



## POLICY BRIEF

# FROM JORDAN TO JIHAD: THE LURE OF SYRIA'S VIOLENT EXTREMIST GROUPS

## RESEARCH AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Earlier this year, the conflict embroiling Syria hit another benchmark: the war's number of foreign fighters now tops Afghanistan in the 1980s. Syria has become the training ground of choice for today's violent jihadis.

While extremist groups in Syria have been strikingly adept at recruitment – tailoring sectarian marketing campaigns to the digital age – traditional prevention efforts are undercut by a lack of data about push and pull factors, methods of recruitment and foreign fighter motivations.

These gaps have catalyzed a reassessment of approach. The White House Summit on Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) in February catalyzed a broad-based policy discussion on appropriate strategies, and in September, at the U.N. General Assembly, national governments are expected to furnish new strategies as part of a platform to prevent violent extremism. Given past confusion about definitions for CVE, and what strategies are most effective, these efforts will hopefully offer new clarity.

This research brief attempts to contribute to this effort, by shedding light on the current challenge in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. Based on a series of interviews with foreign fighters and their families, we find that traditional approaches to stabilization and development are unlikely to address the reasons why Jordanians are joining as Daesh (also known as the Islamic State, ISIS and ISIL) or the Nusra Front (*Jabhat al-Nusra*), Syria's Al-Qaeda affiliate.

Though Jordan is one of the few countries in the region blessed with relative stability, Jordanians are actively contributing to the growth of fighters in neighboring Syria and Iraq. Conservative estimates put the number of Jordanian fighters in Syria at around 1,500, making the kingdom the third highest contributor of foreign fighters (after Saudi Arabia and Tunisia), and the highest

### Some Key Takeaways

- » Poverty does not appear to drive foreign fighter recruitment, at least at the level of the individual. Fighters came from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. Furthermore, we found no evidence fighters, or their families, are being compensated by armed groups in Syria.
- » The most common justification fighters offered for joining the war in Syria was to protect Sunni women and children.
- » Social networks help explain who goes, and which groups they join.
- » Within Syria, intra-Sunni fighting was a key source of foreign fighter disillusionment.



contributor in per capita terms.<sup>1</sup> Others place the number of Jordanian fighters much higher. According to an estimate last fall, roughly 2,500 Jordanians had joined Daesh alone.<sup>2</sup>

The implications of the foreign fighter phenomenon are manifold and dangerous. Jordan's jihadis will likely be a generational plague to peace and stability, whether they stay in Syria or return home. The goal is to convince them not to go in the first place.

**Mercy Corps in Jordan:** Mercy Corps has worked in Jordan since 2003, addressing critical community challenges, such as growing water and energy scarcity and the rising needs of vulnerable people, including those with disabilities, women, children, youth, and refugees. Mercy Corps Jordan has managed over 68 grants worth more than \$110 million. Currently, Mercy Corps Jordan manages a comprehensive portfolio worth approximately \$60 million, comprising both humanitarian and longer-term development programs across water and energy, protection, social cohesion, education, livelihoods, and youth development. Through our network of 175 existing partner Community Based Organizations (CBOs) and seven years of programming in the water and energy sector, we have developed an in-depth understanding of the local communities and their needs and tested appropriate development and humanitarian solutions. Since the beginning of the Syria crisis Mercy Corps worked with Jordanian communities on aid and early recovery with the focus on improving water supply, supporting community projects, mitigating tensions in communities, providing basic needs support, and helping children in crisis. Our youth development programming applies years of research based on positive youth development in complex and fragile transitional environments.

**Methodology:** The assessment was conducted in April 2015 in three Jordanian communities: Ma'an, Salt and Zarqa, all hotbeds of extremist recruitment. The author conducted individual interviews and focus group discussions with 95 Jordanians who had some connection with the conflict in Syria. These included friends and family members of 18 men who had left to fight, as well as interviews with five former fighters who had returned to Jordan. In sum, this research captured the specific experiences 23 foreign fighters.

