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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

Speech

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There is no general open data base of Islamic militants who have joined 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 organisations 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 and most of the people involved in the November 2015 Paris massacre were identified by the police as “radicals” before they went for action. The data we use are taken from these open sources.

There are two ways to define what a “radical” is. First those who jumped into action either 1) having reached a terrorist sanctuary, -Yemen, Syria, Iraq, or previously Bosnia, Afghanistan, 2) having perpetrated a terrorist attack or 3) been caught in an advanced stage of preparation for such an attack. The second category is made by those who manifested only an intention to go to some Jihad place or to do something in Europe. The problem is that the second category has swollen because of the increasing surveillance of the Internet social networks by the security services; it remains difficult to grasp how many would have effectively gone for action if they had not been spotted. There is, as far as France is concerned, a certain discrepancy between the two categories: among the second category (about 7000 people) there are 20% of less than 18- year -olds, 30% of women and 37% of converts, while the first category (about 1500) includes far less under-age people and women, and “only” about 25 % of converts. So the issue is to know whether the second category will pass into the first, or whether it is more about “dreamers”.

The objective beyond collecting individual stories is to understand the process of radicalisation in order to implement a policy of prevention and counter-radicalisation. This is a two-fold process: to spot individual radicalisation before a person goes for action, and to understand the general causes of radicalisation in order to devise a more comprehensive policy aimed at a larger population. The problem is that radicalisation seems more linked to individual trajectories than to the radicalisation of a community (although this 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 various 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 start the first questions: 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 the conclusions: **radicalisation is a youth revolt against society, articulated on an Islamic religious narrative of jihad. It is not the uprising of a Muslim community victim of poverty and racism: only young people join, including converts who did not share the “sufferings” of Muslims in**

Europe. These rebels without a cause find in jihad a “noble” and global cause, and are consequently instrumentalised by a radical organisation (Al Qaeda, ISIS), that has a strategic agenda.

PATTERNS OF RADICALIZATION

1) There are **no psychiatric specific patterns for radicals**. Some come from dysfunctional families, some from “normal” families. Some second generation radicalized Muslims have a family (and often a recent one), with young children (Mostefai/ Paris attacks). To have a newly born baby is never an obstacle to go for suicide bombing.

Nevertheless **frustration and resentment** against society seems to be the only “psychological” trait that is regularly shared. Psychologists that study radicalisation (Fethi Benslama in France) detect a psychological (not psychiatric) state of “suffering”, a discrepancy between their expectations and their social outcome, a need of recognition, in a word a narcissist crisis, which makes them more open to either nihilism or to the narrative of heroism that Al Qaeda or Daesh offer to them. The religious dimension offers them a framework of personal re-structuration: the truth, the good, a clear set of norms, brothers in arms, a clear objective, and salvation, although the latter is not necessarily understood in terms of the paradise as described in the Koran. In fact few of them speak explicitly about paradise. The nihilist dimension (revenge, suicide) seems to supersede the utopian one (to build a new and just society). Radicals are neither happy nor funny people.

2) **The majority of the radicals come from second generation Muslims born in Europe, the others are converts;** almost none came as a young adult or as a teenager to Europe from the Middle East. Apart from that, 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).

In France the geographic distribution corresponds roughly to the demographic map, with a slight overrepresentation of zones with a strong migrant population (Parisian region, the North, Alsace, Lyon and Marseille), and with an under-representation of the big cities in the west of the country, while the western rural areas share roughly the same patterns as elsewhere. But there are interesting discrepancies: the department with the highest absolute number of radicals is Alpes Maritimes (Nice), which is a rather rich department. The 93 (Seine Saint Denis) which has the highest percentage of migrants in France provides little more than each other department of the Ile de France region. The west of the country is under-represented, but there is a significant contribution of rural departments: in a word, in percentage of the population, rural areas contribute significantly to the reservoir of radicalisation (source: Le Monde 27/03/2015).

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), immediately followed by political

radicalisation. There is a clear “breaking point”, often linked with a personal crisis (jail for instance).

4) It is clearly a **youth movement**: almost all of them radicalised to the dismay of their parents and relatives (a huge difference if we compare with Palestinian radicals). Most parents not only disapprove of their children’s radicalisation, but actively try to bring them back or even to have them arrested by the police. This pattern is found as well among parents of converts (a fact we can expect), but also among Muslim parents (Abaaoud in Belgium). In this sense the radicals do not express an anger shared by their milieus or by the Muslim “community”.

It is a peer phenomenon: they radicalise in the framework of a small network of friends, whatever the concrete circumstances of their meeting may be (neighbourhood, jail, internet, or sports clubs). This puts them often at odds with the traditional view of family and women in Islam. These groups are often mixed in gender terms, and the women play often a far more important role than they themselves claim (Boumediene in the Charlie Hebdo killers' team). They intermarry between themselves, without the parents’ consent. In this sense they are closer to the ultra-left groups of the 1970’s. There is often a sibling’s solidarity: many radicalise following a brother (we have a lot of pairs of brothers: Kouachi, Abdeslam).

