

# Foreign Terrorist Fighters: Perspectives from Islamic Organizations in France and Great Britain\*

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**Abstract:** This article looks at the phenomenon of Foreign Terrorist Fighters from Europe and sheds light on the position of institutional Islam towards this security threat. The article first looks at how the new trends characterizing the profile and recruitment process of Foreign Terrorist Fighters represent new challenges for counterterrorism, before considering the position of selected Muslim institutions in Europe. The analysis considers two case studies, namely France and Great Britain. Two organizations are used as examples for institutional Islam: the Union of Islamic Organization (UOIF) in France and the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB). The research results reveal a communication centered on the objective of distinguishing Islam from Daesh and a predominant focus on domestic issues such as counterterrorism legislation and general social cohesion.

**Keywords:** Islamic State, Europe, Foreign Fighter, Terrorism

**Schlagwörter:** Islamischer Staat, Europa, Auslandskämpfer, Terrorismus

## 1. Introduction

A number of European fighters, along with others coming from all corners of the globe, have been joining violent Islamist groups in Iraq and Syria; first and foremost, the so-called Islamic State (IS) or Daesh, the Arabic acronym for "Islamic State in Iraq and el-Sham". The change of denomination from ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) to IS (Islamic State) is a conscious strategy of the terrorist group to find a form of recognition as a state. Using this vocabulary reinforces the sense of self-legitimacy of this so-called Islamic State. Several strategies have been adopted by European states as well as the media in order to avoid this form of indirect recognition: some have decided to cautiously use the denomination of IS by adding "the so-called" or "those calling themselves as...". Others have opted for the Arabic acronym of Islamic State in Iraq and el-Sham – Daesh. This also helps to avoid confusion and to preserve social cohesion as Muslim communities in the West are under pressure. This paper will thus use the term of Daesh.

Daesh and its attraction of foreign fighters quickly became a prominent threat for states in the region and beyond, after the proclamation of a caliphate in June 2014. The phenomenon of foreign fighters supposedly waging jihad abroad is nothing new: it was the case for ex-Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, Iraq, Mali, etc. The Geneva Academy of International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights defines a foreign fighter as an "individual who leaves his or her country of origin or habitual residence to join a non state armed group in an armed conflict abroad and who is primarily motivated by ideology, religion and/or kinship" (Geneva Academy 2014, 6). However, new methods have increased the speed of radicalization and thus facilitated the whole process. For example, the central role of the Internet has seemingly brought about a remarkable change of scale (Carter, Maher and Neumann 2014; Saltman and Winter 2014). The tragic events that took place in Paris in January and November 2015 shed even more light on a worrisome phenomenon: the return of these foreign fighters (Bakker and de

Leede 2015). Europol Director Rob Wainwright considers this to be the most serious terrorist threat faced by Europe since 9/11.<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, after the September 11, 2001 attacks, a growing securitization of Muslim communities living in the West has emerged, whereby issues related to Muslim groups have been mostly considered through the lens of security. The purpose of this study is twofold: first, to analyze the new characteristics of these jihadi waves and their new challenges, compared to previous ones, and secondly, to determine the position of institutional actors of Islam in selected European countries on this recent phenomenon. The study is aimed to shed light on two central questions: What are the characteristics of the Foreign Terrorist Fighter (FTF) phenomenon? Where do Islamic institutional actors situate themselves in this regard, and are they involved in the governmental actions to counter this security threat? The case studies concern the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) and the Union of Islamic Organizations (UOIF) in France<sup>2</sup>. To this purpose, the study utilizes the conclusions of different side-events held during the 25<sup>th</sup>, 26<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup> sessions of the Human Rights Council in Geneva,<sup>3</sup> data taken from the constant monitoring of the issue through Google alerts with "jihadi fighters"<sup>4</sup> as a key word, and finally, a content analysis of documents issued by the selected organizations, UOIF and MCB, from June 2014 to June 2015.

1 *LINFO.RE*. 2015. « Entre 3000 et 5000 Européens sont partis pour le djihad ». 18 January.

2 Belgium and the Executif des Musulmans de Belgique (EMB) were also examined for the purpose of this study, due to the relevance of the phenomenon at hand for the country. However, the lack of press releases by the EMB did not allow for a meaningful study in the period of time considered, compared to the two previously mentioned cases.

