Italian Foreign Terrorist Fighters: a quantitative analysis of radicalization risk factors

Abstract[1]

The Italian jihadist scene with its fluid profile and features has been analyzed in different occasions by academics and experts. Their publications however, were conducted with a qualitative approach and, apart from some real cases description and analysis, there is a vacuum in the quantitative research that needs to be filled.

This short paper is aimed at statistically analyzing data coming from some possible risk factors of violent jihadist radicalization proposed by the prevailing academic literature; the aim is to fill the abovementioned void in the research and promote a more thorough analysis to verify whether there are common denominators that can alert social workers and/or security services about individuals on the path of violent radicalization.

The research is limited in sheer numbers and is related only to foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) involved in the Syrian – Iraqi conflict. The data were collected by the author regarding individuals listed by the Italian government in the FTF national record, with information collected through open sources. The principal goal of this paper is to verify the subsistence of shared radicalization risk factors in the Italian FTFs milieu, highlighting the possible trajectories exploited by jihadist recruiters and propagandists.

However, it is necessary to highlight the fact that this work is only a theoretical hypothesis, which necessarily has to be validated by other studies with a broader analysis sample. Furthermore, validation results should not be taken literally, being clear that a theoretical model remains disconnected from real case scenarios with their unique psychological, personal and societal dynamics.

1. FTF definition and generalities

Since the establishment of the so-called Caliphate in June 2014 by the self-proclaimed Caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi[2], the foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) phenomenon has become of exceptional interest for intelligence apparatus and academic communities; so far, various researchers and institutions have developed definitions and historical context for this topic.

For the limited purpose of this paper, the author refers to the definition of FTFs listed by the UN Security Council Resolution 2178/2014[3]. Amongst academics, David Malet provided the most cited definition, classifying them as "non-citizens of conflict states who join insurgencies during civil conflict"[4] .

Despite being a completely new phenomenon, the SYRAQ conflict and subsequent FTFs mobilization has reached an unprecedented peak attested at around 30.000 by authoritative

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[1] Disclaimer: all the information originates from open sources and/or personal research and study. The expressed opinions as well as any mistake or inaccuracy in the text should be referred solely to the author.

[2] Ibrāhīm ʿAwwād Ibrāhīm ʿAlī al-Badrī al-Sāmarrāʾī, born in Iraq on 28 June1971, self-proclaimed Caliph with the name Abu Bakr (the first Caliph in the Muslim history after the death of the Prophet Muhammad) al Baghdadi (he states his heritage links him directly to the Prophet's family).

[3] "namely, individuals who travel to a State other than their States of residence or nationality for the purpose of the perpetration, planning, or preparation of, or participation in, terrorist acts or the providing or receiving of terrorist training".

[4] D. Malet, "Foreign Fighters: Transnational Identities in Foreign Conflicts", *Oxford University Press*, 2013, p. 9.

estimates[5]. In this paper the author will restrict the analysis only on FTFs involved in the abovementioned conflict despite the transnational nature of global jihadism and groups related to this ideology. In this context, Italy surely plays a marginal role in terms of sheer numbers, and due to its geographical collocation and historical/cultural value for Christianity, the threat assessment of this phenomenon favored a qualitative approach over a quantitative methodology.

Italy and the European Union are currently facing two different but interconnected security threats: the first one regards foreign terrorist fighters trained in Syria and able to execute a coordinated attack in Europe (so called "returnees issue"). Intelligence agencies in the U.S. and Europe have in fact issued warnings of possible future attacks in Europe like the ones witnessed in Paris and Brussels, highlighting the presence of a new European jihadist network made of returnees and "*conflict-commuters*"[6].

The second threat is posed by the Islamic State (IS) and other salafi-jihadist groups influence and *jihadization*[7] capability; large shares of Europeans are exposed to such risk, this leading to the possibility of emulators and to the risk of low-level improvised attacks. IS recent strategy aims at shifting the Western countries focus from SYRAQ, bringing the conflict into Europe and USA; this is why recent jihadist propaganda asks followers and sympathizers not to travel to Syria and/or Iraq, but to attack directly in their motherland[8].

2. Italian FTFs general profile and data

The Italian foreign terrorist fighters situation has been having a minor impact on the society if compared with official figures of other Western European countries[9]. In the past, Italy has been mainly a logistic base for the global jihadist movement rather than a target, and the composition of the Italian *mujahidiin* network has always been fluid and diverse. Those individuals were not very influential if compared with similar networks in Great Britain or France, and they preferred to remain low-profile as Italy served mainly as a harbor and shelter.

