



EDITED BY ARTURO VARVELLI

JIHADIST HOTBEDS

UNDERSTANDING LOCAL RADICALIZATION PROCESSES

INTRODUCTION BY PAOLO MAGRI

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ISPI

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Introduction

Since a long time foreign fighters from all over the world – from North Africa to Central Asia, and from North America to China – have poured to Iraq and Syria to join the ranks of the Islamic State group. However, in hindsight, available data show that the majority of these fighters come from a fewer number of countries, namely Tunisia, Libya, Saudi Arabia, Belgium, France, the UK and Russia (especially Chechnya and Dagestan). Recent analyses also reveal that they mostly originate in or have some connections with specific areas or districts within each state. One can describe them as local/regional “hotbeds” of extremism. These hotbeds all have unique characteristics that drive the radicalization of their population.

For example, after the recent attacks in Brussels most of the media emphasized how the existence of “Muslim ghettos” acted as the incubators of Islamic extremism. As a matter of fact, it is within these spaces where police fear to tread, that crime and unemployment flourish and radical imams recruit young men to jihad. At the same time, while the term “hotbed” is increasingly abused by the media, it remains one of the most underexplored phenomena in the context of rising violent extremism.

Accordingly, this report aims at digging into the controversial relationship between radicalization and territory, contributing to a better understanding of the conditions and triggers of local radicalization processes within specific regional or urban spaces. By examining both the historical and cultural dimensions of radicalization within each country/area it offers an in-depth analysis of such dynamics within different contexts and continents.

The scientific use of the term “hotbed”, tying it to the phenomenon of the foreign fighters, was firstly introduced by the Ali Sou-

fan Group. In the introductory chapter of this report, Ali Soufan and Daniel Schoenfel point out that significant geographic, demographic, and societal diversity exists in regions, cities and towns where hotbeds of the Islamic State's recruitment strategy emerge. The drivers and processes involved in the radicalization and recruitment process are highly individualized and complex. Substantial academic research has effectively discredited the notion that there are any generalizable predictors for radicalization. Even within hotbeds that provide a significantly disproportionate number of jihadist recruits, there is a far larger proportion of the population with similar demographic characteristics that do not radicalize or join extremist groups. Nonetheless, the complexities and challenges involved in meeting global counterterrorism imperatives require an effort to isolate any discernable trends which can help explain why certain areas and neighborhoods provide a disproportionate number of recruits than others.

To get a better sense of both the differences and similarities amongst the various hotbeds, the report provides an overview of some of the largest contributors to Islamic extremists and foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq. To this aim, the report is divided into two parts: the first focuses on Europe and the United States; the second on the Middle East and the Caucasus.

In the U.S., the Minneapolis area seems to be a new hub for IS recruitment. One hundred thousand East African Muslims live there. Some of them failed to assimilate into American culture, with radical mosques recruiting native born jihadists to fight for first al Shabaab in Somalia and now for IS in Syria. In their chapter, Lorenzo Vidino, Seth Harrison and Clarissa Spada note that, even though the size of the problem is substantially smaller than in most European countries, the United States has contended with increased jihadist activity since ISIS's emergence. Although it is only America's fifteenth largest metropolitan area, Minnesota's Twin Cities (Minneapolis and St. Paul) have proven particularly fertile recruiting grounds. The authors attribute the continuity of jihadist currents in the Twin Cities to the multiple strands of motives for radicalization. In addition to the nationalist motives that initially drove al-Shabaab

recruitment, religious and social drivers proved to be enduring factors in mobilizing these Minnesotans to fight abroad.

In Europe the Muslim enclaves in various cities are also breeding grounds for Islamic radicalism and may pose a threat to Western security. For example, dozens of young people have departed to fight jihad in the Middle East from some Belgian towns and industrial suburbs, as Vilvoorde, Verviers or Molenbeek. Guy Van Vlierden explores the Belgian background, analyzing the driver of socio-economic deprivation and proposing the idea of reciprocal radicalization between the far right and violent Islamists.

By the same token, Doug Weeks investigates the radicalization process in the United Kingdom as a product of a long history of events that have challenged Muslim identity. For those who have radicalized, the journey has involved a complex array of influences. Second- and third-generation immigrants often find themselves caught between two worlds: the traditional ways, values, and expectations of their parents, and the society that they belong to. Although extremely heterogeneous, Muslim communities are located in various parts of London, Birmingham, and Bradford to name a few. Inside these areas the IS message seems to find resonance with those that seek identity, belonging, and meaning.

The Western Balkans have been often mentioned as a very significant hotbed. In the fifth chapter Florian Qehaja looks into possible links between certain locations of jihadists in this area, and explores their motivations. Nevertheless, the author argues that it is more accurate to refer to these regions as simply having more individuals who would identify with a Salafi ideology rather than referring to them as a hotbed or ghetto, due to the heterogeneous nature of these neighborhoods. The evidence shows that Gornje Maoče and Ošve are the two most prominent villages with the highest concentration of individuals belonging to conservative Islamic ideologies.

Moving to North Africa, the radicalization processes appear to be connected with the long history of authoritarian regimes. In the sixth chapter Arturo Varvelli analyses the Libyan context. Here the city of Derna was held by the Islamic State until June 2015. This city is an old hotbed of jihadists: the majority of the suicide bom-

bers used by al-Qaeda in Iraq were Libyans from Derna. For very different reasons – similar to the rise of IS in Iraq – the town of Sirte now appears to be a new IS hotbed.

Tunisia, just like Belgium in Europe, has the highest percentage of foreign fighters compared to its population. Within the country – as pointed out by Valentina Colombo in the seventh chapter – the towns of Kasserine and Ben Guerdane, but also some suburbs of Tunis, have become famous as suppliers of fighters to Syria. The mountains around Kasserine harbor terrorist training camps, and the Tunisian security forces have declared the area a closed military zone. Therefore, Tunisian radicalization seems to be the consequence of multiple layers of marginalization, including political, social and religious marginalization.

In the eighth chapter Giuseppe Dentice focuses on the so-called “Sinai Problem”. The killing of the U.S. citizen William Henderson, the beheading of the Croatian inhabitant Tomislav Salopek, the multiple attacks against the Multinational Forces Operation at al-Jura, the largest offensive in Sheikh Zuweid and the shooting down of Russia’s Metrojet flight 9268 defined a change in the ideological and military paradigm of the local jihadists. This new hotbed appears to be a product of demands for autonomy by local Bedouins, poor economic conditions, the repressive policies adopted by the Egyptian authorities, and the lack of basic civil and political rights.

In the Caucasus there are some of the most notorious hotbeds of violent extremism. The second Russian military campaign in Chechnya made things worse in the North Caucasus. For the past two hundred years Chechens from the mountain districts of Chechnya have migrated to settle in the Pankisi Gorge, a remote valley in the northeastern area. Due to a long extremist tradition, young jihadists from here – including Omar al-Shishani, a senior Islamic State commander – are increasingly traveling to Syria and Iraq to join terrorist groups.

To conclude, each area has unique factors that lead to “exporting” fighters or creating new IS-controlled zones. With a view to understanding and countering the process of radicalization on a micro-level, the last chapter by Arturo Varvelli and Paolo Maggolini

revise the local contexts that have spawned more terrorist fighters than anywhere else to highlight how and to what extent common features can be found. Starting from the debate on the origin and nature of jihadist militancy that is dividing the most important scholars of Islam, the authors outline a broad spectrum of radicalization factors leading to the emergence of jihadists hotbeds, such as unemployment, juvenile delinquency, social, political and geographical marginalization, the role of Salafism, familial ties, search for identity. All these are important factors that seem to show how jihadism is the mixed result of two parallel socio-political crises: the one affecting Western societies and the one impacting upon the Islamic world.

Paolo Magri
Ispi Executive Vice President and Director

1. Regional Hotbeds as Drivers of Radicalization

Ali Soufan, Daniel Schoenfeld

The rise of violent extremist groups in the Syrian civil war and post-invasion Iraq has generated a massive wave of foreign fighters traveling to join the various groups that have taken root in the resultant anarchy. With the threat of foreign fighters leaving the battlefield and returning to their home countries looming heavily in the minds of global policymakers, much of the international attention surrounding events in Syria and Iraq has focused on stemming the flow of foreign fighters to the conflict. Though the presence of foreign fighters in civil conflicts is hardly a new phenomenon, the sheer scale and effectiveness of recruitment efforts by extremist groups such as the so-called Islamic State (IS) and al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra is unprecedented. Between 1980 and 2011, wars in Muslim countries drew between 10,000 and 30,000 foreign fighters cumulatively¹. By comparison, in September 2015 United States intelligence estimates indicated that more than 30,000 foreign fighters from over 100 countries had traveled to Syria and Iraq over the course of the nearly five-year old Syrian civil war alone – the vast majority of whom joined the Islamic State². In March 2016, the U.S. government increased that estimate to a total of 38,000 foreigners that had traveled to join the Islamic State³.

¹ Th. Hegghammer, “The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters: Islam and the Globalization of Jihad”, *International Security*, Vol. 35, No. 3, Winter 2010/11, pp. 53-94.

²The Soufan Group (TSG) *Foreign Fighters: An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq*, The Soufan Group, December 2015, http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/TSG_ForeignFightersUpdate3.pdf

³TSG IntelBrief, “Foreign Fighters and Those Who Return”, The Soufan Group, 9

Though foreign militants have been involved in the fighting since the early stages of the civil war, the rate of fighters traveling to Syria has not remained constant. In June 2014, The Soufan Group (TSG) estimated the total number of foreigners that had traveled to join extremist groups in Iraq and Syria to be approximately 12,000 from 81 different countries⁴. By December 2015 – just eighteen months later – TSG research indicated that the number had skyrocketed to between 27,000 and 31,000 from at least 86 countries, which was consistent with U.S. government estimates⁵. Despite a statement made by U.S. Air Force Major General Peter Gersten in late April 2016 suggesting that the number of foreign fighters traveling to join ISIS had dropped by nearly 90%, other high-ranking U.S. officials quickly walked back from the assertion of such a drastic reduction in the flow of foreign fighters⁶. Certainly, the rate of foreign fighters from the West and Europe has slowed as of late, with many official estimates often serving as lagging indicators due to the time it takes respective governments to tally and release foreign fighter data. Nonetheless, foreign fighters are still finding their way to the battlefields of Iraq and Syria, and evidence suggests that Libya is also becoming an increasingly popular foreign fighter destination.

With citizens from over 100 countries traveling to fight in Iraq and Syria, the foreign fighter phenomenon is truly global in nature. Not surprisingly, the majority of recruits come from Syria and Iraq's regional neighbors in the Middle East and the Maghreb region of North Africa. Fighters from Tunisia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Jordan are amongst the most highly represented nationalities in the conflict. Though a lack of reliable information makes it difficult to estimate the true number of fighters originating from countries in the region, estimates based on the best available data indicate

March 2016, <http://soufangroup.com/tsg-intelbrief-foreign-fighters-and-those-who-return/>

⁴ R. Barrett, "Foreign Fighters in Syria", The Soufan Group, June 2014, <http://soufangroup.com/foreign-fighters-in-syria/>

⁵ The Soufan Group (2015).

