

Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq and the socio-economic environment they faced at home: a comparison of European countries

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Abstract:

The contribution looks at the gap in labour market and school outcomes between first and second generation migrants and non-migrants in European countries. It correlates these socio-economic data with the number of foreign fighters per million inhabitants. Far from offering a full, causal and micro-level model to understand the story completely, the contribution finds a clear and robust pattern across Europe.

Key Words: exclusion, labour markets, PISA test scores, Europe, terrorism

JEL Classification: J7, O5, I2

“In Belgium it is easier for me to get an unemployment benefit than to get a job” (quoting a recent MA graduate of African descent from my university who, a few months later, left for Canada)

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Introduction

The terrorist attack on Paris has brought Brussels to the center of global attention when it turned out that the attack was organized and executed by a Brussels-based terrorist cell. Its presumed leader, Abdelhamid Abaaoud, armed to the teeth, was shot dead a few days later in a Paris suburb. Like him, other terrorists who mounted an attack recently have the link with Brussels in common as well as their affiliation with and training by Islamic State. Fortunately, only a small minority of returned Syria fighters commits terrorist attacks. This contribution will not go into the burning question on why and how that terrorist cell committed its attack. Neither will I discuss the equally burning question of the intelligence failure to prevent the attacks. Instead, I want to address the wider question of why many young adults from Europe join Islamic State.

Push and pull factors can be distinguished. The latter are feelings of belonging to a group, contribution to the cause, fun and adventure, the lure of power for the man with the gun, and more of that sort. I am not going into these pull factors here, even when they represent another set of burning questions that need to be addressed to get a full understanding of the phenomenon. Here, I want to focus on the push factors.

Do young adults with a migration background face different constraints compared to their non-migrant counterparts in European countries? I want to address this question at the aggregate, cross-country level, linking two domains – the labour market and the school system, which in essence represent two of the most important institutions that young adults face in their encounters with “society” - with the departure of young adults to join Islamic State. These domains as well as the departure are heavily discussed in the popular press, but to the best of my knowledge, nobody has presented quantitative evidence on the link.

Long before the terrorist attack in Paris and before the ascent of Islamic State, social scientists and civic society in Europe discussed and condemned the arrears of migrants in the labour market and in the school system (for Belgium, see Glorieux et al, 2006, 2009, for France see Valfort, Adida and Laitin, 2010, 2014, 2015). Meaning that the non-enviable position of migrants in the labour market and in the school system is fully part of common knowledge in European academic, civic and policy circles (OECD, 2015) for many years already. It has improved in recent years, but Belgium still lags behind the rest of Europe. Even in 2015, migrants and their offspring continue to face daunting challenges in the labour market and in the school system, in some countries more than in others.

In this contribution, I will not use micro-level data nor present a causal analysis of the factors that drive young people to join Islamic State. My sample size (N=14) will be too small for that. It could very well be that the young adults who join IS are not the most disadvantaged within their group. There seems indeed to be evidence that they finished school and held a job. And leadership types could bring followers with them. But that is not the purpose of what I want to do here. I rather want to present a series of correlations between the number of Syria fighters and the socio-economic environment, faced by the

generation from which IS recruits. The purpose is to observe variation across European countries, including a potential pattern, but refraining from causal interpretation and micro-level interpretation. My take on the 'structural' factors can only serve as an incomplete analysis of recruitment. I know very well that one has to bring in the agency of a potential recruit and look at the micro-level evidence to come to a fuller understanding.

Data and Method

Looking out for comparative data between European countries, I naturally turned to Eurostat, to the European Union Labour Force Surveys (EU-LFS) and to the OECD. The group of persons that are of particular interest for this analysis are the second generation migrants, in other words, the native-born offspring of foreign-born parents as IS overwhelmingly recruits from this group. Most of them have the nationality of the country in which they resided before leaving to Syria or Iraq, or the nationality of another European country. Ideally, I want to compare the situation of this group in school and in the labour market with that of the native-born offspring of native-born parents.

The data can be found, but one has to tease them out. Eurostat, to start with, distinguishes between persons with and without the nationality of the country of residence, and between countries of birth. In that way, we cannot distinguish second generation migrants from native-born offspring of native-born parents as both are born in the country of residence and (most) have the nationality of a European country. Fortunately, the recent OECD report on migrants and their integration (2015) presents data on the second generation (native-born offspring of foreign-born parents). For some countries however, key variables are missing in the OECD data, thereby reducing the sample size from 14 to 12 countries.

