

# HOW DID UK CITIZENS REACT TO THE CHOICE OF THEIR COUNTRYMEN TO JOIN THE WAR IN SYRIA?

## ABOUT /

This report is a collaboration between Listen + Learn Research and ConnectJustice. In it we aim to share some new insights into the public discourse around Syria and put forward some practical recommendations

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# INTRODUCTION

The Syrian Uprising's descent into civil war started in 2011, and with numerous competing factions, currently shows no sign of abating, even in the increasingly unlikely event of the removal of Assad from office (Jenkins, 2014). The tragic conflict has resulted in the death of over 191,000 people (OHCHR/UN August 2014) and the displacement – both internal and external – of over 9 million Syrian nationals (USAid) as well as the large-scale destruction of infrastructure and housing.

During this period of time over 12,000 foreign fighters from at least 81 countries have joined the conflict, of which an estimated 3,000 are from Western countries (Barrett, 2014).

Security experts' reports and media sources consider a range of goals and motivations are being articulated by foreign fighters, from a drive to protect Syrian civilians, to the establishment of IS rule, all of which may be rooted in understandings of religion, notions of justice, and even, particularly in cases of young people, a desire for adventure and heroism.

The scale of young foreign fighters joining the conflict is reflected in the sophisticated, Western-focused communications coming from inside the conflict, including the use of social media by individual combatants. The effect has been the creation of direct and immediate reportage, leading to an enormous number of spectators around the world with eyes on Syria and fingers on keypads, sharing their views about the events.

As such the civil war in Syria is considered the most socially mediated conflict in history (Linch, et. al, 2014).

# INTRODUCTION

In the context of this social media-orientated, highly complex war, this research examined how the decision of some British citizens to join the war in Syria was discussed in the public, online debate.

It examined people's initial reactions, what they think should be done about it now, and what steps should be taken in the future.

This study offers an analysis of the personal views and positions of a community of social media users and its place in the broader context of a multicultural and multi-ethnic United Kingdom.

Our aim was to explore how the public discourse in the UK regarding British citizens joining the war in Syria represents and feeds into older narratives around immigration, multiculturalism and social cohesion, opposed to the existence of 'suspect' communities, and strong, narrow assertions relating to British identity and belonging.

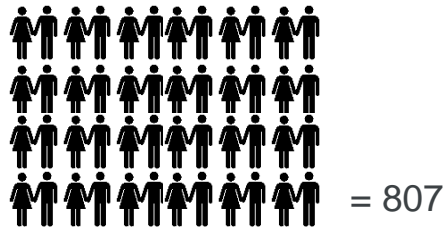
Reflecting the nature of public discourse and the online public space, we used social listening research techniques as the basis of this study. This allowed us to go beyond traditional media coverage to see how these citizens are portrayed in the online conversation.

Our approach to social listening research uses qualitative techniques to fully explore the meaning behind each comment. More detailed and sophisticated than automated text analytics, we combine discourse and thematic analysis within a grounded theory framework to fully understand and interpret what people are saying. In short, we read everything.

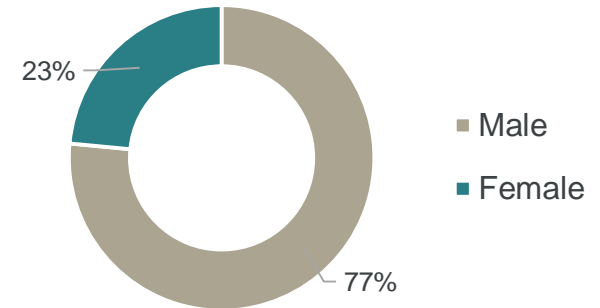
# SOURCES

The analysis in this report was based on data with the following characteristics:

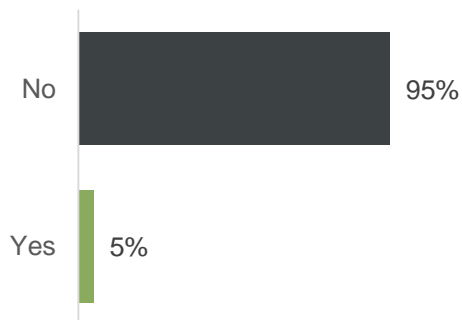
## Sample size



## Gender



## Identify themselves as a Muslim?



## Sources

All public available social media sites, screened for UK content.

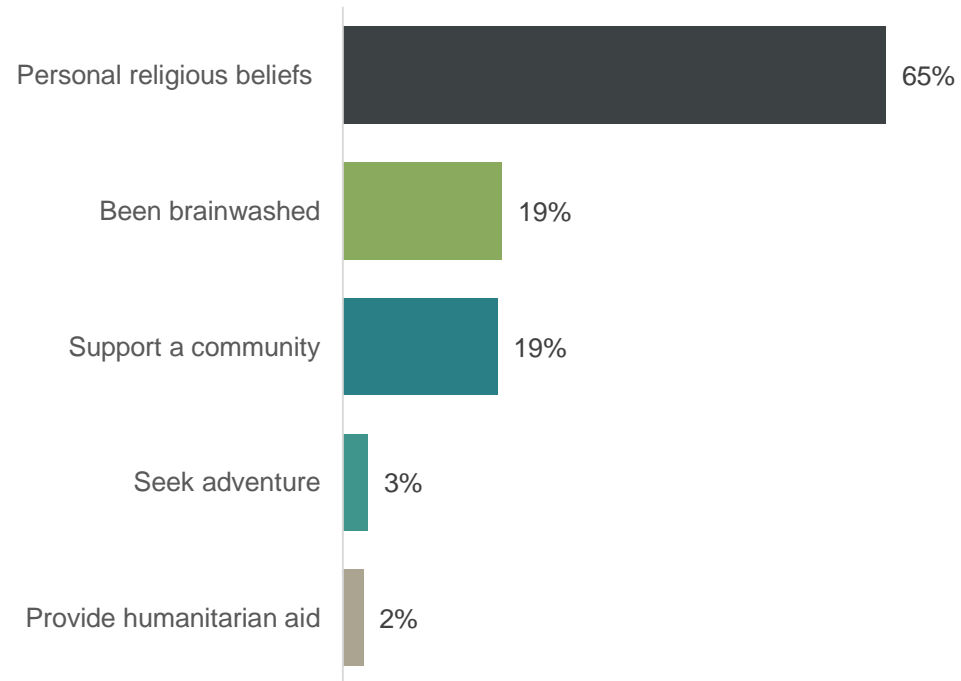
Including: Twitter, Facebooks, Forums, Blogs, News paper sites.

