



## ISIS and Its Impact on Radicalization in the West

- Despite being rejected by the overwhelming majority of Muslims, the resurrection of even a notional caliphate – proclaimed by ISIS in June 2014 – has nevertheless appealed to a very small minority of young men and women in the West.
- The allure of jihadist groups – ISIS in particular – rests in part with a remarkably simple, two-part narrative. One strand of this narrative, which originates with al-Qaeda, compels Muslim audiences to view all current conflicts through the prism of historical attacks against Islam by a “Zionist-Crusader alliance.” The second strand is the appeal of a re-established caliphate, restoring glory and honor to Muslims. This is an objective that al-Qaeda promised, in an abstract and notional way, and that ISIS has worked to accomplish – heightening the group's appeal to a new generation of disaffected Muslims. The ISIS propaganda machine has orchestrated a savvy and highly sophisticated media campaign, producing material that shrewdly seeks to exploit these tensions through appeals on social media and by invoking pop culture.
- In addition to issues of belonging, jihadists offer the image of the chivalrous warrior – a means by which underachieving young men might be recast in their own eyes as the community's champion through what is perceived as heroic sacrifice. In this way, the jihadist recruit discerns a mechanism to reclaim agency, purpose, self-esteem and manhood.
- The jihadist narratives provide a “pull” toward ISIS, but the circumstances and background of a potential recruit also are crucial, providing the “push.” A toxic mix of increasing xenophobia and Islamophobia, alienation and cultural dislocation, socio-economic marginalization and political disenfranchisement that many young Muslims experience leads them to take solace in faux-religious identities proffered by welcoming jihadists. Extremist narratives are almost irrelevant unless they find fertile ground to take root. Jihadist narratives only possess efficacy when they intersect with individuals on a personal level, resonating with the very particular context and circumstances that some young Muslims in the West find themselves in today.

## SUMMARY



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- Western media focuses almost exclusively on ISIS's violent media output, which targets Western audiences and sensibilities. However, the overwhelming majority of ISIS media content depicts blissful civilian life in the "utopian" caliphate – therefore offering an additional compelling narrative and call to action. This is the narrative so important to ISIS's success: of belonging and sanctuary; of new beginnings and state-building; of escaping religious persecution; of helping defend the burgeoning state and community.
- Counterterrorism and countering violent extremism campaigns, which attempt to counter the content of the jihadists' message, or even the medium through which it is disseminated, and try to contest the narrative, without addressing the real-world issues that allow it to resonate in the first place, are likely to fail.

## INTRODUCTION

In announcing the re-establishment of its so-called caliphate in June 2014, ISIS revealed global pretensions, declaring that it was now incumbent on Muslims worldwide to swear allegiance to its leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, or Caliph Ibrahim, as he demanded to be addressed. Unsurprisingly, the backlash from within the Muslim world against this flagrant usurpation of power and authority has been overwhelmingly negative, with the vast majority of Muslims worldwide rejecting any such claim to legitimacy.

Nevertheless, the resurrection of even a notional caliphate has resonated with a small but significant minority of Muslims, leading to thousands of young men, in search of a cause, flocking to the ISIS banner. Indeed, ISIS has drawn foreigners from across the globe, willing to fight and die for its caliphate. Some estimates place the number of foreign fighters who travelled to Syria and Iraq to join violent extremist groups (the majority of whom joined ISIS), to be anywhere between 27,000 and 31,000,

originating from no less than 86 different countries – a truly globalized mobilization on a significant scale.<sup>1</sup>

Many states have shown grave concern about their own citizens joining ISIS, but understandably, also about the dangers inherent in the inevitable influx of returnees once the conflict is over. Fighters returning from the frontlines – brutalized by the ravages of war and potentially suffering from post-traumatic stress disorders – may prove incapable of easily adjusting back into their respective host societies. More ominously, some will also have engaged in horrific sectarian violence or other egregious human rights violations that have become hallmarks of the conflict. The social media accounts of some Western jihadists – tweeting images of grisly executions and selfies with severed heads – or the prominence of individuals like Jihadi John, the Briton who became infamous for brutally beheading American and British hostages, are testament to the barbarity many fighters have not just been immersed within, but have positively relished.

