



Ties that Bind: Dynamics of Group Radicalisation in Italy's Jihadists Headed for Syria and Iraq

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, thousands of radical citizens and residents from Europe have joined the so-called 'Islamic State' (IS) in Syria and Iraq. Unlike other European countries, Italy has traditionally been characterised by the prevalence of individual pathways of radicalisation over group mechanisms. Nevertheless, recent cases show interesting indications of the increasing role of small groups based on pre-existing personal relationships (family and friendship ties). This kind of bond can be particularly salient for IS, a jihadist "proto-state", which needs not only 'foreign fighters' but also new 'citizens' of different sexes and ages, including entire families.

KEYWORDS

Italy; radicalisation; terrorism; jihadism; foreign fighters

Today the danger of so-called 'foreign fighters' ranks high on the international agenda. Clearly, the fear is that, in addition to their role in conflict areas,¹ some of the survivors may return to their home or third countries and carry out or support terrorist attacks, taking advantage of the connections, the experience and the status gained in Syria and Iraq. In fact, a number of serious terrorist attacks in Europe involved returned foreign fighters: from Mohammed Merah's shootings in Montauban and Toulouse in March 2012 to the devastating attacks in Paris on 13 November 2015 and beyond.²

Although the phenomenon is not novel,³ the flow of (Sunni) jihadist foreign fighters into Syria and Iraq is unprecedented. It can be estimated that from 2011 to the present no less than 30,000 jihadist foreign fighters have arrived in Syria and Iraq from over 100 countries. About one fifth of these individuals have come from the West.⁴

Most have joined the so-called 'Islamic State' (IS, also known as ISIS, ISIL or Da'esh). With the crisis of IS' self-proclaimed 'caliphate', the risk is particularly high. In fact, an increasing number of jihadist foreign fighters could leave Syria and Iraq, exacerbating the terrorist threat.⁵

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¹Bakke, "Help wanted?"

²Nesser *et al.*, "Jihadi Terrorism in Europe".

³Malet, *Foreign fighters*.

⁴See Schmid and Tinnes, *Foreign (Terrorist) Fighters*, 7, 27; Van Ginkel and Entenmann, *The Foreign Fighters Phenomenon*.

⁵E.g., Khalil and Shanahan, *Foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq*.

Actually, there is no common and agreed-upon definition of the term ‘foreign fighter’.⁶ However, drawing in part on Hegghammer’s formulation,⁷ a foreign fighter can be defined as an agent who (1) has joined, and operates within the confines of, an insurgency, engaging in combat, (2) lacks citizenship of the conflict state or strong kinship links to its warring factions, (3) lacks affiliation to an official military organisation, and (4) is not motivated essentially by the desire for private gain, unlike a common mercenary.

On closer inspection, however, not everybody who decides to leave for Syria or Iraq for the cause of jihadism is necessarily a genuine foreign fighter in the narrow sense. Importantly, not everybody takes part in combat. IS, in particular, is not only a terrorist group, focused on the use of rebel violence, but also a “proto-state” that controls a territory and governs a population.⁸ Thus, in recent years it has been possible to join IS as new ‘citizens’ of this state, without necessarily engaging in terrorist or military roles. Since the self-proclamation of the caliphate in June 2014, IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi has asked every Muslim believer to fulfil their individual duty to immigrate. This has made traveling to Syria and Iraq attractive for an unusually diverse group of people compared to the past (for example, al-Qaeda in Iraq, which was interested in young male fighters). Hence the diversity within the various national contingents of jihadists, which may consist of both very young and very old persons, of male and female jihadists, and even families with children.⁹ Some of these people may take on combat roles and become foreign fighters in the strict sense, but others do not because of their age (too young or too old), their sex (women are not allowed to engage in combat)¹⁰ or other reasons.

It is interesting to note, however, that even those who do not engage in combat may be involved in violent acts. In fact, supporting activities are often difficult to separate from violence.¹¹ For instance, one of the jihadists present in the sample examined in this article (Aldo Kobuzi), after arriving in Syria, was entrusted with religious policing tasks, which included the stoning of adulterers. Moreover, almost all men receive a rifle and are expected to be armed. Even some women, including one in our sample (Maria Giulia Sergio, Kobuzi’s wife), received firearms training.¹² Nor does the lack of a genuine combat role preclude these people from carrying out or at least supporting acts of violence in the conflict area or even in other countries.

Thus, as millions of people fled Syria and Iraq, thousands of jihadists decided to go the other way in order to fight alongside or simply support armed groups on the ground. They agreed to become *muhajirun* (‘emigrants’ in Arabic). The self-proclamation of the caliphate, based on a radical interpretation and application of *sharia* law, represents a powerful ‘pull factor’¹³ for many jihadists from all over the world.

This article focuses on Italy, an interesting national case that has not been extensively investigated so far. It presents interesting particularities,¹⁴ including the traditional

⁶In particular, Schmid and Tinnes, *Foreign (Terrorist) Fighters*.

⁷Hegghammer, “The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters”, 57-8.

⁸Lia, “Understanding jihadi proto-states”.

⁹Bakker and de Bont, “Belgian and Dutch Jihadist Foreign Fighters”, 847.

¹⁰IS and other jihadist armed groups in Syria and Iraq, basing their activity on a rigid interpretation of *Sharia* law, normally prefer not to use women in military combat. See, among others, Peresin and Cervone, “The Western *muhajirat* of ISIS”.