3 The side-events were the following:  
-*Youth and Radicalization: International Challenge, Family Challenges*, 17 June 2014, International Institute for Peace, Justice and Human Rights, 26th session of the Human Rights Council.

-*War in the Digital Age: Radical Groups and New Practises of the Internet*, 14 September 2014, 27th session of the Human Rights Council.

-*Deradicalization, Reintegration: Which Strategies to Manage Returnees?*, 18 March 2015, International Institute for Peace, Justice and Human Rights, 28th session of the Human Rights Council.

4 Though the term of jihadi fighter is increasingly contested as jihad encompasses various aspects, the word is conventionally used and as such appeared to be the best keyword to conduct this research. Acknowledging this fact, the terms jihadi fighter and Foreign Terrorist Fighter are used in this analysis interchangeably.

\* This article has been double blind peer reviewed.

## 2. The Phenomenon of Foreign Terrorist Fighters: New Trends and Challenges

The expansion of Daesh has been impressive. The group can be considered as a salafi jihadist and extremist movement (Bunzel 2015) which, from its perspective, fights for Sunni Muslims suffering from several injustices.<sup>5</sup> It has become one of the most violent terrorist groups in a very short amount of time. In November 2014, 664 violent Islamist attacks had been reported in 14 countries with a total amount of 5042 deaths (Neumann 2014). The deadliest group was Daesh, with 2206 deaths. Iraq, Nigeria, Syria and Afghanistan account for 80% of all casualties that occurred.<sup>6</sup> Persecutions against the Yazedis, particularly in the region of Sinjar, have continued, causing 200,000 Yazedis to flee the region and find refuge in the mountains in spite of deplorable living conditions.<sup>7</sup> Other minorities such as the Kurds and Shia Muslims are also persecuted. A United Nations report has condemned the kidnapping, forced marriages, forced conversions, slavery, sexual violence and rape of Yazedi and Christian women and little girls (United Nations 2015). Daesh's bureaucratic strategy aims at establishing a real, institutionalized state and means of government (Johnston & al. 2016). It can be observed most clearly in Raqqa, the new capital city of the Islamic State, where there is a police force, taxation and application of Sharia Law through courts.<sup>8</sup>

Daesh has acted as a magnet for candidates to jihad (Bakker and de Leede 2015). The United Nations speak of 30,000 foreign fighters coming from more than 100 countries with 3,000 Europeans amongst them.<sup>9</sup> Contrary to the widespread assumption that the recruitment of foreign fighters is a new problem, the phenomenon has as a matter of fact emerged in numerous civil conflicts from the Spanish Civil War, the Afghan struggle against the Soviets, the Bosnian conflict in the 1990's, and the Chechnya armed conflicts, to name a few (Hegghammer 2010).

The notion of jihad in Islam is a multi-faceted concept with different interpretations over time (Bonner 2006). Though it recovers the idea of spiritual effort against one's ego, it has been reduced lately to its martial aspect. In the early times of Islam, jihad referred to a codified set of rules on how to conduct warfare. Nowadays, the notion of jihad is unfairly often reduced to naming violent political action from radical Islamist groups. The expression of Foreign Terrorist Fighters is one way to dispel this approximation, though it is true that the term of jihad and jihadi fighters continue to be used as conventions, all the more since the fighters identify themselves as such.

Regarding more contemporary expression of jihad, one of the largest foreign fighter recruitments before Daesh's was during the Afghan conflict against the Soviet Union. The emergence of jihadism as a contemporary phenomenon started during the late 70s, where volunteers from all around the globe, mostly those who were initially involved in militant activities in their home country, joined forces

and migrated to Afghanistan (Hegghammer 2010; Saltman and Winter 2014). This happened more prominently after Osama Bin Laden founded Al-Qaeda and opened up a huge financial support base to recruit foreign fighters mainly from the Middle East. The majority of these fighters started an international armed jihadi movement, moving from Afghanistan, to Bosnia, to Algeria, to the Philippines, to Chechnya.<sup>10</sup> At the stage of the post Afghan conflict, foreign fighters began to represent a potential risk and threat overseas, while returning to their home countries or initiating small terrorist groups affiliated to Al-Qaeda in other countries.

