

# nation+world

## THE FACES OF JIHAD

By JOHN-THOR DAHLBURG and MISHA DZHINDZHIKHASHVILI • Associated Press

One day this April, instead of coming home from school, two teenagers left their valley high in the Caucasus and went off to war. ¶ In Morocco, a husband and father left his family for the battlefields of Syria. ¶ From New Zealand came a former security guard; from Belgium, a 20-year-old who loved girls and going to the disco. ¶ And there have been many, many more: between 16,000 and 17,000, according to one independent Western estimate, men and a small number of women from 90 countries or more who have streamed to Syria and Iraq to wage Muslim holy war for the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant. ¶ Ten to 15 percent of the enlistees are believed to have died in action. ¶ The contingent of foreigners who have taken up arms on behalf of ISIL during the past 3½ years is more than twice as big as the French Foreign Legion, and according to a study by German security authorities, “there is no typical profile” for those who join. ¶ “Every person can contribute something to the Islamic State,” a Canadian enlistee, Andre Poulin, said in a videotaped statement used for online recruitment. “You can easily earn yourself a higher station with God almighty for the next life by sacrificing just a small bit of this worldly life.” ¶ The transplant from Ontario urges in the video, “Put God almighty before your family, put it before yourself, put it before everything. Put Allah before everything.”



### The wayward son

LEIDEN, NETHERLANDS - The father says he did not raise his son as a Muslim — and he regrets his decision now.

Maybe if Reda Nidalha, born and bred in the historic Dutch university city of Leiden, had learned about moderate Islam, it would have been harder for extremists to “brainwash” him and help him travel to Syria, his father said.

Mohamed Nidalha sent his son to Belgium to stay with his uncle after Reda fell in with a bad set of friends in Leiden.

But Reda soon came into online contact with a Belgian in Syria who linked him up with a notorious terror recruiting network, Sharia4Belgium.

The 20-year-old who grew up liking girls and going to discos suddenly changed, thanks to a toxic cocktail of online propaganda and covert contact with extremists in Belgium, one of Europe’s hot spots for Islamic radicals.

“He went to the mosque, grew a beard and went to readings somewhere in a secret place — not in a mosque, but in a house somewhere,” says Nidalha, a 49-year-old immigrant from Morocco. “There, he was brainwashed, and prepared. Inside two months he was made totally crazy.”

Reda is emblematic for hundreds of disaffected Muslim youngsters from the largely secular countries of Belgium and the Netherlands who have turned their backs on their liberal Western societies and been sucked into the sectarian maelstrom of Syria’s civil war. A Dutch intelligence agency estimates around 180 Dutch citizens left the country to fight in 2014 alone.

Nidalha is at a loss to explain why exactly his son turned to violent extremism while trying to make a fresh start in Belgium.

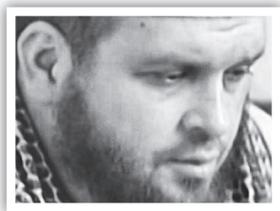
But he suspects the jihadi recruiters saw in his son an easy mark — a kid from a broken home struggling with life and looking for a new direction.

“They pick on the easiest prey they can easily brainwash,” Nidalha said.

Reda has been gone for almost a year now. Nidalha is certain he won’t see his boy alive again, but worries what he would be like if he did return.

“Imagine my son comes back. What kind of son do I get back? I don’t get the same son as before,” he said. “Because my son has now learned things there in Syria. My son might be able to make bombs now, maybe he can shoot.”

MIKE CORDER



### The lonely convert

WELLINGTON, NEW ZEALAND - Before he left New Zealand, Mark Taylor spoke with a local television network. “I’ve been lonely all my life,” he said. “Been rejected by people. Used by people. Abused by people.”

He said that by converting to Islam, he’d become part of a community.

“Because the good thing about being Muslim is you can walk into virtually any mosque and pray,” he told TV3 News, “and people would welcome you.”

When Taylor, 42, began visiting a mosque in the city of Hamilton about four years ago, worshippers there saw him as lonely, a little lost and possessing a childlike view of the world. They didn’t see any anger or radicalism in the security guard who said he was a former Army soldier.

And so they were not only appalled but also worried for him when he resurfaced last year in Syria, describing himself as an adventurer and posting social media messages under the Twitter handle “Kiwi Jihadi.”

Authorities estimate only half-a-dozen New Zealanders have traveled to Syria to fight with ISIL. It’s unclear how they’ve become radicalized, although Taylor’s case might provide a clue: He’s acknowledged listening to the sermons of the late U.S.-born Al-Qaida preacher Anwar al-Awlaki.

How Taylor managed to leave New Zealand — despite being closely monitored — has raised questions about the effectiveness of the country’s intelligence and immigration agencies.

