The Social Roots of Islamist Militancy in the West

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Introduction

The phenomenon of Islamist militancy in the West has preoccupied the public, media and governments. The September 11 events aggravated the already strained relations between the West and the Muslim world. The fact that the perpetrators of the terrorist attacks were Muslims, who had travelled to the United States from European cities, brought the Old Continent's Islamic communities to the spotlight. The homegrown Madrid and London bombings on March 11, 2004 and July 7, 2005, respectively, only confirmed in the eyes of some people the untrustworthiness of European Muslims. In the United States, there have also been some high-profile cases of jihadi attacks or plots in the post-9/11 period (e.g. the 2003 Brooklyn Bridge plot, 2009 Fort Hood shooting). While these attacks and plots were different from each other, they can be classified as cases of Islamist militancy. For the purpose of this study, Islamist militancy will be defined as the aggressive and often violent pursuit of a cause associated with Islam.

Although it is very difficult to know precisely the number of Western Muslims who have been recruited by jihadi groups, a survey conducted by the Nixon Center revealed that there were 212 suspected and convicted terrorists implicated in North American and Western Europe between 1993 and 2003.[1] In addition, Edwin Bakker's study identified 242 individual cases of jihadi terrorists in Europe during 2001-2006.[2] Most recently, there has been a resurgence of Islamist violence in Europe, Australia, Canada and the United States. The Boston marathon bombing in April 2013; the attack against the Jewish Museum of Brussels in May 2014; the October 2014 shooting at Parliament Hill at Ottawa; the December 2014 Sydney Hostage Crisis; and the January 2015 attack against the French satirical weekly newspaper Charlie Hebdo have all something in common: the perpetrators were Muslims living in the West. To make matters worse, several thousand of European, Australian and North American Muslims have moved to Syria to join jihadi groups fighting against the Assad regime.

However, while many analysts have argued that Western countries are currently under substantial threat, Western Muslims were first recruited by jihadi networks in the 1990s.[3] Some well-known cases include Lionel Dumont, who converted to Islam after serving with the French army in Somalia and then fought in Bosnia in defence of local Muslims, as did Christophe Caze who headed the infamous Roubaix Gang on his return to France; British convert David Sinclair, a 29-year-old computer specialist who travelled to Bosnia to fight with foreign Mujahedeen and was killed in a battle by Bosnian Croat forces in 1993; German Stephen Smyrek who was arrested in Israel in November 1997 because he had allegedly been trained by Hizballah to carry out a suicide attack in Tel-Aviv. The first generation of Islamist militants did not initially attract much attention from

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[1] Rober S Leiken, "Bearers of Global Jihad? Immigration and National Security After 9/11", Nixon Center, Washington DC, p. 6, http://www.nixoncenter.org/publications/monographs/Leiken_Bearers_of_Global_Jihad.pdf

[2] Edwin Bakker, Jihadi Terrorists in Europe - Their Characteristics and the Circumstances in Which They Joined the Jihad: An Exploratory Study (Clingendael: Netherlands Institute of International Relations, 2006).

[3] Gilles Kepel, Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006); Marc Sageman, Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008); Lorenzo Vidino, "Homegrown Jihadist Terrorism in the United States: A New and Occasional Phenomenon?", Studies in Conflict and Terrorism, Vol. 32, No. 1 (2009), pp. 1-17; Tali K. Walters, Rachel Monaghan, & J. Martín Ramirez, Radicalization, Terrorism, and Conflict (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013).

Western security services for two reasons. First, their number was so small that they were not thought of as a serious threat. Second, they targeted unpopular foreign regimes rather than their own governments. Yet, some of them did participate in terrorist attacks on European soil; for instance, David Vallat and Joseph Raime, two Frenchmen who converted to Islam while in prison, gave logistical support to Algeria's Armed Islamic Group for its 1995 bombing campaign in Paris.[4]

In any case, the rise of Islamist militancy in the West have raised some important issues that still remain answered. The main question is why some Western Muslims have decided to take arms and fight against their perceived opponents? What are the social roots of Islamist militancy in the West? This paper will focus on the impact of Islamophobia and racism as a factor that can explain Islamist militancy in the West. Then, it will discuss the particular case of European Muslims travelling to Syria to join jihadi groups. Finally, the conclusion will summarize the main findings and sketch the prospects for the future.

