

# **Terrorist Participation Despite Social Influences Opposing Extremism: A Qualitative Study Among Young Jihadists in Spain**

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## **Terrorist Participation Despite Social Influences Opposing Extremism: A Qualitative Study Among Young Jihadists in Spain**

This article uses a sample of 11 juveniles involved in jihadism in Spain to analyze how they experienced and resisted disagreement with members of their personal networks. Drawing on data from interviews, criminal proceedings, and oral trials, the study provides support for a theoretical framework that holds that opposing ties attempt to leverage informational and normative forms of influence (confrontation of perspectives, exposure to warnings, and application of pressures and constraints) to induce attitudinal change, and that these mechanisms are countered through cognitive and social resistance strategies (contestation, selective social exposure, and circumvention). The research suggests how disagreement can contribute to mobilizing young people for political violence.

## **Introduction**

Like many individuals faced with an opportunity for political engagement, jihadists make decisions regarding participation in terrorism by following some members of their personal networks while dismissing others. Empirical evidence shows that supporters of jihadist organizations are often embedded in heterogeneous social environments, as they are simultaneously connected to people that advocate and promote violent mobilization and others that reject and constrain it.<sup>1</sup> Since decisions about political involvement tend to be socially constructed,<sup>2</sup> the question then becomes how militants weigh and deal with social disagreement while going forward with engaging in political violence. In particular, how do jihadists persist in their radical attitudes despite contrary preferences, adverse information, and the sanctions and pressures of a part of their social surroundings?

This article aims to further our understanding of how violent extremists experience and resist opposing social influences by analyzing the instances of disagreement that a convenience sample of 11 juveniles involved in terrorism-related activities in Spain encountered in their interactions with family, friends, and other acquaintances. In so doing, the present study seeks to broaden the dominant research agenda on the role of social networks in jihadist mobilization and offers relevant insights for the design of policies and programs aimed at preventing violent radicalization.

The impact of conflicting social ties on individual views and behaviors has been studied in relation to various manifestations of collective action,<sup>3</sup> including expressions of high-risk and high-cost activism.<sup>4</sup> However, their effects on participation in an extremist form of political mobilization, such as jihadism, have received little attention.<sup>5</sup> Terrorism scholarship has largely focused on the bonds linking prospective participants

with militants already embedded in the global jihadist movement (what some social movement researchers refer to as reinforcing and facilitating ties), often overlooking connections that reject and curb political violence (what is often termed in social movement studies as countervailing ties).<sup>6</sup> In the limited cases in which oppositional connections to violent extremism have been explored, research interest has often been narrowed to specific types of bonds (paternal-filial or peer group) or to cases where terrorist involvement was ultimately prevented or disrupted, and explanations have been based on a partial view of two-way communication.<sup>7</sup> This article differs from those previous studies in several points. First, the analysis is not restricted to a single type of relationship but takes account of the variety of ties that make up jihadists' immediate social environments. In addition, it aims to capture the nature of social relations by understanding both the actions of opposition actors and the responses of jihadists. More importantly, the study seeks to improve the comprehension of the mechanisms of social influence at work in terrorist mobilization by examining when interpersonal connections fall short of their intended goals, rather than when they succeed.

Drawing on previous research on social network influence, this article presents a framework that explains how opposing social ties try to modify the ideas and predispositions of jihadists, and how the latter defy such influential efforts.

Countervailing ties relied on both the sharing of compelling arguments (informational influence) and the enforcing of social norms (normative influence) to induce terrorist desistance, attempting to use dissonance and disapproval as leverage. Jihadists, reacting consequently, developed cognitive and social resistance strategies, using them to either expose themselves to disagreement, avoid it, or prevent it from occurring. Ultimately, this research provides evidence congruent with theoretical predictions that social

disagreement can contribute to political action, even when it takes the shape of a violent extremist movement like jihadism.

A few conceptual clarifications are in order at this point. The term “jihadist” is used in this article to refer to individuals who have undergone a process of radicalization into Salafi-jihadism.<sup>8</sup> A second key concept is social disagreement, which is understood here as the interaction between people who have differing opinions on and approaches to relevant issues.<sup>9</sup> Disagreement might lead to social influence, which is any change produced in a person’s attitudes due to processes triggered by her or his interactions with other people.<sup>10</sup> Influence can be the result of a concerted effort of network partners to induce attitudinal change, but it can also stem from ordinary interaction, the mere exposure to alternate perspectives.<sup>11</sup> Finally, this article adopts the definition of attitudes as “evaluations people hold in regard to themselves, other people, objects, and issues” which “can be based on a variety of behavioral, affective, and cognitive experiences, and are capable of influencing or guiding behavioral, affective, and cognitive processes”.<sup>12</sup>

The rest of the article proceeds in four sections. It begins with a description and review of the theoretical framework. It next describes the study sample, data collection methods, and analysis procedure. The section that follows presents the results of the qualitative analysis, and then the paper turns to a discussion of the findings’ theoretical implications.

### **Theoretical framework**

Social network theories analyze how both individual and collective action are affected by people’s embeddedness in interpersonal relationships, constituting a vital strand of social movement studies.<sup>13</sup> Movement scholars have traditionally argued that personal

links operate as a crucial basis for mobilization and recruitment – abundant evidence shows that pre-existing ties explain the adherence of new members to jihadist organizations<sup>14</sup> – but they have also acknowledged that bonds have variable impact. Since people are usually immersed in multiple relationships, some of which promote collective action while others discourage it, the presence of connections that push in one direction or the other does not necessarily predict a particular participation outcome.<sup>15</sup> As such, early academic contributions claiming that bonds with conflicting groups diminish political involvement were refuted by subsequent scholarship emphasizing different elements, such as the type of political action involved, the source, scope, and nature of political disagreement, or its effects and the responses to it.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, research has found that the presence of simultaneous antagonistic considerations in an individual's social environment may indeed foster political mobilization.<sup>17</sup>

This study builds on and tests a theoretical framework that has been applied to understand how exposure to social disagreement affects different domains of conventional political action. It primarily combines perspectives in social network theory, bringing together interactional and psychological angles.<sup>18</sup> First, it connects literature on social disagreement and social influence. These academic contributions shed light on the means and mechanisms through which heterogeneous social ties affect people's political ideas and predispositions. Second, it acknowledges theoretical work on how individuals resist counter-attitudinal influences. This is complemented with research on closed-mindedness, a central concept in the psychology of terrorism studies. These approaches are used to delve into the resistance strategies through which political actors minimize the effects of uncongenial and oppositional interactions.

