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Leeuwen, L. van; Weggemans, D.J.

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## Research Notes

# Characteristics of Jihadist Terrorist Leaders: A Quantitative Approach

by Lennart van Leeuwen and Daan Weggemans

### Abstract

*In June 2018 Mullah Fazlullah, the leader of the Taliban in Pakistan, was killed in a drone strike. This attack can be seen as part of a decapitation strategy, which is frequently used by states. Often being perceived as a symbol of their organisation, jihadist terrorist leaders take important positions in their groups and beyond. It is therefore not surprising that counter-terrorism strategies often target the leadership of terrorist organisations. However, open source data provide only limited information on these leaders and what sets them apart from other members of their organisation. This Research Note brings together the fragmented information on 66 jihadist terrorist leaders in a new dataset, suggesting the existence of a set of common characteristics of jihadist terrorist leaders. Furthermore, when comparing leaders and followers, this study argues that, on the one hand they differ from them when it comes to religious background and criminal records. On the other hand, they are quite similar when it comes to characteristics such as education and socio-economic backgrounds. The most important finding, however, is that leaders tend to have substantial battlefield experience. Many of them have fought in Afghanistan. This suggests that Syria may become (or perhaps already has become) the breeding ground for a new generation of jihadist terrorist leaders.*

**Keywords:** terrorism, leaders, jihadism, profile

### Introduction

In today's culture, much of the general public seems to be fascinated by accounts on hunting terrorist leaders. The wide variety of books and films on the search for, and elimination of, Osama bin Laden is illustrative of this phenomenon. This case and other cases of targeted killings and organisational decapitation do, however, not only capture the attention of the average citizen, it also illustrates the emphasis of this *modus operandi* within counter-terrorism strategies [1]. Despite a substantial scholarly debate on the effectiveness of decapitation [2], it is frequently assumed that the live or death of a terrorist leader has a significant effect on the longevity of a terrorist organisation. This, then, leads to an assumption that there is plenty of knowledge on what sets these leaders apart: what characterises them and to what extent do they differ from other terrorists? This assumption is false, however.

Weinberg and Eubank have noted decades ago that information on terrorist leaders is "sparse" and "fragmented". [3] More recently, Hofmann has also held that basic knowledge on terrorist leaders is often still lacking. [4] Most evidence on terrorist leadership characteristics still remains anecdotal. On the other hand, many studies have been performed on the characteristics of (jihadist) terrorists in general. [5] However, even with the quantitative analyses of, for example, Sageman and Bakker [6], no single common profile of a (jihadist) terrorist could be established. Nevertheless, these studies have provided considerable insights in some of the basic characteristics of (jihadist) terrorists.

It is the aim of this Research Note to follow in the footsteps of previous research on jihadist terrorists and to improve our knowledge of the characteristics of jihadist terrorist leaders. Closing this knowledge gap will allow a preliminary analysis of the similarities and differences between the characteristics of jihadist rank-and-file terrorists and their leaders. Inspired by the work of Bakker [7] (and therefore indirectly by Sageman [8]), a small database was built with data concerning the characteristics of 66 jihadist terrorist leaders active in the

years 2001-2017. Bringing together fragmented pieces of information can provide new insights, which might lead to a partial rethinking of the wisdom of some counter-terrorism strategies.

### ***Researching Terrorist Leaders***

Following the call of Weinberg, Eubank and Hofmann to advance our basic understanding of (jihadist) terrorist leaders, this Research Note firstly aims to gather open source data on the individuals in this population by establishing an initial dataset on the characteristics of jihadist terrorist leaders. [9] This provides opportunities to learn more about them and what sets them apart from jihadist terrorists in general.

In order to provide a first quantitative comparison between the two populations, many variables mirrored those from the studies of Bakker and Sageman [10]. Some other variables have been added. The variables are ordered in the three categories. The social background category is similar to Bakker's, with regard to the variables. The second category - career in jihadist terrorist organisations - is largely overlapping with his operationalisation but includes some additional elements. While age and place of recruitment are variables Bakker also used, the prior memberships in other jihadist terrorist organisations has been added here. This last variable may help in understanding the career path of jihadist terrorist leaders. Lastly, this study looks into the battlefield experiences of the leaders: did the leaders participate in wars and if so, where? This was not in the scope of Bakker's research, but may provide important insights in the development of jihadist terrorist careers.

For identifying leaders, the Consolidated United Nations Security Council Sanctions List has been used as a starting point. [11] The heads of the jihadist terrorist organisations and their predecessors are included in the sample. This has resulted in a dataset of 66 jihadist terrorist leaders who were active as leaders between 2001-2017. These leaders are spread across 38 organisations with 18 of them still active as of October 2017, while 32 are dead [12] 7 others are incarcerated, 4 are inactive (e.g. in hiding without operational capabilities or de-radicalised or disengaged). In one case no evidence could be found regarding his current status, while four others are categorised as cases with contradictory information on their status. Here sources are not agreeing as to whether a particular leader is active, arrested, deceased or inactive. The Appendix lists all individuals included.