Nevertheless, in light of the exceptional ISIS appearance, its current prominence in the jihadist arena and effective media exploitation, it is necessary to re-assess figures and real meaning also in countries like Italy where the numbers are almost irrelevant at a first glance.

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[5] B. Boutin et al., "The Foreign Fighters Phenomenon in the European Union; profiles, threats and policies"., *International Centre for Counter Terrorism – The Hague* (April 2016) http://icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/ICCT-Report_Foreign-Fighters-Phenomenon-in-the-EU_1-April-2016_including-AnnexesLinks.pdf

[6] V. Pop, "Islamic State is Planning Further Terror Attacks on Europe, Says Europol" *The Wall Street Journal*, January 25, 2016 http://www.wsj.com/articles/islamic-state-is-planning-further-attacks-on-europe-says-interpol-1453726093

[7] Researcher A. Boukhobza, noting the general meaning of the term radicalization and the absence of a widely agreed-upon definition reflecting a nuanced understanding of the phenomenon used the word "jihadization" in this context. A. Boukhobza, "Jouissances jihadistes: genèse d'une Haine-Intellectuelle", PhD thesis manuscript, 2015. This neologism is intended by the author as "the last stage in a rapid process of radicalization towards violent jihadism, not (only) motivated by religious ideology". Prerequisites to this last step are a prior cognitive opening (Q. Wiktorowicz, "Radical Islam rising" Muslim extremism in the West", *Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc*, 2005, p.20-23) towards fundamentalist beliefs (often motivated by trigger factors) and a polarization of positions distancing oneself from the society as a result of exposure to radical propaganda.

[8] M. Chmaytelli et al., "Islamic State calls for attacks on the West during Ramadan in audio message" *Reuters*, May 22, 2016 http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-islamicstate-idUSKCN0YC0OG

[9] Exhaustive data are difficult to obtain due to the impossibility to ascertain how many residents left the countries and effectively joined the conflict in Syria/Iraq. Moreover, not all the European countries are facing the same occurrence, as the official figures show us; B. Boutin et al., "The Foreign Fighters Phenomenon in the European Union; profiles, threats and policies", op. cit., p. 4.

The Italian Muslim community amounts to around 1.8 of the 61 million inhabitants[10], but the data are spurious because they do not take into account the illegal migrant flows. Estimates about conversions are around 4000 per year[11] and growing steadily.

Italy is historically and culturally deep-rooted in Catholicism and, therefore, conversions to Islam are growing at a lower rate in comparison with other European countries. Just a microscopic percentage of the Muslim community embrace an extremist interpretation of Islamic doctrines, and an even smaller number join a jihadist group. There are certain areas in Italy with different reports of jihadist penetration and proselytism, but the vast majority of the Italian Muslim community is well integrated and lives in accordance with democratic principles.

During a 2014 NATO workshop[12] regarding the FTFs phenomenon, an Italian official stressed the fact that Italy considers homegrown terrorism as "terrorist activities or plots perpetrated within a country or abroad by three different categories of individuals":

- Italian citizens: converts and second-generation diaspora Muslims;

- *Sociological citizens*, as termed by L. Vidino[13];

- Visitors: workers or students with a temporary residence certificate radicalized largely within the country.

According to recent reports[14] 16 Italian citizens coming from Italy (of them, two are presumed dead and six others have double citizenship) went to SYRAQ . In the second group of sociological citizens fit another 15 individuals coming from Italy. As to the third category, 67 fighters are comprised in that group, bringing the total number to 98[15]. Notably, to this amount another 88 individuals should be added: they were expelled from Italy for public safety and security reasons from the beginning of 2015[16].

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[10] Data from the IDOS Studies and Research Center 2014 Statistical Dossier on Immigration www.dossierimmigrazione.it/index_en.php The data are also roughly confirmed by the UCOII (Union of Islamic Organizations in Italy): R. Bongiorni "Cresce il peso delle comunità Musulmane" *Il Sole 24 Ore* (January 8, 2015) http://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/notizie/2015-01-08/cresce-peso-comunita-musulmane-063622.shtml?uuid=ABsVOWaC

[11] Since the Muslim community has no formal clergy, there is no central institution registering Islam's adherents or keeping track of the number of conversions. Furthermore, the process of converting to Islam consists of a simple ritual, which requires no formal registration. In order to become Muslim, a person simply speaks out the šahāda (declaration of belief in the oneness of God and acceptance of Muhammad as his Prophet) in front of two Muslim witnesses. Therefore, estimates referring to the number of converts have to be regarded as dubious. M. Uhlmann "Home and Belonging in a Semi-Diasporic Setting: Converts to 'Reflexive Islam' in "West European Societies" in F. Kläger and K. Stierstorfer (ed.), "Diasporic Constructions of Home and Belonging" *De Gruyter*, 2015; p. 207-226, 214.