⁶ W. Strobel and Ph. Stewart, "U.S. Military Softens Claims on Drop in Islamic State's Foreign Fighters", *Reuters*, 28 April 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mid-east-crisis-recruiting-idUSKCN0XP33K>

that at least 16,000 fighters hail from the Middle East (including Turkey) and the Maghreb – roughly half of the total foreign fighter population⁷.

Despite regional fighters filling a significant percentage of the Islamic State's foreign fighter ranks, an extraordinary number of recruits come from outside the Middle East and North Africa. Western Europe is the source of more than 5,000 foreign fighters – the most highly represented geographic group outside the Arab world⁸. At least 4,700 fighters come from former Soviet Republics; Russian president Vladimir Putin has claimed the number to be as high as 7,000⁹. Southeast Asian countries have seen at least 900 of their citizens travel to Syria and Iraq, and at least 875 more fighters have been identified from countries in the Balkans – though that number is likely higher¹⁰.

As more detailed data has come to light concerning where the Islamic State's foreign recruits come from, it has become increasingly clear that the flow of foreign fighters is not uniform across regions or countries. Within those countries that are the sources of the largest numbers of foreign fighters, specific cities, towns, and even neighborhoods provide a disproportionate number of recruits as compared to other locations. Islamic State foreign fighter recruitment patterns in these areas are focused and localized, and recruits often consist of networks of known associates, friends, and family members, rather than a wider web of strangers.

A number of the cities and towns known as hotbeds of jihadist recruitment held that reputation long before the rise of the Islamic State. Towns such as Derna in Libya, Ben Guerdane and Kasserine in Tunisia, and the Pankisi Gorge in Georgia have long been known as jihadist havens, and have supplied fighters to conflicts in Muslim countries for years. Similarly, Bosnia – once a destination for foreign violent Islamist extremists – has emerged as a hotbed of recruitment for the Islamic State.

⁷ The Soufan Group (2015).

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

In addition to areas long known as jihadist incubators, a number of more surprising locations have emerged as some of the most fertile breeding grounds of foreign fighter recruitment. Though influential jihadist preachers and sympathizers have long had a presence in Western Europe, the Syrian conflict has seen Western European recruits flock to jihadist groups on an unparalleled and historic scale. Among the more than 5,000 recruits from Western Europe that have traveled to Iraq and Syria, nearly 3,700 of them were from just four countries. The Molenbeek district in Brussels has been the subject of significant international attention in light of the November 2015 Paris attacks and March 2016 Brussels attacks. In Belgium – which has the highest per capita rate of foreign fighters of any country in Western Europe – the vast majority of recruits have roots in Molenbeek.

Significant geographic, demographic, and societal diversity exists between the various cities and towns that have emerged as hotbeds of Islamic State recruitment. The drivers and processes involved in the radicalization and recruitment process are highly individualized and complex. Substantial academic research has effectively discredited the notion that there are any generalizable predictors for radicalization. Even within recruitment hotbeds that provide a significantly disproportionate number of jihadist recruits, there is a far larger proportion of the population with similar demographic characteristics that do not radicalize or join extremist groups. Nonetheless, the complexities and challenges involved in meeting global counterterrorism imperatives require a responsible effort to identify any discernable trends that can be identified to explain why certain areas and neighborhoods provide a disproportionate number of recruits.

Indeed, in looking more closely at the hotbeds of recruitment, various trends can be observed. The first and most significant is that local grievances and individual problems most often drive radicalization and recruitment. Though the plight of Sunni Muslims in Syria and Iraq and the atrocities of Bashar al-Assad's brutal regime certainly serve as sufficient motivation for some, the majority of recruits flocking to Syria and Iraq – and specifically those recruits

joining the Islamic State – seem to be doing so for far more personal reasons. The prospect of finding identity, purpose, belonging, and adventure seems to be more of a draw for many ISIS recruits than more theological motivations.

Another common trend amongst the disparate hotbeds of recruitment is the presence and influence of one or more charismatic figures already committed to the jihadist cause. There are numerous examples of outspoken and influential Islamic State recruiters, particularly in European recruitment hotbeds. These charismatic leaders tend to prey on vulnerable target populations in the town or neighborhood they operate in, often targeting disillusioned youth and individuals with criminal records. Their presence and knowledge of the community and community issues, coupled with the peer-to-peer nature of their interactions with potential recruits, allows them to tailor their extremist message to address local grievances and thereby maximize effectiveness. Areas where there are close-knit groups of susceptible young people – regardless of the part of the world – are particularly attractive targets for jihadist recruiters, as this allows the recruiter to capitalize on a preexisting sense of lack of purpose or belonging. The confluence of peer-to-peer interaction coupled with the ubiquitous connectivity of social media creates the ‘perfect storm’ for recruitment, with prospective recruits able to directly connect with recruiters or friends already in the so-called Caliphate, and therefore well-positioned to provide first-hand accounts of the Caliphate’s ostensible appeal.

To get a better sense of both the differences and commonalities amongst the various hotbeds of jihadist recruitment, the following will provide a brief overview of some of the largest contributors to the foreign fighter population in Syria and Iraq.

Tunisia

Tunisia is the single largest exporter of foreign fighters to Iraq and Syria – as well as an increasing number that have traveled to Libya. Official estimates put the number of Tunisians fighting for extremist groups in Iraq and Syria at 6,000; unofficial estimates suggest that the number may be higher than 7,000¹¹. With a total population of 11 million, an astounding 55 out of every 100,000 Tunisians have traveled to join ISIS and other extremist groups in Syria and Iraq. At least 1,500 more Tunisians have crossed the border to join groups in Libya, including IS, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), and other al-Qaeda linked groups¹². According to some estimates, Tunisians account for as much as 50% of the total foreign fighter population in Libya.

Despite such a high number of Tunisians amongst foreign fighter ranks, the majority of them come from just a few areas of the country. Ben Guerdane, a southern coastal town not far from the Libyan border, has long had a reputation as one of the most fertile jihadist breeding grounds in the world. The town, which is best known as a major Tunisian smuggling hub for weapons and other contraband, has been a major exporter of jihadist fighters to Iraq since the early days of the second Gulf War. Radical Islam is so deeply rooted in Ben Guerdane that Abu Musab al-Zarqawi – founder of the Islamic State’s predecessor, al-Qaeda in Iraq – is said to have stated: “If Ben Guerdane had been located next to Fallujah, we would have liberated Iraq”¹³. In addition to supplying at least 15% of all Tunisian foreign fighters, Ben Guerdane is also home to the perpetrators of the March 2015 attacks at the Bardo Museum in Tunis and the June 2015 attack on the resort town of Sousse.

Located in the southern part of the country, outside of the northern tourism hubs central to the Tunisian economy, the Tunisian

¹¹ The Soufan Group (2015).

¹² G. Packer, “Exporting Jihad”, *The New Yorker*, 28 March 2016, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/03/28/tunisia-and-the-fall-after-the-arab-spring>

¹³ TSG IntelBrief, “The International Hotbeds of the Islamic State”, The Soufan Group, 22 July 2015, <http://soufangroup.com/tsg-intelbrief-the-international-hotbeds-of-the-islamic-state/>

government has historically largely ignored grievances and issues facing the people of Ben Guerdane. Lacking sufficient government funding, Ben Guerdane residents suffer from high levels of poverty and unemployment. Relatively isolated from broader Tunisian society and with highly limited possibilities for legitimate opportunity, residents of Ben Guerdane have proved comparatively susceptible to the call of jihadist ideology.

The restive town of Kasserine, located near the border of Algeria in one of the poorest regions of Tunisia, has also long held the reputation of being a jihadist breeding ground. Extremists from Kasserine were amongst the most highly represented groups of Tunisians in Afghanistan during the Afghan jihad of the 1980s¹⁴. Kasserine's proximity to the Algerian border and mountainous geography make it an attractive congregating point for jihadists from both sides of the border¹⁵. In Kasserine, like many other Islamic State recruitment hotbeds throughout the world, jihadist recruiters have capitalized on the vulnerabilities of a large and disillusioned youth population. IS recruiters have established footholds within neighborhood mosques throughout Kasserine, and drawn in susceptible targets by engaging in small group conversations about the allure of jihad¹⁶. The personal and direct nature of these interactions allows recruiters to infiltrate clusters of friends, neighbors, and family members, utilizing existing social networks to spread the jihadist narrative.

The northern coastal town of Bizerte has also seen a significant number of fighters travel to join extremist groups in Syria and Iraq. It is estimated that nearly 11% of all Tunisian foreign fighters have come from Bizerte¹⁷. The trend in Bizerte is largely due to a network of jihadist fighters that had formerly been imprisoned until the 2011 revolution, and subsequently settled in the town.

¹⁴ TSG IntelBrief, "North Africa's Export-Import of Terror", The Soufan Group, 23 February 2015, <http://soufangroup.com/tsg-intelbrief-north-africas-export-import-of-terror/>

¹⁵ N. Elbagir, "The Tunisian Town Where ISIS Makes Militants", CNN, 3 July 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/07/03/africa/tunisia-terror-attacks-kasserine/>

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ The Soufan Group (2015).

Libya

The absence of an effective central government and resulting political vacuum in Libya have hindered efforts to accurately determine the number of foreign fighters from the country that have traveled to Iraq and Syria. The best available estimates suggest that at least 600 Libyans have traveled to join the Islamic State and other groups, though those numbers are likely far higher. In addition to exporting fighters, Libya has become a major foreign fighter destination, with the Islamic State actively encouraging recruits to travel to Libya rather than join the group in Iraq and Syria.

The Islamic State's main stronghold in the country is the coastal town of Sirte, which has served as the group's Libyan capital since May 2015. Sirte is the hometown of former Libyan president Muammar Qaddafi and home to the Qaddafi tribe of which he was a member¹⁸. By incorporating a number of former Qaddafi loyalists into its ranks – much like it did with former Baathists in Iraq – the Islamic State has been able to turn Sirte into a highly fertile recruitment ground¹⁹. The town serves as the Islamic State's Mediterranean and North African capital, and as the group faces increasing pressure in its primary territory in Iraq and Syria, Sirte will likely take on an increasingly important role in Islamic State operations.

The Islamic State first gained a foothold in Libya by establishing a presence in the eastern city of Derna in the spring of 2014. Derna has historically been one of the largest exporters of violent extremism in Libya, and many of the at least 600 Libyan foreign fighters in Iraq and Syria come from the Derna region. Like Ben Guerdane and Kasserine in neighboring Tunisia, Derna was home to a high proportion of Libyan foreign fighters in Iraq during the second Gulf War, and before that sent many fighters to Afghanistan

¹⁸ TSG IntelBrief, "The Islamic State's Expansion Strategy in Libya", The Soufan Group, 3 March 2016, <http://soufangroup.com/tsg-intelbrief-the-islamic-states-expansion-strategy-in-libya/>

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

during the Afghan jihad against the Soviets²⁰. An internal document circulated by al-Qaeda in Iraq operatives that has subsequently been uncovered revealed that the majority of the group's suicide bombers were Libyans from Derna²¹. The foundations of the extremist presence in Derna date back to the 1950s, when persecuted members of the Muslim Brotherhood fled Egypt for the relative safety of eastern Libya²². Muammar Qaddafi's subsequent repression of Islamist groups in the country further entrenched Islamist ideology in Derna and fueled the rise of violent militant groups throughout the 1980s and 1990s²³. With such deeply rooted Islamist history, Derna was a natural fit for the Islamic State's virulent ideology to take hold. Though the group was pushed from the town in June 2015, its legacy as a hotbed of jihadist recruitment continues to have long-term implications in the fight against the Islamic State.