As mentioned earlier, the data were gathered from open sources. Data on the leaders were found in (auto-) biographies, (inter-) governmental reports, newspapers, scholarly articles, think-tank reports, webpages such as the 'Mapping Militant Organizations' section of Stanford University and the Counter Extremism Project, as well as from speeches of, and interviews with, terrorist leaders. Furthermore, less than half a dozen of online forums are used as sources (since they can provide translations of Arabic texts which are published by the media outlets of jihadist terrorist organisations) [13]. While most of these sources can be considered to provide reliable factual information, online forums and news articles are more problematical. Their partisan interest may outpace their desire to provide correct information. As a result, during this study, multiple sources have been used to crosscheck information.

The resulting dataset has been used in two ways. First, descriptive analyses have been used to draw a picture of the characteristics of the jihadist terrorist leaders. Second, these results were used to form the basis for the comparison with the characteristics of jihadist terrorists in general.

### ***Characteristics of Jihadist Terrorist Leaders***

The dataset resulting from the above-mentioned approach has provided the following insights on the social background of jihadist terrorist leaders, their careers in terrorist organisations, and their battlefield experiences

#### ***Social Background***

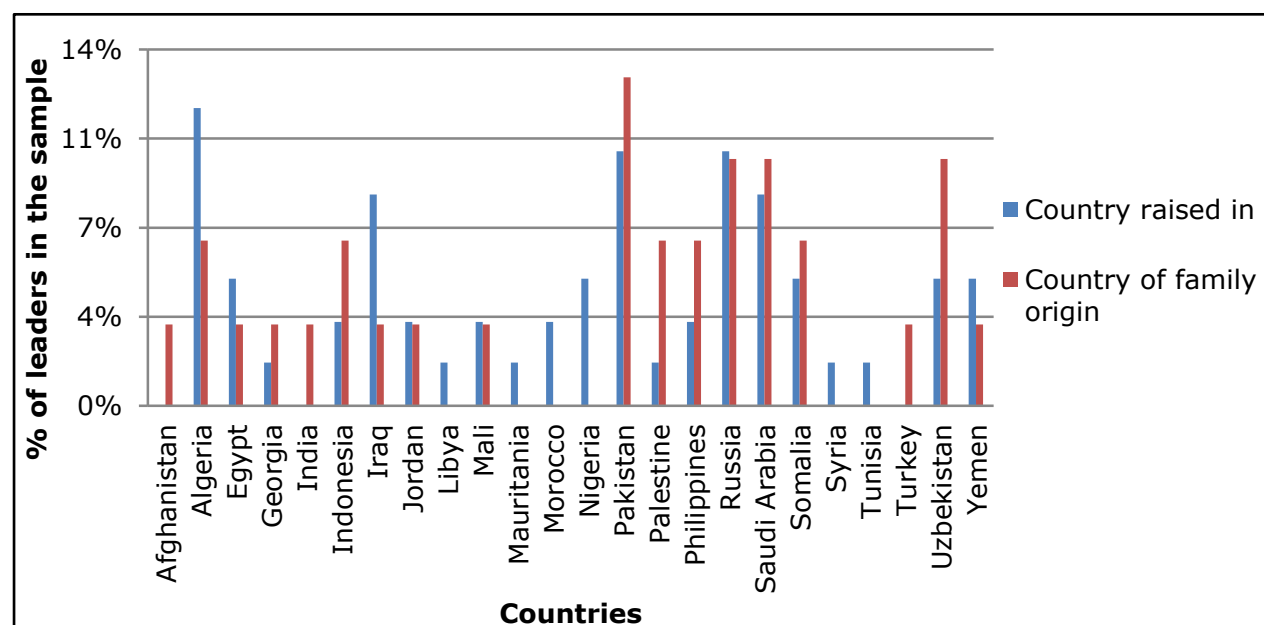
The first category of variables in this study concerns the social background of the leaders. This is detailed in

terms of geography, socio-economic background, education and faith, occupation, and criminal record.

### Geography

The leaders in the sample are from quite different countries of origin. While most leaders were raised in Algeria (n=7), followed by Pakistan and Russia (n=6 each), no fewer than 21 different countries are identified in this category. Furthermore, looking at the family origin of the leaders, 18 different countries are found, of which Pakistan has the highest leader-count (n=4). As can be seen in Figure 1, most of the countries have a predominantly Muslim population.

**Figure 1: Geographical Background of Jihadist Terrorist Leaders**



In addition, when comparing the countries in which leaders were raised and their current/last countries of residence, it becomes clear that these are the same in 58,1% of the valid cases. 41,9% are currently living in a different country than they were raised in or have died in a different country. This shows that while many leaders emigrate at some point in their lives, most stayed in their country of origin.

Moreover, of those leaders who fought in wars or other violent conflicts (more information on this can be found later in this section) and of which the country of where they were raised is known (n=34), 24 (36,4% of total sample) fought abroad and 11 (16,7% of total sample) fought in their home country. Furthermore, of the 19 cases on which information on both the country where they had been raised and the country of military/terrorist training has been found, 16 (84,2%) have had training abroad and 4 (21,1%) received training in their home country. These findings demonstrate that leaders of jihadist terrorist organisations are often not limited to their home country and tend to gain experiences abroad.