Islamophobia and racism

The targeting of Western civilians by Islamist militants has provoked a media hysteria against Islam. There are so many examples of statements and writings that have attacked unjustifiably Muslims that is almost impossible to compile a relevant anthology. However, a few of them attracted much attention due to the celebrated personality of the commentator or the outrageousness of the statement. In October 2006, Joan Smith of The Independent declared that "I can't think of a more dramatic visual symbol of oppression, the inescapable fact being that the vast majority of the women who cover their hair, faces and bodies do so because they have no choice".[5] In December 2014, a famous TV commentator, Eric Zemmour argued that "this situation of a people inside a people, of Muslims inside French people, will lead us to civil war…millions of people live here in France and refuse to live in the French manner"; therefore, he did not exclude the possibility of deporting five million Muslims from the country.[6] One month later, Steven Emerson, a terrorist commentator for The Fox News described Birmingham as "a Muslim-only city" and claimed that "Muslim religious police beat anyone who doesn't dress according to religious Muslim attire".[7]

To make matters worse, there are a growing number of far-right and populist political parties that have openly endorsed racist and xenophobic views against Muslims. France's National Front (Front National), the National Democratic Party of Germany (Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands), Greece's Golden Dawn (Chrysi Avgi), and Italy's League of the North (Lega Nord) have constantly scapegoated Muslims. In this way, they have contributed to what Jocelyne Cesari called the

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[4] Hayder Mili, "Al-Qaeda's Caucasian Foot Soldiers." Jamestown Foundation Terrorism Monitor, 4, 2 November 2006, http://www.jamestown.org/programs/gta/single/?tx_ttnews[tt_news]=948&tx_ttnews[backPid]=181&no_cache=1
[5] Joan Smith, "The Veil is a Feminist Issue", The Independent, October 8, 2006, http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/commentators/joan-smith/joan-smith-the-veil-is-a-feminist-issue-419119.html
[6] Dan Bloom, "France Embroiled in Free Speech Row after Islamophobic TV Presenter is Sacked for Saying Muslims Should be Deported to Prevent Civil War", MailOnLine, December 22, 2014, http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2883275/France-embroiled-free-speech-row-Islamophobic-TV-presenter-sacked-saying-Muslims-deported-prevent-civil-war.html
[7] "Apology for 'Muslim Birmingham' Fox News Claim", BBC News, January 12, 2015, http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-30773297

"securitisation of Islam in Europe" by influencing the policy making process on relevant issues (e.g. immigration laws, anti-terror policies).[8]

Media bias and political xenophobia have stirred up a climate of Islamophobia that has alarmed Muslim communities. The term Islamophobia was defined by the Council of Europe as "the fear of or prejudiced viewpoint towards Islam, Muslims and matters pertaining to them. Whether it takes the shape of daily forms of racism and discrimination or more violent forms, Islamophobia is a violation of human rights and a threat to social cohesion".[9] In 2005, a European survey claimed that "many Muslims have experienced verbal assaults in public transportation means and other public places. Muslim women who wear the headscarf and Muslim men who travel with women dressed this way are particularly frequent targets of offensive comments".[10] Likewise, the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia has reported a rapid increase in the number of verbal and violent attacks against Muslims in many European countries.[11] According to a 2006 survey of Pew Research Center, 51 percent of Germany's Muslims, 42 percent of Great Britain's Muslims, 39 percent of France's Muslims and 31 percent of Spain's Muslims believe that native Europeans are hostile to Muslims, while 19 percent of German Muslims, 28 percent of British Muslims, 37 percent of French Muslims and 25 percent of Spanish Muslims had a bad personal experience.[12]