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 almost never were 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. A consequence is that a monitoring of legal but militant groups, either political (Pro Palestine) or religious (Muslim Brothers) does not yield much information.

In a word, their radicalisation 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 into the French army).

The recruitment process follows different patterns. The more common seems the radicalisation inside a small network of “peers”, where nominal Muslims and non-Muslims meet because they live in the same neighbourhood, share the same patterns of petty delinquency, found themselves together in jail, or are members of the same family (Kouachi). This tightly knit network dimension is often re-enforced by matrimonial links (to marry the sister of one's own friend for instance). Some “lone wolves” follow a process of self-radicalisation and try to get in touch with more hardened radicals. A last process is recruitment through the Internet. It concerns mainly young women, who are systematically and rapidly contacted when they inquire online about Daesh, jihad and Islam in general. For the others the Internet does not seem to be the place of recruitment but a tool of communication, propaganda and information.

6) **The unusual proportion of converts** has been systematically overlooked because it contradicts the (culturalist) idea that individual radicalisation reflects a radicalisation of a frustrated Muslim community. The proportion of converts is 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 radicalisation of 1995, or with the Hofstad group in Holland). The case of the Hofstad group is interesting because although it had something like a third of converts, it was exclusively seen as the symbol of the revolt of young Muslim migrants.

In the USA, 40 percent of those charged in 2011 for jihadist radicalisation were converts to Islam, slightly more than the 35 percent of those charged since the 2001 attacks (source Kurzman).

7) A more recent pattern is the recruitment of young women to marry “jihadists”, instead of sharing 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).

But beside this category, there is a strong tradition of “leading” women (Malika el Arud, Boumedién) who exhibit the symbols of submission (veil, burqa) but whose real life is rather different and doesn't correspond to the cliché of a submissive spouse (they choose their own partners and are closely associated with the decisions).

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 (this is why they need either imported spouses or sex slaves). Palestine is not at the core of the mobilisation process (Palestinians are mainly supported by progressive people and cultural Muslims, not by the Salafists, because it is seen as a “profane” cause).

-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 techniques, but very contemporary aesthetics, with a special role for **aesthetics 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-realisation”** (as an answer to frustration).

9) The religious dimension.

The revolt is expressed in religious terms for two reasons:

- Most of the radicals have a Muslim background, which makes them open to a process of re-islamisation (almost none of them being pious before entering the process of radicalisation).

- Jihad is the only cause on the global market. If you kill in silence, it will be reported by the local newspaper; if you kill yelling “Allahuakbar”, you are sure to make the national headlines. The ultra-left or radical ecology is too “bourgeois” and intellectual for them.

When they join jihad, they adopt the Salafi version of Islam, because Salafism is both simple to understand (*don'ts* and *do's*), and rigid, providing a personal psychological structuring effect. Moreover, Salafism is the negation of cultural Islam, that is the Islam of their parents and of their roots. Instead of providing them with roots, Salafism glorifies their own deculturation and makes them feel better “Muslims” than their parents. Salafism is the religion by definition of a disenfranchised youngster.

Incidentally, we should make a distinction between religious radicalisation and jihadist radicalisation. There is of course an overlap, but the bulk of the Salafists are not jihadist, and many jihadists don't give a dam about theology. None of the radicals has a past of piety.

Most of them either broke with the Islam of their parents, or had no religious transmission from their parents (it may be because they are converts, or orphans, like the Kouachi brothers, or had non practicing parents).

Almost none followed a real process of religious education. Their religious knowledge is low (some brought with them “Islam for the Dummies”). When they said that they were going to learn Islam in Pakistan or Yemen, it is just to appease their parents: in fact they go for jihad.

10) Radicals have a loose or no connection with the Muslim communities in Europe.

The “surprise” story is the more spreaded pattern in the aftermath of a terrorist action. Investigators and journalists who immediately meet the family and the entourage of the attacker are told the same story: *“he was a quiet, nice boy (variation: he was just a petty delinquent), and he was not pious, drank alcohol, had girls etc., except that, recently his attitude has drastically changed”* (the “*takia*” pattern does not apply, because radicals don’t hide their sudden turn).

Few of them were regular “parishers” in a local mosque. None of them was active in religious activities (proselytism): when they preach Islam it is to recruit other radicals, not to spread the good news.

This explains why 1) the close monitoring of mosques brings little information 2) Imams have little or no influence on the process of radicalisation; 3) “reforming Islam” does not make sense: they just don’t care about “what Islam really means”.

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 myth 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, it is not an ideological rationalisation of Islamic 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 for fighting radicalization:

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

To ask the “Muslim community” to bring radicals back to normal life is also nonsense. Radicals just don't care about people they consider as “traitors”, “apostates” or “collaborators” as long as they don't choose the same path.

To consider Islam only through the lenses of “fighting terrorism” will validate the narrative of persecution and revenge that feeds the process of radicalisation.

The priority, beyond building 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-enforce 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. In the longterm it will have an impact on radicalisation, but to be taken seriously, imams have to be imams, not police auxiliaries.

The aim is to accentuate the estrangement of radicals from the Muslim population and to dry up the narrative of Islam as the religion of the oppressed.