Naturally, these revelations will prove all the more troubling should these men choose to return home. Indeed, a small minority have already brought violence back with them, as recent examples have shown. Mehdi Nemmouche carried out sadistic violence in Syria before returning to Belgium, where he carried out an anti-Semitic attack against a Jewish museum in Belgium that left four people dead in May 2014.<sup>2</sup> But most strikingly, the multiple attackers who wrought carnage in Paris in November 2015 and Brussels in March 2016 appear to have been French and Belgian natives acting under the direction of ISIS, and some of whom had recently returned from Syria.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to these early signs of foreign fighter blowback, the siren song of ISIS has also inspired many individuals to carry out domestic terror attacks in their home countries, despite having no tangible links to, or having received training from, jihadist groups. This surge in terrorist activity has understandably caused great concern and uncertainty among states – with potential solutions ranging from revoking citizenship, exclusion and prosecution, to deradicalization and rehabilitation.

However, these measures are by their very nature reactive, dealing with the consequences instead of addressing the underlying root causes of the problem. Rather, in order to stem the flow of willing young recruits to ISIS, we must understand and address the appeal that ISIS holds for a small minority of impressionable youth in Western societies. Why does the narrative of ISIS appear to resonate

with this minority? Considering that recruitment in the West by jihadist groups is certainly not a new phenomenon, and that ISIS has simply usurped al-Qaeda's role as the organization of choice for Western jihadists today, we must also consider the narrative's appeal in broader context, highlighting in particular the continuity within the narrative peddled by both groups.

This paper attempts to answer precisely these questions by providing a fuller, more nuanced understanding of some of the motivations for joining jihadist groups, and explores the relationship between individual motivations and larger jihadist narratives – particularly as those narratives have shifted with the rise of ISIS.

### WHAT IS THE NARRATIVE?

At the heart of ISIS's appeal is the alluring simplicity of its narrative, which is composed of two main strands. The first strand, which sits at the core of all jihadist narratives and originates with al-Qaeda, compels Muslim audiences to view contemporary conflicts through the prism of a wider historical global attack on Islam and Muslims by a belligerent "Zionist-Crusader Alliance." In response to this assault, the jihadists claimed not only to have awakened the *ummah* to the reality of their predicament, but also claimed to serve as the sole and crucial vanguard, offering audiences the opportunity to reply to the enemy in kind.<sup>4</sup> This narrative, as many commentators have recognized, has remained remarkably coherent and consistent over time.<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, the hundreds of individuals who heeded these fervent calls are surely testament to the alluring potency of this narrative. However, beyond the involvement in violence and terrorism, al-Qaeda were unable to really offer any other motivation for "joining the caravan of Jihad."<sup>6</sup> There were some attempts at offering armchair jihadists the opportunity of contributing to the war effort without actively fighting on the battlefield – what I have previously referred to as the "virtual jihad."<sup>7</sup>

**ISIS offers an alluringly simple narrative. One strand of the narrative compels Muslim audiences to view contemporary conflicts through the prism of a wider historical global attack on Islam and Muslims by a "Zionist-Crusader alliance." The second strand, which ISIS uniquely has offered, are claims of a revived caliphate to which faithful Muslims should emigrate, emulating the Prophet Muhammad.**

However, despite these lackluster attempts at accommodating other modes of non-violent jihad, the appeal of jihadism remained limited. Indeed, the vast majority of Muslim audiences have largely remained immune to the cajoling messages of violent global jihad, with large swathes of the Muslim world in fact repudiating the message outright.<sup>8</sup> As al-Qaeda's Ayman al-Zawahiri laments, "...we should realize the extent of the gap in understanding between the jihad movement and the common people."<sup>9</sup> Al-Qaeda did attempt to provide some sort of distant utopian vision of an aspirational future caliphate, as a means of justifying and drawing supporters to their violent excesses. However, this abstract

notional caliphate also lacked any real mobilizing potency – at least until ISIS appeared on the scene. Since June 2014, this second part of the narrative – ISIS's own unique addendum to the already heady mix – claims that the caliphate has now been re-established, thereby restoring glory and honor to the downtrodden Muslims once again.

The obvious corollary to the establishment of the caliphate was that it was therefore now incumbent on every Muslim to make *hijrah*, or emigrate to the new caliphate. *Hijrah* is an important theme in Islamic literature and stems from the emigration of the Prophet Muhammad from Mecca around 632 AD in order to escape religious persecution, and move to Medina, where he founded a religious community and burgeoning city-state.