Egypt

While the Egyptian government's official count acknowledges around 600 Egyptian citizens that have traveled to join the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, other estimates indicate that number could be as high as 1,000²⁴. Since the 2011 ouster of former president Hosni Mubarak, Egypt's Sinai Peninsula has experienced increased levels of instability, which has allowed more space for violent extremist groups to operate. One of the preeminent Sinai jihadist groups that emerged in the aftermath of the fall of Mubarak was Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis, which began operating on the peninsula in 2011. The core of Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis was primarily comprised of small segments of local criminal Bedouin gangs with a long history of smuggling operations²⁵. In 2014, the group's leader, Abu Osama

²⁰ The Soufan Group (2015).

²¹ TSG IntelBrief, *The International Hotbeds...*, cit.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ The Soufan Group (2015).

²⁵ TSG IntelBrief, "Sinai Flashpoint: Ansar Bayt Al-Maqdis", The Soufan Group, 20 February 2014, <http://soufangroup.com/tsg-intelbrief-sinai-flashpoint-ansar->

al-Masri, pledged *bay'ah* (allegiance) to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, forming Wilayat Sinai and hence becoming the Islamic State's affiliate in the Sinai²⁶.

Like so many other hotbeds of jihadist recruitment, local grievances and problems have allowed the Islamic State's poisonous message to gain traction in the area. The appeal of violent extremist recruitment efforts is a direct result of latent anti-government sentiment amongst the local population. Having long been an area over which the Egyptian government has struggled to exert control, the local population of the Sinai has largely been cut off from economic and infrastructure development²⁷. Though the majority of local residents have not fallen victim to jihadist recruitment efforts, Wilayat Sinai has served as a natural progression for some of the more violent Bedouin criminal gangs operating in the region, which have morphed into organized militants.

Wilayat Sinai has been increasingly active over the past year. In July 2015, the group conducted a coordinated attack on approximately fifteen police and military outposts, killing nearly 70 Egyptian soldiers, policemen, and medical responders²⁸. In its most prolific attack to date, the group claimed responsibility for bringing down a Russian airliner in the Sinai in late October 2015, killing all 224 people on board²⁹. Despite sporadic successes against extremist groups operating in the Sinai, the Egyptian government has struggled to exert any sustained control over the area. And so Wilayat Sinai will likely persist for the foreseeable future, allowing the group to continue targeting susceptible segments of the local population for further recruitment.

bayt-al-maqdis/

²⁶ F. Pleitgen, "Russian Plane Crash: Who are Terror Group Al Wilayat Sinai?", CNN, 10 November 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/11/09/africa/egypt-al-wilayat-sinai/>

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ TSG IntelBrief, "The Islamic State Assaults Sinai", The Soufan Group, 2 July 2015, <http://soufangroup.com/tsg-intelbrief-the-islamic-state-assaults-sinai/>

²⁹ TSG IntelBrief, "Terror in the Skies", The Soufan Group, 5 November 2015, <http://soufangroup.com/tsg-intelbrief-terror-in-the-skies/>

The Caucasus and former Soviet Republics

In October 2015, Russian President Vladimir Putin announced that 5,000 to 7,000 fighters from Russia and the former Soviet republics had traveled to Syria to join the Islamic State. Based on its own investigation, The Soufan Group calculated that at least 4,700 fighters from the region had traveled to Syria and Iraq by December 2015. The vast majority of foreign recruits from the former Soviet republics come from the North Caucasus region – specifically Chechnya, the Pankisi Gorge, and Dagestan.

The North Caucasus has long been a hotbed of violent Islamist extremism, which makes its emergence as a recruitment hotbed for extremist groups in Syria unsurprising. What began in the 1990s in Chechnya as a nationalist struggle for separation from Russia quickly morphed into a multi-ethnic Islamist insurgency throughout the Caucasus. Politicized Islamist and nationalist sentiment converged to generate two wars in Chechnya against the Russians, making Chechnya a foreign fighter destination throughout the 1990s. Local grievances have long fueled radicalization throughout the Caucasus. The Islamic Caucasus Emirate (ICE) was formed in 2007 by jihadists in the region with the aim of establishing an independent Islamic emirate in the Caucasus from which to wage jihad against Russia and its other opponents³⁰. Historically affiliated with al-Qaeda, many members of ICE have now traveled to Syria to join the Islamic State or Jabhat al-Nusra, or have joined the Islamic State's wilayat in the Caucasus, known as Wilayat al-Kawkaz³¹. The region's sustained history of militancy coupled with continued repression by both Russian and Georgian troops have provided ideal circumstances for Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra recruiters to exploit.

Though fighters from throughout the North Caucasus fill the ranks of extremist groups in Syria, the Pankisi Gorge – a remote

³⁰ Mapping Militant Organizations, "Caucasus Emirate", Stanford University, <http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/255>

³¹ TSG IntelBrief, "What Omar al-Shishani Leaves Behind", The Soufan Group, 18 March 2016, <http://soufangroup.com/tsg-intelbrief-what-omar-al-shishani-leaves-behind/>

valley region in northeastern Georgia – has provided a significant number of the recruits from the region. The Pankisi Gorge was home to high-profile former Islamic State commander Abu Omar al-Shishani, an ethnic Georgian who rose to the rank of IS defense minister. Shishani was reportedly killed in a U.S. airstrike in March 2016, but his legacy persists through the threat posed by the hundreds of Chechen fighters he helped recruit. Shishani was a highly visible figure in Islamic State propaganda, and his senior position in the group combined with his Chechen roots (his mother was an ethnic Chechen) gave Islamic State recruitment efforts in the North Caucasus a significant boost³².

During the Chechen jihad, the Pankisi Gorge served as a launch point for fighters as they made their way to the conflict zones in Chechnya³³. With the influx of mujaheddin to the valley came the increasing influence of Salafist Islam, which gained popularity with the local Muslim population, primarily composed of ethnic Kists³⁴. This puritanical and more militant form of Islamist ideology took hold in the valley, and strong support for al-Qaeda linked groups has persisted in the region ever since.

Belgium

As of December 2015, Belgium – a country of just 11 million people – had seen at least 470 of its citizens travel to Iraq and Syria to join the Islamic State – the highest per capita outflow of foreign fighters amongst any Western European country³⁵. A February 2016 high-end estimate indicated that the number of Belgians that had

³² TSG IntelBrief, “The Chechen Foreign Fighter Threat”, The Soufan Group, 21 November 2014, <http://soufangroup.com/tsg-intelbrief-the-chechen-foreign-fighter-threat/>

³³ M. Mamon, “The Mujahedeen’s Valley”, *The Intercept*, 9 July 2015, <https://theintercept.com/2015/07/09/mujahedeensvalley/>

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ TSG IntelBrief, “Resilience and the Terror Threat in Europe”, The Soufan Group, 30 March 2016, <http://soufangroup.com/tsg-intelbrief-resilience-and-the-terror-threat-in-europe/>

traveled to Syria and Iraq had risen to as many as 562³⁶. Of the Belgian foreign fighters that have been individually identified, the vast majority is from Brussels³⁷. On an even more granular level, the majority of Belgian foreign fighters from Brussels either grew up or spent considerable time in the Molenbeek district; a poor, primarily immigrant neighborhood with some of the highest levels of unemployment in Brussels.

Demographically, Brussels is home to a large Muslim immigrant population. Historically, Belgium, like its neighbor France, has a notoriously poor record of integrating immigrant populations. With large North African and Middle Eastern immigrant communities pushed to the margins of society, second- and third-generation immigrant Muslim youths in Molenbeek grow up with little opportunity or hope for a better life. Often, these young populations suffer from serious identity issues. The lack of identity, coupled with many other factors that limit opportunities for immigrant young people in Molenbeek, has sparked widespread disillusionment within the community.

These factors make vulnerable segments of Muslim youth in Molenbeek prime targets for charismatic jihadist recruiters. Among the most notorious charismatic recruiters in Molenbeek was Khalid Zerkani, also known as “Papa Noel”, who headed of one of the largest and most successful Islamic State recruitment networks in Europe. Zerkani, a Moroccan national who moved to Belgium in 2002, preyed primarily on vulnerable Muslim teens and young adults who already had criminal records³⁸. Zerkani, who himself had been involved in petty crime prior to taking on the jihadist cause, lured young Muslims with criminal records to his network in

³⁶ P. Van Ostaeyen, “February 2016: A New Statistical Update on Belgian Fighters in Syria and Iraq”, *Pieter van Ostaeyen*, 2 February 2016, <https://pietervanostaeyen.wordpress.com/2016/02/02/february-2016-a-new-statistical-update-on-belgian-fighters-in-syria-and-iraq/>

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ A. Higgins and K. de Freytas-Tamura, “A Brussels Mentor Who Taught ‘Gangster Islam’ to the Young and Angry”, *New York Times*, 11 April 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/12/world/europe/a-brussels-mentor-who-taught-gangster-islam-to-the-young-and-angry.html>

large part by using Islamist ideology as a justification for continued criminal activity, rather than by lecturing recruits on Islamist theology³⁹. For young and disaffected men who felt no attachment to the Belgian state or culture and had highly limited prospects for legitimate future opportunity within Belgian society, Zerkani's message was extremely enticing. By convincing them their criminal exploits were actually in pursuit of a greater and morally just goal based on Islamist ideology, Zerkani radicalized a large criminal network throughout Molenbeek and surrounding areas. The network used the proceeds of petty crimes to finance the travel costs for Belgian recruits to travel to Syria.

Of the approximately 300 Belgian foreign fighters that have been individually identified through open-source research, at least 45 of them have been directly linked to Zerkani's network⁴⁰. That number, which is likely much higher, includes Abdelhamid Abaaoud, the alleged ringleader of the Molenbeek-based cell responsible for the November 2015 attacks in Paris and March 2016 attacks in Brussels, who also played a central role in the Islamic State's external operations branch. Additional members of the cell responsible for the European attacks have also been linked to Zerkani's network, including Salah Abdeslam, and Najim Laachraoui, the cell's suspected bomb maker who blew himself up at the Brussels airport on 22 March⁴¹. Zerkani was arrested by Belgian authorities in early 2015, and sentenced in July 2015 to twelve years in jail for his role in recruiting and radicalizing Belgian youth⁴². As evidenced by the attacks in Paris and Brussels, however, his legacy will continue to have long-term implications for European security.

The social cohesion and familial ties of the Brussels cell responsible for the Paris and Brussels attacks is yet another key factor in European Islamic State recruitment. Many members of this

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ P. Van Ostaeyen (2016).

⁴¹ A. Higgins and K. Freytas-Tamura, "In Brussels Bombing Plot, A Trail of Dots not Connected", *New York Times*, 26 March 2016.