# INITIAL REACTIONS

# PERCEIVED MOTIVATIONS

A central part of the conversation about Syria is a discussion about what motivates those people who choose to go and participate.

We found people tended to justify or explain the motivations of those joining the war in one of five ways:



Sample: 527

# PERSONAL RELIGIOUS BELIEFS



65%

In our data most people felt that those British citizens joining the war in Syria were doing so in pursuit of their own religious beliefs, specifically in pursuit of what the commentator understands as jihad.

Commentators infer that British citizens joining the war in Syria are Muslims (often referred to as 'British Muslims') and that they are joining the war in Syria as jihadists or Jihadi fighters.

In some cases this association is very clear, with people stating plainly that the intention of those British nationals is jihad ("*Some have gone there for jihad*"); in others it is implied by the language used, when referring to British citizens going to Syria as "the jihadists" or "British jihadists".

However, the perceptions people have regarding jihad seem to be loose and unsophisticated, reflecting existing stereotypes around Muslims and Muslim communities, instead of being informed by the facts.

A handful of comments attempt to present a counter-narrative to the major cause of British citizens joining the war in Syria being religious motivations ("*Not all of those who go to fight in Syria, do so out of religious belief*"), considering that the term jihad often serves as an umbrella under which many atrocities are committed ("*It seems very convenient for some people to label any particular armed conflict as "jihad" and that then immediately legitimises any violent acts that the so-called "Jihadists" then carry out.*")

ISIS jihadis from Britain call for more recruits (from Britain). And these seasoned killers will be welcomed back into Britain when they are finished with their jihad in Syria and Iraq, then Jordan and Lebanon.

”



# BEEN BRAINWASHED



19%

The idea of a person being ‘brainwashed’ into pursuing someone else’s goals and beliefs is fairly common (19%) in the public debate.

I understand people who go to fight Jihad in Iraq. They are brainwashed into believing they are doing the right thing and that Allah will reward them for that.

”

However, the use of the word brainwash, as with the use of the word jihad, doesn’t seem to be accurate in the majority of the comments, reflecting Kathleen Taylor’s observation: “we have to call it something, and we don’t know what else to call it” (2004, p. 9).

And so the term tends to be used to frame people’s concerns in a different way, identifying the guilty party as some agent working in the shadows – raising the spectre of the enemy within.

*“Did Syria radicalize Muslims from Europe or did they head for Syria precisely because they were radical to begin with?”*

This extends the sense of responsibility and culpability beyond those directly taking part, to the people and communities they assume to represent back home. This concern can be seen in the words of one commentator: “*Each mosque in the west is a Trojan horse now*” - a direct reference to the notion of Muslims as fifth column citizens, and echoing other contemporary British public debates around Muslim infiltration of state schools.

# SUPPORTING A COMMUNITY

19%

Another group of commentators see the motivation to go as being linked to a desire to support a broader community, either national or religious.

[The] British state and media have been telling us the last few years how virtuous the Syrian opposition are and how noble their cause is. When British Muslims then go and fight alongside the opposition the media then use it as an opportunity to whip up Islamophobia and portray the Muslim community as fifth columnists. ”

- 1. Nation as community:** the perception of Syria as a nation divided by a civil war, with British Citizens justifiably joining the opposition in order to liberate the country from a dictatorship. This view is often supported, not only by democratic reasons, but also because the British political establishment itself publically considered military intervention in Syria against the current government.
- 2. Religion as community:** the perception of the Syrian conflict taking place as part of a broader sense of religious statehood or community. People here talk about the responsibility of Islamic believers, going beyond physical borders and men's laws, which is the defence and support of the Ummah (“the whole community of Muslims bound together by ties of religion”, Oxford Dictionary of English, 2013). In this sense, if this community is being attacked, it is the duty of Muslims around the world to take action in order to defend it.

However, other people express concerns with this type of loyalty: one that overcomes national borders and responsibilities, and questions Britain's national identity:

*“People who are British citizens are expected that their allegiance is to Britain. One wonders if Britain's generosity is well placed accepting people who are happy to take what Britain can offer, but their loyalties lie elsewhere”.*

# SEEKING ADVENTURE



3%

Some people believe that a number of young British citizens are joining the war in Syria motivated by a need for adventure which is associated with their age.

A number of commentators further develop this aspect of it being the age of the individuals joining the war in Syria which is at the root of their choice. These comments pointed to the following drivers to explain such actions:

It's for exactly the same reason that I joined the British Army - for kicks. I toyed with joining the Foreign Legion as an 18 year old too. They go to Syria because it's there. They weren't monks beforehand, they were low level hoodlums looking for a bit of meaning to life. These kids aren't jihadis they're just very naughty boys.