In addition, the author conducted focus group discussions with leaders of community organizations, tribal and religious leaders, two groups of Jordanian mothers, and a Muslim Brotherhood youth group.

**Limitations:** While this assessment represents an advance in our understanding of the foreign fighter phenomenon, it faced a number of constraints. Many Jordanians who leave to fight in Syria do not come back, so we had to rely on interviews with family and friends to illuminate motives for going and how the recruitment process worked. In addition, of those fighters who have returned, they face potential legal sanctions for speaking about their experience in Syria. Navigating these legal constraints curtailed access. Consequently, the data collected represent a small universe of informants. While we do not claim these findings to be comprehensive, our findings parallel other research on foreign fighters and extremist recruitment.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> ICSR, "Foreign fighter total in Syria/Iraq now exceeds 20,000; surpasses Afghanistan conflict in the 1980s" (January 26, 2015), available online:

<http://icsr.info/2015/01/foreign-fighter-total-syriairaq-now-exceeds-20000-surpasses-afghanistan-conflict-1980s/>

<sup>2</sup> Middle East Monitor, "Saudis most likely to join ISIS, 10% of group's fighters are women" (October 20, 2014), available online:

<https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/news/middle-east/14758-saudis-most-likely-to-join-isis-10-of-groups-fighters-are-women>

<sup>3</sup> For example, see Andrew Silke, Holy Warriors : Exploring the Psychological Processes of Jihadi Radicalization, (European Journal of Criminology 2008), available online: <http://www.sagepub.com/martin3study/articles/Silke.pdf> ; see also Vera Mironova's "Voices of Syria" project, available online: <http://vmironova.net/voices-of-aleppo/papers-and-reports/>.

## Main Findings

**To what extent is Jordan’s foreign fighter problem driven by poverty?** A common narrative is that poverty and a lack of economic opportunity is prime motive for men joining extremist groups in Syria. A popular narrative is that extremist groups provide significant fiscal compensation to recruits and/or their families.

- **We found no evidence fighters, or their families, are being compensated by armed groups in Syria.** Every family interviewed denied Daesh or Nusra used money to entice fighters across the border. This casts doubt on straight-forward compensation narratives: fighters are not necessarily young and idle. The socioeconomic profile of fighters was, in fact, diverse. The majority (19 out of 23) were employed at the time of recruitment. Doctors and engineers, for instance, are well-represented. Whereas economic development is urgently needed to stimulate Jordan’s weak market and decrease the financial hardships suffered by poor Jordanians and Syrian refugees, Jordanian foreign fighters do not appear to be motivated by financial gain when joining an extremist group.

“People keep asking me how much money ISIS is sending me,” said a mother whose three sons left to join the group. “They’ve sent me nothing. That’s not why my sons go to fight.” If anything, the money seems to flow the other way. Recruits self-finance their entry into the ranks, paying their own smuggling fees to get across the border. Crossing the border cost one recruit 400 Jordanian Dinar (a little over USD 560 in today’s dollars). He sold his car to afford the fee. And many families regularly send money to Syria to support Jordanian fighters. To send money to his son in Syria, one father described using a *hawala* system: informal money transfers through a network of brokers. Every two months, he said, he sends 100 Jordanian Dinar (approximately USD 140). “That’s a lot of money for us,” he said. He has four other sons. “They won’t go,” he said, but seemed unsure. “I hope they won’t go.”

- **At least some recruiters, however, are paid.** If there is a fiscal motivation driving recruitment, it appears to be on the part of the recruiters, less so the recruits’. Recruiters are compensated for getting people across the border, though the amount hinges on the value of the recruit: well-connected and well-educated men command higher prices than the more marginalized, poorer and less educated.<sup>4</sup> While the character of the individual recruiter undoubtedly varies, in some cases, at least, they do not appear to be ideologically motivated. They are professional smugglers. One man described how he contacted a recruiter through the network of a friend. The hotspot for border crossing is Irbid, in northern Jordan, just a few kilometers from the border. The recruiter gave him a choice: he could join the Free Syrian Army or the Nusra Front. The choice appears to be a function of where the recruiter could get him, once they crossed the border. “For these recruiters, it’s just a business,” the man said. “They don’t care who you fight for, as long as they get their money.”