***How might exposure to social disagreement influence political attitudes?***

Social network researchers have laid out three main ways by which opposing bonds directly affect people's political views and actions: (1) by giving information; (2) by signaling potential problems with attitudes; and (3) by applying social pressures.<sup>19</sup> How these means impact on attitudes, either by weakening or reinforcing their behavioral manifestations, can be understood in terms of two broad forms of social influence: on the one hand, informational influence stirs people's desire to be right; on the other hand, normative influence exploits people's need to be liked.<sup>20</sup>

Individuals may be susceptible to informational influence when they are socially exposed to arguments that conflict with their previous ideas. Research shows evidence that, when facing discrepancies with those close to them, people become better informed about the reasons that challenge their views, as well as more inclined to seek out new knowledge.<sup>21</sup> The sheer awareness that significant others hold a divergent stance on a subject – even without knowing the rationale – could also instill questions about others' correctness.<sup>22</sup> A central theoretical concept to account for this reaction is that of dissonance, which is the inconsistency between related cognitive elements that is caused by conflicting messages. Festinger explained that experiencing dissonance makes people feel psychologically uncomfortable and may lead to a state of imbalance that they want to redress.<sup>23</sup> When this is accomplished by a critical reconsideration of one's own viewpoints, individuals are more likely to suffer an intrapersonal conflict as they grow to have ambivalent attitudes. In her seminal work on the effects of exposure to social disagreement on political participation, Mutz found that such uncertainty makes it more difficult for people to make decisions and ultimately causes them to retreat from critical action.<sup>24</sup> However, to the contrary, a number of studies have linked diversity in network discussions to an increase in political engagement through

improved political interest and understanding, as well as polarized, reactive reaffirmation of ideas.<sup>25</sup>

On the other hand, individuals might experience normative influence when they are subjected to pressure to comply with social standards and expectations. Since people are normally driven by a need to belong, the prospect of gaining social approval from significant others is a strong incentive to adhere to ideas and behaviors that are socially regarded as correct and appropriate.<sup>26</sup> Conformity with group norms not only brings individual rewards (social validation and acceptance, for instance), but it also preserves relational harmony and prevents social conflict. Deviation from group norms, to the contrary, can lead to costs like tension and discord, sanctions such as invalidation and criticism, and, in the end, pressures like rejection or isolation.<sup>27</sup> Social disagreement is thus also depicted in the scientific literature as a source of interpersonal conflict since the use of sanctions and pressures by opposing ties induces social discomfort to rectify people's initial misalignment with group standards. Theoretical and empirical work has shown, however, that when people realize they do not fit the norms of the group and, as a result, believe they will not be socially accepted, they may begin a process of dis-identification with the group and develop attachment to a new collectivity with different standards that have more personal resonance.<sup>28</sup> Because they can look to this new group for validation and membership, the potential for normative influence from the old group of reference lessens.<sup>29</sup> Additionally, there is abundant empirical evidence proving that conformity does not always imply a genuine change in attitude, since public compliance with social norms might hide a private non-acceptance of the demands and political views of the group.<sup>30</sup>

***How do individuals resist the influence stemming from social disagreement?***

Social influences can fail. One of the reasons is that people sometimes oppose, counter, and resist the efforts of network partners to induce change. People are particularly likely to become unreceptive – even hostile – to others’ arguments, judgements, and pressures when influential attempts affect attitudes to which they are strongly committed and about which they care most.<sup>31</sup>

Several loosely related accounts of how individuals reject opposing influences and resist their impact have been proposed in the political science literature and related fields. Despite their disconnected nature, most of these theoretical formulations converge in evincing the complexity of resistance behaviors, which generally combine cognitive and social strategies, as well as diverse individual responses to social disagreement, typically along a continuum ranging from prevention to avoidance and exposure. For example, Huckfeldt and Sprague, in their widely cited theory of resistance to cognitive dissonance, identified three techniques by which people deal with adverse political information encountered in their personal networks.<sup>32</sup> First, by selecting social sources of information with which they agree, thereby avoiding interactions that may elicit disagreement and preserving the biases and frames of reference that support their existing worldview. Second, by reinterpreting and misinterpreting unfavorable messages, which ultimately involves controlling the assessment and processing of information. Finally, by eluding confrontation with network partners who hold divergent ideas via distorting or softening one’s stances.

Also consequential is Baumgardner and Arkin’s study on individuals’ responses to social disapproval, which distinguishes between techniques used to respond to and prevent the discomfort induced by group rejection. Reactive mechanisms for managing negative feedback include denying the existence of the disapproval; discrediting the invalidation and its personal relevance; derogating the source of potential rejection; or

resorting to approving social referents. Preemptive methods of social invalidation consist of diverting the focus of attention of the disapproving source.<sup>33</sup>

Although these theories provide a fairly complete picture of resistance responses to oppositional influences, they lack clarity about the connection between their cognitive and social dimensions. One option to bridge this gap is to consider the integrative notion of closed-mindedness, which relates to the propensity of humans to shut their minds against sources of knowledge instability and inconsistency. The discomfort with ambiguity that drives the resolution of dissonance and the reduction of uncertainty; the quest for validation that motivates a preference for homogeneous over heterogeneous social networks; and the desire for agreeing and confirmatory messages are all traits that cohere with the need for closure.<sup>34</sup> As Kruglanski has shown, closed-minded dispositions are related to a series of cognitive and social mechanisms that are often based on in-group favoritism and out-group rejection. While the in-group comprises of people with whom individuals identify and whom they can trust, the out-group consists of those whom they do not regard as like themselves; whilst the first enables consensus and satisfies desires for approval and acceptance, the second does not.<sup>35</sup> As a result, individuals operating under a high need for closure are more likely to prefer members of their group of reference over those of other groups because the in-group provides the shared reality that they are seeking, while the out-group represents a contrasting, conflicting alternative.<sup>36</sup>

## **Research design and method**

### *Sample*

To test the theoretical framework outlined previously, this research draws on data coming from a sample of 11 juveniles, all of whom had undergone a process of jihadist radicalization and whose views and intentions were challenged by those closest to them before they committed terrorist crimes in Spain.<sup>37</sup> Their involvement in activities related to terrorism occurred between 2012 and 2019, during the jihadist mobilization cycle prompted in Western Europe by the outbreak of the civil conflict in Syria, with the Islamic State (IS) as the main driver. This terrorist organization reached the peak of its mobilization potential after the proclamation of a caliphate in June 2014 that stretched across large swathes of Syria and Iraq. Five years later, when IS's last stronghold fell, the territorial project collapsed and, with it, the group's inspirational impact diminished.

