



International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism



Not All ISIS Returnees are Defectors

Anne Speckhard, Ph.D.

One can never know for sure.

Twenty-seven years old, Belgian, Younes Delefortrie is telling me about his return to Belgium after spending five weeks with ISIS in Syria in 2013. "I hid in the house. Even the children didn't know I was there. For three days the police came by asking [my wife], 'Did you see him?'"

It's February 2016, and I've come here to interview Belgians and family members of those who have traveled to Syria to join ISIS, *Jabhat al Nusra*, or other groups in the Sunni uprising. Belgium is disproportionately represented among ISIS foreign fighters coming from European countries. Five hundred Belgians have disappeared into Syria, many to ISIS, and one hundred and twenty-five have returned.¹ Half of those are imprisoned and the other half are on the streets of Belgium. Younes is one of them.

Only a few months ago, it was a handful of Belgians who had returned from ISIS training in Syria, took up arms and suicide belts, to nearly simultaneously attack the Paris concert hall, stadium, restaurants and bars. Abdelhamid Abaaoud, the alleged ringleader of the attacks, was a Belgian national from the Molenbeek area of Brussels. He was discovered hiding out in a Paris apartment and killed by the French police shortly after the attacks. Likewise, Salah and Brahim Abdeslam, brothers and French nationals had been raised in the Molenbeek neighborhood. Brahim exploded himself while Salah ran and returned to this neighborhood to hide out. Twenty-five-year-old Chakib Akrouh, also born and raised in Belgium, exploded himself after the Paris bombing, during a police raid. He is believed to have been involved in the bar and restaurant attacks. Other Belgians of North African descent were involved in preparing the attacks and aiding Abdeslam's escape. Many of their identities will be discovered in the coming months and it will be discovered that they traveled through Turkey to Syria and back again through Turkey and Greece to attack. However, at the time we are interviewing Younes, only some of this is known.²

When I lived in Brussels from 2000 to 2007 during my husband's diplomatic career, I traveled to places like the West Bank, Gaza, Morocco, Jordan, Iraq, Uzbekistan and Russia to interview hundreds of terrorists, their family members, close associates

and even hostages.³ Eventually it dawned on me—I didn't need to leave Belgium to find militant *jihadi* extremists. There were plenty right in my neighborhood. In fact, numerous al Qaeda-inspired plots involving Belgian cadres had been stopped during the seven years I lived in Belgium, including a suicide operative who planned to detonate himself inside the U.S. embassy in Paris.⁴

It is against this backdrop that I find myself in Antwerp, one of Belgium's main cities, sitting in a small office just off of the Radisson hotel lobby, drinking Belgian coffee and listening to Younes tell his story. Having arrived in pants that are cut short, well above his ankles, in the regulation manner of *Salafi* traditional dress, Younes greeted me with a friendly, but nervous smile. According to his brand of Islam, it's forbidden to take a woman's hand he explained, as he tensely said hello without a handshake and I wondered if I would be able to get much of an interview with him. But now that we are into it, I see that I've gotten him talking freely. I think I may have hit the mother lode.

With the Islamic State's declaration of a "Caliphate" in June 2014, what had been low-level but significant, militant *jihadi* activity in Belgium ramped up on steroids. As the Sunni uprising against Assad began and no one came to the aid of the rebels, alienated young Belgian men and women, already resonating to the call of groups like al-Qaeda, began thinking they could help the anti-Assad rebels. *Salafi* extremists had been cultivating the ground in Belgium for years, working in the streets and out of garage mosques, converting disaffected immigrant youth to their extremist brand of Islam. The young recruits already accepted al-Qaeda's premise that *jihad* against the West was called for because Islamic peoples and lands, and even Islam itself, were under attack, and "martyrdom" missions against the enemy were an instant pathway to Paradise. Already primed, they easily fell for the call of ISIS.

From 2013 onward, Belgian youth became enamored of the idea of adventure, upset by the lack of global support for the Sunni uprising against Assad, and strongly resonated with the idea of an Islamic utopia and the alternative world governance of the "Caliphate" offered by ISIS. They began streaming by the hundreds through Turkey into Syria. These Belgians joined the monthly deluge of a thousand to fifteen hundred

foreign fighters flowing in from around the globe who made it possible for ISIS to suffer the steady degradation of Coalition airstrikes and still renew its ranks.⁵ These recruits from Belgium are part of the group of foreign fighters who our Syrian ISIS defectors consistently described as “true believers,” fully indoctrinated into militant jihadi ideas upon their arrival.

