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To cite this article: Katrine Fangen & Åshild Kolås (2016) The “Syria traveller”: reintegration or legal sanctioning?, Critical Studies on Terrorism, 9:3, 414-432, DOI: 10.1080/17539153.2016.1192260

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17539153.2016.1192260

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Published online: 07 Jun 2016.

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The “Syria traveller”: reintegration or legal sanctioning?

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\textbf{ABSTRACT}

This article analyses discourses on Islamist radicalisation and threats of terrorism in Norway, with a focus on a new category of people known as “Syria travellers”, i.e. young Norwegians who go to Syria to fight for the Islamic State. Our analysis of debates in the media, policy documents and parliamentary discussions revealed two main narratives regarding the authorities’ response to Syria travellers: the first emphasises legal sanctions, and the second highlights the reintegration of returnees. We found that contentions about how to react to the new kind of people (the Syria travellers) are intertwined with the way these people are portrayed, understood or “made up”. In the political realm, there is also a striking consensus on the need for both reintegrative and legislative responses.

\textbf{ARTICLE HISTORY}

Received 4 December 2015
Accepted 17 May 2016

\textbf{KEYWORDS}

Foreign fighters; Syria; Islamic State; radicalisation; citizenship; Norway

\textbf{Introduction}

In Norway, the threat of terrorism was made painfully clear on 22 July 2011, with the horrific mass shooting at a Labour Party youth camp and concurrent bombing of the government complex in Oslo. Within a few years, however, the so-called “lone wolf” threat scenario and apprehensions about right-wing radicalisation were overshadowed by concerns about terrorism perpetrated by “Syria travellers”, in other words, Norwegian foreign fighters recruited by Islamic State (IS) who might return with an aim to carry out terrorist attacks in Norway. The new threat was brought home to residents of Oslo in July 2014, when a terror alert warned of an imminent attack by foreign fighters returning from Syria. Authorities reportedly suspected an attack to coincide with the Eid celebration marking the end of the holy month of Ramadan. The alert was followed by days of heightened security, with an unprecedented number of armed security forces patrolling the streets of Oslo. The new threat perception has more recently been fuelled by media reports on the stories of the alleged perpetrators of terrorism in Paris and Brussels.

This article analyses contemporary discourse on radicalisation and the threat of terrorism in Norway, with a focus on the construction of a new category of people known as “Syria travellers”, a term used to describe Norwegians who have travelled to Syria to fight for IS (aka ISIS). Our key concern is not to study Islamist or jihadist\textsuperscript{1} radicalisation as such, but to investigate how Syria travellers are “made up” (Hacking 1986, 2006) in the particular context of Norway, a European country with a liberal...
democratic political culture and a deeply rooted welfare state model. We describe and analyse how such individuals are referred to by academics, journalists, politicians and bureaucrats (Wodak 2008, 302). We focus especially on how Norwegian elites refer to this category of people, and the measures they propose to deal with them. How people of power represent potential terrorists has important implications, not least for policy-making to counter radicalisation and address threats to public safety. Ultimately, it also affects the precarious balance between protection of civil liberties and counterterrorism. In our analysis of various types of textual data, we are thus interested in negotiations around issues such as whether or not Syria travellers represent a security threat, which measures are being proposed to deal with them, and how these measures are linked to the ways in which Syria travellers are described, or “made up”.

An analysis of our data has revealed that there are (at least) two master narratives at work in the construction of the Syria traveller. One highlights the perceived differences between Syria travellers and the majority of Norwegians, and sees them as Muslim youth at odds with or voluntarily “outside” mainstream society. Proponents of this view draw on generalisations about the illiberal nature of Islam and the need to manage perceived cultural clashes. The other narrative views Syria travellers as young people who have grown up in Norway and become victims of exclusion, due to either socio-economic marginalisation or anti-Muslim prejudice among “ethnic Norwegians”. In this view, we find an emphasis on the diverse backgrounds of Syria travellers and the fact that some of them are themselves “ethnically Norwegian”, although they have converted to Islam as teenagers or young adults. These two narratives influence discussions about how to react to returning Syria travellers, how to prevent IS from mobilising in Norway and how to stop those who have been mobilised from leaving Norway to fight in Syria. According to one perspective, Syria travellers should be punished for their crimes and possibly deprived of their Norwegian citizenship, whereas the other narrative would stress the need to help those who return to reintegrate into society and deal with the trauma they have likely experienced.

**The link between policy interventions and research**

Since the turn of the century, a growing academic literature has emerged on the topic of Islamist radicalisation in general, and the Islamist or jihadist foreign fighter in particular (see, for example, Hegghammer 2010; Li 2010; Malet 2010; Borum 2011; Flyghed and Magnus 2012; Bakker, Paulussen, and Entenmann 2013; Al-Hashimi and Goerzig 2015). There is often a close link between research in this area and policy initiatives for countering radicalisation. After 11 September 2001, policymakers justified the Global War on Terror (GWOT) by portraying the Islamic brand of extremism as the greatest threat to Western liberal democracies (cf. Huntington 1993). A new political discourse emerged in which American, Australian and European Muslims were portrayed as the new “enemy within” or a “suspect community” (Pantazis and Pemberton 2009, 646). Meanwhile, much of the research on radicalisation turned its focus towards Muslims and Islamisation (Rahimullah, Larmar, and Abdalla 2013), with important implications for policymaking to counter radicalisation. As described by Heath-Kelly (2013), for instance, British research on “vulnerability indicators” for radicalisation has led to interventions in
communities that are rendered suspicious, despite the fact that only a small minority are in danger of becoming radicalised.