The establishment of the caliphate in June 2014 therefore provided compelling alternative narratives to audiences: Undertake your own *hijrah* (a journey that paralleled that of the Prophet Muhammad); escape the religious persecution in your own societies; live under Islamic sovereignty and law; help defend the burgeoning state and community; and ultimately restore the state to its long-lost glory. Clearly, these multiple narratives moved beyond al-Qaeda's appeals to violence alone and provided other motivations for joining the jihadist cause. Indeed, many foreign fighters who travelled to Syria prior to the announcement of ISIS's caliphate, and ended up joining al-Qaeda affiliated groups, soon switched sides to ISIS. Take, for

example, the case of Israfil Yilmaz, a former Dutch soldier and one of the oldest and most well-known foreign fighters in Syria due to his social media presence, who joined the fight to topple President Bashar al-Assad of Syria in 2013. He remained fiercely “independent” until mid-2015, when he decided to join ISIS. When asked by journalists why he made the move after previously keeping his distance, he replied:

Ask yourself which other group is implementing the Shariah as complete as possible? Ask yourself which group is fully taking care of the affairs of the people as complete as possible? No other group but the Islamic State, so me joining the Islamic State was just a matter of time, for they are able to govern the people and implement the Shariah on a large scale – protecting the Muslims, their wealth, health and religion.<sup>10</sup>

In addition to the patent appeal to foreign fighters from the West, we have also witnessed cases of numerous young women travelling to join ISIS – the “jihadi brides” phenomenon, as it has been labelled by tabloid media, as well as a number of families with elderly parents and young children in tow, clearly not drawn by the violence, but something much more profound. This is the utopian narrative of belonging and sanctuary, of new beginnings and state-building which have proven so important to ISIS’s success. Western media have focused almost exclusively on ISIS’s media output that purveys the pornography of violence, deliberately targeting Western

audiences and sensibilities. However, the overwhelming majority of ISIS media content is in fact centered around depictions of blissful civilian life in the “utopian” caliphate, and therefore offers an additional compelling narrative. Take, for example, images from ISIS’s flagship English-language magazine, *Dabiq*, and the group’s social media catalogue that focus on presenting a positive image of the caliphate by highlighting a wide range of activities that take place under its jurisdiction, from healthcare to taxation, festivities to blissful married life and the roles of both men and women who choose to join.

These narratives are important in recruitment of Western jihadists; however, they are not, in and of themselves, sufficient to account for the rise of the foreign fighter phenomenon, particularly amongst young Muslims in the Western diaspora. One way of conceptualizing this problem is to view the narrative as one of the important pull factors that offers something – it is the appeal, but the individual’s context and their personal circumstances are central to whether this narrative resonates on an individual level. The narrative has to find fertile ground to take root. And of course, we have to consider the role of individual agency here too. Very few individuals whose context and circumstances intersect with a resonant narrative become *de facto* jihadist automatons. Consequently, it is likely a combination or interplay of these elements that ultimately manifest as a desire to join jihadist groups or move toward violent extremism, and (with a few minor

exceptions) these elements have remained largely constant between those who were drawn to al-Qaeda in the past and those who are drawn to ISIS today, as I will illustrate below.

### RECONFIGURING IDENTITIES

To Western audiences inured to depictions of jihadists as either evil, bloodthirsty savages or deranged, religious zealots, there must be something inherently incongruous and deeply unsettling about recognizing the essentially altruistic sentiments behind the actions of many jihadists. However, as discomfiting as this revelation may be, it is nevertheless important to recognize that many individuals that gravitate toward jihadism often do so for largely selfless reasons, being sincerely compassionate to those they see themselves as helping.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, empathy for fellow Muslims inculcates many potential radical Islamists with a profound sense of duty and justice, which finds effective expression through the conduit of jihadism. The role and value of altruistic appeals within the broader jihadist narrative has remained remarkably potent and consistent amongst jihadist groups over the years. Indeed, it is perhaps best illustrated by the detailed cases of numerous young men who were drawn to al-Qaeda's calls to violence. Take, for example, the case of Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, a Nigerian graduate of the University College London, who failed to detonate explosive-lined underwear on a trans-Atlantic flight in 2009, on behalf of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). He justified his actions to U.S. prosecutors by stating: "I carried

with me an explosive device onto Northwest 253, again, to avenge the killing of my innocent Muslim brothers and sisters by the U.S... to save the lives of innocent Muslims."<sup>12</sup>

Similarly, Mohammed Siddique Khan, the ringleader of the 7/7 bombers in 2005, attempted to justify his actions by pointing to tacit British support for injustices perpetrated against his "fictive kin."<sup>13</sup> In his posthumously released "martyrdom" video testament, later released by al-Qaeda and in which al-Zawahiri also appeared, Khan repeatedly invoked a communal identity in which he identified the subjugation of his community as being principal amongst his grievances.