¹¹Bakker and de Bont, “Belgian and Dutch Jihadist Foreign Fighters”, 849.

¹²Marone, *Italy’s Jihadists*, 15.

¹³Coolsaet, *Facing the fourth*, 39-40.

¹⁴Marone, “Italian Jihadists”, and *Italy’s Jihadists*.

prevalence of individual pathways of radicalisation¹⁵ over group mechanisms. Unlike other European countries,¹⁶ peer pressure or other group dynamics within small groups did not play a crucial role in the past. Instead, the present analysis shows indications of an increasing importance of group dynamics. One characteristic of the cases examined is the influence of pre-existing personal ties and, in particular, family relationships.

According to recent aggregate estimates, the contingent of Italian jihadists who have travelled to Syria and Iraq appears to be comparatively modest, with only 110 foreign fighters up to 2017.¹⁷ On the other hand, Italy represents an important transit country for jihadists heading for Syria and Iraq.¹⁸ The country has been considered a logistical basis for Islamist militants since the early 1990s¹⁹ as it is relatively close to conflict areas and has rather porous borders. Furthermore, it represents an important target for jihadist violence. The city of Rome, in particular, has great symbolic value as the cradle of Christianity and a major symbol of Western civilisation. The incitement to “conquer Rome” has been a key rallying cry of the so-called caliphate since its self-proclamation.

This article considers the war theatre of Syria and Iraq. Especially after the outbreak of the civil war in Syria in 2011, this area has become by far the main destination of Italian – and Western – foreign fighters. Here the focus is on (Sunni) jihadists, but it is important to keep in mind that not all of these unusual emigrants are necessarily jihadists. Even in the context of this conflict, there are individuals who have travelled exactly to fight *against* jihadist armed groups.²⁰

This work examines the dynamics of group radicalisation among Italian jihadists headed for Syria and Iraq, at a micro level of analysis. In particular, it focuses on a select number of individuals who recently decided to leave the country in groups to join IS (four groups: a total of 12 adults and five children). Genuine foreign fighters are only a part of this sample. However, it is interesting to note that the Italian penal code (art. 270-quarter), pursuant to a 2015 amendment, punishes any individual who joins an international terrorist group/entity, even if s/he does not actually commit acts of violence.

The text is organised into four sections. The first section examines the scale of the problem. The second presents a few recent cases on which open-source information is available. The third explores their dynamics of group radicalisation. The conclusion discusses the most important findings presented in the article.

The analysis draws on secondary sources (scientific works, journalistic pieces, official reports) and in part on primary sources (judicial records containing rich wiretaps²¹). As some scholars have recently noted, “the discussion on the topic of foreign fighters [...] is hampered by a lack of empirical data on the phenomenon in general and detailed

¹⁵Many studies have pointed out that jihadists, including foreign fighters, present a variety of individual profiles. Therefore in the literature there has been a general tendency to “shift the focus away from profiling extremists to profiling the radicalization pathways they take” (Hafez and Mullins, “The Radicalization Puzzle”, 959). See also Horgan, “From Profiles to Pathways”.

¹⁶Schmid and Tinnes, *Foreign (Terrorist) Fighters*, 35.

¹⁷Press conference of the Commission of experts on the phenomenon of jihadist radicalisation and extremism, Rome, Italian Government, 5 January 2017, <http://www.governo.it/media/la-riunione-della-commissione-di-studio-sul-fenomeno-della-radicalizzazione-e-dell'estremismo>.

¹⁸For example, the 2015 annual report to Parliament of the Italian Interior Ministry confirmed that: “[i]n relation to the conflict in Syria it should be pointed out that the Italian territory has turned out to be a transit ‘hub’ for foreign fighters who left other European countries and travelled to the abovementioned theatre of conflict” (Italian Interior Ministry, *Relazione al Parlamento - Anno 2015 [Report to Parliament]*, 12).

¹⁹E.g., Björkman, “Salafi-Jihadi terrorism in Italy”.

²⁰Tuck *et al.*, ‘*Shooting in the right direction*’.

²¹Tribunale di Milano (Court of Milan), *Ordinanza [Court order]*.

information on individual cases in particular”.²² This article intends to offer an original contribution to this important discussion, with an emphasis on a country of great interest.

The scale of the problem in Italy

Aggregate official counts regarding the Italian jihadist contingent in Syria and Iraq have been provided by national authorities on various occasions. Recently, in January 2017, the Government commission on jihadist radicalisation and extremism announced that Italian authorities had so far monitored a total of 110 foreign fighters linked to the country. Of these, 32 individuals had already died; 17 had returned to Europe and six were back in Italy.²³

Other details, including names or ethnicities,²⁴ are not supplied on grounds of confidentiality. Importantly, these official counts do not specify how many individuals are genuine foreign fighters in the strict sense. According to the information available, however, the majority of these individuals joined IS.

It is worth stressing that, in the Italian case, official counts are generally high because they include individuals who are linked to the country in various forms (not only citizens and residents). According to available information, more than half are foreign nationals who passed through the country and stayed for short periods.²⁵ Only a minority have Italian passports; arguably a few dozen at the most.²⁶

In the European context, the number of ‘Italian’ foreign fighters is medium/low in absolute terms and very low in relation to the general population (fewer than 2 foreign fighters per million, compared to over 40 per million in Belgium).²⁷ In general, the figures are also low compared to recent estimates for other large European countries, such as France (1,700 fighters), the UK (760) and Germany (760); and even compared to less populous countries such as Belgium (470), Austria (300), Sweden (300) and the Netherlands (250).²⁸ However, they are on the increase: for example, back in January 2015, the contingent of foreign fighters linked to Italy was officially estimated at 59; 110 in January 2017 is an 86 percent increase in 17 months.