Similarly, Li (2010, 356) criticises GWOT-driven interventions aiming to “separate foreign Muslim fighters – typically portrayed as Arab, rootless, fanatical, and brutal – from local Muslims whose potential for moderation must be nourished whenever possible”. Li is sceptical of the identification of a section of enemy fighters as “foreign”, and sees interventions such as extraordinary rendition, “black site” prisons and Guantánamo as the result of targeting “Muslims who are outside of their home countries”. By equating the rootless and fanatical with the “foreign” Muslim, the threat of terrorism from groups such as al-Qa’ida or IS can “be used to justify any number of extraordinary measures, including human rights abuses and impunity for them” (Li 2010). Li here highlights the potential consequences of labelling and “making up” kinds of people as sources of insecurity, namely, the claim that the protection of society at large has to be prioritised over the rights of certain threatening individuals. As we will show, policymakers in Norway have raised similar arguments about Norwegian foreign fighters returning from (or preparing to join) the Syria conflict.

Methodology and analytical framework

The focus of this article is on the Norwegian debate on Syria travellers, particularly how they are described, the potential threat they represent and what measures are required to ameliorate this threat or otherwise deal with Norwegian returnees from the war in Syria. Our analysis is informed by Ian Hacking’s (1986, 228–231) theorisation of how “kinds” of people “come into being” at the same time as the “kind itself” is invented, and that “if new models of description come into being, new possibilities for action come into being in consequence”. We refer to Syria travellers as a “new” subject category because until 2011, the specific category of “people travelling to Syria to fight for the Islamic State” did not exist. We are of course aware that the category of “foreign fighters” existed, and that people also travelled to Syria before 2011. However, the combination of “foreign fighters” and “people joining IS” is, we argue, an entirely new category of people.

Hacking (2006, 10–12) describes seven “engines of discovery”, namely, counting, quantifying, creating norms, correlating, medicalising, biologising and geneticising, that drive how people are made up within the human sciences. Hacking further identifies three engines at work outside of the scientific realm which also produce knowledge that makes up people. These are normalising (as an engine of organisation and control), bureaucratising (as an engine of administration) and resistance (by those who are “made up” or others speaking on their behalf). Our focus in this article is on the most basic engines of social scientific knowledge production (namely, counting and quantifying), as well as the engines at work outside the scientific realm (normalising, and bureaucratising). As will be discussed, however, it is often difficult to distinguish between knowledge production within and outside academia, as the line between them is porous.2

Document analysis for this study was carried out on data gathered for the NATION project.3 The data comprised opinion pieces in Norwegian newspapers, minutes of parliamentary debates, interviews with bureaucrats and key policy documents. The
parliamentary debates analysed here cover discussions about how to deal with Norwegians travelling to Syria to fight for IS, and are all from the current government’s term of office (i.e. since September 2013).\textsuperscript{4} We also analyse the main policy document related to this topic, namely, the Action Plan against Radicalisation and Violent Extremism (Norwegian Ministry of Justice and Public Security 2014). In addition, we draw on a subset of the NATION media dataset,\textsuperscript{5} comprising 375 items based on various searches in the larger dataset, coded with the help of Nvivo™.

Our work on the media dataset confirms our assumption that the Syria traveller is a new kind of person in Norway. A text search with the keywords “radicalisation” or “extremism” in this dataset of opinion pieces gave the following results: 221 items in 2011, 192 items in 2012, 153 items in 2013 and 300 items in 2014. This indicates a continuous interest in radicalisation and extremism over the past years, with a significant increase in newspaper opinion pieces on these topics in 2014. However, when searching with the specific keyword “Syria traveller”, we found 10 items using this term in 2014 and none in the preceding three years. A search with the keywords “foreign fighter” yielded the following results: none in 2011 and 2013, one in 2012 and 51 in 2014. About half of the items including the term “Syria traveller” were duplicated in this search. Another search was performed to include opinion pieces that focused on persons going to Syria, but without using the terms “Syria traveller” or “foreign fighter”. The search words for this were “going to” and “Syria”, in combination with either “radicalisation” or “extremism”. This resulted in 303 newspaper articles. Based on these searches, we put together a subset comprising 375 items in total. The subset included 37 items published in 2011, 69 in 2012, 47 in 2013 and 223 in 2014. This suggests a sharp increase in references to persons travelling to Syria in newspaper opinion pieces in 2014.

**How academia “makes up” foreign fighters and Syria travellers**

The scope of this article does not allow us to go through all the different strands of literature on relevant topics such as radicalisation or foreign fighters in Syria. We will nevertheless give a brief overview of how academia makes up (in the sense of defining and operationalising) the subjects in question. Here, we treat the academic definitions as data, in the sense that they can be seen as part of the making up of the category itself.

**Defining**

An oft-cited operationalisation of the concept “foreign fighter” is that given by Thomas Hegghammer (2010, 57–58), who describes him (or her) as an agent who (1) has joined and operates within the confines of an insurgency; (2) lacks citizenship of the conflict state or kinship links to its warring factions; (3) lacks affiliation to an official military organisation and (4) is unpaid. The last criterion suggests that joining a conflict in another country is not economically motivated. This is partly countered by Desai (2014) who claims that “some groups, like the Jabhat Al-Nusra and ISIS, provide modest stipends for their members”. According to Hegghammer, however, the motivations of a foreign fighter are primarily nonmaterial, such as an idea of (expanded) nationhood, or other beliefs or ideologies. Rich and Conduit (2015) further distinguish between Sunni and Shi’a fighters, arguing that they are too different to be treated as a uniform group.
The term “radicalisation” is a broad concept, and there is an academic debate on how to define it, though it is commonly viewed as a “process of gradually subscribing to a violent ideology espousing terrorism” (Rahimullah, Larmar, and Abdalla 2013). A problem with this definition, which often spills over into counterterrorism policy, is that it builds on the assumption that there is a clear link between “extreme” attitudes and behaviour. By contrast, Tore Bjørgo and John Horgan (2009, 3–5) suggest a conceptual distinction between radicalisation and de-radicalisation on the one hand, and engagement and disengagement on the other. The latter describes changes in behaviour, for example, taking part in violent activities. Their definition is based on the belief that there is a loose connection, but no determination, between attitudinal and behavioural change.

