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WHAT ACCOUNTS FOR THE RISE OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN EUROPEAN CITIES?

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Since the 1970s, scholars have been trying to identify how and why individuals turn to activism and terrorism. These renewed attempts at answering an old question were heavily induced by the radical-left zeitgeist of the 1960s and its parallel wave of transnational radical-left terrorism. The paradigms of "radicalisation" and "violent extremism" were not yet *en vogue*. The attacks in Madrid and London in 2004 and 2005 pushed the question once again to the fore. Unlike the perpetrators of 9/11, these attackers did not come from abroad, but were individuals who grew up in Europe and were often born there. How did they come to resort to terrorism and turn against their own countrymen? Why were they attracted by extremist ideologies? What made them vulnerable to recruiters? Something, it was argued, must turn a person from a "normal" individual into a terrorist. A new concept was introduced – radicalisation. This was supposed to be the key to open this "black box". It soon developed into the holy grail of European (and later worldwide) counterterrorism efforts.

Almost a decade and a half later, the quest for answers is still ongoing. No consensus has been reached on the key drivers that explain how individuals turn into terrorists. Many drivers have been identified, from ideology and religion to socioeconomic deprivation and personal and cultural characteristics, but their exact sequencing and relative importance has failed to achieve consensus.

Moreover, personal trajectories into terrorism and national, regional and local environments are so widely divergent that an overall one-size-fits-all explanation remains frustratingly out of reach. We are also still at a loss when attempting to elucidate the causes behind the emergence of jihadi terrorism, which is chronologically the successor to the abovementioned radical-left terrorism wave, let alone to propose a more granular analysis of the successive "subwaves" within this broader jihadi wave. The perceptive Norwegian terrorism scholar Thomas Hegghammer acknowledges: "[n]obody before 2011 predicted this [ISIS] resurgence, and its precise causes remain unclear" (Hegghammer, 2016).

It might be worth considering turning again to the classics of terrorism studies. In a landmark 1981 contribution on "The Causes of Terrorism", one of the pioneers in contemporary terrorism studies, Martha Crenshaw, also recognised that answering the question of why specific individuals engaged in political violence was a complicated problem. Context, Martha Crenshaw urged, is of the essence in understanding terrorism. Context not only accounts for the instigating circumstances that permit the emergence of terrorism, it also provides situational factors that motivate and direct groups and individuals to use violence. Martha Crenshaw insisted on the need to look into the interplay between this societal context, psychological considerations, and group dynamics to understand terrorism, since it is not an automatic reaction to given conditions.

Fraught with methodological difficulties and confronted with a seemingly endless stream of factors to be taken into consideration, the why-terrorism-occurs research failed to gain traction. Instead, the focus shifted to more practical policy-orientated studies – only to be resuscitated with the advent of jihadi terrorism. The early, somewhat deterministic, root causes approach after the 9/11 attacks has now given way to nuanced portrayals of interlinking dimensions, but this never resulted in a model on which scholars and practitioners could agree.

Now perhaps is the time to pick up Martha Crenshaw's model again and integrate some of the recent findings into this framework. Terrorism and pre-terrorism radicalisation can be viewed as the interplay between a conducive environment, opportunities, kinship and friendship networks or bonds, and ideology. This conceptualisation of the emergence of terrorism goes along the lines of the "puzzle" metaphor introduced by Mohammed Hafez and Chreighton Mullins (2015) as an alternative to the idea of a radicalisation "process" (with, however, some rearrangements). It also encapsulated the "kaleidoscope of factors" as systematically enumerated by the longtime Swedish terrorism scholar Magnus Ranstorp (Ranstorp, 2016), albeit in a mutually interactive mode.

How can the interplay between: (a) a conducive environment, (b) opportunities, (c) kinship and friendship networks or bonds, and (d) ideology help to address the question in the title? More specifically, can it help to explain in simple terms ISIS's success and the unparalleled speed and scale with which foreign volunteers flocked to its proto-state in the Levant? If we were able to satisfactorily answer the latter question, then a cautious look into the future at what might happen after the ISIS chapter might be possible.

A conductive environment

An alternative wording to "conducive environment" is "push factors". What factors have pushed so many often young people from Europe to Syria to end up with ISIS?