We may dispute the notion that Western jihadists comfortably living within the West hail from "occupied," "oppressed" or "subjugated" communities. However, to do so would be to ignore the communal and supra-national nature of radical Islamist discourse, and the widely held perceptions of Western domination and hegemony in the Muslim world more broadly. Indeed, one of the cornerstones of jihadist discourse has been the rejection of a more parochial conceptualization of community that is predicated upon the traditional ambits of ethnicity or nationalism, in favor of a global community of belief instead. As an example of the championing of this global community of belief and purpose – the *ummah* – the Global Islamic Media Front (a prominent media organ of al-Qaeda) stated in 2005, "The [battle]front does not belong to anyone. It is the property of all zealous

Muslims and knows no geographical boundaries.”<sup>14</sup>

Clearly, it is this radically reformulated global community of belief that many incipient jihadists clearly see themselves as identifying with, first and foremost. But how do we explain this confusing dislocation and melodramatic sense of duty to a nebulous and disparate body of peoples, who ultimately become the object of their altruistic sacrifice? This is despite the fact they often have little direct connection to or identification with them – in terms of ethnicity, nationality, language, culture or customs, to name but a few salient markers of identity. Moreover, this attitude is all the more perplexing when juxtaposed against the feelings of indifference and open hostility displayed toward their victims, with whom they often do actually share many facets of their identity. And this should not simply be dismissed as a type of post-hoc rhetoric used to retrospectively justify violent actions. Rather, as the examples of at least the initial influx of foreign fighters to Syria have shown, the profession of humanitarian grounds is often genuinely expressed. Take, for example, Israfil Yilmaz’s response when asked in an interview with CBS about his motivations for fighting:

I would fight anybody, even if it was my own father that was bombing these people, I would fight him and kill him myself... So I felt the need as a person, as a human, and, of course, as a Muslim, because it was the Muslims that were getting crushed in Syria, that I had to stand up and do stuff.

We left everything behind, when we migrated, everything, everything – our families, our friends, basically our future.<sup>15</sup>

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How then do we explain this appeal? This disconcertingly misplaced identification can be partially explained through a process I describe elsewhere as *dual cultural alterity*.<sup>16</sup> Essentially this refers to a double alienation or sense of “otherness” that results in a staunch repudiation of, or at least a distinct lack of identification with, both minority (ethnic or parental) culture and majority (mainstream or host society) culture. This is a result of being unable or unwilling to fulfil either group’s normative expectations, and thus is likely to inspire feelings of uprootedness and lack of belonging.

Individuals relegate their minority culture to obsolescence for a number of reasons, including: the imposition of conservative socio-sexual mores; a profound sense of alienation from one’s family; and the presence of cultural power structures that can ostensibly divest youth of any tangible control over their own lives.<sup>17</sup>

The disenchantment with majority culture, on the other hand, is less clear-cut. This is particularly true for many people who – by virtue of being raised in a pervasively

Western environment and having imbibed many of its values and cultural norms – seem to easily blend into majority culture (particularly popular, mainstream youth culture) prior to their radicalization. However, this comfortable embedment is disrupted at some point and gradually superseded by disillusionment with the majority culture. This can be the result of perceptions of hedonism, consumerism, racism, inequality and the general imposition of conflicting core-value systems from the “host” society, which may render the individual unwilling or unable to perpetuate assimilation into the predominant paradigm.

**ISIS has shrewdly attempted not just to capitalize on Muslims' feelings of alienation, but to nurture them in the West. The group anticipated that provocative attacks would create a climate of fear and hostility, bringing further division to the world and destroying the "grayzone" that allows one to be both a good Muslim and a good citizen of the republic.**

Cherif Kouachi, one of the gunmen in the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks in Paris, was described by his lawyer in 2005 as “a confused chameleon,”<sup>18</sup> aptly summing up the cultural schizophrenia that can be borne out of a dual cultural alterity. Examining identity through the lens of self-categorization theory<sup>19</sup> shows that the self may be defined at different levels of abstraction depending upon differing circumstances. At times it may be in terms of individual uniqueness and at others, in terms of specific group membership. The salience of a communal identity, for example, may arise during periods

of perceived group crisis or threat. In some scenarios, this new communal identity provides an emphatic rejoinder to the experiences of dislocation and lack of belonging in the West, and by extension the identity offered by their own society, which these individuals feel has already rejected them anyway.<sup>20</sup>