**Counting and quantifying**

As described by Hacking (2006, 10), counting is an important engine of discovery of new categories of people. As for the Norwegian Syria traveller, after the 2011 outbreak of civil war in Syria, Norwegian authorities quickly started counting the number of people who travelled to Syria to take part in the war (see, for instance, Norwegian Police Security Service 2015). Researchers have subsequently used these figures to quantify the problem of jihadist radicalisation, particularly IS mobilisation. In addition to data from the Norwegian security service, another commonly used source of quantitative information is the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence. According to their latest estimate, as many as 20,000 people worldwide have joined Sunni militant organisations involved in the Syria/Iraq conflict, of which nearly a fifth (4000) are residents or nationals of western European countries (Neumann 2015).

There is some disagreement regarding the number of individuals from Norway who have joined the war. According to some estimates, about 60 are from Norway, comprising approximately 12 per million inhabitants (Neumann 2015). This means that relative to population size, Norway is in the medium range: neither among the most heavily affected (for example, Belgium, Denmark, and Sweden, with up to 40, 27, and 19 - per million respectively), nor among the least affected (for example, Italy, Spain, and Switzerland, with 1.5, 2, and 5 per million). The annual threat assessment by the Norwegian Police Security Service (PST) provides slightly higher figures, stating that more than 70 Norwegians have travelled to Syria to take part in the conflict (2015, 6). At least 10 of these have been killed in combat in Syria, while 20 have returned to Norway after having been involved in warlike actions in Syria. PST (7) maintains that the number of Norwegian foreign fighters in Syria is “among the highest in Europe”, considering the size of the Norwegian population. In other words, although there is not much numerical discrepancy (60 vs. more than 70), it seems that Norwegian authorities perceive the threat to be comparatively more severe in Norway than in other European countries.

**Normalisation: situating Syria travellers in space and time**

The making of Syria travellers coincides with the emergence in Syria of “the phenomenon of mujahidin foreign fighters … after non-violent protest in March 2011 turned into a full-blown civil war” (Bakker, Paulussen, and Entenmann 2013, 2). This does not
mean that no one went as a militant to Syria from Western countries before 2011. Rather, it means that the distinct meaning of a Syria traveller associated with Islamic radicalisation was non-existent in international discourse. As Hacking (2006, 11–12) points out, academic knowledge production in the form of counting and quantifying is invariably accompanied by knowledge production outside the sciences, seeking to make sense of the new “kind of person”. One engine of discovery is normalisation, which requires situating the new “being” in space and time. Normalisation can also be a way “to make unfavourable deviants as close to normal as possible” (Hacking 1986).

Many of the Norwegians who have thus far travelled to Syria have their origins in Fredrikstad, a small town in eastern Norway, where they have grown up in what media has described as a multiethnic environment (see also Higgins 2015). This type of media coverage is also an example of Hacking’s normalisation engine, since it highlights the fact that these individuals are Norwegian (just like us) and portrays “who they are” in the familiar terms of the social environment, especially close relations within the family, among circles of friends and other people in the neighbourhood. On the other hand, such cases can be seen as a variant of the “enemy within” narrative, suggesting that “evil is in our own neighbourhood, and you can never feel completely safe”.

Another way of normalising is to compare the Syria travellers with foreign fighters known from history, who fought in other wars where they were not seen as terrorists or potential threats once they returned. Historical examples are numerous, though a common point of reference is the story of the socialists, anarchists and communists who joined international brigades in the Spanish Civil War (cf. Malet 2010). Similarly, as described by one of the bureaucrats, we interviewed on the Action Plan against Radicalisation and Violent Extremism:

During the work with the Action Plan, some have pointed out that we have seen this phenomenon earlier in history as well. As in the Civil War in Spain or the Winter War in Finland, people went to support different parties of the conflict back then as well.6

It is worth noting that participation in both the Spanish Civil War and the Finnish Winter War is commonly perceived as legitimate, if not commendable. Moreover, none of these foreign fighters have been associated in any way with terrorism. When foreign fighters in Syria are compared with foreign fighters in the Spanish Civil War, we see a clear example of normalisation.

Politicians draw on historical parallels to the Syria traveller phenomenon, both in parliamentary debates and in public documents, including the Action Plan against Radicalisation and Violent Extremism. Historical comparisons can be used as a way to normalise but also to highlight “foreignness”. We see examples of both in the Norwegian debate, which we will return to later in this article.

Bureaucratisation: dealing with radicalisation

Modifying Hacking’s (2006, 12) notion of bureaucratisation for our purposes would imply investigating how the bureaucracy defines the kind of person in question (in this case, foreign fighters in the context of the Syria conflict) and analysing governmental plans to deal with this kind of person (in other words, plans to prevent individuals from becoming foreign fighters and deal with their possible return). In Norway, the key policy
document that describes these efforts is the 2014 Action Plan against Radicalisation and Violent Extremism (Norwegian Ministry of Justice and Public Security 2014), hereafter, the “Action Plan”. In this section, we analyse the Action Plan’s main arguments and definitions.

