

## Religion or Ideology? The Radicalization of European Jihadists

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*Thousands of citizens from Western countries, second generation immigrants but also converted natives, fight among the radical Islamist group of ISIS or Al Qaeda in Syria and Iraq. Their average age is between 18 and 28, but there are also several minors. More than 10% are women. Who are they? We do not have a standard profile. They come from middle and working classes, from the metropolitan suburbs as well as from residential areas, with different levels of education. Most of them do not have any prior religious or political militancy. They convert back or convert to Islam because they are politically radicalised, not vice-versa. Radical Islam appears to them as a doctrine of complete refusal for western political and cultural systems and also satisfies their needs of identity and sense of youth looking for answers in the latest all-absorbing narration at their disposal, showing total otherness until the decision to use weapons to fight against what the West represents.*

*The article analyzes the factors that push young Europeans towards radicalisation. Radicalisation, ideology, identity, community, generation are the theoretical concepts thanks to which we are going to provide an interpretation-explanation of the phenomenon.*

**T**HOUSANDS of citizens from Western countries, second generation immigrants but also converted natives, fight among the radical Islamist group of ISIS or Daesh (Arab acronym of *Dawlat islamiya fil' iraqwa shâm*).

Islamist internationalism, or better, pan-Islam fighting is not a new phenomenon. Volunteers from the Western world joined the lines of organizations calling for jihad in several conflict areas. More recently, also in the Iraqi conflict between 2003 and 2006. Nonetheless, as from 2011 this phenomenon has taken a whole new dimension, not just from a quantitative point of view. Following the rebellion against Assad's regime, the gradual withdrawal of US military forces from Iraq, the expansion of ISIS in the Iraqi and Syrian Sunni provinces, and the proclamation of the caliphate, the number of European *mujahidins* has increased exponentially.

According to official sources, more than five thousand fighters in the 2011-2015 period are from Europe: one sixth of the estimated number of all ISIS fighters. Others come from the USA, Canada and Australia. Their number has not increased further because Western countries have taken criminal and police measures which make migration to ISIS more difficult or hinder it altogether. Who are they and what encourages them to question their lives and make choices destined for most of them to irreversibly affect their biographies? What has made them undertake such a path?

The plentiful scientific literature on studies on terrorism or political violence shows very little in this respect. In this dimension safety and asymmetric war, with few exceptions, come to the forefront. In other cases it's especially suicidal terrorism that becomes central (Pedhazur 2005; Gambetta 2006; Tosini 2012) bringing to light rational behaviour as regards value (*wertrational*) determined by beliefs, in this case those about «martyrdom».

This discussion counts the cost of the fact that it is the actual concept of terrorism that is controversial in social sciences (Crenshaw 2001; Hoffman 2006; Weinberger, Pedhazur, Hirsch-Hoefler 2004) because of its features which include conceptual stretching and per-

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spectives which question Weber's postulates on value judgment. After September 11<sup>th</sup>, studies on terrorism have been greatly influenced by non-academic actors joining the discussions: States and international organizations, the media, groups adopting or in favour of violence or those who use it as a weapon of political fight to pursue their objectives. All actors who are especially interested in delegitimizing or exalt the actions of terrorist organisations, more than understanding the reasons why their members join them.

Over-crowding in the discussion arenas has resulted in conflict i.e., more than producing a more in-depth reflection on the phenomena, it has resulted in falling back on science. This is generally founded on sharing a labelling mechanism which tends above all to stigmatize the actions of the terrorist group, especially with a group like ISIS which makes an indiscriminate but particularly brutal use of violence and is bearer of a systemic challenge of values. This way instead of aiming at understanding behaviour and motivations of individual parts of the group, as would be the case with Weber's concept of *Verstandnis* (Weber 1922), scientific knowledge tends to internalize behavioural models and expectations resulting in a certain degree of conformity.

Even the concept of radicalization, seen as the process employed by an individual or group to implement violent actions linked to an extremist ideology with political, social or religious nature (Borum 2001; Wilner, Duboloz 2010) but aiming to question the existing order, suffers from this meaning of public safety. This concept becomes more scientifically relevant instead if subjective dimensions and psychic components leading the players under observation to legitimise and practice the use of violence become prominent. In other words, if from a sociological point of view, this concept becomes a key to understand changes going on in society. All of this without underestimating the weight of the following factors on individual choices: stigmatization, social exclusion, the representation of the Other from a cultural and religious point of view, all factors which affect the players before joining the terrorist group, with the victimization mechanism developed by them. Or the search for "authentic" connections they think they will find among the community of fighters, or the dimension of time which is essential to understand that a choice which may appear sudden is indeed mature.