During those years, at least 29 minors were radicalized in Spain into Salafi-jihadism before they turned 18. They were later found guilty of terrorism-related crimes by Spain's National Court, the only court in the country with first-instance jurisdiction over jihadist crimes.<sup>38</sup> These 29 juveniles form the universe of the current research. Applying the principles of purposive sampling, the 11 cases that make up this study's sample were chosen for their potential to provide detailed information on the fundamental interest of this research, as well as to illustrate the diverse ways in which this manifests itself. The aim of this approach was to produce a contrasting and structurally relevant selection of cases to capture overarching themes that cut across a maximum variation sample.<sup>39</sup> Such core themes acquire greater significance precisely because they appear in heterogeneity and mirror the similarities and differences between the research subjects.<sup>40</sup>

Cases differ in many biographical characteristics, with the only exception of age range. All individuals in the sample were between 14 and 17 years old at the beginning of their radicalization process, a developmental stage in which individuals tend to be

more exposed to and influenced by their peers in their search for identity, belonging, meaning, and purpose, and at the same time more distanced from their long-standing reference group, the family.<sup>41</sup> This makes adolescence a phase with a higher prevalence of risk factors for violent radicalization.<sup>42</sup> Other than that, the sample included 5 girls and 6 boys. Regarding their place of residence, 4 of the subjects lived in the Province of Barcelona; 3 in Melilla; 2 in Ceuta; and 1 each in the Community of Madrid and the Province of Valencia. In terms of religion, 8 of them were Muslims by origin, while the remaining 3 converted to Islam without their families and friends following them in the process of embracing their new religion.

All of the sampled youths subscribed to the ideology of Salafi-jihadism and sought different ways of promoting its goals, including both online and offline forms of jihadist participation. Of those sampled, 5 were convicted of creating and sharing virtual violent propaganda; 4 of attempting to travel to terrorist-controlled areas in Syria; 1 of planning to commit an attack in Spain; and finally, 1 other of radicalizing and recruiting other youngsters via social networks and neighborhood contacts. Table 1 summarizes each sampled individual's characteristics.

Table 1. Main characteristics of sampled individuals

<b>Case</b>	<b>Sex</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Religious background</b>	<b>City of residence</b>	<b>Type of jihadist participation</b>
1	F	14	Originally Muslim	Ceuta	Attempting to travel to Syria to join IS
2	M	17	Convert	Barcelona	Attempting to travel to Syria to join IS

3	F	15	Originally Muslim	Melilla	Radicalizing and recruiting other youngsters
4	M	16	Convert	Barcelona	Creating and sharing online propaganda
5	M	17	Convert	Barcelona	Planning to execute a terrorist attack
6	F	17	Originally Muslim	Valencia	Attempting to travel to Syria to join IS
7	M	17	Originally Muslim	Melilla	Creating and sharing online propaganda
8	F	16	Originally Muslim	Ceuta	Attempting to travel to Syria to join IS
9	F	17	Originally Muslim	Barcelona	Creating and sharing online propaganda
10	M	17	Originally Muslim	Madrid	Creating and sharing online propaganda
11	M	16	Originally Muslim	Melilla	Creating and sharing online propaganda

Note: F: female; M: male.

Cases also vary regarding the nature of the heterogeneity of their personal networks and the scope of disagreement to which they were exposed. While they were all exposed to influences that rejected both Salafist-jihadist ideology and individual engagement in jihadist activities, at least 5 were also exposed to subjects who opposed the youth's violent mobilization but supported their radical beliefs.

### *Data collection*

A combination of sources was used to collect and triangulate data from the 11 juveniles. The primary source is eight semi-structured, in-depth interviews with some of the sampled individuals and other key informants. Qualitative evidence was also collected from court sessions, police reports, and criminal records.

Between May 2019 and June 2021, I interviewed four of the sampled youths, a relative of another youth, and two front-line practitioners with first-hand knowledge of two of the other sampled cases. Two researchers with whom I am associated, Fernando Reinares and Carola García-Calvo, conducted an additional interview of a sampled youth. The sample of interviewees includes a diversity of relevant profiles, which is a common practice in research on hard-to-reach populations. The selection of interviewees was based on convenience sampling techniques, which values respondents' accessibility, availability, and willingness to share their insights.<sup>43</sup> Initial contact with them was made through different means, including requests to various official institutions in Spain, among them the General Secretariat of Penitentiary Institutions of the Ministry of the Interior, the General Secretariat of Penitentiary Measures of the regional autonomous Government of Catalonia, and the Agency for the Reeducation and Reinsertion of Juvenile Offenders of the Community of Madrid. Interview requests were also made through informal conversations with private attorneys.

Six of the interviews were conducted in person in four prisons (Barcelona, Girona, Granada, and Salamanca), a juvenile facility (Madrid), and the offices of a law firm (Madrid). An additional interview was conducted by phone at the request of the interviewee. With the consent of the participants, interviews were audio-recorded and

transcribed verbatim. In the only case in which the interviewee did not give permission to record, I took verbatim notes by hand.

Interviews adopted a semi-structured format and lasted one to two hours. The interview guidelines sought to capture respondents' experiences, perceptions, or knowledge regarding a wide array of topics. Since many issues were addressed during the interviews, the relationships of sampled youths with their countervailing social ties were discussed in varying degrees of detail. Open-ended questions explored two aspects: 1) the counter-attitudinal influences the sampled youths experienced; and 2) the resistance strategies they developed to avoid the persuasive effects of disagreement.

In addition, this study was complemented with oral evidence collected in court sessions. Between December 2016 and June 2019, I attended oral hearings held against 9 of the sampled youths at the National Court. During each trial, I took notes about the composition of the sampled youth's personal network and captured evidence about how they interacted with disagreeing members of their social circles. This information came from the statements made by the defendants themselves, their family and friends, and police investigators. The information gathered in this way was expanded and triangulated thanks to access to police reports included in the criminal proceedings of the 11 individuals that make up the study sample. Examples of the textual data analyzed include interrogation reports, telephone-tapping transcripts, and screen captures of text conversations.