### Socio-economic Background

Looking at the socio-economic background of the leaders, the data suggests that leaders are predominantly from the middle classes of society (66,7%). The lower and upper class are equally represented in the sample (16,7%). This finding contradicts some of the literature on terrorist leaders. According to both Leiken and Sendagorta, leaders are recruited from the upper classes, while our data show that this not always the case. [14] However, some caution in the generalising this statement is in order, since the number of cases on which data on the socio-economic status was available is relatively low (n=18).

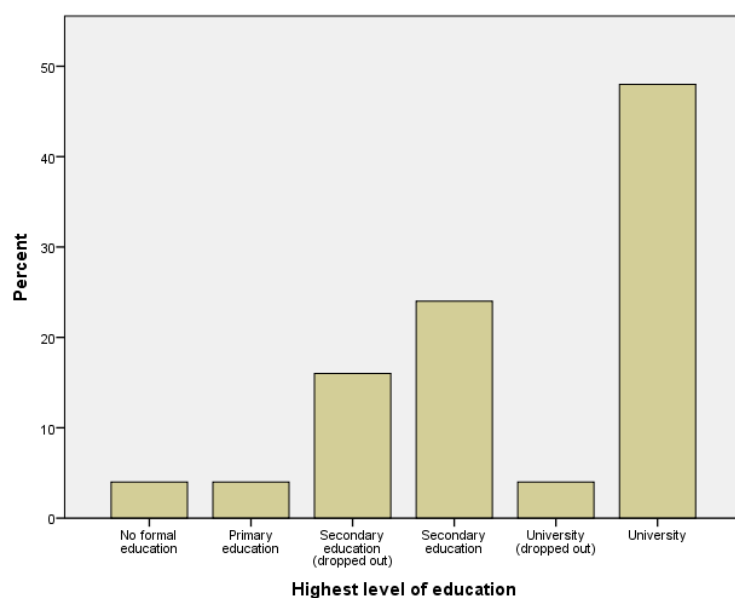
### Education and Religion

It is often stated that many terrorists are relatively highly educated [15]. The new data on jihadist terrorist leaders subscribes to this position (see Figure 2). 52% (n=13) attended university and of those, 12 graduated and one did not. On the opposite side of the level of education scale, having received no formal education, is

Baitullah Mehsud. He is the founder of the umbrella organisation Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan. Moreover, six leaders ended their education after secondary school. Interestingly, 25% (n=5) have ended their education prematurely (i.e. without graduating). Moreover, 48% have graduated from university, while 25% did not graduate from secondary school. Although a wide variety of levels of education could be found among the leaders, most leaders are highly educated.

Further looking into the childhood years of the leaders, it becomes clear that most of them had a religious upbringing, at least to some extent. Of the 20 valid cases, only three had no particular religious background. Furthermore, there is one leader who converted from Christianity to Islam: Tarkan Tayumurazovich Batirashvili (a.k.a. Omar Shishani). Moreover, of the leaders who received an Islamic upbringing, a wide variety of doctrines can be seen (ranging from Deobandism to Salafism and from Wahhabism to Sufism). Interestingly, Sheikh Abu Hashim Muhammad bin Abdul Rahman al Ibr (the arrested leader of Ansar al-Islam) changed from ShiaI to Sunni Islam. This may also be considered as a case of conversion. Thus, while only represented to a minor extent (n=5), converts who becoming jihadist terrorist leaders are a reality.

**Figure 2: Levels of Education among Jihadist Terrorist Leaders**



### *Occupation*

With regard to the professional backgrounds of the jihadist terrorist leaders, it is hard to paint a general picture. Of the 66 cases in total, 28 cases were available for analysis, since these are the cases data were found on the occupational situation prior to or in between membership of jihadist terrorist organisations. The extracted data were, on the one hand, very diverse; professions ranged from low to high on the societal ladder (i.e. from employee of municipal maintenance services to medical surgeon). However, of all occupations found, professions in which the leader takes a teaching role are more common than the other listed in our sample. In eight cases (25,0%) jihadist terrorist leaders had held a teaching position. Furthermore, almost a third (32,1%) have held no jobs. Although one explanation for this might be the young age at which these subjects joined their first jihadist terrorist organisation (usually in their early twenties), no further statistical evidence has been found for this in our sample.