Ten years ago in Antwerp, these North African second-generation youth were already disaffected “true believers,” telling me how alienated they felt in Belgium and France and how angry they were over geopolitics. In fact, when the Paris attacks happened in November 2015, I would have pointed to Antwerp as more of a hotbed of militant *jihadi* activities than the well-known Molenbeek neighborhood of Brussels, from where the Belgian Paris attackers came.

This trip, I was here to try and interview some of these ISIS “true believers”. I wanted to know why young men and women from Belgium would leave circumstances so different from the Syrians who often joined ISIS out of a lack of alternatives, coercion, and pressure to provide for themselves and their families. Were the true believers who returned to Belgium, defectors, like the Syrians we’d been talking to? Or were they simply returnees—still deeply entrenched in militant jihadi beliefs and hence dangerous? Here in Belgium, and across all of Europe, government security officials were especially concerned about their citizens returning home after serving time in groups like ISIS, a concern now greatly heightened by the Paris attacks. How many of those who went to Syria might constitute a threat if they returned home? How many would remain ideologically indoctrinated and were already weapons trained?

I knew it wouldn’t be easy to make contact with ISIS defectors inside Europe. We had hit a pipeline of them in Turkey thanks to Ahmet’s efforts at winning trust, but those who return to Europe would be reticent to talk for a number of reasons. These defectors would fear ISIS just like the Syrians in Turkey. They might not want to admit they had joined ISIS because doing so means they could face prosecution in their European home country. They also might not appreciate an American asking them questions, given the Coalition bombings in Syria. And if they hadn’t really defected, they

might be seriously dangerous. I knew if it was the latter I could potentially be putting my life in danger. It was a calculated risk.

Before I left Ahmet commented, “You always have a police guard with you on these interviews, no?” I turned to him, incredulous. Sure, I would have loved a trained police chief, like Ahmet, along on these interviews, but our budget didn’t allow it. So I went alone—unprotected—as I had done for most of the hundreds of interviews I’d conducted over the years. I never had the luxury of a guard alongside me, except inside the Department of Defense prisons in Iraq.

Younes Delefortrie was seated across the room, speaking in English to me.⁶ We are using his real name, with his permission. I already knew from reading local press about him that he was a convert to Islam, grew up in a Flemish family of five children and that it wasn’t a happy home. His mother was an alcoholic and his father was unable to control her violence or her drinking. Younes was the oldest and may have had it the worst. I’d also read that he doesn’t like talking about his childhood, so I’m treading gently as I ask him to tell me about himself—how he grew up and later became involved with ISIS.⁷

We had the camera rolling as he agreed to a video interview. I was managing to make a connection. Describing himself as a hyperactive child unable to pay attention, I nod, knowing that this description is often the fate of young boys who grow up in chaotic and violent conditions. If a child who is trying to organize himself doesn’t have a reliable attachment figure with whom to make a strong and reliable bond, he will often fail to organize himself well, or even learn to pay attention to authority figures.

“It was a difficult situation,” Younes says, describing his early family life while ruminating on whether or not he was “normal” as a young boy. “Normal needs two parents,” he reflects as a sad expression crosses his face. “I ruined a lot of things in my life—school and education, and had a lot of energy,” he says, easing into his childhood pain carefully.

“Everybody can be a mother. Not everyone can be a mom. My mother left when I was twelve or thirteen.”

“That’s a pretty tender age to lose your mother. Did it break your heart when she left?”

Younes expression becomes sardonic, as he answers, “A mother who has a drinking problem is not something you will miss very soon. I was actually relieved. It’s better for children if there is an unnatural abnormal—it’s best to change the situation. I was also sure that it would improve the situation.”

His mother got so drunk each day that she couldn’t care, cook, or clean for her children. Later, an associate of Younes tells me that his mother was violent as well and tried to make Younes responsible for the other children, blaming and hitting him in her drunken state when he didn’t manage to take up the slack. Given that, it probably was a relief when she jumped ship.

Younes’s father put their mother into alcohol treatment three times. On the third time she decided to run off with another alcoholic in the program. After abandoning her five children, she went on to have five more children with the next man. “She lost my appreciation of being a mother,” Younes sarcastically notes, shaking his head. “She was drunk, annoying, aggressive,” whereas he tells me that his father returned home to try to pull the family together after he “worked eight hours in hard labor.”