”

1. **Physiological:** people link the need for adventure with the normal development of young people's hormones (“Youthful testosterone and adrenaline”) and with feelings of dullness and boredom manifest in some young individuals, who have very few things to look forward to in life.
2. **Intellectual:** some people refer to an intellectual choice motivated by a personal system of beliefs; a personal ideology (rather than religious). This choice is often compared with the choice made by different people in the past, regarding different foreign conflicts(e.g. the Spanish civil war) and is associated with youthful idealism.
3. **Emotional:** The mass media is seen as having a very important influence when it comes to the emotional responses of young individuals regarding conflicts in general, and the civil war in Syria, in particular. Therefore, individuals who in some cases already carry personal and collective grievances (“genuine feelings of resentment”) and who have the will to fight injustice and change the world, see their cause justified and their call for action intensified.

# PROVIDE HUMANITARIAN AID

2%

A small group of people talk about those British citizens travelling to Syria with the aim of providing humanitarian aid.

On this blessed Friday, please make dua for our Brother and Sister, and their team, as they are going to be travelling to Syria on an Aid Convoy to help relieve the pain and suffering of many of those in Syria.

”

Discussions and opinions on this are fairly mixed, however.

On one side it is possible to find acute supporters to the cause of humanitarian aid in Syria. Those who portray humanitarian aiders as good:

*“They’ve made the sacrifice of leaving all their comforts here in the UK to help the people in Syria by giving aid, setting up schools and madrassas”.*

On the other hand, there are those who express concern that humanitarian aid is actually disguising other intentions, such as jihad and radicalisation, thereby enabling people to travel freely to Syria:

*“The UK needs to stop people from entering Syria! Brits entered Syria as humanitarian workers! Now they are fighting their version of jihad”.*

# APPROVAL

Across the debate about Syria, we analysed whether people approved or disapproved of the actions of their fellow citizens. The results were clear:

## Disapprove



84%

## Approve



16%

Sample: 427

# DISAPPROVAL

84%

For the large majority who disapproved, their reasons were fairly consistent:

500 'British Subjects' trot off to do some 'Jihad' in Syria. Let's remove their 'British' status before they bring their s\*\*t back here.

”

For some, this disapproval is expressed in a very blunt and sometimes violent manner:

*“All these 'British' people who have f\*\*\*\*d off to Syria to fight jihad should be shot in the face on their return”*

Others do not even recognize the individuals who make that choice as British citizens:

*“They are not British, not in the slightest. No British person would ever endorse such violence and extremism”*

It is clear though that the majority are afraid the experience in Syria will radicalize these individuals, bringing future consequences in terms of security to the UK.

# APPROVAL



16%

Why criticise young Muslims for going abroad to fight against what they perceive to be an evil regime? I can't recall there being a similar storm of verbal protest in past decades when British mercenaries went off to fight in various African conflicts

”

Those who approve tend to do so with a broader perspective on the situation, and a less emotional response to it. These viewpoints include:

Making the comparisons with the participation of British citizens in previous conflicts, which did not result in any legal consequences:

*“Hundreds fought in the Spanish Civil War without risking prosecution”*

...and the comparison between British citizens in Syria combating a dictatorship (seen as good) and British mercenaries involved in conflicts for material reasons:

*“I love how young Muslims going to Syria = terrorist threat. British teens in Israeli Defence Forces = gap year experience.”*

There is also a perception that British culture encourages people to join the army and take on arms to fight for what they believe in, which may influence people born and bred in this country to do the same.

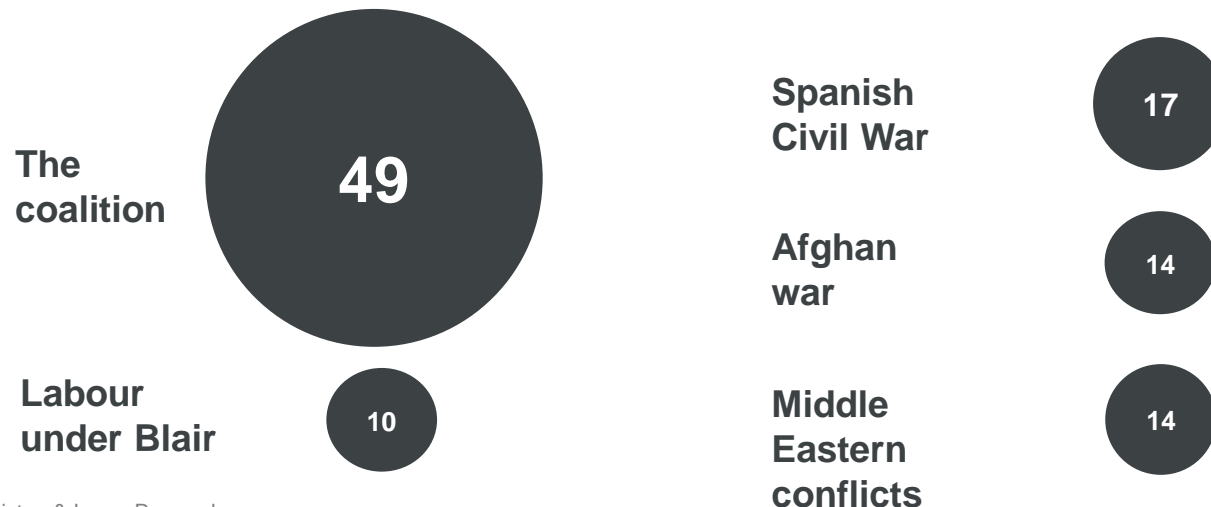
Also, they make the point that people are free to go wherever they wish, even if their actions may have adverse consequences.

