Homegrown Terrorist Radicalization: The Toronto 18 in Comparative Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Canadian concern with the domestic threat of religious terrorism came of age with the arrest of the members of the Toronto 18 in 2006. This chapter seeks to increase our understanding of this case by placing it in comparative perspective in three ways. First, by arguing that the Toronto 18 represents one of the purest instances of so-called "homegrown terrorism." Second, by comparing the data available on the ten adults convicted with the data available on similar terrorists in Europe, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Findings are examined for age, ethnicity, socio-economic status, education, occupations, criminality, mental health, and family and religious background. Third, insights from two recent and comprehensive theories of the process of radicalization, Lorne Dawson's "social ecology model" and Arie Kruglanski et al.'s "3 N model" are used to make better sense of what happened and why. In the end, however, much remains unclear because we still lack the appropriate data.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The seemingly constant threat posed to governments by terrorism is troublesome. The threat posed by so-called "homegrown terrorism," which increased in prominence in Western countries after the London 7/7 bombings (7 July 2005), raised the stakes. Nothing brings the "why" question so sharply to the fore. Why would these young men turn against their fellow citizens with such deadly intent and force? The question looms large not just because of the potential harm to life, liberty, and property, but perhaps, even more, the damage done to our self-conception as safe and relatively harmonious societies (at least in terms of politically or ideologically inspired violence). In this regard, the arrest of the so-called "Toronto 18" in 2006 marked a watershed moment for Canadians. An attack on the core values and institutions of our society, by young people, who were either born or raised in Canada, seemed a strange and unsettling development.

There have been many noteworthy instances of "domestic" terrorism in Western societies. One need only think of the bombing of the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City in 1995, or the bomb that brought down Air India Flight 182 just after it left Canada in 1985.[1] These were the two deadliest acts of domestic terrorism in North America, prior to 9/11. To the extent that people were aware of these events, they were inclined to see them, however, as tragic exceptions, and to think of the perpetrators as rare, marginal, and unbalanced. After the Toronto 18 case, many Canadians realized they could no longer afford to adopt such an attitude. Even more fundamentally, the wave of terrorist plots involving individuals and groups inspired by Jihadism in Europe, the United Kingdom, the United States, Australia, and Canada, set off disturbing concerns about a "clash of civilizations" and the suspect status of whole communities of new citizens.

Can we gain greater clarity about the Toronto 18 case, more than a decade later, by turning to the copious research into who is involved in these Jihadist plots? In this chapter, we make an initial effort to do so, and, in the process, we gain a better sense of why the Toronto 18 case remains

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[1] "The Oklahoma City Bombing," FBI – History, accessed January 12, 2021, https://www.fbi.gov/history/famous-cases/oklahoma-city-bombing; "Air India Flight 182," CBC Digital Archives, broadcasted June 23, 1985, https://www.cbc.ca/archives/entry/air-india-flight-182.

significant. Surprisingly, there are only three academic publications dedicated to the analysis of this case.[2] It is discussed as well in several more general analyses of Jihadism in Canada,[3] and one of the two RCMP agents involved in the case, Mubin Shaikh, published an autobiography.[4] The case has yet to receive the analytic attention it deserves.

The Toronto 18 may well represent one of the purest instances of so-called "homegrown terrorism," and the profile of those convicted points to significant differences between Jihadists in North America, on the one hand, and the United Kingdom and Western Europe, on the other. These differences are consequential for theorizing about the nature and causes of the process of radicalization leading to violence for Jihadists, and perhaps for other violent extremists as well. Consequently, in the first part of this chapter, we briefly make the case for seeing the Toronto 18 as an early and paradigmatic instance of homegrown terrorism. In the second part, we examine the demographic profile of the ten adults convicted in the Toronto 18 case and compare the information with what is now available on the larger set of Jihadists studied in Europe, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The discussion sets the basic parameters for any comparative analyses of the Toronto 18, and thus the wider explanatory context for making sense of what happened and why, as well as its relative significance. Is the profile of this group typical or atypical? In the third part of the chapter, we discuss the process of radicalization leading towards violence and apply insights from the research literature to what little we know about

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[2]   Lorne L. Dawson, "Trying to Make Sense of Home-Grown Terrorist Radicalization: The Case of the Toronto 18," in *Religious Radicalization and Securitization in Canada and Beyond*, eds. Paul Bramadat and Lorne Dawson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), 64–91; Stewart Bell, "Leadership and the Toronto 18," in *The Evolution of the Global Terrorist Threat: From 9/11 to Osama Bin Ladin's Death*, eds. Bruce Hoffman and Fernando Reinares (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 143–62; Marie Ouellet and Martin Bouchard, "The 40 Members of the Toronto 18: Group Boundaries and the Analysis of Illicit Networks," *Deviant Behavior* 39, no. 11 (2018): 1467–482.

[3]   Alex Wilner, *Enemies Within: Confronting Homegrown Terrorism in Canada* (Halifax: Atlantic Institute for Market Studies, 2008), https://www.deslibris.ca/IDFR/214817; Sam Mullins, "Global Jihad: The Canadian Experience," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 25, no. 5 (2013): 734–76; John McCoy and W. Andy Knight, "Homegrown Terrorism in Canada: Local Pattern, Global Trends," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 38, no. 4 (2015): 253–74.

[4]   Anne Speckhard and Mubin Shaikh, *Undercover Jihadi: Inside the Toronto 18 Al Qaeda Inspired, Homegrown Terrorism in the West* (McLean, VA: Advances Press, 2014), chapter X.

the members of the Toronto 18. The analysis remains preliminary and incomplete since we lack sufficient data – such as interviews with many of the participants themselves or those closest to them.

Attempts to explain what happened in this case, and most others, involve grappling with the specificity problem.[5] When we talk about causes of radicalization to violence, the most plausible set of explanatory factors and processes – such as political grievances, socio-economic status, education, mental health concerns, religiosity, and so on – continue to apply to a wider set of individuals than the few who engage in this kind of political violence.[6] Wide swaths of the Canadian public hold political grievances, for instance, but a vanishingly small percentage ever turn to violence to address them. The explanations offered, in other words, lack sufficient specificity. This limitation is endemic to terrorism studies,[7] but as research continues, we can slowly reduce the gaps in our knowledge. That is our objective in this chapter.

II. THE TORONTO 18 IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE: WHAT IS HOMEGROWN TERRORISM?

The notion of "homegrown terrorism" entered discourse on security threats in academic and policy circles after the London bombings in 2005. The label identified a seemingly new development, at least in terms of Jihadist terrorism: attacks perpetrated by Muslims living in the West on the other citizens of the same countries. It also came to be associated with the idea that these terrorists operated quite independently of any guidance from more centralized international terrorist organizations, such as al-Qaeda. The use of the term reflected an emerging debate over whether al-

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[5] Max Taylor, *The Terrorist* (London: Brassey's, 1988); John Horgan, *The Psychology of Terrorism* (London: Routledge, 2005), 74, 101; Lorne L. Dawson, "Clarifying the Explanatory Context for Developing Theories of Radicalization: Five Basic Considerations," *Journal of Deradicalization* 18 (Spring 2018): 146–84. For the specificity problem, see the summary on 149–52.

[6] For overviews of the radicalization literature see e.g., Anja Dalgaard-Nielsen, "Violent Radicalization in Europe: What We Know and What We Do Not Know," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 33, no. 9 (2010): 797–814; Mohammed Hafez and Creighton Mullins, "The Radicalization Puzzle: A Theoretical Synthesis of Empirical Approaches to Homegrown Extremism," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 38, no. 11 (2015): 958–75.

[7] Marc Sageman, "The Stagnation in Terrorism Research," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 26, no. 4 (2014): 565–80; Dawson, "Clarifying the Explanatory Context."

Qaeda was in decline and whether security officials should turn their attention to a new threat that is more challenging: networks of more amorphous and autonomous Jihadi cells, or even just radicalized individuals.[8] The new threat was associated with the train bombings in Spain (2004), the London bombings (2005), the Hofstad Group in The Netherlands (2004–2005), Operation Pendennis in Sydney and Melbourne (2005–2006), the Boston Marathon bombings (2013), and later the attacks inspired by the Islamic State in Paris (2015), Brussels (2016), and elsewhere. In fact, the label seemed to apply to a wide array of attacks and plots in Western Europe, the United Kingdom, North America, and Australia, including the Toronto 18.

Use of the term, however, soon came under criticism. With time and further investigation, researchers found links, in some of the key cases, with various international sources of support, training, and guidance. They discovered, for example, that the two leaders of the London bombings, Mohammed Siddique Khan and Shezad Tanweer, twice travelled to Pakistan where they may have received some training and first planned their attack.[9] Moreover, the term seems to apply equally well to earlier instances of "domestic terrorism," such as le Front de liberation du Quebec or the Red Army Faction. The members of these groups came from the nations they were attacking, and they operated through semi-autonomous cells. What then was the difference, and why was a new term necessary? No clear answer is available, yet the term continues to be used in the scholarly literature. There have been some efforts to develop a more systematic approach, teasing apart the precise definitional aspects of the issue. Crone and Harrow, for example, developed a classic fourfold typology with the following ideal types of homegrown terrorism: internal autonomous, internal affiliated, external autonomous, and external affiliated.[10] The latter type is, of course, actually an instance of non-homegrown terrorism.