“Occasionally he’d drink on the weekends, normally after dinner, or at dinner, or before television at night, but he got up each day at seven a.m.” Younes’ father, a team boss in a metal construction factory, I’d also later learn from others who know Younes’ story, would come home and try to hold the family together. But he would also sometimes give in and drink right along with his wife. Younes’ father was not as much a saint as his son made him out to be.

After his mother left, his grandparents stepped in. “They came at six a.m., to make breakfast. My grandmother cleaned the house and they came back at four p.m. to take us from school,” he says as though everything was fine. In fact he was not fine. Like many young boys who haven’t any coping mechanisms to deal with their emotional pain and act them out through constant motion, Younes became severely hyperactive to the

point that he was diagnosed and received medication. He describes how he was “bored in school, not feeling good, and eventually failed.” Rather than high school he went into a “learning contract” to learn the Belgian art of making chocolate and pastry production. It seems like such a contradiction—from pastry maker to ISIS

As a teen, Younes went on a wild streak for some years—using drugs and partying with girls. “The partying and the girlfriend relationships without any value made me realize that life without borders was not the right life to live, better to have borders and standards. At that moment I was also an altar boy. I was religious. My father and mother were very religious and took us to church, but I had only Western society borders, and those of the Catholic Church—and those two borders were not very good. They didn’t look like borders to me.”

Like all youth, Younes began searching for meaning to his life and as an alienated teenager found his answers among other youth who would sit on the riverbank smoking hashish. “They opened me to search new knowledge—what is Islam, what are the borders.” He explains: “This is clear cut, no grey. Black and white, no doubts—till today I didn’t find doubts. Before, I had non-authentic beliefs,” referring to his Catholic upbringing and likely the hypocrisy he witnessed in his family, torn by drunken violence, living out what they claimed as their creed. Younes was searching for limits, discipline, and certainty, and Islam offered all three. And his emotional pain made him receptive to more extremist versions than what he learned from his hashish-smoking friends.

“So-called moderates,” Younes calls them, “that was my [first] version of Islam. I can describe them as non-well informed. They don’t do acts that put them out of religion, but they just accepted the entry card. We have the five pillars: i.e. saying the *Shahada* [the Muslim testimony of faith], keeping the five daily prayers, fasting during Ramadan, giving *zakat* [charity], and if possible taking at least one pilgrimage to Mecca; but in our [*Salafi*] opinion that is just the passport to calling yourself a Muslim. Human beings are what they are and quickly satisfied with those things. But they need to go deeper.”

“Converts are more motivated—‘radicalized’ is the claim—but the truth is we are just more interested in what we believe. Born Muslims think they get it all. That is a big problem of what we have now. America [American policy makers and political pundits] says we cannot change Islam from inside and said we need to change and renew,” Younes reflects. As a *Salafi*, he roundly rejects the idea of moderating or innovating on Islam in any manner. “Who said we wanted to renew? Our religion has been changed. Catholics made many changes over times, the Jews rejected the Torah and made their own,” Younes repeats a common militant *jihadi* and extremist line that Jews rejected what was given to them and therefore fell into sin, but true Muslims stick to the old interpretations and ways.

“Everything created by human beings, everything created by people, fails.” Younes seems very sure of himself and very dependent on beliefs that sustains his sense of certainty.

It makes sense that he wants something solid and unfailing. Younes grew up with failure—his mother’s failure to nurture and stay sober; his father’s failure to control her; his grandparent’s impotence in the face of her negligence; and the Catholic Church’s numb inability to step in and protect the children. For Younes, his strict version of Islam meets his needs. And like many European converts, he learned about Islam from friends who came from close knit, extended, immigrant families where he saw another way of living.

So while they smoked hashish, Younes began to take an interest in all things Islamic. Christened Michael by his parents, he converted and renamed himself Younes. As a Muslim he became convinced and calmed by a strict system of rules that promised to keep him “safe” from the dangers of his childhood—certainly from alcoholism—as alcohol is banned in Islam.

I ask him about marrying—knowing he’s married multiple times with two children. Younes explains that he went to Morocco as a young man in search of his first wife. “I was of the opinion that Muslim women here are too westernized. People told me that from the mountains of Morocco, the women are more laid back and not

feminist, and if they felt oppressed, they know it's the fault of society, not of a man." Younes was looking for someone who would not be a repeat of his mother, who had blamed and hurt him throughout his childhood, and whom his father couldn't control.