There is a long list of individuals coming from ethnic minorities who were radicalized because they were victimized or believed they were victimized by majority groups and/or authorities. Discrimination and abuse can give rise to anger that could be transformed into rage, hatred and a desire to take revenge. In the post-Cold War era, Islam has come to be seen as a religion of rebels. Olivier Roy has drawn attention to the phenomenon of 'protest conversion' which can be divided into four categories: the politicized rebels who admire the anti-imperialistic rhetoric of political Islam, the religious nomads who convert to Islam after experimenting with other religions, individuals with criminal record who find refuge in Islam, and members of minority groups (e.g. blacks, Latinos and people of mixed race) who are attracted to Islam because of its cross-racial appeal.[13] The last subgroup has been particularly vulnerable to Islamophobia and racism due to its visibility. It is hardly a surprise that an increased number of Western jihadi fighters are members of black and minority ethnic communities. While there are many examples of such individuals who have been radicalized and joined jihadi groups, this study will focus on two cases: Richard Reid who is known as the shoe bomber for his 2001 attempt to detonate explosives hidden in his shoes during a transatlantic flight and Denis Mamadou Cuspert who started his career as a musician but he ended up as a jihadi fighter.

Richard Reid, a British convert of Jamaican-English descent, is a typical example of this category. Reid had a troubled youth and served sentences for various crimes. He converted at the age of 25 while in prison. Reid reportedly blamed racism for his troubles with the law. According to his father,

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[8] Jocelyne Cesari, "The Securitisation of Islam in Europe", CEPS Challenge Programme, Research Paper no. 15, April 2009.
[9] Ingrid Ramberg, Islamophobia and its Consequences on Young People (Budapest: Council of Europe, 2004), p. 6.
[10] Ann-Sofie Nyman, Intolerance and Discrimination against Muslims in the EU: Developments Since September 11 (Vienna: International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights, 2005), p. 30.
[11] The European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia, "Muslims in the European Union: Discrimination and Islamophobia" (Brussels: EUMC, 2006).
[12] Pew Research Center, "Muslims in Europe: Economic Worries Top Concerns About Religious and Cultural Identity", 2006, http://www.pewglobal.org/2006/07/06/muslims-in-europe-economic-worries-top-concerns-about-religious-and-cultural-identity/
[13] Olivier Roy, Globalized Islam: The Search for New Ummah (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), p. 317.

"he was born here in Britain...it was distressing to be told things like Go home, nigger!".[14] Being a mixed race person, he felt he did not belong anywhere. He joined the Finsbury Mosque in North London at the time that Abu Hamza, a radical imam of Egyptian origin, was preaching there. During 1999-2000, he visited Afghanistan where he possibly received training from al Qaeda. Within the jihadi networks, Reid was treated as an equal. In this way, he coped with racism and marginalization. He found a new role in life, and his self-esteem was boosted.

Denis Mamadou Cuspert (aka Abou Malleq) is another representative of this subgroup. Being a mixed race person (his father is from Ghana and his mother is an ethnic German), Cuspert probably felt he did not belong anywhere. He joined youth gangs to revolt against his family. He converted to Islam after meeting Pierre Vogel, an influential neo-Salafist German preacher, in 2009. Following his conversion, he started propagating Islamist messages. His songs have praised Osama bin Laden and jihadi warriors, while denouncing racism and Islamophobia. Cuspert has served a role model for Muslim teenagers of immigrant origin who struggle to cope with social exclusion and racism. Indeed, Cuspert has been accused of inspiring Arid Uka, a Kosovo Albanian, who killed two American airmen at the Frankfurt airport in March 2011. Although he denied any direct connection with Uka, Cuspert did not hesitate to argue that "the brother hasn't killed civilians...[Uka] has killed soldiers who had been on their way to kill Muslims".[15] Finally, Cuspert himself became a jihadi fighter sometime during 2013; first he went to Egypt to join members of Millatu Ibrahim, a banned German Salafist group, and from there he ended up joining the ISIS in Syria.[16]

In both cases, individuals who are members of minority groups turned to Islamist militancy, at least partly, due to the racism and Islamophobia they experienced. In general, Islam preaches about racial and ethnic equality, solidarity and brotherhood. Militant groups like al-Qaeda and the Islamic State of Syria and Iraq (ISIS) have been very successful in recruiting members of black and ethnic communities because they emphasize religious identity over national one.

