

UNIVERSITY OF BELGRADE

Faculty of Political Sciences

Belgrade, August 2018

At the meeting of the Department of International Studies, held on 7 September 2017, the Master Thesis Defense Commission (hereby the Commission) for the candidate Nastassja Elliott-Robertson was formed with the following members: Prof. dr Tamara Džamonja Ignjatović, asist. dr Marko Veković, and prof. dr Nemanja Džuverović. The Council for the Second and Third Cycle of Studies has accepted the proposal made by the Department.

After reading the master thesis, the Commission is submitting the following report.

R E P O R T

The master thesis of Nastassja Elliott-Robertson entitled "The Analysis of Attractions that Influence Young Western Europeans to Join Jihad in Syria and Iraq" is comprised of three comprehensive chapters (Literature Review, Attractions for Western Europeans, and Discussion), next to the Introduction, the Conclusion, and the list of references.

The master thesis aims to investigate what are the main attractions that influence young Western Europeans to join the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. The issue resulted from the expansion of the Islamic State (ISIS) who came to power during 2011 during the Arab Spring with emergence of foreign fighters who have become involved in civil conflicts. In recent years, many European countries have been struggling to grapple with the harsh reality with their own citizens who have travelled to Syria and Iraq to join the Islamic State.

In the first chapter the candidate shows that the peak of the foreign fighters joining the Islamic State was between 2011-2015 and the foreign returnee fighters back into Western Europe was between 2016-2017. The larger Western European countries which produced many of these foreign fighters were France, Germany and the United Kingdom. The smaller countries that prided foreign fighters (in proportion to their population size) were Belgium and the Netherlands. The idea of jihad has become so appealing and attractive that there is no denying the rapid flow of foreign fighters has been rising and/or returning since 2011 and right through to the end 2017. There seems to be no end despite the European Union's effects trying to stem the flow of their own citizens travelling to Syria and Iraq.

In her thesis the candidate elaborates that ideologies, prison time, other radical peers, universities, mosques, hotbeds of extremism and personal choice is what had changed over

the recent years of radicalisation. ISIS had changed the game for radicalisation where they have no limitation in respect of gender, race, religion, language, skill or education levels. There is a role for everyone who joins. Exclusive groups have created mixed feelings of belonging and from this comes new identities. It is shown in the thesis that self-identification can be sought out in mosques where radical imams preach, scholars in universities or in recent times, through the world wide web. When one is exposed to the more radical side of Islam where the West is perceived as an enemy, living in that Western society may cause a tear in one's idea of who one is, which may become difficult and can feel unbearable. Having an identity can provide a 'self-togetherness' that allows individuals to interact with others with similar identities. It is precisely because of this, according to the candidate, that many people gravitate toward extremist groups. Those who create such new identities often adopt new names as they feel the new name is far better suited as to how they now identify.

The second part of the thesis is dedicated to understanding what factors influence attractions of young foreign Western European jihadists. In this part, the candidate identifies five possible factors: community building, money, religion, social media and thrill-seeking.

Regarding the first factor, the candidate shows that the yearning to become a part of a community comes about when someone have become an outcast within society with nowhere else to turn to. The loneliness sets in and it is in human nature for the need to connect with others. Western European jihadists participate in these foreign civil conflicts because they see fighting in Muslim lands as legitimate self-defence, not an act of aggression. They are fighting for the community who they share similar values and beliefs with.

When it comes to financial factors, the candidate stipulates that the Islamic State has become the wealthiest extremist group of today. They have managed to fund themselves through scams, frauds and donations. Those who live in poverty-stricken neighbourhoods in Western European countries are easily swayed by the money that ISIS offers. Frustration grows with those living in poverty in their own countries and so joining ISIS is seen as a means of an escape, for survival.

The third factor explored in the thesis is religion. The candidate states that those who converted have found that Islam has provided them with sense of spiritual fulfilment and Western European converts of a blond blue eyed descent were able to go unnoticed throughout their travels to Syria and Iraq. Those who found the extremist side of jihad appealing had converted because Islam upheld the Sharia law.

According to the analysis the biggest attraction is technology which nowadays has made life easier for people to connect and organise crimes at the click of a button. ISIS used

social media to spread their propaganda in multiple languages and to portray the suffering of Syrian and Iraqi people against tyrants and those who had empathy and sympathy reached out and joined. Finding online communities in the dark web and voicing their support for ISIS.

Finally, the factor of thrill-seeking is introduced in the analysis. The lure of being a martyr, entering jannah, fighting, having power and the sense of adventure was particularly attractive towards young men. The adrenaline of danger and having one's legacy live on long after his or her death was fascinating. Thus, luring in more people.

The third chapter is dedicated to the discussion on the empirical findings. In this segment, the candidate states that the idea foreign fighters are second or third generation Muslims is not the case and the underlying trends show the foreign fighter phenomena. She also shows that the changes of radicalisation along with new identities keep these foreign fighters growing. The conclusion of this part is that the attractions are a wider perspective of just how much today's generation are influenced by such extremist groups rather than how these extremist groups recruited people in the past.

In the concluding part, the candidate stipulates that despite the territorial losses of the recent years, the Islamic State continues to be a force that threatens international security. Western European recruits travelling to ISIS' held territories shows no signs of slowing down. In her own words, the world has only begun to witness the introduction of the Islamic State. The extremist organisation is likely to offer interesting topics of research in the future if more information becomes available and the academic world learns more about the organisation along with the foreign fighter phenomena.

The Commission is convinced that the candidate Nastassja Elliott-Robertson has shown sufficient understanding of motivations of young Western Europeans in joining the cause and fight (so called jihad) of the Islamic State of Syria and Iraq. Also, the Commission is satisfied how the candidate has applied the theoretical framework on five possible attractions of young European jihadists. Based on this, the Commission concludes that the master thesis "The Analysis of Attractions that Influence Young Western Europeans to Join Jihad in Syria and Iraq" by Nastassja Elliott-Robertson fulfils all the formal criteria for the public defence.

The Commission:

Prof. dr Tamara Džamonja Ignjatović

Assist. dr Marko Veković

Prof. dr Nemanja Džuverović