Jihadist networks and their practical appeal to vulnerable irregular migrants


Introduction

The war and presence of ISIS in Syria and neighboring countries has initiated a stream of refugees in recent years. This influx of migrants has raised serious concerns among member states of the European Union, whose concerns about their absorption capacity have become supplemented with worries about possible terrorist threats. On one hand, the latter seems irrational; besides the possibility that terrorists disguised as refugees utilize migration routes to Europe, why would refugees escaping war and terrorism turn into terrorists in their host country? This seems especially unlikely in the case of refugees who apply for asylum and hope to settle securely at least for some time in their new countries. On the other hand, when their process of settling in and requesting asylum could end in failure, they may turn into ‘irregular migrants’ with very little legal options. If the receiving society is unable or unwilling to meet crucial needs of these irregular migrants, alternative environments such as extremist networks may become appealing. A previous study in the Netherlands did illustrate a disproportionate presence of irregular migrants in jihadist networks. Irregular migrants, who had exhausted all legal procedures to obtain a

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1This chapter is an abbreviated and amended version of a previous publication: Jasper L. de Bie, Christianne J. de Poot and Joanne P. van der Leun, Jihad networks and the involvement of vulnerable immigrants: reconsidering the ideological and pragmatic value, “Global Crime”, 15, 3-4 (2014), pp. 275–298.

2 With irregular migrant we refer to individuals from third countries who reside in the country without lawful permission of the government. We reserve the term illegal for the nature of the residence or stay (illegal stay). This can imply that a person entered the country illegally, but many irregular migrants in the Netherlands overstay their visa or drop out of the asylum procedure. For a discussion on terminology and an overview of studies in this field, see e.g. Godfried Engbersen, Joanne van der Leun and Jan de Boom, The Fragmentation of Migration and Crime in the Netherlands, “Crime and Justice,” 35, 1, 2007, pp. 389-452.

residence permit, became affiliated with jihadist networks and conducted all kinds of tasks within these networks. Building on this finding, we investigated to what extent and why jihadist networks were appealing to irregular migrants in the Netherlands. Although ideology usually gets a lot of weight when explaining jihadist involvement, a possible complementary explanation that is often neglected is the pragmatic value of such networks. Several studies have shown that many members of jihadist networks are vulnerable individuals who search for solutions in order to deal with their alleged deprived situation⁴. The current chapter will therefore try to lay bare this pragmatic value of jihadist networks to find out whether this can explain, in some part, the attractiveness of jihadist networks to irregular Muslim migrants in the past.

The findings analyzed below are based on an extensive analysis of voluminous police files and additional semi-structured interviews with experts in the field. We do not seek for the explicit motivations that drove migrants to join jihadist networks, but merely focus on (documented) activities and behavior. The studied networks are associated with the *Jihadi-Salafist* ideology. This ideology aims at a return to the pure interpretation of Islam, as it was lived in the original Muslim community (*umma*) in the time of the prophet Muhammed and the following caliphates⁵, and approves the use of violence to materialize this ambition⁶. Within these networks we selectively focus on migrants without residence rights in the Netherlands, who have come to the attention of the authorities because of their alleged involvement with terrorism. It should be kept in mind that the vast majority of irregular Muslim migrants in the Netherlands, does not conduct unlawful activities⁷. Some of them engage in crime, but joining a jihadist network is very

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rare. So we focus on a very specific but nonetheless critical category of migrants. Before we present our findings, we will focus on existing literature in this field, and provide a brief overview of the methods used.

**Background factors of radical Muslims and irregular migrants**

Radical Muslims and irregular migrants appear to be very different categories of individuals. Yet, an analysis of selected radicalization and migration studies elucidates that for young men within those categories, similar background factors have been described. Firstly, radical Muslims and irregular migrants suffer respectively from relative and absolute deprivation. This perceived deprivation among radical Muslims is influenced by the generally low socio-economic position of Muslims in Western societies, which they see as unfair. They feel that society failed them. Irregular migrants experience absolute deprivation due to their formal exclusion from society. The restrictive migration policy in the Netherlands, especially since the enactment of the Linking Act (1998; Amendment of the Dutch Aliens Act), enhanced the systematic exclusion from public services such as non-essential health care, public housing and social security. Second, both irregular migrants as well as Dutch Muslims living in the Netherlands struggle with identity problems. Dutch Muslims suffer from negative stigmas and exclusion, whereas the identity of male irregular migrants as caretaker of the family is jeopardized when they are not able to provide an income. Finally, mental problems play a role. For both groups, deprivation and identity problems lead to...
insecurity, psychological and physical problems, and strong emotional responses. In sum, although the causes are different, young Dutch Muslims as well as illegal migrants can experience similar problems and end up in similar positions according to the literature.