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<sup>4</sup> The exact amounts are difficult to verify. But as an example, according to some sources, a doctor is worth thousands – up to USD 25,000.

**Why do recruits go?** In addition to the motives underlying a fighter’s decision to go (the why), we were also trying to understand the process of the recruitment (the how). We examined patterns, common narratives and the role of religion in shaping the choice.

- **Social networks help explain who goes, and which groups they join.** Among this population, recruits rarely, if ever, go by themselves. The desire to join an extremist group develops among a small social circle: a tight group of friends or family. These social dynamics influence both who goes and which groups they go to: support for one or another extremist group hinges on family and community ties. “I joined Nusra because that’s where the people from my community tended to go,” said one man. “You want to be with people who know you.” According to the psychology literature, small group dynamics are often central to processes of radicalization.<sup>5</sup> Intimacy with a small group of like-minded individuals is polarizing, and encourages individuals to take a step they would not otherwise have taken. Most have a friend or family who had previously joined an extremist group in Syria, and who keep in touch by phone, email or social media.<sup>6</sup> According to many, this is why recruiters target charismatic and educated people with broad social ties: if a popular, well-respected man is recruited, so goes the thinking, others will follow. While potential recruits may be identified in the mosque, recruitment no longer happens there, according to a number of informants. Instead, outreach is primarily done through small groups or clubs. “They ask you to play football or go on a picnic, things like that,” said one man who was being actively recruited. “And everything is normal, but gradually they start talking to you about what is happening in Syria. It’s a process. They want to get a sense of your opinions and then shape them, if they can.”
- **Social media plays a powerful recruitment role by glamorizing the struggle and by dramatizing the plight of fellow Sunnis in Syria.** Ubiquitous social media is a prevalent and powerful recruiting tool. Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and other platforms provide potential recruits with role models, news about events in Syria, and an opportunity to interface – even if, at first, gingerly – with virtual communities supporting, or sponsored by, extremist groups. Social media may also open opportunities for otherwise cloistered women to be recruited, or to serve as recruiters. ISIS has proven particularly adept at capitalizing on the digital space, flooding Twitter alone with 90,000 tweets a day.<sup>7</sup> According to fighters and their families, the Internet provided recruits with much of the narrative about events in Syria, the crimes of the Assad Regime and its Shi’ite allies, Hezbollah and Tehran. As one mother said, “The Internet is the real champion of the war.”
- **Religion was not an obvious driver.** Religious leaders complain that the lack of religious education, and lack of critical thinking skills in school, contributes to young people being susceptible to extremist

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<sup>5</sup> Silke (2008).

<sup>6</sup> In some cases, strong tribal ties appeared to blunt recruitment efforts, but not always. Where traditional institutions are weakened, or lack legitimacy among the younger generation, they offer few alternatives to young people who are seeking social status, acceptance and/or meaning. And even where intra-clan ties are relatively strong, it may render some more vulnerable to peer pressure within the group: a young man may be more likely to follow the example of an esteemed cousin who departed for Syria, not less.

<sup>7</sup> Jethro Mullen, “What is ISIS Appeal for Young People?” CNN, February 25, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/02/25/middleeast/isis-kids-propaganda/>

interpretations of the Quran and hadith. While this is probably true, the role of religion, as a recruiting tool, appears to be mixed. Most (16 out of 23) fighters were, according to themselves or their families, not particularly religious before going to Syria. The decision to fight appears to be less about a particular interpretation of one's religious obligations, and more an emotional response to injustices perpetrated by an outside group (see below). Yet while piety did not obviously correlate with a decision to head to Syria, all former fighters said the experience made them more religious.

