



Victims, Perpetrators, Assets: The Narratives of Islamic State Defectors

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Executive Summary

- Defectors from the so-called Islamic State (IS) are a new and growing phenomenon. Since January 2014, at least 58 individuals have left the group and publicly spoken about their defection. They represent a small fraction of the many disillusioned fighters who have turned against IS.
- The defectors provide unique insight into life in the Islamic State. But their stories can also be used as a potentially powerful tool in the fight against it. The defectors' very existence shatters the image of unity and determination that IS seeks to convey. Their narratives highlight the group's contradictions and hypocrisies. Their example encourages members to leave the group. And their experience and credibility can help deter others from joining.
- The defectors' reasons for leaving may be as complex as the reasons they joined. Not everyone has become a fervent supporter of liberal democracy. Some may have committed crimes. They joined the most violent and totalitarian organization of our age, yet they are now its worst enemies.
- Among the stories of the 58 defectors, we identified four key narratives:
 - 1) 'IS is more interested in fighting fellow (Sunni) Muslims than the Assad government.'
 - 2) 'IS is involved in brutality and atrocities against (Sunni) Muslims.'
 - 3) 'IS is corrupt and un-Islamic.'
 - 4) 'Life under IS is harsh and disappointing.'
- Defecting from IS is complex and dangerous. Wannabe defectors are faced with numerous obstacles. Their first challenge is to separate from IS and make their way into non-IS held territory. But even those who succeed are not necessarily safe. What prevents them from speaking out is the fear of reprisals and the worry that prosecutors may use their openness against them.
- Our recommendations are for governments and activists to recognize the value and credibility of defector narratives; provide defectors with opportunities to speak out; assist them in resettlement and ensure their safety; and remove legal disincentives that prevent them from going public.

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Introduction

*When you want to stop [Islamic State] from deep in your heart,
you go public and you talk about it.*¹

Ebrahim B., German defector

In late August 2014, a British fighter for the so-called Islamic State (IS) contacted ICSR research fellow Shiraz Maher. He claimed to speak for two dozen of his comrades who had gone to Syria wanting to fight the Assad government: ‘We saw the videos. They hyped us up’. But the reality they found was very different. ‘Muslims are fighting Muslims’, he said: ‘Assad’s forgotten about. The whole jihad was turned upside down’.²

This conversation was the first evidence of a ‘disillusioned’ IS fighter. Since it came out, dozens more have fled to Turkey, while others are reported to have been caught and executed as ‘spies’ or ‘traitors’. Many are still trapped inside Syria or Iraq – unable to escape an organization that they no longer feel any allegiance for.³

No one can say how representative these stories are, and it would be mistaken to conclude that all – or even a majority – of IS fighters are ‘disillusioned’. But the reports have been sufficiently frequent to shatter IS’ image as a united, cohesive and ideologically committed organization. They demonstrate that IS is not the jihadist⁴ utopia that the group’s videos promise; and that many of its own fighters have deep concerns about the group’s strategy and tactics.

Until now, very few of the fighters who have ‘defected’ were willing to speak out. Little was known about their backgrounds and reasons for leaving. To learn more about them, we created a database in which we recorded every known instance of public defection from IS. The earliest cases date from January 2014; the latest entries are from August 2015.

By the time this report went to print, there was a total of 58 individuals who had left IS and publicly spoken about their defection – a sizable number but likely only a fraction of those disillusioned, ready to defect, and/or willing to go public.

About this Report

This report offers a first (and very provisional) insight into the stories of the IS defectors – a new phenomenon that will grow in size and importance as the conflict in Syria and Iraq continues. It provides a compilation of the 58 cases of public defection; a summary of what their testimonies tell us about their reasons for joining and leaving IS;

1 Cited in full transcript of interview with Ebrahim B., Northern German Broadcasting (NDR), 1 August 2015.

2 Private messenger conversation, 25 August 2014.

3 See, for example, Richard Kerbaj, ‘Jihadists from UK stuck in Turkey after deserting Isis’, *The Sunday Times*, 5 October 2014.

4 For a definition of the terms of jihadist and jihadism, see Peter R. Neumann, *The New Jihadism: A Global Snapshot* (London: ICSR, 2014), pp. 9–10.

and an assessment of the defectors' role and potential, as well as recommendations for how their voices can be amplified.

The report does not attempt to excuse, justify or glorify people's decision to join IS. Nor does it pretend that all defectors have abandoned the ideas that caused them to join. Some, in fact, are likely to have committed crimes. Their experiences, motivations and mindsets are diverse, and too little information is available to know whether they were perpetrators, victims – or indeed both.