**Behavioral responses to encountered problems**

Radicalization studies focus on how religion, ideology, group membership, and solidarity can be seen as answers to aforementioned problems. Although these findings are highly valuable, this approach often ignores practical considerations. Besides faith and belief in a higher purpose, radical networks can also provide other benefits, such as material support and access to different kinds of goods and services. These benefits can be provided through illegal means and crime, as the studies on the crime-terror nexus illustrate. Whereas crime is often depicted as a tool to invigorate funding for terrorist plots, crime is rarely seen as a mechanism to attract recruits. Migration studies, which often depart from a functionalist perspective with regard to criminal involvement, offer

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supplementary insights. Based on Merton’s strain theory\textsuperscript{18}, migration scholars argue that by a lack of resources, migrants may adopt practical coping strategies in order to deal with deprivation\textsuperscript{19}. The social capital of irregular migrants plays an important role in that regard, and is often embedded in networks of relatives, friends, and acquaintances\textsuperscript{20}. However, when their social networks are unable to provide for basic needs in a legal manner, some irregular migrants get involved in criminal activity. To these groups, survival crime can offer a practical alternative to informal employment\textsuperscript{21}. We therefore assume that a similar process may play a role with jihadist networks. The current study therefore focuses on the criminal aspects of jihadist networks, to see how it attracts new people.

**Methodology**

**Data**

Following the foregoing theoretical integration, we depart from two complementary perspectives. On one hand, from the perspective of the irregular migrant, who may be driven towards jihadist networks for different reasons. To explore their needs and frustrations, we have conducted 23 semi-structured interviews with key-informants from asylum centers (AC) and detention centers (DC)\textsuperscript{22}. These are the prime locations where, for this research, relevant migrants who may end up as irregular migrants concentrate. In these centers thirteen semi-structured interviews were conducted with staff members with different executive positions, who work in close relation with the population of migrants over a longer course of time. Furthermore, 10 out of 11 Imams who worked at the time of research for the Custodial Institutions Agency engaged in a focus group interview. All the

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\textsuperscript{22} Detected irregular migrants and asylum seekers who exhausted all legal procedures and who are obliged to leave the country, are detained in DCs.
23 interviews were conducted in the first quarter of 2012, which means that the findings from these interviews should be seen in that particular context.

Secondly, we focus on the perspective of jihadist networks. To explore the practical benefits of these networks, we have analyzed 12 large-scale confidential police investigations on jihadist terrorist activities in the Netherlands, containing information on the period 2000-2005. We selected four jihadist networks from these files, yielding 41 jihadists without a legal residence status to further analyze their documented behavior.

Table 1 shows the background characteristics of the migrants concerned. In addition, we conducted 10 semi-structured interviews with public prosecutors and team leaders of the police who were closely involved in the studied police cases. This enabled us to place the information from the police files in perspective. Although we have combined different sources of data, including very rich police files, we must keep in mind that we have only been able to use indirect information. Therefore, the results must be interpreted with care.

Data analysis and limitations

To gather and analyze the rich data, we developed a documentation sheet to scrutinize suspect hearings, witness statements, original wiretap transcripts (both telephone and internet), observation reports, reports of house searches, and other relevant information from the police investigations. We then applied a coding procedure derived from grounded theory methods. This is a methodology that aims to generate theories inductively, rather than deductively. In other words, a researcher is motivated to create data-driven theories by applying extensive coding procedures and consequently letting the data speak, instead of testing hypotheses derived from existing theories which are not necessarily built on empirical data. While applying these procedures, we formulated our own definitions and categorizations rather than copying police classifications.