Overall, however, the term's usage remains loose, and we might best think of it as a continuum, with some cases of terrorism being more homegrown-like than others. In this sense, the Toronto 18 stands out as a

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8   Elaine Sciolino and Eric Schmitt, "A Not Very Private Feud Over Terrorism," *New York Times*, June 8, 2008, https://www.nytimes.com/2008/06/08/weekinreview/.html.

9   Bruce Hoffman, "The 7 July 2005 London Bombings," in *The Evolution of the Global Terrorist Threat*, eds. Bruce Hoffman and Fernando Reinares (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 192–223.

10   Manni Crone and Martin Harrow, "Homegrown Terrorism in the West," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 23, no. 4 (2011): 521–36.

quintessential case of "homegrown terrorism." Were the perpetrators citizens or foreign nationals? Were they born and raised largely outside the country? Did they receive training abroad? Were they agents of international terrorist networks? Were they veterans of foreign wars or insurgencies involving terrorist groups or tactics? Did they receive direct guidance and encouragement to perpetrate an attack, online or otherwise, from foreign terrorist groups or individuals? In the case of the Toronto 18, the answer to each question is no, suggesting it should be located towards the homegrown end of a spectrum.

The group did have some online contact with a British extremist, Aabid Khan. Known as Abu Umar, he was an active recruiter for terrorist groups in Pakistan. Investigative reporter Stewart Bell reported that Umar "led the Toronto group's online discussion about how to train, where, with whom, and how to finance it."[11] He also came to Toronto in March of 2005, where two of his online associates, Syed Haris Ahmed and Ehsanul Islam, from Atlanta, Georgia, joined him. During their weeklong visit, they discussed possible terrorist attacks, in the United States and Canada, with some members of the Toronto 18. They also discussed travelling together to Pakistan to receive training. Only one member of the Toronto 18, however, ever went to Pakistan, Jahmaal James, and he fell ill and failed to make contact with any radical groups.

From the limited information available, it is hard to gauge the significance of these contacts. In a brief interview we conducted with the chief RCMP undercover agent, Mubin Shaikh (see also Chapter 4), he suggested several reasons for why he attaches a lot of importance to this visit by Khan and the two budding terrorists from Atlanta:

> They were online for some time. When the two from Atlanta came up, Abid Khan from Manchester came to Toronto as well. They all got together and decided that they were going to do something. This is why after this meeting you had Yasin Mohamed and Ali Dirie go down to bring guns back, you had Jahmaal James go to Pakistan for training, and why you had the training that happened in December. It was this meeting that led them to move from talk to action.[12]

He indicates it solidified the intent of the key members of the Toronto 18 to undertake some kind of training and perpetrate attacks. The record of evidence, from members of the Toronto 18 themselves, is too limited to determine if this is true. The individuals in the Toronto 18 were not

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[11]   Bell, "Leadership," 147.
[12]   Speckhard and Shaikh, *Undercover Jihadi*, 253–54.

members of al-Qaeda, and no foreign terrorist organization ever specifically directed the actions of the Canadians. They were collecting, circulating, and discussing ideological texts and videos created by al-Qaeda and other Jihadists, and their conversations reveal that the key members of the group thought they were followers of al-Qaeda. As Bell concludes, they were "al-Qaeda inspired."[13] From our casual conversations with some members of the Toronto 18, however, it seems clear that this label is only accurate for some of them. Others, who came across the label "al-Qaeda inspired" in newspaper articles, felt it did not characterize their involvement accurately.

Using the rhetoric and ideas of al-Qaeda marks the group as Jihadists; it does not help us to gauge whether the group was homegrown. They were a cohort of Canadian citizens, several born in Canada, and all raised in Canada, who independently formed a group and hatched a plot. They financed their own activities, developed their own resources (with the covert help of the RCMP), operated exclusively in Canada, and were intent on killing Canadians to force an adjustment in Canadian government policies with regard to the war in Afghanistan. Overall, this places them very close to the homegrown end of any spectrum, even though they were part of a burgeoning global movement of Jihadist radicalism.

III. THE TORONTO 18 IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE: DEMOGRAPHIC CONSIDERATIONS

This comparative analysis is limited to the ten men convicted in this case (see the timeline in Appendix B for more information, as well as the cast of characters in Appendix A). There is insufficient information available on the one youth convicted, and the three youths and four other adults who had their charges stayed. The *Youth Criminal Justice Act* protects the privacy of young persons who are accused or found guilty of a crime, keeping their identity and other personal information confidential. The current analysis relies, moreover, on open sources, such as court documents and media reports, which poses problems for the reliability of the data. This limitation is, however, endemic to terrorism studies.[14] Below, we compare information on the age, ethnicity, socio-economic status, education and occupation, criminality, family and religious background, and mental health of the members of the Toronto 18 with the limited data available on

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13   Bell, "Leadership," 149–50.
14   See Sageman, "Stagnation."

other Jihadists. To maximize the information provided, this includes both participants in domestic attacks and plots and those Western "foreign fighters" who travelled from Europe and North America to fight for Jihadist groups in Syria and Iraq.

A. Age

The age of the ten men convicted in the Toronto 18 case ranged from 18 to 30 years old at the time of their arrest. The average age was 21.8. Nine of the ten were younger than 25 years old. In comparison, assessing the data available on the 336 participants in 65 cases of Jihadist terrorism in Europe between 11 September 2001, and 31 December 2009, Edwin Bakker found that the average age at the time of arrest was 27.7.[15] Examining 171 individuals convicted of al-Qaeda-related offences, or who died in suicide attacks, in the United States between 1997 and 2011, Robin Simcox and Emily Dyer found an average age of 29.6 years. The modal age, however, was 24, with over half being under the age of 30 and one-third between 20 to 24 years.[16] Summarizing the findings of 34 studies with at least some empirical data on foreign Jihadi fighters in Syria and Iraq coming from Europe and North America, Dawson[17] found that ten studies provide mean ages for the men ranging from 23.5[18] to 27.5.[19] The average of the ages

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[15] Edwin Bakker, "Characteristics of Jihadi Terrorists in Europe (2001–2009)," in *Jihadi Terrorism and the Radicalisation Challenge*, ed. Rik Coolsaet, 2nd ed. (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2011), 141.

[16] Robin Simcox and Emily Dyer, *Al-Qaeda in the United States: A Complete Analysis of Terrorism Offences* (London: Henry Jackson Society, 2013), vii, https://henryjacksonsoc iety.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/Al-Qaeda-in-the-USAbridged-version-LOWRE S-Final.pdf.

[17] Lorne L. Dawson, "A Comparative Analysis of the Data on Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq: Who Went and Why?" (February 2021), https://icct.nl/publication/ a-comparative-analysis-of-the-data-on-western-foreign-fighters-in-syria-and-iraq-who-went-and-why/."

[18] Edwin Bakker and Roel de Bont, "Belgian and Dutch Jihadist Foreign Fighters (2012–2015): Characteristics, Motivations, and Roles in the War in Syria and Iraq," *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 27, no. 5 (2016): 837–57.

[19] Norwegian Police Security Service, "What Background do Individuals Who Frequent Extreme Islamist Environments in Norway have Prior to their Radicalisations?" (12 September 2016). There are likely some differences between those who launch domestic attacks and those who become foreign fighters (see Thomas Hegghammer, "Should I Stay or Should I Go? Explaining Variation in Western Jihadists' Choice between Domestic and Foreign Fighting," *American Political Science Review* 107, no. 1

reported is 26.5 years. Alex Wilner reports a similar finding from his dataset of 95 individuals "with a nexus to Canada who have, or are suspected of having, radicalized, mobilized, and/or participated in Islamist terrorist activity between 2006 and 2017."[20] The average age is 27. In every case, the overall range of ages is quite broad, with older individuals and youth involved. It is clear, however, that Jihadi terrorism is largely a young man's game, but the Toronto 18 stands out as one of the youngest groups of Jihadi terrorists. If we were also to consider the role of multiple underage youths in the group's activities (charged and not charged), then the relative age is even younger.[21]

B. Ethnicity

Like the vast majority of Jihadists in other contexts,[22] the ten adults convicted in the Toronto 18 case were the children of immigrants. Unlike the majority of European Jihadists, however, who are born and raised in Europe,[23] seven of the ten members of the Toronto 18 were born and partially raised elsewhere. They came to Canada as children. One each came from Egypt, Afghanistan, Jordan, Somalia, and Saudi Arabia, and two from Pakistan, though the parents of the child born in Saudi Arabia are Pakistani. Three were born in Canada with parents from Fiji, Pakistan, and

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(February 2013): 1–15), but they tend to come from the same pool of potential jihadists.