"So I went [to Morocco] in Ramadan. I met the family of the mother of my children. The guy said to me we have a sister that wants to marry. She stayed [with me] five years so I knew she wasn't just looking for citizenship. I knew it was risky. It took a year to finish the papers—sixty [government] stamps to get the marriage papers. We have two children, but the marriage didn't last," he explains getting a pained expression on his face. "I am very strict, and not easy to live with."

He was also looking for more than this Moroccan woman saw as her wifely role. "I expected love, Romeo and Juliet, and she thought she was doing enough to cook and clean and take care of our children. I expected love, but I got the boring sheep. She's a good mother and takes care of my children," he admits, "But that was not enough for me. I wanted love." Of course he did. He hadn't been loved as a boy and he grew up in the West where love and romance are normal expectations in marriage.

"So it didn't work," Younes continues. "I was alone." Still anxious for limits, certainty, and strict guidelines, Younes fell in with *Sharia4Belgium*.

In 2010 British extremist, Anjem Choudary, who headed the extremist organization *Islam4UK*, began working with Belgian extremists, including one named Fouad Belkacem, formerly arrested for possession of drugs and burglary, to set up a similar organization based in Antwerp. The Antwerp based organization was called *Sharia4Belgium*. At its inception, Belkacem stated in a video message: "We believe *sharia* will be implemented in Belgium and worldwide... Democracy is the opposite of Islam and *sharia*... This is a dirty, perverted community [Belgium]."⁸

Sharia4Belgium, like al Qaeda and ISIS, followed an extremist version of Islam that encourages practicing *Takfir*, meaning they believed only they had the true Islam and could declare other Muslims as apostates worthy to be killed. At first Belgian authorities were lenient toward the group. Perhaps because they made laughable statements like Belkacem's call for ex-first lady of France, Carla Bruni, to convert to

Islam: “I ask Allah to guide Carla Bruni, to turn her into a *niqab*-wearing Muslim, and to make her divorce that unbeliever, [French ex-president] Sarkozy, may Allah fight him.”

As the Sunni uprising occurred in Syria, *Sharia4Belgium* quickly aligned itself with *Jabhat al Nusra*, and later ISIS. Over time it became a feeder organization for unemployed and disenchanted Belgians who wanted to join the uprising, sending them off to Syria to train with these groups. Now Belgian authorities took notice. In 2014, Belkacem and forty-five other members of *Sharia4Belgium* were indicted and in December 2014, found guilty of membership in a terrorist organization—half of them sentenced *in absentia*—as they were either suspected dead, or still fighting in Syria.

As *Shariah4Belgium* was activating in Belgium, Younes remarried, “a Moroccan lady from Holland,” he tells me, but was again quickly disappointed. “She was divorced and was not at the point to start over again, so that became difficult.” Younes lacked the social skills to keep a relationship with a woman intact; never learning from his own parents and with a raging hurt inside, he feared that his wife might turn out like his mother. Unable to make this second troubled marriage a success, he escaped—by going to Syria.

“In December 2013, we broke up again and I left to go to Syria. The war was getting heavy” as was the political situation with *Sharia4Belgium*. “In Belgium there was no place to talk freely anymore. We got arrested every time on the street [proselytizing], put in jail for twelve hours, and we were under surveillance, with them checking us, and everyone’s phones tapped. We were under the eye of the state security. It’s not fun to live without privacy or freedom of speech.”

Younes glances around and gestures beyond the room as he continues, “If you see this neighborhood, twenty meters further there is an African church. They try to gather people to their church, but if we tried to do it in the streets, [the state accuses us] ‘he’s radicalizing and calling for hate and violence.’ We were confronted every day of the week with double standards, on television and in the news,” Younes complains. *Although the African church was probably not offering to send anyone off to join a terrorist group in Syria, whereas Younes’ group was engaging in such activities, I reflect.*

“If you don’t see the possibility to make yourself in your society, you change your society to where you can be useful,” Younes continues, echoing hundreds of interviews I’ve made in Antwerp, Brussels, and Paris with North African, second-generation immigrants. The significant discrimination leads them to believe they can never be accepted and succeed in mainstream Belgian or French society. In France, youth in the ghettoized North African immigrant suburbs of Paris told me during the riots and fires in Paris in November of 2005, “Liberté, égalité & fraternité [Liberty, equality and fraternity]—these things don’t apply to us.”⁹

