JIHAD AS A LIFESTYLE

'Pop-jihad as a lifestyle', so the Dutch Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism opined, when expressing his worries about the appeal of jihadist symbols to young Europeans[1]. Starting in 2012, many thousands Europeans have travelled to join jihadist groups in Syria, in particular the so called Islamic State (aka ISIL or ISIS). Numbers vary from 3,400 to 5,000. By July 2015, from Belgium alone some 440 individuals have gone to the region (included are the 50 or so who never made it to Syria). But looking into the motivations and backgrounds of this relative large group from a small country might help to shed a light on the journey of Westerners to "a country they do not know, in a culture they are not familiar with, and where a language is spoken that they do not understand[2]."

In past decades, Europeans have been joining jihadi battlefields. But today's European foreign fighters are difficult to compare with the jihadis of the past decades. Several characteristics set them apart from their predecessors. The first difference is related to their age: the Syria fighters are on average many years younger than their predecessors. In previous decades, the average age was 28 years and the typical age range 25–35. Nowadays however, it is more likely to be close to 20, and the age range of the foreign fighters from Belgium seems to be typically 20–24. Unfortunately, teenagers are no exceptions, and neither are entire families, and mothers with small children travelling to Syria.

The suddenness of their decision to leave for Syria is also a striking characteristic for most of the youngsters. As a result of this, and of their younger age, their religious knowledge is even more superficial than their predecessors', as is their acquaintance with international politics. Geopolitics is less important to them than to their predecessors, who felt motivated by the struggle against the superpowers. Injustice was often a starting point in their predecessors' journey towards extremism and terrorism. Now, personal estrangement has become the primary engine.

Once in Syria and Iraq, their yearning to place themselves at the centre of events (with numerous selfies and social media posts on trivia like kohl makeup for boys and other teenage themes) reflects a degree of narcissism that was largely absent among their older predecessors.

However the uncomfortable truth is that just as in the terrorist campaigns of the past, today's foreign fighter phenomenon is rooted in the characteristics of our modern society. It is fair to characterize the current foreign fighters phenomenon as part of a youth subculture that has developed against a very specific social

and international context. Moreover, it is a generational conflict. Up to a point, the very same mechanisms were at play during the protest movements in the 1960s and the 1970s, when parts of the younger generation also rebelled against society, to the bewilderment of their parents, who couldn't possibly comprehend their youngsters' discontent.

But society now differs significantly from society in the 1960s and 1970s.

To begin with the most obvious transformation, society today puts much greater pressure on young people than it did 40 years ago. Individualism and the lifting of traditional political, religious and ideological fault lines leave youngsters much earlier to their own devises and exposed to society than their peers back then. At a much earlier stage, today's young people have to make their own decisions in a society that offers incomparably more choices in all dimensions of life. Simply put, it is more demanding to be young today than it was back then.

Firstly, struggling with identity and self-image might have been demanding for youngsters since time immemorial, but modern times gave it a new label: 'teenage angst'[3]. Today, moreover, this happens in an environment that has become very complex, with fewer benchmarks and points of reference, as a result of the dynamics of globalisation and the post-industrial revolution. And on top of this, the future doesn not look bright: "The generation coming of age in the 2010s faces high unemployment and precarious job situations, hampering their efforts to build a future and raising the risk of social unrest[4]."

Secondly, pessimism rules today. All European countries have been increasingly under the spell of pessimism, according to surveys. This pessimistic outlook stands in stark contrast to the optimistic zeitgeist of the 1960s and 1970s, when the horizon looked bright, activism thrived, and radical changes for the better appeared to be within reach. But when pessimism is all-pervading, ideals die, resignation is omnipresent, and the energy to strive for change fades away.

Thirdly, an additional factor of potential estrangement puts pressure on a specific segment of youngsters in Europe. Exactly 30 years ago, a French weekly featured the portrait of a veiled Marianne to illustrate the cover story: 'Serons-nous encore Français dans trente ans?'('Will we still be French in 30 years from now?'). Nowadays, the children and grandchildren of the migrant workers are still being confronted with their origins. They are still routinely labelled 'migrant communities' – notwithstanding the fact that these families have now been present on European soil for three or four generations, and that many of them have acquired Belgian (or other European) nationality.

Moreover, after 9/11 a general stereotype developed to equate 'immigrant' with 'Muslim'. The significant diversity within diasporic communities from Muslim-majority countries was thus compressed into a single monolithic category of 'Muslim community', conflating ethnicity with religion, and setting them apart as group. Prompted by this 'stigma', many started to think of themselves first as Muslims rather than as citizens of their country[5]. 'Proud to be a Muslim' became the theme in lyrics and Facebook accounts. Around 2008, a 'Cool Islam' movement emerged, developing into a youth subculture, with its own rap, designer clothes and magazines[6]. Some who could afford to started to look for opportunities to emigrate to more welcoming places, like Montreal or New York[7].