What is currently striking in comparison with previous waves of jihad is the diversity of profiles and the novelties introduced in the processes of attracting candidates, which can be considered a form of "branding". The most characteristic features in this regard are:

- the diversity of profiles, including the participation of teenagers and militarily inexperienced, untrained people, along with the emergence of females due to the Daesh logic of settlement;
- the central use of the Internet as a multidimensional tool to communicate, inform, attract and indoctrinate Foreign Fighters,
- and the openness of the process online compared with the more underground aspect of past jihadi waves.

### 2.1 A Diversity of Profiles: Youth and Women

French authorities have identified 1,704 fighters: 470 fighters are fighting abroad, 320 are considered in transit, 213 came back to France, 521 contemplate leaving and 105 are presumed dead. France is the greatest provider of fighters in Europe, just before Great Britain with 700 individuals identified as fighters or potential fighters, of whom 315 are in the field, approximately 350 have returned and 70 are presumed dead (Assemblée Nationale 2015, 20; Van Ginkel and Entenmann 2016).

The European fighters are either Muslims by birth or converts to Islam, generally without an in-depth knowledge of Islam and even less of the Arabic language (Van Ginkel and Entenmann 2016). In France, more than 20% are converts (Assemblée Nationale 2015, 23), though the figure seems closer to 6% of all European fighters (Briggs Obe and Silverman 2014, 12).

The majority of fighters are young: the average age of British fighters is 23.5 years old, whereas estimates establish it at 27 for French fighters (Briggs Obe and Silverman 2014, 12).

They are mostly male, but women are increasingly involved and now represent from 10 to 20% of the fighters (Assemblée Nationale 2015, 23). Recruiters play on feelings of compassion, and humanitarianism is used as the main argument to attract young boys and girls.<sup>11</sup> Cassutt emphasizes this idea when it comes to recruiting women by noting that: "the women who embrace jihad generally include those who want to defend oppressed populations and seek to restore a certain sense of justice", even though Daesh is renowned for its brutal methods<sup>12</sup>.

5 *The Guardian*. 2014. "ISIS: a portrait of the menace that is sweeping my homeland", 16 August.

6 *Gulf News*. 2014. "Militants attacks in Iraq kill 5,042 in November", 11 December.

7 *France 24*. 2014. « Mourir affamé ou tué par les djihadistes, l'impossible choix des Yazidis » 6 August.

8 *Les Echos*. 2014. « État Islamique en Irak: comment un groupe terroriste est devenu une organisation militaire », 8 August.

9 *UN News Centre*. 2015. « Foreign terrorist fighters pose 'significant and evolving' global threat, warns new UN report », 6 October.

10 Vowles Erica. 2015. *What history teaches us about foreign fighters*. 31 July. <http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/rearvision/what-we-can-learn-from-history-about-foreign-fighters/6662712>

11 *La Vie*. 2014. « Comment le goût du djihad vient aux filles », 3 June.

12 *USA Today*. 2014. "Jihadist Jane: Islamic State seeking out women", 1 November.

Female recruits who join IS occupy a range of non-military functions especially connected to recruitment and the more long-term, state-building mission (Hoyle, Bradford and Frenett 2014). Women participate in recruitment, spreading propaganda, logistics and fundraising (Bakker and de Leede 2015). They effectively utilize blogs, Twitter and social networks in order to attract other girls living in the West (Bakker and de Leede 2015, 8). Emphasis is put on the “honor of raising new fighters for Islam”.<sup>13</sup> They are not expected to fight but to teach children, with the “love of jihad” as the main principle of education: this strategy is also part of the Islamic State’s initiative of establishing a real state, which entails settlement and the perpetuation of population.<sup>14</sup> An all-female British unit, the Al-Khansaa, is used as a police force in Raqqa, charged with monitoring women’s observance of the established rules<sup>15</sup> and, more generally, enforcing Sharia as understood by the Islamic State.<sup>16</sup>

## 2.2 A Sophisticated Communication: Promoting the Daesh “Brand”

The role of social media is crucial: it is relatively easy for recruiters to navigate social media in order to identify potential candidates and concentrate their efforts on them.<sup>17</sup> While in the past, religious leaders would typically motivate fighters, there has been a change: now, fighters prefer to rally around a charismatic leader, usually a former jihadist from the Afghan front against the Soviet Union (Carter, Maher and Neumann 2014). “New spiritual authorities” operate on the Internet and act as inspirational figures, representing the emergence of a new style of virtual preacher without borders. These disseminators are not even necessarily in the field, but they act on their own initiative for the cause of Daesh (Carter, Maher and Neumann 2014).