"Before I went, I was not very religious," said a man who fought with the Qatari-funded Tawhid Brigade, then joined Nusra. "I did not pray. I did not understand Jihad very well." The city of Ma'an sits at a crossroads of Islam, on the way to Mecca, and is peopled by the descendants of *haji* pilgrims. Here, dark Moroccans mix with light-skinned, blue-eyed Bedouin. He wore a long white robe – the *abaya* – popular in the Gulf States, and a red-and-white *keffiyeh*. His beard was long. Maybe he wasn't religious before he left, I said, but now he looked like a sheikh. He laughed. "Well, yes of course," he said. "When I was in Syria, I was surrounded all the time by death. That will make you more religious."

- **However, fighters often deployed religious language to legitimize the enterprise.** Virtually all fighters described "jihad" as an obligation rooted in justice. Jihad, they said, was a personal and social obligation to protect the weak and fight non-Muslim aggressors. As Syrian refugees have flooded into these communities, carrying stories about the horrors in Syria. The psychology literature outlines how radicalization functions: the perception of grievance drives the search for a violence-justifying ideology, not the other way around. In the case of Islamic extremism – though by no means is it unique to that – the language of jihad legitimates the grievance, offers a sectarian culprit and a method for righting the wrongs.<sup>8</sup> Joining an extremist group, like ISIS or the Nusra Front, provides fighters with an opportunity to fight injustice and restore the honor of the dishonored.<sup>9</sup>

"You have an obligation to go," one man said. "Sunnis are being killed by Shi'ites." He described jihad in terms of justice and self-defense. There is a long line of conservative Islamist thinking, going at least to Sayyid Qutb, which supports this view: when Muslims are under attack by infidels, jihad becomes the individual obligation (*fareda*) of all Muslims, particularly on those who live nearby. Proximity matters and you must defend your neighbor. He is very thin, all frail-looking angles. He fought for Daesh in Aleppo and was shot in the arm. The bullet blew apart his elbow: there's a scar-covered gap where the humerus should connect to the joint. His right hand dangles, useless. He shook with his left. After he was wounded in Aleppo, he returned to Jordan, was held in detention for 43 days by the government, before he was returned to his family. "If my hand was fixed, I would back to Syria tomorrow," he said. "Jihad is about justice. And Islam is one body. We must defend ourselves."

- **The most common justification fighters offered for joining the war in Syria was to protect Sunni women and children.** Virtually every family – and every returned fighter – identified the crimes of the Shi'ites in

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<sup>8</sup> See Arie W. Kruglanski and David Webber, *The Psychology of Radicalization and Deradicalization: How Significance Quest Impacts Violent Extremism*, (International Society of Political Psychology, 2014), available online: [http://gelfand.umd.edu/KruglanskiGelfand\(2014\).pdf](http://gelfand.umd.edu/KruglanskiGelfand(2014).pdf)

<sup>9</sup> For similar observations, see Jesse Singal, "Why ISIS is Terrifyingly Effective at Seducing New Recruits," *New York Magazine*, August 18, 2014, <http://nymag.com/scienceofus/2014/08/how-isis-seduces-new-recruits.html>; and Erin Marie Saltman and Melanie Smith, *Till Martyrdom Do Us Part: Gender and the ISIS Phenomenon*, (Institute for Strategic Dialogue, May 2015), available online: [http://www.strategicdialogue.org/Till\\_Martyrdom\\_Do\\_Us\\_Part\\_Gender\\_and\\_the\\_ISIS\\_Phenomenon.pdf](http://www.strategicdialogue.org/Till_Martyrdom_Do_Us_Part_Gender_and_the_ISIS_Phenomenon.pdf)



Syria (namely, the Alawite Assad regime and the government of Iran) as the predominant rallying narrative. In particular, an oft-repeated story of the systematic raping of Sunni women by Assad's soldiers. This narrative seemed to trigger multiple identities: religious obligations to defend the Sunni community, a political enmity with Assad and Iran and a masculine obligation to defend women and children. Gender is often militarized by both sexes. It can encourage men to go, to prove their masculinity, and to shame those who stay behind. "Those men who went to fight, those are real men," said a young man in Ma'an. "There's no doubt about that." It was a sentiment frequently echoed, across communities, and even the phrasing is the same: "real men."