# LESSONS FROM HISTORY

Most people's comments tend to be based on what is happening in the here and now, without accounting for how history can provide background and context to the present debate.

However, there is a sizable group (20%) who use historical references to contextualise and expand their opinions, such as different moments in history when British citizens joined foreign conflicts, or considered doing so. Some have also considered the impact that actions taken by certain British governments have had in the present circumstances.

When we looked at the time frame in which these references were based, they clustered around the following moments (figures show percentage of comments):





# LESSONS FROM HISTORY (CONT.)

49%

Where people make reference to the past it was most likely (49%) to be in relation to the current Liberal-Conservative coalition. Here they focus predominantly on the recent debate about possible intervention in Syria and its consequences for British society.

If you feel marginalised by your government, fighting with / as an ally of ISIS and al-Nusra to overthrow the government is the answer. This is what the Syrian/ Iraqi "revolutionaries" have been told by the US/UK government for the last three years and this is exactly what the marginalised Western Jihadists will be doing when they return to their home countries, from Syria! ”

People blame the current government for inciting people in Syria to fight against Assad, which created an influx of foreign fighters joining the war, and which might create a blow-back effect on their home countries.

To add to this, some refer to the role the UK played in supplying weapons to the conflict. Thus, criminalisation of individuals for travelling abroad is seen as hypocritical on the part of the very same government which had previously debated "helping and arming" the rebels fighting Assad.

However, some people go further and blame the government for a lack of action in the first place regarding the prevention of extremism in Britain:

*“David Cameron says: "British subjects coming back from Syria [might be] radicalised". Me thinks they've been brainwashed before they went Dave.”*

And finally, a few commentators feel betrayed by their government, which is not able to preserve Britain's national identity and which gives in to foreign powers and wills.

# LESSONS FROM HISTORY (CONT.)

## Labour under Tony Blair

10%

This part of the discussion views the decisions of the Labour Party, led by Tony Blair, to invade Iraq and its migrant policies (EU) as mistakes and is highly critical of them in terms of their consequences for British society.

Thanks Mr Blair. This is what you and your Labour cronies with your illegal war and open borders have left us with. It is irrecoverable and will result in the UK descending into a religious and ethnic ghettoed, fractured cesspit.

”

## Spanish Civil War

17%

Some draw a parallel between the current situation and that of the Spanish civil war (1936-39), where British nationals travelled abroad to fight in a similar manner.

What is the difference between going to fight for the opposition in Syria, which the UK government says it supports, and those who joined the International Brigade in Spain in the 1930s, which the government of the day opposed?

”

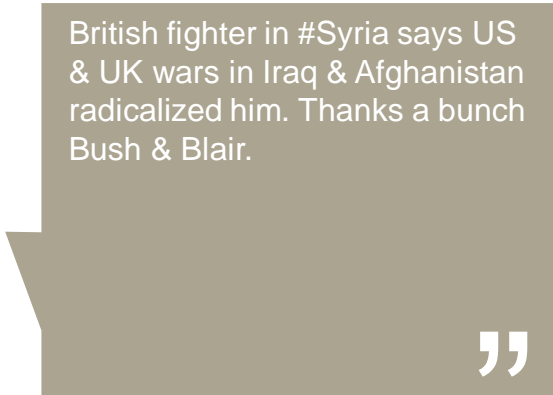
# LESSONS FROM HISTORY (CONT.)

## Afghan war



14%

These people suggest past grievances as the reason why some are going to Syria, in the sense that the conflict in Afghanistan has contributed to the frustration and radicalization of certain individuals, who then choose to join the war in Syria as a result.



British fighter in #Syria says US & UK wars in Iraq & Afghanistan radicalized him. Thanks a bunch Bush & Blair.

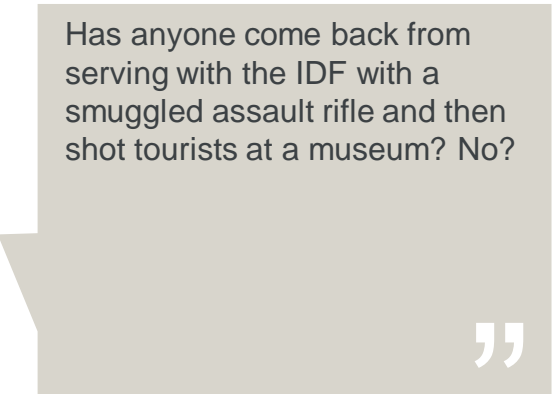
”

## Middle Eastern conflict



14%

The debate here concerns a comparison between British citizens joining the Israeli Defence League and British citizens joining the war in Syria. The majority of comments see IDF and its fighters in a much better light than the fighters in Syria.