Twitter is a major tool for disseminators (Klausen 2015). A profile was developed to share updates about news of the group and a range of hashtags have been mobilized to share media content and thus serve propaganda. Facebook accounts give the possibility to share all the aspects of the jihadi life in Syria.<sup>18</sup> The radical discourse is thus also appealing to emotions and can reach greater numbers via the Internet. Even humor and the codes of geek and pop culture are used in the process, in order to normalize the status of these fighters and thus attract even more potential candidates, as the tech-savvy generation is the main target of Daesh (Atwan 2015, 20).

The role of the Internet and the exploitation of tools used by everyone should not, however, lead to an overestimation of what remains essentially a tool (Ghaffar and Salman 2014, 17). The social aspect of radicalization is crucial, as most of the time, it involves groups of young people embarking on the radical track together, with peer pressure playing a large role in the process (Neumann 2014: Bakker and de Leede 2015, 35). Erin Saltman insists that the

first point of contact for radicalization remains offline; the Internet mainly serves to “indoctrinate, educate, and socialize”.<sup>19</sup>

## 2.3 A Complex Security Threat

Two developing dynamics characterizing the recent jihadi wave to join Daesh have been exposed: the diversity of profiles and the multidimensional role of the Internet. These dynamics call for an adaptation in the fight against terrorism and this particular phenomenon as these three trends increase uncertainty and make prevention and the identification of potential candidates more complex. Before turning to the position of Islamic institutions on this issue, it is necessary to quickly reassess the reaction of the European governments at large. This is a prerequisite before trying to answer the question of whether institutional Islam is involved in this reaction.

One of the biggest threats concerns the “returnees” and the fact that when the fighters come back to Europe, they bring along with them special training, fighting techniques, and contacts within the “international jihadist sphere”.<sup>20</sup> Gilles de Kerchove, the European Union Coordinator for the Fight against Terrorism estimates that 30% of the approximately 3,000 fighters who have been to Syria have come back to the EU.<sup>21</sup>

Another parallel threat may involve further indoctrination and the making of ‘terrorists-at-home’: acquiring fighting skills and possibly more ideological arguments, and benefiting from a new legitimacy of ‘jihadi veteran’, returnees can act as inspirational figures for candidates to jihad either abroad or on European soil (Bakker and de Leede 2015). This can also lead to the establishment of sleeper cells, which can be ready to strike at any times.

Measures adopted or experimented by states to confront this issue can essentially be approached with three categories: punitive measures to sanction, preventive measures to discourage potential candidates, and deradicalization programs which can act preventively or after the return as a reintegration tool.

Leela Jacinto reckons that the solution most probably lies in a hybrid approach: “the challenge, for Western governments, is to hammer out a balanced approach” (Jacinto 2014). The situation is rendered complex by the fact that some fighters actually want to return. *The Independent* reports that disappointed French foreign fighters have asked families and lawyers<sup>22</sup> for help to manage their return.<sup>23</sup> However, the political cost of an official position on the management of returning fighters is too high, as a returnee may get involved in future terrorist attacks.<sup>24</sup>

European governments find themselves in a difficult predicament: they continue to experiment and debate over

13 *The Daily Beast*. 2014. “The ISIS online campaign luring western girls to jihad”, 6 August.

14 *I24 news*. 2014. « Syrie : les djihadistes de Daech bouclent Raqqa », 30 June.

15 *Fiscal Times*. 2014. “ISIS is growing its terror army of global Jihadists”, 4 December.

16 *Al Monitor*. 2014. “Syria Pulse, Islamic State’s female bloggers draw European women to Syria”, 23 December.

17 *Le Journal du Dimanche*. 2014. « Djihad en Syrie : sept Strasbourgeois incarcérés », 18 May.

18 *L’Express*. 2014. « Le djihad 3.0 des Français partis en Syrie », 21 June.

19 Side-event on *War in the Digital Age: Radical Groups and New Practises of the Internet*, 14 September 2014, 27th session of the Human Rights Council.

20 *L’Express*. 2014. « Humour de djihadistes: la guerre sainte a aussi ses lolcats », 17 June.

21 *LINFO.RE*. 2015. « Terrorisme : entre 3000 et 5000 européens sont partis pour le djihad », 18 January.

