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Islamic State is also recruiting in Switzerland

The Swiss authorities have recorded around 70 people leaving to join the jihad, a proportionally lower figure than elsewhere in Europe. Miryam Eser Davolio believes social networks could be used to prevent people from joining up.

STÉPHANE HERZOG

Since 2001, the Swiss intelligence services have identified 73 people who have left the country to join the jihad, 58 of whom have reached Syria and Iraq, the base of Islamic State. Who are these Swiss citizens and residents? What can be done to prevent such a break with their home country? And how should those who return be dealt with? The following interview is with Miryam Eser Davolio, a doctor of educational sciences, who led a multidisciplinary study in 2015 on the process of jihadist radicalisation in Switzerland. She is a professor in the School of Social Work at the Zurich University of Applied Sciences.



Miryam Eser Davolio

families. Radicalised young people sometimes accuse their parents of not being good Muslims. The parents are powerless to respond to such arguments.

What are the motivations of the Swiss jihadists?

They vary but are often more ideological or political than religious. Religious factors are overestimated.

Those being recruited have a dichotomous view of the world: on the one hand there is the Muslim world and on the other there is the West, whose values, which are deemed to be decadent, have to be fought. The jihadists see themselves as the victims of a system where hidden forces – the US, the Jews, the Europeans, etc. – are seeking to destroy all Muslims.

“Swiss Review”: Who are these Swiss people leaving to risk their lives for Islamic State?

Miryam Eser Davolio: Their profiles are extremely diverse. It is therefore impossible to generalise.

Are they very young?

In contrast to what is happening elsewhere in Europe, here they are aged between 25 and 35. They are not as young and include fewer females than elsewhere, even though there was a case of a 15-year-old girl leaving for Syria with her 16-year-old brother.

Is it true to say that most of those leaving are Muslims?

Yes, that's right. Four-fifths of those going are Muslims. The rest are converts. That figure is disproportionately high in relation to the few Muslim converts in Switzerland. Another point is that those seeking to leave have often grown up in secularised

It is not widely known that Swiss people are also fighting with IS.

Photo: Keystone



Would Islamic State be seen as a kind of ideal?

Yes, in the sense that it represents a more just and coherent state. The fight against Bashar al-Assad is also being idealised.

Some analysts believe the attacks in Paris on 13 November 2015 – where young Europeans were killed by other young Europeans – marked a decline in support for Islamic State. What is your view? Has there been an impact in Switzerland?

I completely agree. Whereas there were still voices legitimising the “Charlie Hebdo” attacks in January 2015, the recent acts of terrorism have seen an increase in cooperation between Muslims and the authorities. Muslims in Switzerland, young people included, are now showing greater willingness to report suspicious activities. They are paying greater attention to signs of radicalisation in people. I received a call recently from people telling me that their boss was sending money to IS via charitable foundations. We put them in touch with the police.

That Switzerland is a recruiting ground for terrorism comes as a shock, doesn't it?

Yes, it does. Even though the phenomenon is not as noticeable here as elsewhere, it is still more common than it should be. I nevertheless believe it is hard to recruit jihadists in Switzerland. The integration of minorities is better here than elsewhere in Europe. Civil society has links enabling cooperation between its various bodies. Dialogue with most mosques is commonplace in the cantons – to ensure their security apart from anything else. Work is being carried out with young people in schools on tolerance, respect and so on. The prevention of violence is working thanks to cooperation between social workers and the police. That is vitally important. I was as-

tonished that Abdeslam Salah, who took part in the Paris attacks in November 2015, could spend three months living in his neighbourhood of Molenbek in Brussels. People recognised him but nobody did anything. That would have been impossible in Switzerland in my view.

What should be done about people returning to Switzerland after spending time with Islamic State?

There are always legal proceedings but I believe we also have to work on people's attitudes and beliefs and focus on trauma. Those returning may have distanced themselves from their activities in Syria or Iraq but in an ambivalent way. We've visited the prisons. They carry out risk management and provide treatment. That

“An attack on Swiss soil cannot be ruled out”

Frédéric Esposito, director of the University Observatory on Security in Geneva, believes Switzerland is not immune to the growing fascination with the Islamic State.

While Switzerland has never been a terrorist attack, it no longer enjoys a special status. “Islamic State no longer differentiates between Switzerland and France because Switzerland has provided its good offices in the Syrian crisis,” according to the Geneva-based academic. An attack on Swiss soil cannot therefore be ruled out, but how great is the threat? “Geneva for example has a four-level terrorism alert scale. A national system is needed to be able to answer this question, but that would require joint decisions by the cantons,” he says. “Background to jihadist radicalisation in Switzerland” Zurich University of Applied Sciences, September 2015.

is a good thing. Do specific programmes need to be developed? That is something currently being discussed.

What means can be deployed to discourage or prevent people from going?

The internet often plays a role in people leaving. There is also contact with religious “mentors” who are not

necessarily encountered in mosques but in bars, apartments, gyms or wherever young people spend time. The online battle is complex because it's impossible to control all sources of propaganda. One option is to present the other side of the argument, as the French government did with an anti-jihad advert. On the one hand, we need to focus on language as a means of communication. And on the other, non-governmental institutions deemed more “credible” have to be involved. This is why an appeal has been made by 120 Muslim clerics opposing jihad.

What arguments can be made to someone being radicalised?

One approach is to tackle issues relating to values, politics and conflicts. It might be an early sign if someone has a simplistic view of the world, dividing it into believers and unbelievers, for example. If they believe the use of violence against enemies is legitimate then radicalisation is taking place. Such cases require a lot of work. Experts, parents, a brother or an uncle have to be involved. It is a matter of showing potential jihadists that others accept them without agreeing with them. How can indoctrination be stopped? By making the person think. If someone believes all wars are anti-Muslim, they should be shown that this is not true by pointing to NATO's intervention in Kosovo, for example.