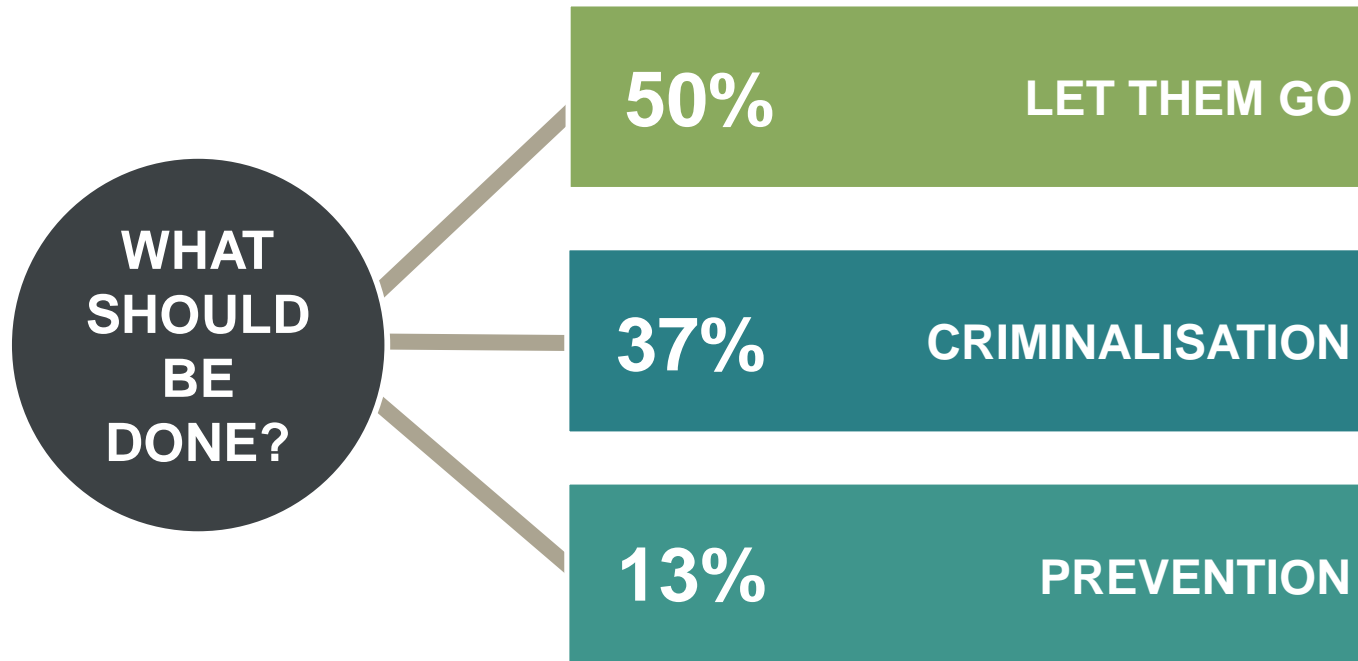
Has anyone come back from serving with the IDF with a smuggled assault rifle and then shot tourists at a museum? No?

”

**WHAT SHOULD BE DONE ABOUT IT - NOW?**

# WHAT SHOULD BE DONE NOW?

When it comes to the question of what should be done now, we found opinion and discussion split into three main areas:



# LET THEM GO

50%

Most people agree with letting them go, but within this conversation there are two different points of view:

Most people are positive or ambivalent about the departure of British citizens on the basis that they may not return (because they may die) or must be forbidden from returning. Those who are more ambivalent may not necessarily oppose British nationals fighting abroad, yet they largely still do not want to see the consequences “back home”.

However, there is also a small minority of people who actively support the right of British citizens to travel to Syria.

[Person A] I say let the Brit jihadists fight in Syria. May they all get blown up.

[Person B] If they want to fight in Syria, fine - let them go. But if they return to UK, they should face treason charges, and the penalties that go with them. ”

If they feel strongly enough, then it's up to them, we can't stop them. ”

# CRIMINALIZATION



37%

The nature of these comments is quite homogenous, with people suggesting various legislative changes, such as: banning travel to Syria; deporting British citizens; or the criminalization of their family members in the UK. The feeling is that these changes to criminal law would improve the situation and make the UK safer.

Foreign hate preachers, extremism activists and those returning from Syria who were active in that conflict, their British networks and those of influence in Britain should be arrested, detained and deported without trial or laborious ineffective and expensive human right type investigation and monitoring - their radical training and effect puts us all at risk.

”

The main ideas put forward are:

- That participation in the Syrian civil war should be made a criminal offence – with the punishment being the deportation of those involved (even if they haven't been to Syria themselves but might support the cause in question). This view is justified by the potential security threat those individuals represent.
- Interdict the immigration of Muslims to the UK and deport those who hold extremist views.
- Criminalize the families of those who go to Syria, in the sense that they are somehow responsible for their relatives' choices and actions.
- Prohibit travel to Syria altogether as a preventive measure.

# PREVENTION



13%

Commentators here are evaluating the role of the different prevention programmes being put into place in the UK, regarding British citizens joining the war in Syria.

I'm not at all supporting the idea of this so-called 'jihad' (I'm ex-British forces myself), but I can see why the overwhelming demonization of al-Assad by the British political establishment and in the media has encouraged some young and impressionable Muslims to go and fight al-Assad's regime, which is by any measure a brutal dictatorship.

”

These include such actions as joint police and community gatherings on the: 'Dangers of British Muslims travelling to Syria and how to stop it' – and the supporting Imams who oppose fighting in Syria among their congregations.

However, various people are also concerned with the fact that something went wrong on our end in terms of prevention programmes on radicalization – particularly when it came to the control of these people and the places that spread extremism.

Another view is that the position taken by the British government regarding Assad's regime and the associated support to the rebels' cause, acted as a counter-prevention programme regarding British citizens joining the war in Syria.

Finally some people reflect on the fact that, at some point, a failure in the integration of migrant generations into the British culture occurred, which in itself would have been a form of prevention.



