

BESIDES THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC MOTIVATION, THE CHARM OF THE CALIPHATE AMONG CHILDREN OF IMMIGRANTS

The importance and characteristics of the phenomenon

The United Nations Resolution 2178 (2014), adopted unanimously by the Security Council, includes, for the first time, a definition of what a “foreign terrorist fighter” is under international law. Foreign terrorist fighters are defined as “[...] individuals who travel to a state other than their states of residence or nationality for the purpose of the perpetration, planning, or preparation of, or participation in, terrorist acts or the providing or receiving of terrorist training, including in connection with armed conflict.”



In April 2015, the United Nations estimated that as the Syrian conflict escalated, the total foreign fighters inflow increased from 700-1,400 in mid 2012, to 22,000 in early 2015, 1 including approximately 4,000 terrorists from Western Europe. Coming from 100 different countries, foreign terrorist fighters have joined Sunni militant organizations in Syria and Iraq. With up to 11,000 terrorists, the Middle East represents the main region of origin of foreigners involved in the conflict. Among them, 3,000 are Tunisians, 2,500 come from Saudi Arabia and 1,500 from Jordan. As said, Western European states have also experienced notable outward flows of terrorists. France, the UK, and Germany have produced the largest numbers of fighters, while in comparison to their total population size, the most heavily affected countries are Belgium, Sweden, Norway and Denmark.

Regarding the characteristics of the foreign fighters, experts found that almost all Europeans who have joined militant organizations in the Middle East pretend to be Muslim and few of them have direct connections to Syria such as relatives or acquaintances. 2 In addition, their knowledge of the conflicts in the Middle East appears to be very limited. As Remi Piet 3 writes: “Their understanding of the conflict in Syria in fact is, in

most cases, the result of a very recent indoctrination, devoid of any solid mastering of the holy texts and historical facts.” 4 Also recent is their discovery (or rediscovery) of the religion and based on some interpretations, they develop or reinforce the perception of a fundamentally sectarian conflict.

As previously mentioned, the majority of the foreign fighters do not have close connections to Syria but, on the other side, according to the findings of the anthropologist Scott Atran, 95% of the foreign fighters who join ISIS are recruited by friends and family members. Family relationships seem to play a crucial role in the recruitment process. In most cases, in fact, radicalisation takes place in small groups and the decisions are influenced by an individual's interaction with pre-existing social networks or with like-minded individuals. Individuals are often introduced to the jihadist ideology by relatives, friends or even casual or new acquaintances made in a peculiar environment (such as neighbourhood or jail)with whom they recreate their “ideal” family and find a sense of brotherhood. They become a chosen group of fighters for a better world: as the international expert, Lorenzo Vidino, explains, “Jihadist radicalisation in Europe is largely, in substance, a bottom-up process that is better defined as linkage.” 5 For this reason, being based on personal ties, these networks are also more impervious to infiltration. It is also important to note that it is now easier to maintain contacts through social media such as Facebook or Twitter. Those who left for Syria can stay in touch with friends back home and, chat after chat, convince them to leave too. As stated by the researcher and specialist in Islamic radicalisation, Montasser AlDe'emeh “If you play football every day in the park and two of your friends go to Syria, you stay in touch with them on Facebook. They say, 'It's boring there in Belgium. Here we have nice rivers and Kalashnikovs. Here in Syria we are somebody'. In Belgium, they're nobody.” 6 Besides the socio-economic motivation: what drives the second generation to leave everything and go fight for the Islamic State? What do they look for and what do they not find in European societies?

Experts agree that radicalisation is a highly complex and individualised process and they identify structural (root causes) and individual motivations (personal factors) that sometimes interact with each other: political tensions and cultural cleavages, the shock of a life-changing event and the influence of a mentor. Finally, several theories have been formulated to specifically explain the radicalisation of European second generation youth; as shown by Vidino, “These range from a search for identity to anger over discrimination and relative economic deprivation.” 7

Today more than ever, the socio-economic motivation, the gap between natives and immigrants (from outside the E.U.), in terms of employment and education opportunities, is not enough: other, perhaps more important, reasons are emerging more related to moral values and purpose for life, and should be discussed and considered for effective programmes of counter-radicalization.

The famous French anthropologist Dounia Bouzar confirms: “Radicalization used to be limited to the poor and the uneducated. Immigrants from Muslim backgrounds were usually the ones who joined jihadist groups. But the situation has changed today.” 8 Some European foreign fighters, in fact, hold college degrees and do not come from deprived neighbourhoods or face a precarious socio-economic and professional situation. Among the second generation immigrants there are those who feel as if they have no future and are disappointed for not being recognised and accepted as equal citizens. However, the foreign fighters phenomenon is more than a signal of failure in integration policies.