The use of police files as a source of data is unique but also comes with inherent limitations: (1) not all jihadist activities and background data are known to the police; (2) whether to start an investigation is guided by investigation policy choices and priorities; (3) the initial aim

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23 In total, the data comprised information on 119 actors, 41 of whom resided illegally in the Netherlands.

of the files is to inform a judge; (4) the case selection is limited to the period 2000-2005 and the current findings should therefore be seen in that specific context and interpreted with great care; (5) the so-called groups are in reality less well defined than the police investigations often portray them to be; (6) many subjects within the analyzed radical networks appear to show different degrees of involvement, which does not always warrant the label of ‘terrorist’. The nature and composition of the four selected networks are summarized in Table 2, which also shows the time of investigation, the (terrorist and criminal) activities observed and the number of irregular migrants involved.\(^{25}\)

\(^{25}\) The irregular migrants under study were not arrested as a result of migration control. All investigations started under the presumption of terrorism.
Table 1. Demographic facts of 41 irregular immigrants within the criminal investigations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic facts</th>
<th>Absolute numbers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>≤25 year</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26-35 year</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>≥36 year</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Native country</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Algeria</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morocco</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Marital status</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Completed Education</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tertiary Education</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary/Secondary Education</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Employed\textsuperscript{26}/study</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textsuperscript{26} Further information about employment is lacking, this is most likely to be illegal labor.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Network no.</th>
<th>Years investigated</th>
<th>Number of subjects</th>
<th>Number of irregular immigrants</th>
<th>Intent of terrorism</th>
<th>Criminal activities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1          | 2000-2001          | 29                 | 9                              | - Plans for suicide bombing | - Passport theft  
- Passport forgery  
- Burglary  
- Credit card fraud/skimming  
- Trade in counterfeit clothing |
| 2          | 2001-2003          | 36                 | 26                             | - Facilitating liquidation  
- Recruiting foreign fighters for jihad  
- Facilitating foreign fighters for jihad  
- Weapon trade | - Passport theft  
- Passport forgery  
- Shoplifting  
- Drug trafficking |
| 3          | 2003-2005          | 11                 | 4                              | - Recruitment for jihad  
- Possession of weapons | - Passport forgery  
- Human trafficking |
| 4          | 2003-2005          | 48                 | 3                              | - Ideological liquidation  
- Plans for attacking government buildings  
- Weapon trade | - Passport fraud  
- Identity fraud  
- Shoplifting |

Table 2: The nature of jihadist networks based on police investigations.²⁷

²⁷ Several subjects reside in more than one network. This means that the total number of irregular immigrants exceeds 41.
Findings

Problems and needs of irregular migrants

The key informants within the detention facilities emphasized the grim conditions asylum seekers live in. They share relatively small and plain living spaces with several people, leading to limited privacy and regular social conflicts. Asylum seekers are supposed to organize their own leisure activities, but have difficulties integrating into society due to their lack of contacts and language skills. In addition, their financial opportunities are limited to the weekly compensation by the Dutch government, as they are not allowed to work. Furthermore, in a DC irregular migrants are subjected to a prison regime, which means they cannot leave the premises to work or undertake any social activities in society. Contrary to the AC though, social activities are organized in the DC and the living facilities offer a little bit more privacy than in the AC. Nonetheless, the living conditions in DCs are still frugal and inhumane, according to a Dutch study.  

Until 2010, asylum seekers had to deal with asylum procedures that could last for years. Since the Amendment of the Dutch Aliens Act 2000 in 2010 this process has been accelerated, but asylum seekers are still confronted with time-consuming procedures, which tend to make them passive. DC respondents stated that rejected asylum seekers often do not leave the country after the final negative decision. Consequently, according to the respondents, they become irregular migrants, who have very little to fall back upon and therefore often start committing petty crimes. Many of them, according to the respondents, return to the DC after a while and attempt to start a new asylum procedure. Many migrants concerned perceive the negative decision in their case and the way they have been treated as unjust. In the DC this is combined with feelings of anger, because migrants perceive their behavior as non-criminal while they are literally detained. This dissatisfaction fuels a sense of ‘us versus them’. The Imams in the detention centers also observe these feelings and attempt to mollify them. Still, some of the migrants think they are detained because they are Muslim, which makes it difficult to influence their views.