[20]   Alex Wilner, *Canadian Terrorists by the Numbers: An Assessment of Canadians Joining and Supporting Terrorist Groups* (Ottawa: MacDonald-Laurier Institute, 2019), 21, https://ma
cdonaldlaurier.ca/files/pdf/20190205_MLI_Canadian_Terrorists_Wilner_PAPERW
ebFinal.pdf.

[21]   In the studies, it is not always clear whether the age stated reflects the age when individuals left to fight abroad, were arrested or convicted for a terrorist offence, or simply when they were interviewed. Moreover, the relationship of the average ages reported to the time at which the individuals first radicalized remains unknown. Scholars engaged in the study of Jihadists in the West have sensed they are getting younger (see e.g., Robin Simcox, "The Islamic State's Western Teenage Plotters," *CTC Sentinel* 10, no. 2 (February 2017): 21–26.). However, only one study has documented this trend so far (see e.g., Shandon Harris-Hogan and Kate Barrelle, "Young Blood: Understanding the Emergence of a New Cohort of Australian Jihadists," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 32, no. 7 (June 2018): 11).

[22]   Bakker and de Bont, "Characteristics," 139; Dawson, "Clarifying the Explanatory Context."

[23]   Bakker and de Bont, "Characteristics," 139.

the West Indies. Of the ten, six arrived in Canada between the ages of nine and twelve, and one came as a "youth."

The sheer prevalence of immigrant backgrounds suggests that some aspect of the shared immigrant experience plays a significant role in the process of radicalization.[24] How this is the case, however, is far from clear. There is much speculation about the potential influence of generational culture clashes at home, generational refugee trauma, racism and discrimination, immigrant religious identity, and the failure of integration and inclusion in the process of radicalization.[25] The specificity problem looms large, however, since millions of young people from immigrant backgrounds experience these challenges, and only a few ever engage in ideologically inspired violence.[26]

Some scholars of European Jihadism have also noted a tendency for Western Jihadist terrorists to cluster along ethnic lines.[27] Three of the four bombers in London, for instance, were second-generation Muslims of Pakistani origin while seven of the nine men arrested in Melbourne, and five of the nine men arrested in Sydney, in Operation Pendennis, shared a Lebanese background. In the Toronto 18 case, the ethnic composition of the group is much more diverse. The bond seems to be primarily their shared identity as Muslim immigrants, and many were students together in high schools where Muslims were a distinct minority.

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[24] Lorne L. Dawson, "Sketch of a Social Ecology Model for Explaining Homegrown Terrorist Radicalisation," *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism: The Hague* 8, no. 1 (2017), https://dx.doi.org/10.19165/2017.1.01.

[25] Basia Spalek, "Disconnection and Exclusion: Pathways to Radicalization?" in *Islamic Political Radicalism: A European Perspective*, ed. Tahir Abbas (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 2007), 192–206; Mirella L. Stroink and Richard V. Wagner, "Process and Preconditions Underlying Terrorism in Second Generation Immigrants," *Peace and Conflict* 13, no. 3 (2007): 293–312; Jocelyne Cesari, "Muslims in Europe and the Risk of Radicalism," in *Jihadi Terrorism and the Radicalisation Challenge in Europe*, ed. Rik Coolsaet (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 97–107; Stuart Croft, "Constructing Ontological Insecurity: The Insecuritization of Britain's Muslim," *Contemporary Security Policy* 33, no. 2 (2012): 219–35.

[26] Maria Sobolewska, "Religious Extremism in Britain and British Muslims: Threatened Citizenship and the Role of Religion," in *The New Extremism in 21st Century Britain*, eds. Roger Eatwell and Matthew J. Goodwin (London: Routledge, 2010), 23–46; Sadiq Rahimi and Raissa Graumans, "Reconsidering the Relationship Between Integration and Radicalization," *Journal of Deradicalization* 5 (Winter 2015): 28–62.

[27] Petter Nesser, *Islamist Terrorism in Europe: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Angel Rabasa and Cheryl Benard, *Eurojihad: Patterns of Islamist Radicalization and Terrorism in Europe* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

C. Socioeconomic Status, Education, and Occupation

From the data gathered on 336 Jihadi terrorists (between 2001 and 2009) from open sources (e.g., media and court records), Bakker was able to glean limited information on the socio-economic status of only 93 individuals.[28] He estimates five of these came from upper-class backgrounds, 36 from middle class, and 52 from lower class. The occupational data for 125 individuals reflects this preponderance of persons with lower socio-economic backgrounds. Thirty-four were unskilled workers, 19 had semi-skilled occupations, and only 16 had jobs that might be skilled. Thirty percent were unemployed when arrested.[29] These findings correspond with Dawson's synthesis of findings from 34 studies with empirical data on Western foreign Jihadist fighters.[30] He found there is a substantial number of studies of European foreign fighters that indicate these fighters come disproportionately from the lower socio-economic ranks of society. The education levels are lower as well, and the levels of unemployment are higher than the norm in their countries.[31]

In every case, however, information is available for only a small subset of the foreign fighters in their samples, and, given the reliance on open sources or police records, the reliability and representativeness of the data is unknown. There are also sizable numbers of fighters who run contrary to this trend. Ahmed and Pisoiu found, for example, that while the majority of the German fighters in their sample (54) were working class, the majority of the British fighters were middle class (with data for 41 individuals). Likewise, educationally, one-third of the U.K. sample "were university educated or about to attend university," while most of the Germans had not progressed beyond high school and only one had gone to university.

[28] Bakker and de Bont, "Characteristics."
[29] Bakker and de Bont, "Characteristics," 140.
[30] Dawson, "Western Foreign Fighters."
[31] Daan Weggemanns, Edwin Bakker and Peter Grol, "Who Are They and Why Do They Go?: The Radicalisation and Preparatory Processes of Dutch Jihadist Foreign Fighters," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 8, no. 4 (2014): 100–10; Anton W. Weenink, "Behavioral Problems and Disorders among Radicals in Police Files," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9, no. 2 (2015): 17–33; Bakker and de Bont, "Belgian and Dutch"; Linus Gustafsson and Magnus Ranstorp, *Swedish Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq: An Analysis of Open-Source Intelligence and Statistical Data* (Bromma, Sweden: Arkitektkopia AB, 2017) Center for Asymmetric Threat Studies, Swedish Defence University, 2017), http://www.diva-portal.org/smash/record.jsf?pid=diva2%3A1110355&dswid=-450; Sean C. Reynolds and Mohammed M. Hafez, "Social Network Analysis of German Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 31, no. 4 (2019): 661–86.

Occupationally, the discrepancies continue, with U.K. fighters being primarily students and then white-collar workers, and German fighters being blue-collar workers, students, or persons with no occupation.[32]

Simcox and Dyer report that 52% of those who committed an al-Qaeda related offence in the United States (from 1997 to 2011), "had attended some form of college." For those perpetrators born in the U.S., the number is even higher, with 60% receiving a college education. In fact, nearly a quarter (23%) "had been educated to between college graduate and doctorate level."[33] Forty-four percent of the perpetrators were employed and 13% were students; for American-born offenders, 49% were employed and 18% were students. Wilner reports, "that just under half of the sample [of Canadian Jihadists] had enrolled in post-secondary education programs." Comparing this data with findings from Europe, he concludes, "the educational achievement of Canadian and American Islamists is exceptionally high."[34]

Eight of the ten adults convicted in the Toronto 18 case had completed high school and six had some exposure to university or college. When arrested, one had completed three years of a four-year degree before dropping out, two were full-time university students, and one was a part-time college student. There is insufficient information on the education or occupations of two others. With regard to the others, we know one was a successful entrepreneur running his own software design business, one had a semi-skilled job and was a part-time student, two were university students, and four were unemployed. The limited information available on the families suggests they largely came from the kinds of lower-middle-class to middle-class households typical of the two suburban areas where they lived (i.e., Scarborough and Mississauga). Saad Khalid says he had a typical middle-class immigrant upbringing in suburbia.[35] The majority, it is fair to

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[32] Reem Ahmed and Daniela Pisoiu, *Foreign Fighters: An Overview of Existing Research and a Comparative Study of British and German Foreign Fighters* (Hamburg, Germany: Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy at the University of Hamburg, 2014), 11–12, https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/ZEUS-WP-8-Foreign-fighters-Foreign-fighters-%3A-An-of-Ahmed-Pisoiu/8e04f0be7559a36fb78b90e6ee0459173b354b36.

[33] Simcox and Dyer, *Al-Qaeda in the United States*, viii–ix.

[34] Wilner, *Canadian Terrorists*, 23.

[35] Janet Davison and Janet Thomson, "Homegrown terrorist: Toronto 18 bomb plotter Saad Khalid recalls his radicalization," *CBC*, April 16, 2014, https://www.cbc.ca/news/ homegrown-terrorist-toronto-18-bomb-plotter-saad-khalid-recalls-his-radicalization-1.25 32671.

say, had not experienced any real material hardship in their childhoods. It is hard to draw any strong conclusions from the lower levels of education and employment of some of the members of the Toronto 18, however, since the data may simply be an artefact of their age. Certainly, it is fair to say that the ringleaders, Fahim Ahmad (unemployed) and Zakaria Amara (a gas bar attendant and part-time student), were underemployed and experiencing some hardship.