[12] NATO Centre of Excellence Defence against Terrorism "Homegrown Terrorism, causes and dimensions" (June 3-4, 2014) http://www.coedat.nato.int/publication/workshop_reports/02-Homegrown_Terrorism_Workshop_Report.pdf

[13] According to Vidino's definition, sociological citizens are legally permanent residents raised in a country (although originally coming from another), who absorbed the local culture, values and social perception of events. L. Vidino, "Home-Grown Jihadism in Italy. Birth, development and radicalization dynamics" *Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale* (April 2014) www.ispionline.it/it/EBook/vidino-eng.pdf

[14] The figures were updated by the author adding more recent data to the Italian Defense Minister statement of September 20, 2015 http://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/notizie/2015-09-20/pinotti-file-dell-isis-87-foreigh-fighters-passati-dall-italia-170441.shtml?uuid=AC51QL1

[15] Figures were updated by the Italian Police Chief during the hearing at the Committee for the Security of the Italian Republic on April 26, 2016. http://www.quotidiano.net/terrorismo-foreign-fighters-1.2100450.

[16] P. Lami, "Terrorismo, espulsi i genitori di due marocchini jihadisti radicalizzati", *Il Secolo D'Italia*, May 20, 2016 http://www.secoloditalia.it/2016/05/terrorismo-espulsi-i-genitori-marocchini-jihadisti-radicalizzati/

3. Analysis of radicalization risk indicators

As noted by various researchers, is not possible to delineate a common path towards radicalization since so many unique elements concur to the individual mental and ideological process. From a counter terrorism perspective, what is particularly worrying is that the process of radicalization is occurring quickly and more anonymously in the Internet age than only one generation ago. Human interactions are limited and an assessment of the individual radicalization is often based on "digital elements"[17]; this create a shadowy zone of people expressing extreme ideas, resentment and hatred against Western countries policies. Does it represent a terrorist activity? The answer should be a sound denial, but at the same time it requires a necessary multiagency monitoring activity to better understand grievances and try to intervene where and when necessary.

Apart from the official Italian figures regarding deceased, arrested or still active FTFs, there is a *grey area* of individuals, places and situations that are constantly monitored by the intelligence apparatus. Some 1200 "sites of interest" are in the intelligence list, as well as 300 individuals. Places like mosques and cultural centers, but also private houses, shops, restaurants, internet points are under scrutiny; furthermore, among the 300 known radicals under examination, at least one third have an "extremely complex and problematic profile[18]"

As already stated, it is the academics prevailing opinion that a unique path of radicalization cannot be determined; however, common features are observed worldwide and are commonly associated to guidelines used in Counter Violent Extremism (CVE) programs to counter radicalization and extremist propaganda. Therefore, a simple statistical analysis on those risk indicators can hopefully offer a useful tool to better understand dynamics and patterns linked to violent radicalization paths in Italy.

However, it must be underlined that the present research is limited and needs further, in depth analysis. For his purpose the author used only available open source information, so a validation with sensitive data, and on a more broad sample, is required. Moreover, confirmation of the analysis hypothesis should not be considered as a perfect match with real life scenarios. Black swans are always around the corner and every theoretical model is always a generalization of real cases with their unique psychological, emotional, personal and societal dynamics.

Nevertheless, according to the results from the limited analysis completed on the Italian FTFs, it is possible to extrapolate interesting hints on their general profile and background.

3.1 methodology

The study sample is composed of forty individuals out of the ninety-eight officially listed Italian FTFs (40,8%). The list includes Italian citizens (35%), sociological citizens (30%) and visitors (35%). The examined individuals are young adults ranging from seventeen to forty-two years of age and they include persons of Italian, North African, Balkan and Middle Eastern origin. In the sample there are eight women (20%) and thirty-two men (80%). Altogether, it is a comprehensive view that collects the Italian societal insights with its differences and similarities.