In light of this, the contribution of Fahrad Knhoskokhavar (2014) is relevant from a theoretical point of view. In his writings he uses a sociological and anthropological approach to stress the subjective dimension of the phenomenon. This way the concept of radicalisation allows us to understand the return to religion using violence which is analysed by studies on contemporary fundamentalisms from the point of view of a sociology of religion which is aware of the connection with politics.

Nonetheless, not even the concept of radicalisation in a subjective perspective can on its own explain the spread of radical Islam and the jihadi doctrine among the young people in Europe. Without omitting the incidence of international politics, special attention must be paid to dimensions and concepts such as ideology, generation, identity. Indeed, radicalisation leads to the case under investigation, to the support of part of a generation – to be intended as historical-social category (Mannheim 1952) – to a particular ideology seen as comprehensive world view (Mannheim, Shils 68). This world view is capable of giving a unique sense, shaping mobilization and producing an identity (Sciolla 2010), both collective and individual, clearly marking the difference between «us» and «them», thanks to its different nuances in meaning. The radical Islamist ideology (Guolo 2003, 2004; Kepel 2000; Roy 1992, 2002) distinctly defines the enemy's field. In it, the Western world, as a cultural and political system which is opposed by a different system of beliefs, values, symbols and norms.

Radicalisation, ideology and identity are therefore the theoretical concepts thanks to which we are going to provide a genuine contribution and an interpretation-explanation

of the phenomenon which sees men and women, born or living in Europe, making choices destined to profoundly shape their existence and more.

#### IDEOLOGY AND IDENTITY

The sociological profiles that can be drawn from open sources such as the media, security forces and intelligence reports made public and judicial enquiries show that Western origin *foreign fighters* are from 18 to 28 years old. Therefore the second generation of immigrants is the real protagonist of this second jihadi wave. It is often characterised by the «double lack» condition (Sayad 1998) in which the immigrant is neither a citizen, nor a foreigner, he is both outside the community of origin and not fully integrated in the society he now lives in. He is trapped in that mixed sector of the social space which is between social being and not-being (Bourdieu, Wacquant 2000), a condition which fosters both recrimination and resentment.

For second or third generation young Muslims, radical re-islamisation is both the answer to the failed cultural integration in Western societies which is the result of several factors, and difficulties experienced by the culture they originally belong to which has shown it is incapable of transmitting a suitable system of values with the new social environment and which has been subject to acculturation processes. Islam traditionally passed on in family which features specific religious or ethical dimensions, appears incapable of providing the answers that the complex life in contemporary societies requires. This seems to be especially the case in a context in which Islam has no social evidence, it lacks territory and institutions that can impose observance of norms and in which, due to secularisation, religion and culture diverge even more (Roy 2002). It's a refusal which affects other forms of selective assimilation in which the cultural elements necessary for a functional integration of ascending social mobility processes coexist with the preservation of codes referring to the original culture and community dimension. At the same time, these new social actors label the logic of action of neo-traditional Islamic groups which express non-radical political Islam, as «treason» (Guolo 2004). This logic is based on requests for acknowledgment to ensure visibility forms to Islam and a certain degree of separation which is functional to reproduce their identity.

Radicalized youngsters do not have a feel of belonging and therefore of political loyalty towards the nation state they live in. This sense of uprooting, without a 'territory' makes it easy to join a transnational group such as that of radical Islam which opposes the bonds of the 'warm circle' of the faith and political community to those – which are ever weaker due to globalisation – which should tie them to the nation state and which they view as foreign. This is shown by the videos made by Al Furqan and Al Hayat, the media production houses employed by ISIS, in which young westerners tear and burn their passport, the symbol of a rejected belonging. The same belonging, even the very same concept of it, is considered subordinate to the Western idea of the nation state which is blamed for the artificial division of the «community of believers». This is repeated in the videos in which youngsters openly address western public opinions in their language. A series of images and messages marking the total departure from the culture in which they were socialized, whether for a little or a long time. Adhesion to a world deemed 'authentic', their political loyalty given to the only state they recognise: the one founded by ISIS.