Both were married with children, though they were only 21 and 20 years old respectively. In their statements to the Court, each indicated the pressures they were experiencing as young husbands and parents struggling to provide for their families. In addition, they may have been experiencing some form of relative deprivation.[36] However, it is also fair to say that they may not have had much interest in achieving more, in a conventional sense, because of their radical commitments and rejection of the rest of society. They both were working hard at being extremists, so the causal relationship is unclear.

These findings point to the diversity of Jihadists, but, more tellingly, they are indicative of the differences many researchers have noticed between Jihadists in Western Europe, the U.K., and North America. Consequently, while experiencing low socio-economic prospects may play a causal role in the turn to Jihadism in Western Europe, its overall role in the process of radicalization, given the U.K. and American data, is less clear. Moreover, in the end, it is not clear what the findings mean. Is the failure to complete a level of education, for example, a causal indicator of radicalization or an effect of radicalization? In some cases, it may be the former, in others it may be the latter, or it may be both.

D. Criminality

Bakker reports that one-fifth of his sample of 336 Jihadists had a prior criminal record and only a few of these arrests related to terrorist activities.[37] Given the youthfulness of most of the Jihadists, this level of criminality is not particularly noteworthy because of the well-established age-crime curve

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[36] Rabasa, Benard, and others note that some data points to a substantial gap between the education levels and forms of employment of second-generation Jihadi terrorists in the U.K., so a sense of "relative deprivation" may be a contributing factor in their radicalization (see Rabassa and Benard, *Eurojihad*, 66). In the absence of appropriate interview data, however, it is hard to assess this possibility.

[37] Bakker and de Bont, "Characteristics."

detected by criminologists.[38] Young people, especially adolescents, perpetrate most crimes, and rates of offence start to decline sharply from the early to mid-20s. There has been little systematic effort, however, to apply findings from criminology and psychology on the links between youth and deviance to aspects of the process of radicalization.[39]

Nevertheless, evidence of the prior criminality of many Jihadists has set off discussions of a "crime-terror nexus."[40] In his analysis of 34 studies of Western foreign fighters, however, Dawson could find only ten that discuss data related to their criminal backgrounds.[41] Only seven of these studies present original data, and much of it is limited. Nonetheless, the studies suggest that foreign fighters do have unusually high levels of prior criminality. Bakker and de Bont state, for example, that "roughly 20%" of the Belgian and Dutch Jihadists in their sample had been "suspected of criminal activity prior to departure."[42] In this and other cases, though, much of the evidence on the criminal background of European fighters stems from police registries of "suspected criminal activities," and not convictions per se. At least seven other studies, presenting original qualitative data and case studies, fail to note any particular criminal proclivity or involvement in criminal networks.

Simcox and Dyer do not report any data about the prior criminality of perpetrators of al-Qaeda-related offences in the U.S. between 1997 and 2011.[43] This holds true for another large study of U.S. Jihadists, Lorenzo Vidino and Seamus Hughes' analysis of 71 individuals charged with ISIS-related activities between March 2014 and December 2015.[44] However, a similar study of Islamist terrorist offences in the U.K between 1998 and 2015, by Hannah Stuart, states, "[t]hirty-eight per cent of [Islamist-related

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[38] David P. Farrington, "Age and Crime," in *Crime and Justice: An Annual Review of Research*, vol. 7, eds. Michael Tonry and Norval Morris (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 189–250.

[39] Harris-Hogan and Barrelle, "Young Blood," 11–13.

[40] Rajan Basra and Peter R. Neumann, "Criminal Pasts, Terrorists Futures: European Jihadists and the New Crime-Terror Nexus," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 10, no. 6 (2016): 25–40.

[41] Dawson, "Western Foreign Fighter."

[42] Bakker and de Bont, "Belgian and Dutch," 844.

[43] Simcox and Dyer, *Al-Qaeda in the United States*.

[44] Lorenzo Vidino and Seamus Hughes, "ISIS in America: From Retweets to Raqqa," Program on Extremism, George Washington University, December 2015, https://extre mism.gwu.edu/isis-america.

offences] were committed by individuals with previous criminal convictions (26%) or a history of police contact, including prior investigations, arrests and charges that did not result in a conviction or control order/TPIM (12%)."[45]

Addressing the Canadian context, Wilner notes:

[T]he vast majority of the Canadian profiles did not have a criminal background prior to their radicalization or mobilization to violence. Only 11 percent are reported to have criminal charges laid against them prior to involvement in political violence (for theft, vandalism, drug possession, or domestic abuse, for instance).[46]

Only one member of the Toronto 18 had a criminal conviction, Mohammed Ali Dirie. This was for attempting to smuggle two handguns into Canada from the U.S. in August 2005, at the behest of Fahim Ahmad, one of the two ringleaders of the Toronto 18. Ahmad had rented the car Ali Dirie was driving when arrested at the border.

On balance then, while there is some evidence for the significance of the crime-terrorism nexus in the case of European Jihadists, including the Jihadist foreign fighters, the overall evidence for the linkage is limited, fragmentary, and a bit opaque. Certainly, it does not seem to be a causal factor shared by the Toronto 18, and perhaps North American Jihadist offenders in general. Even where there is evidence that Jihadists come disproportionately from those with criminal backgrounds, the results are open to different interpretations. Is there a continuum of motivations for criminal and terrorist activities, as Rik Coolsaet[47] and others imply, or is the turn to Jihadism indicative of an urge to overcome the criminality? The answer makes all the difference when considering the motivations of these individuals. Similarly, it is not entirely clear how knowing that a particular individual had a prior history of a non-violent offence, like vandalism, would help researchers understand their radicalization trajectory. Much of the data in the literature on the crime-terror nexus, much like the data on mental health and radicalization (discussed below), needs to be disaggregated in order to be potentially meaningful. Furthermore, some of

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[45] Hannah Stuart, *Islamist Terrorism: Analysis of Offences and Attacks in the UK (1998–2015)* (London: Henry Jackson Society, 2017), x.

[46] Wilner, *Canadian Terrorists*, 23.

[47] Rik Coolsaet, "Facing the Fourth Foreign Fighters Wave: What Drives Europeans to Syria, and to Islamic State? Insights from the Belgian Case," *Egmont: The Royal Institute for International Relations* 81 (March 2016), http://www.egmontinstitute.be/facing-the-fourth-foreign-fighters-wave/.

the criminal activity reported may be the result of radicalization rather than a precursor. At this time, it is not clear how the two phenomena are related, and to the best of our knowledge, the majority of Jihadists simply have not been engaged in criminal activity, a fact too often overlooked.

E. Mental Health

In both the popular and academic imaginations, there has been a strong tendency to think of terrorists as somehow psychologically abnormal. Consequently, researchers sought to correlate terrorists with diagnosable psychopathologies or personality disorders.[48] The traits and behaviours proposed have proved to be either too vague or insufficiently present. As predicted by Martha Crenshaw, the limited data available suggests that the most "outstanding characteristic" of terrorists is their "normality."[49] Some terrorists surely are suffering from forms of mental disorders, but, as Victoroff concludes, the research literature shows that terrorists "are psychologically extremely heterogeneous."[50] More recent and methodologically sophisticated approaches are generating findings about the mental health issues of specific types of terrorists.[51] The findings indicate that mental health issues play a role, though still less than anticipated, in lone-actor terrorism, and that it is more prevalent with single-issue forms of lone-actor terrorism (e.g., animal-rights, anti-abortion) than Jihadist or extreme right-wing terrorism.[52] Contrary to popular

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[48] Andrew Silke, "Cheshire-Cat Logic: The Recurring Theme of Terrorist Abnormality in Psychological Research," *Psychology, Crime and Law* 4, no. 1 (1998): 51–69; Jeff Victoroff, "The Mind of the Terrorist: A Review and Critique of Psychological Approaches," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 49, no. 1 (2005): 3–42; Horgan, *Psychology of Terrorism*; Arie W. Kruglanski and Shira Fishman, "The Psychology of Terrorism: 'Syndrome' Versus 'Tool' Perspectives," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 18, no. 2 (2006): 193–215.

[49] Martha Crenshaw, "The Causes of Terrorism," *Comparative Politics* 13, no. 4 (1981): 379–99.

[50] Victoroff, "Mind of the Terrorist," 35.

[51] Paul Gill, John Horgan and Paige Deckert, "Bombing Alone: Tracing the Motivations and Antecedent Behaviors of Lone-Actor Terrorists," *Journal of Forensic Sciences* 59, no. 2 (2014): 425–35; Emily Corner, Paul Gill and Margaret Bull Kovera, "A False Dichotomy? Mental Illness and Lone-Actor Terrorism," *Law and Human Behavior* 39, no.1 (2015): 23–34; Emily Corner and Paul Gill, "Is There a Nexus Between Terrorist Involvement and Mental Health in the Age of the Islamic State?" *CTC Sentinel* 10, no. 1 (2017): 1–10.