That was before the rise of ISIS, and it was mainly al Qaeda that, as a result, could recruit such youth into their ranks. But to join al Qaeda, one had to really prove himself, ideologically and as a trusted cadre, before he’d be accepted into going to an al-Qaeda training camp. Today under ISIS, there is the declared “Caliphate” to escape to, and the dream of a utopian, alternative world order where frustrated young men and women are promised significance, purpose, belonging, honor, adventure, jobs, and marriages. And for the men—even sex slaves. The rise of ISIS gives these disenfranchised youth a place to go, and it’s not hard to get there—a quick flight to Istanbul, then a bus or an internal flight to a town close to the border—and then an ISIS-arranged smuggler to get them into Syria.

Younes references the militant jihadi view that *hijra* [migration] to Muslim lands and joining jihad are duties of every Muslim. It’s a view that was popularized to Westerners by al Qaeda’s Anwar al-Awlaki. Younes explains to me, “You have to prepare for your life after. It’s a religious duty—*hijra* to Syria and Iraq. It is religious aspects of why they leave.” Then suddenly turning defensive, he adds, “My history, my choice to go over there has nothing to do with my childhood. It’s very sad that people try to search for another reason [aside from religious duty]. We are honored when we take this step. I hope it is religion that motivates everyone else.”

“Also, not everyone is going to fight. I know five people who went to live there with their families. Why go to a country at war? Why, when one hundred thousand families are running from it, you go to live there?” he asks and then blames the political

situation in Belgium. “ That is the fault of the society we live in. They are making peoples lives unlivable.”

Then turning to the immigrants who are streaming into Europe from Syria he states, “They can leave the women and children here. They have no protection anymore, they are more breakable. But all the guys from ages twenty to twenty-four should be sent back. Half are war criminals. They fought with the army of the regime. The rest are running away from *shariah* and Islam and don’t want to live under those rules so they run. But they are going to confront their Creator sooner and later. They are blinded by democracy here. They have to sell their religion to live under the safety of democracy.” Younes still believes that life is better under the “Caliphate.”

I want to know about his journey to Syria, how he made it in, and why he then left and returned to Belgium.

“I went in the evening. I took a bus to Cologne [Germany].” Typical of his impulsive nature, he failed to let the “brothers” know he was coming and to make arrangements to be met by ISIS cadres at the Turkish border. “I left without asking someone,” he says but defensively adds, “I didn’t have to ask permission to go where I wish to go. I went to Dusseldorf, then flew to Istanbul, and took another plane to Adana [in Turkey] near the border of Syria. I stayed a week in a hotel but didn’t find someone to help me cross the borders. At these times it’s more difficult to join, but at that time in 2013, the Turkish [authorities] had one eye closed. For everything related to Kobani [a Syrian city on the Turkish border overtaken at that time by ISIS], the Turkish government was helping—with weapons, shotguns and pistols—unofficially or not, I don’t know. The logic was that it was official.” So once again, we hear about Turkish complicity in supporting rebel groups—including ISIS.

“I was searching on Facebook. I was searching for someone already there, profile pictures, asking, ‘Abu [xxx], do you have a connection [inside ISIS]?’ The ball gets rolling. After six days I found someone to take me in. We went then and stayed five days right on the border in a Turkish house.” Indeed, Ahmet later confirms that in some places in Turkey, the houses are very near the border, their backyards only meters away from

Syria. Younes went to stay in an ISIS smuggler's home, making it easy to run through backyards late at night to cross into Syria.

"[Before crossing into Syria] I met two women from Holland. I was asked to escort them through the border. We went to the [smuggler's] house and met also a Kazak family there—a father and his son, his wife and two daughters staying in another room. They tried to cross a big field where there was big barbed wire, but they were stopped and sent back."

"So the Turks do control the border and try to prevent people from going to join the rebel groups?" I ask.

Younes smiles mockingly. "They didn't want to see it openly. It's like the child's game—one, two, three, piano—you turn around and if you are caught moving you have to go back." He returns to his story. "We crossed at five in the morning. The sisters and me were allowed to take only one bag. The rest came later."

"All of the people who were gathered in the house crossed. We went over the barbed wire. There was a place where it was pressed down." Then a small comic tragedy occurred as Younes ran, carrying a bag for the sisters. "I was trying to get over the barbed wire and the bag I was carrying opened and *burkas* fell out. The barbed wire caught and tore these *burkas*. The women over there asked for good quality *burkas*, so they [the Dutch women] brought a lot for the other sisters. They ended up all hanging on the barbed wire! She was not happy," Younes looks rueful over the mishap. I laugh to myself imagining the sun rising on black *burkas*, caught on the barbed fence, flapping in the wind—the symbolism shining in the morning sun.