#### A NEO-COMMUNITY

The radical identity is strictly connected with the idea of community. The need for community comes from the need to rediscover sense, to stop fragmentation, chaos, the lone-

liness, even internal, which characterises the individual in modern society. Radical communitarianisation in European societies is also the result of the new lonely crowd made of individuals who were previously not part of any religious, political, cultural fabric. Individuals who re-socialise in small groups who feel they are the vanguard of an imaginary community.

The radical Islamist community is essentially a «community of fellows», an endo-group with a clear cut distinction between us and them and in which the control over personal life, interiorisation of duties and prohibitions are very strict. Individualisation, which is typical of Western culture, is rejected because it undermines the community blending typical of Islamist holism. Adherence to a strictly prescriptive idea of religious law reinforced by activist praxis which strengthens and promotes dogmatism, offers cultural coherence to radicalised youngsters. This cultural coherence is based on precise and clear regulative principles that cannot be found elsewhere. Thus radical Islam becomes a compass magnetically orienting its adepts in a daily life that at last appears to have a meaning and can be interpreted. The longed for united world doesn't appear so out of reach anymore.

Islamist communitarianisation (Roy 2015) is rebuilt thanks to the deculturation process involving the new generation of Muslims in the Western world and in which radical Islam plays a leading active role. A role which is carried out by denying the identity forms gained in the Western context, the Muslim culture passed on by the family or the original environment, maybe with an ethnical connotation or with specific religious beliefs. Hard-line Salafism that separates culture from religion is often set up against this culture (Roy 2012). Indeed, radical Islam creates clear-cut boundaries even among Muslims who do not share its ideology. Among the defining factors, the real willingness to fight for Jihad and die as a «martyr», *shahid*, anywhere the *umma*, i.e. the community of believers, is deemed to be «threatened». The Jihad is the real cornerstone of the radical Islamic political and religious belief. A personal duty, *fard al ayn*, which makes no exception.

#### THE IMPOSSIBLE PROFILE-TYPE

The profile of young jihadists in Western countries is socially and culturally varied (Gullo 2015). When trying to come up with theories to explain this phenomenon it will be necessary to avoid single-cause explanations based on automatic connections between social condition and path to Jihadism. The difficulty in drawing up a profile of western foreign-fighters, unless he's a second or third generation Sunni Muslim or a convert, is due to the presence of individuals from the middle class and the working class, from the outskirts or metropolitan suburbs, as well as from residential areas, small neighbourhood thugs and graduates from good universities. Despite this, not all those from working-class neighbourhoods in big cities have a background of marginality and deviance dropping out of school, using drugs or with small drug pushing, micro-criminality and jail time. Such a component is certainly present, especially among young French from banlieues, but radicalized people include young educated people who often haven't managed to use their education to achieve a satisfactory professional life. The dominant trait of this group is, if anything, part of refusal for a downward type assimilation: this is what happens in urban outskirts that have become areas of social segregation and in deprived environments with cultures opposing institutions and the normative models of Western societies due to cultural cross-breeding inherent in migration processes.

In looking for reasons for such a social and cultural heterogeneity the role of the ideological dimension become prominent, as happened with other political movements who

see themselves as revolutionary. This is indeed the case with the self-representation of radical Islam which is both bearer of political aspirations which are incompatible with the contemporary form of states and the borders of current nation states, and because it is the expression of a clear refusal of Western culture, accused of undermining the roots of Islam. Adhesion to radical ideology implies refusal of what Islamic authenticity calls *westoxification*, i.e. intoxication from the West. This includes any cultural forms and lifestyles, from music to food, from clothing to consumption and sexuality which have any connection with the Western culture.

The refusal is embodied by political radicalization which then becomes religious radicalization. It is not by chance that for many youngsters the return to religion is accompanied by joining radicalisation. Most of them do not have any prior religious or political militancy. They convert back or convert to Islam because they are politically radicalised, not vice-versa. Radical Islam appears to them as the supreme doctrine of complete refusal for western political and cultural systems. A last great storytelling opposing an order and values they intend to destroy.

