

# Leaving peace for war: An exploratory study of Swiss men's trajectories toward engagement in Arab conflicts

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## *Abstract*

*While the issue of foreign fighting has been very present in Swiss public discourse in recent years, little is known about the actual trajectories of young men who engage in this particular form of political violence. Based primarily on face-to-face in-depth interviews with four Swiss male nationals who travelled to conflict zones in the Arab World, the present analysis offers insights into the first phases of violent engagement, by investigating elements related to grievance formation such as collective memory and moral shocks, and elements facilitating violent action, such as legal cynicism. Further, the role of combat masculinity, a set of values providing guidance on behaviours and attitudes to be adopted in the face of injustice, is explored. Methodological considerations and some implications for policymaking are discussed.*

*Keywords: foreign fighters, Switzerland, radicalisation, political violence, grievance formation*

## **Introduction**

Foreign fighters have occupied a prominent place in Swiss public discourse in recent years. The international mobilisation of foreign fighters to combat zones in Syria and Iraq, which started soon after the beginning of the Syrian civil war in 2011, did not exclude the neutral country at the heart of Europe. According to the Federal Intelligence Service (FIS 2019), between 2005 and 2016, 93 individuals have left Switzerland to join combat or receive military training in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia, Syria and Iraq. Since 2016, no foreign fighters have been registered, nor have any returned. However, the officially declared defeat of the so-called Islamic State (IS) in Syria has reignited the debate surrounding the potential return of foreign fighters. On 8 March 2019, the Swiss Federal Council decided that Switzerland will not proactively support the return of Swiss citizens who joined IS (Gyr 2019). Several

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Swiss citizens are therefore still in custody in Northern Syria. While foreign fighting tends to be associated with rebel factions such as IS or Al-Qaeda and their affiliates, the phenomenon is far from being limited to these groups. The recent verdict of Johan Cosar, who supposedly founded and fought alongside the rebel group *Syriac Military Council* in Syria from 2013 to 2014, raised awareness thereof (Alder 2019). In public discourse, however, the parochial focus on so-called jihadist foreign fighters persists.

Regardless of the particular orientation of the group joined abroad, the question of why Swiss citizens choose to leave their comfort, peace and safety behind to risk their lives fighting for a cause, imposes itself. More specifically, how do Swiss males come to embrace a cause in the Arab World and what factors facilitate their physical engagement for it? My aim here is to tackle this question using an exploratory study of four Swiss nationals' trajectories towards engagement for causes in the Arab World, based on their narratives collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews.

After describing the Swiss legal and political context pertinent for the phenomenon of foreign fighting, I will briefly sketch out the state of the research and introduce some theoretical concepts. Then, I will share some methodological and epistemological reflections on the data collection process, before presenting the analysis. Finally, some implications for policymaking and research will be discussed.

## Context

### *Incriminating foreign fighting: the legal context*

Amongst intense political debates on how to preserve Switzerland's internationally recognised neutrality, it was decided to introduce article 94 into the Swiss military penal code, adopted in 1927, in order to prohibit joining foreign armies or non-state armed groups (Kuehne 2015). It can be punished with detention of up to three years (Militärstrafgesetz, §94). Historic applications of this law have occurred during the Spanish Civil War between 1936 and 1939, which many Swiss citizens joined on the side of factions fighting against then-dictator Franco (Kuehne 2015). According to Kuehne (2015), the law has been applied about twice yearly since 2000, mainly to individuals who joined the French Foreign Legion and others who fulfilled military duties in another country without the required authorisation. Rarely, it is applied to individuals who join non-state armed groups, such as fighting factions of the Kurdish PKK or, more recently, the IS).

While, from a military penal perspective, the orientation or identity of the military or military-like entity joined may be of debatable pertinence, the identity of the group does matter for other legal dispositions. Article 260<sup>ter</sup> of the Swiss penal code punishes joining a criminal organisation with up to five years of custodial detention.<sup>2</sup> The Swiss Federal Act of 12 December 2014 specifically proscribes providing any support to Al-Qaeda, IS as well as their cover and successor groups. Anyone who violates said act risks a custodial sentence of up to five

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<sup>2</sup> The Federal Criminal Court considers various international groups such as Brigade Rosse, ETA, Al-Qaida and IS as criminal organisations (Bundesstrafgerichtsurteil SK.2016.9).

years. Moreover, all dispositions of the Penal code apply to acts committed by Swiss citizens abroad. However, given the lack of evidence, it remains painstakingly difficult to prosecute individuals for specific acts committed in conflict zones.

### *Preventing radicalisation in Switzerland: The political context*

On the level of policymaking, significant evolutions have taken place in recent years in Switzerland. Amidst the rampant military success of the so-called Islamic State in 2014 and a series of large-scale violent attacks committed in Europe in 2015 and 2016, increasing public anxiety led to political pressure on Swiss policymakers to develop policies in order to prevent attacks on Swiss soil. In 2015, the Federal Council adopted the counterterrorism strategy for Switzerland (The Federal Council 2015). Beyond domestically-oriented measures, one of the stated goals was to prevent the export of terrorism from Switzerland abroad, which includes preventing Swiss citizens or residents from leaving the country in order to take part in terrorist activities. In July 2016, the Swiss Security Network (SSN 2016), provided an overview of existing measures to prevent radicalization,<sup>3</sup> which formed the basis for the Swiss National Action Plan to Prevent and Counter Radicalisation and Violent Extremism, published in December 2017. The 26 preventive measures cover various domains ranging from education and integration to the criminal justice system (SSN 2017). Since 2019, significant funding is being provided to programmes and entities implementing the measures (Der Bundesrat 2019).

### *What do we know about Swiss Foreign Fighters?*

Academic interest in foreign fighting has grown in recent years. Studies are predominantly interested in jihadist mobilisation, looking at drivers on the macro, meso and the micro level. Prominent works include Thomas Hegghammer's (2013) *Should I stay or should I go?*, on Western jihadists mobilisation for transnational *jihad*, and David Malet's (2013) *Foreign Fighters: Transnational identity in Civil Conflicts*, which provides insights into various foreign fighter movements over the past century, up to the presently dominating transnational jihadist phenomenon. Malet (2013) divides foreign fighters by their ethnic relation to the conflict they join. The most common type, he argues, is the *true believer*: non-coethnics involved in a non-ethnic conflict. These fighters join ideological rebels to defend a shared identity, without sharing ethnic characteristics. Swiss foreign fighters joining groups in Syria and Iraq are likely to correspond to this type, for the great majority do not share ethnic characteristics (see Biemann 2017).