In some cases, it is easy to understand why these potential jihadist recruits might feel that way. The example of France, which has contributed the largest contingent of Western foreign fighters to ISIS, is a striking case in point. The public discourse in France around Muslims and Islam has become increasingly toxic over the last few years. In France, there is an ominous fear of Islam, the immigrant or the “other,” and is what has led to, among other things:

- the desecration of gravestones of French Muslim World War II veterans;<sup>21</sup>
- sartorial restrictions on Muslim women’s dress such as the hijab and burkini, and also importantly the linkage of dress to security;
- the lionizing of fictional best-sellers like Michel Houellebecq’s *Soumission* which, in classic fear-mongering tropes, depicts a future Islamized France, in which women are compelled to wear the veil, men practice polygamy and the Quran is taught in universities;<sup>22</sup>
- and perhaps most significantly, helped spur the far-right Front Nationale party to victory in the European Parliament in 2014.<sup>23</sup>

ISIS has shrewdly attempted not just to capitalize on these feelings

of alienation, but hopes to actively nurture them by creating conditions in Western societies that are conducive to these outcomes. In the wake of the January 2015 *Charlie Hebdo* attacks, ISIS wrote in the February issue of *Dabiq* magazine about polarizing the world by destroying its greatest threat, the “grayzone” – that space in which young Frenchmen could be both Muslims and good citizens of the Republic, without any inherent contradiction. ISIS anticipated that provocative terrorist attacks, like the ones in Paris in January and November of 2015, would goad the French toward overreaction and create a climate of fear and hostility, further alienating French Muslims from wider society, and “further bring division to the world and destroy the grayzone everywhere.” Western Muslims would then be forced to make “one of two choices”: between apostasy or ISIS’s bastardized version of belief. The article even cited, rather approvingly, George W. Bush’s central dictum that underscored the Global War on Terror: “The world today is divided into two camps. Bush spoke the truth when he said, ‘Either you are with us or you are with the terrorists.’ Meaning, either you are with the crusade or you are with Islam.”<sup>24</sup>

Naturally these sorts of confused crises of identity and belonging can prove incredibly useful for jihadist recruiters, as they can easily be co-opted by and yoked to the jihadists’ utopian narrative of a global fraternity or community of believers – the *ummah* – which does not recognize color, race or nationality, and claims to be equally besieged from all sides. Indeed, the Islamic State’s

narrative exemplifies this message. Issue 11 of *Dabiq* shows happy multi-racial brothers in arms alongside the slogan “*wala and bara*” (the concept of loyalty to believers and disavowal of disbelievers), juxtaposed against what it claims is its opposite: “American Racism.” Indeed, it is no accident that this issue was released when the social media hashtag #BlackLivesMatter was trending in the United States, in response to police shootings of African-American men.

It is this radical interpretation of the religious community of believers then that becomes the sole locus of identity and belonging. Consequently, in the absence of an appealing cultural paradigm from either parents or mainstream society, the individual simply resorts to a cultural entrenchment that assumes a religious hue by default – transforming religion from religion per se into the principal anchor of identity.

Those who buy into this identity reconfiguration narrative should be thought of as the “born-again” variety of believer. They have much in common with religious converts found in all faiths. Indeed, it is no accident that Islamic converts are disproportionately represented among Western jihadists.<sup>25</sup> With little previous religious socialization, no effective spiritual counterweight in their immediate circle, and a desperate desire to prove their religious credentials, the born-again variety are far more likely to accept totalitarian visions of Islam, with the proverbial zeal of the converted.