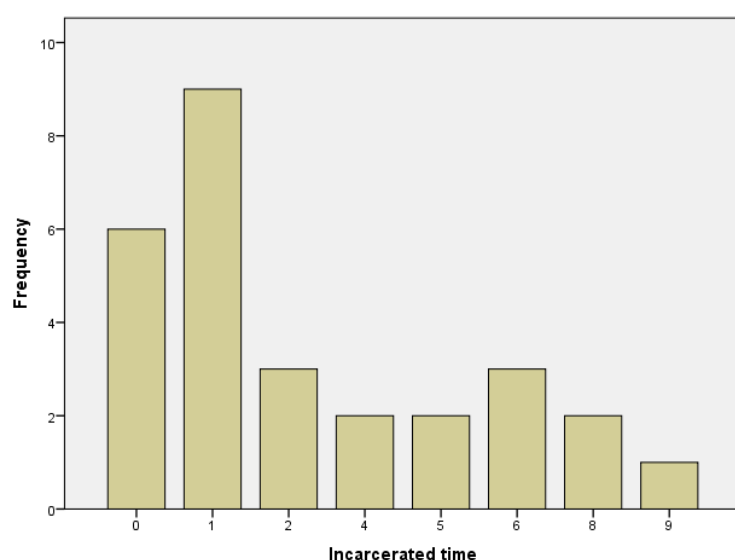
### *Criminal Backgrounds*

Concerning the criminal backgrounds of the jihadist terrorist leaders, the majority (22 of the 28 valid cases) had been incarcerated in their past. The average time in prison (including those who had not been incarcerated) is 2.71 years, but most (n=9) have spent a total of one year behind bars. 8 leaders were incarcerated for 5 years or longer. Overall, leaders tend to have been incarcerated for a period of time in their past. Of only 6 (9,1% of the total sample) it could be determined that they had spent no time in prison. Figure 3 displays the incarceration

of the jihadist terrorist leaders.

Most leaders who have been found guilty in court (n=28) [16] have faced terrorist activity charges or were accused of membership in a terrorist organisation (n=22). Furthermore, there are two counts of kidnapping, four counts of illegal weapon possession, three charges of murder or murder threats, three cases of robbery and petty theft. One future leader had been tried and found guilty of participating in a student protest, while there was one account of undermining the ruling government by promoting the establishment of an Islamic state. While the charges were very diverse, most leaders had been incarcerated or sentenced due to their terrorist activities.

**Figure 3: Incarceration Length of Jihadist Terrorists Leaders**



### ***Career in Jihadist Terrorist Organisations***

The second category investigated was 'career in jihadist terrorist organisations'. This category encompasses the ages of joining the first jihadist terrorist organisation, recruitment (i.e. location of recruitment and social affiliation), age of entering their current or previous organisation, and the number of jihadist terrorist organisations the leader had been part of.

When joining their first jihadist terrorist organisation, leaders were, on average, 28 years of age. Moreover, 50% of them entered the jihadist scene under the age of 26 and most of them were 21 or 22 years old. However, the youngest age identified was 15 and the eldest was 61.

Related to the age of joining their first jihadist terrorist organisation is the recruitment context. Two variables were examined: the location of recruitment and the effect of relatives, friends and other close acquaintances on the joining of such organisations (i.e. social affiliation). Unfortunately, too little relevant data were found on the latter. On the location of recruitment it can be said that Afghanistan often stood out. Of the 43 valid cases, 13 can be directly linked to Afghanistan in their recruitment. The Soviet invasion and occupation of Afghanistan in the years since 1979, led many Muslims to Afghanistan to fight. This study does not equate joining the resistance movement in Afghanistan with membership in a terrorist organisation, but the location has been vital in the start of jihadist terrorist careers of these 13 leaders. Other places of recruitment have been as diverse as the other countries listed above.

Comparing the ages at which the future leaders joined their first jihadist terrorist organisation with the age at which they entered their current or last (in cases of being incarcerated or deceased) organisation, the ages in the latter variable are generally higher, as one might expect. With the valid number of cases being 45, the average age is 36. While most leaders were 29 or 33 when they entered their current organisation (n=5 for



both), 50% of all leaders were 33 or older. Abu Bakar Ba'asyir is an outlier with his age. Being the eldest case in the sample with a birth date in 1938, he also exemplifies the phenomenon that leaders often tend to break away from their first jihadist terrorist organization.

Of the 42 cases data could be found, 39 have been a member of at least one other jihadist terrorist organisation than their current/last organisation. Nevertheless, the higher the number of other memberships, the less common it becomes (see Table 1). Most leaders have been part of one other organisation (n=23, which is 34.8% of the total sample) while only one leader (Ahmed el Tilemsi) was part of four other jihadist terrorist organisations (also the maximum number of other organisations in this sample).

**Table 1: Interorganisational Mobility of Jihadist Terrorist Leaders**

	Memberships of other jihadist terrorist organisations	Count	Percentage of total sample	Percentage of total valid cases
	0	3	4.5%	7.1%
	1	23	34.8%	54.8%
	2	13	19.7%	31.0%
	3	2	3.0%	4.8%
	4	1	1.5%	2.4%
<b>Valid total</b>		42	63.6%	100%
<b>Total</b>		66	100%	

### ***Battlefield Experience***

The last category explored was battlefield experience. This section will look into the extent to which the leaders had been actively participating in wars or other violent conflicts, and the locations of these battlefield experiences.

Leaders who participated in wars or other violent conflicts are very well represented in the sample. Of the 38 valid cases, 35 score positively on this variable. It is not only a relatively high number within the valid cases, also within the total sample it is a substantial amount. With 28 accounts of missing data, it can be stated that at least 53% of the total sample has had frontline battle experiences - at least to some extent. While some have participated in many conflicts, others have only had battlefield experience in one conflict. Nevertheless, 35 leaders have fought at the forefront on the battlefield. Jihadist leaders are predominantly veterans of war.