Few studies, however, have explored the phenomenon of Swiss foreign fighters. Vidino (2013) conducted the first extensive study of jihadist radicalisation in Switzerland. Based on approximately sixty interviews with academics and practitioners of different domains, he established an overview of the phenomenon of Swiss-based individuals travelling abroad to join jihadist groups and organisations such as Al-Qaeda or affiliated organisations. He mentions two individuals from the region of Biel/Bienne as the first Swiss-based individuals to engage in

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<sup>3</sup> While one should remain sensitive to the conceptual limits of the term *radicalisation*, for which no consensual definition exists to this date, it is omnipresent in policymaking and academia. When used in the context of this paper, it ought to be understood in relation to the specific policy, law or academic source cited.

this form of foreign fighting. Soon later, he published, together with journalist Daniel Glaus, a report on Swiss individuals who joined the Syrian battleground (Vidino/Glaus 2014). Villiger (2017) looks at the phenomenon of engaging in political violence, including foreign fighting, more generally. Empirically, her study is based on archives on left-wing organisations as well as semi-structured interviews with fourteen Swiss individuals who were formerly engaged in political violence in Switzerland or abroad. Among others, she studied the cases of Bruno Bréguet and Marc Rudin, who travelled abroad to participate in activities linked to the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO).

The study of jihadist radicalisation, a core concern of which are individuals travelling to combat zones in Syria and Iraq, has gained new impetus from 2015 on, around the apex of IS' outreach. However, empirical studies of the phenomenon in Switzerland remain scarce. Eser Davolio and colleagues (2015) conducted an exploratory study of the phenomenon of jihadist radicalisation in Switzerland. Using a multi-method approach including interviews with domestic and international experts, information provided by intelligence services and analysis of online activities of Swiss jihadist groups and individuals, her team provided an extensive overview of the way jihadist radicalisation, including foreign fighting of this particular type, are perceived and tackled by various entities in the Swiss context. Given its funding by three federal departments, the study unsurprisingly adopts a heavy policy-orientation.

A more recent study, again into the specific phenomenon of jihadist foreign fighting, has been conducted by Biemann (2017). He obtained access to extensive investigative reports of individuals who were being or had been prosecuted for joining violent groups with a jihadist agenda (mainly IS). Concerning the Swiss context, his study is the most insightful so far, in terms of its empirical grounding in individuals' personal statements during investigative and judicial interrogatories and evidence (e.g. messaging content) collected by the intelligence services. Villiger's (2017) study is the only one resorting to extensive face-to-face interviews with foreign fighters. However, the individuals included in the study do not represent the current wave of foreign fighters leaving for battleground in Syria and Iraq. Eser Davolio et al. (2015) conducted one scarcely documented interview with an individual who returned from Syria, where he had joined IS. Hence, a first-hand narrative-based empirical analysis of the phenomenon of Swiss foreign fighters does not exist to this date. This fact is not particularly characteristic of the Swiss case. Rather, most studies of phenomena related to political violence and terrorism are not based on face-to-face interviews (Horgan 2012). While the lack of empirical foundation is certainly a weakness of terrorism research, this is not to say that basing analysis on face-to-face interviews necessarily produces the most solid findings, qualitatively speaking (see chapter 4). However, given the political appetite of gaining greater understanding of the phenomenon, particularly to inform effective policymaking, there should be more studies based on in-depth analysis of individuals' self-reported accounts. The present analysis, based on the concerned individuals' personal narratives, is meant to provide a step into this direction. The research method is primarily inductive (rather than deductive), i.e. taking empirical realities as the starting point from where suitable theoretical concepts are identified (Caron 2017). Some of the theoretical concepts that have emerged are briefly summarised in the next chapter and later discussed in relation to specific examples in the analytical chapters.

## Theoretical concepts

In the literature on radicalisation, the separation between cognitive (justifying violent action) and behavioural radicalisation (engaging in violent action) has found some consensus among scholars (Ducol 2013; McCauley/Moskalenko 2017). One benefit of this conceptual separation is that it takes into account the often-asked question: why does only a minor fraction of those who hold so-called *radical* or pro-violent attitudes end up engaging in violent action? Building on this separation, the present analysis will focus on the cognitive aspects, that is, the factors relevant at the stage of grievance formation and justifications for violent action. Grievances are objects of frustration, indignation and anger related to socio-economic, political or personal circumstances that result from “threat or harm to a group or cause the individual cares about” (McCauley/Moskalenko 2011: 21). Some authors argue that virtually all radical groups define themselves around social or political grievances (Doosje/Moghaddam/Kruglanski/De Wolf/Mann/Feddes 2016; Peterka-Benton/Benton 2014). Frequently cited models on radicalisation tend to locate the importance of grievances within the early stages of the radicalisation process (Borum 2011; Hafez/Mullins 2015; McCauley/Moskalenko 2017; Wiktorowicz 2005). Haggerty/Bucerius (2018) argue that it is via a process of *vicarious victimisation* – i.e. through identification with the suffering of others – that individuals come to experience grievances.

Grievance-generating elements include experiences that feed into a gradually evolving and crystallising, more or less coherent, set of grievances. These experiences may be nurtured by collective memory (Paez/Liu 2011; Rydgren 2007) or resulting from moral shocks (Jasper 2011) – concepts much discussed in social movement theory. Becker’s (1963) “moral entrepreneurs” and Pollak’s (1993) “memory entrepreneurs” are useful conceptual tools to analyse how individuals learn about collective memory and come to embrace it as their own.

The path from grievances to actual physical engagement is far from straightforward. To shed light on that transition, concepts drawn from criminology can prove useful. They include legal cynicism (Sampson/Bartusch 1998), Sykes’/Matza’s (1957) neutralisation theory, and thrill-seeking behaviour (Ferrell 1999; Katz 1988). Furthermore, ideas related to masculinity (or masculinities), developed by gender studies (Ferber/Kimmel 2008; Gilmore 1990; Kimmel 2003; Sion 2007) can help understand why violent engagement for a cause becomes *the right thing to do*.