[52] Corner and Gill, "A False Dichotomy," 30–31.

prejudices, however, the prevalence of mental disorders amongst group-based terrorists is markedly lower than in the general population.

Bakker reports that 12 of the 336 persons in his sample appear to "suffer from mental illness or disabilities" and notes that this level is higher than the world base rate. He notes, however, that four of the individuals only "started to show symptoms of mental illness after their arrests."[53] Simcox and Dyer provide no data on mental health for their sample of American Jihadists, nor do Vidino and Hughes.[54] Stuart does not discuss the issue in her analysis of Islamist-inspired terrorists in the U.K., and Wilner does not address the issue in his overview of Canadian Jihadists.[55]

Dawson found that only four of the 34 studies on Western foreign fighters he examined offer any data on the number of fighters with psychological disorders, and the figures are discrepant.[56] Weenink, for example, reports that 6% of his sample of 140 Dutch fighters had diagnosed mental health problems, but he thinks the presence of "serious problem behaviour" is much higher.[57] Bakker and de Bont (2016) conclude that only 2% of their sample of 370 Dutch and Belgian foreign fighters "had some sort of psychological disorder before traveling to Syria," but this rather broadly includes "feeble-mindedness, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, schizophrenia, and claustrophobia."[58] A report on foreign fighters by the Norwegian Police provides a much higher figure but states that the "distribution of mental problems are no more prominent among the individuals in the study (21%) than what would be expected in a control group drawn from a comparable segment of the general population."[59] There are also conceptual and methodological differences between these studies that make comparisons of the data problematic. Still, overall, it appears that serious mental health problems do not play a significant role in the radicalization of militant Jihadists.

What about the members of the Toronto 18? The limited evidence available from the court documents suggests they largely conform to the same conclusion. None of the ten adults convicted were suffering from

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53 Bakker and de Bont, "Characteristics," 141.
54 Simcox and Dyer, *Al Qaeda and the United States*; Vidino and Hughes "ISIS in America."
55 Stuart, *Islamist Terrorism*; Wilner, *Canadian Terrorists by the Numbers*.
56 Dawson, "Western Foreign Fighters."
57 Weenink, "Behavioral Problems."
58 Bakker and de Bont, "Belgian and Dutch," 884.
59 Norwegian Police, "What Background," 8.

diagnosable mental illnesses or personality disorders. They were struggling with life issues that troubled them in ways that would not particularly differentiate them from many of their peers. One of the more peripheral figures, Asad Ansari, for example, was reported to have been very depressed because he could not afford to go to the university of his choice to study computer science. Instead, he pursued a business degree at a school closer to home but dropped out in his first year. In sentencing Saad Khalid and Saad Gaya, the two captured unloading the fertilizer for the bombs, the judge quoted a psychiatric report which found that their motivations did "not flow from anti-sociality, impulsivity or psychopathy".[60] There was "no substance abuse, intellectual impairment, or significant personality maladjustment."[61]

Rather, they were motivated by their religious beliefs, sympathy for the suffering of fellow Muslims elsewhere, and a perceived need to take a stand against the foreign policy that lead to this suffering.[62] The psychological report determined that Khalid was "a young man with many pro-social characteristics, raised in a middle-class supportive family and university educated."[63] Gaya had been "a studious, dependable, and pro-social individual who excelled in educational, employment, volunteering and social spheres."[64] Both became extremists, in part, because of their strong "affiliative needs," "need to emulate powerful and influential leaders," and "youthful naiveté."[65] In addition, Khalid might have been "vulnerable" because of the death of his mother by drowning in 2004.[66] This latter factor, however, represents more of a triggering event than a motivation for radicalization rooted in a mental health issue. Like the more general "needs" referenced by the judge, it is hard to determine what role these soft factors actually played in the radicalization of some of the Toronto 18 members. The problem of specificity comes to the fore again in this situation.

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[60] R v. Khalid, 2009 CarswellOnt 9874 at para 34 (Ont Sup Ct) [*Khalid* (ONSC)]; R v. Gaya, 2010 ONSC 434 at para 43.
[61] *Gaya*, ONSC at para 43.
[62] *Khalid* (ONSC), CarswellOnt at para 34; *Gaya*, ONSC at para 43.
[63] *Khalid* (ONSC), CarswellOnt at para 34.
[64] *Gaya*, ONSC at para 43.
[65] *Khalid* (ONSC), CarswellOnt at paras 31, 128; *Gaya*, ONSC at para 43.
[66] *Khalid* (ONSC), CarswellOnt at para 128; Speckhard and Shaikh, *Undercover Jihadi*, 146.

F. Family and Religious Background

Reliable information on the family and religious background of most Jihadists is not available, and this is largely true for the Toronto 18 as well. Bakker has some information for only 56 persons out of his sample of 336 European Jihadi terrorists. Nineteen of these were converts to Islam, and this is likely why this variable received even some attention in the open sources used to create his dataset. For the other 37 persons, "11 were raised in a religious family and 26 did not have a particularly religious childhood."[67] Simcox and Dyer present no pertinent information other than their analysis of the role of religious converts in al-Qaeda related offences in the U.S. In line with others,[68] they found that converts are significantly overrepresented. Coverts committed 24% of offences, and 54% of the offenders born in the U.S. were converted.[69] Stuart similarly reports that converts perpetrated 16% of Islamist-related offences in the U.K.,[70] while Wilner reports that 20% of his sample of Canadian Jihadists are converts.[71] Only one member of the Toronto 18, Steve Chand, was a convert. The vast majority of Jihadists come from Muslim families, and we know little about the levels and types of religiosities in these families.[72]

Only Shareef Abdelhaleem, the oldest member of the Toronto 18 (at 30), is known to have come from a devout family. His father was an Islamic scholar, had a Ph.D., and held conservative views. Court records indicate that two others, Fahim Ahmad and Saad Gaya, came from "moderate Muslim households."[73] It is unclear, however, what this means, and Ahmad's comments on his own family suggest they were only nominally

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[67] Bakker and de Bont, "Characteristics," 140.

[68] Bart Schuurman, Peter Grol, and Scott Flower, "Converts and Islamist Terrorism: An Introduction," International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, Policy Brief (June 2016), https://openaccess.leidenuniv.nl/handle/1887/46602

[69] Simcox and Dyer, *Al-Qaeda in the United States*, ix.

[70] Stuart, *Islamist Terrorism*, ix.

[71] Wilner, *Canadian Terrorists by the Numbers*, 23.

[72] In an earlier analysis of 172 persons involved in the global Jihadist movement, Sageman suggests there is a discrepancy between the largely religious background of most of the non-European members of his sample and those residing in Europe. The latter appear to come from relatively secular, or at least non-practicing, families, while many of the members of al-Qaeda from the Middle East were very religious as youths (70%) and came from quite observant families. The data, however, is fragmentary and inferential at best. See Marc Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 77–78.

[73] *Khalid* (ONSC), CarswellOnt at para 31.

religious. The other families appear to have been largely secular, but little is known.

As the courts noted, certain insecurities in the family backgrounds of five of the ten adults convicted may have contributed to their vulnerability to radicalization. No information is available for the other five. Since immigrating, for example, Ahmad's parents were forced to work long hours at low-paying jobs to make ends meet, despite being well educated. Amara's mother was Christian, and the family relocated several times during his childhood before his parents divorced. Similarly, Chand's parents divorced when he was nine years old. Dirie's father was killed in Somalia before the family immigrated to Canada, and Khalid's mother died suddenly when he was 15 years old. Each of these disruptive experiences may have contributed to their radicalization, but no clear causal link exists. The specificity issue arises again as such uncertainties differ little from those faced by many of their peers who did not radicalize.

IV. THE TORONTO 18 IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE: THE PROCESS OF RADICALIZATION

The full research corpus on radicalization is too copious to review here, but there is a need to provide some insight into the elements of this process to help contextualize many of the other contributions to this volume. When the Toronto 18 arrests happened in 2006, few people had heard of "radicalization," and the concept was broadly associated with the leftist violent extremism of the 1960s, 70s, and 80s and groups like the Red Brigades, the Red Army Faction, and the Weathermen. In those cases, the focus of attention was on how groups of young activists involved in large social movements (e.g., opposition to the war in Vietnam) became frustrated with peaceful means of protest and gradually turned to more violent actions.[74]

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[74] Klaus Wasmund, "The Political Socialization of West German Terrorists," in *Political Violence and Terror: Motifs and Motivations*, ed. Peter H. Merkl (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1986), 191–228; Donatella Della Porta, "Recruitment Process in Clandestine Political Organizations: Italian Left-Wing Terrorism," in *International Social Movement Research*, vol. 1, eds. Bert Klandermans, Hanspeter Kriesi, and Sidney Tarrow (Greenwich, CT: JAI Press, 1988), 155–69; Ehud Sprinzak, "The Psychopolitical Formation of Extreme Left Terrorism in a Democracy: The Case of the Weathermen," in *Origins of Terrorism: Psychologies, Ideologies, Theologies, States of Mind*,

With the Madrid bombings in 2004 and the London bombings in 2005, the concept of radicalization gained more prominence and its meaning shifted. The focus became the more perplexing phenomenon of "homegrown terrorism."[75] Attention pivoted from social movements and processes of gradual socialization to violence, to the social and psychological factors and processes involved in a more rapid process of turning small and relatively autonomous groups of ordinary, and largely apolitical, young men into lethal Jihadists. Individual pathways to violence were examined,[76] and several rather simple models of radicalization advanced.[77] As case studies of radicalized groups and individuals proliferated,[78] the need for a more sophisticated approach grew.[79] Soon, more complex conceptions of

ed. Walter Reich (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 1990), 65–85.