The locations of the wars and violent conflicts the leaders participated in are on the one hand diverse, but, on the other hand, a pattern can be discerned. There are fourteen locations in which the leaders in our sample have gained fighting experience. These stretch from Algeria to Indonesia but are predominantly Muslim countries. Two main hot spots emerged. First, conflicts in the Caucasus have attracted and shaped 8 leaders. Second, Afghanistan has had a strong appeal, 21 out of the 66 leaders in total (31,8%) have fought in the Afghan war against the Soviet Union and/or later against the United States and its allies. A substantial number of the leaders have had links to Afghanistan.

### ***Comparing Leaders and Followers***

In this section, a preliminary comparison will be made between (mostly) Bakker's findings on the characteristics of jihadist terrorists and our findings on jihadist leaders.

#### ***Geographical Background***

With regard to jihadist terrorists in Europe, Bakker and Leiken argued that there are two types of terrorists

in terms of their geographical origins. [17] On the one hand, there are the first generation of immigrants who were raised in a non-Western country and, on the other hand, there are the 'insiders' who were raised in Europe but have a non-Western family origin. The connotation of insiders and outsiders is less applicable to the jihadist terrorist leaders across the globe. While Bakker argues that most jihadist terrorists in Europe are raised there and have different family backgrounds, the leaders in this dataset have predominantly been raised in the country they are residing in.

Nevertheless, the locations of family background do seem to be related. As Jenkins also argued, family origins of the jihadist terrorists in the United States often lay in North Africa, the Middle-East, South Asia and the Balkan region. [18] Unsurprisingly, the jihadist terrorist leaders also come from these regions. The related countries often display strict Islamic doctrines and it is therefore no wonder that these states are linked to jihadist terrorist organisations with their extremist views regarding the teachings of Islam.

#### *Socio-economic Background*

Several scholars have found that the (jihadist) terrorist comes from the lower or middle classes of society. [19] Nevertheless, Bakker has also found cases of jihadist terrorists in the upper classes in Western Europe. [20] While Leiken argues that the leaders are recruited in the highest societal regions and the common members of the terrorist group in the lower classes [21], this is not reflected in the analysis of our dataset. The present comparison between followers and leaders leads us to conclude that there is no great difference between the two groups when it comes to socio-economic status. We found that only a few leaders are from the lower or upper classes of society. Just like among other members of jihadist terrorist organisations, the middle class is very well represented. The differences are therefore not substantial.

#### *Education*

Nesser, Bakker, Hudson, and Jenkins have all argued that followers of terrorist organisations are often highly educated. [22] Leiken, on the other hand, has argued that this is mostly true for the leaders. [23] The present investigation has indeed found that leaders tend to be highly educated. Over 48% of them have received a university-level education. However, in contrast to what Leiken argues, this, according to the other four authors mentioned, is not only a characteristic of leaders. Furthermore, in both populations cases of 'drop-outs' (i.e. those who did not finish the education they started) have been recorded. The leaders and followers therefore do seem to have much in common when it comes to their level of education.

#### *Occupation*

(Jihadist) Terrorists often have a wide variety of occupations, according to Hudson and Bakker. [24] Although unemployment has been found in their biographies, its rate is not significantly different from their peers in society. Sendagorta also argues that unemployment in itself is not a very decisive factor in joining terrorist groups. [25] Similar characteristics have been found in the sample of jihadist terrorist leaders. An interesting outcome of our research is that there is a substantial portion of leaders who have had a teaching background and/or were religious preachers. While Bakker and Hudson do not elaborate on the exact professions of the members of jihadist terrorist organisations, it can be hypothesised here that this is a true characteristic of the leaders, since they have been given a didactical role to play in the terrorist organisation.

#### *Criminal Record*

While Nesser argues that only a few terrorists have a criminal record, Bakker found that 25% of his sample has been sentenced for criminal offenses. [26] Nevertheless, both authors agree that most of the terrorists do not have a criminal record. However, the jihadist terrorist leaders show a relatively higher number of criminal offenses. One-third of the sample has been incarcerated and 42% have been found guilty in court (some leaders have been sentenced in absentia). While it is not always clear what the criminal charges of the members of jihadist terrorist organisations generally were, it can be argued that the leaders of the current sample have a criminal record more often than not. [27]

#### *Religious Background*

Some scholars have found that, in terms of religious backgrounds, jihadist terrorists have developed their faith over time. Bakker, for example, found that only a small percentage had an Islamic upbringing (22%) and 58



of his 61 subjects had been identified as having increased their faith in the months prior to joining a terrorist organisation. [28] Nesser has also found this, arguing that, before terrorists join an organisation, they have not been very active in observing their religion. [29] Schuurman, Grol & Flower furthermore found that “converts are considerably overrepresented” in Islamist extremism and terrorism. [30]

Leaders of jihadist terrorist organisations, however, do not match this description. Rather the opposite is true. Only a small percentage did not receive an Islamic upbringing and the number of converts is quite low. This contrast may be the result of the different focus areas of the above-mentioned studies. The secular and partially Christian Europe in which the terrorist of the mentioned studies grew up in has provided a totally different ideological context than the predominantly Islamic countries in which the leaders were raised. Nevertheless, this difference in upbringing may be interesting to follow up in future research.