The Action Plan does not mention Syria travellers specifically, and according to our interviews with bureaucrats who took part in writing the Action Plan, this is a conscious decision, since the plan is meant to be applicable more broadly and not only to one specific category of people. Nevertheless, the bureaucrats confirmed that a major concern when writing the plan was to prevent Norwegians from travelling to Syria to become foreign fighters. For the purpose of this article, the most relevant parts of the Action Plan are those that refer specifically to foreign fighters, who are defined as “individuals who have travelled to a conflict zone abroad and participated in hostilities without being part of the regular armed forces” (9). The Action Plan expresses a fear that the experiences of such foreign fighters may increase their violent intentions and give them “a lower threshold for supporting or utilizing violence as an instrument” (2). In short, the plan describes a concern that the experiences of foreign fighters may lead them (or “make it easier for them”) to participate in planning and executing terrorist attacks in Norway. The Action Plan explicitly warns that individuals who perceive Norway as an enemy state may represent a threat to Norway and Norwegian interests.

Policymakers often use definitions proposed by researchers, and this is clearly the case with regard to Islamic or jihadist radicalisation. Similar to the previously mentioned definition by Rahimullah, Larmar, and Abdalla (2013), both the Action Plan and the security police (PST 2015) define radicalisation as a process where a person increasingly accepts the use of violence as a means to achieve political goals. The Action Plan further defines violent extremism as “activities of persons or groups who are willing to use violence to achieve their political, ideological or religious goals”, while terror is defined as the “ultimate consequence of radicalisation and violent extremism”. The plan states that preventive measures are central to safe-guarding fundamental values like democracy, human rights and security, and that “[a] fundamental aspect of a secure society is to be able to live without fear of becoming a target of hatred and violence”. The following model illustrates the causal links described in the Action Plan:

Radicalisation → Terror
Preventive measures → Democracy, human rights, and security

A radicalisation process that leads to violent extremism is characterised by the Action Plan as a cognitive development towards an “increasingly biased or one-sided perception of reality” where there is no room for alternative perspectives, and subsequently, a further development in which this perception of reality is experienced as so acute and serious that acts of violence are necessary and just.

Critics have pointed out that a model that simply implies a causal link between radicalisation and terror risks confusing non-violent radicals with “real terrorists” (Bartolucci 2010, 128). As pointed out by Kühle and Lindeklilde (2010, 25), the use of the adverb “increasingly” in the definition by Rahimullah, Larmar, and Abdalla (2013) gives the impression of a linear process. Moreover, the definition implies that radicalisation is an individual process, whereas the concept of radicalisation in its original form, as used in the 1980s and 1990s, understands it as a collective process (Kühle and Lindeklilde...
The problem with an individualised definition is that it obscures the fact that radicalisation often happens collectively in social networks or cults (Kühle and Lindekilde 2010, 96).

The Action Plan identifies two major extremist groups in Norway, both in strong opposition to each other: al-Qaida-inspired extremism, and anti-Islamic right-wing extremism. In the worst case, further polarisation among Norwegian extremists might lead to increased recruitment, radicalisation of existing groups and the emergence of new organisations on both sides. The Action Plan describes key actors in al-Qaida-inspired extremism as young individuals who have grown up in Norway. These individuals propagate hatred and violence against the West, specifically Norway and associated interests and symbols. According to the Action Plan, a violent attack by radical Islamists in Norway might contribute to mobilisation and greater coordination of Norwegian right-wing extremists. This is seen as paving the way for increased sympathy for, and association with, right-wing extremist ideology in the mainstream population.

The plan identifies three challenges that make it difficult to prevent and counter radicalisation towards violent extremism. First is the emergence of the Internet and social media as a virtual arena for radicalisation. Second, international affairs have a much greater impact on the threat of radicalisation than earlier. Third, compared to the past, there is now a greater risk of increasing polarisation among different sections of society.

When the plan was launched, Prime Minister Erna Solberg (Conservative Party) stated that “[e]veryone must take their share of responsibility for creating an inclusive society”, and pointed to the need for close follow-up to prevent radicalisation within local communities, schools, work places, and by authorities. In the parliamentary session on 14 January 2015, just after the armed attack against the headquarters of Charlie Hebdo in Paris, Prime Minister Solberg made another explicit reference to foreign fighters (Norwegian Parliament 2015). Answering a question posed by former Foreign Minister Jonas Gahr Støre (Labour Party) on the need for more stringent border controls, Solberg stated that “[w]e also have to work long-term to prevent the growth of extremism, prevent an increase in exchanges and movements of foreign fighters out of the country, while also managing to reintegrate them and limit the effects of what we have so far seen”. Interestingly, Prime Minister Solberg left unstated the details of “what we have so far seen”. On the other hand, her emphasis is clearly on the reintegration of foreign fighters when (or if) they return from Syria.