Consequently, religion not only provides an emphatic rejoinder to Western identity, but is also interpreted *de novo*, without the perceived cultural accretions of the Islam associated with their parental or ethnic identity – thereby constructing a legitimate identity outside both minority and majority cultures. Take, for instance, the case of Umar Farouk Abdulmuttalab, who wrote in the final text messages to his devout father back in Nigeria, “I’ve found a new religion, the real Islam”; “You should just forget about me, I’m never coming back”; “Please forgive me. I will no longer be in touch with you”; and “Forgive me for any wrongdoing, I am no longer your child.”<sup>26</sup> Olivier Roy argues that globalized radical Islam is particularly attractive to diasporic Muslims precisely because it legitimizes their sense of deculturation and uprootedness by refusing to identify Islam with the pristine cultures of their parents, pointing to a strong correlation between deculturation and religious reformulation.<sup>27</sup>

### RELIGIOUS MOTIVATIONS AND RHETORIC

This leads us on very usefully to one of the enduring myths that has surrounded jihadists for many years: the ascendancy of religious motivations over other, more “worldly” concerns. It is easy to understand why this myth has come to exist. Many of these individuals themselves employ starkly religious language and invoke religious texts that promise “other-worldly” rewards as compensation for “this-worldly” sacrifice – including, among other things, the guarantee of

eternal Paradise and, most famously, the lascivious offering of 72 heavenly virgins.<sup>28</sup>

However, they often do so while also citing a host of worldly reasons. This makes it extremely difficult to discern that which is genuinely “religious” from other, more secular factors, particularly if all we have to base this on is the overtly sanctified and highly stylized discourse of the individuals themselves. So, although we must give credence to their stated sacred intentions and their own attribution of meaning to their actions, we must crucially also be aware of the *post hoc* attribution of meaning and validation to these acts.<sup>29</sup> To put it differently, religion may not provide the initial motive, but it does provide the motif or stamp of approval.<sup>30</sup> Take the example of a young man who wants to go to Syria to fight for any reason that is not explicitly religious. It is not enough to just fight and even die like a jihadi: To be accepted by that community (and indeed not to end up beheaded as a member of a rival group), you need to walk, talk and behave like one of them too. The highly stylized genre of video “martyrdom testaments” that suicide bombers record prior to their deaths are a very good example of this sort of conformity. It is no accident they all look and sound pretty much the same, as they need to display certain religious tropes and conform to established archetypes for conferral of the status of “martyr” by the wider community.

One recent telling example of this sort of religiosity-tacked-on-at-the-end is the case of Mohammed Ahmed

and Yusuf Sarwar, two young British men from Birmingham who were jailed for travelling to Syria to join and fight alongside a jihadist group in 2013, in response to what they saw as their religious duty. But it was the reading material they purchased to accompany them on their trip – the books *Islam for Dummies* and *The Koran for Dummies* – that prove most revealing about their lack of religious literacy and motivation.<sup>31</sup> This characterization appears to hold equally true for the violent men who attacked the *Charlie Hebdo* offices in Paris. The Kouachi brothers, as orphaned children of Algerian immigrants, were raised in foster care and certainly not as pious Muslims. Rather, as the French newspaper *Libération* reported back in 2005, Cherif led a decidedly non-devout and hedonistic lifestyle – smoking marijuana, drinking alcohol, listening to gangster-rap, and with numerous girlfriends. Indeed, during his trial in 2008 for helping transport jihadist fighters from France to Iraq, Cherif's lawyer described his client as an "occasional Muslim."<sup>32</sup> Similarly, a number of those who committed the Paris 2015 attacks showed an equally indifferent attitude toward religion – smoking marijuana, drinking alcohol and partaking in other activities that ran contrary to central tenets of the Muslim faith.<sup>33</sup>

Now, this is not to exonerate religion in any sense. Religion historically has been responsible for a great deal of violence, and religious texts and doctrines can often appear to condone and legitimize violent acts. However, unlike believers, academics tend to understand religion in

epiphenomenal terms – as products of social, economic, political and other factors that offer solutions to something. So to what does religion offer a solution, in the case of Europe's jihadists?

**An enduring myth has surrounded jihadists for many years: the notion that religious motivations have taken ascendancy over other, more "worldly" concerns. Jihadists often plan violent acts while also citing a host of worldly motivations. For an increasing number, the urge to join jihadist groups seems to arise from an egotistical desire to overcome ennui borne largely of underachievement.**

#### *Transforming Losers to Martyrs*

In addition to the timely identity reconfiguration offered in the face of a dual cultural alterity, this particular form of religiosity also offers meaning and purpose in the lives of those who desperately lack it. It appears that for an increasing number of aspiring jihadists, the appeal of al-Qaeda or ISIS does not stem from altruistic identification with a community of victims, but rather results from an egotistical desire to overcome an unbearable ennui borne largely of underachievement. In these instances, the turn to jihadism serves as an emphatic rejection of the banality and monotonous inanity of daily life, providing – perhaps for the first time – a sense of being part of an elite group that compensates for the shortcomings of one's own trivial existence,<sup>34</sup> or as Sageman suggests, "martyrdom lifts them from their insignificance."<sup>35</sup>

Anthony Garcia, one of the failed 2004 "Blewater bomb" plotters, appears to epitomize this motif.