⁴² "Khalid Zerkani, Brussels' Jihadist Preacher Who 'Perverted a Generation'", *France 24*, 23 March 2016, <http://www.france24.com/en/20160325-khalid-zerkani-brussels-jihadist-preacher-kriket-molenbeek>

cell were well known to each other beforehand. The network included multiple sets of brothers, including Ibrahim and Khalid El Bakraoui – two of the bombers in the Brussels attacks, and Salah and Ibrahim Abdeslam, both involved in the Paris attacks. Abdelhamid Abaaoud and Ibrahim Abdeslam reportedly spent time in prison with each other, and the majority of the known members of the cell had criminal backgrounds⁴³. At least fourteen of the known members of the cell had direct ties to Brussels – many to Molenbeek, and at least eleven members of the cell were of Moroccan descent⁴⁴. These commonalities are just a few examples of how tightly knit and community-centric this specific European jihadist recruitment network was. This pattern is consistent with research that suggests that individuals who radicalize often have close personal ties to other radicalized individuals, such as family members, friends, or acquaintances. Recruitment then extends from there, spreading throughout a network of known associates, rather than high levels of interaction between random or unknown strangers.

United Kingdom

At least 760 British citizens have traveled to Iraq and Syria to join the Islamic State and other jihadist groups since the beginning of the conflict. Though recent events have generated a massive amount of media attention to the unprecedented Islamic State-linked threat currently facing the European Union, networks of jihadist sympathizers have existed in Europe for decades. In June 2006 – a full eight years before Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi would proclaim the so-called Caliphate – scholars such as Peter Neumann of King's College London were writing about Europe's jihadist dilemma and were already calling Europe a nerve center for global jihad⁴⁵. At that time, Neumann and others had already identified

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ P.R. Neumann, "Europe's Jihadist Dilemma", *Survival*, vol. 48, no. 2, Summer 2006,

personal grievances and sustained crises of identity as some of the only more or less generalizable characteristics of individual jihadist sympathizers in Europe⁴⁶.

The presence of influential jihadist ideologues in Europe pre-dates the September 11, 2001 attacks in the United States. Throughout the 1990s, al-Qaeda – under the direction of Osama bin Laden and his deputies – ran numerous front organizations throughout Europe to assist both financing and recruitment efforts for the terrorist group. In a rather prescient example of historical irony, it was Europe’s lax immigration and asylum laws in the 1990s that allowed many influential radical Islamist clerics to flee to Europe in the face of persecution in their home countries⁴⁷. Though most of the original radical clerics and preachers who headed networks of jihadist sympathizers in Europe have been rooted out since 9/11, they laid the groundwork and influence for the newer generation of charismatic jihadist leaders who have stepped up to fill the void⁴⁸.

One of the most prominent Islamist leaders in Europe prior to 9/11 was an Egyptian named Abu Hamza al-Masri. Abu Hamza, who moved to London in 1979, was a veteran of the Afghan jihad where he had direct contact with Abdullah Azzam, a mentor and close associate of Osama bin Laden⁴⁹. After returning to London in 1993 to receive treatment for injuries sustained while fighting in Afghanistan – where he lost both his hands – Abu Hamza gained a reputation as one of the leading Islamist preachers in the United Kingdom⁵⁰. In 1997, Abu Hamza became the *de facto* imam of the infamous Finsbury Park Mosque in London – a well-known hub of jihadist support⁵¹. Under Abu Hamza’s direction, the Finsbury Park

pp. 71-84

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ C. Stewart, “Europe’s Chronic Jihadist Problem”, *Stratfor*, 5 April 2016, <https://www.stratfor.com/analysis/europes-chronic-jihadist-problem>

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ “Abu Hamza Profile,” *BBC*, 9 January 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-11701269>

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ “Londonistan, Al Qaeda and the Finsbury Park Mosque”, *Stratfor*, 12 August 2005, <https://www.stratfor.com/analysis/londonistan-al-qaeda-and-finsbury-park-mosque>

Mosque served as a critical link between al-Qaeda operatives and prospective local recruits in Europe⁵².

Another highly influential charismatic Islamist leader in the UK prior to 9/11 was Omar Bakri Muhammad. Bakri immigrated to Britain from Syria in 1980, where he received political asylum⁵³. Like Abu Hamza, Bakri was well known in the UK as a radical Islamist preacher, and was the founder of the British-based jihadist group al-Muhajiroun. Though he fled to Lebanon after the 7 July, 2005 London transit bombings, Bakri's influence left a lasting legacy that had direct impact on Islamic State recruitment efforts in the United Kingdom. One of Bakri's principal disciples was Anjem Choudary, who became the leader of al-Muhajiroun, and has gained more recent notoriety as one of the most outspoken supporters of the Islamic State in Europe. Choudary, who was arrested in August 2015 on charges of inciting support for the Islamic State, is a highly charismatic Salafist preacher who directly motivated or influenced many of the at least 760 British Islamic State recruits to join the group⁵⁴.

Though Choudary has been the focus of significant media attention in recent years due to his open support for the Islamic State, the following he and Bakri cultivated in the early years of al-Muhajiroun is a prime example of the impact charismatic leaders have on the radicalization and recruitment process. Though social media certainly gave Choudary and other recruiters a boost, it was the specific appeal of Choudary's tailored delivery of the message and the ability of prospective recruits to personally reach out and interact with him that underlined the effectiveness of the content Choudary and his network spread via social media.

⁵²*Ibid.*

⁵³ A. Griffin, "Omar Bakri Muhammad: Islamist Leader Seeks Return to UK, After Being Banned in Wake of 7/7 Praise", *Independent*, 29 June 2014, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/omar-bakri-muhammad-islamist-leader-seeks-return-to-uk-after-being-banned-in-wake-of-77-praise-9570963.html>

⁵⁴ A. Anthony, "Anjem Choudary: The British Extremist Who Backs the Caliphate", *The Guardian*, 6 September 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/sep/07/anjem-choudary-islamic-state-isis>

Bosnia

The Balkans have historically been home to a small but still sizeable population of violent Islamist extremists. Bosnians account for a significant proportion of foreign fighters from the Balkans in Iraq and Syria; at least 330 of the total of 875 fighters from the region come from Bosnia⁵⁵. Like Chechnya, Bosnia was a destination for foreign violent jihadists in the 1990s. In a manner very similar to what occurred in the North Caucasus, the war in Bosnia in the early 1990s brought a large influx of Muslim foreign fighters, who traveled to Bosnia to come to the aid of their persecuted Bosnian Muslim brothers. The fighters brought with them Salafist ideology, which took root in the country and persisted after the war in Bosnia ended.

In the wake of terrorist attacks in the country in 2010 and 2011, the Bosnian government began cracking down on jihadist groups within the country⁵⁶. This forced jihadist sympathizers to retreat to more remote areas of Bosnia, including the village of Gornje Maoče, which has become a stronghold of violent extremism in the country⁵⁷. As jihadist sympathizers became dispersed throughout remote areas of the country, a highly influential preacher named Hussein “Bilal” Bosnic emerged as the unifying voice of the jihadist community in Bosnia. In many small and remote villages, Bosnic was viewed as the religious authority⁵⁸.

With the emergence of the Islamic State, Bosnic became the group’s most powerful and persuasive recruiter in Bosnia. He would reportedly visit prospective recruits at their homes, and would put considerable effort into engaging in one-on-one contact with vulnerable targets⁵⁹. The extraordinarily high unemployment rate in

⁵⁵ The Soufan Group (2015).

⁵⁶ I. Spaic, “Bosnia: Salafist Leader Gets Seven Years for Recruiting Boys to Islamic State”, Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project, 6 November 2015, <https://www.occrp.org/en/blog/4579-bilal-bosnic-salafist-leader-gets-seven-years-for-recruiting-boys-to-islamic-state>

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

Bosnia, coupled with a large Muslim youth population severely lacking in prospects for improving their lives, provided Bosnian with a highly susceptible pool of prospective recruits. In addition to radicalizing vulnerable targets, Bosnia was pivotal in facilitating travel arrangements for Bosnians hoping to get to Syria to take up arms with the Islamic State.

Bosnian was arrested in 2014, and in November 2015 was sentenced to seven years in prison for his role in promoting jihad⁶⁰. Despite his arrest, the foundations laid by Bosnia paved a path for the strong ties between Bosnian jihadist sympathizers and the Islamic State. In addition, the high level of sympathy for the Islamic State that Bosnia instilled has helped transform Bosnia into a transit hub for foreign fighters from other parts of the world attempting to travel to Syria⁶¹.

United States

Compared to other countries around the world, the United States has experienced relatively few foreign fighters travelling to join extremist groups in Iraq and Syria – particularly in terms of per capita numbers. It is estimated that approximately 250 Americans have traveled or attempted to travel to Syria to join the Islamic State and other like-minded groups. With a total population of more than 320 million people, the scale and scope of jihadist recruitment in the U.S. is clearly far smaller than that seen in various parts of Europe, the Caucasus, and North Africa.

Yet among those who have traveled to join the Islamic State, Minneapolis is home to many. Like so many other hotbeds of recruitment worldwide, Minneapolis has had a reputation as a fertile ground for violent extremist group recruitment for some time. Minneapolis hosts a large Somali-American community, and since the mid-2000s has seen a number of recruits travel to Somalia to

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ H. Voinov, “ISIS and the Balkans”, *Vostokian*, 12 January 2016, <http://www.vostokian.com/isis-and-the-balkans-part-two>

join the al-Qaeda affiliate al-Shabaab. The rise of the Islamic State, however, has led to a shift in destination for many foreign fighter recruits from Minneapolis for whom Iraq and Syria have become more popular battlegrounds than Somalia.

A September 2015 report released by the U.S. House Homeland Security Committee revealed that recruits from Minnesota made up 26% of a sample of 58 known cases of American fighters traveling to Syria to join the Islamic State⁶². In contrast to a number of other Islamic State recruitment hotbeds, recruitment in Minneapolis – and in the U.S. as a whole – has been mostly reliant on social media, particularly in the initial phases of the process. Skilled recruiters initially connect with prospective recruits via social media and subsequently follow up with vulnerable targets through more personalized peer-to-peer communication utilizing various widely available – and often encrypted – messaging applications.

There is no generalizable profile of recruits from Minneapolis. Though most tend to be in their teens or twenties, recruits have ranged from students to those with jobs and potential for further opportunity, to the unemployed. Like other recruitment hotbeds, social networks play an important role. The most vulnerable recruitment targets often have friends or family who have either joined or sympathize with the Islamic State. Some of the most successful Islamic State recruiters in Minneapolis are individuals who successfully traveled to Syria to join the group, and then utilized social media in efforts to persuade friends back home to make the trip. One such example was the case of Abdi Nur, a 20-year old from Minneapolis who successfully traveled to join the Islamic State in 2014⁶³. Once in Syria, Abdi Nur communicated with a number of friends back in Minneapolis via social media and messaging apps, and was eventually able to persuade six of his friends to attempt to travel to join the group⁶⁴. Though all six

⁶² P. McEnroe and A. Sherry, “Minnesota Leads the Nation in Would-Be ISIL Terrorists From U.S., Report Finds”, *Star Tribune*, <http://www.startribune.com/minnesota-leads-the-nation-in-would-be-isil-terrorists-from-u-s-report-finds/329942131/>

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

were intercepted and arrested by the FBI prior to leaving the U.S., the episode serves as a clear illustration of the role social networks play in the recruitment process.