The Action Plan recommends a range of measures to combat radicalisation, such as support for dialogue arenas for young people, efforts to prevent hate speech on the Internet, training for teachers and information through schools, religious dialogue and related preventive measures against radicalisation, and research on radicalisation processes and motivational factors related to radical Islamism and foreign fighters. The stated purpose of the research is to fill a glaring knowledge gap and specifically to learn more about Norwegian foreign fighters who have travelled to Syria, to address concerns about their capacity and intention to use violence after they return to Norway. Other measures related directly to foreign fighters are to alert relevant authorities as soon as a foreign fighter returns to Norway, and to follow up on those who have already returned. Both the statements by the Prime Minister (cited above) and the Action Plan itself point to the need for sanctioning acts of violence, as well as the need for reintegration.
However, in Norway and in other countries, measures to prevent radicalisation have come under attack. In the United Kingdom, the government has since 2008 campaigned against radicalisation in schools, but as critics have pointed out, an estimated 400 British Muslims have joined IS in spite of these preventive measures (D’Souza 2015). Similarly, a wide range of de-radicalisation programmes in countries like Denmark, the Netherlands, Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, Saudi Arabia and Yemen have come under criticism for producing meagre or questionable results (D’Souza 2015, see also Rom 2013, Feldstein 2015). Against this backdrop, some countries have recently tried to limit the mobility of new recruits or block the return of foreign fighters. For instance, Malaysia has proposed to invalidate the passports of its citizens who join IS (D’Souza 2015). Australia initially banned its nationals from going to Raqqa, the location of the IS headquarters, and has since passed legislation that allows the government to revoke the Australian citizenship of dual nationals who affiliate with IS. We will discuss similar measures in the next section.

The legal sanctions narrative

As argued in Norwegian parliamentary debates, as well as newspaper opinion pieces, some view Syria travellers primarily as criminals who should be met with legal sanctions. According to such a narrative, the problematics related to Syria travellers is above all a security issue and a task for the police. Among the strongest proponents of this view is the journalist Lars Akerhaug, author of two books on Norwegian “Muslim extremists” (Akerhaug 2013, 2015). As Akerhaug states in an op-ed in the tabloid daily newspaper, Verdens Gang:

> The recruitment of young people growing up in Norway to Syria is an acute problem that cannot be solved solely by prevention. A dozen youths have acquired battle experience and contact with Islamist terror networks. This is an acute threat. Police and authorities need more tools […] There is a lack of Norwegian research on effective preventive measures. Yet the government has shown a strong belief in the efficacy of such measures, often based on anecdotal examples from work against neo-Nazis and gangs in the 1990s. […] The Minister of Justice and Public Security, Anders Anundsen [Progress Party], has largely used a single word, namely “prevention”, to answer the question about what the government should do with the rise of extremist networks in Norway. The belief that preventive action can combat radicalization of young Muslims rests on the perception that there is a simple causation as regards who and why young people are extremists. […] Today the PST [Police Security Service] stands watching while youth leave the country on their way to the battlefield. Surprisingly, unlike the previous government, this government has failed to prioritize legislative work. It’s amazing that a Conservative-Progress Party coalition government increasingly seems to use words such as “prevention” as a resting pad, while society is faced with a threat. (Akerhaug 2014)

The arguments expressed here shed strong doubts about the use of preventive and reintegrative measures, favouring instead hard security and law-and-order measures. In response to this op-ed, Vidar Karlsen Brein (Progress Party), State Secretary of Justice and Public Security, defends his party’s position:

> To criminalize exiting, which Akerhaug in reality advocates, is probably a bit difficult. Many would travel to Syria via other countries without telling anyone in advance that they intend to go to Syria to fight. Moreover, it is difficult to prove that young people travelling for
example to Turkey on the pretext of going for a vacation actually travel there to go ahead and fight in Syria. It is also strange that Akerhaug attempts to ridicule prevention against radicalization. If we succeed in the prevention work, there will be fewer people who pose a future threat to Norwegian interests. Simultaneously we will be tough against those who violate Norwegian law. Projecting prevention as “extreme paralysis” simply suggests a lack of situational awareness. As Akerhaug himself says, there is no prototype of who becomes radicalized. Therefore we need a comprehensive approach to prevention efforts involving parents, schools, municipalities, community child welfare services, and the police. If we focus less on prevention today, we will have to deal with more dangerous people tomorrow. (Karlsen 2014).

Interestingly, the State Secretary has no objections to Akerhaug’s focus on new legislation in itself, but highlights the practical difficulties in stopping radicalised people from travelling to Syria to join the war. Many parliamentarians, even those representing the right-wing populist Progress Party, have similarly tended to emphasise prevention and reintegration above legislative measures, while most have tried to avoid the “legal sanction” narrative.

In Norway, a scheme to outlaw Syria travellers by withdrawing their citizenship was tabled in mid-2014. In July 2014, a month after the Action Plan’s release, a terror alert warned of an imminent attack by foreign fighters returning from Syria. This resulted in several days of visibly heightened security, which directed considerable public attention to the threat of Syria travellers returning as terrorists. The following month, the Ministry of Children, Equality and Social Inclusion launched an evaluation of the feasibility of sanctioning foreign fighters by withdrawing their Norwegian citizenship. Professor Benedikte Moltumyr Høgberg was tasked with a preparatory study for the government, which entailed assessing the specific conditions that might lead to a foreign fighter’s loss of Norwegian citizenship, or a “legal change of citizenship”. The ministry’s press release on the “rules for loss of citizenship” referred specifically to “Norwegian citizens who travel to Syria” and also mentioned “people who wish to participate in acts of terror and warfare”. Minister Solveig Horne (Progress Party) emphasised that “no stone can be left unturned” in the search for effective measures against radicalisation and extremism. The press statement clarified that the new rules would apply to situations where a citizen “acts to strongly harm vital interests of the state or has voluntarily served in a foreign military service”. Horne further explained the value of Norwegian citizenship: “It offers all rights in Norwegian society; to withdraw [Norwegian citizenship] can thus be a very strong signal” (Norwegian Parliament 2014a).