Without underestimating the significant national and even subnational differences among the European foreign fighter contingents, one might use Marc Trévidic's portrayal of the youngsters who have passed through

his office in his 15 years' tenure as an anti-terrorism judge in Paris as a shorthand description for the European volunteers as a whole. Jihadism has become a "hype" (*un phénomène de mode*): "Ninety percent of those who leave, do it out of personal reasons: they are looking for a fight, or for adventure, or revenge, because they do not fit in society … and only 10% out of religious beliefs […] Religion is not the engine of this movement and that's precisely its strength."

At the risk of excessive generalising, but for the sake of clarity, two groups of Europeans travelling to Syria can be distinguished. A first group is composed of individuals, often youngsters in their early twenties, with a previous life of petty crime, drug trafficking, and other forms of juvenile delinquency. "A gang of street thugs" was an often heard depiction former friends and neighbours offered of the group of young terrorists that perpetrated the November 2015 Paris attacks. Patterns of engagement, age range, groupthink (by which members end up embracing the opinions of the majority of the group), propensity for violence, and a feeling of having no stake in society are characteristics shared by street gangs and ISIS-related foreign fighters' networks. Joining ISIS represents a once in a lifetime opportunity to join a "super-gang" from which they derive status, recognition, power and freedom to use violence to a point they could never have obtained in the streets of their home towns.

Whereas most of them are well known to the police from an early age, this is not the case for the second group. Before suddenly deciding to leave for Syria, the youngsters in this group didn't show any sign of deviant behaviour and nothing seemed to distinguish them from their peers. In social media, wiretaps or interviews, hey often mentioned earlier personal difficulties (of various kinds) that left them feeling stifled and discontented. One gets the impression of solitary adolescents, frequently estranged from family and friends, in search of belonging. Often, these stories point to a desire to leave this *dunya* behind, to be "someone", to be accepted, to do something "useful". They want to look up to heroes – or to be one themselves. They long for an alternative lifestyle. And they want to believe in "something".

The common denominator between the two groups is the lack of prospects, both real and perceived. This does not simply equal socioeconomic deprivation. For some it amounts to quintessential teenage angst that makes them receptive to a groomer's attention. For others, however, it results from a life of broken dreams and harsh daily experiences of being considered second-rate citizens in their own country.

A specific segment of European youth has indeed for quite some time been facing a series of hurdles that cannot but feed estrangement from society. More than 30 years ago, the French weekly *Figaro Magazine* featured the portrait of a veiled Marianne to illustrate the cover story: "*Serons-nous encore Français dans trente ans?*" ("Will we still be French 30 years from now?"). The children and grandchildren of the migrant workers that European states invited to come *en masse* in the 1960s are still being confronted on a daily basis 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 a new nationality. After 9/11, it then became standard practice to equate "migrant" with "Muslim". The significant diversity within diasporic communities from Muslim-majority countries was thus compressed into a single monolithic category labelled the "Muslim community", conflating ethnicity with religion. Some empathy would suffice to comprehend the impact of four decades of political, media and social misgivings on this group of European citizens, be they highly qualified or not. The sense of inequity that results from this can reasonably be expected to end in frustration, anger, and feelings of revenge.

Lack of prospects is clearly not simply a matter of failing to secure a job or facing discrimination – even if one should never underestimate the impact of this on the group of Europeans that left for the Levant. It's about facing an impasse (as said earlier, both real and perceived). "No future" is the essence of the youth subculture that drove many young Europeans towards Syria. "*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, sensed when speaking at schools in the French *cités*. A social mapping of Molenbeek, a municipality in the northwest of Brussels that saw some fifty (mostly young) inhabitants leave for Syria, contains a similar quote: "Nobody cared about [the host of problems in] Molenbeek – therefore it is a good place for radicalisation to develop" (EIP, 2017).

ISIS has been the object of all kinds of fantasies for all kinds of people, from thrill- and revenge-seekers to the mentally unstable to those seeking for meaning and belonging, who all want to be part of ISIS, because it offers them a once in a lifetime, instant opportunity to go from zero to hero. The explanation for their decision is thus found not in how they think, but in how they feel, as Marc Sageman once opined. For most, especially in the early years, going to Syria was an escape: they were convinced they had nothing to lose and everything to gain.