Hence, I will use two definitions of migration to compare data between non-migrants and migrants. The first is from Eurostat and the EU-LFS. This allows me to present comparative data across 14 European countries on the employment rate of own nationals and non-EU nationals. This should give us an idea of the (variation in) challenges faced by migrants on the labour market of European countries. While these challenges certainly do not disappear when a migrant has or acquires the nationality of the country of residence (see for example the work on name-based discrimination in the labour market in France by Adida et al mentioned above), I agree that the situation of non-EU nationals in Europe is not necessarily the same as that of second generation migrants. As the latter group is of particular interest here, I also use a second definition of migrants: I present data (for 12 countries) comparing the unemployment rate for 25 to 34 year old native-born offspring from native-born parents to that of native-born offspring of foreign-born parents. This is as close as a definition can get to finding comparable data on the target group. I want to stress that these samples are not samples of convenience. I take each time the largest group of European countries for which the data were available in a comparative way, meaning collected under the same definition by either Eurostat or the OECD.

Since I am also interested in the schooling of the (offspring of) migrants, I also work with the PISA test score data. In PISA, one can compare indicators for second generation students with those of native-born students from native born parents.

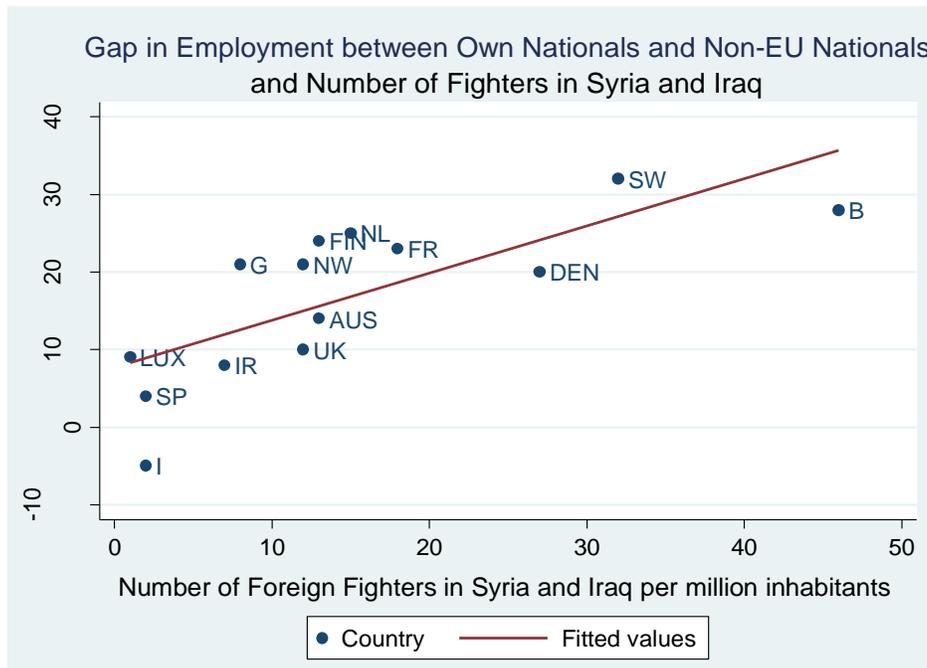
Thus, I am using four data sources: (i) from Eurostat and from the European Union Labour Force Surveys (EU-LFS) I am using employment data of the year 2010. These data give an adequate picture of the situation potential recruits faced on the labour market before their departure. During 2005-2008, the situation of migrants on the labour market in Europe improved somewhat compared to 2001-2004 (Kansengroepen in Kaart, 2012, p.10), but worsened again with the 2009-2010 economic crisis; (ii) I am using data on the employment situation of second generation migrants, defined in OECD, 2015 as “native-born offspring of foreign-born parents”. These data are available for the year 2013, which is later than what I prefer, but I am confident that the gap between the second generation migrants and the native-born from native-born parents did not change much between 2010 and 2013; (iii) I also use (pooled) PISA test scores in mathematics for the PISA waves of 2003, 2006, 2009 and 2012. The reasons for these dates are the same as for the labour market, they are readily available and they represent the situation of migrants in the school system at the moment that most Syria fighters were in school. As students take the PISA test age 15, the pooled sample should capture the situation of Syria fighters when they were at school, for younger as well as older fighters; and (iv) I am using the number of fighters that left for Syria and Iraq per million inhabitants. The data on fighters are retrieved from the international Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence in New York and are updated to mid-2015. I found these data online at the website of Radio Free Europe – Radio Liberty, retrieved on November 28, 2015.