[75] Aiden Kirby, "The London Bombers as 'Self-Starters': A Case Study in Indigenous Radicalization and the Emergence of Autonomous Cliques," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 30, no. 5 (2007): 415–28; Marc Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008); Crone and Harrow, "Homegrown Terrorism"; Stefan Malthaner, "Radicalization: The Evolution of an Analytical Paradigm," *European Journal of Sociology* 58, no. 3 (2017): 369–401.

[76] John Horgan, "From Profiles to Pathways and Roots to Routes: Perspectives from Psychology on Radicalization into Terrorism," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 618, no. 1 (2008): 80–94.

[77] For example, Fathali M. Moghaddam, "The Staircase to Terrorism: A Psychological Exploration," *American Psychologist* 60, no. 2 (2005): 161–69; Mitchell D. Silber and Arvin Bhatt, *Radicalization in the West: The Homegrown Threat* (New York City Police Department, 2007), https://seths.blog/wp-content/uploads/2007/09/NYPD_Report-Radicalization_in_the_West.pdf; Sageman, "Leaderless Jihad."

[78] For example, Lorenzo Vidino, "The Buccinasco Pentiti: A Unique Case Study of Radicalization," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 23, no. 3 (2011): 398–418; Virginie Andre and Shandon Harris-Hogan, "Mohamed Merah: From Petty Criminal to Neojihadist," *Politics, Religion and Ideology* 14, no. 2 (2013): 307–19; Nesser, *Islamist Terrorism In Europe*; Bart Willem Schuurman, Quirine A.M. Eijkman and Edwin Bakker, "The Hofstadgroup Revisited: Questioning its Status as a 'Quintessential' Homegrown Jihadist Network," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 27, no. 5 (2015): 906–25.

[79] Max Taylor and John Horgan, "A Conceptual Framework for Addressing Psychological Process in the Development of the Terrorist," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 18, no. 4 (2006): 585–601; Dalgaard-Nielsen, "Violent Radicalization in Europe"; Michael King and Donald M. Taylor, "The Radicalization of Homegrown Jihadists: A Review of Theoretical Models and Social Psychological Evidence," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 23, no. 4 (2011): 602–22.

radicalization started to emerge,[80] along with greater awareness of the explanatory limits of existing models.[81] In recent years, several innovative ways of conceiving of the process have emerged.[82]

It is now widely recognized that no two individuals radicalize in the same way, and the process of radicalization does not involve a simple or linear progression through stages.[83] Rather, we need to think in terms of many and diverse factors that impact, in various combinations and to varying degrees, the extent and type of involvement of individuals in violent extremism. Radicalization is the result of the dynamic interplay of individuals with their environments and contingencies that influence each person's case in ways that are hard to predict.[84] Nevertheless, as empirical research indicates, there are commonalities.

Zakaria Amara's comments on his own radicalization, as illicitly posted on a Facebook page in 2018, reflect this reality:

> Guilty, I am. Radicalized I was. Yet I still find my entire situation incredibly surreal. I often go back in time in order to retrace my steps and figure out how I ended up here. Every time I engage in this exercise, I find a young man who was caught up in a perfect storm of internal and external influences. The inevitability of it all is what I find most remarkable.

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80 Alex P. Schmid, "Radicalisation, De-Radicalisation, Counter-Radicalisation: A Conceptual Discussion and Literature Review," *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague* 4, no. 2 (2013): 1–65, http://dx.doi.org/10.19165/2013.1.02; Hafez and Mullins, "The Radicalization Puzzle"; Malthaner, "Radicalization".

81 Mark Sedgwick, "The Concept of Radicalization as a Source of Confusion," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 22, no. 4 (2010): 479–94; Oluf Gøtzsche-Astrup, "The Time for Causal Designs: Review and Evaluation of Empirical Support for Mechanisms of Political Radicalisation," *Aggression and Violent Behavior* 39, no.1 (2018): 90–99; Matteo Vergani et al., "The Three Ps of Radicalization: Push, Pull and Personal. A Systematic Scoping Review of the Scientific Evidence about Radicalization into Violent Extremism," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 43, no. 10, https://doi.org/10.1080/1057 610X.2018.1505686; Dawson, "Clarifying the Explanatory Context."

82 Dawson, "Sketch of a Social Ecology Model"; Arie W. Kruglanski et al., "The Making of Violent Extremists," *Review of General Psychology* 22, no. 1 (2018): 107–20; Noémie Bouhana, *The Moral Ecology of Extremism: A Systemic Perspective*, prepared for the U.K. Commission for Countering Extremism, July 2019, https://assets.publishing.service.go v.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/834354/Bouhana-The-moral-ecology-of-extremism.pdf.

83 Horgan, "From Profiles to Pathways"; Jonathan Rae, "Will it ever be Possible to Profile Terrorists?" *Journal of Terrorism Research* 3, no. 2 (2012): 1–6; Dawson, "Clarifying the Explanatory Context," 152–57.

84 Dawson, "Sketch of a Social Ecology Model," 3.

In this chapter, we integrate insights from two of the newer theories, Dawson's social ecology model of radicalization and Kruglanski's significance quest theory, to make some sense of the complex realities of the radicalization of the Toronto 18. Each theory synthesizes data and insights from the broader literature while pointing to the pivotal role of three factors in the radicalization of individuals. Kruglanski and colleagues[85] have appealingly identified these three factors as "the need," "the narrative," and "the network." Each of these labels actually identifies a cluster of related factors. Adopting a somewhat more multifaceted and specifically ecological approach, Dawson discusses these three factors as well, but as aspects of five ecological niches or contexts of dynamic interaction between individuals and environmental factors. The relevant ecological niches are: (1) the structural features of late modern society; (2) immigrant experience; (3) youthful rebellion; (4) ideology; and (5) small group dynamics.[86]

These five niches align, quite readily, with Kruglanski et al.'s three factors. The first three ecological niches address the factors influencing someone's openness to be radicalized, Kruglanski et al.'s "need." Dawson's fourth ecological niche, discussing the crucial role of ideology in framing this need, addresses Kruglanski et al.'s "narrative." Kruglanski et al.'s "network" is part of Dawson's fifth niche, focusing on the role of small group dynamics in consolidating radical commitments. There are slight differences between the two theories, but the theories are remarkably similar in their identification and delineation of the crucial contributors to radicalization. Moreover, each theory integrates the role of an array of macro, meso, and micro aspects of human existence, while keeping a commonsensical focus on how these factors impact individuals. In each case, the focus is on why and how individuals interpret the world while searching for meaning and significance, in ways that are consonant with engaging in the extreme violence characteristic of terrorism.

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[85] David Webber and Arie W. Kruglanski, "Psychological Factors in Radicalization: A '3 N' Approach," in *The Handbook of the Criminology of Terrorism*, eds. Garry LaFree and Joshua D. Freilich (West Sussex, England: Wiley-Blackwell, 2018), 33–46; Kruglanski et al., "The Making of Violent Extremists."

[86] Dawson, "Sketch of the Social Ecology Model"; Amarnath Amarasingam and Lorne L. Dawson, *'I Left to be Closer to Allah' – Learning about Foreign Fighters from Family and Friends* (London: Institute of Strategic Dialogue, 2018), http://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Families_Report.pdf.

In fact, both theories identify the search for personal significance as the "dominant need that underlies violent extremism."[87] Kruglanski has been a leading researcher exploring the "quest for personal significance" in experimental social psychology and based on some of his earlier publications, Dawson incorporates this notion into his model. In many cases, the research suggests that people come under the sway of a drive for greater personal significance "in the wake of negative, stressful, or traumatic circumstances." In these circumstances, engagement in extremist violence serves to compensate for a perceived loss of significance, for either the individual or a group they strongly identify with.[88] This is not always the case, however, and sometimes the path to extremism is simply rooted in a higher-than-normal personal need for significance, absent any preceding specific loss.[89]

Kruglanski et al. specify at least three reasons why violence can be attractive to individuals searching for significance. First, "it sends an unambiguous message about the importance of a cause" and hence those promoting it, and it is "almost sure to make [them] feel noticed and agentic." Second, engaging in violence for a cause dramatically heightens commitment to the cause and strengthens intragroup bonding. Being violent is "counternormative" and creates cognitive dissonance. The experimental evidence suggests this dissonance is allayed often by doubling down on the commitment underlying the violence. Third, the exercise of violence "demonstrates immediate power, status, and control," and it serves as "a deterrent for future instances of significance loss" by threatening competitors and opponents with the prospect of more violence and hence loss in their significance.[90]

Dawson's use of the concept of a quest for significance is more circumspect; it is only one important part of the puzzle of radicalization. He thinks that it helps to explain, however, why only some individuals, amongst the many who experience the conditions associated with extremism, actually radicalize. An inordinate need to make a difference may be one of the key differentiators, and hence help with the specificity problem. His interest in this factor stems, in part, from his study of the

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[87] Kruglanski et al., "The Making of an Extremist," 108.
[88] Kruglanski et al., "The Making of an Extremist," 109.
[89] Kruglanski et al., "The Making of an Extremist," 109.
[90] Kruglanski et al., "The Making of an Extremist," 114.