### ***Circumstances of Joining the Jihad***

#### *Age*

Bakker found that the ages of the subjects in his sample at the time of their arrest were spread large. With a minimum of 16 and a maximum of 59, the average was 27 [31]. This relatively young age is also reflected in the studies of Jenkins (average age of 32) [32] and Hudson (stating that on average the terrorists were in their early twenties) [33] All three authors thus agree that terrorists are rather young.

The data from our exploration point in the same direction. However, as can be expected, the age of current leaders is much higher. This higher age is consistent with the idea that leaders in general are more experienced and thus older. The data thus show that although the distribution of ages varies greatly in both the jihadist terrorist population and among jihadist terrorist leaders, the ages upon entering the jihadist scene are mostly between 20 and 30. However, the leaders of jihadist terrorist organisations are substantially older than the jihadist terrorists in the West.

#### *Place of Recruitment*

The places of recruitment can only be compared to a limited extent. Since Bakker’s sample only included jihadist terrorists in Western Europe, his findings automatically differ greatly from the places of recruitment found in our present sample. Nevertheless, both Bakker and Nesser argue that Pakistan is an important place of recruitment. [34] This is also reflected in the sample of the leaders, but is not in terms of a breeding ground. Only three leaders were reportedly recruited in Pakistan. It is Afghanistan that had the greatest recruitment appeal for them. Still, no direct conclusions may be derived from this comparison, due to the different foci of the studies.

In sum, the picture that arises is that leaders and their followers have both similar and differing characteristics. The data of this research does not support a dichotomous conclusion. The leaders do not differ substantially from the followers, but neither are they completely the same. Table 2 provides an overview of the discussed characteristics and the way the characteristics of the leaders and followers are related.

**Table 2: Summary of Comparisons between Leaders and Followers**

	Difference/similarity	Legend	
<i>Geographical background</i>	+	--	Very different
<i>Socioeconomic status</i>	+	-	Different
<i>Education</i>	++	+	Similar
<i>Occupation</i>	-	++	Very similar
<i>Criminal record</i>	-		
<i>Religious background</i>	--		
<i>Age</i>	-		
<i>Place of recruitment</i>	-		

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### ***Conclusion and Reflection***

This Research Note took some first, exploratory steps towards filling the gap of knowledge on jihadist terrorist leaders, heeding to some extent to the call made decades ago by Weinberg & Eubank and more recently by Hofmann. [35] By first bringing the publicly available data on jihadist terrorist leaders together and then comparing the information on leadership characteristics with existent knowledge on jihadist terrorists in general, some important (but preliminary) conclusions can be drawn.

Looking at the social background, this Research Note makes clear that the jihadist terrorist leaders in this study are not extraordinary individuals. They are not of high or low class and they have not spent significant time in prison. However, more often than not the leaders have significant battlefield experience, which sets them apart from others. Thus, while on the one hand they do not differ much from average persons in society with regard to their social background, there are some indications that they do differ on other grounds.

It is also in the comparison with the followers that the leaders do not substantially stand out. Although having had (1) a more religious upbringing, (2) different occupational backgrounds, (3) a greater criminal record, (4) a slightly higher age, and (5) different places of recruitment, the leaders are generally quite similar to the followers in this study. Geographical backgrounds, socioeconomic status and education are more or less the same for both populations. The present exploration has made clear that there are both similarities and differences between leaders and followers. It is a preliminary conclusion on which future research can build on.

This study shows that many jihadist terrorist leaders have fought in wars and/or other violent conflicts. Their participation has drawn them deeper into jihadist theatres of conflict, which have become important places to build up a network from. The war in Afghanistan in particular, has been a facilitator in connecting individuals with, for example, Osama bin Laden. Therefore, a parallel with contemporary jihadist 'hot-zones' is plausible. Countries at war and in violent conflict such as Syria and Iraq, and in which foreign fighters play or have played an important role (as was the case in the Afghan war during the Soviet occupation), are likely to be breeding grounds of future generations of jihadist terrorist leaders.

Being only an explorative first step into enhancing our knowledge on jihadist terrorist leaders, some caveats about our findings have to be addressed here. With regard to the established dataset, it must be mentioned that, although many data are publicly available, much data is still missing. Missing data, naturally, affects the quality of this study. The dataset must be further enriched (with regard to the saturation of the variables) in order to provide a more solid portrait of jihadist terrorist leaders. The call of Weinberg and Eubank to find more information on terrorist leaders therefore is still valid. [36]

With regard to the second objective of this study - the evaluation of the differences and similarities between the two populations - it has to be emphasized that research is still dominated by studies on Western jihadist terrorists. Further research should focus on more in-depth comparisons between followers and leaders within the same jihadist terrorist organisations.

In order to systematically enhance our understanding of (jihadist) terrorist leaders, future research must build on existing studies, just as this study has built on Bakker's. Using the same variables, but with different approaches (some are better suited for qualitative research), will lead to new insights. Research on jihadist terrorist leaders could also greatly benefit from the findings of other disciplines. For example, the leadership characteristics identified by organisational studies theories could be used for further analysis. On the effect of leaders on the longevity of (jihadist) terrorist organisation, social movement theory may provide important insights.

In sum, while this quantitative study has thrown some light on jihadist terrorist leaders, much more needs to be done to deepen our knowledge and widen our theoretical scope.