"When we'd crossed two hundred meters there was someone waiting in a big van. We stayed in the van until the morning. Then we went to the Islamic police. It was not yet the Islamic State. It was ISIS, but they hadn't declared the Caliphate yet."

Just as the Syrian ISIS defectors have been telling Ahmet and me, the European newcomers were housed near the border and checked carefully before gaining free entrance to the group. "They checked everything. There was another Younes—Younes Bunting. He left a month before I came. He was also a convert and they discovered he

was working with the *Mossad* [Israeli intelligence]. So when another Belgian Younes came without announcing, they found it strange and suspected me. They searched my phone, my computer, everything. Their lives and security depend on it. If a spy is able to infiltrate and tell their location, the Coalition can send a drone to kill all the foreign fighters.”

Shaking his head regretfully, Younes adds, “All those American soldiers who died after 9-11—their blood is spoiled for nothing; but in our situation our blood is not spoiled. We believe Muslim blood that is spilled for implementing the *sharia* state—you get your efforts rewarded in the afterlife.” I nod, thinking this belief in the afterlife gives a lot of terrorists courage to risk their lives.

“They gave me a choice. They asked me, ‘What are you going to do here?’”

“‘I want to make myself useful in every way possible, as good as I can handle, according to my capacities,’ I answered. “They searched for a place [for me] with some Belgian fighters, but there were some issues with the guys from Belgium who were still upset over the Younes who came before me. They didn’t want another troublemaker. So [the ISIS leaders] assigned me to a group of Frenchmen and Libyans. It was not a bad idea, my French was not that bad,” Younes tells me. As a Flemish Belgian living in Antwerp where Flemish is the dominant language, French would be less necessary. Being tri-lingual says something about his intellectual abilities. It’s obvious to me that he’s smart, despite having failed in school.

“It is something special—all these people speaking many foreign languages,” Younes says, his voice filled with appreciation. “They put me in a house and I was welcomed. The first day when I came in they were doing evening dinner, eating on the ground [in the traditional Arab style] in a big house—a mansion really,” Younes’ face lights up describing it. Clearly it fit his fantasies of belonging to a traditional and welcoming culture and religious community where men are honored and share a strong sense of brotherhood. But all was not good—even from the start.

“I got in and then in the first week, I started noticing the situation—evening bombings. It’s overwhelming at first but you get used to it very quickly.”

“Was it loud and frightening?” I ask.

Younes nods looking like he was quite frightened but tries to downplay it, saying, “You just try to find your tranquility.”

“Did you take *shariah* training?” I ask, knowing it’s the pattern in which ISIS moves its new recruits to swearing their *bayats* before becoming trained fighters.

“There was no *shariah* training at that house,” Younes responds. “They asked me to give allegiance, *bayat*, but I rejected and they found that strange. ‘I don’t want to be stuck to an organization,’ I explained to them. ‘I want to know what it’s all about. I am not against you. I want to make myself useful. I will check out the houses, do guard duty, but I don’t want to be forced to stay with you.’”

“They accepted this,” Younes explains. “Now, with the Caliphate, it will not be accepted. If they are soldiers [of ISIS] they must give *bayat*. You cannot make *hijra* and then have them say, ‘okay you can leave.’ Adani’s statement [the spokesman for ISIS] says, ‘You will leave with a bullet in your head.’ It’s logical,” Younes says, justifying the murderous deserter policies that ISIS now implements as normal for any state.

“So what kinds of things went on while you were there?” I ask.

“After the second week, they gave me an AK-47 and explained how to clean and reload it, and grenades—two grenades. I slept with them under my pillow. Once we were attacked by the Free Syrian Army and I carried five RPGs [rocket propelled grenades] on my back.” He also posted photographs of himself posing with weapons on his Facebook page, where he named his employers as *Jabhat al-Nusra* and *Revolusi (Revolution) Dawlah al-Islamiah* (ISIS).¹⁰

“The regime attacked our village in the beginning,” he explains. “It was a mixed up place—with *Jabhat al-Nusra*, ISIS, the Free Syrian Army—but everyone was cooperating at first. Since January 2014, it all changed.” Younes looks perplexed and abruptly stops this line of conversation. Perhaps he doesn’t want to doubt ISIS, or he doesn’t want to talk about carrying arms for a terrorist group.