Toronto 18 case.[91] The use of this concept also helps to dissociate the violence characteristic of terrorism from irrationality and pathology and to cast the motivation of the Jihadists as "moral," at least from the perspective of the terrorists. As Dawson states, "young terrorists in the making are gripped by a stronger sense of moral duty than their peers, and not less, as commonly assumed by outsiders."[92]

Becoming a terrorist elevates the sense of significance in association with an altruistic sacrifice of the self for the greater good of the group they identify with. This commitment is visceral and goes well beyond consent to the rhetoric of a justifying ideology. They are fighting to right a wrong, and thereby acquire a transcendent significance, that renders realistically achieving the stated political objectives almost inconsequential.[93]

Dawson situates this need for significance within a context where three sets of pressures are converging for the young men and women drawn to Jihadism. First, there is the heightened awareness of events worldwide brought on by globalization and the explosive intrusion of mass media into peoples' daily lives, combined with the maintenance and even promotion of diaspora identities amongst immigrants who are able, or even feel compelled to, sustain relationships with those left behind or with which they ethnically and religiously identify. Second, personal experiences of marginalization, associated with being immigrants or children of immigrants, reinforce these pressures.[94] A failure to integrate fully and achieve one's dreams, and experiences of perceived discrimination, can lead to a sense of lower significance.[95] In this regard, Dawson calls special attention to the plight of many young Muslim immigrants. They can find themselves managing the expectations of two, often discordant, worlds: the culture and norms of their parents and the expectations of their non-immigrant peers.[96] "For the young," Dawson states, "there is a desperate need to fit in and yet be seemingly unique, and the torque of the situation

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[91] Lorne L. Dawson, "Trying to Make Sense of Home-Grown Terrorist Radicalization."
[92] Dawson, "Sketch of a Social Ecology Model," 8.
[93] Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence*, 3rd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).
[94] Baljit Nagra, *Securitized Citizens: Canadian Muslims' Experiences of Race Relations and Identity Formation Post-9/11* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017); Tamar Mitts, "From Isolation to Radicalization: Anti-Muslim Hostility and Support for ISIS in the West," *American Political Science Review* 113, no. 1 (2019): 173–94.
[95] Kruglanski et al., "The Making of an Extremist," 111.
[96] Dawson, "Trying to Make Sense," 81.

can be particularly acute for those from cultural and ethnic minorities."[97] Third, aggravating all the uncertainty of this situation is the fact that most Jihadists radicalize in their adolescence or young adulthood when they are experiencing the normal identity struggles of that time of life. Most of the members of the Toronto 18, we should remember, came to Canada later in their childhood (nine to 12 years old), and they radicalized in high school and their first year of university. We can only speculate, but some of the central figures – Ahmad, Amara, and Khalid, and perhaps others (Ansari and Gaya) – appeared to be struggling to become somebody by finding an adult identity and making a mark in life beyond their humble circumstances.

Some of the comments made by Amara in his Facebook posting are illustrative of this state of affairs:

> After any major Terrorist attack, there usually is a fierce debate about what makes individuals susceptible to radical ideologies... If I had a noose around my neck and the only thing that could save my life was the answer to this apparently dumfounding question then I would have to say it is <u>the emotional state of feeling utterly worthless</u>.

> I have always felt worthless... Perhaps I feel this way because I carry within me a strong Inner Critic that has been ripping me apart since childhood. Perhaps it is due to the fact I have always felt like an outsider. You see, even though I am a citizen of this country, I have never felt Canadian.

Thinking of radicalization, Dawson and Kruglanski et al. both recognize that the strong yet inchoate need to matter, to make a difference, and to belong becomes relevant through the influence of a "narrative" and a "network." A clear and strong ideology focuses on the need and turns it into action, rather than aimlessness. It "frames" the issues,[98] and "connects the dots in a satisfying way, one which offers a simple but definitive explanation for their angst, offers a grand solution, targets a culprit, and prescribes a course of action. Most of all it sets the individuals' struggles in a transcendent frame of meaning that gives an ultimate and virtuous purpose to their existence. It places their personal troubles in solidarity with those of a whole people" – the *ummah*.[99]

The Jihadist ideology, with its clear and absolute conceptions of good and evil, and the imperative to actually live one's faith, provides cognitive

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[97]   Dawson, "Sketch of the Social Ecology Model," 6.

[98]   Quintan Wiktorowicz, *Radical Islam Rising: Muslim Extremism in the West* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2005).

[99]   Dawson, "Sketch of a Social Ecology Model," 8.

closure and a course of action. It establishes a coherent identity, one welded to a world-transformative project of great significance.[100] Given the youthfulness of most of the members of the Toronto 18, the simplicity of the Jihadi narrative heightened its appeal. As the court records indicate, the group did not have a very good grasp of the geopolitics of the "war on terror," and the judges, in passing sentences, repeatedly cite their youthful naiveté as a mitigating factor in sentencing them. In the case of Khalid, for instance, Justice Durno quite typically states, he was "young and in an impressionable state, and lacking in life experience."[101]

In taking on the Jihadist role and ideology, Amara said on his Facebook page that he felt "worthy, righteous, and heroic." "You see yourself as a saviour of your people," he says: "Your mind is obsessed with injustices that they are suffering from and that's all you wish to talk about. You see the world in strictly black and white terms. Deep inside you suspect that there may be other colours, which subconsciously drives you to engage in constant re-enforcement of your beliefs."

In this regard, it is important to call attention to one particular aspect of the radicalization of the Toronto 18, the role of fantasy. In a letter Ahmad submitted to the court, in the sentencing process, he professes that he was naïve and sought to compensate for the inadequacies of his real life by indulging in a fantasy. The mosque, he says, "was where I could get the attention that I wasn't getting from those closest to me. It was where I could be larger than life and not hear a word of criticism. I would say things, often terrible things, that I felt would get me attention in that fantasy world."[102]

Certainly, in Shaikh's account of the group, as the key RCMP agent, fantasy emerges as a key interpretive theme (e.g., pages 152, 154, 167, 170–171, 184, 190, 191–192). Fahim, in particular, the inspirational leader, was prone to use exaggerated depictions of the group's plans and activities to make them seem far more significant than they were. At the December 2005 amateurish training camp that many participated in at Washago, for example, Shaikh quotes him as saying, with "reverence filling his voice": "look around you brothers… It's just like we're in Chechnya. The winter snow, we are in the woods. We are living the life, brothers! We are living just like the mujahideen are!" We are told that this outburst caused Shaikh

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100 Kruglanski et al., "The Making of an Extremist," 111–12.
101 *Khalid* (ONSC), CarswellOnt at para 128.
102 R v. Ahmad, 2010 ONSC 5874 (Exhibit #3: Written Submissions of Fahim Ahmad (Re: Sentencing)).

to realize that "Fahim wants to enter the pure fantasy of those he considers his life heroes – Chechens and Talibans."[103] Similarly, after checking out the safe house the group was thinking of buying in northern Ontario, Shaikh recounts the following conversation:

> Look, one of the reasons we are getting this place is because we will need to hide out after our big mission at the Parliament," Fahim said as he reentered his grand fantasy of terrorist destruction.
>
> "So what happens at Parliament?" Durrani asked.
>
> "We go and cut off some heads," Fahim answered matter-of-factly.
>
> "Then what?" Durrani asked.
>
> "Then we read about it," Fahim cackled as Mubin pulled the van into a roadside café to take a break.
>
> "We'll attack the Parliament buildings of Canada," Fahim continued as they got out of the van for coffees. "First we'll distract the police with car bombs going off all around the city. That will take all the security forces attention away from the Parliament," Fahim fantasied. "And then when they are responding to the car bombs, we will storm the Parliament buildings![104]

The degree to which fantasy played a significant role in the radicalization of the others in the group remains less clear. Fahim, however, was the "entrepreneur," to use Petter Nesser's label for the ideologically inspired and inspiring leaders of terrorist cells.[105] He created the group, and it would seem reasonable to conclude that part of his success lay in his inclination and ability to spin such fantasies. He stimulated the adolescent dreams of glory that many in the group may have craved, and their recruitment, in turn, legitimatized the fantasies – even though both remained rather embryonic.