## Methodological reflections

The data used for the analysis presented here stems from interviews conducted between 2018 and 2019 in Switzerland. Three interviews were conducted with individuals who had joined fighting factions in Syria (FF1, FF2, FF3). One interview was conducted with a militant who travelled to Palestine to support the Palestinian cause, in primarily non-violent ways (FM). Further, a handful of interviews have been conducted with professionals working with young men who have joined or expressed interest in joining groups. The choice of including a militant who has chosen mainly non-violent forms of engagement is partly motivated by calls to compare non-violent with violent militants, in line with Tilly’s (2003: 238) argument that

*collective violence [...] interweaves incessantly with nonviolent politics, varies systematically with political regimes, and changes as a consequence of essentially the same causes that operate in the nonviolent zones of collective political life.*

In fact, at the level of grievance formation and factors facilitating engagement, which constitute the focus of this analysis, I found all interviewees to display striking similarities.

The interviews took between two and three hours and were conducted in the sole presence of the interviewee, with one exception where the gatekeeper was present in the room. They were semi-structured. The same interview guide was used for all of them. Minor adaptations were made in light of findings that emerged from individual interviews. The interview map covered the most important dimensions relevant for both the engagement and the disengagement process.<sup>4</sup> It was constructed through a literature review of works on politically motivated violence drawn from various disciplines including criminology, sociology, conflict studies, political science and studies of social movements, terrorism, extremism, radicalisation and the likes. While the interviewer made sure to cover the different dimensions, the interviewee was given a lot of freedom to expand and develop his narrative, in line with suggestions made by Luna Reyes/Andersen (2003). The four main interviews were transcribed integrally and analysed using thematic analysis.

At the time of the interview, none of the individuals was incarcerated, nor had all been sentenced yet. Not all of them were being prosecuted either. Thus, in order to preserve their anonymity, a minimum of personal information will be provided. At the time of their engagement, which took place between 2013 and 2017, they were between 20 and 30 years old (FF1, 20; FF2, 30; FF3, 27; FM, 24). They joined different groups, mostly non-Islamist (FF1, IS; FF2, secular group; FF3, secular group; FM, humanitarian organisations). At the time of the interview, none of them was physically engaged in violent action. All of them had at least part-time employment. All of them are Swiss nationals. Two of them have one (FM) or two parents (FF3) who moved to Switzerland before or shortly after their birth. While their foreign heritage does have some pertinence for their engagement, mostly at the level of collective identity and sensitivity to issues related to particular political struggles, this will not be the focus of the present analysis, since the objective is to concentrate on factors of transversal relevance.

There are, of course, well-documented methodological limitations to the interview-based approach in the field of political violence, such as the difficulty of getting access to interviewees, the risk of providing a platform that interviewees may use to publicise and politicise their struggle, and the inevitability of interviewees' rationalising and justifying their past actions in light of the present (Bonelli/Carrié 2018; Horgan 2012). In the present analysis, I tried to slightly compensate for the limited number of subjects by pursuing depth and richness in the narratives collected. The small number is unsurprising given the very few officially known returnees in the Swiss context (14, according to the Federal Intelligence Service (FIS 2019)) and the difficulties of gaining access to them. These include that professionals in charge of

<sup>4</sup> In short, the dimensions related to: important childhood and adolescent experiences; the process of engaging in activism/violent action; collective memory and collective identity; the types of grievances experienced and their sources; emotions related to grievances; violent and non-violent action repertoires; personal relationship with violence; reasons for and process of disengaging from activism or violent action; vision of future engagement and personal projects.

foreign fighters (at some point after their return) do their best to protect them. This applies particularly to individuals who have not been sentenced yet. Professionals' wariness is also very legitimate in light of the immense mediatisation of some cases and the risks posed thereby for concerned individuals. Also, individuals who know they are being monitored by police or intelligence services, will be very careful to keep a low profile and therefore difficult to locate via informal gateways. Even when direct contact can be established, individuals are sometimes unwilling to participate in interviews, because they are, for example, wary of potential legal consequences or prefer not to be reminded of a sometimes painful past.

The individuals in this sample can be considered as disengaged from violence. As Bonelli/Carrié (2018) point out, disengaged individuals are likely to reconsider past episodes of violent engagement in a less favourable, or even harshly condemning, light. This has certainly been the case for some of my interviewees:

*Actually, the injustice I was perceiving was clearly mistaken, but in my head at the time, it was an injustice that I couldn't bear. [...] I was telling myself, regarding all that was happening, when I see people that get totally... of course it was totally biased, because those were propaganda videos and not the reality, but I was influenced by that so when I saw that the people were being massacred and all these atrocious things... But then, how could you know who started it? (FF1, emphasis added).<sup>5</sup>*

The reworked and self-censoring character of the narrative is evident. On two occasions, the interviewee does not finish the sentence that refers to the specific injustice he was perceiving and instead rushes to downplay it by invoking the bias of propaganda videos or the complexity of the conflict situation. This ongoing dialogue – between the engaged individual in the past and the disengaged in the present – undeniably hampers our understanding of why the individual engaged in the first place. Nevertheless, while at times methodologically disadvantageous, it is also a marker of interviewees' self-reflectiveness, which provided rich and dense narratives.

Horgan (2012) pointed out that a question frequently faced by researchers who conduct interviews in a variety of forensic contexts is: "How do you know if they are telling the truth?" (Horgan 2012: 200). In line with constructivist perspectives of narrative criminology (Presser 2016), I acknowledge the constructed nature of all interviewees' narratives, shaped not only by the timing of the interview (after their engagement), but also the physical location of the interview, the presence of the gatekeeper, their perceptions of the interviewer's trustworthiness and a series of other factors. Interviewees tend to reassemble past experiences into more or less coherent narratives, in an aspiration to create a seemingly logical sequence of events. Moreover, I acknowledge that the reasons for violent engagement are not always clear to the individuals themselves. In fact, as Akram (2014) argues, using Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*, violent engagement may be the result of grievances, memories and experiences, which have been stored over a long period of time and are in some way present during the engagement, without necessarily being clearly articulated to the individuals themselves. Thus, I am far from

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<sup>5</sup> In all quotes, I use three dots without brackets to illustrate brief narrative pauses. Three dots with brackets are used when part of the quote is cut, which is done exclusively for purposes of readability.

arguing that through these interviews, any particular truth could be revealed. If anything, it was *a* truth – the truth of these individuals at that particular moment and in the specific context of the interview – that I was able to capture and analyse.