### ***Research strategy and data analysis***

This research is aimed at theory testing. By corroborating or refuting the expectations derived from the literature, the article seeks to extend the scope conditions of the

aforementioned theoretical framework. The process of theory testing entailed a regular reconciliation between evidence from different cases, data from diverse sources, and between the qualitative corpus and the framework of this research.<sup>44</sup> To implement the process, all of the qualitative material (transcripts of interviews, notes taken during oral trial sessions, and evidence obtained from police reports and criminal proceedings) was imported into QSR NVivo computer software for thematic analysis.<sup>45</sup> This method of encoding consists of finding thematic patterns in a qualitative corpus and organizing them in a structured, coherent way to inform interpretation. Specifically, this study used a version of template analysis, as this technique is suitable for analyzing a small dataset composed of different forms of textual data, using descriptive, hierarchical, and predefined codes.<sup>46</sup> Unlike ordinary template analysis, which follows an inductive logic, this research adopted a deductive approach. Although the themes were defined at the beginning of the analytical process, they were modified as I identified nuances and emphasis in the textual data.<sup>47</sup>

### ***Ethics***

The ethics committee of the Universidad Rey Juan Carlos approved this study (internal registration number: 1605201909719). For data protection reasons, a number was assigned to each of the individuals in the sample. As for the interview participants, they were informed of the purpose of the study and of the confidential and anonymous treatment of the results, and were provided with consent forms.

### **Results**

The results of the qualitative analysis illustrate two aspects and discern six themes: the instances of social disagreement that the youth experienced within their personal networks (confrontation of perspectives, exposure to warnings, and pressures and constraints), and the strategies they developed to resist its effects (contestation, selective social exposure, and circumvention). Table 2 presents their occurrence in the qualitative corpus. This section examines each aspect in turn. The analysis also briefly describes how disagreement affected the sampled individuals.

Table 2. Occurrence of themes in the qualitative corpus

<i>Case</i>	<b>Experiences of disagreement</b>			<b>Resistance strategies</b>		
	Confrontation of perspectives	Exposure to warnings	Punishments/constraints	Contestation	Selective social exposure	Circumvention
<i>1</i>	x		X			x
<i>2</i>	x					x
<i>3</i>	x	x		x		
<i>4</i>	x	x		x		
<i>5</i>			X	x	x	
<i>6</i>	X		X	x	x	
<i>7</i>	X		X	x		x
<i>8</i>		x	X	x	x	
<i>9</i>	x	x	X		x	
<i>10</i>		x		x		
<i>11</i>	x	x	X		x	

### *Experiences of disagreement*

Social disagreement between the sampled individuals and members of their personal networks occurred in three main ways: confrontation of perspectives, exposure to warnings, and application of punishments and constraints. These experiences of disagreement allowed for the flow of both informational and normative forms of social influence.

#### *Confrontation of perspectives*

A confrontation of perspectives was noted when youngsters and their opposing social ties clashed in ways that exposed the former to alternative interpretations of a range of issues that figured prominently in their justifications for jihadist violence and their motivations for terrorist involvement, such as personal and collective experiences of grievances against Muslims, geopolitical crises affecting Muslim-majority countries, or religious precepts justifying violence. Discrepancies on these topics were disclosed and debated in diverse ways and with varying degrees of intensity.

The qualitative corpus captures a few instances in which the young people were challenged with theological or intellectual reasonings that contradicted their defense of jihadist organizations. These occasional, argument-driven interactions tended to revolve around the interlocutors' respective interpretations of Qur'anic texts as either supporting or opposing violent jihad. A paradigmatic example of this is the discussion between Case 3 and her father, recounted in a police report:<sup>48</sup>

“[Case 3] says that she was arguing with her father: he was watching TV while images of the [Syrian] conflict and a mujahideen talking with his back turned were displayed. She asked who he was, and her father said that he was a terrorist, so she responded: ‘Since when is a mujahideen a terrorist?’. The father told her that neither jihad nor mujahideen exist today. She responded by asking him whether he knew that an Islamic State already exists in Iraq and Syria, and that the Prophet declared that jihad will continue until the end of time, or when the world ends. Everyone who has grasped the Sunnah and the Koran is aware of this. Her father said that jihad cannot exist without an emir or caliph to declare it. She said, ‘there already is and he [former ISIS emir, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi] has already called it.’”

In other instances, the exchange of views was based more on expressions of preference or opinion than on the provision of reasons in support of a position. Confrontations developed in the form of a moral or spiritual debate on the appropriateness of political violence and individual participation in it in cases where discussion partners had a gap in Islamic knowledge that might have impeded them from engaging in an ideological argument, as was, for instance, the case with the converts. The appeal to emotions is also seen in the way the young people raised relevant issues in their conversations with disagreeing others. Case 2, the only convert to Islam in a family of Evangelical Christians, exemplifies how the appeal to solidarity and civilian protection as justifications for mobilization was met with social opposition:

“I didn’t tell [my mother] that I was leaving [for jihadist-held territory in Syria], but I told her: ‘look at the horrible things [the Bashar al-Assad regime] are doing’. I showed her the video of children being removed from a bomb site, and they took out the dead child... things like that... My mother, who is very patient, very kind, she believes in God a lot... told me: ‘No! God will help them. Don’t worry, it will pass’ and similar things.”

In addition to the dispute of their arguments and opinions, the young people in the sample perceived a general disagreement with their social network when their

sources of information were questioned and discredited, as well as when they were encouraged to broaden and diversify the views on which they based their own vision of reality. The mother of Case 4 explained that she tried to get her son to reconsider his radical attitude by encouraging him to be skeptical of users' opinions, news, and propaganda content he accessed through social media: "I told him: 'When you want to know something about religion, don't listen to people. Get a book! People will give you their view, they won't tell you the truth.'"

In contrast, analysis of the qualitative corpus shows that some of the sampled youth did not argue their radical ideals much or at all with their oppositional ties. This was the case where disagreement with their personal networks arose not when the young people first started to adhere to Salafi-jihadism, but later, when they began to act in a way that was consistent with this ideology. For instance, Case 8 recalled that jihad was considered a "taboo subject" in conversations with relatives and friends while they were unaware of her plans to travel to Syria. Sometimes, though, the absence of interpersonal discussion is explained by the fact that the individuals' immediate environment was supportive of jihadist ideals.