22 *Le Figaro*. 2014. « Des recrues de Daech demandent à leur avocats de préparer leur retour en France », 30 November.

23 *The Independent*. 2014. “Jihad isn’t all it’s cracked up to be, say disgrunteled Isis recruits”, 1 December.

24 *Le Figaro*. 2014. « Des recrues de Daech demandent à leur avocats de préparer leur retour en France », 30 November.

the most suitable course for action, while trying to ensure social cohesion. Indeed, these counter-terrorist measures contribute to the increased securitization of Muslims (Triandafyllidou 2015): there are concerns over risks of further feeding radicalization by stigmatizing Muslim communities.<sup>25</sup> How do actors of institutional Islam fit into this picture?

### 3. Perspectives from Institutional Islam: Case Studies

France and Great Britain constitute ideal comparative examples, because they have a similar post-colonial Muslim presence, even though they stand for two “ideal-typical cases of different models of immigrant integration” (Modood, Triandafyllidou & Zapata-Barrero 2006, 2). If both were subject to post-colonial migration and present a relatively liberal citizenship policy, individual integration into a civic culture, secularism and a resulting strong rejection of public displays of religion characterize the French model (Gallup 2009, 24), whereas a community-based integration model recognizing collective rights and ethnic and religious groups characterize the British model (Modood, Triandafyllidou & Zapata-Barrero 2006, 2).

The entry point for the two institutions considered in the study are press releases provided on their respective websites and general press reports. The analysis has been conducted for press releases and reports issues between June 2014 and June 2015, the proclamation of the caliphate by Daesh justifies June 2014 as the starting point of the timeline.

Despite the importance of the FTF on security agendas of European governments, Muslim organizations tend to focus on domestic issues and ignore international issues.

#### 3.1 France

The official body representing Islam in France is the French Council of the Muslim Cult (CFCM). Council action is mostly prominent in issues related to the certification of *halal* meat, the organisation of the Hadj and the nomination of Muslim chaplains in prisons (Laurence & Vaïsse 2006, 155). As the French Council of the Muslim Cult is mostly dedicated to religious issues (Zehgal 2005, 1: Laurence & Vaïsse 2006, 267), the Union of Islamic Organizations in France (UOIF), is known for its annual gathering at Le Bourget and its intense activism, naturally stood out as a case study. UOIF is a strong grassroots force, which was founded in 1983 and gained visibility in 1989 with the first headscarf affair and the Salman Rushdie affair. Theologically situated in the movement of the Muslim brotherhood but without formally being affiliated to the organization (Vidino 2010, 42), the organization is relatively successful as a result of efficient networking at the grassroots level on the one hand and its links with transnational networks on the other hand (Zehgal 2005, 5). The UOIF’s aspirations rely on the idea of an interpretation of Islam that takes into account the European context, while developing an active citizenship and

mobilizing on global issues much beyond the scope of religion (Amghar 2009; Maréchal 2009).

There are few press releases concerning Syria, Iraq and Foreign Fighters in light of the numerous events affecting the region. Three poles are focused on by the organization:

- domestic security issues, especially the Charlie Hebdo attacks and the crisis management that ensued,
- institutional issues, notably the inscription of the UOIF on the list of terrorist groups by the United Arab Emirates, and
- foreign policy issues with a bias in favor of Palestine, with some occasional references to other conflicts (Nigeria, Pakistan...).

As to Daesh, UOIF regards the group as a “sect”, not a “religious phenomenon”.<sup>26</sup> In a call to all Muslims in France, it is stated that the group is neither a state nor Islamic.<sup>27</sup> It is interesting to note that UOIF constantly uses the term Daesh rather than ISIS. Before that, it used the expression “the group that calls itself the Islamic State”, a paraphrase to indicate that both the terms Islamic and State are abused.