#### SOCIAL SEGREGATION AND IDENTITY: THE CASE OF THE BANLIEUES

One of the countries with the highest number of jihadists is France: in the past four years, approx. onethousandfivehundred citizens of the Republique have been involved among the jihadi ranks or have fought in Syria. Not all of them come from the banlieues. Some used to live in residential areas with middle class families. On the other hand the *banlieusardes*, often have a similar background: they were born in Muslim families but they were de-Islamized. Their path to radicalisation is generally marked by specific stages: life in the outskirts, petty crimes, the transformation into «fixed clients» of the police, jail, re-islamisation, for some the initiation journey in their countries of origin or in conflict areas.

The *banlieues*, i.e. urban social segregation and self-producing marginality areas, are incubators of individual and collective resentment towards the social structure which fuels injustice and discrimination but also the State (Kepel 2015). The latter is accused of betraying the implicit pact of the assimilation integration model which promises citizenship and equal opportunities in exchange for giving up cultural particularism in the public sphere. Exclusion is carried out by young people from the outskirts based on their being north African or from sub-Saharan Africa, on their accent or the colour of the skin, their religion and language their posture and proxemics. A perception which fuels hostile behaviour which in turn generates stigmatization by others, whether locals or included. Stigmatization symbolised by the well-known expression *racaille*, scum, used against *banlieusards* by the then Minister of Interior Sarkozy in 2005 at the apex of the revolt in the outskirts (Jobard 2006). Stigmatisation leads to a feeling of unworthiness in those it is aimed at and it often results in aggressiveness towards those excluded, but also towards the family or the other inhabitants in the outskirts, transforming the socially constructed disdain for oneself into hate towards others.

In a context in which rising social mobility is often barred, deviance is seen by these young people as a shortcut to bypass exclusion, at least that affecting consumption. The next step, jail, plays a relevant role in radicalisation both because it is an institution which does not foster religious expression by Muslims, especially at a time in which its control over inmates members of a potentially 'suspect' belief has become tighter (Beckford, Joly, Khosrokhavar 2005). But also because radical and Salafist wings fostering separation not only between Muslims and non-Muslims, but also between those deemed to be 'au-

thentic' believers and others spread among inmates. For most, identity re-islamization in jail enables them to understand the reasons for their personal failures under a new light (Rhazzali 2010), freeing those reborn from the sense of guilt and their personal responsibility. After a similar journey the others, society and those condemning young people – seen as Muslims – in the outskirts to deviant marginality appear the guilty ones (Khosrokhavar 2004; 2006).

#### CONVERTS

European Jihadists also include converts. According to official records they make up a quarter of the total among French jihadists. The phenomenon of the conversion to political Islam was not rare among members of the political generation (Bettini 1999) in the '70s with prior militancy in the far right or left. They came from the same background after the decline of ideologies following the end of the «short century», the common criticism towards the Western system of values, the fascination for the new pan-Islamic militant internationalism and, according to the political culture of origin, from the idea of radical Islam as last egalitarian account or rediscovery of traditions and refusal of modernity.

As regards collective imagination, today radical Islam is still seen as the last great ideology capable of making sense of the world. Nonetheless, the political radicalisation of European converts does not offer continuity with prior militant experiences, except for registry features. As the result of post-ideological times, even radicalisation is carried out at an individual level or through fluid aggregation. In this case it's not a matter of ideological re-conversion processes, but adhesion, for the first time, to an all-absorbing conception of the world.

Within this framework, there are several life stories involving those who profess being «all-out loyal». Generally speaking, converts come from middle class families and have no prior criminal records. Some, especially in provinces, had a catholic upbringing and attended catholic associations until the end of their adolescence. As often happens with conversion phenomena resulting in adhesion to sect movements, converts often ignore how complex the Islamic belief is and adopt a dogmatic version of it believing it is the «true Islam». With no knowledge or family guidance, they rely on those who control the radical religious field (Bourdieu 1971), with the utmost diligence. The matter of identity, whether personal or collective become relevant in making a choice even in the case of converts.