Four cases of groups headed for Syria and Iraq

Although there is relatively little public information on jihadists who decided to leave Italy for Syria and Iraq, a few stories are sufficiently known. We will examine four recent cases of groups headed to the theatre of war, involving in total 12 adult jihadists, plus five children. These cases were chosen based on their diversity in terms of age, sex and origin, and level of detail in publicly available material.²⁹

Not all these individuals were able to arrive in Syria and Iraq, despite their efforts. In fact, only two family groups (namely, the Kobuzi-Sergio couple and the Brignoli-Koraichi family) were able to reach the caliphate. However, as our focus is on the radicalisation

²²Bakker and de Bont, “Belgian and Dutch Jihadist Foreign Fighters”, 838.

²³Press conference of the Commission of experts on the phenomenon of jihadist radicalisation and extremism, 5 January 2017.

²⁴Cf. Boncio, “Italian Foreign Terrorist Fighters”.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 10.

²⁶Marone, *Italy’s Jihadists*.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 5.

²⁸See Schmid and Tinnes, *Foreign (Terrorist) Fighters*; Van Ginkel and Entenmann, *The Foreign Fighters Phenomenon*.

²⁹Cf. Lindekilde *et al.* “Who Goes, Why”, 860.

dynamics before their settlement abroad, the cases of failed journeys are equally relevant for our analysis.³⁰ All these adults have been investigated in Italy. However, they must of course be considered innocent until proven guilty.

As in other studies of this kind, the information upon which our analysis is based has some limitations.³¹ We have information for 12 adults and five children within a universe of at least 110 foreign fighters. As a consequence, our conclusions are preliminary and their scope limited. Nevertheless, while the sample is small, it is drawn from a relatively small population (especially as regards Italian citizens and long-term residents) and can contribute to a better understanding of the problem in Italy.

The four cases are presented in the order in which they decided to leave for Syria and Iraq.

The Sergio-Kobuzi family³²

This case concerns an Italian national, her Albanian husband and her family of origin. Maria Giulia Sergio was born in 1987 in Torre del Greco, near Naples, to a Catholic family (father, mother and an older sister). Her parents came from a humble background and had various economic problems. The family decided to move to northern Italy around 2000 and settled in Inzago, a town between Milan and Bergamo (Lombardy Region).

After highschool, Sergio went to university but did not graduate. She also worked in part-time jobs. In 2007, she converted to Islam on her own initiative and took a new name, Fatima az Zahra.

Over time, her religious positions became increasingly extreme. Her radicalisation process had a breakthrough in 2014, at the time of the rise of IS. In September, she married an Albanian citizen, Aldo Kobuzi, in a marriage of convenience, facilitated by a mutual acquaintance of Albanian origin. Unlike other 'IS brides', Sergio wanted to marry a man she met through personal contacts before her departure for the self-proclaimed caliphate, so as not to be compelled to marry a total stranger in Syria in circumstances that were out of her control.³³

Aldo 'Said' Kobuzi was born in northwestern Albania in 1991. He worked as a mechanic in his country and moved to Italy for his marriage. His younger sister, Serjola (born in 1996), had already left for Syria in 2013 together with her husband (now deceased) and their child. Just four days after their marriage, Sergio and her husband, together with her mother-in-law, left for Syria, where they joined IS. They were reunited with Kobuzi's sister. In Syria, Maria Giulia/Fatima took up firearms training, in the hope of taking part in combat someday. She explicitly expressed her desire to fight. Maria Giulia Sergio is the first female *muhajira* with an Italian passport.

Aldo Kobuzi was sent to an IS training camp in Iraq in November 2014. He was exempted from fighting, however, because he had to take care of his widowed sister Serjola, who was pregnant. For this reason, he was, as mentioned, entrusted with religious policing tasks.

One by one, all Sergio family members converted to a very strict form of Islam. In July 2015, Italian police arrested Sergio's father, mother and sister, as they were preparing to go to Syria, convinced by the young woman's pressing requests. This was the first case of radicalisation of an entire Italian family.

³⁰Cf. De Bie *et al.*, "Shifting Modus Operandi", 420.

³¹Lindekilde *et al.* "Who Goes, Why", 861.

³²Factual information comes from Serafini, *Maria Giulia che divenne Fatima*; Marone, "Italian Jihadists" and *Italy's Jihadists*.

³³Marone, *Italy's Jihadists*, 15.

Interestingly, Sergio's relatives had different attitudes and motivations. Her older sister, Marianna Sergio, was easily persuaded to leave for Syria: she was already showing sympathies for the cause of IS and, in addition, was apparently interested in finding a new husband after her divorce. By contrast, her father, Sergio Sergio, and especially her mother, Assunta Buonfiglio, were more sceptical and hesitant. In the end, apart from the emotional attachment to their daughter, they were also persuaded by the promise of a better social position in IS-controlled territory.³⁴

The Brignoli-Koraichi family³⁵

This case concerns an entire family of five. Alice Brignoli, an Italian citizen, was born in 1977 to a Catholic family. She worked as a secretary in a small firm and there met Mohamed Koraichi (born in 1985), a Moroccan welder who grew up in Italy. They got married in 2008 and had three sons. They lived in Bulciago, a small town in the province of Lecco (Lombardy region).