In what follows, the results of the thematic analysis will be combined with insights from the literature. What is important to keep in mind about the individuals included in this sample is – despite their commonality of having mobilised for conflicts in the Arab World (Syria, Palestine) – the heterogeneity of the specific causes fought for, the organisations joined and the ideological convictions driving engagement, in different phases of their lives. The present analysis will focus on common aspects in their engagement that resonate with the existing literature on the topic. Thereby, I will inevitably fail to do justice to the individual trajectories, including the ideological maturity some of them have achieved through years of reflection and engagement.

### **Analysis: Trajectories towards foreign fighting**

#### *Reclaiming collective memories of resistance*

In his analysis of engagement in ethnic conflict, Rydgren (2007) highlights the importance of “collective memory”, which Paez/Liu (2011: 105) define as “widely shared knowledge of past social events that may not have been personally experienced but are collectively constructed through communicative social functions”. In other words, memory is not simply individual but co-constructed through social processes and interactions, particularly through narrativisation of the past. In the present sample, the collective memory pertinent for engagement in foreign fighting can in most cases be found in interviewees’ references to their familial history. On the one hand, it contains accounts of parents’ sensitivity to social and political issues:

*My father was a social worker in the French banlieues, working with the generation of immigrants. Today, he helps out refugees. My mother works in education and a lot with children who are less fortunate. Social issues have always been something that mattered to them (FM).<sup>6</sup>*

In another case, a parent’s political engagement had a significant influence on his early interest in politics:

*Politics, I have bathed in it since I was a kid. My father was very politically engaged. [...] Politics has always been of great importance at home. I was interested in what was happening in the world (FF2).*

Sometimes, the collective memory contains stories that refer to specific experiences of political struggle and resistance:

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<sup>6</sup> Interviews have been conducted in French and German. All quotes in this paper are translated by the author, not literally but *faithfully*, attempting to produce the precise contextual meaning of the original within the constraints of grammatical structures, as suggested by Ordudari (2007).



*I am a son of political exiles. I have grown up in stories of political struggle, militancy, seeking refuge, frustrations over failed projects and destroyed dreams. This idea of fragility has been passed on to me very strongly (FF3).*

Another individual recalls his parents telling him stories of his great grand-parents' resistance against colonialist powers in their home country or helping smuggle refugees into Switzerland during World War II. He also recalls stories of his father organising protests. There is also evidence that parents can have a specific impact on the causes one may come to care about: "My parents were always on the side of the Palestinians, so that was certainly a perspective I was influenced by" (FM). Collective memory sometimes also includes very specific actions of violent resistance and retaliation:

*It was an act of retaliation. The army had mutilated two of their friends. They dragged them through the streets, burned them and then dropped them in their neighbourhood. It was a very incisive moment. Those were close friends of my father. So, they decided to take revenge by sieging a bank and taking hostages (FF3).*

Apart from familial historical accounts, collective memory may be transmitted through a history of political struggle knit into the very social fabric the individual grows up in. One interviewee recalls his early confrontation with narratives of violent resistance:

*It's also the fact that the canton that I grew up in went through a struggle for independence [points to a poster on the wall commemorating the achievement of independence]. Of course, at our level, less bloody. But it's something important that you hear about regularly. [...] When my parents arrived there, it was already independent, but I like to discuss with parents and grand-parents of my Jurassic friends. For this cause, I am more committed than most of my Jurassic friends. I think that history played an important role for my engagement (FM).<sup>7</sup>*

In allusion to Becker's (1963) concept of "moral entrepreneurs", memories may be the work of *memory entrepreneurs* who, analogously to moral entrepreneurs, "create shared references and monitor respect for them" (Pollak 1993: 30). In my sample, the main memory entrepreneurs are members of interviewees' own or their friends' families. What is important to note is that collective memories are vulnerable to the bias of *availability heuristic* (Kahneman/Slovic/Tversky 1982): significant events tend to be remembered more easily and more widely than insignificant events. The pertinence of collective memory lies not, however, in the memories' historic veracity, but in their potential to significantly shape the world vision of future generations. To the interviewed individuals, the collective memories contain interpretations of historical events that provide "a specific repertoire of possible action" (Ruggiero 2005: 11), including violent or non-violent resistance and political emancipation, which they all reappropriate for a variety of causes.

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<sup>7</sup> On this, I also recommend Villiger's (2017) work on former members of separatist and anti-separatist groups in the Canton Jura.

### *The lasting impacts of moral shocks*

Apart from memory entrepreneurs, the collective memory can also be fed by incisive events that occur in individuals' own lifetime. Episodes that have such a strong impact have been referred to as *moral shocks*, defined as a

*vertiginous feeling that results when an event [e.g. personal experience or witnessing of unjust treatment] or information [e.g. news, video footage, documentary] shows that the world is not what one had expected, which can sometimes lead to articulation or rethinking of moral principles' (Jasper 2011: 289).*

Moral shocks (and the inherent analysis of injustice) elicit what Jasper (2011) terms *moral emotions*, among them moral indignation and outrage. Moral shocks can lead to political action as a form of redress and they have helped recruit people to various causes ranging from animal rights to antiracist movements. The individuals in this sample have experienced moral shocks that relate to international conflict situations, but also to domestic events. One interviewee recalls watching the news of the first Palestinian Intifada:

*What really left its mark on me was this shocking image... while watching the news with my parents... this image of total inequality between that young boy holding a stone, facing that Israeli tank. I think that strong image is what deeply troubled me and shook me in my young spirit (FM).*

These were the first moments of his emotional engagement for the Palestinian cause. However, at the time of the interview, his engagement had shifted towards the promotion of climate justice. Interestingly, it is through his description of his feelings towards this fresh and more current cause, that it was possible to access the moral emotions that were present during the initial phases of his engagement for the Palestinian cause. His tone and posture changed visibly when he started talking about climate justice:

*Extreme indignation... I mean, it's been 46 years that we have been aware of this, since the first reports were published. And the governments haven't done anything. Experts talk of an ecocide, a genocide against the planet, against everyone in fact. That's something that revolts me. I think I am at the same level of indignation that I was at during the first phases of my engagement for the Palestinian cause (FM).*

Another important episode of moral indignation for three interviewees was the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, which constituted a violation of international law and sparked protests worldwide, including in Switzerland. To them, this was the moment where they realised the blatant impunity of the most powerful countries. Around the same time, developments in neighbouring France coincided with one interviewee's protest against the Iraqi invasion:

*It was the period of the beginnings of Jean-Marie Le Pen, etc. in France. There were questions that made me think. And then I did my first big protest, when I was 15 years old. The big manifestation against the war in Iraq. That was a moment when I started to think more seriously about questions related to global politics (FF2).*

To another individual, it was the impunity of a dictator and the inability of the international community to do justice to the people who had suffered from his actions during years:

*We wanted to see justice in the face of this dictator. I think as a first political experience, this marked me significantly. We were hanging in there for a moment, expecting that justice would be done. But eventually, justice was not done. He was freed and that's it. I think it was the first time that I saw concretely, in front of my eyes, the emotions and the mobilisation of the community. And that the response of the world was injustice (FF3).*

While grievances related to global events dominated the narratives, locally-oriented grievances were also mentioned by some, such as the election of the controversial right-wing politician Christoph Blocher to the Federal Council: "We are in Switzerland. And a guy like that gets elected" (FF2). Hafez/Mullins (2015) have already pointed out that engagement in political violence tends to be influenced by both globally-oriented and locally-oriented grievances.

McCauley/Moskalenko (2011), in their biographical study of different cases of political violence, concluded that "what moved [them], while others who shared their convictions did nothing, seems to have been an unusual capacity to care about others" (McCauley/Moskalenko 2011: 76). In his study of politico-religious self-sacrifice, Cohen (2016) found that perpetrators of suicide attacks displayed "heightened awareness and sensitivity to social and/or political grievance" (Cohen 2016: 751). What all interviewees undeniably have in common is their sensitivity to injustice, which the following quotes illustrate:

*I've always been very sensitive to injustice. When I was 4 or 5 years old and we went on vacation, I cried when I saw the boys of my age working on the street, while I was there on vacation. I think that certainly played a role. The fact of always having seen this inequality. It definitely influenced me (FM).*

*My parents always told me that as a boy, I strongly disliked injustice. At school, I spoke up against teachers when I thought something was wrong. I was kind of a troublemaker as a kid. When I saw something that seemed unjust, I was not afraid of pointing it out. That's what my parents have always told me (FF2).*

While individuals may have a personal predisposition toward sensitivity to injustice, it is also, to a certain extent, a personal choice, which is opposed to the *carelessness* of those people who remain idle in the face of injustice: "When it came to political causes, I could be very violent, verbally. When I saw injustice and I couldn't understand how people couldn't react. In those cases, I really felt great anger" (FM). A tragic example is also offered by Heather Hayes, who tweeted, just before she lost her life in the protests that took place in Charlottesville in August 2017: "If you're not outraged, you're not paying attention" (Independent, 2017). Her statement implies that any normal human being would have cared if they had chosen to pay attention to what was happening.

Something to be noted about moral shocks is the role of media and social media in particular. In fact, they are the main sources of information through which these individuals have learned about political events and injustices, whether domestic or global. Again, similarly to collective memory, the pertinence of moral shocks produced by information received through media or social media lies not in its truthful representation of world events, but in their lasting emotional impact, which comes to the fore through the narrated expressions of grievances. The emotional impact is naturally even greater, when moral shocks are the result of direct

victimisation. In my sample, such experiences were the result of traumatising interactions with the police. One individual shares his experience of being arrested during a protest rally:

*Something that I experienced, which certainly pushed me towards a certain form of radicality, was police brutality. [...] I saw things that I will never forget, which no one who was present will ever forget. [...] They arrested us, handcuffed us and brought us to their headquarter, where they put us into four cells. Once in the cells, that's where it became incredible. [...] Since we were in there as groups, we tried to have some fun, by singing and playing football with a plastic bottle. The cops didn't like that. They kept telling us to stop and sit down. Then they started yelling at us. Then, they brought in the dogs, but that only got us more excited. Ten minutes later, they sent in the special forces who entered the cells, teargassed us, cuffed our hands behind our backs and kept us like that for another hour and a half. After eight hours and some interrogations, they let us leave. [...] Imagine that, people were crying, begging them to stop. Many stopped all political activity after that (FF2).*

Another individual recalls an instance where he and a group of friends were arbitrarily arrested and let go soon after:

*It was a bad experience. I think it has strengthened my convictions. Because the first time that I was arrested, it was particularly violent. The cops were completely mistaken. They were looking for a group of youngsters who were burning cars. And I was 13 years old maybe. I was sitting with friends in a courtyard. And all of a sudden, a guy appears and points at us with a gun. We are in Switzerland! We didn't get it. And then, more guys jumped out of the bushes and threw us to the ground, feet on our heads, in a really ugly way. And two hours later, they let us go: 'It wasn't you'. We were like 'what?' [...] And again, I understood that the world was not a just place. I knew I was lucky they didn't find a box of matches in my pocket. Otherwise they would have accused me of burning these cars. Until then, the cops were just nice guys you see on the street. Up to the moment when you find yourself between their hands. And they treat you like a criminal. Then you understand what they are capable of (FF3).*

The emotions that accompanied the delivery of these detailed accounts could not be missed. The narratives were riddled with facial and tonal expressions alternating between genuine disillusionment and utter indignation. These moral shocks strongly impacted these individuals' worldview, their faith in state actors and their already dwindling belief in the legitimacy of the state, including systems and entities supposedly representing it. In other words, such moral shocks are likely to foster *legal cynicism*, that is, a loss of faith in legal norms and agents, which typically results from experiences of criminal *injustice* (Sampson/Bartusch 1998). The selected quotes of these individuals demonstrate very clearly how legal cynicism can emerge in the Swiss context but may also – considering the example of the invasion of Iraq or the failure to prosecute the dictator – result from their recognising international institutions' failure to provide justice. Legal cynicism is pertinent for the study of foreign fighters because it enables justifications of law-breaking behaviour, in line with reflections suggested by Sykes/Matza's (1957) neutralisation theory. One may also argue that engaging in foreign fighting could be

considered as a form of *exported* political contestation. This argument is supported by the fact that individuals seem to consider their engagement in foreign fighting as an extension of a generally defiant posture towards the state and international institutions. Hagan/Kaiser/Hanson (2016) found that legal cynicism played an important role in mobilisation of Iraqis against US/coalition forces in Iraq after 2003. Interviewees express varying degrees of legal cynicism. For example:

*Of course there are many laws that I don't find just at all and I don't have a problem disrespecting them. [...] There are laws that you disobey because there are things that matter more than a few lines on a piece of paper (FM).*

Legal cynicism also opens up a vacuum which can be filled by other norms, sometimes influenced by *subcultural peers* (Sampson/Bartusch 1998):

*My bike was stolen for the third time, so I went and stole one myself. In a way, I said to myself, they steal my bike, I'll steal one. It is a gradual process. You disconnect from the society you live in. Add to that the people who tell you certain things: how to react, how to act, brainwashing you in a way. We started being kind of apart, because we didn't accept any other norms than ours (FF1).*

### *The latent role of combat masculinity*

In the study of foreign fighting, and political violence more generally, some attention has been paid to the concept of masculinity. By *masculinity* (or masculinities), I am referring to a group of historically and culturally available, recognised and legitimate themes which are more or less identified with certain aspects of being a man in a certain society, as suggested by Gilmore (1990). While masculinity was not a concept included in my interview grid, it clearly emerged as a recurring theme throughout the analysis. Leone/Parrott (2018) argue that the dominant perspective linking masculinity to crime and aggression is *hegemonic masculinity*, an ideology that postulates the defence of values associated with *manhood* in order to ensure men's superiority over non-males. While certainly relevant for the narratives analysed here, I found the concept of *combat masculinity*, which Sion (2007) identified in her study of Dutch soldiers, to be more fitting. Values associated with combat masculinity that can be formulated based on interviewees' narratives are, for example, *men stand up against injustice* or *men defend and protect their country, their people* and *men endure the toughness of combat*. Kimmel (2003) refers to such statements as characterisations of manhood. On some occasions, such statements were made explicitly by interviewees, as the following excerpt shows:

*What upset me was to see that the people were incapable of defending their own country. [...] I was a young man and to me, I really had that kind of value of the man that had to go fight, to defend his country and his values. The fact that you leave your wars and countries is what forces people who are not even from here, not from this country or religion, such as me, to go fight there. So, I had a lot of anger for these people. Even in prison, I continued to feel that way, telling myself that it is because of people like you that I have to go fight. [...] For example, I met a guy who*

*had left his wife and his kids behind to flee... I thought this was so cowardly! As a man, you dare flee and leave your family behind? (FF1).*

In a more subtle way, combat masculinity can appear in the form of taking responsibility and choosing to take action. One interviewee's admiration for other foreign fighters who he met when he arrived in Syria is self-revealing: "These were people who had a trajectory similar to ours. They were people who had no obligation to be there. They had *chosen* to come here." (FF2). The notion of *choice* appears to be crucial: Choosing to engage in combat for the *right cause* is considered as virtuous behaviour associated with combat masculinity. One interviewee recounted a situation where he was used as an example by an older man to call out other young men who had not engaged in combat. He was brought to a café where many young men of that particular community were known to be gathering. The message, the interviewee said, was: "Look at this Swiss guy who is willing to go fight in your stead. And you are staying here, smoking pot" (FF3). The interviewee himself was not aware of the way he was used by that older man, but expressed approval in hindsight:

*I think he was right to do that, to put some pressure on them, to use me for that purpose. They are at peace in Europe. They can smoke pot and go to cafés. That situation reminded them a bit that if you call yourself a [member of that community, AA] all year long, there is a moment when you have to stand up for it (FF3).*

The approving posture of the interviewee is revelatory of his own adhesion to the concept of combat masculinity, which postulates that people who are affected, whether through their membership of a particular community or country or their witnessing of injustice, have an inherent responsibility to step up to the plate. Although not always explicitly articulated, values associated with combat masculinity seem to play into reflections of these young men to mobilise for combat.

### Jusqu'au-boutisme: going all in

Furthermore, all interviewees express admiration for those who go *all in*. This idea is well captured by the French expression *jusqu'au-boutisme* (literally: *to-the-end-ism*), translated as *brinkmanship*, but also as *extremism*. Interviewees express commitment to the idea of *jusqu'au-boutisme*:

*What annoyed me was that it was all just talk. And I needed deeds. [...] If I engaged in something like this, I would go through with it to the end. So, I called up this friend and told him that I wanted to leave for Syria (FF1).*

Interviewees further expressed their wish to examine their own ability to go *all in*:

*It started titillating me, I wanted to know whether I was ready to go myself. [...] that's something that I clearly said to myself. I wanted to test myself. Was I ready to do like they say in the books, to pick up an arm and go fight? (FF2).*

It appears that the tendency towards *jusqu'au-boutisme* translates a struggle to achieve authenticity, and thereby affirm combat masculinity. Importantly, the idea of going *all in* can imply a self-sacrificing posture, which the following quote captures well:

*It was an extremist need to sacrifice myself for the people I loved. I could do anything for a person. I could dedicate my body and soul to something if that could alleviate even a tiny bit of that person's pain (FF1).*

Another interviewee decided to leave for Syria despite his mother being deeply worried: “My mother went through a depression because of that [him leaving, AA]. But that couldn't stop me either. No” (FF2). The quest for utmost authenticity seems to be inextricably tied to assertions of self-sacrifice, including a willingness to expose oneself to the risk of dying in combat, of potentially hurting family members and the risks of prosecution and imprisonment: “Even if I have a kid. That won't keep me from fighting. [...] I've also changed my point of view on prison. Prison is not the end. It's perhaps an inevitable phase” (FF2). As a consequence, interviewees express great admiration for those who actually *give everything*, especially *martyrs*:

*I have always admired people who give everything. [...] I admire these people for their sacrifice. People who leave the individualism behind, who transcend it. 'I am going to dedicate my life to others'. That gesture, I admire it immensely. [...] Martyrs are people who show you the way, because they chose to sacrifice everything (FF2).*

Archer (2003) suggests that expressing approval of and admiration for martyrdom should be seen as performing and invoking a particularly potent form of masculinity.