It appears that religious motivation represents a strong push factor, de facto their knowledge of Islam is generally extremely superficial (some studied on “Islam for the Dummies”). As professor Rik Coolsaet writes, “They claim for themselves the right to interpret the Koran as they see fit – instead of studying it over decades. Their understanding of Islam is, in most cases, the result of a very recent indoctrination, devoid of any solid mastering of the holy texts and historical facts.” But it is also important to note, as Olivier Roy pointed out after the Paris attacks, that “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 like better ‘Muslims’ than their parents.” 9

Most of them either broke from the Islam of their parents, or did not share religious beliefs with their parents, a religion culturally integrated in the European societies. It seems that the first generation was not

able to share their Islamic culture with their children and also the countries of origin, especially those in the North Africa region, were not involved. The case of Turkey is different, which guaranteed the cultural transmission by sending tutors and imams to destination countries.

Their rediscovery of religion, and in particular of the Salafist version of Islam, also shows this generation has a need for strong narratives. As in the 1970s, many joined Fidel Castro or Che Guevara in South America against "American imperialism," today, Islam is the new revolutionary ideology, but this time, it is not only against the economic and political "Western imperialism" but more against the cultural imperialism or the "Western approach to life in society." In fact, the main criticism of the societies where extremists live is not only about discrimination or economic deprivation (if they are victims), but also about the loss of values from the Western societies. This involves questioning the role of women, the use of drugs, gay marriage etc. In this sense ISIS, as well as other extremist groups, provide for an alternative society with clear and straightforward rules. Moral absolutes are part and parcel of IS' force of attraction, and all the more so since these can be applied immediately in Iraq and Syria. 10 The goal of the recruiters and of ISIS propaganda is to make these young people believe that the world is evil and that they have been chosen, to go to Syrian and Iraq to fight for jihad, to make it a better place.

According to Dounia Bouzar, ISIS is able to conquer the minds and hearts of young people with a key message: they, who can no longer recognize and find themselves in the world in which they grew up, in those values and in that kind of culture, they are not the wrong ones, on the contrary, they are "the chosen by God, those to who he revealed the truth than others are not allowed to see."

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As Roy highlights, those who joined ISIS shared the youth culture of their generation, they probably drank alcohol, smoked pot, towed girls and then, one day, they decided to (re)convert to the religion of their fathers but in the Salafi version, because they rejected the culture of their parents and even the "Western" culture, which become the symbol of their self-hatred. They believe the Islam proclaimed and lived by the jihadists is the right path to follow to be a good Muslim and the Islamic state is the only place in the world where one can be a good Muslim. In addition, the charm and strength of the message of ISIS compared to that of other fundamentalist groups, including Al Qaeda, is that today, ISIS offers the young who fail to find their place in the West both for socio-economic reasons, values and lifestyles, not just a cause to fight for, which makes them feel part of the community (ummah) of the believers, but also a physical place where they can be full citizens and true believers.

Footnotes

1. The International Centre for the Study of Radicalization and Political Violence (ICSR) updated figures in the run-up to UN Security Council Resolution 2178 in September 2014, for which ICSR served as external advisor. Last updated data were published by ICSR in collaboration with the Munich Security Conference in beginning 2015. The figures include estimates for 50 countries for which sufficient data and/or reliable government estimates were available. With the exception of some Middle Eastern countries, all figures are based on data from the second half of 2014 and refer to the total number of travellers over the course of the entire conflict. <http://icsr.info/>
2. Different from Libya where the fighters have a family connection to the country, as McQuinn, a researcher from the University of Oxford, who conducted field research in Misrata, Libya, pointed out.
3. Remi Piet, French jihadists in Syria and cyber-indoctrination, Al Jazeera, 24 April 2014, <http://www.aljazeera.com/>
4. Remi Piet, French jihadists in Syria and cyber-indoctrination, Al Jazeera, 24 April 2014, <http://www.aljazeera.com/>
5. "It seems apparent that there is no one path to radicalism and no common profile, but each case must be analysed individually. And in many cases, it seems clear, psychology is more useful than sociology in identifying the dynamics of radicalisation". Lorenzo Vidino, Home-Grown Jihadism in Italy: Birth, Development and Radicalization Dynamics, European Foundation for Democracy and ISPI, 2014, <http://www.ispionline.it/it/EBook/vidino-eng.pdf>
6. Michael Birnbaum, Why is tiny Belgium Europe's jihad-recruiting hub?, 17 January 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/>
7. Lorenzo Vidino, Home-Grown Jihadism in Italy: Birth, Development and Radicalization Dynamics, European Foundation for Democracy and ISPI, 2014, <http://www.ispionline.it/it/EBook/vidino-eng.pdf>
8. Rik Coolsaet, What drives Europeans to Syria and to IS? Insights from the Belgian case, Egmont paper 75, Royal Institute for International Relations, 2015, <http://www.egmontinstitute.be/>

9. Olivier Roy, What is the driving force behind jihadist terrorism? – A scientific perspective on the causes/circumstances of joining the scene, speech at European University Institute, BKA Autumn Conference, 18 - 19 November 2015, <https://life.eui.eu/>
10. Rik Coolsaet, What drives Europeans to Syria and to IS? Insights from the Belgian case, Egmont paper 75, Royal Institute for International Relations, 2015, <http://www.egmontinstitute.be/>

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