Main Result

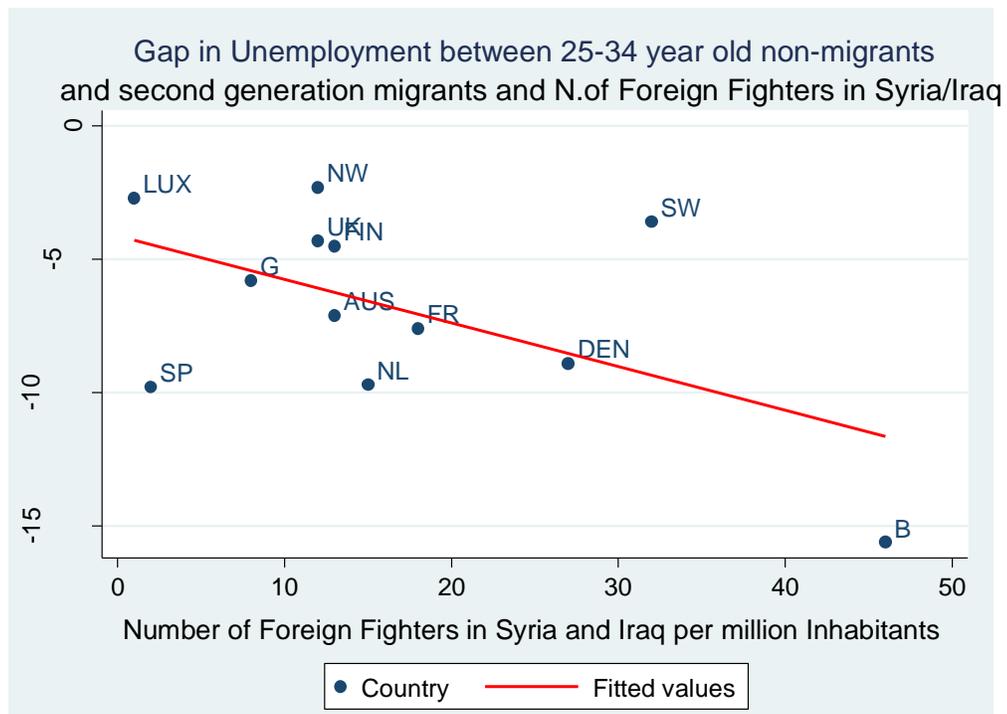
Graphs 1(a) and 1(b) show a positive correlation between the gap in employment of migrants and non-migrants on the one hand and the number of Syria fighters per million inhabitants on the other hand in a sample of European countries. Belgium is performing worst on both indicators. The Pearson correlation coefficient between both variables is 0.74 (see Table 1) in graph 1(a) and -0.55 in graph 1(b), which is high. The first is statistically significant at the 1% level, the second at the 7% level. Correlation is not the same as causation. I refrain from attributing the high number of Syria fighters in Belgium and elsewhere solely to their situation in the labour market. I am not looking for one causal factor, that would be ridiculous for such a complex phenomenon. Having said that, the graphs show a pattern across Europe.

Graph 1

(1a) First definition of migrant, N=14



(1b) Alternative definition, N=12



On average, across the EU, the youth unemployment rate among native-born offspring of foreign born parents is 15% whereas it is 10% for the native-born offspring of native-born parents. This allowed the authors of the 2015 OECD report to write: "In the European Union, the youth unemployment rate among native-born offspring of immigrant parents is almost 50% higher than among the young with native-born parents." (OECD, 2015, p.232). Graph (1b), based on the OECD data, shows the remarkable differences between European countries: from 6.3 versus 21.9% for Belgium making a difference of -15.6 and from 4.9 to 14.6 for the Netherlands, making a difference of -9.7 to Germany, the UK and Norway with smaller differences.

Is there a selection effect?

It could be that the profile of migrants in Belgium and other bad performing countries is different from that of other countries. Migrants in bad performing countries could be more violent and combat-ready compared to migrants in other countries, and/or, they could be lower educated and more vulnerable to unemployment. Social scientists and economists call such situation a 'selection effect', meaning that the bad performers would be home to a group of migrants with particular characteristics that ill-prepare them for school and for the labour market.