UOIF has issued a series of press releases to condemn the various crimes committed by the group, such as the assassination of foreign hostages<sup>28</sup> or the destruction of cultural sites.<sup>29</sup> In a press release reporting the destruction of works of art by Daesh, the comparison is made with the destruction of the Buddhas of Bamiyan.<sup>30</sup>

The condemnation of executions is often made with theological references related to the sanctity of human life in Islam. In a press release condemning the execution of Peter Kassig, UOIF notes that “the life of a human being in Islam is sacred and cannot be the object of such a crime”.<sup>31</sup> Religion in this perspective is perceived as being instrumentalized: UOIF considers that “All these executions in the name of Islam are only an instrumentalization of the Muslim religion by terrorist groups”.<sup>32</sup>

The major concern of UOIF is to distance itself and Islam as a religion from the ideology and the actions of the group. Regarding the beheading in 2014 of French mountain guide Hervé Gourdel by Junud al-Khilafa (a group who pledged allegiance to the Islamic state in Algeria), the press release entitled “In Memory of our compatriot Hervé Gourdel” insists that Muslims refuse to be associated to such crimes.<sup>33</sup> When condemning the assassination of David Haines, UOIF notes that “Muslims shall not tolerate that such crimes be committed in the name of Islam”.<sup>34</sup> Likewise, when UOIF condemns Christians’ deportations, it does so “in the name of Islam” as “this behavior contradicts the teaching and the values carried out by Islam and do not reflect Muslims in their entirety”.<sup>35</sup> A text on “The preservation of life in Islam, a fundamental principle” argues on the sanctity of life in Islam based on theological arguments taken from religious sources. The most

26 UOIF. 2014. *Le discours de l'EI ne peut prendre que chez ceux qui n'ont aucune culture musulmane-interview de JP Filiu*. 19 November. Authors' translations.

27 UOIF. 2014. *Appel des musulmans de France*. 15 September.

28 UOIF. 2015. *Exécution de deux otages japonais*. 2 March.

29 UOIF. 2015. *Destruction d'un patrimoine exceptionnel*. 28 February.

30 UOIF. 2015. *Destruction d'un patrimoine exceptionnel*. 28 February.

31 UOIF. 2014. *Assassinat de Peter Kassig*. 17 November.

32 UOIF. 2014. *Assassinat de Peter Kassig*. 17 November.

33 UOIF. 2014. *A la mémoire de notre compatriote Hervé Gourdel*. 14 September.

34 UOIF. 2014. *Assassinat ignoble d'un humanitaire*. 15 September.

35 UOIF. 2014. *Déportation de Chrétiens en Irak-Communiqué*. 25 juillet.

25 BBC.com. 2015. « Prevent Strategy : Is it failing to stop radicalisation ? », 6 March.

interesting paragraph, emphasizing the instrumentalization of Islam by terrorist groups, notes that: “Today, more and more killings are done in the name of ideologies or religion. The international situation (terrorism...) and the media-political context lead to a distorted image of Islam letting people believe<sup>36</sup> that human’s life preservation is not a prior dimension”.<sup>37</sup>

The website also includes an interview by the French daily newspaper *Le Monde* of Jean-Pierre Filiu, a historian who, when asked about the significant proportion of French converts among the French fighters, answers that “The thing is it has nothing to do with Islam!” Filiu emphasizes that Daesh is a sect holding an eschatological discourse that can only reach people without religious knowledge and culture.<sup>38</sup>

The most formal and strongest condemnation of Daesh takes place via an “Appeal of France Muslims” signed by a range of other Muslim organizations such as the Great Mosque of Paris, French Muslims’ Gathering, or the Coordination Committee of French Muslim Turks.<sup>39</sup> The structure of the appeal is interesting and deserves to be deconstructed in more detail: the first paragraph condemns “the exactions committed by Daesh” in the most formal way. The following parts note that the beheadings of James Foley, Steven Sotoloff and David Haines “are in total contradiction with the most elementary elements” of Islam” and acknowledge the “responsible, spontaneous and unanimous” condemnation by French Muslims and their imams. Regarding the issue of foreign fighters, young potential candidates wishing to join the group are being warned that they risk being accomplices of crimes not only “against humanity” but “against God”.<sup>40</sup> The organization addresses French Muslim youth, mostly mobilizing religious convictions. No reference is explicitly made to punitive state policies. The following paragraphs then make reference to how Christian authorities also highlight the fact that Muslims are equally victims of Daesh and calls on all citizens, regardless of their convictions, to show unity and foster dialogue in order to avoid “any alleged clash of civilizations”.<sup>41</sup> The calls for action, in form of helping refugees and as prayers, are contained in the last paragraph.<sup>42</sup>

Regarding direct mobilization, UOIF has remained relatively discreet. Mobilizations are often organized on occasion of the Friday’s prayer. Following Hervé Gourdel’s assassination, UOIF called all French mosques to “organize gatherings” following Friday sermons.<sup>43</sup> No coordinated action with the government seems to have taken place in that period, in line with the French model of assimilation that does not recognize minority politics.