"The men from Salt go to Syria to fight because they're real men," said a woman from Salt. A city of ancient sandstone houses, Salt straddles the hills west of Amman, near the Jordan Valley.

"They hear about the rape of women in Syria and they have to go," she said. By comparison, she said, "The men in Amman only care about their hair." All three of her sons have gone to fight for Daesh. Two of them have been killed.

"I am happy they went," she said. If it is a façade, it does not crack. "Jihad was their duty as Muslim men, to protect their sisters." And where did they learn about jihad? "From me, of course," she said. "They learned it here, in the home."

**How does context facilitate recruitment?** We wanted to better understand the enabling environment in these communities. Violent jihad is an aspirational social act, and context facilitates the decision to fight, by framing motive, expectations and sympathies.

- **Jihad offers the promise of improved social standing to recruits.** Where life in Jordan may disappoint, fighting in Syria is perceived as a path to legitimacy and, for some, social rehabilitation. Until a year ago, when a local man from Ma'an would die in Syria, a martyrdom celebration would be thrown in his honor, apparently sponsored by local Salafists.<sup>10</sup> Some residents, such as one elderly man whose son had left for Syria, denounced the celebrations as propaganda. If so, they seemed to have had an effect. "I felt some envy watching the celebrations," one man said, recalling the honors heaped on dead neighbors. Many fighters described feeling lost or insignificant prior to going to Syria. "My husband kept saying there was nothing for him here," said one woman in Russaifeh. "He was an engineer, we have a son. He should have been happy, but he was empty and all he could think about was Syria and what was happening there. He once said that fighting Assad was the only way to gain meaning." Joining an extremist group is a way to build meaning. This may be why universities and prisons are both fruitful recruiting grounds. Young people, separated from recognized support networks, seek new sources of legitimacy and acceptance. In both cases, radicalization offers an opportunity to reinvent.

"My son Yusuf went to Syria because he had no choices in this life," a woman in Russaifeh said. "Or that is how he felt." Yusuf didn't have Jordanian citizenship. His father was from Gaza, and Jordanian Nationality

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<sup>10</sup> Today, however, the celebrations are no longer held. There were various explanations why. "Perhaps they were stamped out by the government," one man said.

Law defines nationality through the blood bond of the father. It is a rampant problem. Roughly 360,000 people born in Jordan currently do not have passports.<sup>11</sup> Yusuf couldn't find work and he was routinely hassled by police. "He was treated as if he was less than human, and he lacked hope," she said. "He tried to get married, but was refused by the woman's family." He joined a Salafist group and, a few months later, called his mother from Syria. "Don't worry, mother," he told her. "After death I'll get a wife." He died shortly thereafter.

- **Perceptions of the Nusra Front and Daesh vary across and within these communities.** The burning of the Jordanian pilot, First-Lieutenant Muath Al-Kaseasbeh, by ISIS last February led many people to denounce ISIS as terrorists. However, they did not see Nusra in the same way. The Nusra Front, many maintain, are revolutionaries, fighting for justice against the Assad regime. This is not to say that support for ISIS has been completely eroded. There was some evidence that ISIS is gaining ground among the country's Salafists. Jordanians' perspectives on these groups are fluid. But generally, Jordanians in these communities – whether they support one group, neither or both – do not put Daesh and Nusra in the same basket.

**Why do fighters return home?** Critically, we wanted to understand why recruits, having left to fight for Daesh or Nusra, come home. Many are not allowed to leave, according to anecdotal reports, but those who do provide insights diminishing the appeal of VE recruitment efforts.