Conclusion

Despite the geographic and societal disparities of the areas that have emerged as hotbeds of jihadist recruitment, closer examination of each hotbed present several important commonalities. Addressing these common factors alone will not necessarily prevent or lessen recruitment but counter-recruitment policies should be developed with these factors in mind. The first common trend seen in various hotbeds is that the factors that facilitate jihadist recruitment are most often grounded in local grievances specific to the town or neighborhood in which the recruitment occurs, rather than more wide-ranging causes. This is certainly not to say that broad societal issues such as poverty, unemployment, or dissatisfaction with government automatically generate radicalization. Indeed, there are many cities, towns, and neighborhoods throughout the world that suffer from similar societal ailments yet do not produce violent extremists. However, under the right conditions, such locally based grievances can open the door for jihadist recruitment, providing recruiters with fertile avenues for exploitation. In locations that suffer from comparatively high levels of jihadist recruitment, counter-recruitment efforts should therefore be locally grounded and seek to address local grievances facilitating recruitment efforts.

Another common factor seen across hotbeds of jihadist recruitment – which is largely a byproduct of the first commonality – is the critical importance of peer-to-peer interaction in the recruitment process. Despite the considerable efforts the Islamic State makes to produce sophisticated and alluring recruitment propaganda that is widely distributed over social media, one-to-one contact between Islamic State members or sympathizers and vulnerable individuals is the group's most effective recruitment tactic. Such direct peer-to-peer contact might occur online via social media and secure mes-

saging applications, but more often in hotbed recruitment locations it occurs in person. In places such as Molenbeek, remote villages in Bosnia, parts of the UK, and other recruitment hotbeds, influential and charismatic recruiters have established a strong presence. These charismatic leaders entice vulnerable segments within a community with highly persuasive narratives that are tailored to address grievances specific to the community, and even the individual recruit. The recruiters then leverage existing social networks within the community, relying on those that have been successfully radicalized to influence others within their social circle.

The close-knit nature of susceptible groups – who are often close friends or family members – presents a significant challenge to counterterrorism and counter-recruitment efforts. Once a network of recruits is established amongst an existing social network, strong bonds between recruits tend to drive heightened loyalty and increased influence within a given community. Counter-recruitment efforts within recruitment hotbeds, therefore, must aim to discredit the message of the individuals at the top of the recruitment network as early as possible. In places where recruitment networks are already well established, efforts should focus on containing the group's influence and reach, with the goal of limiting further recruitment of vulnerable individuals as much as possible.

Jihadist Hotbeds –
Western Countries

2. ISIS and al-Shabaab in Minnesota's Twin Cities: the American Hotbed

Lorenzo Vidino, Seth Harrison, Clarissa Spada

Even though the size of the problem is substantially smaller than in most European countries, the United States has contended with increased jihadist activity since ISIS's emergence. Although it is only America's fifteenth largest metropolitan area, Minnesota's Twin Cities – Minneapolis and St. Paul – have proven particularly fertile recruiting grounds for foreign terrorist organizations. From 2007 until 2012, more than 20 men left Minneapolis' Somali diaspora to join al-Shabaab¹. More recently, the trend has manifested itself through ISIS recruits, as twelve Minnesotans have attempted to join the organization – marking a plurality of all instances in the United States².

This chapter attributes the continuity of jihadist currents in the Twin Cities to the multiple strands of motives for radicalization. In addition to the nationalist motives that initially drove al-Shabaab recruitment, religious and social drivers proved to be enduring factors in mobilizing these Minnesotans to fight abroad. This allowed for radicalizing influences to transcend both organization and conflict. The chapter is organized into four sections. First, by way of introduction, a brief history of Somali settlement in the Twin Cities is offered. Second, the chapter chronicles al-Shabaab's recruitment

¹ United States of America v. Saynab Abdirashid Hussein. Government's Position With Respect to Sentencing. Common Appendix II. United States District Court for the Minnesota, Criminal No. 13-222 (MJD). Filed 13 December 2013.

² L. Vidino and S. Hughes, "ISIS in America: From Retweets to Raqqa", Washington D.C., Center for Cyber and Homeland Security, 2015.

efforts in the Twin Cities. Third, Minnesota's ISIS recruits are examined. Finally, it presents the future prospects of jihadi recruitment in the Twin Cities.

Minnesota's Somali community

Somali communities in the United States can be directly traced back to the 1991 civil war that broke out in the wake of the Barre regime's collapse. Throughout the conflict – which has largely remained unresolved today – migrants fled to refugee camps based in Kenya³. In response, the United States launched a resettlement program. By 1993, the first wave of Somali refugees had entered the United States⁴. In particular, the Twin Cities became a favored resettlement location. Originally this was due, in part, to the concentration of volunteer organizations, which were active throughout Minnesota⁵. Groups like Lutheran Social Services, Catholic Charities, and World Relief Minnesota played an active role in bringing Somalis to the United States⁶. Over time, the presence of Somalis in the Twin Cities became self-perpetuating: incoming migrants moved to the area because of the already entrenched Somali community⁷. Today, Minnesota's Somali diaspora is estimated to contain over 60,000 members⁸.

Although a series of integration efforts have been incorporated into refugee and resettlement programs, many American Somalis have never adopted an American identity and feel as though they have been exiled from Somalia. In other words, their residence in

³ J. DeRusha, "Good Question: Why Did Somalis Locate Here?", *WCCO Minnesota*, 19 January 2011.

⁴ Minnesota Historical Society. *Becoming Minnesotan: Stories of Recent Immigrants and Refugees. Finding A New Home*, July 2010, <http://education.mnhs.org/immigration/communities/somali> (last retrieved 12 April 2016).

⁵ J. DeRusha (2011).

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ A. Roble and D. Rutledge, "The Somali Diaspora in America", in *The Somali Diaspora: A Journey Away*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2008.

⁸ Minnesota Historical Society (2010).

the United States is viewed as a temporary condition⁹. Nonetheless, programming has been set up to foster an integration process. Language programs have proven valuable for younger generations and English Language Learning classes have been institutionalized in public schools throughout the Twin Cities¹⁰. Further, both the technological and financial infrastructure is in place for Somalis living in America to remain connected to family still in Somalia¹¹. The largest barrier to assimilation with the American mainstream remains cultural differences¹². Here, a spectrum of issues creates tension between the older generation of migrants and their younger counterparts. Many of these disputes are religious in nature: wearing the hijab and consuming alcohol have proven to be particularly sticky points of contention¹³.

The al-Shabaab years

First Wave

The bulk of al-Shabaab's initial recruits from Minnesota formed a highly centralized, coordinated cell¹⁴. The cluster included ten men¹⁵ and appeared to have formed through the merger of two groups of friends¹⁶. The network met throughout the Twin cities to make plans and was able to raise money for travel costs under the pretense of fundraising for local mosques¹⁷. Additionally, sympathizers contributed funds and, by extension, leadership¹⁸. In order to avoid detection, the group staggered their departures in small

⁹ A. Roble and D. Rutledge (2008).

¹⁰ Minnesota Historical Society (2010).

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² A. Roble and D. Rutledge (2008).

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ L. Yuen, S. Aslanian, and L. McCallum. "Minnesota pipeline to al-Shabaab: 'First Wave (late 2007)'"', *Minnesota Public Radio*, 25 september 2013.

¹⁵ Note: The ten include: Khalid Mohamed Abshir, Shriwa Ahmed, Ahmed Ali Omar, Omer Abdi Mohamed, Kamal Hassan, Salah Ahmed, Abdifatah Yusuf Isse, Mohammed Abdullahi Hassan, Mustafa Ali Salt, and Dahir Gure.

¹⁶ United States of America v. Saynab Abdirashid Hussein (2013).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

groups¹⁹. From October until December 2007, the cluster's membership left the United States and reconvened in an al-Shabaab safe house in Marka, Somalia²⁰.

Although the group's motivations to mobilize were muddled, religious, community-based, and nationalistic drivers all played a role. Religiously, the group cited notions of jihad and grievances with un-Islamic components of American culture²¹. As the group's commitment to their plans grew, their religiosity increased. This is perhaps best demonstrated by Shirwa Ahmed's decision to undertake hajj in Saudi Arabia before joining the rest of the group in Somalia²². Further, the group required that travelling members prove their understanding of al-Shabaab's brand of Islam, before departure²³.

On a social level the group was promised a space, where they would feel wholly integrated. As Cabdulaahi Ahmed Faarax – who would later return to al-Shabaab in the third wave – expressed to the group, al-Shabaab provided a meeting point for young Somali men from across the world to reunite²⁴. The younger members of the American Somali diaspora, in particular, faced difficulties in retaining their Somali identity, in the context of integrating with mainstream American society. In Minnesota, a small community formed in support of al-Shabaab, which resolved this ongoing question of identity.

Anti-Ethiopian sentiments undoubtedly played a role as well. Many of the cluster's members themselves cited Ethiopian aggression as the impetus for their initial interest in joining al-Shabaab. These anti-Ethiopian sentiments were only strengthened upon the group's arrival in Somalia. Shortly after arrival, al-Shabaab operatives inundated the group with a more formal anti-Ethiopian narrative.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ United States of America v. Cabdulaahi Ahmed Faarax and Abdiweli Yassin Isse. Criminal Complaint. United States District Court for the Minnesota. Filed on 8 October 2009, p.8.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ United States of America v. Saynab Abdirashid Hussein (2013).

²⁴ United States of America v. Cabdulaahi Ahmed Faarax and Abdiweli Yassin Isse (2009).

Second Wave

By 2008, the tempo of Minnesotan Somalis travelling to join al-Shabaab rapidly increased. In early January 2008, Mohammed Said Omar travelled to Somalia and met up with first-wave fighters in al-Shabaab safe houses²⁵. He returned to Minnesota a few months later and served as crucial link between aspiring combatants in Minnesota and the first-wave foreign fighters²⁶. Throughout the rest of the year nine²⁷ additional community members successfully joined al-Shabaab in Somali²⁸.

The promise of social harmony among all members of the Somali diaspora proved to be a key mobilizer throughout all waves of al-Shabaab recruits from Minnesota – though second-wave recruits served as the spokesmen for this appeal. In 2013, al-Shabaab released “Pathway to Paradise”, a video which chronicled its recruits from the Twin Cities. Although the video’s narration relies heavily on religious appeals for recruitment, testimonies from the foreign fighters themselves reveal that they held Somalia to be a desirable alternative to their prospects in Minnesota. In the video, Troy Kastigar, a convert who flew to Somalia in al-Shabaab’s second recruitment wave makes an appearance. Kastigar was outspoken in his endorsement of joining al-Shabaab remarking, “If you guys only knew how much fun we have over here [...] This is the real Disneyland!”²⁹. Elaborating, Kastigar goes on to explain the “happiness in [his] heart when [he’s] amongst these people here”³⁰. In the second “Pathway to Paradise” video, released in January 2016, Zakaria Maruf builds on the communitarian aspect of jihad, in reference to Kastigar, saying, “We grew up together and we used to play basketball together. We used to do everything together and now, all praise is due to Allah, we’re doing the best thing together; we’re doing Jihad together”³¹.

²⁵ L. Yuen, S. Aslanian, and L. McCallum, “Minnesota pipeline to al-Shabaab”, *Minnesota Public Radio*, 25 September 2013.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ United States of America v. Saynab Abdirashid Hussein (2013).