European jihadi fighters in Syria

According to news reports, a growing number of European Muslims are fighting alongside the insurgents. A study published by the King's College International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation claims that between 400 and 2000 European Muslims have gone to Syria since 2011 to fight the Assad regime, representing 18 percent of the foreign fighter total.[17] It appears that most of them come from Great Britain, Germany, France, Belgium and the Netherlands.[18] While there are not

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[14] Michael Elliott, "The Shoe Bomber's World", The Time Magazine, February 16, 2002.
[15] Souad Mekhennet, "German Officials Alarmed by Ex-Rapper's New Message: Jihad", The New York Times, August 31, 2011, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/01/world/europe/01jihadi.html?_r=1&pagewanted=all
[16] See Benjamin Weinthal, "The Rise of a 'German Salafist Colony' in Egypt", The Long War Journal, August 15, 2012, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2012/08/the_opening_of_a_ger.php; "Berlin Rapper in 'Islamic State' Beheading Video", Deutsche Welle, November 5, 2014, http://www.dw.de/about-dw/profile/s-30688
[17] "ICSR Insight: Up to 11,000 foreign fighters in Syria; steep rise among Western Europeans", http://icsr.archivestud.io/2013/12/icsr-insight-11000-foreign-fighters-syria-steep-rise-among-western-europeans/
[18] Emmanuel Karagiannis, "Transnational Islamist Networks: Western Fighters in Afghanistan, Somalia and Syria", The International Spectator: Italian Journal of International Affairs, vol. 48, no. 4, 2013, pp. pp. 119-134.

reliable statistics about their racial/ethnic origins, many jihadi online videos have revealed that a significant percentage of them are members of black and ethnic minority groups.

To start with, British men of Arab and Asian origin, as well as converts, have joined the opposition forces. The British security agencies estimate that as many as 500 British nationals have travelled to Syria for the purpose of fighting there.[19] The case of British fighters in Syria first drew media attention when a British and a Dutch journalist, who had been kidnapped by an unknown jihadi group, managed to escape from captivity and made it to Turkey in July 2012. It was later revealed that some of their captors were actually British-born Muslims of South Asian origin.[20] Most recently a British national was identified as the infamous Jihadi John who was shown in videos of Western hostages' beheadings. [21]

Members of other nationalities have joined the Syrian opposition as well. In July 2013, Berlin estimated the number of Germans fighting in Syria at more than 70, predicting a further rise in their number in the future.[22] Tens of Belgian Muslims have also joined the opposition forces in Syria. The cases of the Belgian teenagers, Brian De Mulder and Jejoen Bontinck, from Antwerp have received public attention because their families have launched a campaign to bring them home; the father of Jejoen Bontinck even travelled to Aleppo to find his son but in vain. [23] In February 2013, a former Guantanamo prisoner, Slimane Hadj Abderrahmane became the first Danish fighter to be killed in Syria. [24] In May 2013, an American woman convert was killed in northern Syria, although it is not exactly clear what her role there was.[25] Additionally, Muslims from Ireland and Spain have travelled to Syria for the purpose of joining the opposition forces.

Although most senior leaders of the ISIS are of Arab origin, the group is keen to emphasize its pan-Sunni membership and post-ethnic ethos. For instance, the self-declared Caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi released a statement on July 1, 2014 stating that [the Caliphate] is a state where the Arab and non-Arab, the white man and black man, the easterner and westerner are all brothers. It is a khilafah that gathered the Caucasian, Indian, Chinese, Shami (i.e. Syrians), Iraqi, Yemeni, Egyptian, Maghribi (i.e. North African), American, French, German, and Australian…Their blood mixed and became one, under a single flag and goal, in one pavilion, enjoying this blessing, the blessing of faithful brotherhood… The State is a state for all Muslims. The land is for the Muslims, all the