Brignoli rapidly converted to Islam and took the name Aisha. She started wearing the *hijab*, the traditional Islamic veil. Alice/Aisha left her job and rarely went out of the house in order to dedicate herself full-time to their children. After Koraichi lost his job, the couple received welfare payments and financial support from their parents.

The gradual radicalisation of the couple became apparent around 2009-10. In February 2015, they left Italy with their children and travelled to the caliphate by car, stopping off in Bulgaria.³⁶ In Syria, Koraichi received training and became an IS foreign fighter. He expressed the desire to die as a martyr.

In the caliphate, the couple proudly endorsed the jihadist indoctrination of their sons, in particular, the oldest. Moreover, according to intercepted conversations,³⁷ in Syria, with the consent of Brignoli, Koraichi agreed to marry at least one other woman, Yassine, a young widow from the Netherlands, and adopted her three year-old son.

As will be seen below, Koraichi encouraged two other Italian residents of Moroccan origin, Abderrahim Moutaharrik and Abderrahmane Khachia, to travel to IS-controlled territory and, additionally, to carry out terrorist attacks in Italy, as wiretapping demonstrated.³⁸

Brignoli attempted to convince at least her mother to convert to an extremist version of Islam and travel to Syria and Iraq but, unlike in Sergio's case, her efforts were not successful.

The Bencharki-Moutaharrik family and Abderrahmane Khachia³⁹

This case concerns a family of four and a family friend. Abderrahim Moutaharrik was born in Morocco in 1988. He is married to Salma Bencharki (Islamic rite only), and has two children. Moutaharrik and his wife were residents in Italy for many years. They lived in Lecco (Lombardy region). Unlike the other foreign-born jihadists in our sample, Moutaharrik obtained an Italian passport. He worked as a labourer and was also a semi-professional kickboxer.

³⁴*ibid.*, 30.

³⁵Tribunale di Milano, *Ordinanza*. See also Giuzzi, "Famiglia scompare dalla Brianza" ["Family from Brianza disappears"]; Biondani, "Ecco Alice nel Califfato" ["Here's Alice in the caliphate"].

³⁶Serafini, *Maria Giulia che divenne Fatima* [*Maria Giulia becomes Fatima*]; Tribunale di Milano, *Ordinanza*, 11.

³⁷Tribunale di Milano, *Ordinanza*.

³⁸*ibid.*

³⁹*ibid.*

In early 2016, Moutaharrik decided to leave for the caliphate with his family and a friend, Abderrahmane Khachia. This young man, born in Morocco in 1993, lived in Brunello, a small town in the province of Varese (Lombardy region), not far from Lecco. He was the younger brother of a foreign fighter, Oussama, a friend of Moutaharrik, who, after his expulsion from Italy in January 2015 for his explicit jihadist positions, joined IS in August 2015 and lost his life in battle in Iraq in December 2015. His tragic death shocked his brother Abderrahmane but also had a profound effect on his friend Abderrahim. In all likelihood, it represented a powerful source of inspiration for their swift decision to take action.

In early March 2016, Abderrahim Moutaharrik and Abderrahmane Khachia, through Moutaharrik's wife, came into contact with Mohamed Koraichi's sister, Wafa, who was living in Baveno, a small town near Lake Maggiore (Piedmont region). Wafa Koraichi seemingly supported her brother's extremist positions, against the will of her father and her Moroccan husband. Through this woman, Moutaharrik and Khachia asked Mohamed Koraichi, who had already joined IS, to provide them with the *tazkia* (in Arabic), a sort of pass/letter of recommendation for their relocation to the caliphate.

Moreover, through Mohamed Koraichi, Moutaharrik and Khachia came into contact with an unknown jihadist, known as the 'Sheikh', who Italian authorities consider a "high-profile member" of IS. Through phone messages, the Sheikh invited the two friends to "avenge Muslims" in the West.

According to Italian investigators, Moutaharrik and Khachia were ready to leave for the caliphate, together with Moutaharrik's family, and carry out terrorist attacks in Italy.⁴⁰ They were arrested in April 2016.

Moreover, investigators found out that the father of the Khachia brothers, Brahim, had supported both Oussama and Abderrahmane in their efforts to leave for Syria and Iraq. He had already been suspected of Islamist extremism in Italy in the early 2000s.⁴¹ Eventually Brahim Khachia and his wife were expelled from Italy in May 2016.⁴²

The Pilè-Sagrari couple⁴³

This case concerns an Italian citizen and her Tunisian husband. Sara Pilè, an Italian girl, was born to a Catholic middle-class family in 1991 and grew up in Monticelli Brusati, a small town in the province of Brescia (Lombardy region).

She married Naim Sagrari, a 30-year-old Tunisian citizen, with an Islamic rite in 2010 and later with an Italian civil ceremony in 2015. The man worked for some time in the small company of Sara's father, a local entrepreneur. They lived together with the Pilè family until the man was thrown out, probably because of disagreements with Sara's father on lifestyles.⁴⁴

⁴⁰*ibid.*

⁴¹Biondani and Ronchetti, "Is, la strana storia del jihadista di Varese" [IS, the strange story of the jihadist from Varese], *L'Espresso*, 28 January 2016.