Opportunities

A conductive environment does not automatically lead to violent extremism or terrorism. There has to be an opportunity, a "pull factor".

Why was ISIS able to appeal to such a wide variety of individuals, to a degree that Al-Qaeda could not (and was not willing to)? Part of the answer lies in ISIS's unique feature among contemporary jihadist groups: control over a large territory. ISIS has been able to successfully tap into this European subculture and to speak both to members of inner-city gangs with a propensity for violence, and to youngsters who simply felt estranged from society, because the establishment of its proto-state straddling Syria and Iraq offered the prospect of instant satisfaction of the host of personal motivations, as the French judge Marc Trévidic observed.

One can view ISIS as an online catalogue of boundless offers for anyone seeking to join them, physically or virtually. The catalogue offers a new beginning, a future, prospects, and a feeling of finally being accepted the way they are. It suggests to them status, empowerment,

belonging, camaraderie, respect, recognition, adventure, heroism, and martyrdom. Some years ago, ISIS social media messages were said to convey the rhetorical question: "Why be a loser when you can be a martyr?"

ISIS also offered material wealth: a salary and a villa with a pool. It offers, for those who join in, power over others, revenge, and even a license for viciousness in the name of a higher goal. But joining ISIS was not only about fighting. It offered a new life. Its proto-state needed "normal" people not bent on violence: doctors and nurses, officials and engineers, mothers and teachers. ISIS went to great lengths to project a new utopia of peace, harmony and universal brother- and sisterhood, a potent alternative to a life of drugs and petty crime, with simple and straightforward rules.

British fighters once described their engagement in Syria as a "five-star jihad". Until the international intervention following Jim Foley's beheading in August 2014, Syria was indeed a relatively risk-free location (compared to other jihadi theatres), thanks to ISIS's full control over a large territory. This undoubtedly explains the appeal of *hijra* to Syria as well as the unprecedented speed and scope of the foreign fighters phenomenon. Without it, ISIS's appeal could never have produced the same results.

ISIS's seizure of large swathes of Iraq and Syria made the catalogue of solutions credible and within immediate reach. Osama bin Laden's Al-Qaeda was never in a position to offer this.

Kinship and friendship networks

Between a conductive environment and an opportunity a link must be established for terrorism to emerge.

Recent research indicates that foreign fighters often travel in clusters, originating from specific locations. Belgium is a case in point. The first wave of foreign fighters, who left the country between April 2012 and July 2013, departed from a limited number of urban neighbourhoods, especially from Antwerp and Brussels, as well as Vilvorde (near Brussels). In these locations, small extremist groups and entrepreneurs had been active for some time: Sharia4Belgium (the Belgian franchise of the London-based jihadi network al-Muhajiroun), Resto du Tawhid in Schaerbeek and a network clustered around Khalid Zerkani, who acted as a bridge between the small Belgian jihadi scene and the criminal rings of young delinquents. These pre-existing, tight-knit groups played a significant role in connecting push and pull factors in the early stages of the Syrian crisis. Once on the scene, they reached out to their peers in their home country, creating a snowball effect that increased the numbers of foreign volunteers.

In his 2008 *Leaderless Jihad*, Marc Sageman specifically identified kinship and friendship bonds as key components of the socialisation process that leads individuals into terrorism. He was referring to a third wave of foreign fighters that he labelled "home-grown". These individuals indeed entered the jihadi scene through such networks, and

connected to the global context via the internet, but failed to physically link up with the remnants of Al-Qaeda or other jihadi organisations.

Such groups, which Lorenzo Vidino (2017) aptly branded "radicalization hubs", make all the difference between street gangs and terrorist groups. An individual joining a given group evolves with the group he (or she) is part of. Group dynamics push the members into easy moneymaking via drug trafficking, while another evolves into biker gangs (and sometimes both), while a third group can take a completely different track and excel in street art or in a martial arts school. Or join the jihadi scene.

Without terrorism-oriented entrepreneurs, an individual seldom links up with terrorism. Lone wolves do exist, but they represent only a handful of individuals. One does not simply become a terrorist by watching social media messages or heroic videos. However important they may be as a means of feeling oneself part of a (virtual) community of likeminded people, in most cases cyberspace bonds need a physical extension in order for an individual to suit the action to the word.