As a part of our study, we asked several bureaucrats about the logic behind the proposal to revoke the Norwegian citizenship of Syria travellers who return to Norway. In an interview with a bureaucrat from the Ministry of Justice and Public Security, the proposed measure was explained as follows:

I believe that when you participate in a war which is led by someone other than the Norwegian state, then you defend values that we define as non-Norwegian, because they are partly a violation of our laws. And you conduct actions that are illegal. So in that respect, these are in a way nothing that we want to define as Norwegian. We do not want [those values and actions] to be a part of our society. We will sanction them, if this happens. […] we think that Norwegians agree on what is permissible and acceptable and legal here, and those [values and actions] fall outside.
Interviewer: What do you think about the possible change of law proposed now, about depriving citizenship as a result of having participated in foreign fighting?

I think it may be fair to do that because citizenship is in a way like a mutual contract; you give your loyalty to the state and the state takes responsibility for you. Whereas if you actively and consciously choose another state, then you kind of stand by that choice. Then you must opt out of Norwegian citizenship.

Interviewer: So you think this can be understood as a real measure to counter radicalization and terror? Or is it mostly about giving some signals in relation to national identity?

I think that such a provision might not have a preventive effect, in the way that people would stop going and stop becoming foreign fighters because of the provision. Because I think that when you go to that step and you are so convinced, then it would not play such a big role. Plus, you probably identify yourself so little with the country you have citizenship in, so you might not care about it. But I think that it is not done only to create a signal either, because there’s a sanction there. This is in a way to clean up in the aftermath of what happened.

This interviewee clearly emphasised the non-Norwegian identity of the foreign fighters in Syria who have travelled there from Norway. By underlining the importance of loyalty and belonging to the nation as a source of rights to citizenship, loss of citizenship is viewed as natural or given when someone shifts his or her loyalty to another state. However, the above-mentioned excerpt is a bit ambiguous as regards the purpose of revoking Norwegian citizenship, and whether there are punitive as well as preventive grounds for this measure. A similar ambivalence is seen among Norwegian politicians currently in the government, several of whom have supported the revocation of the Norwegian citizenship of returning IS fighters.

The current Norwegian government is a coalition made up of two parties: the more moderate Conservative Party and the right-wing populist Progress Party. They agree on the recent tightening of Norway’s Penal Law § 147 on acts of terrorism, but not necessarily on the Act’s suitability for preventing participation in war in a foreign country. As described by Michael Tetzschner (Conservative Party), an interpellant in the Norwegian parliament, “the actual security threat lies in the way in which the combat experience of foreign fighters in Syria may affect behaviour or provide weapons knowledge that can later be used in Norway” (Norwegian Parliament 2014b). The question raised is thus whether Penal Law § 147 is still sufficient to counteract the threat of terrorism in an adequate manner, or whether it is necessary to pass legislation that can more effectively prevent “war tourism”.

In his reply, Minister of Justice and Public Security, Anders Anundsen (Progress Party), cites the PST’s latest annual threat assessment, which concludes that the terror threat against Norway has increased. Anundsen argues that the rise of Syria travellers makes it necessary to re-examine the current legislation to find out whether it is adequate. This work should also assess possible new measures to prevent people from gaining war experience in countries that do not recognise international law. Anundsen agrees with the interpellant that joining the war in Syria potentially implies committing several crimes, such as murder, violent assault, sabotage and acts of terror, which are already illegal. The problem, as Anundsen explains, is to prove which crimes have been committed in another country. Therefore, it is of major concern “to prevent individuals from even going to these conflict areas to fight”, Anundsen maintains. On the other hand, the
minister also mentions softer preventive measures and reintegration. Here, he points to the Action Plan and the need to follow up on those returning from Syria, as well as information strategies for municipalities where the returning Syria travellers reside.

Despite considerable agreement between the interpellant and the minister on these matters, a key difference is that Tetzschner points to the problem of prohibiting individuals from going to Syria, since the law allows freedom of movement, and this is a right which is important in a free society. Anundsen agrees that this is problematic, also because some people go to Syria to do humanitarian work. He does not give a final conclusion to the issue of prohibiting individuals from going to Syria, but leaves open the question of how and whether this should be done.

The reintegration narrative

The reintegration narrative can be seen as a technique of normalisation, using Hacking’s terminology. As the term itself implies, integrative measures are given greater emphasis over legislative measures. This draws on the view that the Syria traveller phenomenon is related to difficulties in immigrants’ assimilation and acceptance in their host countries. As described by Bass (2014), “[t]he reasons for ISIS’s recruiting successes are likely as varied as the recruits themselves, including youth unemployment and globalization itself. But clearly many European recruits are pushed toward joining ISIS by their failure to be assimilated, accepted, and respected by their adoptive countries”.

While politicians (for example, Anundsen) generally draw on both narratives, we see a remarkable degree of consensus on these narratives among the politicians taking part in parliamentary debates. Most of them point to the need for both legal sanctions and integrative measures. The same is true for our interviews with bureaucrats, who all hold quite nuanced views. Nevertheless, we find that most of the bureaucrats and politicians lean somewhat more strongly towards the reintegration narrative. This basically implies that the reason some young people go to Syria is that they have experienced marginalisation, and that returned Syria travellers need to be reintegrated. In this section, we will discuss the perspectives of some of the politicians and bureaucrats that argue more in line with such a narrative. Often, the emphasis on such measures is combined with a normalisation of those who travel to Syria. They may have been affiliated with criminal gangs, but they are not necessarily religious fanatics, as articulated in the following statement by one of the bureaucrats we interviewed:

There are many different motives [for going] – everything from feeling the need to be part of a solution, that is, finding a solution, rescuing people, to more religious motives, which can be totally misunderstood […] Then there are also those who have underlined more the excitement. It is interesting too that there are many young men – practically a macho-culture. And you have a lot of access to weapons and can almost live out a video game in real life. What’s interesting is that there are many who have a history of other types of criminality […] since a young age, with youth criminality, youth gangs, established criminal gangs, and now into this field. And this can also support the argument that religion is not the most interesting aspect here; maybe there are other things, since this is like an offer, an offer of pride and belonging.