- **For some fighters, life in Syria turned out to be less glamorous than expected.** Life in Syria would be more meaningful, exciting and honorable than day-to-day life in Jordan: that at least is what entices many recruits. Upon arrival, however, some experienced a rude awakening. "It wasn't like what I'd seen on YouTube," said one man. He'd been seduced by slick promotional videos, he said, of exciting training exercises and campaigns against Iranians. "I didn't see one Iranian," he said. Another man, crossing the border to join the Nusra Front, found himself tasked as a baker. Long days laboring at the ovens, and experiencing no combat, he grew restless and fled.
- **Within Syria, intra-Sunni fighting was a key source of foreign fighter disillusionment.** The fragmented nature of the Syrian conflict has undermined the willingness of some Jordanians to participate. "I went to Syria to fight Shi'ites," said one former fighter. "But I saw Sunnis killing one another. That is not jihad." As intra-factional struggles between Sunni groups become more apparent, it undermined the struggle's appeal, according to fighters and their families.
- **In some cases, mothers exerted a powerful pull on getting their sons to come back.** According to the Prophet Mohammed, "Paradise is at the feet of the mother." And yet domestic obligations are no guarantee that a man won't leave for Syria. Many foreign fighters were married and had children. Others were breadwinners for their mothers and younger siblings. In a number of cases, mothers exerted a powerful pull on sons who've left. A mother's mental anguish, or her newfound economic vulnerability,

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<sup>11</sup> Oddone, Elisa, "Jordanian progeny gain ground in nationality fight" (May 05, 2015) available online: <http://bit.ly/1ABt01d>



can convince a son to come home.<sup>12</sup> This is not to say that all mothers are agents of peace. Indeed, about a third of mothers (7 out of 23) encouraged their sons to go on Jihad, and extolled them, within the community, as examples of a righteous Muslim man.

Nevertheless, most mothers mourn the loss of their sons. The pull of the Jordanian mother, and the mother's status within Islam, may be a counterweight to the gendered narratives that compel some men to go north to defend the honor of Syrian women. One mother interviewed said that her son departed for Syria after reading Internet accounts of the systematic rape of Sunni women by the Assad Regime. However, his departure left her destitute. Penniless, she was approached by a wealthy man from the Gulf of Arabia, she said, who offered to pay her for a "one-night wedding." While stories of the serial raping of Syrian women are well-circulated on YouTube and Facebook, the vulnerability of female family members, left behind by fathers and sons, is not.

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<sup>12</sup> And in some cases with the blessings of the extremists (or at least this is true in the case of the Nusra Front, which cleared two fighters to return to Jordan to care for their mothers).



## Recommendations

- **Focus future prevention programs on social networks, not demographics.** The profile of former fighters is diverse. Poverty, a lack of education and family background did not clearly correlate with recruitment. For instance, a large majority of fighters were employed (19 out of 23), many in white collar jobs, at the time of recruitment. And universities are popular recruiting grounds, according to informants. Given the diversity of backgrounds represented among this pool of Jordanian fighters, developing risk profiles – based on ethnicity, economic status, and so on – would appear to be of limited value. Networks may be more important than demographics. Recruitment is a social enterprise: Almost no one decided by themselves to go to Syria. Instead, peer influences, family connections in Syria, a desire for social status and/or the example of a respected family member or friend were central to the decision. Given recruitment is rooted in the cultivation of a tightly-knit, collectivist identity, prevention efforts should focus on providing community-based alternatives: incorporating youth into peaceful groups, mentorship, and creating opportunities for youth to build individual identities<sup>13</sup> and positive family connections.
- **Increase political and financial support for programs that address governance gaps that drive extremism.** Across contexts, Mercy Corps research has found that poor or weak governance can facilitate the recruitment of extremist groups.<sup>14</sup> This is particularly obvious among communities that are, or feel, political marginalized. Improving good governance – including transparency, accountability and the availability of services – should be a priority both for donors and the Jordanian government.
- **Future efforts at preventing violent extremism should be holistic, locally-led and attentive to the narratives that facilitate extremist recruitment.** As past experience suggests, overt CVE efforts can strengthen extremist groups, by giving them legitimacy and attention.<sup>15</sup> Any attempts at prevention must be rooted in, and driven by, context, taking into account the narratives that are acceptable to local communities. Words matter. Approaches rooted in a CVE lens, or that use Western terms – “extremism,” “terrorism,” and so forth – may achieve little, and indeed may prove counterproductive.
- **Support, educate and partner with peaceful local actors – particularly wives and mothers – to dissuade potential recruits.** Trusted community voices are the ones most likely to foster peaceful views and offer positive role models. Educating them about the reality of the war in Syria – of Sunnis killing Sunnis – may resonate even among those who are broadly supportive of the conflict. Local tribal leaders and imams, for instance, are valuable shapers of opinion. And mothers’ groups, in particular, have much to offer in