⁴²"Terrorismo, Alfano: 'Due espulsi'" ["Terrorism, Alfano: Two people deported"], *Ansa*, 20 May 2016.

⁴³"Terrorismo, coppia bresciana pianificava la partenza per la Siria: il marito lascia l'Italia" ["Terrorism, Brescian couple plans departure for Syria: husband leaves Italy"], *La Repubblica*, 8 June 2016; "Le due vite di Sara Pilè: dal mare con la parrocchia al martirio in nome di Allah" ["The two lives of Sara Pilè: from trip to the seaside with parish to martyrdom for Allah"], *Brescia Today*, 8 June 2016; Petenzi, "Il marito consegnato all'antiterrorismo tunisino" ["Husband handed over to Tunisian anti-terrorism"], *Corriere della Sera*, 9 June 2016; Cittadini, "Terrorismo, bresciana voleva andare in Siria" ["Terrorism, Brescian wanted to go to Syria"], *Il Giorno*, 9 June 2016; Rodella, "Filmati dell'Isis e odio per l'Occidente. L'altra faccia di Sara, jihadista bresciana" ["Videos of ISIS and hate toward the West. The other side of Sara, jihadist from Brescia"], *Corriere della Sera*, 5 August 2016.

⁴⁴Buizza, "Voleva il martirio in Siria, la Digos infrange il sogno" ["She wanted martyrdom, the DIGOS police special division shatters her dream"], *Bresciaoggi*, 8 June 2016.

According to the information available, Sagrari had a significant influence on Pilè. She converted to Islam and later left her job in a pastry shop and lost contact with her friends. She seldom left her house. The couple had few contacts with local mosques. But, in contrast, Pilè was active on the internet. In particular, on her Facebook account she expressed anti-Western attitudes and her desire to die as a martyr.

According to Italian investigators, by 2016 the couple was ready to leave for Syria, allegedly to join IS. They were interested in buying a car for the journey. The couple was arrested in June 2016. In Pilè's computer and smartphone, the Italian authorities found over 120 videos and 4,000 photographs regarding IS.⁴⁵

Sagrari was soon expelled to his country of origin and was banned from re-entering Italy for 10 years. Pilè was not considered socially dangerous and was not imprisoned. She could not be deported in any case because of her Italian citizenship.⁴⁶ However, the authorities identified the "concrete risk" that her pathway could "result in operative conduct". Therefore, in July 2016, she was subjected to special supervision for three years. This innovative measure requires that she cannot leave her town of residence nor use the internet.

Overall, as regards age, most jihadists were young, but five small children and a middle-aged couple are also present in our sample.

With respect to sex, our sample includes both men and women. As mentioned, women have so far not been allowed to engage in combat for jihadist groups in Syria and Iraq. However, Sergio explicitly expressed their willingness to fight and even took firearms training in Syria.

As regards their origin, like most foreign fighters in Italy,⁴⁷ almost all the adults in our sample are either second generation children of Muslim immigrants or recent converts to Islam. The members of the Sergio family, Brignoli and Pilè were born in Italy to Italian families, but the other jihadists, regardless of their formal nationality (only Moutaharrik obtained Italian citizenship), are still "sociologically Italians"⁴⁸ because they had been socialised in the country since childhood. Only Kobuzi was simply a visitor; he arrived in Italy in 2014 to marry Maria Giulia Sergio.

Radicalisation dynamics

The concept of 'radicalisation' has gained great popularity in recent years, but it is actually still a matter of dispute in the academic literature.⁴⁹ Some scholars distinguish two forms of radicalisation.⁵⁰ On the one hand, "cognitive" radicalisation refers to the acquisition of radical attitudes, values and beliefs, with the aspiration of undergoing a profound transformation of the socio-political status quo. On the other hand, "behavioural" radicalisation refers to the actual participation in a range of radical activities, including illegal and clandestine ones, which can culminate in the use of political violence.

⁴⁵Rodella, "Filmati dell'Isis".

⁴⁶On anti-terrorism deportation measures in Italy, see Marone, "The Use of Deportation".

⁴⁷Marone, *Italy's Jihadists*.

⁴⁸Vidino, *Home-Grown Jihadism in Italy*, 77 and *passim*.

⁴⁹On the debate about the concept of radicalisation, see, among others, Horgan, "From Profiles to Pathways"; Borum, "Radicalization into violent extremism"; Bartlett and Miller, "The edge of violence"; Neumann, "The trouble with radicalization"; Coolsaet, *All radicalisation is local*.

⁵⁰E.g., Neumann, "The trouble with radicalization".

There is not necessarily a link between these two forms of radicalisation, much less an automatic one. Indeed, the majority of people with radical views do not, in the end, engage in radical activities. At the same time, not all radical militants or terrorists are motivated primarily by their convictions.⁵¹

The individuals examined in this article decided to embrace a behavioural form of radicalisation by joining (or at least planning to join) a jihadist armed group abroad. A minority (Koraichi, Kobuzi) even engaged in violence in Syria. However, at least some of them (in particular, Sergio's parents)⁵² did not display genuine and deep-seated radical beliefs.

Like most homegrown Italian jihadists in recent years,⁵³ the radicalisation of the jihadists included in our sample did not take place in traditional settings, such as prisons. Unlike other European foreign fighters,⁵⁴ none of these Italian jihadists had been to prison. Nor had any been involved in criminal gangs or drug dealing.