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[17] "*Keyboard jihadists*" is another term proposed by L. Vidino to address individuals on an intermediate stage of radicalization, on the path to violent action. L. Bianchi, "Abbiamo chiesto a un esperto quanto è seria la minaccia del jihadismo in Italia", *Vice News*, February 9, 2015 http://www.vice.com/it/read/jihadismo-autoctono-italia-intervista-lorenzo-vidino-649

[18] C. Giudici, "Garage, scantinati, kebab. Ecco i luoghi dove si prepara il terrore in Italia", *Il Foglio*, January 16, 2016 http://www.ilfoglio.it/cronache/2016/01/16/garage-scantinati-kebab-ecco-i-luoghi-dove-si-prepara-il-terrore-in-italia___1-v-137105-rubriche_c422.htm

The data were collected and confirmed through multiple open sources, mostly in Italian language; out of 280 entries (seven indicators for forty individuals) only fourteen information are missing; it was not possible to find open source news regarding some risk indicators, mainly because some visitors had no previous media coverage nor accessible biography.

The seven risk indicators, already mentioned and qualitatively analyzed by academics are the following:

- Age (at the time of their *hijra*/arrest/expulsion): jihadist groups are primarily focused on late teens, early twenties individuals for their recruitment activities due to the fragility and the incomplete development of their mind[19]. Besides, young age is associated with an unsophisticated vision of the world, and (especially for second generation Muslim diaspora) with social grievances[20];

- Criminal record: well aware of the prison role as incubators of violent radicalization, academic literature analyzed in recent years the relationship between periods spent into correctional institutes with individuals thought extremization[21]; the prevailing literature links radicalization to the inmate violent environment and the exposure to extremist thoughts[22]. Prisons bring together alienated people who may be receptive to anti-social messages offering violent solutions to complex personal and/or societal problems[23].

- Employment: some researches showed a correlation between lack of employment (or an unqualified job) with a radicalization path[24]; frustration and a sense of perceived social injustice are probably the main factors exploited by jihadist recruiters; nonetheless, a new trend shows young and skilled professionals leaving their country to live and work in an idealized Islamic state[25];

- Family situation: some researchers argue that a poor or absent parental supervision, or the presence of a violently radicalized member in the family are risk factors for youngsters to become offenders before age twenty[26]; despite recent events of entire (or partial) family

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[19] See K. Ramakrishna, "Understanding youth in the age of ISIS: a psychosocial analysis", *E-International Relations,* February 11, 2016 http://www.e-ir.info/2016/02/11/understanding-youth-radicalization-in-the-age-of-isis-a-psychosocial-analysis/

[20] J. Horgan, "The search for the terrorist personality", in A. Silke (ed.), "Psychological perspectives on terrorism and its consequences", *John Wiley & Sons Ltd.*, 2003, p.3-27.

[21] R. Rowe, "From jail to jihad? The threat of prison radicalization", *BBC Panorama*, March 12, 2014 http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-27357208

[22] T. M. Veldhuis, "Prisoner radicalization and terrorism detention policy", *Routledge*, 2016, p. 49.

[23] J. P. Bjelopera, "American Jihadist Terrorism: Combating a Complex Threat", *Congressional Research Service*, 2013, pp. 23-25.

[24] A. Rabasa & C. Benard, "Eurojihad. Patterns of Islamist radicalization and terrorism in Europe", *Cambridge University Press,* 2015, p. 66

[25] F. M. Maloof, "ISIS recruiting engineers, doctors, accountants, reporters", *WND.com,* February 2, 2015 http://www.wnd.com/2015/02/isis-runs-help-wanted-ads-for-professionals/

[26] As confirmed by A. P. Schmid, a solid family with a positive father figure is a resilience factor against youngsters radicalization. A. P. Schmid & J. Tinnes, "Foreign (Terrorist) Fighters with IS: a European perspective", *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism*, December 2015, p.40 http://icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/ICCT-Schmid-Foreign-Terrorist-Fighters-with-IS-A-European-Perspective-December2015.pdf

jihadization[27], it is still debated if the abovementioned factor can also influence jihadist radicalization[28];

- Attitude towards religion; according to O. Roy, nowadays we are witnessing an "Islamization of radicalism, rather than a radicalization of Islamism"[29]; swift change of religious behavior and rapid conversions are usually associated with a poor understanding of Islamic tenets and as one of the ideological factors linked to violent radicalization[30].

- Technological skills: communication technologies (smartphone applications, encrypted messages, and social networks) play a crucial role in the development of the threat of international jihadism so that technological expertise boosts the grassroots radicalization process. Furthermore, radical messages spread via the Internet both inspire and mobilise individuals and networks, serving as a "virtual training camp[31];

- Second generation Muslim diaspora. The identity crisis for Muslim youngsters born and raised in European Western countries, as well as the issue of social integration in such states is often observed as a risk factor of exposure to extremist ideas[32]. Individuals with a Muslim family background, but living in a Western secular society, can experience a general sense of marginalization linked to their religion, a feeling that can be exploited by jihadist recruiters and proselytizers.