28 J. Verhoef, P.C. van Dorst, M.B. van der Kleij, and S. Andric, Vreemdelingenbewaring: Strafregerie of Maatregel om Uit te Zetten. Over Respect voor Mensenrechten bij Vreemdelingenbewaring. The Hague, National Ombudsman, 2012. Furthermore, also ACs are claimed to be inhumane. In May 2014 a German judge prohibited the return of an asylum seeker to a Dutch AC because the risk of possible inhuman treatment was too high (NRC Handelsblad, May 10, 2014).
A negative decision by the authorities can cause an emotional outburst of anger and disappointment, according to the respondents, varying from verbal expression to physical aggression. In most extreme cases (which were rare), staff members are threatened or migrants may demonstrate suicidal intentions:

“Sometimes it can become personal. They start threatening you and shout ‘I will not leave! I will not let myself be deported’[…] They sometimes threaten you with death, such as ‘If I run into you outside…you wait, I’ll get you. I will kill you if I run into you outside.’” (Staff member 1, Detention Center, March 6th 2012)

In these situations, the Imams attempt to play a neutralizing role, because they are relatively close to the migrants. But the respondents in both AC and DC unanimously state that basically all migrants develop some form of mental instability, which can be intensified when the migrants have to deal with a negative decision concerning their asylum application or due to the living conditions. This often leads to conflicts, depression, or social isolation:

“The threshold for conflicts is much lower after some time. Nothing major, but for the people enough to let the bubble burst. This can be caused by the living conditions but predominantly by the psychological problems and the pressure of the procedure. They have a lot to deal with in this couple of weeks.” (Staff member 21, Asylum Center, February 27th 2012)

To conclude, the interviews confirm the aforementioned problems of deprivation and mental instability among irregular migrants.

*Pragmatic solutions by jihadist networks*

Drawing on the police investigations, the population of irregular Muslim migrants in our study proved heterogeneous. On one hand, we found seven *heartland-oriented* subjects who appeared to have ‘imported’ the Jihadi-Salafist ideology into the Netherlands and whose status in their networks seemed to be largely based on Quran knowledge and former jihadist experiences. We also found 34 irregular Muslim migrants who could not
claim a similar background. They seemed to have become active in the jihadist movement only after they migrated to the Netherlands. In the present chapter we predominantly focus on these 34 subjects, whose marginalized position seems to be an important factor influencing their affiliation with the analyzed networks. We base this conclusion on their active engagement in facilitating rather than ideological activities. It seems that these activities acted as a pull-factor, because they provide them with practical benefits such as residential, travel, and financial opportunities.

One of the core activities of the networks was crime in the form of theft and forgery of passports. These activities enabled members to travel to jihad training and fighting hotspots abroad, but also provided them with fake residence permits for the Netherlands. During several house searches, the police found a wide variety of stolen documents including foreign passports, identity cards, and marriage certificates. In one case, the police also found a stock of passports which was stolen from a foreign municipality years before. The irregular migrants in these networks were also actively engaged in the forgery of stolen passports. For example, during a house search in a house inhabited by irregular migrants from network 1, the police found a counterfeiting workshop and confiscated around 60 stolen documents (passports, ID-cards, driving licenses) from all over the world. They also detected equipment to forge these documents; needles, (municipality) stamps, markers, folding and cropping equipment for photo processing, and press molds. Other irregular migrants from network 2 also possessed counterfeiting equipment that enabled them to forge Dutch, Belgian, French, Spanish, and British documents. The police also found laminate, a laminator, blank cards, blank identity cards, punch letters, an instruction manual, and printers. Some irregular migrants claimed that they explicitly conducted these criminal activities to help other irregular Muslim migrants. Sometimes, these activities helped them to gain entry to the Netherlands with the help of smugglers or through sham marriages. Network 3 uses these methods in order to offer an alternative migration entry. For example, an irregular migrant tried to obtain Dutch citizenship with the coordinated help of a jihadist who had already helped him to travel to the Netherlands with smugglers. The wiretap transcripts documented how they tried to arrange a sham marriage by persuading a woman to marry him for the reward of 2,000 Euros.
Not only can forged documents offer members of jihadist networks a semi-legal existence, selling them to other irregular migrants is also a lucrative business. Subjects from network 1 claimed to make a 150 German Marks profit for each sold forged document. In network 2, the profit per forged document varied between 50 and 300 Euros. These revenues were used to finance terrorist purposes, maintain the members of the networks or to support other jihadists worldwide. Financial investigations showed how some transactions made by members of network 1 were directed to other foreign jihadists who allegedly forwarded this to training camps in Pakistan and Afghanistan. These findings imply that theft and forgery of documents facilitated the jihadist movement, but also offered an alternative to an irregular position in society. According to an irregular migrant from network 2, he started to work for the network in return for a passport that he could not pay for. By helping with forgery and bringing in new customers, he could pay off his debt. He was also financially assisted in renting his apartment, whilst in return the network placed counterfeiting equipment in his apartment.