Many frequented Islamic places of worship or cultural centres. Maria Giulia Sergio attended a few mosques quite regularly. Brignoli and Koraichi frequented the mosques of Lecco and Costa Masnaga, in the province of Lecco, where Moutaharrik and Khachia met. Pilè and Sagrari had few contacts with local mosques. However, in all cases, according to the information available, mosque attendance did not play a crucial role in the decision to join IS in Syria and Iraq.⁵⁵

Most jihadists in our sample exhibited outward “signs of radicalisation”,⁵⁶ in terms of changes in lifestyle, habits and social relationships. For example, Maria Giulia Sergio and Sara Pilè started wearing the *niqab* (the veil that covers the entire face with only a slit for the eyes). Pilè and Alice Brignoli agreed to spend most of their time at home and cut many of their previous social ties. Mohamed Koraichi left his full-time job as a welder because he came to see it as incompatible with his religious practices and duties.⁵⁷

These jihadists decided to take the leap from a (more or less intense) cognitive form of radicalisation to a behavioural form. In relation to cognitive radicalisation, all expressed serious grievances, some of a political/social or religious nature, often associated with strong emotional states. For example, in intercepted conversations, Moutaharrik and Khachia lashed out against Western “infidels”.⁵⁸ Others had a more personal tone. For example, Maria Giulia Sergio complained about intolerant and Islamophobic attitudes in the country.⁵⁹

Some of these grievances are not uncommon in sectors of Europe's Muslim communities. Moreover, Italy's strict naturalisation laws, largely based on the *jus sanguinis* principle, often exacerbate the sense of discrimination and feelings of frustration, resentment and anger.⁶⁰ However, these Italian radicals framed problems, solutions and calls for action in

⁵¹Schuurman and Horgan, “Rationales for terrorist violence”, 60.

⁵²See Serafini, “Il padre di Fatima la jihadista italiana: ‘Voglio tornare cattolico: mia figlia mi ha manipolato’” [“The father of Italian jihadist Fatima: ‘I want to go back to being Catholic: my daughter manipulated me’”], *Corriere della Sera*, 19 November 2015.

⁵³In particular, Vidino, *Home-Grown Jihadism in Italy*.

⁵⁴Basra et al., *Criminal Past*.

⁵⁵Serafini, *Maria Giulia che divenne Fatima*; Tribunale di Milano, *Ordinanza*; Petenzi, “Il marito consegnato all'antiterrorismo tunisino”.

⁵⁶Schmid and Tinnes, *Foreign (Terrorist) Fighters*, 38-9.

⁵⁷Serafini, *Maria Giulia che divenne Fatima*; “Le due vite di Sara Pilè”; Tribunale di Milano, *Ordinanza*.

⁵⁸Tribunale di Milano, *Ordinanza*.

⁵⁹Serafini, *Maria Giulia che divenne Fatima*, 42, 46-7.

⁶⁰Marone, *Italy's Jihadists*, 24.

the perspective of jihadist ideology, with its principles, narratives, and symbols. Thus, the transition from words to actions was presented as both possible and necessary.

All jihadists displayed their religious commitment, but none had extensive expertise in Islamic studies. There was no *taqiyya* (dissimulation of the Islamic faith). Furthermore, some of them did not hesitate to advance their radical ideas publicly, at least to a certain degree: Maria Giulia Sergio gave various interviews; Moutaharrik displayed pro-IS signs in his sport competitions.⁶¹ Many jihadists in our sample were active on the social media, where they expressed extremist positions, including incitement to hatred, particularly, Maria Giulia Sergio, Moutaharrik and Pilè on Facebook.⁶²

At some point, these jihadists decided to take action and leave for Syria or Iraq. They agreed to move on to a behavioural form of radicalisation by joining a jihadist armed group. Their decision to leave occurred in a peculiar “geopolitical situation”.⁶³ In fact, they were attracted by Baghdadi’s call and, unlike previous foreign fighters from Italy,⁶⁴ arrived, or at least planned to arrive, after the self-proclamation of the caliphate in mid-2014, at the height of its strength.

None of these jihadists had family or ethnic ties with Syria and Iraq. Like many aspiring fighters, they were not particularly focused on any one specific country of destination. For example, Moutaharrik and Khachia took Libya into consideration for a while.⁶⁵

In general, social networks can play an essential role in foreign fighter mobilisation.⁶⁶ In particular, we know that in Europe the decision to leave a country for Syria or Iraq is often the decision of a small group rather than one individual. For example, “bunches of guys”,⁶⁷ may get together in a neighbourhood, a mosque, school, sports club or prison.⁶⁸ Group dynamics (such as “group polarisation”, the tendency to take decisions that are more extreme than the initial inclination of the members⁶⁹) can encourage the process of cognitive and behavioural radicalisation.

Initially, many Italian foreign fighters travelled to the conflict area on their own. Unlike in many other Western European countries, peer pressure did not play an important role. This important characteristic may be due to the traditionally small size, dispersion and fragmentation of the homegrown jihadist scene in Italy. In such a context, each potential foreign fighter is led to take action on their own.⁷⁰ In fact, in previous years, many Italian *muhajirun* (such as Giuliano Delnevo, Anas el-Abboubi and Meriam Rehaily⁷¹), who were not able to find significant contacts in Italy, sought connections abroad and finally decided

⁶¹*Ibid.*, 25; Tribunale di Milano, *Ordinanza*, 40.