Ideology

One last piece is still missing from the equation: ideology. Ideology is what distinguishes terrorism from other crimes.

Ever since the adoption of the concept of radicalisation in 2004, the relationship between terrorism and ideology has been hotly debated. For some, ideology is the key driver that transforms individuals into terrorists. For others it merely represents a justification for violent action. Whatever the position one takes in this debate, most will probably agree that ideology does play several important roles in terrorism: justification, motivation, bonding, groupthink and cohesion. But is it the key driver of ISIS's success?

Even scholars who tend to strongly emphasise the importance of Salafism as an "unprecedented cultural challenge" insist that it only leads to jihadist violence "when social, cultural and political conditions are ripe" (Kepel and Rougier, 2016).

Labelling ideology a key driver fails to explain the differences between member states of the European Union as to their respective foreign fighter contingents – or differences within these states. It also contrasts with the often superficial religious (and political) knowledge of ISIS-related individuals. In 2016, a new concept was even coined: "flash (or instant) radicalisation", to come to terms with the fact that many plotters apparently didn't go through a lengthy process of radicalisation.

Ideology does not equal theology, as the German deradicalisation expert Daniel Koehler is used to saying. Whatever the theological credentials of ISIS's leadership and its scholars, the rank and file of the European foreign fighters and their grassroots companions are mostly uninterested in theological or ideological discussions – even if some are. That at least is the experience of many front-line prevention workers dealing

with "radicalised" individuals, especially in the early years of the Syrian war. Put simply: the European ISIS generation is not fundamentalist in the specific sense of the word. Most of them entered the jihadist scene without having gone through a previous Salafist phase.

ISIS offers (as Al-Qaeda did previously) an overarching narrative that wraps the variety of individual motivations into a collective storyline that heavily emphasises surpassing oneself, heroism, victory, and apocalyptic revenge. The ISIS brand of jihadi ideology has been all the more credible and alluring since it not only shrewdly appealed to the host of specific motivations of the individuals and groups it targeted, but also because it promised instant solutions. Its relentless 24/24 and 7/7 online campaigning did the rest.

Anticipating the post-ISIS landscape

This emergence of ISIS-linked violent extremism in Europe has thus been the result of a unique combination of: a conducive environment; pre-existing kin- and friendship bonds that stimulated individuals, often very young, to journey to Syria, once the opportunity arose; and an overarching narrative that neatly fitted with the needs of the no-future subculture. Cities are the physical spaces where these factors most easily fall into place.

But the Islamic State is no longer what it used to be. It has lost much of its territory and income and many of its fighters. The battle for Mosul is officially declared over and Raqqa will probably follow before the end of 2017. ISIS's global media output has decreased significantly. ISIS as we used to know it, with its proto-state and its shining aura of invincibility and unstoppable expansion, attracting tens of thousands of foreign volunteers to the Levant, is rapidly coming to an end.

Jihadism, however, is by no means over. Most importantly, the root causes jihadi groups have been able to tap into are still very much in place. Violent extremism will unfortunately linger on for some time before it starts to decline. But decline will happen. The ISIS brand will lose its appeal over time, since its unique selling proposition, its proto-state, is rapidly shrinking. By itself, ISIS's "virtual caliphate" will not be able to sustain the ISIS dynamic. Moreover, there is no inexhaustible source of "jihadis next door". ISIS veterans' networks are very high on all of Europe's police and intelligence services radar and will face the same unravelling as Al-Qaeda's post-Afghan networks.

The waning of ISIS offers a window of opportunity to deal with the conducive environment it has been able to exploit. In Europe, this implies taking a hard look at the reasons why so many young people feel like second-rate citizens. Europe also has to come to terms with its identity politics and corresponding polarisation, since this is exactly the stated goal of jihadism. And one way or another, member states and Muslim communities alike will have to find a way to facilitate the anchoring of Islam to the local environments. Violent extremism is not inevitable and neither ISIS nor jihadi terrorism represent an existential threat – unless Europeans choose to see them this way and act upon that perception.

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