### Defying and embracing roughness

Finally, I would argue that combat masculinity is also at play in the very attraction towards combat and violent action. It is exhibited through descriptions of the toughness of combat and the roughness of life away from comfort. Importantly, it is also revealed through assertions that fighting for justice requires courage to give up that comfort in the first place: “Leaving for combat is also a way of asserting one's willingness to leave behind the European petit-bourgeois comfort” (FF2). Closely associated with visions of combat masculinity is the ability to endure duress and difficult conditions: “We expected to take a sleeping bag and sleep on the street. We were really in war mode. Of course, I didn't believe we were going to be in a five-star hotel, sipping cocktails” (FF1). Similar descriptions can be found in the same interviewee's account of his incarceration:

*It was rough in the beginning because the food was absolutely dreadful, the covers were musty and there was no hot water. When I got there, it was January. First week, I got sick immediately. But then, you get used to it. You get used to it [laughs] (FF1).*

Similarly to the idea of being in *war mode*, this interviewee describes his experiences in combat as follows:

*It was tough. We were in commando mode, on the river, knowing that the [soldiers] were ready to shoot at us anytime. Walking through the mud, for eight hours [...] then we passed the border in commando mode, it was quite funny (FF2).*

While it may seem counterintuitive, such descriptions of tough conditions are all narrated in an amused, almost excited way. In fact, attraction for the roughness of combat or similar situations appears to be mixed with bravado and adventurism, and perhaps a slight sense of pride. Ferrell (1999: 404) described this as

*intense and often ritualised moments of pleasure and excitement [that] define the experience of sub-cultural membership and, by members' own accounts, seduce them into continued subcultural participation.*

Katz (1988) similarly argued that people who engage in delinquent activity are not necessarily involved for a particular end product, but also for the excitement of escaping from normal, mundane lives, a phenomenon that has also been described as “escapism” (Crettiez 2016). While this almost juvenile exaltation about combat is virtually absent from most analyses of foreign fighters, I found that it resonates strikingly with a colleague’s soberingly honest self-appraisal of conducting ethnographic research on Syrian fighters engaged in the civil war:

*This terrain provides this inebriation of an uncertain adventure, of joining these men who give their lives for a cause they consider just. In a way, there is this excitement of peril and the unusual. War produces a whole series of experiences, many of which do not fail to excite. The most decisive one is, without a doubt, that of being with these men whose actions will determine the future. To that, add the morbid curiosity of experiencing bombings, its manifestations and effects. Finally, there is probably also this pride of being courageous and accepting to experience these critical situations at the risk of one’s own life (Huët 2015: 46).*

In the following quote, the excitement joins an expression of appreciation for the clarity provided by being involved in the fighting:

*When I was over there, I didn’t feel like coming back. Because it’s epic! Because you don’t have the same problems. I never asked myself questions about money, accommodation or the purpose of my life. Really. Like the purpose of my role. It was clear. There was this clarity: you go sleep there, eat there, and you are here for this (FF3).*

Doosje et al. (2016) postulate that engagement in political violence is part of a *significance-seeking* project. As the above quote illustrates, there is clearly something to the idea of having clarity of purpose in one’s life. It seems that, convinced of the cause they are engaged for and knowing they are sacrificing their lives for it, these individuals gain a potent sense of purpose.

### Attitudes towards violence

Interviewees also convey fascination for combat sports, extreme sports, the military and heroic movie characters: “For me, it has always been the combat. I have always loved this, martial arts, the historic films on wars, I have always been fascinated by that” (FF1) or “I have always been someone who likes the adrenaline rush. I practice extreme sports” (FF2). They also enjoy the energy produced by violent action:



*We organised the protests, things were busting and moving, it was cool! We were young and we were able to move things, we were happy. When it was a big mess and everything, I liked that (FF2).*

Describing a situation where he and a group of friends faced an intervention by the police, this interviewee fails to hide his amusement:

*The cops entered through the windows and we started fighting with them. It was funny. They tried to come through the windows, so they came one by one and we were ten on the other side. A big fight, it was quite funny! And then they chased us through the streets during the whole night (FF3).*

The same interviewee also described another situation: “We were a group of five. We organised a trip to join this protest. Like going to combat. To go fight, in fact. And it was really cool” (FF3).

All interviewees also describe themselves as having been pugnacious and combative during adolescence. This may be understood as early confrontations with conceptions of combat masculinity. More importantly, however, today, they have all learned to manage their anger and indignation – “I still feel that anger, but I use it in a more positive way” (both FM and FF1) – and critically apprehend the use of violence:

*That’s the term: necessity. I don’t like combat, I won’t look for violence. I have never liked that. But I like being ready. And to be able to use it if necessary. There is a very pragmatic side to this. To me, finding myself in combat and not being ready, that’s too late. We live in a society where there is violence. [...] But you have to be self-critical. It’s all very exciting, being in these situations. They’re incredible sometimes. But it shouldn’t be violence just for the sake of it. [...] If you are just guided by your own desires, it merely becomes another manifestation of self-centredness (FF2).*

Undeniably, such critical views are also the result of long processes of self-reflection. Interestingly, non-violent coping with anger and indignation does not seem to be at odds with expressions of combat masculinity. In other words, individuals do not have to abandon values associated with combat masculinity when choosing non-violent over violent action. This becomes visible through the persistent use of expressions such as *combat* or *fighting*, even for seemingly mundane situations: “To me, my everyday life, it’s a fight, a struggle. It may be work, school, my relationship with my family and friends. That’s my fight” (FF1).

### Combat masculinity: constructed through binary systems

Masculine identities are the result of a continuous repositioning of self and others, whether in relation to other men or women. In fact, Gilmore (1990) argues that *manhood* is defined in relation to other men rather than women. Similarly, and crucially, I have found that combat masculinity provides a value repertoire that is far from being exclusive to men, as illustrated by the admiration of some interviewees for fellow female fighters:

*Imagine the strength you need to have to be a woman and go to a place where you are encircled by fifteen male fighters to convince them that what they are doing is wrong? That was one of the most impressive things I saw over there (FF2).*

Thus, by using *combat masculinity* conceptually – maybe for lack of a better term – I am not implying that these are traits specific to men, but rather gendered stereotypes available to both men and women that provide guidance on the *right way to act* in the face of perceived injustice.