What nearly all of them share, however, is a sense of outrage about IS' extreme brutality, violence and abuse against the very people it claims to defend: the Sunni Muslims of Syria and Iraq. This narrative has caused many to turn their backs on IS, flee abroad, and – in some cases – risk their lives by speaking out. Whatever their personal and political views, their testimony is unique and valuable.

Our conclusions are simple:

The defectors' testimony can be important in helping to prevent young people from being radicalized and recruited. No one has more credibility in challenging the IS narrative and giving a realistic impression of the group and the totalitarian society it seeks to create than the people who have experienced it. In our view, governments can do more to remove obstacles that prevent defectors from speaking up.

Even so, the narrative of brutality, conflict and indiscriminate killing works both ways. As long as the conflicts in Syria and Iraq continue, IS – and groups like IS – will succeed in exploiting people's outrage, their sense of shared identity and religious obligation. Ultimately, therefore, defeating IS requires addressing the causes of the conflict and producing a new political order that is just and stable.

The Dataset

Our dataset consists of 58 individuals who have defected from IS and publicly spoken about their time as part of the group (see Table 1 and Appendix A). 51 of them are male, 7 are female.

The earliest cases were reported in January 2014 – just eight months after the group had come into existence – while the most recent date from August 2015. Half of the defections became public in the autumn of 2014 (12 cases in September, October and November) and the summer of 2015 (17 cases in June, July and August).

Overall, our numbers suggest that the pace of public defections has increased: almost 60 per cent of the cases were reported in the first eight months of 2015 and nearly a third took place in the last three months of observation.

The 58 defectors in our database were permanent residents or citizens of 17 countries, reflecting the group's transnational identity and international recruitment strategy. More than a third (21) were Syrians and nearly a quarter (17) from other parts of the Middle East. We also recorded 9 individuals from Western Europe and Australia, as well as 7 from Central, South and Southeast Asia. Two defectors were Turkish, and in two cases the nationality was unknown.

Having excluded duplicates and possible 'fakes', we are confident that all 58 defections are credible. The quality of their testimony varies, however, and the precise circumstances and reasons for leaving IS aren't always clear. We should stress, therefore, that our aim was not a detailed reconstruction of individual cases, which would have been impossible to achieve with the limited evidence at our disposal. Instead, we restricted ourselves to capturing the broad outlines of this new and growing phenomenon, describe its size and scope, and highlight – where possible – overarching themes, trends, and narratives.

Another serious concern was that defectors were not giving true accounts of their involvement. Having defected from IS and returned to their home countries (or Turkey), they have an incentive to downplay their ideological commitment, the role they played in crimes and atrocities, and – more generally – say whatever they think will save them from prosecution or worse. Some of the defectors are likely to fall into this category, but their narratives have been so strong and consistent that we are confident that our broader assessments remain valid. Not least, their testimonies are identical with many of the arguments we have heard from disillusioned fighters over the course of nearly three years of conducting primary research on the Syrian/Iraqi conflict.

Table 1: Public Defectors by Country and Date of Publication

	1/14	2/14	3/14	4/14	5/14	6/14	7/14	8/14	9/14	10/14	11/14	12/14	1/15	2/15	3/15	4/15	5/15	6/15	7/15	8/15	Total		
Australia														1								2	
Belgium															1								1
Egypt					1																		1
France																			1				1
Germany																			2				2
India											1												1
Indonesia																3					1		4
Iraq															1								1
Jordan																					1		1
Libya						1																	1
Saudi-Arabia			2	1						3					1	1							9
Switzerland																		1					1
Syria	2	1					1		4	1	3	1					2	1	1	4			21
Tajikistan																		1	1				2
Tunisia													1	3									4
Turkey							1												1				2
UK																					2		2
Unknown													1										2
Total	2	1	2	1	1	1	2	0	4	4	4	1	2	5	4	4	3	3	6	9			58

Recruitment Narratives

Identifying IS recruitment narratives is not the same as explaining why people join. The process of radicalization and/or recruitment is complex and multifaceted, and consists of a variety of factors and influences, such as grievance, beliefs, social dynamics, and even chance.⁵ Narratives are part of this, because they provide the rationales, justifications and incentives that convince people to join. In IS' case, those narratives have been remarkably stable and can be grouped into three categories for which we found strong evidence among the stories of the 58 defectors.

The most prominent is about the Syrian conflict and – especially – the atrocities that have been carried out by the Assad government, which many of the non-Syrians claimed they had been told about by preachers and seen documented in videos. They often perceived the conflict in sectarian terms, and believed that (Sunni) Muslims in Syria were faced with genocide. Confronted with the notion of an 'existential threat', which David Malet has written about in other contexts,⁶ this helped create a strong sense of obligation based on humanitarian instincts and their (Sunni) Muslim identity.