The attraction created by radical Islam in individuals looking for fixed points in the uncertainty of life seems to be confirmed by the life stories of converts. Some come from difficult family situations in which the crisis of parents' authority has resulted in dissolution of the authority principle. In Islam, especially in its strictest connotation, these young people look for a new set of rules, like if not more than the others. It's as though they were looking for a *nomos* to replace the lost *Pater*, thereby inverting the roles of fathers and children. The result is a law they try to impose on others countering the dissolution of values by extremely hardening their stance (Beslama 2004; 2005; 2014). On the other hand, the alluring power of Islamic radicalism lies in its ability to offer itself as the sole and authentic truth. Adhesion to Islam is indeed submission to Law. This is the literal sense of the word.

#### MUHAJIRAT.

##### WOMEN IN THE HOUSE OF RADICAL ISLAM

Ten percent of Europeans who have left for Syria and Iraq are women. Their age is between 18 to 24 years old, but there are also minors among them. They are considered

*muhajirat*, a word to indicate those who migrate due to their faith, cutting any ties with the surrounding blasphemous» environment which is deemed not only non-Islamic, but hostile to Islam (Guolo 2016). In today's radical connotation it refers to those women who abandon their countries to join the Islamic state. Their motivations, whether political or ideological, are the same as their male counterparts.

There are also some specific ones, like wearing the full veil without incurring in state bans forbidding full face covering for reasons of public safety or deeming it a way of submission to men's will. This choice doesn't often meet the approval of their own families. It should be noted that in the case of women of Muslim faith since their birth, the very same families they come from are in most case not strictly practising and those who already used the veil, wore the hijab or the Amira, not full veils like the *niqab*.

For radical Islamic women wearing a full veil is especially a religious duty, a requirement to build a society based on purity. In the vision of the world of «women emigrated for faith», full covering takes on a meaning which is exactly the opposite of female oppression, a recurring theme in the Western debate. It expresses, before anything else, the rejection of the Western world, whether internally, present on the bodies of the women wearing the veil, whereas the «real Islamic» woman refused to be looked at by men, or externally. In this case the West is seen as a civilization averse to the principles of Islam. For these women, wearing the full veil, banned in schools, university or at work, even outdoors in some countries, means claiming their religious identity and so they refuse the permissive and hostile Western culture. In the Islamic state they live in an environment in which not only religion has a strong social value, but in which sharia is fully applied. In a rigid observance of the religious Law they look for certainties which enable them to reduce uncertainty and responsibility when making choices.

To realise its project, the Islamic State needs families with a high rate of ideological adhesion. Their duty is first of all to build their daily life as per the principle of the sharia. Becoming wives to the mujahidin who still don't have one and reunite a husband with his wife left in the West therefore becomes paramount.

The mujahirat leaving Europe may or may not be married. Among those who are, there are some with children who join their husband who is already fighting the jihad. But most of them leave after getting married over the internet with a husband seen only once on the screen. Then there are young unmarried women, not even on the web: among them, girls who have left home following brief exchanges online. Single and younger women usually leave shortly after their conversion or the first conversations online with recruiters.

Marriage proposals are promoted by Western women already in the territories of the Islamic State. They know both which emotions to appeal to and which cultural codes to use in order to be successful in their proselytism. The young European women listen to «sisters» who have already embarked on the journey they are tempted by: they compare life in the Islamic State with the experience of other women who already live in that reality. To convince them the muhajirat show potential recruits material expressly created by ISIS propaganda centers: images from the daily life showing what women in the Islamic state do and how they live. Pictures and videos portraying family settings, Koran education of children, religious welfare services.

When deciding to leave, even the adventurous connotation of the choice is relevant, especially for the youngest girls. This meant not only breaking off with their family, but also the idea of becoming wife and mother to a militant in the Caliphate thanks to marriage. In the collective imagination the militant taken on the connotation of the romantic and

manly hero. A husband with whom to have children before his possible «martyrdom» in the jihad, a real possibility in a context of war and fighting based on self-sacrifice. To be with a martyr's child is an honour in the radical scale of values.

Departure for the territories of the Caliphate is a choice full of implications. It's an experience destined to have a long-lasting effect on those who undertake it; though not employed in combat, even women risk their lives due to bombings or other military events. But also because the possible return home, in the event of having second thoughts on the choice made or because of widowhood, is not at all easy. Neither culturally, not politically after having lived in a context of extreme contrast with Western values. And not even on a legal and safety measure level, due to the antiterrorism regulations adopted by the countries of origin against the return of *foreign fighters*. Moreover, the same control, social and not, wielded against them by their ISIS «brothers» and «sisters» is a serious obstacle; it's done not only not to give any information to the enemy, but to exploit the muhajirat's choices as clear proof of the failure of Western values and models.