(i) Selection on violence?

The scarce literature on the attitudes towards violence mostly deals with differences between migrant communities *within* one country, for example those of Moroccan vs Turkish descent. It seems very unlikely that the migrants in bad performing countries have other *innate* attitudes compared to their colleagues in other European countries. Let me add here "at the time of migration" or "at the outset", because it could be that several other factors influence the attitudes towards violence among migrants, after migration. These factors could be different across Europe. One of those factors is the recruitment of young adults by Salafist preachers. Another is the presence of mosques spreading an ultra-conservative interpretation of the Koran and of Islam (Wahabism). I have not studied how present these factors are in other European countries, but they are very present in Belgium for example. In any event, this factor is an external intervention. It cannot be attributed to the innate characteristics of the migrant population. It also begs the question why Salafist preachers are more present in certain countries/cities compared to others.

(ii) selection on the level of education?

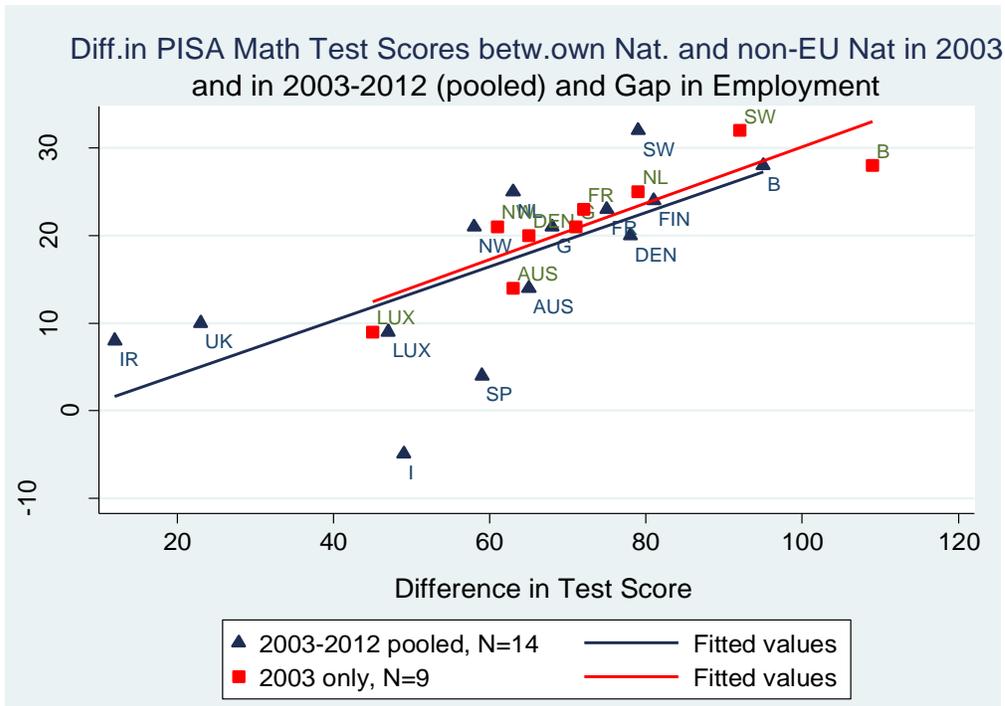
The second part of a potential 'selection effect' lies in the level of education and its corollary, the vulnerability to unemployment of the migrants. Here, there is more evidence. The OECD (2015, p.28) classifies Austria, Belgium, France, the Netherlands and Germany as longstanding destinations of lower-educated migrants. That could thus play a role. We note however that 4 of these 5 group members seem to belong to a 'middle-performing' cluster of countries in Graph 1a, not the best, but not the worst either.

As any school director can tell, it is much easier to achieve great test scores if your students are high performing already before they came to your school. At this stage, I want to bring in evidence from the PISA studies (very large program of student testing at age 15). Graph 2 shows the correlation between the difference in test scores between migrants and non-migrants on the mathematics test on the one hand and the gap between the % of non-migrants in employment compared to migrants on the other hand (as also used in Graph 1). Graph 2a shows a positive correlation, larger differences in test scores correlate with larger gaps in employment. The Pearson correlation coefficient is 0.87^{***} with test scores of 2003 (this is when the average recruit for IS was 15 years old). The correlation coeff. is 0.67^{***} when we pool all math scores for the years 2003 to 2012 as they are reported in PISA in FOCUS (OECD, 2015,p.4). I remark that these coefficients are not reproduced in Table 1.