The second narrative relates to faith and ideology. Many defectors became convinced that IS represented a perfect Islamic state which every Muslim had a duty to support and help succeed. In their view, it offered the opportunity to live in accordance with Sharia law and fight for a holy cause. In the majority of cases, the defectors who articulated this narrative had been part of extremist milieus and accepted the notion and legitimacy of a jihadist state long before it was declared. For them, going to Syria was a logical consequence of the extremist beliefs and ideology they had been socialized into.

The third narrative appeals to personal and material needs. Some of the defectors mentioned promises of food, luxury goods, cars, and having their debts paid off. Others said they were attracted by notions of adventure, brotherhood, fighting, and the chance of becoming a hero. They are the ones who were least likely to be religiously literate, and rarely articulated a strong sense of religious obligation or identity. That they nevertheless joined an organization whose alleged *raison d'être* is to create a society in which selfish desires have no place seems like a contradiction, and may be indicative of social pressures, countercultural dynamics, or – simply – their lack of intellectual sophistication.

5 See Peter R. Neumann, *Preventing Violent Radicalization in America* (Washington DC: Bipartisan Policy Center, 2011), pp. 15–6.

6 See David Malet, *Foreign Fighters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

Defection Narratives

The reasons that the 58 defectors provided for leaving the group often mirrored those that had convinced them to join. Practically all of them argued that the group hadn't lived up to their (political, religious, or material) expectations, and that IS' actions and behaviors were inconsistent with its own claims and ideology. In a small number of cases, this seems to have prompted a re-examination of their commitment to the jihadist ideology. But for the majority, the critique of IS continued to be framed in jihadist and/or sectarian terms.

Narrative #1: Infighting

One of the most persistent of the defectors' criticisms was the extent to which IS has been involved in fighting against other Sunni rebels. While the group's leadership considers the Free Syrian Army, Ahrar al-Sham, and al-Qaeda's affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra as enemies and has engaged in vicious battles with all of them, grassroots members are often less hostile. Many defectors argued that fighting against other Sunni groups was wrong, counterproductive and religiously illegitimate. Several described the infighting as *fitna* – an emotive term which is mentioned in the Quran and has been used throughout Islamic history to refer to periods of internal division and civil strife.

Another part of this critique is the accusation that IS had failed to confront the Assad regime. From the defectors' perspective, toppling the regime didn't seem to be a priority for IS, and little was done to help the (Sunni) Muslims who were targeted by it. Instead, they argued, most of the group's attention seemed to be consumed by the quarrels with other rebel groups and the leadership's obsession with alleged 'spies' and 'traitors'. This, many said, was not the kind of jihad they had come to Syria and Iraq to fight.

Narrative #2: Brutality against (Sunni) Muslims

Another defector narrative addresses the group's brutality. Many of the individuals in our dataset complained about atrocities and the killing of innocent civilians. Their testimonies referred to military operations which had no regard for 'collateral damage' and led to the deaths of numerous women and children. They also cited the random killing of hostages, the systematic mistreatment of villagers, and the execution of fighters by their own commanders.

Even so, none of the specific episodes that were highlighted by the defectors involved minorities or others that could be seen as 'apostates' or 'infidels'. The only brutality that the majority of defectors objected to was violence against 'Muslims' – that is, *Sunni* Muslims – whose rights they believed should have been protected. Brutality, therefore, didn't seem to be a universal concern: it was seen through a sectarian lens, and caused outrage mostly when its victims were fellow Sunnis.

Narrative #3: Corruption and Un-Islamic Behaviors

The corruption narrative covers a range of behaviors that defectors considered unjust, selfish, and contrary to the group's ideals and standards of conduct. Practically no one believed that corruption was systemic (though one described the leadership as a 'band of mercenaries' whose principal objective was to cut oil and business deals with the very people it was meant to fight). For the majority, incidents of 'corruption' had to do with the conduct of individual commanders and 'emirs' who had mistreated their fighters and favored some over others. The Syrian defectors complained about privileges that were given to foreigners, for which they claimed was no justification based on the group's philosophy or Islam in general.

Indeed, many of the defectors who criticized 'corruption' implied that the behaviors they had witnessed were un-Islamic, and that senior members had failed to live up to the Islamic State's central promise, which is to create a perfect Islamic society. While many were willing to tolerate the hardships of war, they found it impossible to accept instances of unfairness, inequality, and racism, which they said went against everything the IS claimed to stand for.