Upon their arrival in the territories of the Islamic state, muhajirats are assigned a single house, if married; if they aren't, they live together with other «sisters» in a maqqar, a sort of female hostel, waiting to be given in marriage to the fighters. Their maintenance is ensured by the proceeds of the *ghamyna*, the plunder gained by ISIS. Their main activity at home or in the maqqar is housekeeping, but they study Arabic, if they cannot speak it. Knowledge of the language is considered essential not only to read the holy books and the books written by Islamic ideologists, but also to communicate with Syrian and Iraqi women. Western women are foreign also from a cultural point of view, despite their conversion to Islamic ideology. It is not easy for them to deal with a culture completely different from the one they were brought up in. Arabic is destined to replace English, the enemy's language used by several radicals who do not speak «the language of the Revelation».

Muhajirats do not go out of their home very often. Those who are married cannot move without their husband, a member of their family or, without them, the *mahram*, the tutor. Those who are not married must observe even stricter limitations. Regardless, women may leave their home or the maqqar to study theology or to carry out treatment duties or, if authorised by a specific fatwa, a legal response which enables them to have a more active public role to take part in the activities of the female units of the religious police of the Islamic State.

Despite being sort of maid of the jihads between 2011 and 2013 with roles strictly connected with the family life, later on due to the increase in number of women, their role varied. They are not just wives and housewives anymore, but some more actively participate in building the Islamic State. Thus, in addition to their care activities which are mainly carried out by medicine students or nurses, but also assistants without any specific training taught on the spot, they also carry out educational duties in female Koranic schools. They may also be employed in the religious police with the task of ensuring observance of Sharaitic duties regarding the veil and female decency, as is the case of Al-Khansaa Brigade in the Syrian town of Raqqa.

In spite of the pictures which appeared on the Net of women holding a Kalashnikov and the creation of a training school in which they learn to use weapons and prepare explosive belts, ISIS women do not fight. Only in the event of absolute danger, both personal and for the fate of the Islamic state, they may be used in combat situations. Officially, no martyrdom operations or the use in female fighting units (*katiba*) are envisaged for them. Their aspiration to take part in the jihad with weapons emerges in several chats used by



the most ideological women, but the leaders from ISIS give very sharp and negative answers, confirming the validity of the ban (Hoyle, Bradford, Frenett 2015). A misinterpreted equality in death would make visible what by definition cannot be visible in life: female behaviour in a non traditional scenario, like war. It would be too risky for a movement which theorizes the domestic role as natural destiny for women.

Those who are more convinced from an ideological point of view and are more reliable are used to recruit other women through social forums or instant messaging services. Using their female sensitivity, the «sisters» engage in a dialogue which is made easier by the common language and culture. The role of recruiters is highly prestigious in the ISIS hierarchy.

French and British women, followed by Germans, make up the greatest number of the *muhajirat*. There are several reasons for the choice made by this post-9/11 generation of young women, last but not least the stigma which has signposted Islam in the West since the first decade of the new millennium. French women also reject the assimilation policy obliging them to remove their veil in the public sphere and after 2007, the year in which the law against full veil was approved, also in the public space. The Islamic state is seen as the place in which this dimension of identity is guaranteed. For the British women, who are generally part of the middle class and are still studying in secondary school or university, this stands for the rejection of the British foreign policy, as is the case with British young men, in addition to the perception of islamophobia. Despite the inclusive multicultural integration model they feel strong public opinion hostility towards Islam. Moreover, even in their case, there is the attraction towards a life in the Caliphate based on specific principles with clearly defined roles and no uncertainty (Cassut 2015).

#### THE DIFFERENT WAYS TO LIVE (AND DIE) IN THE JIHAD

There are three types of radical youngsters, including Europeans, fighting the jihad: the playfals, the martyropathics and the rectifiers (Khosrokhavar 2002).