[19] Lamiat Sabin, "Two British men from London killed fighting for Isis in Syria", The Independent, November 22, 2014, http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/two-british-men-killed-fighting-for-isis-in-syria-9877366.html
[20] Raffaello Pantucci, "British Fighters Joining the War in Syria", CTC Sentinel, February 20, 2013, https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/british-fighters-joining-the-war-in-syria
[21] Steven Erlarger, "Jihadi John' From ISIS Execution Videos Was Under Watch by British Intelligence", The New York Times, February 26, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/27/world/europe/british-intelligence-services-had-early-encounter-with-man-identified-as-isis-fighter.html?_r=0
[22] "Regierung besorgt über Gotteskrieger", Waz, July 27, 2013, http://www.der westen.de/politik/regierung-besorgt-ueber-gotteskrieger-aimp-id8241646.html.
[23] "Regierung besorgt über Gotteskrieger", Waz, July 27, 2013, http://www.der westen.de/politik/regierung-besorgt-ueber-gotteskrieger-aimp-id8241646.html.
[24] Helen Russell, "From techno DJ in Denmark to martyrdom fighting Assad in Syria: the life and death of Slimane Hadj Abderrahmane", The Independent, March 25, 2013, http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/fromtechno-dj-in-denmark-to-martyrdom-fighting-assad-in-syria-the-life-and-death-of-slimane-hadj-abderrahmane-8548987.html
[25] Paul Owen and Luke Harding, "British man and American woman killed in Syria, reports say", The Guardian, May 31, 2013, http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2013/may/31/us-woman-dies-syria-nicole-mansfield

Muslims. O Muslims everywhere, whoever is capable of performing hijrah (emigration) to the Islamic State, then let him do so, because hijrah to the land of Islam is obligatory... [26]

By acknowledging the multi-ethnic character of the ISIS, al-Baghdadi attempted to encourage more foreigners to join the group. The flow of foreign-born Muslims not only could strengthen the ISIS forces, but also alter the demographic make-up of the new state. Indeed, a number of Moroccan and Tunisian jihadis have brought their families to settle to ar-Raqqa and other ISIS-controlled Syrian cities, and foreign preachers have been appointed in mosques.[27] The ISIS propaganda machine has encouraged Muslims to immigrate to the ISIS-controlled territories in Syria and Iraq by publishing photos of a well-organized communal life.[28] The ISIS leadership has framed the new state as a heaven on earth for Muslims who want to practice their religion free of foreign interference. This is an attractive possibility for those who felt like outcasts in their home country and wish to become pioneers of a new political entity.

For the new recruits, the jihad-trip is the equivalent of an internship through which they can prove themselves to their family and friends (who have usually criticised them for their conversion to Islam or their growing religiosity) and, more importantly, to the larger group – the world's Muslim community, the ummah – which will give them recognition. Indeed, it can be argued that jihadi fighters have developed a hybrid identity that combines jihadism with Islamic universalism. They believe that they are involved in an open-ended religious conflict between the ummah and its enemies. Therefore, they consider it their own individual obligation (fardh al-ayn) to defend the ummah.

Conclusion

While the huge majority of Western Muslims have been law-abiding citizens, a small number of them have participated in jihadi activities. This study has claimed that racism and Islamophobia have contributed to Islamist militancy in the West because some individuals have found refuge in post-ethnic and post-racial jihadi groups. In other words, the marginalization of Muslim communities in the West can, at least partly, explain the phenomenon of Islamist militancy, both inside and outside the West.

Moreover, the involvement of Western Muslims in the Syrian civil war could have important security implications for Western countries. If the history of Arab Afghans is a guide, the return of these jihadi fighters to their home countries may contribute to the outbreak of jihadi campaigns. Since they have already gained valuable skills and experiences, they may later be tempted to target their own governments and societies. While investing more in intelligence-gathering is certainly an option, a

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[26] http://www.thegatewaypundit.com/2014/07/breaking-isis-leader-baghdadi-releases-first-major-statement-since-formation-of

[27] "The Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria: Two Arab Countries Fall Apart", The Economist, June 14, 2014, p. 35

[28] "A Window into the Islamic State", Dabiq Magazine, no 4, 2014, pp. 27-29.

successful strategy should promote the social inclusion of Western, particularly European, Muslims. Therefore, European governments should promote inter-religious dialogue, enforce legislation on equality and non-discrimination, and take measures to combat Islamophobia. In this regard, working with Muslim communities and their leadership is a precondition for implementing any policies to tackle Islamist militancy in the West.

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