### 3.2 Great Britain

The Muslim Council of Britain is an umbrella organization created in 1997 and aspiring to be the voice of Muslims in the

country (Pêdziwiatr 2007, 45; Archer 2009, 336). Presented as the “first democratic British Muslim organization”, the MCB counts more than 500 affiliated organizations and claims to challenge extremist groups.<sup>44</sup> The Council advocates participation and engagement in the political process with aims of influencing policies (Pêdziwiatr 2007, 46). Conceived from the beginning as an organization close to the government, the MCB consulted on various occasions with the government, especially after the 9/11 attacks, to discuss various issues such as the media coverage, the protection of Muslims, and foreign policy (Birt 2005, 94).

The action of the MCB is also focused on the domestic level and the fight against discrimination and Islamophobia. Regarding Daesh, two categories of action stand out:

- detaching its actions from the Islamic faith, and
- promoting the creation of a counter-propaganda against Daesh.

The MCB’s resonance of its discourse in the media is much stronger than its French counterpart.<sup>45</sup> The MCB holds a discourse similar to the UOIF’s when condemning the executions by Daesh. Once again, the idea that the acts committed by Daesh in the name of Islam violate the principles of this religion is recurrent, for example in the following quote: “These extremists in Iraq and Syria claim to be acting in the name of Islam. But there is nothing in our faith that condones such behavior. Muslims in Britain and around the world have condemned these people, and the arguments they use have been refuted comprehensively as being far from the religion of Islam”.<sup>46</sup>

In another press release, the MCB notes that “ISIS does not speak for Islam, and has been repudiated by all Muslims”.<sup>47</sup> The MCB notes that “Muslims abhor the way ISIS has dishonored Islam’s teachings of peace and tolerance”.<sup>48</sup>

Where UOIF would simply state that Daesh has nothing to do it with Islam, the MCB goes further by accusing the media of perpetuating the confusion: therefore, the MCB invites media to differentiate the group from the Islamic faith in general, in order to avoid any misperceptions.<sup>49</sup> The MCB urged “the media in refraining from giving them any further undue exposure beyond conventional reporting”.<sup>50</sup>

The condemnation of hostage assassinations has been particularly strong, with an emphasis on the sanctity of life in Islam.<sup>51</sup>

44 MCB. 2007. *The Conservative Party’s Group on National and International Security – ‘Uniting the Country: Interim Report on National Cohesion’, A response from the MCB, Annex 1. 2 May.*

In its FAQ section of the website, the MCB is presented as an independent “national representative Muslim umbrella body with over 500 affiliated national, regional and local organisations, mosques, charities and schools. The MCB is pledged to work for the common good of society as a whole; encouraging individual Muslims and Muslim organisations to play a full and participatory role in public life. »

45 MCB. 2014. *Not in our Name: British Muslims Condemn the Barbarity of ISIS*. 20 August.

46 MCB. 2014. *British Muslims Condemn Murder of Fellow Briton David Haines*. 14 September.

47 MCB. 2014. *Not in our Name: British Muslims Condemn the Barbarity of ISIS*. 20 August.

48 MCB. 2014. *British Muslims Hope for Peace in Iraq and Syria*. 26 September.

49 MCB. 2014. *Islam Channel: Discussion on British Muslims and the Islamic State*. 14 August.

50 MCB. 2014. *Not in our Name: British Muslims Condemn the Barbarity of ISIS*. 20 August.

51 MCB. 2014. *Muslims condemn murder of David Haines*. 14 September. MCB. 2014. *Alan Henning’s Murder a Despicable Act, Offensive to Muslim*. 10 March.

36 Bold characters in original text.

37 Authors’ translation.

38 UOIF. 2014. « Le discours d’El ne peut prendre que chez ceux qui n’ont aucune culture musulmane ». 19 November.

39 UOIF. 2014. *Appel des musulmans de France*. 15 September.

40 UOIF. 2014. *Appel des musulmans de France*. 15 September.

41 The expression of clash of civilizations in the press release is used in comas, probably as a way to show that there is no endorsement of this concept.