Narrative #4: Quality of Life

A small but significant number of the defectors expressed disappointment about living conditions and the quality of life. They were typically among the ones who had joined the group for material and 'selfish' reasons, and quickly realized that none of the luxury goods and cars that they had been promised would materialize. Moreover, Westerners seemed to find it hard to cope with shortages of electricity and basic goods, though few were willing to admit that this was the reason they defected from the group.

A related aspect was the defectors' experience of combat, which – in many cases – failed to meet their expectations of action and heroism. One of them referred to his duties as 'dull' and complained about the lack of deployments, while others claimed that foreign fighters were systematically 'exploited' and used as cannon fodder. Two individuals decided to defect upon learning that their commanders were planning to deploy them as suicide bombers. They wanted to first experience fighting and get an opportunity to enjoy the spoils of war before going on their final mission.

Obstacles to Defection

Wannabe defectors are faced with numerous obstacles. Their first challenge is to separate from IS and make their way into non-IS held territory. But even those who succeed are not necessarily safe. What prevents them from speaking out is the fear of reprisals and that their openness may be used against them.

Getting Out

The initial hurdles are both practical and psychological. IS, after all, is an army that requires members' full commitment and views itself as the ultimate realization of a divine plan. Defections, therefore, will be considered 'acts of apostasy' and those who leave enemies of the faith. Wannabe defectors need to be one hundred per cent sure that IS does not represent the 'true faith', and that defecting does not equal leaving Islam.

Defectors also have to be shrewd: they need to avoid attracting the attention of IS' internal police, which has executed dozens of fighters as 'spies' and 'traitors',⁷ and come up with a convincing reason that allows them to get away from their units and cross the border.

For defectors who are originally from Syria, one of the Turkish border towns is likely to be their new home: they have to start building a new life with little money or support and the constant fear of being tracked down. What stops them from going public is the concern for their own safety and that of their families who may still be inside IS territory.

Foreign defectors face a different challenge: their governments are likely to see them as 'sleepers' or 'dangerous returnees'. Some may not want them back, have cancelled their passports or withdrawn their citizenships, while others will remain deeply skeptical about their claims of disillusionment.

Reprisals

The majority of IS recruits are no world travelers: they are desperate to see their families, and typically return to the towns and villages where they grew up and first joined the jihadist movement. They are likely to run into friends who are still supporters of IS. Where those friends have links with active fighters, the news about the defection might have spread, and defectors could be exposed to threats, assaults, or worse.

Going public, therefore, means moving to a different part of the country, going into hiding, and making sure that family members are protected. It also means having to build an entirely new social circle, coping with a new and unfamiliar environment, and learning to live with the constant fear of being discovered. Not every defector wants to live this kind of life.

⁷ 'Isis executes 100 deserters in Syria's Raqqa', *Al Arabiya*, 20 December 2014.

Prosecution

Another obstacle is the threat of prosecution. Many of the countries from where fighters have gone to join IS have started bringing charges against those who have come back. Although many governments have exercised their powers with discretion and prioritize the ones who are believed to pose an imminent risk, practically everyone who is known to have returned faces legal proceedings and lengthy prison sentences.

In many jurisdictions, there are no legal incentives for disillusioned fighters and defectors to come out and share their story. Whatever they say in public may, in fact, be used against them. Given that IS membership is difficult to prove, and that any admission of involvement in fighting will increase the length of the sentence, they are – in most cases – better off if they remain silent.

Recommendations

Defectors from IS are a new and growing phenomenon. Since January 2014, at least 58 individuals have left the group and publicly spoken about their defection. They represent a small fraction of the many disillusioned fighters who have turned against IS.

Their reasons for leaving may be as complex as the reasons they joined. Not everyone has become a fervent supporter of liberal democracy. Some may have committed crimes. They joined the most violent and totalitarian organization of our age, yet they are now its worst enemies, and their stories can be used as potentially powerful tools in the fight against it:

- They **shatter the image of unity and determination** that IS seeks to convey.
- Their narratives **highlight the group's contradictions and hypocrisies**, and expose many of their promises as lies.
- Their example **encourages members to leave the group**.
- Their experience and credibility can help **deter others from joining**.

Among the first to recognize the value of defector narratives has been the U.S. State Department's Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications, which has recently started to amplify their voices. Others need to follow.

Our recommendations are:

- For governments and activists **to recognize the value and credibility of defector narratives;**
- **To provide defectors with opportunities to speak out;**
- **To assist them in resettlement and ensure their safety;**
- **To remove legal disincentives** that prevent them from going public.