3.2 findings

Despite a required review of the information on a wider sample, some basic considerations can be drawn from this preliminary analysis:

a) Almost all the individuals in the sample experienced a swift return to Islamic principles and beliefs (72,5%), and in case of converts (20%), the process was not lengthy at all. This feature confirms the common sudden process of *jihadization* of youngsters, since they often lack critical instruments to analyze and deconstruct violent propaganda and narratives[33]:

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[27] See as example the case of A. Brignoli and M. Koraichi who left Italy to live in the IS controlled territories with their three children. A. Biondani, "Ecco Alice l'italiana nel Califfato coi figli", *L'Espresso*, March 18, 2016 http://espresso.repubblica.it/attualita/2016/03/18/news/ecco-alice-l-italiana-nel-califfato-coi-figli-1.254571

[28] L. Dawson, "Trying to make sense of home grown terrorist radicalization: the case of the Toronto 18" p. 64-91 in P. Bramadat & L. Dawson "Religious radicalization and securization in Canada and beyond", *University of Toronto Press*, 2014.

[29] O. Roy, "La paura dell'Islam", *RCS Media Group S.p.A.*, 2016, pp. 28-29

[30] Especially for the case of converts, the process of internalization of Islam is a long and in many cases painful path. M. Uhlmann states that converts have a pronounced cognitive and individualized access to Islam; she refers to this process as conversion to "reflexive Islam" to distinguish them from the short time-span radicalization processes usually associated with *jihadization.* M. Uhlmann, "Choosing Islam in Wes European societies – an investigation of different concepts of religious re-affiliation" *European University Institute – R. Schuman Centre for advanced studies,* December 2015, pp.5-11, http://cadmus.eui.eu/handle/1814/38204

[31] VV.AA., "Violent Jihad in the Netherlands. Current trends in the Islamist terrorist threat", *Ministry of Interior and Kingdom Relation*, 2006, p.43. R. Simcox, "we will conquer your Rome". A study of Islamic State terror plots in the West", *The Henry Jackson Society - Centre for the Response to Radicalisation and Terrorism,* September 2015, p.53 http://henryjacksonsociety.org/2015/09/29/we-will-conquer-your-rome-a-study-of-islamic-state-terror-plots-in-the-west-2/

[32] L. Vidino, "Homegrown jihadist terrorism in the United States: a new and occasional phenomenon?" p. 469-484 in J. Horgan & K. Braddock, "Terrorism Studies. A reader", *Routledge*, 2012. A. P. Schmid & J. Tinnes, "Foreign (Terrorist) Fighters with IS: a European perspective", op. cit., p.34

[33] This is especially true for the *digital* environment where youngsters often search for guidance and blindly trust the findings. "Preventing Radicalisation to Terrorism and Violent Extremism. Approaches and practices", *Radicalisation Awareness Network* 2016, p.157 http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-

those who converted were probably fascinated by jihadist ideology even before or at the same time of embracing Islam.

b) Thirty-three subjects are fluent with new technologies, social networks and digital communication (82,5%). Seven of them are real experts (17,5%), thus confirming the nature of the last transnational jihadist wave, hyper-connected and radicalized mainly through the Internet. In Italy this trend was observed since the early 2000's with a lot of "*self-recruited*" individuals among the local jihadist milieu[34].

c) Youth seems to be another common denominator of this phenomenon: apart from a seventeen years old boy[35], twenty-one people in the examined sample range between eighteen and twenty-seven years of age (52,5%), fourteen others are between twenty-eight and thirty-seven years of age (35%) and only four are more than thirty-seven years old (10%). It is undoubtedly easier to influence young idealistic minds especially providing a dichotomous (good/evil) vision of the world that gives to such individuals a sense of belonging, very much needed by young, insecure people[36].

d) Nineteen individuals were living in dysfunctional or problematic families (47,5%) at the time of their arrest or when they decided to leave for SYRAQ; young individuals with no role models at home may seek different figures and behavioral patterns elsewhere. Moreover, it must be remembered that young age, even if associated with a normal family environment, can spark possible generational contrast, furthering the risk of violent radicalization. However, these findings should be necessarily revised in light of the absence of information on six individuals (15%).

e) At least twenty-three persons in the sample were not employed (57,5%) and fourteen of them had an occasional job or an unskilled one (35%). The lack of a job (or a frustrating/alienating working position) is usually considered as a trigger factor leading to violent radicalization[37]. Unemployment in fact may lead to "*life-turns*" hoping to gain a professional position within IS current "*state building*" phase. Percentages in this section are incomplete, as the Author was not able to collect information on three cases (7,5%).

f) Thirteen people had a criminal record (32,5%) before leaving for SYRAQ (or being arrested before doing so). This finding is however spurious because five persons were 18 years old at the time of *hijra*/arrest, with an obvious downward influence on the statistical percentage. Conversely, 55% of the examined individuals had no previous criminal charges (22 subjects) while there was no information available on five cases (12,5%). The Italian findings regarding the association between crime history and jihadism are at least questionable; however, almost one third of the analyzed sample has had some justice issue, and prisons are known incubators of extremist thoughts and violent ideas.