#### *Exposure to warnings*

Close contacts also demonstrated their opposition to the ideological affinities of the youths sampled by expressing their disapproval of jihadist beliefs or informing them of the costs and dangers of mobilization. Such a combination of arguments and sanctions in social interactions was found in the qualitative corpus when disagreeing members of their social circles raised concerns and objections to the radical personal connections of the youngsters. Examples abound. A friend of Case 3 warned her against a neighbor renowned for his Salafist activism and advised her to stay away from him. In three other

instances, family members criticized the ultra-conservative religious practice of the youngsters' new friends and cautioned them of the danger of being "brainwashed." In a similar vein, Case 11 recalled that close acquaintances tried to alert him to the fact that the group of worshippers with whom he had started to associate could drag him into extremist beliefs:

"The same community said to me: 'Hey, you're making a mistake. You're going from one extreme to the other'. And I said: 'Why?' 'We have told you to come to pray, not to get together with these people. Don't you see how they look?' 'Yes, but they say that there is a *hadith* [a tradition or saying of the Prophet Muhammad] that says that'. 'No, they are deceiving you.'"

Sanctions were also used in response to the actions of the youth. Disapproval was exercised, for instance, in bringing attention to the penal consequences of jihadist participation. Case 10 explained that he was the only one in his immediate environment to support his older brother's trip to Syria. After publicly praising his sibling's death and the organization he had joined, he was reprimanded: "I had people close to me there who came to me warning me many times: 'Hey, don't share this on Facebook! You could get into trouble.'"

In other instances, dissonant messages were intended to increase awareness of the risks associated with terrorist involvement. Significant others who sympathized with jihadism but opposed the action plans of the sampled individuals deployed this strategy as a deterrent. Case 8 offers a clear illustration of this. She recalled how her radicalization was sparked by watching videos about the Syrian conflict and IS propaganda with her elder brother, who eventually traveled to the combat zone. At a time when relatively few women had joined the jihadist organization and there were no security assurances for young women like her, he warned her against following in his footsteps:

“I assumed that when we talked about it, he was including me in his plans. He used to say: ‘We have to go.’ Well, if you say ‘we’ when you and I are talking, I won’t think [you mean] you and your friends. But no, he didn’t include me. That really... when he left, that was what hurt me the most. He left me feeling abandoned. The first thing I asked him was: ‘Why didn’t you take me with you?’ (...) He said: ‘Look, this is very hard. This is not a holiday; this is a war. There are people with amputated arms here... you can see a lot of things.’ (...) He told me: ‘What you see in the videos is only a little, even though there are videos that show many things. This is very complicated; if it is complicated for us, imagine for you.’”

### *Punishments and constraints*

Sampled individuals also faced explicit social pressures to desist from their violent attitudes when their determination and intents to engage in jihadist activities became apparent. Qualitative evidence suggests that countervailing ties applied punishments and coercive actions to reaffirm social norms contrary to Salafist principles and to enforce collective preferences over peaceful forms of collective action, with the ultimate purpose of triggering a scenario in which the rising social costs of terrorist involvement and the emerging obstacles to participation would cause the renunciation of violent mobilization.

Those in disagreement with the sampled individuals subjected them to specific forms of rejection, such as social devaluation and lowered acceptance. Hostilities manifested in mistrust, reduced communication, and avoidance. As social interactions declined, some ties vanished. Case 8 explained that relations with her family and peers were dominated by blame and wariness following her brother's departure to Syria. Suspicions and surveillance intensified when her own plans to travel were revealed:

“When my brother left, my father beat me even more: ‘You knew he was going, you’re his accomplice!’ My family started to ramble. Instead of supporting me or trying to help me in some way, they blamed me more. (...) When I came back from

Turkey... socially I had a lot of rejection. I mean, from everybody. It was quite a hard situation. My family, my aunt, and so on, what they did was... as if I was a person who was hooked. But if someone doesn't want to get off and you force him, you're not going to achieve anything.”

Rejection-related experiences took on particular significance when they occurred within the family. Social punishments in this context are sanctioned by a religious precept placing the honoring of parents as a general obligation of every believer and reprehending as a sin any action contrary to their express wishes. Violation of this principle may even be penalized by the severing of kinship ties. For instance, the mother of Case 6 relied on that convention to threaten her daughter with disownment if she persisted in her plans to migrate to the caliphate, disregarding repeated warnings that the Salafi-jihadist beliefs ran counter to how the family understood and practiced Islam.

In order to impose moderate social norms, disagreeing others also used methods of authority – rather than noncoercive influence – aimed at increasing barriers to participation. Attempts to physically separate young people from their jihadist associates and to keep them away from their radicalizing environments were particularly common. In some cases, family members forbade the youth from inviting their associates home and from keeping such company in the street. In other instances, they decided to geographically separate the sampled individuals from their networks after determining that they were in danger of being recruited. The father of Case 7 was sympathetic to Salafi-jihadist views, but nevertheless resolved to move the entire family to Belgium to prevent his son from keeping in touch with a group of local activists committed to creating jihadist propaganda for online dissemination. Case 8 was also relocated. “My aunt sent me to Marbella. She told me: ‘You're not going to stay here.’”

Prior to that, her father had confiscated her passport to keep her from leaving the country.

Coercive techniques escalated to a higher level when countervailing ties assumed the failure of the pressures they had previously applied. Fearing that the youths would eventually become involved in terrorism, opposing ties turned occasionally to law enforcement agents for help. This was an option even for those social links that showed an ideological affinity with Salafist-jihadism but rejected individual participation, as Case 1 illustrates. Her sister, herself married to a man convicted of jihadist crimes, was instrumental in aborting the girl's travel:

“When she left [to go to Syria], she changed her WhatsApp profile and the oldest sister rapidly noticed it because the girl had been living with her. So, the sisters went to the police and reported it. They didn't want her to leave. We are pretty sure about that. But, well, the values, the ideology, were transmitted by the women members of the family.” (First-line practitioner related to Case 1)

### ***Resistance strategies***

Experiencing dissonance and disapproval produced a state of imbalance in most of the sampled individuals. The empirical evidence indicates that negative reactions to their ideas and predispositions from their social environment had an impact on their thoughts and emotions, even if this did not stop young people from eventually being involved in terrorist activity.