42 UOIF. 2014. *Appel des musulmans de France*. 15 September.

43 UOIF. 2014. *Tous unis contre la barbarie*. 26 September.

Similarly to the UOIF, the MCB occasionally uses theological arguments. When calling for the release of Alan Henning, a British hostage, the MCB posted on its website “a translation of a Covenant reported to have been made to Christians by the Prophet Muhammad, upon whom be peace. We hope it is a reminder to all of the obligations Muslims have in respecting and upholding the rights of people of other faiths”.<sup>52</sup>

Whereas the documents of the UOIF did not explicitly contain a political position on the situation of Syria, the MCB has warned about the risks related to a military intervention for the civilian population, while calling for the British Parliament to find a political solution to the conflict.<sup>53</sup>

Regarding more specifically the issue of foreign fighters, the debates have centered on new counter-terrorist legislation heavily criticized by the MCB. Reflecting the securitization of Islam that has been going on since the September 11 attacks, the MCB criticized the bill for its ineffectiveness, the lack of inclusion of the Muslim community in the creation of the bill, its discriminatory practices (stop and search), and general alienation of Muslims.

The mobilization of the MCB seems more grounded in political action than the UOIF’s, being mostly limited to the humanitarian aspect, through demonstrations, aid to refugees and prayers. The MCB thus gives specific prescriptions on foreign fighters, including the need to tackle hate speech, the need to build a counter-narrative to Daesh’s propaganda by mobilizing for example returnees, and the need to be more flexible with them: this means “treating each case on its own merit” to identify the voices that can be used “against further recruitment” as stated by Talha Ahmad.<sup>54</sup>

Contrary to the French context where the UOIF is not engaged in a partnership with state authorities, the MCB claims its status of stakeholder in debates regarding counter-terrorist legislation. The MCB perceives the government’s Counter-Terrorism and Security Bill as a threat to community cohesion. In a press release calling for the Parliament to vote against the project, the MCB notes that “Whether it is in mosques, education or charities, the perception is that all aspects of Muslim life must undergo a ‘Prevent compliance’ test to prove our loyalty to this country. The proposed Bill will add to this climate of fear and victimization within the Muslim community, further weakening trust with public authorities”.<sup>55</sup>

The Foreign Fighters issue enhances again the securitization of Islam, and the MCB continues to work to dispel the narratives of British Muslims as internal enemies to ensure social cohesion.

#### 4. Conclusion

This analysis has emphasized the most significant evolving dynamics of the Foreign Terrorist Fighters phenomenon. These dynamics naturally force governments to think differently

52 MCB. 2014. Muslim Council of Britaine Calls for the Release of Alan Henning. 17 September.  
53 MCB. 2014. *British Muslims Hope for Peace in Iraq and Syria*. 26 September.  
54 MCB. 2014. *Talha Ahmad Speaks to Channel 5 News about New Terror Powers*. 17 November.  
55 MCB. 2015. *Confront terrorism by backing freedom: the Muslim Council of Britain calls for a re-think on the proposed Counter-Terrorism and Security Bill*. 7 January.

about strategies to counter radicalization and terrorism, but the focus of this study was on a specific actor: selected Islamic organizations in France and Great Britain.

Though no generalization can be made over the position of Muslims in France and Great Britain on the issue of Daesh and its attraction of Foreign Terrorist Fighters, it is still revealing to look at the position of respective organizations in each country to highlight specific trends. In this regard, the priority for the two organizations is to avoid any confusion regarding Daesh and the Muslim communities at large. There is a strong emphasis to delegitimize the religious nature claimed by the group. As to the policymaking regarding security issues, the MCB is confronting the government, a trend which is not specific to the events triggered by Daesh, but which can be identified since the 9/11 attacks and the securitization of Islam-related issues that ensued. As the French centralized and assimilationist model is not favorable to partnerships with religious groups, there are no surprises there as well: the UOIF invests its efforts in delegitimizing Daesh, but is more discreet on the counterterrorist policies and deradicalization. When reading the press releases and reports between June 2015 and November 2016, these trends seem to continue though the issue of returnees becomes more acute with the increasing military pressures on the Islamic State and their apparent deteriorating situation as attested by the decrease of their propaganda (Milton 2016). Further research on other patterns of other European countries affected by the issue of Foreign Terrorist Fighters is needed, taking into account the Paris attacks in November 2015, the Brussels attacks of March 2016, and how the state of emergency in France may have redistributed the cards for Islamic organizations in France.



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