Garcia left school at the age of 16 with few qualifications and no discernible ambitions, instead peripatetically drifting from one menial job to another. Prior to his arrest, Garcia had been working night shifts stacking shelves at a local supermarket, but spent much of his time daydreaming about becoming a jihadi fighter, with the jihadist fantasy clearly providing a form of escapism from the daily tedium and drudgery of his otherwise uneventful life.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, for others like Richard Reid, the “shoe bomber” who tried to detonate an Atlantic flight in mid-air in December 2001, martyrdom offers not just an escape from underachievement, but also a life plagued by incarceration and petty crime.<sup>37</sup>

often cited as being one of the key environments in which radicalization takes place.<sup>39</sup> Consequently, any attempt to explain why France is the largest exporter of Western jihadists to Islamic State – without acknowledging the clear and striking role played by the presence of gross structural and socio-economic inequalities – is bound to be incomplete.

In direct contrast to these feelings of boredom, purposelessness and insignificance, the jihadists offer redemption through the image of the chivalrous warrior, with the individual recast as some sort of avenging hero. Following the *Charlie Hebdo* attack, ISIS’s official radio station praised the Kouachi brothers, validating their transformation from petty criminals and nobodies into heroes of Islam:

We start our bulletin with France. Heroic jihadists killed 12 journalists and wounded ten others working in the French magazine *Charlie Hebdo*, and that was support for our master (Prophet) Mohammad, may Allah's peace and blessings be upon him.<sup>40</sup>

It is only via the redemptive prism of the chivalrous jihadi warrior, through which he is recast as the community's champion as a result of his heroic sacrifice, that the individual then discerns a mechanism to reclaim agency, purpose, self-esteem and manhood. Mohammed Siddique Khan’s martyrdom video emphatically refers to his coterie of martyrs as “real men,” pointedly distinguishing them from the emasculated individuals who “stay at home.”<sup>41</sup>

**Jihadists offer redemption through the image of the chivalrous warrior – a means by which the individual is recast as the community's champion through heroic sacrifice. In this way, the jihadist recruit discerns a mechanism to reclaim agency, purpose, self-esteem and manhood.**

In the case of the Kouachi brothers and the Paris 2015 attackers, jihadism potentially offered a rejection of, and escape from, the banal and inane drudgery of daily life in French *banlieues*, which for many French Muslims is a mix of unemployment, crime, drugs, institutional racism and endemic cycles of poverty and disenfranchisement. For example, although Muslims make up around 7 percent of the French population, Muslim inmates constitute as much as 70 percent of the prison population in France.<sup>38</sup> This disparity by a factor of ten is all the more troubling considering that prisons are

The appeal to the valiant holy warrior or chivalrous knight is a recurring trope in jihadist literature, and indeed it is no accident that Ayman al-Zawahiri's most important work is titled *Knights Under the Prophet's Banner (Fursan Taht Rayah Al-Nabi)*,<sup>42</sup> shrewdly seeking to exploit traditional Muslim male sensitivities around chivalry, honor, shame and sacrifice. The astute framing of this loss of dignity as being somehow sinful offers up the prospect of redemption and absolution through sacrifice and martyrdom.<sup>43</sup>

Mohammed Siddique Khan exemplifies the transformative power offered by the jihadists' mask, undergoing the ready metamorphosis from children's learning mentor to heroic avenging soldier:

I am directly responsible for protecting and avenging my Muslim brothers and sisters... And until you stop the bombing, gassing, imprisonment and torture of my people we will not stop this fight. We are at war and I am a soldier. Now you too will taste the reality of this situation.<sup>44</sup>

More recently, the ISIS propaganda machine has orchestrated a savvy and highly sophisticated media campaign, producing material that shrewdly seeks to exploit these tensions. Recent social media agitprop from ISIS included the telling phrases, "Sometimes people with the worst pasts create the best futures" and "Why be a loser when you can be a martyr?"

