbitant use of violence, their focus not on the Assad regime but instead on other militias and their lack of protecting fellow Muslims, a preventative context can be provided, deterring would-be jihadists go to Syria or Iraq.

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