⁶²Serafini, *Maria Giulia che divenne Fatima*; Tribunale di Milano, *Ordinanza*; Petenzi, “Il marito consegnato all’antiterrorismo tunisino” [“Husband handed over to Tunisian anti-terrorism”].

⁶³De Bie *et al.*, “Shifting Modus Operandi”, 436.

⁶⁴Cf. Marone, *Italy’s Jihadists*.

⁶⁵Tribunale di Milano, *Ordinanza*, 49.

⁶⁶See Reynolds and Hafez, “Social Network Analysis”.

⁶⁷Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad*.

⁶⁸Schmid and Tinnes, *Foreign (Terrorist) Fighters*, 35.

⁶⁹McCauley and Moskalenko, “Mechanisms of political radicalization”.

⁷⁰Marone, *Italy’s Jihadists*, 28-9.

⁷¹Delnevo, the first Italian-born foreign fighter in Syria, left Genoa in November 2012 and died fighting for an al-Qaeda-linked group in the Aleppo area in June 2013. El-Abboubi, a second-generation ‘born-again’ Muslim from the province of Brescia, joined the ranks of IS in Syria in September 2013. Rehaily, a female ‘second-generation immigrant’ from the province of Padua, left for the self-proclaimed caliphate in July 2015. See Vidino, *Home-Grown Jihadism in Italy*; Marone, *Italy’s Jihadists*.

to leave for the war theatre alone. Maria Giulia Sergio, too, contacted an Albania-based network and travelled to Syria with an Albanian man she had just met.

In some respects, it can be argued that these individuals were unable to find a ‘breeding ground’ within the country, especially in terms of social networks. Interestingly, Delnevo decided to break from a small group of converts he had joined in his home city, Genoa, after he showed his willingness to join the jihad abroad. El-Abboubi tried to open an Italian branch of the radical *Sharia4* franchise without much success.⁷²

By contrast, the dynamics operating within the Sergio, Brignoli-Koraichi, Bencharki-Moutaharrik and Pilè-Sagrari families and the friendship between Moutaharrik and Khachia show signs of group radicalisation in Italy. Group dynamics can take different forms. In particular, Sergio was ready to exploit the affective and emotional ties in her family to promote the jihadist cause. In the radicalisation process of Moutaharrik and Khachia, peer pressure dynamics between friends and the emulation of a role model (Koraichi and above all the late Oussama Khachia) were salient. In the case of Pilè and Sagrari, it is plausible to presume the influence of Sagrari within the couple. In the cases of the Khachia brothers, their father, Brahim, may have represented a role model.

The importance of pre-existing personal ties in the recruitment of terrorists is not new for scholars.⁷³ This sort of relationship usually presents some elements that can be useful for the functioning and activities of clandestine groups, including mutual knowledge and understanding, trust, solidarity and a willingness to cooperate.⁷⁴

Pre-existing personal ties also play an important role in the ‘facilitation’ process of aspiring *muhajirun*. Unlike domestic terrorists, these individuals cannot directly join the ranks of a jihadist armed group in their country of residence. They need the assistance of a ‘facilitator’ (person or group) who contacts, vets and finally helps the candidates transfer from their country of residence (Italy, in this case) or transit zone (for example, Turkey) to the combat area (Syria and Iraq). The facilitator connects the foreign volunteers with the armed group operating in the conflict area.

Facilitation fills two main functions.⁷⁵ First, it provides information and resources related to the logistics of travelling. Second, it can help the armed group in the task of screening volunteers. Like other organisations, jihadist armed groups may rely on ‘guarantors’ to vet and select candidates. In fact, Koraichi, from Syria, vouched for Moutaharrik and Khachia and provided them with the *tazkia*, a sort of letter of recommendation.

According to the information currently available, these jihadist volunteers were not directly recruited by an armed group through a top-down process, but rather actively sought contacts with various facilitators, through a bottom-up process.

Interestingly, in some cases the facilitation dynamic was seemingly based on a relatively generalised mechanism of organisational ties that are potentially open and accessible to volunteers.⁷⁶ For example, after reaching Turkey by air, Sergio and Kobuzi were assisted by a specialised agent named Ahmed Abu al-Harith, considered to be an “IS member” by Italian authorities.⁷⁷

⁷²Sharia4 is a transnational Islamist movement with autonomous branches in various European countries. See Vidino, “Sharia4”.

⁷³E.g., Della Porta, *Clandestine Political Violence*.

⁷⁴Hafez and Mullins, “The Radicalization Puzzle”, 964-6.

⁷⁵Holman, “Gonna Get Myself Connected”, 7-8.

⁷⁶See Holman, “Gonna Get Myself Connected”.

⁷⁷Serafini, *Maria Giulia che divenne Fatima*.