***About the Authors:*** Lennart van Leeuwen, holds a BA in Safety and Security Management, with a focus on conflict studies, from Avans University of Applied Sciences. He graduated in 2018 with a Master of Crisis and Security Management from Leiden University. He is currently employed in the field of information security in the

financial sector.

**Daan Weggemans** is a Ph.D. researcher at Leiden University's Institute of Security and Global Affairs (ISGA). He is also a Research Fellow at the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague. Recent research includes studies on the lives and preparatory processes of foreign fighters, the role of families in radicalisation and the detention and re-integration of jihadist extremist offenders.

Correspondence: [d.j.weggemans@fgga.leidenuniv.nl](mailto:d.j.weggemans@fgga.leidenuniv.nl)

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### **Appendix: List of Jihadist Leaders whose Backgrounds have been Studied (n = 66)**

Organisation	Leader
Abu Sayyaf Group	- Khadafi Abubakar Janjalani - Radulon Sahiron
Al-Qaeda	- Osama bin Laden - Ayman al-Zawahiri
Armed Islamic Group	- Rachid Oukali - Nourredine Boudiafi
Asbat Al-Ansar	- Haytham Abd al-Karim al Sa'di
Harakat Ul-Mujahidin/HUM	- Farooqi Kashmiri
Islamic Army of Aden	- Khalid Bin-Muhammad Bin-Ali Bin Abdulrab al-Nabi
Islamic movement of Uzbekistan	- Tahir Yuldashev - Abu Usman Adil - Usman Ghazi
Libyan Islamic Fighting Group	- Abdelhakim Belhadj
Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat	- Hassan Hattab - Nabil Sahraoui
The Organisation of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb	- Abdelmalek Droukdel
Jaish-I-Mohammed	- Masood Azhar
Ansar al-Shari'a in Tunisia	- Saifallah Ben Hassine
Jemmah Anshorut Tauhid	- Abu Bakar Ba'asyir
Ansar al-Islam	- Najmuddin Faraj Ahmad - Wirya Salih - Sheikh Abu Hashim Muhammad bin Abdul Rahman al Ibrahim
Islamic International Brigade	- Thamir Saleh Abdullah - Abd Al-Aziz Bin Ali Bin Said Al Said Al-Ghamdi - Farid Yusef Umeira
Riyadus-Salikhin Reconnaissance and Sabotage Battalion of Chechen Martyrs	- Shamil Basayev - Aslan Avgazarovich Butukayev
Special Purpose Islamic Regiment	- Movsar Suleimanov/Barayev - Khamzat Tazabayev

Al-Qaeda in Iraq	- Ahmad Fadil Nazzal Al-Khalayleh - Abu Hamza al-Muhajir
Islamic State	- Ibrahim Awwad Ibrahim Ali Al-Badri Al-Samarrai - Tarkan Tayumurazovich Batirashvili
Laskar-e-Tayyiba	- Hafiz Muhammad Saeed
Islamic Jihad Union	- Najmiddin Kamolitdinovich Jalolov
Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula	- Nasser al-Wuhayshi - Qasim al-Raymi
Emarat Kavkaz	- Doku Khamatovich Umarov - Aliaskhab Alibulatovich Kebekov
Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan	- Baitullah Mehsud - Jamshed Mehsud - Fazal Hayat
Al-Murabitoun	- Abderrahmane Ould el Amar - Mokhtar Belmokhtar
Ansar Eddine	- Iyad ag Ghali
Muhammad Jamal Network	- Muhammad Jamal abd-al Rahim Ahmad al-Kashif
Jabhat Fateh al-Sham	- Abu Muhammad al-Julani (2012 - present)
Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati Wal-Jihad	- Mohammad Yusuf - Abubakar Shekau
Ansarul Mislimina fi Biladis Sudan	- Khalid al-Barnawi
Abdallah Azzam Brigades	- Majid bin Muhammad al Majid
Harakat Sham al-Islam	- Ibrahim Bin Shakaran - Abu Talha al Andalusi - Abu Muhammad al Baydawi
Mujahidin Indonesian Timur	- Abu Wardah
Jund al-Khilafah in Algeria	- Gouri Abdelmalek - Bashir Othman al-Assimi
Jamaat-ul-Ahrar	- Maulana Qasim Khorasani
Jund Al Aqsa	- Muhammad Yusuf 'Uthman 'Abd al-Salam - Abu Dhar al-Najdi al-Harethi
Al-Shabaab	- Aden Hashi Ayro - Ahmed Abdi Godane - Ahmad Umar
Haqqani Network	- Sirajuddin Jallaloudine Haqqani
Unknown current organisation	- Hamada Ould Mohamed el-Khairiy

## Notes

[1] This was recently again demonstrated by the reported killing of Fazal Hayat (a.k.a. Mullah Fazlullah) with the use of a drone (Al Jazeera. (2018). *Pakistan Taliban chief Mullah Fazlullah 'killed in drone attack'*. URL: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/06/pakistani-taliban-chief-mullah-fazlullah-killed-drone-strike-180615094513389.html>, on the 16<sup>th</sup> of June 2018). Fazlullah has been a subject in the sample of this study, but his death is not recorded in the data.