²⁹ Path to Paradise. Troy Kastigar. <https://archive.org/details/T.ila.F#>

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Path to Paradise 2. Zakaria Maruf. http://www.liveleak.com/view?i=dcc_1451672037

Third Wave

By 2009, the dynamics in the Somali civil war had rapidly changed. The ICU reconciled with the TFG over talks held in Asmara, Eritrea, and formed a unity government³². Al-Shabaab, which had been distancing itself from its role as the ICU's armed branch, had lost its leading political ally and was relegated to the fringes of Somali society³³. Most importantly, the deal saw the complete withdrawal of Ethiopian troops from the country³⁴. With the community's leading grievance resolved, the influx of Minnesotan foreign fighters dropped radically. A single cell emerged during 2009 and contained three members³⁵.

In addition to community-oriented motivations, al-Shabaab also used an early system of bridge figures, through which fighters on the ground corresponded with prospective recruits in their own communities. Cabdulaahi Ahmed Faarax was a key figure for the group of first-wave recruits³⁶ and recruited two more community members to join him in this third wave³⁷. In addition, Mohammed Said Omar returned to Minnesota a few months after he left in January 2008 and served as a crucial link between aspiring combatants in Minnesota and the first-wave foreign fighters in Somalia³⁸.

Fourth Wave

In 2012, al-Shabaab experienced a brief resurgence, after declaring allegiance to al-Qaeda³⁹. Despite these gains, the group only attracted two recruits from Minnesota's Somali community. In July 2012, Mohamed Osman and Omar Ali Farah successfully traveled to Somalia and linked up with al-Shabaab operatives⁴⁰.

³² D. Gartenstein-Ross, "The Strategic Challenge of Somalia's Al-Shabaab: Dimensions of Jihad", *The Middle East Quarterly*, vol. 16, no. 4, 2009, pp. 25-36.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ L. Yuen, S. Aslanian, and L. McCallum (2013).

³⁶ United States of America v. Cabdulaahi Ahmed Faarax and Abdiweli Yassin Isse (2009).

³⁷ L. Yuen, S. Aslanian, and L. McCallum (2013).

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Council on Foreign Relations, *CFR Backgrounders: Al-Shabaab 'Turning Points'*, March 2015, <http://www.cfr.org/somalia/al-shabab/p18650> (last retrieved 14 April 2016)

⁴⁰ L. Yuen, S. Aslanian and L. McCallum (2013).

ISIS recruitment

ISIS has relied on past military victories and bridge figures from al-Shabaab's recruitment classes – like Mohammed Abdullahi Hassan and Mohamed Osman – to attract its group of Minnesotan fighters. The first instances of ISIS-related radicalization in Minnesota's Somali community spread throughout St. Paul's Burnsville High School⁴¹. For all of these early recruits, religion was the most powerful driver⁴². ISIS's biggest success came, however, when a group of nine Minnesotans⁴³ conspired to join the fighting in Syria with ISIS⁴⁴. The group was not entirely distinct from the Burnsville High School group, as one member of the former cluster maintained [re-mained?] the latter's 'emir'⁴⁵. However, these nine radicalized distinctly, viewing ISIS propaganda videos, and organized their own conspiracy over a three-month period⁴⁶. As with the first foreign fighter wave to Somalia years before, the cluster staggered its departures and was met with only limited success⁴⁷.

Mohammed Abdullahi Hassan – also known as Mujahid Miski – was key in directing Minnesota Somalis to join ISIS. Miski was radicalized early on and sought to join al-Shabaab in the first wave of Minnesotan foreign fighters. He was deemed too young, however and was forced to wait until the 2009 second wave to travel to Somalia. Over time, Miski developed a robust Twitter presence and following, juggling between over 30 accounts.

As al-Shabaab's position in Somalia continued to weaken, Miski became increasingly conflicted about where to direct his contacts in

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ The nine men include: Abdullahi Mohamud Yusuf, Hamza Naj Ahmed, Zacharia Yusuf Abdurahman, Adnan Abdihamad Farah, Hanad Mustafe Musse, Guled Ali Omar, Abdirahman Yasin Daud, Mohamed Abdihamid Farah and Abdirizak Mohamed Warsame.

⁴⁴ L. Vidino and S. Hughes (2015).

⁴⁵ United States of America vs. Abdirizak Mohamed Warsame. United States District Court for the District of Minnesota. Criminal Complaint. Filed on 9 December 2015. <https://cchs.gwu.edu/sites/cchs.gwu.edu/files/downloads/warsame.pdf>

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

America and ultimately decided to redirect his recruits to aid ISIS. One tweet summarized his outlook reading, “My Heart is in Sham, My eyes are in Aqsa and My Soul is in Somalia”⁴⁸. In turn, he began to spread large amounts of ISIS propaganda and other radicalizing materials. Drawing on his experience with al-Shabaab, he further popularized the tactic of spamming vast amounts of content rapidly, in the hopes of gaining increased exposure. Miski used a more personal approach with the Minnesotan Somalis, recruiting and advising them over long Facebook conversations⁴⁹.

Mohamed Osman serves as a second example of a cross-organizational bridge figure. Although he is less well known, Osman travelled to Somalia in the fourth recruitment wave and strongly supported Yusuf Jama with his efforts to join ISIS⁵⁰. Undoubtedly, Yusuf’s relationship with Osman provided the former with operational insights and motivations to effectively join ISIS in Syria.

Looking forward

Since the end of last year, al-Shabaab has shifted its strategy in an attempt to capitalize on its recent gains. Throughout 2015 and into the new year, al-Shabaab has gradually worked its way back into a position of regional significance, through several operations conducted against the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) peace-enforcement mission⁵¹. It appears that for 2016, the group is working toward a resurgence that would place them back on the global radar. To do so, the organization must contend with a dwindling number of Western recruits. This shortfall is attributable to

⁴⁸ Anti-Defamation League, *Minnesotan In Somalia Encourages Americans To Engage In Terror*, May 2015, <http://blog.adl.org/extremism/minnesotan-in-somalia-encourages-americans-to-engage-in-terror> (last retrieved 14 April 2016).

⁴⁹ United States of America v. Abdullahi Yusuf and Abdi Nur. United States District Court for the District of Minnesota. Criminal Complaint. Filed on 14 May 2014.

⁵⁰ L. Yen, M. Ibrahim and S. Aslanian, “Called to fight: Minnesota’s ISIS Recruits”, *MPR News*, 23 March 2015.

⁵¹ K. Abdul and C. Barnes, “Somalia: Why Is Al-Shabaab Still A Potent Threat?”, International Crisis Group, 11 February 2016.

internal ISIS defectors and high attrition rates. In response, al-Shabaab has redirected American recruitment efforts from Americans of African origin toward frustrated segments of the broader African American population.

In January, a senior al-Shabaab member declared that any affiliation with any other Islamist movement would be punishable by death⁵². The announcement was largely prompted by two top commanders' pledges of allegiance to ISIS⁵³ and the formal targeting of al-Shabaab operatives in ISIS' recruitment strategy⁵⁴. This shift in policy may be necessary to preserve al-Shabaab's internal integrity but has limited its draw to American – particularly Minnesota – recruits. The point is best illustrated by Mujahid Miski, who defected from an al-Shabaab camp in December and was turned over to the United States by Kenyan authorities. In this, both al-Shabaab and ISIS lost a key bridge figure who had a proven track record of mobilizing extremists in the United States. In another instance, Maalik Alim Jones, who joined al-Shabaab in 2011 from Baltimore, defected and was recently indicted by the Department of Justice⁵⁵. Operationally, the ISIS-related crackdown severely limits al-Shabaab's ability to effectively draw recruits from the United States. Further, this harsh treatment of members directly counters the narratives of brotherhood and community that were so essential in initially recruiting Minnesotans.

Attrition also plays a large role in curbing the sustainability of al-Shabaab's presence in the United States. Of the twenty-three recruits who successfully travelled to Somalia, nine⁵⁶ have died in

⁵² A. Laing, "How al-Qaeda and Islamic State are competing for al-Shabaab in Somalia", *The Telegraph*, 12 January 2016. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/islamic-state/12015075/How-al-Qaeda-and-Islamic-State-are-fighting-for-al-Shabaab-affections-in-Somalia.html> (last retrieved 14 April 2016).

⁵³ T. Joscelyn, "Shabaab's leadership fights Islamic State's attempted expansion in East Africa", *The Long War Journal*, 26 October 2015.

⁵⁴ A. Laing (2016).

⁵⁵ United States of America v. Maalik Alim Jones. United States District Court for the Southern District of New York. Criminal Complaint. Released on 11 January 2016.

⁵⁶ The nine include: Dahir Gure, Shirwa Ahmed, Zakaria Maruf, Abdirashid Ali Omar, Burhan Ibrahim Hassan, Mahmoud Ali Hassan, Jamal Bana, Troy Kastigar, and Farah Mohamed Beledi.

combat and an additional five⁵⁷ have since been apprehended by law enforcement⁵⁸. The pattern extends further to the wider pool of Minnesota recruits. Only one Minnesotan – Yusra Ismail – remains of the four Minnesotans to arrive in Syria. As American recruits continue to be deployed operationally, their ability to serve as bridge figures will be severely limited for both al-Shabaab and ISIS. It is telling that the second installment in the English-language “Pathway to Paradise” series lacks recent footage of an American, instead featuring interviews with a Canadian fighter and a British narrator.

In response, al-Shabaab has broadened the pool of Americans to which it is appealing. The second “Pathway to Paradise” installment explicitly appealed to African Americans through surveying institutional racism throughout the United States. It provides statistics about the mass-incarceration of African Americans, while highlighting racist organizations throughout the country. The video offers Islam as an accepting alternative to the discrimination faced in America. While the narrative is superficially consistent with past al-Shabaab recruitment techniques, the video marks the most explicit incorporation of racial issues into Jihadist messaging. Ultimately, however, ground successes will most effectively drive al-Shabaab’s recruitment efforts.

⁵⁷ The five include: Mohammed Abdullahi Hassan, Mahamud Said Omar, Kamal Said Hassan, Abdifatah Yusuf Isse, and Salah Osman Ahmed.

⁵⁸ L. Yuen, S. Aslanian and L. McCallum (2013).

3. Molenbeek and Beyond. The Brussels-Antwerp Axis as Hotbed of Belgian Jihad

Guy Van Vlierden

At a European scale, the whole of tiny Belgium can easily be considered a hotbed of Islamic extremism. But as small as it is, concentrations do exist. About three-quarters of the Belgian foreign fighters active in the current Syrian-Iraqi conflict originate from Brussels, Antwerp and a number of towns in between. The major explanation seems to be the existence of two highly active recruitment networks, while the early success of the far right in Belgian politics may have fed the feeling of rejection that became a main motivation to leave for jihad.

According to the most recent figures, Belgium is still at the top of Western European countries in the per capita count of foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq. At its high-end estimate of 589 people who have at least tried to reach the battle zone, and of which an estimated 75% has joined the terrorist group *Islamic State*¹, Belgium has 52.01 fighters per one million inhabitants now. It ranks tenth worldwide, surpassed only by Kosovo (160.34) and Bosnia-Herzegovina (87.92) on the European continent. By comparison, within the European Union, the United Kingdom comes second with 31.21 fighters per one million inhabitants, followed by Sweden (30.61),

¹ P. Van Ostaeyen, "April 2016: A new statistical update on Belgian fighters in Syria and Iraq", 3 April 2016, <https://pietervanostaeyen.wordpress.com/2016/04/03/april-2016-a-new-statistical-update-on-belgian-fighters-in-syria-and-iraq/> (last retrieved on 8 May 2016).