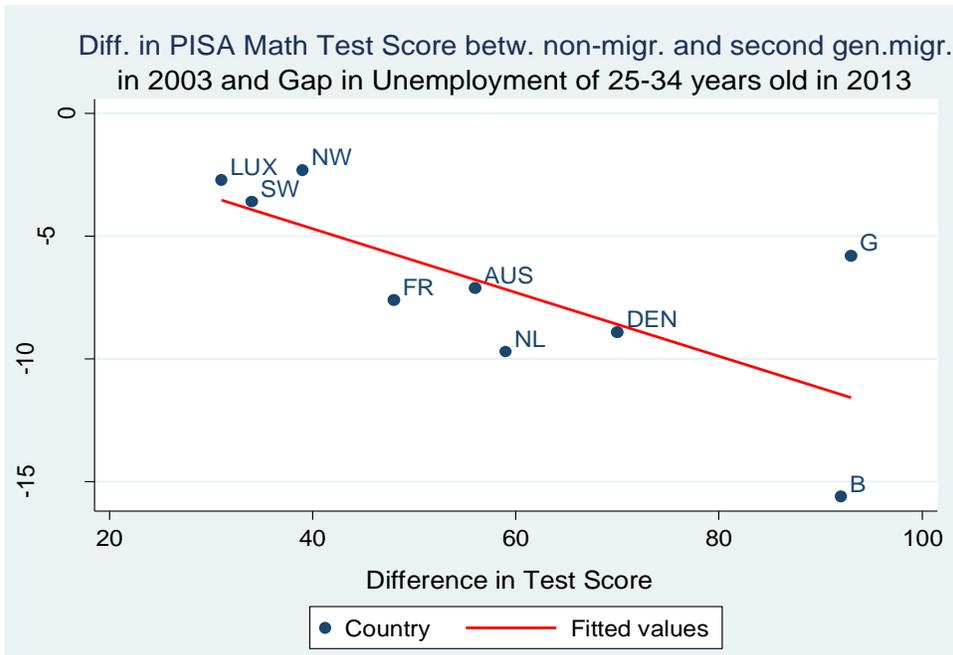
The result using the alternative definition of migration is shown in Graph 2b. The Pearson corr. coeff. of -0.72^{**} , stat. significant at the 4% level. Our sample size however is further reduced from 12 to 9 as PISA 2003 data for three countries are not available. As before, Belgium performs the worst of the entire class, having the largest difference in test scores compared to non-migrants of any PISA country. Backed by several research reports by Glorieux et al (2006, 2009), a 2012 report of regional labour bureau of Flanders (VDAB) on the situation of migrants on the labour market already noted: "the dire situation on the labour market is a consequence of the equally dire situation in the school system" (Kansengroepen in kaart, p.14).

Graph 2

(2a) First definition of migrant



(2b) Second definition of migrant



When one performs a similar analysis at the school level, comparing PISA test score for math in schools with a high concentration of migrants and without migrants, the difference in Belgium is +70 points, the second highest in all of PISA countries (PISA in Focus, 2015, p.2). Importantly, the OECD also reports the difference after accounting for school and student socio-economic status. This captures the above mentioned selection effect to a great extent. In this case, the difference in test scores for Belgian schools with an high concentration of migrants and without migrants is reduced to +30. It remains however the third largest in all of the PISA countries. Two countries from the group of “longstanding migration of lower-educated” (see above), The Netherlands and Germany, manage to do away with the difference completely after accounting for the socio-economic situation of the students and the schools.

Hence, the level of education at entry point can only partly explain the dismal performance of migrants in Belgian schools. The other part is to be find in the school system itself, in particular for second and third generation students, who were born in Belgium and went to school there. There is a lot of evidence that the school system in itself is a major contributor to the dismal performance of (the children of) migrants. It caters very well to the children from middle-class, but its curriculum, teacher training, way of testing and school culture fail to connect with the lives and aspirations of migrant children.