**WHAT SHOULD BE DONE ABOUT IT - IN THE FUTURE?**

# CONCERNS

Many people are clearly concerned with what will happen upon the return of British citizens who have been fighting in Syria. These concerns seem to be based mostly on the following:

## Radicalised individuals

There are some who express concerns with the return of British citizens who have been fighting in Syria. This concern seems justified or influenced by:

- The perception that these individuals, having been exposed to violence and extreme ideologies, are more likely to become radicalized.
- The perception that the people fighting the Assad regime are particularly violent and extreme. Citing crucifixions and beheadings as examples of their behaviour.

The jihad that Muslims from the UK are waging in Iraq and Syria today will be waged on the streets of London tomorrow.

”

## Mistrust in the Government

Others do not trust the UK government to be able to protect the nation from a potential security threat posed by the return of British citizens from the war in Syria.

This is backed up by two main arguments:

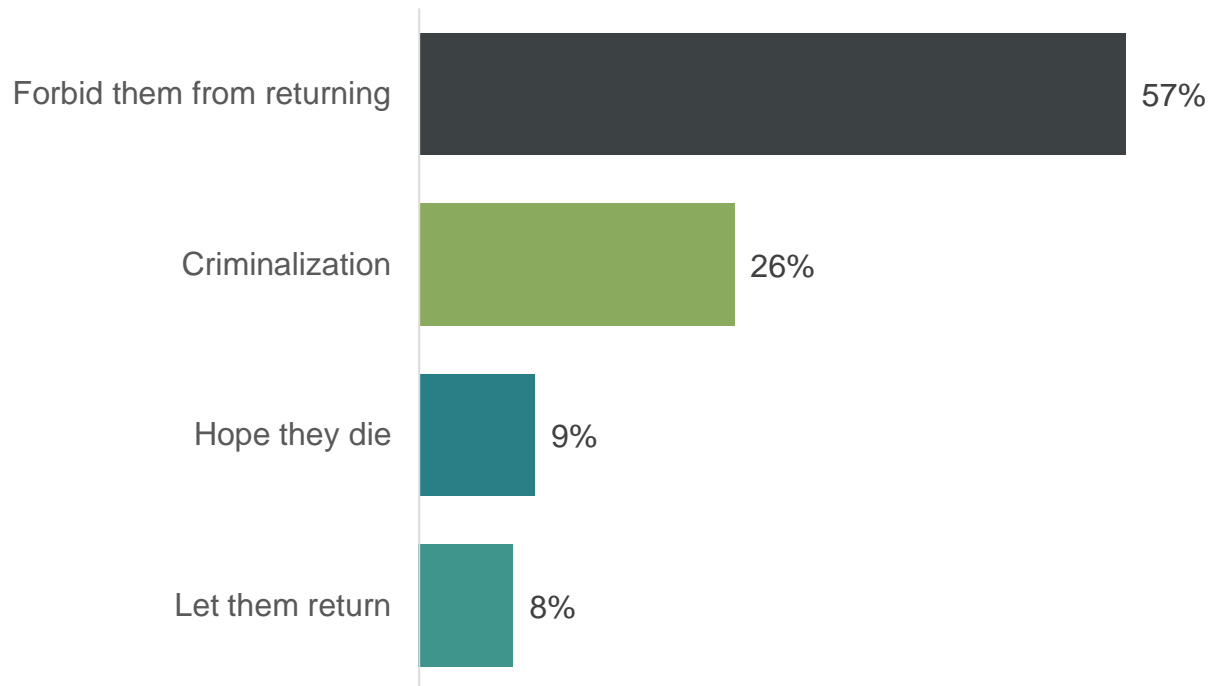
- Current security resources are not enough to monitor all the people returning from Syria.
- The British government was the first to think about providing military support to Assad's opposition in Syria and some public figures showed their support of British citizens joining the conflict.

We don't even know who lives in this country let alone who is in Syria. We have absolutely no control of our borders and the Government knows it.

”

# WHAT SHOULD BE DONE IN THE FUTURE?

We found that very few people (8%) feel that those British nationals who went to fight in Syria should be allowed to return to the UK with no consequences. The main opinions about what should happen include:



# FORBID THEIR RETURN



57%

Most people suggest that those British citizens who join the war in Syria should be forbidden from returning to the UK.

I don't understand why the government simply don't revoke their citizenship and passports? How come that jihadists who went to fight in Iraq and Syria are able to return to the UK, and not suffer consequences for their actions is beyond me. If these people return from there, they are a threat as they could radicalize even more young people, mastermind terrorist attacks etc.


”

Some develop this idea, but do not go much further from considering the security threat that people returning from fighting in Syria pose to the UK.

However, some people realize that it is not possible, or that easy, to simply forbid British citizens from returning to their home country. In this sense, they consider that the law has to be changed in order to consider British citizens joining the war in Syria as “traitors” whose “citizenship should be revoked”, because:

*“British citizens who run off to fight for ISIS, pose an immediate threat to national security and should either not be allowed to return (or if that is illegal by international law) thrown in prison for a very, very long time when they do return.”*

# CRIMINALIZATION



26%

Some people consider that those British citizens who went to Syria should be criminalized upon their return to the UK.

They need to be stopped from returning to this country! It matters not whether they were born here, they should be stripped of their British citizenship and the moment they set foot on British soil they should be arrested for treason, have their passports taken away and immediately deported. So to should their extended families, they too including anyone who supports them should be stripped of their British citizenship and thrown out of the country!

”

However, there are a range of different suggestions for the type of sentences that should be applied: from being trialled as a terrorist, to simply being arrested or deported to another country.

It is also important to highlight that a few people suggest criminalization of new things such as faith schools or religion.

A few people go even further and suggest the criminalization of particular communities as a preventive and educational measure.

We found Human Rights and Human Rights lawyers were not well thought of. People look at the former as a way of escaping a deserved punishment and at the latter as opportunists.