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do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/ran-best-practices/docs/ran_collection-approaches_and_practices_en.pdf

[34] As stated by S. Dambruoso, former Italian Public Prosecutor in many investigations related to terrorism. L. Vidino, Home-Grown Jihadism in Italy. Birth, development and radicalization dynamics", op. cit., p.8

[35] Mahmoud Ben Ammar was recruited in 2015 on the internet by Albanians ISIS affiliated resident in Turin. The boy, who expressed the desire to become a FTF, after an internal struggle decided not to leave for SYRAQ and informed the Italian police who arrested the recruiters. W. Petenzi, "ISIS, per la Cassazione Brescia ha fatto scuola: quello fu arruolamento", *Il Corriere della Sera*, October 15, 2015 http://brescia.corriere.it/notizie/cronaca/15_ottobre_15/isis-elvis-elezi-wilma-petenzi-procura-brescia-cassazione-bceaf93e-7348-11e5-b973-29d2e1846622.shtml

[36] F. Khosrokhavar "Inside jihadism: understanding jihadi movements worldwide", *Routledge*, 2016, p.196

[37] M. Dunne, "is unemployment to blame for radicalization?", *World Economic Forum*, May 22, 2015 https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2015/05/is-unemployment-to-blame-for-radicalization/

g) Finally, a particular note is about second-generation Muslims immigrants; twenty-two persons (55%) out of those sampled are children of first generation Muslim migrants. In Italy, this issue is yet to develop its full potential, but partial indications tend to confirm similar trends from other European countries. Italy in fact was interested by massive migration flows only from the '80s, while the end of World War II brought the first wave of Muslim diaspora into other European countries; this is especially the case of France, Germany, Belgium and United Kingdom, that nowadays (and not by coincidence) account for more than half of the European FTFs currently in SYRAQ[38].

4. Similarities with the European situation and Italian features.

The growth of the FTF phenomenon in Italy follows the European trend, even though it is slightly lagged in reacting to external stimuli. In May 2014 (before the establishment of the so-called Islamic State Caliphate) there were some 30 Italian *mujahidiin*; in January 2015 the total was 53 (+76%); in May 2015 the number reached 74 (+39,6%); in September 2015 the total was of 87 individuals (+17,5%)[39]. Finally, in April 2016 the figures are indicated at 98 (+12,6%).

Apart from isolated cases[40], the striking and rapid rise of ISIS heavily influenced youngsters in Italy as well as in the rest of Europe, giving them a sense of belonging (especially after the Caliphate "establishment") and the idea of a new direction in life[41].

An interesting feature is a certain overrepresentation of ethnic *mujahidiin* from the Balkans, while the number of North Africans among the Italian foreign terrorist fighters is lower[42]. It may appear surprising since Muslims with North African origin represent the larger community settled in Italy and the biggest share of the recent immigration wave.

The explanation for this situation is probably twofold. Italy's first substantial immigration flow from North Africa begun in the 80's. For this reason, the second-generation Muslim diaspora is nowadays reaching adult age, thus influencing the rate of radicalized individuals.

The second possible cause is related to the ongoing turmoil in Libya, Egypt and Tunisia. ISIS expansion into those gave North Africans a different chance to wage jihad. Moreover, the Maghreb region is easier to reach from Italy and they already have connections, know the social environment and the political situation.