Austria (30.00) and France (28.20)². Furthermore, Belgium ranks fourth in the “foreign fighter score” that researchers Will McCants and Chris Meserole have recently introduced, combining the rate of radicalization within a country’s Sunni Muslim population with that country’s share in the number of foreign fighters globally. Only Tunisia, Jordan and Lebanon get higher scores³.

Belgian foreign fighters come from all over the country, as shown on map 1. It is based on official information⁴ and some additional data gathered by the author in cooperation with independent researcher Pieter Van Ostaeyen, resulting in a dataset of 469 Belgian foreign fighters for which the place of origin is known. Of a total of 589 Belgian municipalities, 87 had at least one fighter leave. The largest concentration however can be found in the cities of Brussels and Antwerp, and a number of towns in between. From that stretch 50 kilometers long, at least 355 fighters have left, about 75% of the entire dataset. At first glance, the importance of the Brussels-Antwerp axis does not come as a surprise. These two cities are the biggest population centers in Belgium, while research has shown that on a European level more than 90% of all foreign fighters originate from large metropolitan areas and their peripheral suburbs⁵. Moreover, a logical correlation exists with the country’s main Muslim areas, of which Brussels and Antwerp also are the most important⁶.

² G. Van Vlieden, “Foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq - an updated per capita count”, 26 April 2016, <https://emmejihad.wordpress.com/2016/04/26/foreign-fighters-in-syria-and-iraq-an-updated-per-capita-count/> (last retrieved 8 May 2016).

³ Ch. Meserole, “The French Connection, Part II: Radicalization, Laïcité, and the Islamic Veil”, 25 April 2016, <https://religion.org/2016/04/25/french-connection-part-ii-radicalization-laicite-and-the-islamic-veil/> (last retrieved 8 May 2016).

⁴ Overview of locations in Belgium from where foreign fighters had left as of 28 January, 2016. Communicated by the Ministry of the Interior responding to a parliamentary question and distributed to the Belgian press.

⁵ B. van Ginkel and E. Entenmann (Eds.), “The Foreign Fighters Phenomenon in the European Union. Profiles, Threats & Policies”, The Hague, The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, 2016, <http://icct.nl/publication/report-the-foreign-fighters-phenomenon-in-the-eu-profiles-threats-policies/> (last retrieved 8 May 2016).

⁶ There are no official data about the number of Muslims in Belgium, let alone their distribution throughout the country. Therefore, all assumptions about numbers of Muslims are based on estimates from independent research: J. Hertogen, “Moslims in België van 6,3% naar 6,5% van de bevolking”, 8 October 2014, <http://www.npdata.be/BuG/239-Moslims-2013/> (last retrieved 8 May 2016).

While the Brussels-Antwerp axis may thus be a predictable center of gravity, its actual share in the Belgian figures is disproportionately high. To illustrate that, we compared the Brussels-Antwerp axis with four other Belgian regions where similar factors are at play. First, we looked at the Liège-Verviers area. Liège is Belgium's fifth largest city and both locations are in the top-ten of major Muslim towns. Second is a much less urbanized area, centered around the towns of Genk and Maaseik. Due to its past as a coal mining region, which attracted lots of immigrants from Morocco and Turkey, it is also home to an important part of the country's Muslim community. Third is the area comprising Charleroi, Mons and Namur. These three top-ten Belgian cities also rank high in estimates of Belgium's Muslim population, with Charleroi as Belgium's fifth largest Muslim town. Finally, the comparison is made with Ghent and its surroundings, being Belgium's third largest population center and its fourth Muslim town. Table 1 makes it sufficiently clear that none of these areas even come close to the Brussels-Antwerp axis, even when the numbers of foreign fighters are corrected for the size of their overall and Muslim populations.

When looking for an explanation for both the high Belgian numbers and the concentration on the Brussels-Antwerp axis, it is clear that the existence of two major networks of recruitment in those cities has played a crucial role. In Antwerp, there was Shariah4Belgium, a neo-Salafist group established in 2010. It was founded as an offshoot of the British al-Muhajiroun and Islam4UK movements, led by Omar Bakri Muhammad and Anjem Choudary. Initially, its main activities were "dawa" sessions in Belgian cities (trying to convert non-Muslims by preaching in public places) and protests against what they considered violations of Belgian Muslims' rights. As these actions were highly overt and outspoken, Shariah4Belgium was not considered to be a dangerous organization with the potential of violent acts. That made the threshold to join particularly low. Many youngsters were attracted by its rebellious attitude, and its appeal was further increased by policy measures like a ban on wearing headscarves in Antwerp's public schools⁷.

⁷ G. Van Vliedden, "How Belgium Became a Top Exporter of Jihad", The Jamestown

TABLE 1. POPULATION NUMBERS ONLY INCLUDE THOSE MUNICIPALITIES FROM WHERE FOREIGN FIGHTERS HAVE LEFT

	Number of foreign fighters	Estimate of Muslim population ⁷	Foreign fighters per 10,000 Muslims	Number of inhabitants ⁸	Foreign fighters per 1 million inhabitants
Brussels-Antwerp axis ⁹	355	378,167	9.4	2,044,352	173.6
Liège/Verviers area ¹⁰	27	48,515	5.6	398,990	80.6
Genk/Maaseik area ¹¹	21	35,601	5.9	335,018	62.7
Charleroi/Mons/Namur area ¹²	18	50,902	3.5	580,415	31.0
Ghent area ¹³	9	32,452	2.8	291,137	30.9

⁷ Foundation - *Terrorism Monitor*, vol. 13, issue 11, 29 May 2015, http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=43966&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=7&cHash=462a3da25136ea4c02b6a99f9e5fa442#.VyH4KirtUl (last retrieved on 8 May 2016).

⁸ J. Hertogen (2014).

⁹ Although more recent data exist, for reasons of continuity we stick to the figures used by J. Hertogen (2014)

¹⁰ Including the municipalities of Anderlecht, Antwerp, Auderghem, Berchem-Sainte-Agathe, Borsbeek, Brussels, Dilbeek, Edegem, Etterbeek, Evere, Forest, Ganshoren, Grimbergen, Halle, Ixelles, Jette, Kapellen, Koekelberg, Mechelen, Molenbeek-Saint-Jean, Mortsels, Ranst, Saint-Gilles, Saint-Josse-ten-Noode, Schaerbeek, Schoten, Sint-Pieters-Leeuw, Uccle, Vilvoorde, Wemmel, Willebroek and Woluwe-Saint-Lambert

¹¹ Including the municipalities of Dison, Esneux, Eupen, Herstal, Herve, Liège, Neu-pré, Oupeye, Verviers and Welkenraedt.

¹² Including the municipalities of Beringen, Bilzen, Dilsen-Stokkem, Genk, Hasselt, Heusden-Zolder, Houthalen-Helchteren, Kinrooi and Maaseik.

¹³ Including the municipalities of Aiseau-Presles, Charleroi, Farciennes, Gembloux, Jemeppe-sur-Sambre, La Louvière, Mons, Namur and Sambreville.

¹⁴ Including the municipalities of Deinze, Ghent and Zelzate.

Apart from its mentors in Britain, Shariah4Belgium developed strong ties with like-minded groups in other European countries – such as Millatu Ibrahim in Germany and Forsane Alizza in France, while in the Netherlands Shariah4Holland was founded as an offshoot of Shariah4Belgium itself¹⁵. But there were no obvious ties to pre-existing jihadi networks, contributing to the impression that the movement was more of a nuisance than a real security risk. When authorities finally started to act against the group at the end of 2012 – culminating in the arrest of its leader, Fouad Belkacem – lots of its several hundreds of followers had already radicalized beyond a point of no return. And exactly at the time when it became impossible to continue overt activities, the Syrian war presented itself as an alternative. Altogether, at least 80 people have left for the Syrian jihad from within Shariah4Belgium, as we know by now¹⁶. Shariah4Belgium has since disbanded, while at a trial in 2015 it was formally identified as a terrorist group¹⁷.

The main network recruiting in Brussels was of a totally different kind. Led by the 42 year old Moroccan Khalid Zerkani – thought to be a veteran of the Afghan-Pakistani terrorist camps of al-Qaeda – it had no website, no logo and even no name. Recruiting was done under the guise of offering youngsters sports activities, while further indoctrination happened in old-fashioned backrooms¹⁸. According to the latest figures, this so-called Zerkani network has sent at least 59 people to Syria and Iraq¹⁹ – including Abdelhamid Abaaoud, Chakib Akrouh and Najim Laachraoui, three perpetrators of the recent ter-

¹⁵ Based on observations by the author. For some more detail about these organizations and their early links to violent acts, please see: G. Van Vlierden, “The Woolwich attack and the dangers of the European shariah movement”, 24 May 2013, <https://emmejihad.wordpress.com/2013/05/24/the-woolwich-attack-and-the-dangers-of-the-european-shariah-movement/> (last retrieved 8 May 2016).

¹⁶ P. Van Ostaeyen (2016).

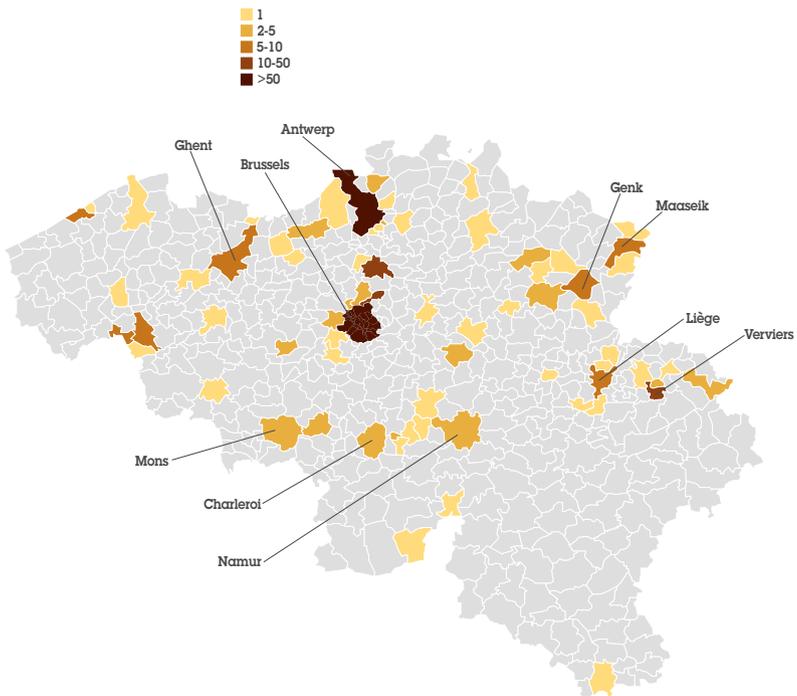
¹⁷ M. Torfs, “Former Sharia4Belgium leader Belkacem gets 12 years”, 11 February 2015, <http://deredactie.be/cm/vrtnieuws.english/News/1.2236417> (last retrieved 8 May 2016).