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<sup>13</sup> In Sri Lanka, for instance, one element of de-radicalization efforts for former Tamil Tigers were art and yoga programs, which were deemed valuable helping them separate from the former group and cultivate an individual perspective.

<sup>14</sup> Keith Proctor, *Youth & Consequences: Unemployment, Injustice and Violence*, (Washington, DC: Mercy Corps, 2015), available online: [https://www.mercycorps.org/sites/default/files/MercyCorps\\_YouthConsequencesReport\\_2015.pdf](https://www.mercycorps.org/sites/default/files/MercyCorps_YouthConsequencesReport_2015.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> See Gerard Saucier, Laura Geuy Akers, Seraphine Shen-Miller, Goran Knević and Lazar Stankov, *Patterns of Thinking in Militant Extremism* (Perspectives on Psychological Science, May 2009), 256-271, available online: <http://pps.sagepub.com.proxy.mii.edu/content/4/3/256.full.pdf+html>



blunting the appeal of extremists. When a Jordanian man leaves home to defend Syrian women and children, Jordanian mothers and wives are often left destitute, children can't afford to go to school. But these stories get drowned out by the gendered recruitment narratives that VE groups deploy, via the Internet and within the community. Given the exalted position of the mother in Islam, women's peace groups offer a serious potential counter to VE propaganda. Admittedly, women's role within these communities is ambivalent: they are variously the encouragers and discouragers of violence. All the more reason to educate them about the realities of the conflict, empowering them to disrupt extremist propaganda in the home and, where possible, through social media.<sup>16</sup>

- **Where possible, facilitate spaces where former fighters can serve as prevention advocates and mentors within communities and universities.** Former foreign fighters – at least those who regret their decision to go – have much to offer their fellow Jordanians. Perhaps nothing so important as a dose of reality. Romanticized notions of life in Syria must be debunked. In particular, where jihad is framed as a sectarian fight against the Alawite Assad Regime and its Shi'ite supporters, knowledge of intra-Sunni struggles may dampen the desire to go. Former fighters are the ideal people to adjust public perceptions of the war, particularly its dubious religious nature. But it is vital these individuals are not seen as tools of the state, or somehow compelled to speak out. Otherwise, they will be easily dismissed.
- **The government of Jordan and international donors should support further research on the drivers of radicalization, the processes of recruitment and best practices for prevention.** The problem of violent extremism is not new, and while there are abundant academic studies on processes of radicalization, there has been little systematic qualitative work in places like Jordan. Many efforts by implementers are still at the literature review stage. More needs to be done, and quickly. Donors, NGOs and the government of Jordan should commit to a strategic research agenda on the context-specific factors that contribute to violent extremism.

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<sup>16</sup> The organization Sisters Against Violent Extremism provides one model. The group has established schools along the Tajik and Afghan border to teach women how to discourage their sons from joining extremist groups. For more, see <http://www.women-without-borders.org/save/>.



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