The defectors' voices are strong and clear: 'IS is not protecting Muslims. It is killing them'. They need to be heard.

Appendix A: Public Defections from IS

#	Name	Nationality	Sex	Date	Source
1	Abdallah al-Sihli	Saudi	M	29/03/15	YouTube
2	Abul Hakim Munabari	Indonesian	M	01/04/15	Jakarta Post
3	Abu Abdallah	Saudi	M	23/10/14	YouTube
4	Abu Abdullah	Syrian	M	10/11/14	Telegraph
5	Abu al-Layth al-Ansari	Syrian	M	01/11/14	YouTube
6	Abu al-Mouthanna	Syrian	M	06/11/14	FNC
7	Abu Ammara	Syrian	M	18/02/14	CNN
8	Abu Dujanah al-Libi	Libyan	M	22/06/14	Al Alan News
9	Abu Hamzah	Tunisian	M	16/01/15	Al Alan News
10	Abu Handhala	Syrian	M	23/05/15	Al Alan News
11	Abu Ibrahim	Syrian	M	10/08/15	Foreign Policy
12	Abu Ibrahim*	Australian	M	09/02/15	CBS News
13	Abu Julaybib	Syrian	M	06/05/15	Al Alan News
14	Abu Muthena	Syrian	M	30/08/15	NBC News
15	Abu Omar	Syrian	M	29/09/14	Buzzfeed
16	Abu Yusr al-Masri	Egyptian	M	27/05/14	Al Alan News
17	Adam Brookman*	Australian	M	20/05/15	The Age
18	Ahmad Junaedi	Indonesian	M	01/04/15	Jakarta Post
19	Ali	Tunisia	M	03/02/15	New York Daily News
20	Areeb Majeed	Indian	M	30/11/14	Times of India
21	Ayoub B.	German	M	17/07/15	Telegraph
22	Bandar Ma'shi	Saudi	M	13/10/14	YouTube
23	Unknown	Likely Turkish	M	14/07/14	BBC
24	Unknown	Syrian	M	25/09/14	NPR
25	Unknown	Syrian	M	04/09/14	CNN
26	Unknown	Syrian	M	17/11/14	BBC
27	Unknown	Syrian	M	23/01/14	Al Alan News
28	Unknown	Unknown	M	15/09/14	BBC
29	Unknown	Turkish	M	27/07/15	NBC
30	Unknown	Jordanian	M	27/08/15	Khaberni
31	Unknown	British	M	26/08/15	Independent
32	Dua	Syrian	F	13/08/15	NBC
33	Ebrahim B.	German	M	17/07/15	ARD
34	Farukh Sharifov	Tajik	M	05/07/15	AP
35	Ghaith	Tunisian	M	03/02/15	New York Daily News
36	Hamad Abdul Rahman	Saudi	M	03/02/15	New York Daily News
37	Hamza	Iraqi	M	17/03/15	New York Post
38	Helmi Alamudi	Indonesian	M	01/14/15	Jakarta Post
39	Jamolbee Khamidova	Tajik	F	21/08/15	BBC
40	Jejoen Bontinck	Belgian	M	11/03/15	Guardian
41	Khadja	Syrian	F	05/10/14	CNN
42	Majd al-Din	Swiss	M	08/06/15	Al Monitor
43	Mazlan	Indonesian	M	17/08/15	Strait Times
44	Mufri al-Kathami	Saudi	M	23/04/14	YouTube
45	Muhammad al-Sulayti	Saudi	M	07/04/15	YouTube
46	Muhammad al-Utaybi	Saudi	M	26/03/14	YouTube
47	Muhammad al-Asiri	Saudi	M	13/10/14	YouTube
48	Murad	Syrian	M	19/01/14	Telegraph
49	Saleh	Unknown	M	10/03/15	Sky News
50	Maher Abu Ubaida	Syrian	M	31/07/14	Al Monitor
51	Shukee Begum	British	F	15/08/15	Telegraph
52	Sofiane	French	M	30/07/15	France TV
53	Sulayman al-Fifi	Saudi	M	26/03/14	YouTube
54	Umm Asmah	Syrian	F	25/06/15	Al Alan News
55	Umm Abaid	Syrian	F	13/07/15	PBS
56	Umm Ous	Syrian	F	13/08/15	NBC News
57	Usaid Barho	Syrian	M	16/12/14	New York Times
58	Youssef Akkari	Tunisian	M	03/02/15	New York Daily News

* There is speculation that Adam Brokman and Abu Ibrahim may be the same person, but this could not be fully verified by the time this report went to print.

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