On the other hand, in other cases, personal and, in particular, family ties played a significant role in facilitation. In particular, it is possible that at least in an initial stage, up to their arrival in Turkey, the Kobuzi-Sergio couple was helped by an Albanian recruiting network linked to his family. Moreover, the couple reunited with Kobuzi's sister who, significantly, was already in Syria.⁷⁸ The role of close personal ties is also evident in the case of Moutaharrik and Khachia. They contacted Mohamed Koraichi in Syria, through his sister in Italy, in order to reach IS-controlled territory. Moreover, Khachia had already tried to find contacts through family connections in the preceding months.⁷⁹

Pre-existing personal ties facilitate forms of "bloc recruitment".⁸⁰ In other words, volunteers are mobilised in small groups (including families) – not as separate individuals travelling on their own, as was previously common in Italy. Interestingly, the use of personal ties in facilitation can somehow be seen as a substitute for the lack of 'free zones' that provide direct support and cover in the country of departure.⁸¹ For example, according to various accounts, the municipality of Molenbeek in Belgium⁸² represented an important recruitment area and a sort of safe haven for various jihadists, including the terrorists who carried out the attacks in Paris in November 2015 and in Brussels in March 2016. Places like this can be used as focal points for selection and recruitment. However there do not seem to be high-risk neighbourhoods or suburbs like Molenbeek in Italy.

The presence of domestic organisations and groups that are able to connect supply with demand for of foreign fighters and *muhajirun* (like Sharia4Belgium in past years in Belgium⁸³) is still weaker than in other Western European countries. The foreign fighters phenomenon in Italy has traditionally been characterised, to a large extent, by the presence of *foreign* recruitment networks operating within the country.⁸⁴

Thus, it is not surprising that many jihadists who wanted to travel to Syria and Iraq sought contacts abroad to organise themselves and/or relied on pre-existing personal relationships. Sergio, for example, had various kinds of connections with Albanian jihadists.⁸⁵

In turn, unlike in previous years, there is evidence that some of these *muhajirun* from Italy committed to recruiting other people. Maria Giulia Sergio was able to recruit skilfully all her family and, in addition, helped indoctrinate other women from Syria via the Internet.⁸⁶ Koraichi encouraged and tried to facilitate the departure of Moutaharrik and Abderrahmane Khachia to Syria. According to intercepted conversations, they were in turn ready to seek other potential recruits in the Lecco area.⁸⁷

All these signs of group dynamics could prefigure an important development in the scenario of foreign fighters in Italy.

In previous years, most Italian foreign fighters were not interested in preparing attacks on Italian territory.⁸⁸ For instance, Maria Giulia Sergio was not involved in terrorist plots.

⁷⁸*Ibid.*

⁷⁹Tribunale di Milano, *Ordinanza*, passim.

⁸⁰Reynolds and Hafez, "Social Network Analysis".

⁸¹Spagna, *Il network jihadista in Italia [The jihadist network in Italy]*, 7.

⁸²Van Vlierden, "Molenbeek and Beyond".

⁸³Coolsaet, *Facing the fourth*, 41-2.

⁸⁴Marone, *Italy's Jihadists*.

⁸⁵Giacalone, "Islamic Extremism".

⁸⁶Serafini, *Maria Giulia che divenne Fatima*.

⁸⁷Tribunale di Milano, *Ordinanza*, 60.

⁸⁸Cf. Hegghammer, "Should I Stay or Should I Go?".

By contrast, wiretapping revealed that Moutaharrik and Khachia were discussing the idea of planning attacks in Rome, in particular on the Israeli Embassy.⁸⁹ In this sense, there are indications that the threat posed by Italy's jihadist *muhajirun* could become more serious at the domestic level.

Conclusion

This article has explored the dynamics of group radicalisation of 'Italian' jihadists who recently decided to join IS in Syria and Iraq. Unlike in other Western European countries, the domestic jihadist scene in Italy is not only relatively small in size but also fragmented.⁹⁰ It is still dominated by single individuals or at most small "primordial clusters"⁹¹ often based on pre-existing personal ties. Connections among the different units are uncommon and in any case rather weak. A notable exception is represented by the links between Koraichi, Moutaharrik and the Khachia brothers. Overall, cooperation at the domestic level among aspiring jihadist *muhajirun* appears to be limited and rudimentary.

In this context, pre-existing personal relationships and, in particular, family ties can be salient. In general, this kind of bond can play a significant role in terrorist organisations.⁹² In addition, such relationships, and in particular, kinship ties can be even more important for the specific cause of IS, a "proto-state" which needs not only (young male) fighters, but also, unlike other terrorist groups, new 'citizens' of different sexes and ages, including entire families. However, pre-existing personal relationships do not automatically represent effective vehicles for political commitment, including the extremist cause of jihadism. They have to be specifically activated for this purpose, where possible. Alice Brignoli, Sara Pilè and Wafa Koraichi, for example, had to face the clear opposition of some of their relatives and loved ones.

Moreover, it is important to observe that strong ties such as family or close friendships present clear advantages but also significant disadvantages. In fact, as sociologist Mark Granovetter noted in his famous work,⁹³ "weak ties", such as acquaintances, are generally better suited to facilitating the transmission of information and ideas across groups. Basically, an organisation that depends solely on recruiting operatives and supporters from highly dependable sources associated with kinship and friendship ties is likely to be limited in scope and reach.⁹⁴ Thus, pre-existing personal relationships may represent valuable opportunities but also significant constraints for terrorist organisations, depending on the circumstances.

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⁸⁹Tribunale di Milano, *Ordinanza*, 44.

⁹⁰See Vidino, *Home-Grown Jihadism in Italy*; Marone, *Italy's Jihadists*.

⁹¹Felson, "The natural history".

⁹²Cf. Marone, "L'organizzazione del segreto" ["The social organisation of secrecy"].

⁹³Granovetter, "The strength of weak ties".

⁹⁴Kennedy and Weimann, "The strength of weak", 205.

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