“Why did you leave so quickly after arriving to ISIS?” I ask him.

“The [second] wife from Holland—our relationship was tough. She was missing me and I was missing her. I didn’t find it smart for her to come. Everyone was starting to fight each other. We decided that we will meet up in Turkey and decide what to do. I ended up coming instead to Holland. I thought then we can get money. The Free Syrian Army stole my laptop, money, and things, and I saw the opportunity to replace my money and materials, and perhaps get my wife back.”

Younes likely knew that as a Belgian he might be lucky enough not to show up on another European country’s terrorism lists for having departed to Syria. “The airport of Holland was not a problem,” he tells me; he passed through Dutch security unchallenged. This is a fundamental problem in Europe—the national borders are open, but the intelligence agencies and police do not always share information as openly across these same borders. Younes makes sure I understand how he departed ISIS. “I didn’t run away, I asked them, ‘Is it okay to go back?’ They [ISIS] tried to convince me to stay, that it’s not a good idea [to leave]. They were totally right. Now, I’m in the exact situation they predicted.”

His broken second marriage underwent its final twisted challenge. “I had my last one hundred euros with me that I had from the brothers. She was at the airport but [not realizing she was there waiting for me] I took a taxi to Rotterdam. We missed each other! Even at home, she came to the front door, but I went to the back, to not let the neighbors see me. At the front, there were police waiting at the door so I hid in the trunk of the car. The police arrested her. They didn’t know that we were texting each other.”

“The Dutch police try to manipulate, use people, and not be according to the law. We cannot expect something else,” Younes complains. “They released her and she returned home with her ex-husband and children. I wanted to kill him at that moment. I was so disturbed. ‘You cannot stay, they will watch the house,’ she said, so I decided to call the police myself.”

“I called and asked, ‘What do you want from me?’ I met them at the gas station. They asked me to raise my shirt. They thought I had a [suicide] belt. Then they let me

go.” It seems incredible that a young man who could be a suicide attacker is so easily let go after being checked, but that’s how he tells it.

“I went and I hid in the house. Even the children didn’t know I was there. This went on for three days. The police came and asked my wife, ‘Did you see him?’ Then they came with papers from Interpol saying the Belgian police want to speak to me.”

Realizing he needed to face the music, Younes explains, “I returned to Belgium after a week. I did five interviews with the media. I didn’t want to be put silently in prison. I did my story before I reported myself to the police. That way they cannot do whatever they want. They have to apply [the law] according to the book,” Younes explains, as I think, *This guy is a clever operator*.

Younes was prosecuted and received a sentence of three years with suspension and a fine of fifteen thousand euros also with an extension. “If I am brought in court again, I have to pay it,” Younes explains. “I had an empty file [no criminal charges] before this situation. The judge told me, ‘You have a critical profession—to be a baker, so go make some bread and be quiet.’” This makes me laugh—it’s so Belgian. But on the other, I am convinced that Younes should have been sent to some kind of de-radicalization or disengagement treatment, at a minimum.

Younes did go back to baking and even opened his own bakery, but Gert Wilders, a far right, Dutch, anti-immigration politician saw fit to shut him down by publicizing his terrorist affiliation. “‘There is blood on this bread,’ he said in the papers,” Younes tells me. As a result, people stopped coming to the bakery. “He’ll pay for it—legally,” Younes threatens, making sure not to issue an actual threat to the politician, “in this life or the next.” This is no light thing in the Netherlands. Another outspoken Dutch critic of Muslims, Theo van Gogh, was stabbed to death; implying violent wishes against Gert Wilders is risky. I wonder what Wilders was thinking when he shut down the business of a known extremist who was trying to make it in society and earn an honest living. Didn’t he see how that could drive Younes right back into his former extremist activities, increasing the danger to himself and to society?

Younes, wearing a black hoodie adorned with the drawing of a Kalashnikov and the ISIS logo on the back, tells an *al-Jazeera* journalist a month after our interview that since his conviction he finds it hard to find work, and when he did land a job, found that his mid-length beard doesn't sit well with his new boss who urged him to "trim it a bit". Likewise he complains about his own father's racial slurs against "brown" Moroccans, adding that in Antwerp he faces a barrage of continuous assaults on his Muslim identity.¹¹ An associate of Younes' also tells me that he lives a very isolated and lonely life, caught inside the certainty of his extremist beliefs that keep his childhood pain at bay, and unable to reach out for the help he so obviously needs to socialize and rehabilitate himself back into society.