Civil liberties do not receive any better treatment. Many people consider that they go too far and hinder the security of the UK.

# WHAT TO DO (CONT.)

## Hope they die



9%

These comments reflect those people who are just making light of the situation, as well as those who are very angry. However, it is interesting to note that the anger is not precisely directed at the British citizens joining a war in another country, but at all British Muslims who hold any extremist beliefs which might be substantiated into acts of violence in this country.

We are warned that they will become radicalised and cause us trouble when they return home. Simple solution DON'T LET THE DEMENTED IDIOTS BACK INTO THE COUNTRY!!!!!! We don't have to send troops in. We know where they are congregating so drop a bloody bomb on them.

”

## Let them return



8%

This group sees no difference between British citizens joining the war in Syria and all those who have joined several different wars in the past and who were not criminalized for doing so. There is also an interesting discussion about the practicality of criminalizing those returning from Syria due to the lack of legislation required to enable it.

“You people are very casual with the civil liberties of other British citizens. You would be well advised to contemplate that the civil liberties you want to abridge are also your civil liberties.”

”

# IMPLICATIONS

# IMPLICATIONS

The actions of British citizens choosing to join the fight in Syria is clearly a concern for many.

Social media is playing a significant role in shaping the discussion, because it enables people on all sides to share their views, find like minds, and argue their points of view.

We looked across the range of different voices and analysed hundreds of individual comments. From this we see the following implications rising from the debate:

- The majority of public opinion (as expressed on public social media) seems deeply concerned with the idea of British citizens travelling to Syria to join the war.
- The main fear appears to be that exposure to violence and extremist ideologies will 'radicalise' those who go. This fear of radicalisation is then expressed in terms of worries about what will happen when they return.
- Most favour legislative changes that would allow the UK Government to stop these individuals from returning.
- There is a minority voice in the discussion arguing that the picture is less black and white, drawing on historical references, referring to events at home and pointing to humanitarian aid efforts.



# IMPLICATIONS (CONT.)

- Talk by those in Government, police or security directly influences and frames the conversation.
- Across the data British citizens joining the war in Syria are referred to as “British Muslims”, “British jihadists” or simply “jihadists”. This categorization seems to be influenced by the media coverage on this matter, which seems to portray the inevitability:

British + Muslim + young + men = travelling to Syria

This is clearly not the case for the vast majority, but there seems a danger that this stereotype could gain traction.

- For some, the conversation provides a scapegoat which allows them to express hatred towards foreigners, in general, and the Muslim community, in particular, which are perceived, for instance, as exploiting the welfare system.

# IMPLICATIONS (CONT.)

- We found a tendency that is not generally aired in public, multi-ethnic multicultural Britain, but which seems to be deep rooted in some people's views: the tendency to differentiate British citizens according to the origins of their ancestors. Thus, a division within British society is put forward:
  - On one side we have a strong narrative of "Britishness" – what it means to be British explicitly in terms of values and loyalties, and implicitly in terms of religion and ethnicity – something that is seen to be 'under attack' (see also Hickman, et. al, 2011).
  - On the other side we have the enemy within: the attacker – British passport holders who are not regarded as British citizens in the deepest sense, because their loyalty lies elsewhere (e.g. with the Ummah).
- There is a sense that because this is now a legitimate concern, it can be used to justify racial intolerance.
- There is a danger that some of this lazy thinking (British Muslim = jihadist) fuels resentment within the Muslim community in the UK.

● CONNECT ●  
**justice**  
justice in conflict

# ABOUT CONNECTJUSTICE

ConnectJustice is a social enterprise that creates and supports collaboration within and between communities, practitioners, academics and state actors to develop grassroots-led solutions to social conflict and injustice. We focus on the most conflict-generating issues, including violent extremism and the counter-terrorism response, child sexual exploitation, and gangs.

Strategically, ConnectJustice carries out in-depth research to create and share knowledge, and inform policy. This knowledge underpins our operational work with evidence, through which we develop and test practice-focused community projects that connect, facilitate and train people to tackle social problems in innovative and community-friendly ways.

Our collaboration with Listen + Learn Research connects to several areas of interest around the rise of foreign fighters from Britain to Syria and Iraq.

# IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL COHESION

Currently, the state response is centred upon increasing legislation and enforcement. At ConnectJustice we are conscious of the need for longer-term, sustainable approaches that acknowledge the variety of challenges which foreign fighters present: increasing resilience to the factors driving people – especially young people – to fight and preventing them from joining extremist organisations in Syria and Iraq; developing intervention and rehabilitation for returnees; and, as Listen + Learn’s findings demonstrate within this report, understand and act to reduce the impact of foreign fighting and the surrounding public discourse on social cohesion.

The impact on social cohesion has been overlooked in much analysis – not only in terms of hardened attitudes to minorities and immigration in a context of economic cuts, but in hate-crime, threatened social unrest (see for example Harris & Mason 2014<sup>1</sup>), and further recruitment to violent extremism, including the far right.

From a research perspective, very little evidence has been gathered to understand this connection between public perception and cohesion, nor to better understand the motivations and experiences of foreign fighters and returnees from their own perspectives, the danger they may or may not present to the British public and themselves. Furthermore, we are currently lacking a nuanced understanding of the different groups our citizens may be joining, whether IS, Nusra Front, or moderate groups and the Kurdish battalions to which British citizens are also drawn, including those of Christian heritage.