Table 1: Pearson Corr. Coeff. between a set of socio-economic indicators and the per capita number of Foreign Fighters who went to Syria/Iraq from 14 European Countries

Correlation Coefficient	Gap in (un) Employment Rate	Gap in residence in urban areas(b)	Gap in Rel. Poverty rate (c)
definition 1 of migrant, N=14	0.74***(a)	0.60**	0.32
definition 2 of migrant, N=12	- 0.55* (a')	0.53*	0.30

Notes: I am using the difference between migrants and non-migrants, as the non-differentiated value of the indicator risks to capture the state of the economy in general, which I want to avoid. I want to capture the difference between the two groups within each economy.

(a) The employment rate is the % of Non-EU migrants *in employment*. Source is the difference in the employment rate of individuals bearing the nationality of each of the countries and Non-EU migrants. Source is the European Union Labour Force Surveys (EU-LFS), 2010 retrieved from Kansengroepen in Kaart, VDAB, 2012, p11. I am using this definition as well as an alternative definition “comparing native-born children from foreign-born parents with native-born children from native-born parents (arguably better for my purpose, as this is the group of second generation migrants). For this alternative I only found data for 12 of the 14 countries (not for Ireland and Italy, data retrieved for 2013 from OECD, 2015, p.263), which reduces my already small sample. Nevertheless, when I calculate the Pearson Corr.Coeff., see (a’) in Table 1 for these 12 countries with the alternative definition applied to the *unemployment rate* of the group of 25-34 years old, I find a corr. coefficient of -0.56, stat. sign. at the 6% level. See the row for N=12. This is measured as difference in the two percentages.

(b) Is the difference in the % of the non-migrant and migrant population residing in cities.

(c) Is the difference between the relative poverty rate for non-migrants and migrants, source:OECD, 2015, p.31

Concluding Remarks

In its edition of November 28, 2015, *The Economist* (*Charlemagne: A continent like Belgium*, p.28) argues to stop bashing Belgium because we are dealing with a European-wide phenomenon. That plea will certainly please the Belgian government, but I doubt that the content of the body of the article will. It dissects the dysfunctionality of Belgium at several levels, only to conclude that many European countries face the same issues. From my analysis above you will expect me to say both “No” and “Yes” as a reply to this concluding question. Starting with the “Yes”, *The Economist* is correct to state that other European countries also have to deal with young adults joining IS in Syria and Iraq. As in Belgium they are also drawn from these countries’ migrant populations. But “No”, because Belgium is at the extreme end for the indicators used in the analysis above: Number of fighters per capita, gap between the employment status of the non-migrants and the migrants as well as the PISA test scores. Hence, it is perfectly legitimate to keep the spotlights on Belgium: the magnitude of the issues in other countries (apart from maybe 2-3) seem a lot smaller.

Just as other European countries, Belgium has a very elaborate welfare state. All citizens have health coverage, schools and universities charge no or few fees, child benefits, unemployment benefits, pensions, are all in place. There does not seem to be a strong correlation with the gap in relative poverty in the sample of 14 (see table1), but there is one with the gap in residence in cities, with its concentrations of disadvantaged neighbourhoods in some European countries. Almost all fighters from Belgium lived in Brussels, Vilvoorde or Antwerp. As I said in the introduction, this does not mean that each individual recruit is or needs to be unemployed for the correlation to hold. Here is what Blattman and Ralston (2015) say about this is a recent extensive overview of employment and violence:

“If terrorist groups want a small cadre of highly motivated, high-performing recruits, it may make sense to recruit from the better educated and even employed. Indeed, giving up gainful employment could be a signal of ideological commitment or other non-material incentives for committed participation. (referring to Krueger and Maleckova (2003)

There is some evidence, however, that poor economic conditions help terror organizations recruit more able, better-educated people to participate in more complex, higher-impact terror missions. For instance, high levels of unemployment seem to have enabled Palestinian terror organizations to recruit better educated, more mature, and more experienced suicide terrorists, who in turn attacked more important Israeli targets” (referring to Benmelech et al (2012)).

The correlations do mean that the larger is the gap with the native population (the larger the disadvantage experienced at the group level) in a given country, the more recruits from that country .

The welfare system comes at a cost of a closed labour market, meaning a labour system that heavily protects those who are in, but makes entry for newcomers very difficult. In fact the opposite as seen in the Anglophone world. In Belgium, just as in the Scandinavian Countries, inequality between citizens measured for example by the Gini coefficient is very low. What

the Gini does not show however is the inequality between the 'natives', 'the second generation' and the 'non-EU nationals', a statistic that seems to show a pattern across Europe when it is put to the test of correlation with the number of Syria fighters per million inhabitants. That is why my African student moved to Canada.

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