For one thing, the qualitative data reveal instances of intrapersonal tension in the young jihadists. Discrepant and condemning messages over their beliefs heightened uncertainty and prompted an introspective examination, to the extent that most sought information to allay their concerns and even questioned their envisaged mobilization.

Case 6, for instance, told a virtual peer that family and friends' criticism had weakened her resolve to migrate to the caliphate:

“Well, I have doubts. Like your sister Ana [all names used are pseudonyms]. Is what the [Islamic] State does right? What does it do with the girls who emigrate? Is it obligatory for sisters to emigrate? I see that everyone around me is against the [Islamic] State.”<sup>49</sup>

Data also shows that social disagreement gave rise to interpersonal tensions. Some of the juveniles experienced unpleasant emotions related to real or expected rejection experiences, with several variations. Case 2 evoked the distress and anxiety he suffered as he tried to conceal his radicalization from family and friends and preserve his social image. Case 8 explained that she felt hopeless and abandoned when her brother disavowed her mobilization plans (“he has always been my reference”); later, her community's refusal left her feeling alone and vulnerable. Other youngsters, out of concern for how their ideological positions would damage their relationships, negotiated their level of engagement in jihadist activities and delayed it. Case 11 eventually gave up trying to preserve social harmony when he assumed the impossibility of pleasing conflicting groups:

Interviewer (1): So, you listened to your mother...?

Interviewee (2): As much as possible.

(1): ...it's not always like that.

(2): I know. I tried to reconcile two worlds that were irreconcilable, and that, in the end, led me to what it led me to.

In order to mitigate these negative effects of disagreement and continue with their planned jihadist involvement, young people evolved a range of cognitive and social resistance strategies over time. These could be broadly categorized into three

themes: contestation, selective social exposure, and circumvention. The remainder of this section examines them.

### *Contestation*

One of the ways through which young people resisted the impact of opposing influences was by reacting defensively against disagreeing voices within their personal networks. So as to defend their jihadist ideals, sampled individuals reinterpreted messages that contradicted their views and beliefs and placed doubt on the credibility and reliability of countervailing social ties. At the core of this resistance strategy was the propensity of the sampled youths to turn to corroborating social sources that reflected their biases and preferences. This validation propelled them to actively participate in conversation with opposing discussion partners and willingly expose themselves to social disagreement. Case 3, for example, had intense discussions about jihad with family and friends. She was also a frequent participant on Facebook pages like “Denounce ISIS,” where she supported the terrorist group against the critics of other young Muslims. Poorly versed in Islamic fundamentals, her counterarguments relied heavily on inputs she gleaned through jihadist propaganda. A police report recounts that when a friend forewarned her about the news that two Austrian teenage girls who had travelled to the caliphate decided to return home and expressed their regrets, she replied that “the girls who go are very happy and have religiously fulfilled the duty of defending Islam” and that “they cannot remain silent in the face of the outrage suffered by their Muslim brothers”.<sup>50</sup>

Jihadists evolved further denial techniques to counter discrepant messages. Typical of their information processing style was the interpretation of the unfavorable data to which they were socially exposed as intentional attempts to deceive them. In this manner, Case 3 countered that the news about the Austrian teenagers consisted of

“manipulations by the Police to deter potential women who would like to leave for Syria and to offer a distorted image of the people who go there.” Case 4 provides a similar example. He argued in a virtual conversation with a friend that the hadiths usually employed as evidence to disprove IS “could have been fabricated by the police. Many hadiths have been fabricated for political purposes and many hadith scholars have criticized Kitab al fitan for having very weak and strange narrations.”<sup>51</sup> “And me doubting so much for nothing” he followed, alluding to the initial effect such hadiths had had on him.

Too often, youngsters derogated opposing ties out of a sense of moral superiority, claiming to be the only ones in their immediate environment who accurately interpreted the Islamic tradition. Confident in this presumed correct observance of religious norms, duties, and responsibilities, they also denied the personal relevance of unfavorable social views. Case 6 defied the sanctions and continuous pressures from her mother to desist from her plans to travel to Syria on the grounds that she was ignorant of Islam. In an online chat with a like-minded peer, the girl justified her refusal to comply with her mother’s demands: “It is not possible to obey a created being in disobedience to its creator.”<sup>52</sup> She went on with a proud reaffirmation of her standpoints while neglecting the signals of disapproval: “I don’t need anyone to understand me. I have already understood my religion. I’m on the right path, and with Allah’s permission, I’ll do my duty and emigrate.”<sup>53</sup>

The data also shows how jihadists developed their capacity to resist opposing influences by leaning on referents who shared their beliefs and could validate the correctness of their views. The reliance on reinforcing sources of influence allowed some of them to maintain a sense of confidence, an illusion of personal control over future events, and to disregard warnings about the repercussions of their actions. Case 3

acted in that way when she disdained a friend's warning messages: "And as for what you said about prison, I swear I don't care. The best sheiks, those who induce and talk about the obligation of jihad and talk with truth and knowledge, are in jail."

### *Selective social exposure*

Jihadists also resisted the negative effects of social disagreement by interrupting their exposure to opposing influences. As dissonance and disapproval are diluted in homogenous environments, some sampled individuals created structurally and attitudinally coherent social networks to reduce their chances of encountering alternative belief systems, receiving contrasting messages, and facing social hostility. Social closure often comprised two concurrent movements: as youngsters withdrew from interactions with dissenting partners, they intensified their physical or virtual connections with like-minded people. Case 9 stopped hanging out with her group of friends as criticism and rebuttals against her sympathy for IS and cautions against the influence exercised by her boyfriend intensified: "My friends, my family, they didn't want me to go with him. And as much as everyone was against it, I became more and more attached to him. And, at the same time, I stopped partying. I just quit going out."

The qualitative evidence shows that this redefinition of their communities' boundaries first targeted those contacts who acted as direct sources of disagreement. However, in most cases, the exclusionary drift extended to other members of the youths' personal networks who belonged to social categories that had acquired a novel relevant and determining distinctiveness, and who might pose a challenge to their worldview and sense of self. Jihadists often used religious affiliation as a dividing line when initially determining who fit into their group and who did not, as Case 8 recounted:

“I stopped hanging out with my friends. I had a friend whose father was a policeman, so I didn’t talk to her anymore. My friends who were Christians, I didn’t see them again. My friends were those who, for me, were no longer friends because they were unfaithful, unbelievers.”