1. Harris & Mason 2014. Is Saving Newcastle Mission Impossible? Funding crisis leaves Newcastle facing ‘impossible cuts’ and social unrest The Guardian, Monday 24 November 2014 <http://www.theguardian.com/news/2014/nov/24/-sp-is-saving-newcastle-mission-impossible>

# OUR PERSPECTIVE

For ConnectJustice, the research findings within this report connect directly to current policy and academic interest in online activity and its connection to real life, off-line<sup>2</sup>. In particular, the question of whether extremist and prejudiced discourse reflects or even predicts real-life hotspots and flare ups in community tensions and hate crime opens up great potential in preventative approaches to violence.

While the connection is difficult to measure without more extensive, longitudinal methodologies, it is clear from wider research that far right and Al-Qaeda related activity and recruitment are very real and increasing online, with each discourse feeding the other. The murder of Drummer Lee Rigby in Woolwich and the subsequent rise in hate crime, is a pertinent and tragic example.

In the UK and internationally for example, the far right is using examples of Muslim extremism such as ISIS activity as justification for more general anti-Muslim and anti-minority narratives, fuelling recruitment and a sense of 'war', online and potentially on our streets. Furthermore, narratives utilised by the far-right confirm andacerbate the sense of not belonging and hostility that extremist Muslim discourses use as recruitment points, especially to those vulnerable to and having had experience of racism and anti-Muslim hatred.

2. See for example, STFC-funded conference 'Community Tensions: Evidence-Based Approaches to Understanding the Interplay between Hate Crimes and Reciprocal Radicalisation', held at RUSI on 26 April 2013: <https://www.rusi.org/publications/occasionalpapers/ref:O53E4E5CCD0D85>

# OUR PERSPECTIVE (CONT.)

But, as this research illustrates, it is not always the extremes that reveal the most information. While the monitoring of extremist chatter has specific outcomes, it may be argued that samples from the general public are a far more accurate reflection of mood – a barometer of wider social attitudes and tensions. The findings here for example, highlight a lack of informed debate or nuance amongst online participants interested in the subject, and trends that point to the issue of British foreign fighters:

- are polarizing opinion,
- fuelling further divisive narratives,
- building upon established prejudicial narratives,
- and increasing community tensions.

The danger of increasing levels of radicalization within such a context is clear.

ConnectJustice therefore suggests a multi-tiered approach that takes into account the complex problem of British foreign fighting in Iraq and Syria, and its impact at home, including:

1. the wider impact on cohesion;
2. related recruitment to violent extremism;
3. preventive measures in relation to the symbiosis of IS and Far Right recruitment;
4. and intervention and rehabilitation of returnees.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on this analysis, we would recommend proactive collaboration between community activists, practitioners, researchers and funding bodies to develop a series of research and practice-based responses in the following areas, gathering ideas and evidence, prototyping and piloting to create a series of complementary projects, in three areas:

- Cohesion
- Prevention
- Intervention



# RECOMMENDATIONS

## Cohesion

### Research

- Social listening to gather longitudinal sampling of public online interactions to analyse spikes in hostility and pinpoint changes in public attitudes.
- Mixed method offline research at the grassroots to complement online research and assess connections.

### Practice

- More proactive approaches to assessing and tackling divisive politics as a preventative measure against violence and to promote community cohesion, including inter-community events, and facilitation of discussion between activists to develop grassroots-led initiative.
- Proactive engagement with key media figures to promote more nuanced reportage, including ongoing connection with community activists and young people whose influence is key, and who often bear the brunt of social conflict.
- Developing social and traditional media initiatives to promote a more informed public discourse.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## Prevention

### Research

- In-depth, qualitative research and social listening to better understand the motivations and experiences of foreign fighters and, crucially, returnees from their own perspectives.
- Development of more robust and transparent techniques to assess the danger that returnees may or may not present to the British public and themselves .
- Understanding the impact of returnees from different groups including IS, Nusra Front, or moderate groups including the Kurdish battalions to which British citizens are also drawn, including those of Christian heritage.

### Practice

- Utilising the experience and credibility of ‘formers’ – recent or historical, whose stories can present the realities of violence, and whose current forms of activism, where appropriate, demonstrate alternative actions to political violence.
- Broader community and state engagement to increase trust and confidence, particularly between communities and the police, whose partnership is crucial in prevention and intervention

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## Prevention

### Research

- Independent scoping and assessment of current intervention work with returnees including those that are state, community and third-sector led.

### Practice

- Use of current research to inform intervention development, including flexible and tailored approaches that take into account the journeys of each individual, for example if families may be able to help – or not – and further use of ‘formers’ and other credible figures to facilitate disengagement from violence.

These are first-stage suggestions based upon analysis of current research and practice. Listen + Learn and ConnectJustice therefore invite further discussion and partnership, understanding that increasing knowledge and evidence through these means will require strategic, longer-term funding and a commitment to engage with grassroots groups who understand the context, with a view to developing practical, innovative solutions.

# PROJECT CONTACTS



## GET IN TOUCH

Raquel Silva / Manager, Research Projects

Somerset House, T135 & T136, New Wing, Strand, London WC2R 1LA

e: [raquelsilva@listenandlearnresearch.com](mailto:raquelsilva@listenandlearnresearch.com)

w: [listenandlearnresearch.com](http://listenandlearnresearch.com)

@LALResearch



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# GET IN TOUCH

**Dr. Laura Zahra McDonald**

e: [l.z.mcdonald@connectjustice.org](mailto:l.z.mcdonald@connectjustice.org)

**Zubeda Limbada**

e: [z.limbada@connectjustice.org](mailto:z.limbada@connectjustice.org)

[www.connectjustice.org](http://www.connectjustice.org)