He had been arrested in 2009 in proximity to Al-Qaida militants in the Pakistani region of Waziristan. He told authorities he was there looking for a bride, and was later released.

Diplomatic cables leaked to WikiLeaks show Australian authorities recommended in 2010 that Taylor be placed on a watch list because of his “demonstrated connections” with al-Awlaki. In 2011, New Zealand Prime Minister John Key said a number of restrictions had been placed on Taylor.

Taylor’s Twitter profile says he is “in Dawlah Islam, Islamic state,” though his current status is unclear. In April, he posted a video calling on ISIL supporters in New Zealand and Australia who have had their passports confiscated to commit terrorist acts at home, “even if it means you have to stab a few police officers or soldiers.”

NICK PERRY



### The role model

BIRKIANI, GEORGIA - In the summer of 2012, a former Georgian Army corporal who had served prison time for illegal possession of ammunition burned his photo albums and quit his native village.

Tarkhan Batirashvili had wanted to become a policeman, but couldn’t get hired. Now, this offspring of a Christian father and a Muslim mother was about to start a new chapter in his military career — one in which he would be credited with some of ISIL’s most stunning battlefield victories and rise to senior rank.

Last September, the U.S. Treasury Department placed Batirashvili — who now calls himself Omar al-Shishani and is believed by some to be ISIL’s chief of military operations — on its list of “specially designated global terrorists.” But to some in the Pankisi, the mountainous region of northeastern Georgia where he was born in 1986, the ginger-bearded commander is a hero and a role model.

To follow the path he blazed, as many as 200 of his young countrymen have left their villages. Batirashvili’s father, Temur, is aghast.

“It’s monstrous what’s going on in the valley, that they are deceiving these kids and they’re leaving to fight in a foreign land,” the 72-year-old man said. “My son should not be in Syria.”

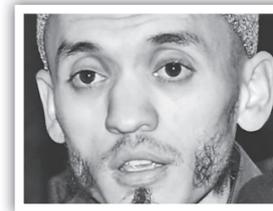
The Pankisi is home to an estimated 5,000-7,000 descendants of Muslim Chechens who settled here in the 19th century. In the village of Omalo, locals say, a green-tile roofed building is used by preachers from the Wahabi branch of Sunni Islam to enlist volunteers for jihad.

On April 2, 16-year-old Muslim Kushtanashvili and his schoolmate Ramzan Bagakashvili, 18, joined the valley’s recruits to ISIL. That Thursday, the teens left as usual for their school in Omalo. They never came home.

Muslim called friends later to say he was in Turkey. Then word came back that the 10th-grader had crossed into Syria. Muslim had no passport, so his family can’t understand why Georgian border guards let him fly out of the country. They suspect authorities are protecting the recruiters.

“Here they are stirring up things, recruiting youths,” said Tina Alkanashvili, Bagakashvili’s mother. “You can’t get authorities to watch them.”

MISHA DZHINDZHIKHASHVILI



### The embittered activist

RABAT, MOROCCO - Journalists and activists in Morocco during the heady days of the Arab Spring knew Anas Haloui, a slight, serious, wispy-bearded man in his 30s who would bombard them with e-mails about the plight of jailed Islamists.

Unlike many Salafis, as followers of his ultraconservative strand of Islam are known, he was eager to engage with people who didn’t share his beliefs.

But one day in December 2013, Haloui left behind his wife and children and quit Morocco to join a group linked to ISIL.

“I love my country with my last breath, but I was a victim of injustice,” he said in a letter of farewell.

His older brother, Yusuf, remembers a different Anas — one who enjoyed singing. He recalls a cheerful boy in a family of eight kids growing up in the foothills of the Rif mountains.

Haloui attended Fez University, but after the 2003 Casablanca suicide bombings by young Islamic radicals that claimed 45 lives, Haloui dropped out and returned home. His efforts to distance himself from his student activism were in vain. He was arrested and convicted of forming an extremist group and spent three years in prison. When he got out in 2007, he was a changed man, his brother said.

The 2011 Arab Spring demonstrations in the region inspired Haloui. He joined the protests with secular activists. Morocco got a new constitution promising greater freedoms. But the police soon returned to their old habits. One day men in plainclothes picked up Haloui’s fiancée, slapped her around and warned her against marrying him.

“After this his personality changed,” said his brother. “His dreams were shattered.”

Haloui’s attention turned to the bloodshed in Syria. “We know it is a war of extermination and that the only way to stop them from harming the innocents is through arms, God may one day ask us where we were during the Syrian events,” he said in his goodbye letter.

In April 2013, his family learned through Facebook that he had died on a Syrian battlefield.

PAUL SCHEMM