Sampled youths also avoided being exposed to influences that contradicted their perceptions, values, and beliefs by distancing themselves from other Muslims who adhered to alternate understandings of Islam, and who therefore held competing views on the very roots that inspire pro-jihadist attitudes. This preference for social closure appears to have been aided by source derogation strategies that accentuated differences in judgment between individuals and diminished the perception of shared group membership. For Case 11, the indications of his most radical close acquaintances led him to reduce the diversity of attitudes in his social surroundings under the pretense that the majority of those closest to him were poor observers of Islam. In this way, a false social consensus sympathetic to the goals and tactics of jihadist groups was imposed:

“One day, they told me: ‘Hey, the other day we saw you walking with Said. You shouldn’t hang out with him. He’ll lead you astray. You have to keep yourself pure’. ‘But we’ve always been friends’ (...) ‘If you’re walking with us, you can’t do that. You can’t go around with whoever you want because they’re going to see you with us and they’re going to think we’re that way. If you want to be a good Muslim, this is the way’. So, I gradually reduced my friendships, my social circles.”

Not all of the sampled individuals ended up in social bubbles, however. Notably, qualitative data failed to reveal any indication of a selective social exposure strategy among youngsters who did not exhibit out-group rejection. Case 2 serves as an illustration. He described his conversion to Islam as an individual process which only became salient “from my bedroom door inwards” and that did not alter the way he saw and treated his significant others: “I didn’t care if someone was an atheist or a Christian;

only that he was a good person.” He noted that despite his increasingly radical convictions, he did not separate himself from his community:

“My case is not like that of people who became radicalized and then distanced themselves from others. No, I didn't go through that. I remained the same with my family, with my friends... the same as always. The weekend before [I left for Syria], I had a basketball game, and I went. On Saturday and Sunday, I partied with my friends. And on Thursday, I left.”

### *Circumvention*

A less common strategy used by jihadists to resolve the conflict between their aspirational goals and the preferences and demands of their closest ties was to keep their radical ideologies or violent aspirations hidden to avoid disagreement being aimed directly at them. The few youngsters who opted for self-censorship cared about rejection from those for whom they felt respect with whom they had strong emotional connection and feared the consequences that being subjected to social censure would have on their opportunities to pursue their goals. The abovementioned Case 2 explained that, by circumventing his immediate environment, he was able to maintain harmony with relatives and friends who shared neither his religion nor his approach to the Syrian conflict. More significantly, he acted in this manner so as not to have to compromise his ideological leanings to preserve social acceptance from those close to him:

“If [my mother] had told me ‘no’... [if] she had found out about [my plans to travel to Syria] and she had told me ‘no’, that would have been the end of it for me. Also, internet and stuff. No, no, no... This reaches my mother’s ear and [she would have said] ‘stop there... Don’t move from there’. And I can’t say ‘no’ to my mother.”

Jihadists also resorted to circumvention when they feared their militant intentions would be thwarted by members of their personal networks who were sympathetic to jihad but opposed individual participation in political violence. Case 1

took every precaution to keep the measures she had taken in her progress towards terrorist activity from her sister, despite that sister having been crucial in starting and sustaining her radicalization. She hid her visits to Salafist mosques, her social media connections with jihadist activists, and later also her travel plans to the caliphate, as recounted in a police statement:

“She declares that on August 1, she left her sister’s house at six o’clock in the morning, went to the Castillejos border, from where she took a taxi to Tétouan, where she took a bus to Al Hoceima. That the money she had was given to her by her sister a long time ago, without the sister knowing what she was going to use it for. That when she left her sister’s house, her sister asked her where she was going, the affiant told her that she was going out but that she was going to come back. That her sister did not see the suitcase, as the affiant had left it outside the night before.”<sup>54</sup>

## **Discussion**

This article contributes to the literature on the role of social ties in terrorist participation by presenting a framework that explains how jihadists experience opposing social influences and resist their effects. The framework identifies that interpersonal bonds opposing jihadist involvement exerted their influence through information and norms, and that these mechanisms were countered through cognitive and social resistance strategies. Drawing on a maximum variation sample of juveniles involved in jihadism in Spain, the findings further discern variances in the interactions between the jihadists and their disagreeing significant others. The study also provides the basis for testing, in the specific context of jihadist mobilization, theoretical assumptions about the relationship between social disagreement and participation in political action.

### *Jihadists' experience and resistance of opposing social influences*

Efforts to prevent the sampled youths' jihadist mobilization by disagreeing members of their personal networks can be interpreted in terms of the distinction between informational and normative forms of social influence. Findings show that when opposing social ties tried to induce attitudinal change, they usually did it via either the creation of reasons to agree or pressures to comply.<sup>55</sup> Further, the means by which informational and normative influence might flow (confrontation of perspectives, exposure to warnings, and pressures and constraints) demonstrate that relatives, friends, and other acquaintances tried to exploit dissonance and disapproval as primary causal mechanisms to produce desistance from terrorist involvement.

Opposing ties exposed the sampled individuals with information that contradicted their prior views, motivating doubts and sparking reconsideration of their positions. In line with previous research, the results suggest that network members who had a more sophisticated and up-to-date understanding of politics and religion, as well as those who were not afraid to have difficult conversations, were more likely to talk to jihadists about their attitudes.<sup>56</sup> Variations in how informational influence was exercised were also due to the extent and nature of disagreement between network members, as other studies have shown. Those youngsters who maintained a pro-jihadist stance in isolation from their social circle were exposed to evidence and opinions that contradicted key constructs of their radical worldview and had the integrity and trustworthiness of their social ties and information sources questioned. In contrast, those others who were immersed in jihadist-friendly social environments, while opposed to individual involvement, were subject to an informational influence that fundamentally

discouraged their participation in terrorism on the basis of risks and costs that the young people had not contemplated.