But not everybody has this opportunity. Last but not least, this cultural divide in Europe is indeed also intimately intertwined with real inequalities that have been growing in European societies too. Socio-economic inequality is one of them. Citizens with a non-European background are overrepresented in the lower rungs of most socio-economic categories (unemployment, housing, health, education). Compared to their peers, youngsters in this group are confronted with a number of real obstacles, in particular discrimination on the job and the real estate market and educational deficiencies. Within migrant communities, despair, discouragement, and even fear about their youngsters' chances of overcoming these situations in the foreseeable future, has been prevalent for some time now. Some of these youngsters feel as if they have 'no future' as their horizon. 'Un sentiment d'abandon' ('a feeling of abandonment'), was the prevailing sentiment Latifa Ibn Ziaten, the mother of one of the soldiers killed by Mohammed Merah in 2012, had sensed when speaking at schools in the French cités[8].

This is the conducive environment for the wide array of personal, age-related motivations through which youngsters may be tempted by a departure for Syria. Frequently they refer to the absence of a future, to personal difficulties that have to be coped with in everyday life. Often their stories point to a desire to leave all this behind, to be 'someone', to be accepted. Ultimately, to find refuge in a more welcoming environment. Straightforward moral absolutes appeal to them, as a way out of the complexities of their environment. More malicious motives are at play too, evading prison sentences, kicking on Rambo-style violence, adventure seekers, looking for something more thrilling than everyday life in Belgium. To all these push factors, IS provides for an outlet.

Posts on social media sometimes refer to Tupac Shakur, icon of American gangsta rap. His life and his rap lyrics indeed seem to fit well into the world outlook of this group. The foreign fighter phenomenon is rooted in a specific youth subculture that has developed in reaction to an environment young people feel and perceive as complex, demanding, unequal and devoid of hope for improvement. It is no longer the result of a more or less protracted process of political radicalisation. It is foremost an escape from their estrangement from society and the apparent lack of empathy of society to their situation.

This fault line between society and part of the younger generation that gave birth to the subculture in which this new generation of foreign fighters thrive, is barely acknowledged by mainstream politics, and is essentially overshadowed by the reductionist debate on the compatibility of Islam with western values.

The author

Rik Coolsaet is Professor of International Relations at Ghent University (Belgium). He was invited to join the original European Commission Expert Group on Violent Radicalisation (established in 2006) and the subsequent European Network of Experts on Radicalisation (ENER). His latest publications on terrorism and radicalisation include: What drives Europeans to Syria, and to IS? (www.egmontinstitute.be/publication_article /what-drives-europeans-to-syria-and-to-is-insights-from-the-belgian-case), and Jihadi Terrorism and the Radicalisation Challenge. European and American Experiences (Ashgate, 2011).

1 Janny Groen, "Nieuw: 'popjihad', flirten met de symbolen van Al-Qaeda", De Volkskrant, November 26, 2013, http://www.volkskrant.nl/dossier-burgeroorlog-in-syrie/nieuw-popjihad-flirten-met-de-symbolen-van-al-qaeda~a3551228/.

2 According to Ben Hamidou, who plays the role of ideological leader of a group of men leaving for Syria, in Djihad, a successful theatre play in Brussels theaters in 2014.

3 The Dutch novelist Abdelkader Benali has used this label in a poignant reflection on the Charlie Hebdo attack. Ahmad Benali, "From Teenage Angst to Jihad. The Anger of Europe's Young Marginalized Muslims", New York Times, January 13, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/14/opinion/the-anger-of-europes-young-marginalized-muslims.html?_r=0.

4 World Economic Forum, "Global Risks 2014, Ninth Edition," Geneva: World Economic Forum, 2014.

5 The Pew Global Attitudes Project, "Muslims in Europe: economic worries top concerns about religious and cultural identity," Washington D. C.: Pew Global Attitudes Project, 2006.

6 Maruta Herding, "Inventing the Muslim cool: Islamic youth culture in Western Europe," Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2014.

7 Nadia Fadil, "Moslims trekken niet enkel richting Syrië," De Morgen, April 15, 2013, http://www.demorgen.be/buitenland/moslims-trekken-niet-enkel-richting-syrie-a1614738/

8 Latifa Ibn Ziaten, "Le message de paix de la mère d'une victime de Mohamed Merah," 2015, http://www.francetvinfo.fr/faits-divers/terrorisme/le-message-de-paix-de-latifa-ibn-ziaten_826641.html.