Also, values and attitudes associated with combat masculinity appear to be constructed through binary systems, that is, through their contrasting with attributes of *non-masculinity*. Binary systems that emerged from the analysis are: caring vs. careless; taking responsibility vs. remaining idle; authenticity/*jusqu'au-boutisme* vs. hypocrisy; courage vs. cowardice; embracing the toughness/roughness of combat vs. refusal to abandon the comfort of life in a peaceful European country; and collectivism vs. individualism. Benslama (2016) and Crettiez/Ainine (2017) found that young Frenchmen who joined or sympathised with IS define themselves in opposition to Frenchmen that they accuse of weakness and cowardice. Archer (2003) also found support for such binary systems among Scottish youth of Asian origin. For the Swiss case, this raises the question whether combat masculinity may be defined against a vaguely defined idea of *Swissness*. In fact, I found that individuals do express frustrations with perceived Swiss *apoliticality* – “People pretend to be apolitical and objective. [...] To me, it always seemed more like they didn’t want to get involved and change things” (FF3) – and *calmness*: “I think we were trying to distance ourselves from the ‘calm Swiss’, to define ourselves against that” (FM). However, my findings on this aspect, which would merit being explored more thoroughly, remain tentative.

### *Ready for combat? The importance of context*

As mentioned before, my focus here was on the cognitive rather than the behavioural aspects of violent engagement. While individuals may come to justify violent action, through a variety of experiences and processes, some of which have been discussed here, there is a range of contextual and situational factors that may prevent or facilitate actual engagement in action. Thus, while there may be a large population that envisages violent action for a political cause, only a minor fraction will actually engage in it. Contextual and situational factors relevant for that spilling over can be found in this sample as well. While they are beyond the scope of the present analysis, they deserve brief mention. In line with social control theory (Gottfredson/Hirschi 1990), I found evidence for the importance of *stakes*, such as having flexible employment or being in a relationship:

*I always told myself, I was in a relationship and I didn’t want to do that to my girlfriend. [...] at the beginning of the summer, we weren’t sure anymore, and at the end of the summer we broke up. And then, I told myself, there is nothing holding me back anymore (FF2).*

Other situational and contextual factors identified in this sample include the importance of peers, community and networks, as well as financial considerations.

### Concluding remarks: Adding nuances to an unnuanced debate

My intention here was to present reflections on engagement in foreign fighting based on examples of Swiss males who travelled abroad to engage for causes and conflicts related to the Arab World. I chose to focus on factors that are at play during the initial phases of the engagement, when individuals come to embrace a cause and justify physical engagement for it.

The interviewees of this study all express high levels of sensitivity to injustices and a certain degree of political acumen, related to both domestic and global affairs. I found these attributes to be at least partly informed by a collective memory mainly shaped by members of their family. Their collective memories contain stories of political struggle and violent resistance, which, taken together, form an action repertoire that can be reclaimed by future generations. The role of collective identity, which may be provided through a familial religious heritage, may significantly shape the collective memory available to the individual. While collective identity did not constitute a transversally pertinent dimension for my sample and was therefore omitted, it is worth mentioning because, especially for conflicts in the Arab World, some form of Islamic cultural heritage may crucially influence the way individuals associate themselves with the collective memory of a perceived global *Islamic community* (Lakhani 2013). This is an aspect that Bielmann's (2017) findings point to as well. I further found moral shocks to play a crucial role. In the present sample, moral shocks were produced by news and imagery vividly describing situations of suffering and injustice, but also by personal experiences of police brutality and arbitrary arrest. As a result, a certain level of legal cynicism could be found among all interviewees.

Finally, I have identified *combat masculinity* – a set of values associated with the *right way to act* in the face of injustice – as an ideological construct pertinent for justifications of violent action. Here, my analysis presents a departure from gendered studies on terrorism (e.g. Ferber/Kimmel 2008), which tend to argue – in a slightly pathologising manner – that engagement in terrorism can be seen as a reaction to humiliation and *emasculatation*, i.e. as an attempt to restore hegemonic masculinity. In my sample, values associated with masculinity do not seem to be about restoring anything lost, but about stepping up to the plate and bearing the hardships this entails. Thus, combat masculinity appears to be latently present in descriptions of the need to take responsibility, to defend and protect innocent civilians, in expressions of admiration for those who go *all in* up to sacrificing their lives for a cause, and in the very attraction to combat and violence. It also seems that masculine values or identities are forged through binary systems, that is, in opposition to attributes such as carelessness, idleness, cowardice or weakness. For future research, I suggest considering the likely entangledness of masculine ideologies with religiously-tainted pro-violent ideologies, in line with the findings of Choudhury (2007) and Lakhani (2013).

To date, there is a paucity of research on the most recent wave of Swiss Foreign Fighters. Existing studies fail to provide in-depth analysis of the processes and rationales at play in trajectories towards engagement in political violence. One (empirical) reason may be the virtual absence of face-to-face interviews from their data collection process. Another characteristic hampering analytical depth, I would argue, is their exclusive focus on so-called jihadist foreign fighters. While undoubtedly influenced by the public discourse, this parochial focus – worry-

ingly reminiscent of what Garland (2001) termed the *criminology of the other* – serves to *exceptionalise* a particular kind of foreign fighting by constructing it as an analytical category per se, while obscuring a large array of non-jihadist forms of engagement for causes in the Arab World, whose analysis can deliver crucial insights into why individuals from Switzerland choose to leave peace for combat. Ironically, in a sort of negative feedback loop, such studies produce biased findings that are fed back into the political sphere, thereby continuously reinforcing and narrowing both academic and public perception of the issue at hand. If the present analysis is to provide any takeaway for policymaking, it may be precisely to recall the nuances of the complexity of the issue of foreign fighting, in order to counterbalance the oversimplifying tendencies of both academia and policymakers, as suggested by Maurer (2017).

Likewise, I would warn against the loss of nuances in discussions of *radicality*. Sweeping criminalisation of all forms of perceived *radicality* under the pretext of counterterrorism or the prevention of radicalisation has been shown to lead to the censoring of legitimate forms of political contestation – with devastating effects on civic participation (Ahmed 2016; Lister/Jarvis 2013; Taylor 2018). Therefore, nuances should also inform the current debate on *disengagement* versus *deradicalisation*, which has been reignited among concerns of returning foreign fighters following the IS' official territorial defeat. Projects of deradicalisation are likely to contribute to the *criminalisation of thoughts* and will soon be at odds with the fundamental principles of a liberal-democratic state. As the narratives collected in this study demonstrate, individuals may be disengaged without being deradicalised and they may hold pro-violent attitudes that are in conformity with pro-social convictions, something that has also been observed by Da Silva et al. (2018). Aiming for disengagement would therefore seem to be a more fruitful avenue towards dealing with the phenomenon of foreign fighting, and political violence more generally.

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