Overall, the Italian jihadist milieu is in line with the rest of the European landscape; it might be represented as a smaller version of the German setting, with high number of unemployed and undereducated people among its ranks, often composed of individuals with previous criminal

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[38] B. Boutin et al., "The Foreign Fighters Phenomenon in the European Union; profiles, threats and policies" op. cit., p.3

[39] A. Boncio "Italian Foreign Terrorist Fighters. Numbers, features and case studies", *International Security Observer*, November 16, 2015 http://securityobserver.org/italian-foreign-terrorist-fighters-numbers-features-and-case-studies/

[40] Giuliano Delnevo was the first Italian convert to die in Syria in 2013 as a shahid. He apparently fought with the al-Nusra front, but was allegedly disappointed with their leadership in some notes written on his personal diary. E. Dellacasa, "Il diario di 'Ibrahim', jihadista genovese: capi in hotel, noi in tenda", *Il Corriere della Sera*, August 24, 2014,http://www.corriere.it/esteri/14_agosto_24/diario-diibrahim-jihadista-genovese-capi-hotel-noi-tenda-e654d982-2b61-11e4-9f19-fba1b3d7cb6f.shtml

[41] "Foreign Fighters. An updated assessment of the flow of foreign fighters into Syria and Iraq", The Soufan Group, December 2015, p.6, 10 http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/TSG_ForeignFightersUpdate3.pdf

[42] This is the case for the official list of 98 Italian Foreign Terrorist Fighters; in the examined sample for this research twenty-one individuals are of Maghrebi origin or descent (some of them are Italian citizens), while only nine persons come from the Balkan region.

records. Quite differently from the British jihadist network, usually better educated and integrated and with more qualified jobs[43].

5. Conclusion. Further researches.

This preliminary study, quantitatively analyzed the relationship between some risk factors of violent radicalization with the growth of the current Italian jihadist generation. Within the terrorist threat assessments published by various institutions and authors, the extreme fragmentation of the human factor and a quicker process of violent radicalization are the norm[44]. Homegrown jihadism is a solid reality for IS and the Qa'idist movement as a whole; youngsters identity crisis, intra and extra societal factors, lack of reference models are a fertile ground for skilled recruiters and proselytizers. IS presents a simplistic vision of the world, immediately accessible for the youth searching for an appealing ideology to build a sense of belonging and change their position in the society, going "*from zero to hero*", chasing their dream in SYRAQ with the newly established Islamic state[45].

Another reason that stimulated this research is the necessity of de-radicalization programs, useful to defuse this downward spiral and intervene when needed. Many wannabe foreign terrorist fighters fall into violent jihadism as a result of period of personal distress; psychological, economic, personal difficulties are not vehicles towards radicalization, but factors that increase the risk. It is necessary to develop a comprehensive approach to enhance the resilience of individuals to jihadist narratives and to de-radicalize (permanently) those already under this spell[46].

The Italian situation has not yet developed all the push and pull factors related to the radicalization of individuals who decide to join the conflict in SYRAQ and become foreign terrorist fighters. The preliminary outcome of this research shows that some indicators are (at the moment) more relevant than others in shaping a "national" general radicalization pathway model, and hopefully more researches will be published to refute and/or confirm the findings.

Other factors and elements should be examined and linked to the unique societal and historical situation of Italy as cradle of Christianity in order to have a clearer picture of the Italian FTFs phenomenon. However, the author's hope is that this first quantitative research will be at least useful in shaping a priority list of warning elements related to the violent radicalization process in the country.

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[43] R. Ahmed & D. Pisoiu: "Foreign fighters: An overview of existing research and a comparative study of British and German foreign fighters" - *Centre for European Peace and Security Studies*, December 2014 https://ifsh.de/file-ZEUS/pdf/ZEUS_WP_8.pdf

[44] As proposed in 2005 by jihadist ideologue Mustafa Setmarian Nasar, better known as Abu Musab al Suri in his e-book "A call to global Islamic resistance"; in his lengthy book he foresaw a new generation of jihadists with no direct link to the central leadership, training and learning by themselves in independent, individual terror cells. D. Samuels, "The new mastermind of jihad", *The Wall Street Journal*, April 6, 2012, http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702303299604577323750859163544

[45] V. Premazzi, "From zero to hero, women and men attracted by the Islamic State" *Oasis Center,* February 5, 2016, http://www.oasiscenter.eu/articles/jihadism-and-violence/2016/02/05/from-zero-to-hero-women-and-men-attracted-by-the-islamic-state

[46] G. Sabato, "Nella mente del terrorista. Strategie di prevenzione", *Le scienze – Italian edition of Scientific American*, April 23, 2016 http://www.lescienze.it/news/2016/04/23/news/terrorismo_prevenzione_psicologia_radicalismo_culti-3063513/.