The playful ones consider the adventure in the battlefield an essential experience. Death is reckoned with, but they reach fulfilment in the community's life at the front, not in martyrdom, notwithstanding «God's absolute rights». Hence military creativity, the desire for heroic gestures for which they are often reproached by more seasoned fighters who are less prone to the romantic dimension which often nears unruliness and which may cost some the risk of being marginalized or their own life. For playful youngsters taking on risks and squandering of themselves in excess are a way of life. The dimension of the sacred and the radical other is reached thanks to transgression which makes it possible to restore the community at the front using excess. The playful one utterly lives an interior experience, *Erlebnis*, which goes against calculation, self-preservation, anxiety for death. The subjectivity of those practising excess in jihad with a playful connotation is linked with the space to the sacred of the elective community at the front whose members are bound to each other by sharing and extraordinary experience.

Martyropathics are instead deeply attracted to death. Despite an aesthetical idea of death, their "being for death" outlines a scenario in which life is fulfilled by sacrificing oneself, *i.e.* in «martyrdom». Only dying while inflicting death gives sense to one's existence. Jihad makes it possible to reach God thanks to death and put an end to an "impure and corrupt" order which refuses submission to its will. This is carried out in a sort of religious nihilism in which the destruction of the Other is also self-destruction.

One of the reasons which pushes young people to fight in the Mesopotamian plain is the sense of injustice: the idea that there is a double standard against Islam, that the

international community tolerates massacres like those carried out by the Syrian regime because Muslims (the Sunnis) are deemed something else by Western victims. The politician takes on the role of injustice and is revisited as per the friend/enemy logic. The “rectifiers” are prone to this kind of fascination. Their aspiration is to change the order of things because it is perceived as unjust, also by means of violence.

#### THE THIRD POLITICAL GENERATION

Foreign fighters from Western countries are part of the third political Jihadist generation, the «Syrian» one. It's the generation after the «Afghan» one which fought against the soviets in the '80s during the first episode of fighting pan-Islamism and later had a leading role in the national jihad in Egypt, Algeria and The Philippines in the '90s. It comes after the «Al-Qaeda» generation of fighters which includes those in the second half of the '90s who got together, even ideologically, under the mantle of Al Qaeda sharing its global jihad project. Al Qaeda member fought against the Americans in Iraq after the invasion in 2003.

In this context with generation we mean a historical-social category, not a cohort or a group of people of similar age. As Mannheim points out (1952), it is a group of individuals belonging to a concrete group living the same significant experiences and preserving a generational link based on the awareness of having shared common paths and problems in a given historical period. This concept is defined more convincingly by Abrams (1983) when he defines as social generation a group that share particular experiences, revolutions or wars, which merge life stories and history and for which identity is formed within a double construction of time: that of individual biography and that of society's history. To have a political generation there needs to be a defining moment which shapes and gives a precise social and collective reconstruction. The various jihadist political generations are linked with a «green thread», a collective memory which shapes the jihadist identity. From this point of view it's a matter of combined eras with great matches between old and new generations.

Therefore the choice of jihad as a missionary and militant experience represents a break between before and after, between the time of the daily life and that marked by the dissolution of the distinction between life and death. The decision to abandon one's family, the country of origin or residency and one's job to react to what is perceived as a believer's duty challenges the existing bonds. The «structural death», the gradual detachment between the prior life and that of the community at the front, between past and present, are the necessary result of the interior battle that young jihadists live together with the battle at the front.

In this reorganization of the self, comradeship among «brothers» carries out a function of social cohesion but also of compensation for what has been removed. Indeed, the «society of fighters» tends to result in the warm circle of the community. The religious and ideological dimension of such experience which fosters solidarity among those living it deeply structures the relationship between the fighter and the community at the front. This community appears as a 'genuine' social environment to its members as opposed to the one created politically and religiously by the Enemy, but also to the family environment of origin which is deemed to be meaningless. The sense of belonging to the community at the front fostered by sharing common experiences and fate takes on the connotation of ethical authenticity in the eyes of the mujahidin, antithetical with the immorality of everyday life in the time of «godlessness».

So, there are several factors that push young Europeans towards radicalisation. Radical Islam satisfies the needs of identity and sense of youth looking for answers in the latest

all-absorbing narration at their disposal, showing total otherness until the decision to use weapons to fight against what the West represents. This is also the case for converts who find the reason for their extreme choice in refusing their prior identity and looking for new authority.

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