## CONCLUSION

As ISIS continues to draw young Muslim men from every corner of the globe to its caliphate, it is clear that their broader jihadist narratives are continuing to resonate at some level, even with a very small but significant minority of young men and women born and raised in the West. This significant exodus of foreign fighters from many European states will no doubt continue to haunt us long after ISIS meets its inevitable demise, through the foreign fighter blowback syndrome. Indeed, it appears likely that as ISIS continues to lose ground and recruits, it will lash out wildly in a desperate attempt to somehow recapture the narrative that they are indeed still winning, as we have already witnessed in the spate of terrorist attacks over the last year.

If we are to address this pressing security issue, it is important not just to understand what ISIS's appeal is, but also crucially to recognize that their narrative only resonates and has potency when it intersects with the very particular context and circumstances that some young Muslims in the West find themselves in today. The toxic mix of increasing xenophobia and Islamophobia, alienation and cultural dislocation, socio-economic marginalization and political disenfranchisement that many young Muslims experience leads them to take solace in faux-religious identities proffered by welcoming jihadists. These new religious identities not only provide a sense of identification and belonging, but also serve as catalysts to transform young people's lives – lifting them from underachievement,

marginalization and criminality, or simply even purposelessness and boredom, and in the process cast them as heroes and champions of the new reconfigured community of believers. The Internet and attendant new media environment, which has become the principal platform for the dissemination and mediation of the culture and ideology of jihadism,<sup>45</sup> is also largely responsible for the increasing circulation and resonance of these ISIS narratives. It is in these cloistered yet highly immersive Web 2.0 environments that jihadist propagandists rely on emotive imagery and other affective content to venerate the hero – not just through polished jihadist video montages, stirring devotional songs, and fawning hagiographies of martyrs, but also through appeals to videogames like "Call of Duty" and "Grand Theft Auto" and other popular culture references. These strategies are tailored toward the newer generation of young, diasporic, non-Arabic speaking, digital natives,<sup>46</sup> and so it is inevitable that these young people will not just continue to be drawn to the ISIS narrative, but will also continue to contribute disproportionately to the jihadist demographic.<sup>47</sup>

In light of the seismic events to have taken place in the Middle East/North Africa region and beyond – from the failed Arab Spring, to the death of Osama bin Laden and the rise of ISIS – jihadist narratives have changed considerably over the last few years. However, these changes represent a gradual shift rather than an abrupt rupture, and the narrative has retained its overall cogence and coherence. In a sense, the establishment of

ISIS's so-called caliphate has simply followed al-Qaeda's narrative to its logical and inevitable conclusions, changing abstract utopian aspirations to tangible worldly realities. In the process, ISIS has resurrected the ailing jihadist narrative for a whole new generation.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Radicalism is not always a bad thing. It usually indicates a political awakening among young people – the presence of latent energy and a desire to change the world around them for the better, or at the very least, a dissatisfaction with the status quo. We might contrast the political radicalization of young people (no matter how problematic) with the widespread political apathy among youth in recent years, as evidenced by chronically low voter turnout in virtually all democracies. We might attempt to direct the very same energy hijacked by extremists and radicals toward positive, healthy outcomes.
2. Support political empowerment by helping to restore political agency to young people. They must be provided with the means to become agents of positive change within their own societies. Conventional political literacy and socialization are important, but alternative forms of engagement that may be more appealing to youth need to be supported as well. Young people must genuinely believe that they can become effective agents of

change. They require access to mechanisms through which they can air their grievances against the political establishment. Further, when young people express dissatisfaction with political elites or the status quo through protests and demonstrations, they must be taken seriously, and appropriate action must be taken to mitigate their concerns and address their grievances. If their criticisms and frustrations are ignored, they may seek resolution through more negative modes of political engagement. It must be acknowledged that in some cases it will not be possible to cognitively change extremist beliefs and attitudes. However, in these scenarios, it may be possible to disengage young people from violence, to delegitimize violence as a response, and to aim for political socialization focused on more legitimate modes of political engagement.

3. Create inclusive identities. Help to create progressive and inclusive forms of citizenship and belonging, to prevent the marginalization of youth and other disadvantaged populations. Create avenues for youth civic participation so that young people feel they have something vested in the state and society. Grievances and narratives of victimhood, whether real or perceived, must be addressed so young people can see that their concerns are taken seriously. Intolerance, sexism, racism and xenophobia must be eliminated, and their highly corrosive effects on community cohesion, healthy identity development and civic responsibility must be acknowledged.
4. Address socioeconomic inequality. Governments and other stakeholders must address all forms of socioeconomic inequality, pushing for better governance and transparency, and work to eliminate barriers to upward social mobility.

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