Many of the statements by politicians and bureaucrats underline the need for legislative measures, but regard integrative measures as somewhat more important. In a
parliamentary debate, for example, Jorodd Asphjell (Labour Party) starts by expressing his approval of several of the measures discussed by the current government, and highlights that the previous government, of which he was a part, started revising the laws in order to prevent people from taking part in armed struggle. However, his main concern is that legislative measures are of less use when it comes to the traumas that the returned foreign fighters may have. He appreciates that the current Minister of Justice and Public Security (Anundsen) has a strategy for providing information to municipalities when individuals return, but he would like to know if he has plans for a template for the municipalities on how to deal with these persons. As of now, it is up to the individual municipality to figure out what to do, but this is not a satisfactory solution, he claims. He argues that Denmark has developed a work plan in prevention and follow-up of Syria travellers, where there is close cooperation between the police, the municipalities and groups of parents of the young people going to Syria. This also includes the use of mentors that can serve as positive role models for young people who are on their way to becoming radicalised.

Politicians across the political spectrum share similar views. For instance, Hårek Elvenes (Conservative Party), in the parliamentary debate (2014) cited earlier, calls for reintegrating foreign fighters into Norwegian society, in the labour market, and the education system, and treating them for the psychological scars they may have after experiencing trauma. Elvenes supports the need for role models and agrees to look to the programmes implemented in Denmark, concluding that the police (PST) should not have the main responsibility for reintegration. Elvenes’ view is quite similar to that of Snorre Serigstad Valen, who belongs to a party on the opposite side of the political spectrum – the Socialist Left Party. When Valen (in the same debate) explains why young people join the battlefield in Syria, he normalises them by focusing on historical examples similar to that of the present-day Syria travellers. Valen also highlights the normality of youthful behaviour such as being rebellious and adventure-seeking. Valen further advises that people should be strongly warned against joining an extremist movement, stating that we know there are fundamentalist ideologues who are actively recruiting fighters in Norway. This is dangerous and has to be stopped. In particular, groups like the Prophet’s Ummah advocate religious dictatorship, glorify violence, and entice Norwegian youths to a terrible fate.

Valen further describes the foreign fighters as “young people who have so much to give and so much to live for, if they get a little help in choosing a different path”. In this way, he points to the more collective aspect of radicalisation processes. Valen recommends acting tough on extremists and causes of extremism, as “we do not have a single Norwegian youth to lose to the ideology of hatred”. Nevertheless, he concludes, it is important to remember the individual conditions and experiences of these youths. It is problematic to compartmentalise Syria travellers, and it is not easy to find a “one-size-fits-all solution” for how to treat people who have participated in “grave acts abroad”, he states.

In the parliamentary debates we have analysed, the reintegration narrative is quite prominent, and there is little one-sided othering of the Syria travellers. Many politicians point to the diversity of motives for going to Syria, and emphasise that returned Syria...
travellers must be judged on an individual basis. By contrast, the Norwegian print media gives ample space for critics calling for more government action, as seen in the following editorial in the newspaper *Verdens Gang*:

It is therefore essential that you try to stop the flow of young Norwegians and other Europeans who travel to join the IS. [...] The government needs to speed this up. It does not make sense that we are now sending troops to Iraq, but fail to do enough to stop the Norwegian export of foreign fighters. (Editorial in *Verdens Gang* 2014)

Describing US news coverage of terrorism, Crenshaw (2014) states that “a news cycle that habitually others the attacker and obscures the related political and social issues creates a ‘guilty of terror crimes until proven innocent’ mindset”. In Norwegian media, however, we find little evidence of the “outlaw” mode of othering, and a much greater focus on the radicalised jihadist as what could be called the “boy (or girl) next door”. Linked mainly to the reintegration narrative, this portrayal of Syria travellers is relatively common in the media. For instance, the political scientist Kamil Azhar (2013) questions the othering of Syria travellers and the related perception of “threat” in the newspaper *Klassekampen*:

The two girls who are on their way to Syria are not only two Somali girls, rather they are our girls. What if Prime Minister Erna Solberg or Child and Inclusion Minister Solveig Horne had expressed concern for the safety of the young girls and boys, instead of only presenting them as a security threat for Norway when they return home?

A balance between (re)integrative and legislative measures is often emphasised in policymaking against the recruitment of Norwegians as foreign fighters. Many are sceptical of measures intended to stop people from travelling to Syria, such as confiscation of the passports of suspects. Furthermore, all politicians are in favour of reintegrative measures, though some want the police to take charge, whereas others want the municipalities to be responsible. There is also an overall consensus on the need to use legal sanctions when it is possible to prove that individuals have taken part in warlike actions in Syria, as well as the importance of reintegrating returnees. Yet, this might not be such a surprise. When it comes to sensitive topics, especially those concerning national security, a consensus is often emphasised by politicians across the political spectrum. In such situations, politicians in the opposition parties and the parties in government often close ranks.