[2] For instance, Johnston, P.B. (2012). Does Decapitation Work? Assessing the Effectiveness of Leadership Targeting in Counterinsurgency Campaigns. *International Security*, 36(4), pp. 47-79; Cronin, A.K. (2006). How al-Qaida Ends. The Decline and Demise of Terrorist Groups. *International Security*, 31(1), pp. 7-48; Carvin, S. (2012). The Trouble with Targeted Killing. *Security Studies*, 21(3), pp. 529-555; Jordan, J. (2009). When Heads Roll: Assessing the Effectiveness of Leadership Decapitation. *Security Studies*, 21(3), pp. 529-555.

*Studies*, 18(4), pp. 719-755; Ingram, H.J. & Whiteside, C. (2016). Don't Kill the Caliph! The Islamic State and the Pitfalls of Leadership Decapitation. URL: <https://warontherocks.com/2016/06/dont-kill-the-caliph-the-islamic-state-and-the-pitfalls-of-leadership-decapitation/>, on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of July 2018.

[3] Weinberg, L. & Eubank, W. (1989). Leaders and followers in Italian terrorist groups. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 1(2), pp. 156-176. 156.

[4] Hofmann, D.C. (2017). The study of terrorist leadership: where do we go from here? *Journal of Criminological Research, Policy and Practice*, 3(3), pp. 208-221.

[5] For instance, Sageman, M. (2004). *Understanding Terror Networks*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press; Bakker, E. (2006). *Jihadi Terrorists in Europe, their characteristics and the circumstances in which they joined the jihad: an exploratory study*. The Hague: Netherlands Institute of International Relations Clingendael; Van Dongen, T. (2014). The lengths terrorists go to: perpetrator characteristics and the complexity of jihadist terrorist attacks in Europe, 2004 –2011. *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression*, 6(1), pp. 58-80; Leiken, R.S. (2005). Europe's Angry Muslims. *Foreign Affairs*, 84(4), pp. 120-135; Sendagorta, F. (2005). Jihad in Europe: The Wider Context. *Survival*, 47(3), pp. 63-72; Nesser, P. (2006). Jihadism in Western Europe After the Invasion of Iraq: Tracing Motivational Influences from the Iraq War on Jihadist Terrorism in Western Europe. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 29(4), pp. 323-342; Jenkins, B.M. (2011). *Stray Dogs and Virtual Armies*. Santa Monica: RAND Corporation.

[6] Sageman (2004) and Bakker (2006)

[7] Bakker (2006).

[8] Sageman (2004).

[9] Weinberg & Eubank (1989: 156) and Hofmann (2017). Dataset available via authors.

[10] Bakker (2006); Sageman (2004)

[11] United Nations Security Council. (2017). *Consolidated United Nations Security Council Sanctions List*. URL: <https://scsanctions.un.org/fop/fop?xml=htdocs/resources/xml/en/consolidated.xml&xslt=htdocs/resources/xsl/en/consolidated-r.xsl>, on the 18<sup>th</sup> of October 2017.

[12] Recent deaths, such as the death of Mullah Fazlullah, have not been taken into account here, as the data gathering was concluded in October 2017.

[13] For instance, a translation of 'Knights under the Prophet's Banner' (originally written by Ayman al-Zawahiri) was found online, as well as a translated interview with the family of Abu al-Walid (deceased leader of the Islamic International Brigade). Other sources included, inter alia, reports of Interpol, the United Nations, and multiple international news outlets (e.g. the BBC, CNN, The Washington Post, The New York Times).

[14] Leiken (2005); Sendagorta (2005).

[15] Nesser (2006: 327); Bakker (2006: 38); Hudson (1999: 48); Jenkins (2011).

[16] Some leaders have been sentenced in absentia, which results in a criminal offense without having spent time in prison.

[17] Bakker (2006); Leiken (2005).

[18] Jenkins (2011).

[19] For instance, Bakker (2006); Leiken (2005); Sendagorta (2005).

[20] Ibid.

[21] Leiken (2005).

[22] Nesser (2006: 327); Bakker (2006: 38); Hudson (1999: 48); Jenkins (2011).

[23] Leiken (2005).

[24] Hudson (1999: 48); Bakker (2006).

[25] Sendagorta (2005)

[26] Nesser (2006: 327); Bakker (2006: 40).

[27] The data has not been corrected for the criminal record during the 'reign' of the subject. Future research should establish whether the criminal records of the leaders were established during their time at the head of a jihadist terrorist organisation or prior to this.

[28] Bakker, 2006: 39.

[29] Nesser, 2006: 327

[30] Schuurman, Grol & Flower conclude this from their literature review as well as from their own empirical data. See: Schuurman, B., Grol, P. & Flower, S. (2016). *Converts and Islamist Terrorism: An Introduction, 1*. International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague.

[31] Bakker, 2006: 41.

[32] Jenkins, 2011.

[33] Hudson, 1999.

[34] Bakker (2006: 41); Nesser (2006: 326).

[35] Weinberg & Eubank (1989: 156); Hofmann (2017).

[36] Weinberg & Eubank (1989: 156).