Opposing ties also attempted to curb jihadist participation by promoting compliance with norms based on custom, family tradition, community practices, or mainstream conventions. Social disapproval was expressed when youths were exposed to critics of their radical acquaintances or their activities. They also faced explicit social rejection and hostilities from their closest contacts, were physically removed from environments that enabled their radicalization and recruitment, and, in some instances, even their detention was facilitated to prevent jihadist mobilization. Results seem consistent with previous work indicating that individuals attempt to capitalize on their capacity to enforce normative influence when they hold the majority opinion in the social aggregate – and therefore form part of the social consensus that determines what is acceptable – and when their target of influence depends on them in some way – for welfare and safety, for instance, as is the case with parents or older siblings.<sup>57</sup> This last aspect also helps us to understand that individuals sometimes try to impose norms against participation in high-risk, high-cost political activities even when they themselves participate, as other previous works have found.<sup>58</sup>

This study further shows that the effects of social disagreement that are theoretically expected to reduce jihadist involvement did not operate in such a manner. The pattern of results evinces that intrapersonal and interpersonal tensions may occur and still not cause a change in attitude. While dissonance produced ambiguity and doubts in youngsters, and disapproval made them feel socially uncomfortable, neither agreement nor conformity ensued, and thus jihadists persisted in their radical attitudes despite social efforts to prevent violent mobilization. In this regard, the thematic analysis lends credence to the hypothesis that individuals are capable of resisting

attitudinal change when social influence targets attitudes to which they are strongly committed. In particular, the analysis found that different cognitive (contestation) and social resistance strategies (selective social exposure, circumvention) helped the sampled individuals override and mitigate the effects of informative and normative forms of influence.

Resistance to opposing influences is a complex phenomenon, insofar as the nature and intensity of its manifestations may differ among individuals. In coincidence with previous theoretical explanations, this study finds that while disagreement prompted some of the sampled individuals to defend their ideas and thus expose themselves voluntarily to dissonance and disapproval, others chose to suppress it from their immediate environment, so as to avoid the discomfort of knowledge inconsistency and social criticism, and a minority maneuvered to prevent it from even manifesting itself, in order to preserve the state of their social relations and their public image.

These competing responses are, however, not that disconnected. The analysis suggests that contestation and selective social exposure are cognitive and behavioral strategies through which opposing ties are denied their status as sources of information and normativity, because the sense of shared group membership between young people and their disagreeing significant others has been diluted. In the qualitative corpus, both strategies appear linked to a strong in-group identification and out-group demonization, in consistency with explorations of closed-mindedness. It could be argued that when the young people sampled began to see those with opposing views as dissimilar, deviated, or corrupting, when they imputed ignorance, dishonesty, or immorality to those who disapproved of them, they started to exclude the countervailing ties from their in-group, and eventually no longer felt receptive to the substance of their arguments or pressured to comply with their expectations. Interestingly, these results are also in line with

theoretical approaches to social group influence that have emphasized that one is socially influenced even without direct interpersonal contact. This explains why the sampled individuals reshaped the boundaries of their community of interactions to keep out even those who had not tried to exert on them a conscious, deliberate effort to induce behavioral change, but who were nevertheless clearly outside their in-group.

Cognitive and social closure were not always explicitly manifested, however. Those sampled who opted for circumvention ignored dissenting arguments without reacting to opposing views, justifying themselves or limiting social relationships, and often avoided the causes of disagreement in their interactions in order to evade their effects. Yet circumvention demonstrates that jihadists can disregard their oppositional ties as informationally and/or normatively inconsequential, while still seeking acceptance and a sense of belonging and purpose from those same members of their personal networks. Consequently, it stands to reason that the sampled individuals preferred this strategy to challenge members of their personal networks who sympathized with jihadism but failed to support their violent mobilization.

### ***Implications and limitations***

By showing that interpersonal and intrapersonal tensions caused by disagreement did not curb jihadist involvement, this article contradicts research that connects exposure to discrepancies with non-participation in political activities<sup>59</sup> in general, and violent extremist activities in particular.<sup>60</sup> The results of this study, however, raise other important questions about causality. Is it possible, as one stream within studies of social disagreement and political action suggests, that exposure to oppositional influences positively influenced these youths' violent mobilization? Even though this article cannot go so far as to prove a causal relationship, it can postulate, in accordance with

the theoretical framework, the potential ways in which social opposition may have contributed to jihadist participation to some extent. If jihadists looked to congruent sources of information and like-minded people to alleviate their ambivalence and anxiety, it can be inferred that they achieved their needed level of attitudinal confidence in dealing with oppositional influences. The results also lend credence to the hypothesis that the confrontation of viewpoints with their oppositional ties may have prompted jihadists to reinforce and reaffirm their radical attitudes towards jihadism as a defensive response against threats to their strongest ideological commitments. Finally, the results also allow us to argue that jihadists might have mitigated the distress caused by social disapproval by strengthening their attachment to their constituencies comprised of like-minded individuals, ultimately boosting their personal commitment to jihadism. These hypotheses mark lines along which to advance the work begun in this article.

Both the understanding of how jihadists resist social influences opposing extremism and how disagreement can impact individual engagement in terrorism offer important insights for policymakers and practitioners seeking to prevent violent radicalization. To the extent that a central pillar in the design of public policies to fight extremism has consisted of the dissemination of virtual content that counteracts the propaganda of jihadist organizations, the empowerment of credible voices that question the legitimacy of the religious interpretation of Salafi-jihadism, or the promotion of social diversity in all its dimensions – and with it the potential exposure to dissent – the unintended and undesirable effects that these initiatives may have, in terms of an exacerbation of resistance strategies that nullify any positive influence or that even bolster violent mobilization, must be anticipated and taken into account.

Although this study contributes to advancing a research agenda on the impact of conflicting social influences on participation in terrorism-related activities, it is not

without limitations. A number of methodological and analytical constraints should be taken into account. First, the retrospective accounts collected in the semi-structured interviews represent a potential source of inaccurate information, as they might be altered by selective memory, a posteriori rationalization, or deliberate omission. Secondly, the other two sources of information (oral trials and documentary evidence) provided only an episodic view of the relationship between the young people in the sample and their opposing ties, as only passages captured in phone taps, WhatsApp conversations, or social networks were available. This makes it advisable to be cautious in interpreting and generalizing the results. Third, the small sample size may have reduced the observable diversity of the phenomenon studied. It is possible that a larger number of cases would have led to a more thorough understanding of the attempts of jihadists' opposing social ties to alter their attitudes and interfere in their decisions to participate in terrorism-related activities, as well as of the way jihadists resist and confront such influential efforts.

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