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**International Terrorism: How Can Prevention and Repression
Keep Pace?**

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**What is the driving force behind jihadist terrorism? - A
scientific perspective on the causes/circumstances of joining the
scene**

Abstract

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There is no general open data base of Islamic militants who join Al Qaeda or ISIS in Europe. A scientific quantitative analysis is thus difficult to do. But there are a lot of individual stories describing the path of radicalization. In fact most of the militants who joined these organizations have been identified: moreover their life story and background are quite well documented, not only through police investigation but also by journalists. For instance in France, Merah, the Kouachi Brothers, Koulibaly were identified by the police as “radicals” before they went for action. The data we use are taken from these open sources.

The objective beyond collecting individual stories is to understand the process of radicalization in order to implement a policy of prevention and counter-radicalization. This is a two-fold process: to spot individual radicalization before a person goes for action, and to understand the general causes of radicalization in order to devise a more comprehensive policy aimed at a larger population. The problem is that radicalisation seems more linked to individual trajectories that to the radicalisation of a community, although it is also good news.

The study of individual trajectories allows us to spot a cluster of repeated patterns (but also to spot the absence of patterns that would have been expected). Two caveat. First if general patterns are common in all Europe, there is a different distribution of these patterns according to the different countries (for instance: few French radicals have a connection with a mosque, while the reverse seems to be true in Austria). Secondly there are always exceptions and specific cases.

And here starts the first question: can we draw a general portrait of an Islamist radical; can we define the conditions and circumstances under which he or she may become radical? Are there sociological, psychological, cultural patterns that could be identified as characterizing the radical?

To sum up:

1) There are no psychiatric or psychological specific patterns for radicals. Some come from dysfunctional families, some from “normal” families. Frustration and resentment against the society seems to be the only “psychological” trait that is regularly shared.

2) There is no common sociological background, or more exactly the Muslim radicals share the common sociological background of second generation Muslims (some are not integrated, others have diplomas and jobs), while converts come from diverse milieus (mainly working and low-middle class).

3) Many have a past of petty delinquency and drug dealing. Before turning born-again or converts, they shared a “youth culture” which had nothing to do with Islam. But most of them share the pattern of a sudden and rapid “return” to religion (or conversion). There is a clear “breaking point”.

4) It is clearly a youth movement: almost all of them radicalized to the dismay of their parents and relatives (a huge difference if we compare with Palestinian radicals). It is a peer phenomenon: they radicalize in the framework of a small network of friends, whatever the concrete circumstances of their meeting (neighbourhood, jail, internet, or sport clubs). This puts them often at odds with the traditional view of family and women in Islam. These groups are mixed in gender terms, and the women play often a far important role than they themselves claim (Boumediene in the Charlie Hebdo killer’s team). They intermarry between themselves, without the parents’ consent. In this sense they are closer to the ultra-left groups of the 1970’s.

5) Very few of them had a previous story of militancy, either political (pro-Palestinian movements) or religious (local mosques, Tabligh, Muslim Brothers or even main stream Salafism). They were almost never pillars of a local Muslim congregation. Contrary to a

widely shared belief, they never mobilized for Palestine and (almost) never spent some times with the Muslim Brothers.

In a word, their radicalization is not the consequence of a long-term “maturation” either in a political movement (Palestine, extreme left, extreme right) or in an Islamic environment. It is on the contrary a relatively sudden individual jump into violence, often after trying something else (Merah tried to enlist in the French army).

6) The unusual proportion of converts has been systematically overlooked because it contradicts the (culturalist) idea that individual radicalization reflects a radicalization of a frustrated Muslim community. The proportion of converts is the highest in France (25%) but is significant everywhere. It is not new at all (it was already a pattern in France with the first wave of radicalization of 1995, or with the Hofstadt group in Holland).

7) A more recent pattern is the recruitment of young women to marry “jihadists”, instead of sharing a common militancy as their predecessors. The rate of converts among this category is probably the highest among all categories of recruits. It has to do with the construction of the narrative of the “hero” (see next point).

8) The main motivation of young men for joining jihad seems to be the fascination for a narrative: “the small brotherhood of super-heroes who avenge the Muslim Ummah”:

- this ummah is global and abstract, never identified with a national cause (Palestine, or even the Syrian or Iraqi nations). In Iraq the foreign volunteers don't identify with the local Arab population that they are supposed to support (it is why they need either imported spouses or sex-slaves).

- the narrative is built using schemes taken from the contemporary youth culture: video-games (Call of duty, Assassins).

- it is “staged” (*mis en scène*) using not only modern technics, but a very contemporary aesthetics, with a special role for an aesthetic of violence, which is also to be found in places with no Islamic reference (“Columbine”, the Mexican Narcos).

- Two “figures” are of particular importance: the suicide-bomber and the “*chevalier*”, the first being linked with what I call a “generational nihilism”, the second with the video-games. In both cases what is at stake is “self-realization” (as an answer to frustration).

What they are not:

- There is no theological dimension. Their knowledge of Islam is minimum (“Islam for the dummies”) and they don’t care, although the religious mystic plays an emotional role. We tend too much to identify religion with theology (what does Islam say about jihad?); while there is certainly an important religious dimension in the way they experience their struggle, but it is not an ideological rationalisation of theology. “Religiosity” not theology is the key.
- They are not the vanguard of a European (or Middle Eastern) Muslim community that would tend to see them as heroes. On the contrary they have little connection with this community, they broke with their family (the fact that they desperately try to “convert” their family shows their degree of estrangement, not of proximity), and they did not arouse fascination except of course among their peers. They don’t even reconnect with a real Muslim local society in Syria or Yemen.

Consequence:

To promote a “moderate Islam” to bring radicals back to the mainstream is non sense. They just reject moderation as such.

To ask the “Muslim community” to bring them back to normal life is also non-sense. They just don’t care about people they consider as “traitors”, “apostates” or “collaborators” as long as they don’t chose the same path.

The priority, beyond a more sophisticated intelligence system, is to debunk the narrative of heroism, to break the “success story” of ISIS as being invincible (including on the ground) and to let Islam in Europe appear as a normal religion. In a word the management of Islam should not be identified as a security issue first: in this case it will

re-inforce the fascination of “rebels looking for a cause” towards what is constructed by the West as the arch-enemy. Instead of “exceptionalising”, we should “normalise”. Radicals hate normal people. If imams are appointed as Muslim chaplains in jail, it should be to deal with the spiritual needs of inmates, not to fight radicalism. On the long-term it will have an impact on radicalisation, but to be taken seriously, imams have to be imams, not police auxiliaries.