Annex 1

RADICALIZATION RISK FACTORS FOR ITALIAN FOREIGN TERRORIST FIGHTERS

#	NAME	AGE AT DATE OF HIJRA/ARREST	CRIMINAL RECORD	EMPLOYMENT	FAMILY ENVIRONMENT	ATTITUDE TOWARDS RELIGION	TECHNOLOGY SKILLS	SECOND GENERATION MUSLIM DIASPORA
1	G. DELNEVO	23	NO	NO	PROBLEMATIC	CONVERT	YES	NO
2	M.G. SERGIO	25	NO	NO	NORMAL	CONVERT	YES	NO
3	M. SERGIO	30	NO	NO	NORMAL	CONVERT	YES	NO
4	W. KORAICHI	24	NO	WAITRESS	PROBLEMATIC	SUDDEN RETURN	YES	YES
5	A. MOUTHARRIK	24	NO	WORKER	NORMAL	SUDDEN RETURN	YES	YES
6	M. SCIANNIMANICA	25	NO		NORMAL	CONVERT	EXPERT	YES
7	S. COSTANTINI	18	NO	NO	NORMAL	CONVERT	EXPERT	YES
8	A. EL ABOUBI	21	YES	NO	NORMAL	SUDDEN RETURN	EXPERT	YES
9	M. REHAILI	18	NO	NO	NORMAL	SUDDEN RETURN	EXPERT	YES
10	E. HODZA	27		NO	PROBLEMATIC	SUDDEN RETURN	YES	NO
11	A.R. NAUROZ	36	YES	NO		SUDDEN RETURN	EXPERT	NO
12	A. BRIGNOLI	32	NO	NO	PROBLEMATIC	CONVERT	YES	NO
13	M. KORAICHI	30	NO	NO	PROBLEMATIC	SUDDEN RETURN	YES	YES
14	B. GAROUAN	28	YES	FARM HAND	PROBLEMATIC	SUDDEN RETURN	EXPERT	YES
15	A. KOBUZI	23	NO	FARM HAND	PROBLEMATIC	CONVERT	YES	NO
16	H. EL MAHDI	20	NO	WORKER	NORMAL	SUDDEN RETURN	EXPERT	YES
17	M. KARAMALESKI	27	NO	WORKER	NORMAL	SUDDEN RETURN	YES	YES
18	I. MESINOVIC	36	NO	MENIAL JOB	PROBLEMATIC	SUDDEN RETURN	YES	NO
19	M. EL MKHAYAR	18	YES	NO	PROBLEMATIC	SUDDEN RETURN	YES	YES
20	T. ABOULALA	18	NO	ELECTRICIAN	PROBLEMATIC	SUDDEN RETURN	YES	YES
21	S. HAISAM	42	YES	NO		HIGHLY RELIGIOUS	YES	NO
22	V. BERISHA	33	NO	NO	PROBLEMATIC	SUDDEN RETURN	YES	NO
23	L. NOUSAIR	28	YES	NO	PROBLEMATIC	SUDDEN RETURN	YES	NO
24	O. KHACHIA	31	YES	WORKER	PROBLEMATIC	SUDDEN RETURN	YES	YES
25	J. IBRAHIM	31	YES	NO	PROBLEMATIC	SUDDEN RETURN	YES	NO
26	K. BEN HAMIDA	38	YES	NO	PROBLEMATIC	HIGHLY RELIGIOUS	YES	NO
27	V. MAQELARA	41	YES	NO	PROBLEMATIC	SUDDEN RETURN	YES	NO
28	H. MEHDI	25	NO	MERCHANT	NORMAL	SUDDEN RETURN	YES	YES
29	D. EL MEHDI	23		NO	PROBLEMATIC	SUDDEN RETURN	YES	YES
30	E. AMVEDOSKI	31	YES	NO	PROBLEMATIC	SUDDEN RETURN	YES	YES
31	S. BENCHARKI	26	NO	NO	PROBLEMATIC	SUDDEN RETURN	YES	YES
32	A. KHACHIA	23	NO	NO	PROBLEMATIC	SUDDEN RETURN	YES	YES
33	M. N. BEN AMARA	36	YES	PIZZA COOK		SUDDEN RETURN	YES	NO
34	J. EL HANAQUI	25	YES	NO	NORMAL	SUDDEN RETURN	YES	YES
35	L. BRIKI	35	NO	WORKER	NORMAL	HIGHLY RELIGIOUS	YES	YES
36	M. WAQAS	27	NO	WORKER		SUDDEN RETURN	YES	YES
37	S. PILE'	24	NO	NO	NORMAL	CONVERT	YES	NO
38	N. SAGHARI	34		WORKER	NORMAL	SUDDEN RETURN	YES	NO
39	M. T. BEN AMMAR	17	NO	NO	NORMAL	SUDDEN RETURN	YES	YES
40	A. ELEZI	38			PROBLEMATIC	SUDDEN RETURN	YES	NO