When I ask Younes, who is not wearing any ISIS branded clothing in our interview, how he feels about the recent Paris attacks he tells me that they are "understandable." I ask if he thinks it's appropriate for a group to target innocent civilians to which he answers that these civilians vote for their governments who are carrying out troubling actions in Islamic lands.

"Targeting women and children?" I push.

Younes agrees that children are always innocent, but won't go further than that. "The Ottoman empire was not created by honey and bees. It started in war, crusades," he argues. "Even your American revolution was won by shedding blood." I don't think to tell him that our rebel forces never pointed their guns at civilians in their marketplaces.

"I still believe it's better to be living under Islamic law than to live under a democratic system that is not applying the laws of our Creator. I'm sure of it," Younes says with conviction. "We will never be able to practice our religion completely," and tells me that he still believes in the dream of the "Caliphate" and wants it to be extended throughout Europe. In an interview only months earlier with *Paris Match*, Younes is reported to have shown reporters the black flag of ISIS proudly hanging over his bed.¹² He still clings to the certainty of convictions, identity, and hope in a utopian Islamic future that ISIS offers troubled youth.

I ask him, if I were Belgian, would I be able to practice my religion freely if there were a “Caliphate?” He cracks a dour smile and tells me, “there will be rules to follow.”

As I listen I again wonder why the Belgian judge let him go back freely into society and failed to address the fact that Younes is still heavily radicalized and in need of treatment to disengage from the extremist mindset. He’s still vulnerable to becoming a dangerous element in Europe. Moreover, during his prosecution, Younes spent only a few months in prison but he says to me, “Thirty years in prison—your life is over. Better to kill me now—so I don’t have to sit in jail.”

That gives me a chill, remembering how Zakaria Zubedi, the head of *al-Aksa Martyrs’ Brigade* in Jenin, on the West Bank, also told me that he’d rather die than be imprisoned again and was nearly killed, rather than be re-arrested. We also know that Chechen would-be suicide bombers-turned-fugitive have booby trapped their homes and bodies so they can explode themselves upon arrest rather than undergo torture and imprisonment by the Russians.¹³ We even heard the same about Chechens operating inside Syria—that they constantly wore suicide vests. *Victory or Paradise!* their motto.¹⁴

Indeed, the threat of imprisonment can drive individuals who believe in “martyrdom” into enacting it and that makes them especially dangerous. Little do I know, as Younes and I finish up our interview and part ways, in only a month’s time we will see exactly that scenario play out in Belgium. And I will be there.

Reference for this article: Speckhard, Anne (April 2, 2017) Not all ISIS Returnees are Defectors *ICSVE Brief Reports* <http://www.icsve.org/brief-reports/not-all-returnees-are-defectors/> Reprinted from Anne Speckhard & Ahmet S. Yayla *ISIS Defectors: Inside Stories of the Terrorist Caliphate* Advances Press 2016.

Anne Speckhard, Ph.D. is Adjunct Associate Professor of Psychiatry at Georgetown University in the School of Medicine and Director of the International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism (ICSVE). She is the author of *Talking to Terrorists, Bride of ISIS* and coauthor of *ISIS Defectors: Inside Stories of the Terrorist Caliphate; Undercover Jihadi; and Warrior Princess*. Dr. Speckhard has interviewed nearly 500 terrorists, their family members and supporters in various parts of the world including Gaza, West Bank, Chechnya, Iraq, Jordan, Turkey and many countries in Europe. In 2007, she was responsible for designing the psychological and Islamic challenge aspects of the Detainee Rehabilitation Program in Iraq to be applied to 20,000 + detainees and 800 juveniles. She is a sought after counter-terrorism experts and has consulted to NATO,

OSCE, foreign governments and to the U.S. Senate & House, Departments of State, Defense, Justice, Homeland Security, Health & Human Services, CIA and FBI and CNN, BBC, NPR, Fox News, MSNBC, CTV, and in Time, The New York Times, The Washington Post, London Times and many other publications. Here publications are found here: <https://georgetown.academia.edu/AnneSpeckhard> Website: <http://www.icsve.org>

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⁶ Younes spoke English well, but occasionally inverted word order or used poor grammar, which I have corrected here to help make his meaning clear.

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