Fantasizing, then, is a component of both the narrative and the network drivers of radicalization, but before addressing the latter, some further comment is in order. The complex functions of fantasy exceed what we can say here, but through fantasy, identities are discovered and forged by transcending the specifics of history and time and establishing imaginary solidarity with desirable others. In this case, the unity achieved is with the saintly warriors who defended Islam in the past and are doing so in the

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[103] Speckhard and Shaikh, *Undercover Jihadi*, 170–71.
[104] Speckhard and Shaikh, *Undercover Jihadi*, 191–92.
[105] Petter Nesser, "Joining Jihadi Terrorist Cells in Europe: Exploring Motivational Aspects of Recruitment and Radicalization," in *Understanding Violent Radicalisation*, ed. Magnus Ranstorp (New York: Routledge, 2009), 87–114.

present, and through that heroic role, with the wider communal ideal of the past, present, and future *ummah*. In helping to articulate both individual and collective identities, fantasy "extracts coherence from confusion, reduces multiplicity to singularity, and reconciles illicit desire with the law."[106] Fantasy is characteristic of childhood, but it is not simply childish, and its role in fostering identity is one way of making sense of the overall Jihadi quest for significance.

The point is we are dealing with a process that goes well beyond mere accent to an ideology. Reflecting on his experience from prison, on his illicit Facebook page Amara says:

> I did not see my radical ideology as separate from my religion and this caused me to fear that abandoning it would lead to abandoning my faith. I also feared confronting the reality that I may have thrown my whole life away and brought so much suffering upon my family for no good cause.

The commitment to the Jihadist ideology seems to involve what sociologists call a role-person merger[107] and what social psychologists call a process of identity fusion, in which someone's personal identity is largely subsumed by the commitment to the needs of the group or cause.[108] The cause becomes an integral and pivotal part of the challenging "project of the self" that Anthony Giddens thinks confronts youth in the de-traditionalized context of late modernity.[109]

We have very little information from the other members of the Toronto 18, but in letters sent by Saad Khalid to CBC reporters,[110] he simply says, "There will probably always be someone who will be allured by the extremist narrative. It took me a long time to be convinced that I was wrong." Like so many other young Jihadists throughout the Western world, Khalid traces his radicalization to the powerful online English-language

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[106] Joan W. Scott, "Fantasy Echo: History and the Construction of Identity," *Critical Inquiry* 27, no. 2 (2001): 284–304.

[107] Ralph H. Turner, "The Role and the Person," *American Journal of Sociology* 84, no. 1 (1978): 1–23.

[108] William B. Swann et al., "Identity Fusion: The Interplay of Personal and Social Identities in Extreme Group Behavior," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 96, no. 5 (2009): 995–1011.

[109] Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991).

[110] Davison and Thomson, "Homegrown terrorist"; Janet Thomson and Manmed Alhuwalia, "Toronto 18 bomb plotter Saad Khalid Tells His Story," *CBC*, April 16, 2014. A series of brief videos are available at: https://www.cbc.ca/news2/interactives/homegrown-terrorist.

lectures of Anwar al-Awlaki. As he writes, "He had a knack for telling a good story, so when I came across his lectures on Jihad, I was hooked... Here was someone I respected and he was connecting global grievances that Muslims share with what your responsibility is in terms of these issues." After listening to al-Awlaki, Khalid says he felt he would be committing a major sin if he did not fulfil his obligation to engage in Jihad, and somewhat more cryptically, he adds, he did not realize he was being radicalized, he just thought he had "found a solution to a problem that had always bothered me."

In our casual discussions with another member of the Toronto 18, who wishes to remain anonymous, there also was some reference to a "role-play element" in the process of radicalization. This person says they became politically aware at the time of the war in Iraq and radicalized by a growing sense of guilt over failing to come to the aid of their fellow Muslims. Unlike the others, he was first engaged in forms of "activism." Gradually, however, he felt a fantasy-like desire to emulate the great heroes of Muslim history. Person-to-person interactions at the mosque and with other people, most notably Amara, played a large role as well and in ways whose "significance," he says, he did not understand at the time.

Fantasy turns to reality and becomes the foundation for action when individuals participate in "the network" of like-minded people. Individuals access the narrative through their interaction with both informal networks of friends and family, as well as formal networks like al-Qaeda and countless other international Jihadist organizations. This happens both online and offline. It also is how the narrative and the call to violence is validated, since we are inherently social beings and the active support of others is influential,[111] especially for risky behaviour. As Dawson stipulates:

> Invariably it is the shared nature of the experience between close friends and family members that ratchets-up the enthusiasm, and eventually the courage to act. As many convicted homegrown [J]ihadists have acknowledged, long hours spent watching videos online and discussing [J]ihadists tracks with other angry young men, solidified their commitment to the cause.[112]

The turn to the narrative and the bonds with the deviant group co-evolve, and though Kruglanski et al. surprisingly do not discuss it, experimental social psychology exhaustively documents the many ways in

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[111]   Kruglanski et al., "The Making of an Extremist," 110.
[112]   Dawson, "Sketch of a Social Ecology Model," 8.

which groups exert powerful pressure on the behaviour of individuals.[113] Small-group dynamics, Dawson's last ecological niche, provides the affective closure that complements the cognitive closure provided by the narrative. Once thoroughly engaged, separation from the group can be tantamount to self-destruction for many members.

Operating from a psychological point of view, Kruglanski et al. prioritize the role of the need in the process of radicalization. "Without such a need, narratives and networks should not be able to evoke extreme actions unless they can induce a desire for significance."[114] Dawson, as a sociologist, places greater emphasis on the role of social processes: in this case, the co-evolution and interaction of the narrative and the network. These factors shape a rather too pervasive youthful need into the specific identification with the beleaguered *ummah* and the adoption of the Jihadi role. An underlying quest for significance is only one contributing factor that plays a strong role in many cases. Both agree, however, that all three factors – need, narrative, and network – must be present to create a violent extremist.

V. CONCLUSION

Researchers have been trying to ameliorate the specificity problem when it comes to radicalization leading to violence for decades. With the rise of ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria) in 2014, this research took on a new urgency. ISIS supporters were intensely active on a host of social media platforms, recruiting new Jihadists and inspiring attacks in the West and elsewhere. Much of the attention of researchers was fixated on understanding and assessing this newest, innovative, and perhaps most dangerous manifestation of the Jihadist threat. We were engaged in this research as well.[115] Along with the other contributors to this volume, however, we never lost sight of the value of more fully mining this historical case for fresh insights.

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[113] Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko, *Friction: How Radicalization Happens to Them and Us* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

[114] Kruglanski et al., "The Making of an Extremist," 110.

[115] Lorne L. Dawson and Amarnath Amarasingam, "Talking to Foreign Fighters: Insights into the Motivations for Hijrah to Syria and Iraq," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 40, no. 3 (2017): 191–210.

As we have argued here, the Toronto 18 represents one of the most paradigmatic cases of so-called homegrown terrorism, and its further study can help to better understand how and why relatively well-integrated, reasonably well-off, and well-educated young men from suburbia would choose to become violent extremists, potentially sacrificing their lives in the process. Admittedly, only an inner core of perhaps six or seven individuals were fully committed to the cause and even then, it is questionable if they all fully understood what they were doing. It is important, all the same, to piece together a more satisfactory picture of their experiences and perceptions – a task we only begun in this chapter.

The members of the Toronto 18 were young (like most other homegrown Jihadists), but, somewhat atypically, they were even younger than other homegrown Jihadists. Like other Western Jihadists, they were from immigrant families, but relative to their European counterparts, they had not suffered as much, at least materially. Their socioeconomic status was higher, and they were better educated. Their prospects were relatively good, but most were too young to tell, and perceptions of relative deprivation may have played a role for some. At any rate, they did not display the prior criminality characteristic of European Jihadists born in circumstances where this may be one of the few pathways out of deprivation. Mental health issues, as with most Jihadists, played no significant role in their radicalization, and with one possible exception, they did not come from families with strong religious commitments or extremist views.

On every count, however, despite the exhaustive legal proceedings, what we actually know about the lives of these men is insufficient to account for their radicalization. The "need" driving their turn to political violence, to use Kruglanski et al.'s term, remains obscure, though there are grounds to speculate about their apparent desire to fulfil a heroic role. They felt a deep obligation to come to the defence of their fellow Muslims suffering in distant zones of conflict, and, in this respect, the role of the "narrative" seems more obvious. The courts, however, were content to establish that they possessed extremist literature and espoused extremist ideas. Little is known about what they read, how they interpreted it, and their understanding of why it mattered so much.[116] The "network" appears,

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116   Donald Holbrook, "The Terrorism Information Environment: Analysing Terrorists' Selection of Ideological and Facilitative Media," *Terrorism and Political Violence* (2019): 1–23, https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2019.1583216.

characteristically, to have been a very important factor in their radicalization. In this pre-social media age, however, their own local network mattered most in exerting an influence on their behaviour. The social bonds of the group were a significant motivational factor. The siren call of a larger global and historical significance, though, did inspire their willingness to take action. On all counts, however, we need to obtain more information from these men directly to identify the complex blend of social structural, group dynamic, and personal factors that led to their disturbing choices.