Other criminal activities conducted by jihadist networks that led to significant financial gain according to the police files were credit card fraud, transportations of drugs, and burglaries. Again, several irregular migrants were engaged in these activities. For instance, several subjects travelled throughout Europe in order to buy stolen credit cards and then used them in other countries. They possessed a skimming machine and the records of 45 different names and account numbers. They had connections with people across the world, who were able to either send or place skimming equipment. In addition, the police traced three separate drug transportations coordinated by subjects in network 2. They confiscated 27,000 Euros when they intercepted the first transport. A third transport failed because one of the members stole the transportation truck and sold the cocaine for his personal gain. Finally, some irregular migrants in network 1 conducted residential burglaries, in which they specifically aimed for passports. However, they also stole random goods such as an alarm clock, coffee, fruit, towels, shampoo, reading glasses, and a sleeping bag. Furthermore, several irregular migrants in network 2 were notorious shoplifters who specifically aimed at stealing clothes. The purpose of the stolen goods was initially to provide for foreign jihadists during their temporary stay in the
Netherlands. However, regarding the nature of many of these goods, we assume that it is also a way to provide irregular migrants with basic necessities.

Another benefit of the forged documents for irregular migrants was the opportunity to be formally employed or to gain access to social services. An irregular migrant in network 1 tried to obtain a Dutch social security number by registering at a government institution while using a forged French passport. In addition, another subject in network 2 provided several irregular migrants with a social security number and a forged passport (next to food, shelter, and train tickets), which they used to register at an employment agency. As a result, some of the irregular migrants started to see him as a social worker and stayed closely connected to him. In network 3 several members were closely linked to a shady employment agency that accepted false passports. The members brought in new irregular migrants who had just entered the country with the help of smugglers to this agency, which in turn arranged jobs for them.

Finally, the networks concerned offered housing opportunities to the irregular migrants in houses of fellow subjects. Some subjects opened up their house to irregular migrants who were in need of shelter or accommodation. Others continuously moved in and out with members of the group they had met in the AC.

Conclusion

Many terrorism studies assume that subjects within extremist movements have embraced and internalized a radical religious ideology, implying that these subjects are per se attracted and motivated by ideology. This chapter has nuanced or at least complemented this assumption, by bringing together the vulnerable position of irregular migrants and the pragmatic value of jihadist network.

The analysis of a selective sample of irregular migrants involved in jihadist networks between 2000 and 2005 in the Netherlands, was based on a range of rich police investigations and additional semi-structures interviews with key informants. Based on the interviews, we started out by mapping the problems that asylum seekers and irregular migrants in ACs and DCs encounter in their daily lives. The data showed that many of the migrants involved appeared to struggle with feelings of deprivation and mental issues. Next, based on an analysis of extensive and well-documented police files, we focused on
the practical solutions jihadist networks were able to offer. Criminal activities appeared to offer the most helpful solutions, which clearly indicated the pragmatic value of the networks. At least for our case study, this seemed to be more important as a pull-factor than often assumed.

The illustrated findings may be applicable for a particular phase and place, but they do have wider implications. First, these findings shed a different light on the crime-terror nexus discussion. A pragmatic solution – such as engaging in income generating crime – is not only beneficial to fund terrorism and facilitate the pursuit of ideological goals, but can also attract vulnerable new members. Second, it warns for potential negative outcomes of an inadequate response to the influx of refugees. When they do not obtain a residence status and when they are not able to live under reasonable circumstances, this vulnerable position may lead them to look for alternative forms of integration, for instance into criminal and/or radical networks. We must keep in mind though, that the findings presented in this chapter are based on data from 2000-2005 in a specific context, which means it is not clear whether and how contemporary jihadist networks are still able to meet the needs of vulnerable migrants including those who lack a residence status. Yet it demonstrates that under specific circumstances and for certain groups, radical and criminal networks can attract vulnerable individuals who subsequently may be drawn into facilitating terrorism and committing crimes. This is not to say that ideology does not play a part, but these observations tend to remain hidden when we solely look at the role of ideology.