**Making up the Syria traveller: categories and their implications**

In September 2014, Professor Benedikte Moltumyr Høgberg took on the task of assessing the specific conditions that might lead to a foreign fighter’s loss of Norwegian citizenship. The practice of withdrawing the passports of nationals fighting with IS was then already implemented in the United Kingdom, Australia and France (Desai 2014). Several countries were also contemplating new legislation to allow the revocation of citizenship, among others Australia, Canada and Israel. In Høgberg’s (2015) report to the Norwegian government, she concluded that three conditions need to be in place to allow withdrawal of Norwegian citizenship of persons joining wars abroad: (1) the individual in question must have dual citizenship, since nobody can be left stateless
(which would constitute a breach of international conventions); (2) it must be proven in a Norwegian court that the individual has taken part in warlike actions (or similar crimes) and (3) the individual cannot have strong family ties in Norway (in line with the human rights paragraph concerning the right to family life).

Paradoxically, the proposed new citizenship legislation faces a major obstacle in the current Norwegian rules against dual citizenship. In principle, anyone who seeks Norwegian citizenship is required to renounce his or her previous citizenship. Norway is thus reluctant to accept dual citizenship, and equally disinclined to break international conventions against statelessness. It is therefore difficult to say whether Norway is actually taking a softer, more cautious approach than that of countries such as Israel, the United Kingdom or France. Nevertheless, the proposal to withdraw the Norwegian citizenship of foreign fighters has crucial implications for the debate about Norwegian nationhood and citizenship. Importantly, if the revocation of Norwegian citizenship were to be introduced as a measure against fighters in the war in Syria or elsewhere, loss of citizenship would have to be understood as an entirely new form of punishment.

As described by Hacking (1986, 228–231), whenever new “kinds” of people are invented and “new models of description come into being”, we also see the emergence of “new possibilities for action”. Our study shows that contentions about how to react to the new kind of people (the Syria travellers) are deeply intertwined with the way these people are portrayed, understood, or “made up”. Interestingly, the perception of returnees from the war in Syria as a new terror threat was not linked to any previous incident that had occurred in Norway (such as the 22 July 2011 events). Rather, it was founded on threat assessments made by the PST concerning the recruitment of Norwegians into IS, based on intelligence that was never actually disclosed to the public.

Contributors to the “making up” of Syria travellers have expressed different views about how to define and characterise the new “kind” of people, linked closely to proposals on how to deal with them. While views are complex and often ambiguous, two main narratives can be drawn from the debate, one emphasising similarities between Syria travellers and ordinary young Norwegians, and the other highlighting the exceptionality of the new kind of people, and the threat they pose to Norwegian society. Related to the way Syria travellers are understood, there is disagreement on policymaking between those who argue for sanctions against returning Syria travellers, versus those who call for more prevention and reintegration measures. At the same time, most politicians argue for both kinds of measures. As for legal sanctions, there is a debate on how stringent such measures should be, despite widespread agreement that returning fighters should be tried for participation in war or warlike actions in a Norwegian court.

Ultimately, it is difficult to see any clear differences between the “making up” or discovery (Hacking 2006, 10–12) that goes on “outside”, and that which occurs “inside” of the scientific realm. We find that the definitions and views of academics, government agencies and policymakers cut across the divides and disagreements on who the Syria travellers are, and how to respond to them. The security establishment draws extensively on the studies of academics, while terrorism researchers draw on intelligence gathered by the security establishment. In this situation, it is nearly impossible to
distinguish between “realms” of discovery, or delineate the boundaries between the “making up” activities of researchers, authorities and policymakers.

Notes

1. Jihad is here defined simply as a “struggle for the sake of Allah” (van Zuijdewijn and Bakker 2014, 1).
2. The “newness” of the Syria traveller might perhaps be regarded as different from that of Hacking’s cases, such as people diagnosed with multiple personality disorder and autism. However, we still find Hacking’s theorisation to be useful for our purposes.
3. The NATION project explores the ways in which the nation is being negotiated in contemporary Europe, revisiting long-running debates on nationalism, nation building and the nation state in view of both long-term societal changes and sudden events of particular impact.
4. The current government is a coalition between the Conservative Party (Norwegian: Høyre) and the right-wing populist Progress Party (Fremskrittspartiet), with support from two centre-right parties: The Liberal Party (Venstre) and the Christian Democrats (Kristelig Folkeparti).
5. The media data consist of opinion pieces published in Norwegian newspapers during the four-year period from 1 January 2011 to 31 December 2014. Covering a range of topics related to Norwegian identity and nationhood (immigration and integration, citizenship, multiculturalism, etc.), the dataset was compiled manually from the archives of five newspapers (three nation-wide and two regional) selected specifically to represent a cross section of political views and readerships across the country. These newspapers are Aftenposten, Klassekampen, Verdens Gang, Bergens Tidende and Nordlys.
8. Interview conducted on 11 March 2015 with advisor in the Migration Department of the Ministry of Justice and Public Security.

Acknowledgments

This study was carried out as a part of a project entitled, Negotiating the nation: Implications of ethnic and religious diversity for national identity (NATION), which explores the ways in which the nation is being negotiated in contemporary European societies, especially in Norway, France and the United Kingdom. The project revisits debates on nationalism and the nation state in view of both long-term societal changes and sudden events of particular impact. Mari Nielsen Vaage collected the data for this article. We would like to thank her and our other colleagues in the NATION project, as well as colleagues at the Department of Sociology and Human Geography, University of Oslo and at the Centre for the Study of Professions, Oslo University College of Applied Sciences, for fruitful discussions and constructive comments on earlier drafts of this article.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.
Funding

This work was supported by the Research Council of Norway, grant number 222757.

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