¹⁸ G. Van Vlierden, “The Zerkani Network: Belgium’s Most Dangerous Jihadist Group”, *The Jamestown Foundation*, Hot Issue, 12 April 2016, http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=45305&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=7&cHash=c4c931fd3012238c3cf56a3ca6d7815e#.VylCjCrtU1 (last retrieved 8 May 2016).

¹⁹ P. Van Ostaeyen (2016).

rorist attacks in Paris and Brussels. In contrast to Shariah4Belgium, the Zerkani network included several people with a long history in jihadist circles – such as Abdelhouaid Aberkan, convicted in 2004 for his role in the assassination plot against the Afghan anti-Taliban commander Ahmed Shah Massoud. And while a criminal background seemed to be rare within Shariah4Belgium²⁰, it turned out to be the rule in Zerkani’s entourage. He actively encouraged his recruits in all kinds of petty crime to raise money for the jihad. That may have fueled the intertwining of ordinary crime and Islamic extremism, now considered a main characteristic of the Molenbeek scene that played a central role in the aforesaid terrorist attacks²¹.

FIGURE 1. BELGIUM



²⁰ According to a well-informed security source speaking on condition of anonymity.

²¹ S. Kermani, “Brussels Attacks: Molenbeek’s gangster jihadists”, 24 March 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-35890960> (last retrieved 8 May 2016).

In between Antwerp and Brussels, the towns of Mechelen and Vilvoorde also stand out on the map of jihad. Mechelen (population: 82,602 of which 14.2% Muslim) is a somewhat dubious case, since its local authorities keep insisting that no foreign fighters left from there²². On social media however, traces of at least one were found and reliable sources within the city's Muslim community assure that at least thirteen others exist²³. A possible explanation may be that they had moved to a place with a more active jihadist scene prior to their departure for Syria, and are listed with that new residence in official statistics. Who is responsible for recruiting people from Mechelen is hard to establish without more details about who has left, but it is known that Shariah4Belgium has tried to get a foothold there. For Vilvoorde (population: 41,432 of which 16.2% Muslim), it is entirely clear who led recruitment there. Although the town is much closer to Brussels, it became a bastion of the Antwerp-based Shariah4Belgium under the impulse of Houssien Elouassaki. He was an early member with lots of charisma, and his fearless confrontations with the police helped him to establish his own local chapter of the group. In September 2012, Elouassaki was one of the first Shariah4Belgium members leaving for Syria – where he pioneered the integration of the Belgian fighters in a militia called Majlis Shura al-Mujaheddin. That was led by the late Abu Atheer al-Absi, a Syrian who subsequently became a heavyweight within Islamic State. The fact that Elouassaki was soon chosen as his deputy responsible for all European fighters within Majlis Shura al-Mujaheddin, contributed to the stature of Shariah4Belgium and has certainly helped the organization attract such a large amount of people willing to leave²⁴.

It seems clear that the existence of these two recruitment networks – very different in their *modus operandi*, but equally efficient – has been the most decisive factor behind Belgium's tremendous

²² A. Eriksson, "Mechelen: the Belgian city with no foreign fighters", 26 April 2016, <https://euobserver.com/beyond-brussels/133185> (last retrieved 8 May 2016).

²³ P. Van Ostaeyen, personal communication with the author.

²⁴ G. Van Vlierden, "Profiles of Three Major Belgian Fighters in Syria and Their Paths to Jihad", The Jamestown Foundation, Militant Leadership Monitor, vol. VI, no. 7, July 2015.

share in current foreign fighter figures. But of course, other factors may have been at play. It is tempting to seek an additional cause – at least for the concentration of the phenomenon in Belgium – in the socio-economic situation of the communities where most of the recruitment took place. 82% of the Belgian foreign fighters in the cited dataset indeed originate from municipalities with a per capita income below the Belgian average, while 35% lived in Belgium's ten poorest towns²⁵. Those figures can be misleading, however. Up to 80% of Belgian foreign fighters have Moroccan roots²⁶, and there is still a strong correlation between low-income areas and the main concentrations in Belgium of people from Moroccan descent. This said, it is not clear what mattered most in terms of radicalization: being Moroccan or being poor.

While many of them may have been born and raised in impoverished neighborhoods, often those Moroccan-Belgian foreign fighters appear to come from exactly those families who did manage to improve their situation fairly well. Paris terrorist Abdelhamid Abaaoud for instance, was the grandson of a Moroccan who migrated to Belgium for work as a coal miner. But Abdelhamid's father climbed the economic ladder by running a successful clothing store. He sent his oldest son to an elite school and groomed him to become his successor in the family business, thus providing a more than decent prospect for Abdelhamid's future²⁷. We know the example of Shariah4Belgium member Saïd El Morabit, said to have worked in a leading position for an important insurance firm before he left and died in Syria²⁸. And when the Belgian police raided the home of two brothers recruited for the Syrian jihad by Shariah4Belgium in the Antwerp suburb of Kapellen, Soufiane and Adel Mezroui appeared

²⁵ Algemene Directie Statistiek - Statistics Belgium, *Fiscale statistiek van de inkomens 2013*, http://statbel.fgov.be/nl/binaries/fisc2013_C_NL_tcm325-274998.xls (last retrieved 8 May 2016).

²⁶ G. Van Vlierden, "Wie trekt ten oorlog voor Islam? Studie schetst gedetailleerd profiel van westerse moslims in jihad", *Het Laatste Nieuws*, 27 November 2014

²⁷ G. Van Vlierden, "Profile: Paris Attack Ringleader Abdelhamid Abaaoud", *CTC Sentinel*, vol. 8, no. 112, 15 December 2015, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/profile-paris-attack-ringleader-abdelhamid-abaaoud> (last retrieved 8 May 2016).

²⁸ G. Van Vlierden, "Syriëstrijders zijn niet allemaal boefjes", *Het Laatste Nieuws*, 3 April 2014.

to have lived in a villa of 2,500 square meters with an indoor pool, a sauna and a fitness room – recently bought by their father, trading in tropical woods and importing furniture from Morocco²⁹.

A much more important driver than socio-economic deprivation, seems to be the feeling of rejection – as non-indigenous citizens, as Muslims or as a combination of both. “I wanted to move, to escape. I was sick and tired of Belgium and I wanted to live in an Islamic environment”, Shariah4Belgium convert Michael “Younnes” Delefortrie told his interrogators after his return from a short stay on the Syrian front in January 2014³⁰. In a text that was published on Facebook by the already imprisoned Shariah4Belgium leader Fouad Belkacem, he cited the “arrogance and deeply rooted Islamophobia of the Belgian state” as the main motivation for establishing his organization. “For more than 50 years now, Muslims are humiliated and forced to beg for simple rights, such as places to pray and locations for ritual slaughter. Any Belgian Muslim with foreign roots is still considered an asylum seeker by public opinion, and even when he speaks both official languages fluently, he constantly risks being treated like his grandfather back in the seventies”, Belkacem wrote³¹.

If that feeling of rejection has indeed been a major driver of radicalization, a hypothesis worth investigating is whether the early success of a far-right political party with an outspoken anti-migrant and anti-Islam platform has contributed to Belgium’s foreign fighter problem. In many other European countries such parties were a marginal political factor until much more recently. In Belgium, and especially in Dutch-speaking Flanders, the party that was initially known as Vlaams Blok and later rebranded to Vlaams Belang (VB) had its breakthrough 25 years ago. In the general election of 1991, it tripled its share of the vote and enlarged its presence in the federal parliament from three to seventeen seats³² – a moment

²⁹ J. Bogaert, “Shariastrijder in chique villawijk, Het Laatste Nieuws”, 18 April 2013 (combined with unpublished details gathered by the author).

³⁰ Cited in court papers in the possession of the author.

³¹ P. Van Ostaeeyen, “Statement by Fouad Belkacem Sharia4Belgium”, 20 September 2014, <https://pietervanostaeeyen.wordpress.com/2014/09/20/statement-by-fouad-belkacem-sharia4belgium/> (last retrieved 8 May 2016).

³² Federale Overheidsdienst Binnenlandse Zaken, “Belgische Verkiezingsuitslagen”, 24

still known as “Black Sunday” in the political history of Belgium³³. It reached a peak of almost 25% in regional elections in Flanders in 2004³⁴ – thus becoming the largest political party in half of the country – campaigning against immigrants and Islam. Examples of the slogans it used are “Fit in or leave”, “Our own people first” and “Freedom or Islam: dare to choose”. Its leader, Filip Dewinter, once openly stated that a Muslim girl wearing a headscarf cannot be considered Flemish, even if she was born in Flanders and speaks Dutch, using the metaphor: “A cat born in a fish-shop is still a cat and not a fish”³⁵.

Due to an agreement between all major political parties – known as the “cordon sanitaire” – VB has never found a coalition partner willing to govern with it³⁶. But even from within the opposition, it has had a profound impact on the attitude towards Islam and immigrants in Belgian society³⁷. If the unique position of Belgium regarding foreign fighters requires a search for differences with other European countries, this could be one: the existence of a generation of Muslims for whom the message that they are unwanted always has been omnipresent – spread on billboards throughout their city, splashed on leaflets pushed into their mailbox, and trumpeted on national television. That this far-right party only existed in Dutch-speaking Flanders fits with the much heavier presence of jihadists there than in the French speaking south. It could also explain

August 2008, <http://www.ibzdgip.fgov.be/> (last retrieved 8 May 2016).

³³ C. Mudde, *The ideology of the extreme right*, Manchester/New York, Manchester University Press, 2003, p. 89.

³⁴ Federale Overheidsdienst Binnenlandse Zaken (2008)

³⁵ H. Coffé and J. Dewulf, “Wavering between Radical and Moderate: The Discourse of the Vlaams Belang in Flanders (Belgium)”, in M. Feldman and P. Jackson (eds.), *Doublespeak: The Rhetoric of the Far Right since 1945*, Stuttgart, 2014, p. 160.

³⁶ K. Abts, “Attitudes Towards a Cordon Sanitaire vis-à-vis Extremist Parties: Instrumental Pragmatism, Affective Reactions, and Democratic Principles”, *Centre for Ethics - KU Leuven*, Ethical Perspectives, vol. 22, no. 4, 2015, pp. 667-698, <https://soc.kuleuven.be/ceso/ispo/publications/abts-2015> (last retrieved on 8 May 2016).

³⁷ B. Meuleman and J. Billiet, “Etnocentrisme in Vlaanderen: opmars of afname? - De evolutie van de perceptie van etnische dreiging tussen 1991 en 2004 en de relatie met institutioneel vertrouwen”, in *Vlaanderen Gepeild*, Brussel, Ministerie van de Vlaamse Gemeenschap, 2005, pp. 37-60, <https://lirias.kuleuven.be/handle/123456789/83688> (last retrieved 8 May 2016).

why *Shariah4Belgium* – of which the hometown Antwerp was also the major base of *VB* – seemed much more politically driven than the “old school” jihadist movement behind the Brussels Zerkani network. Again, it is a hypothesis, but the impression exists that the Belgian far right has in fact nurtured the monster of violent Islamism that it intended to fight.

In Brussels, things are complicated

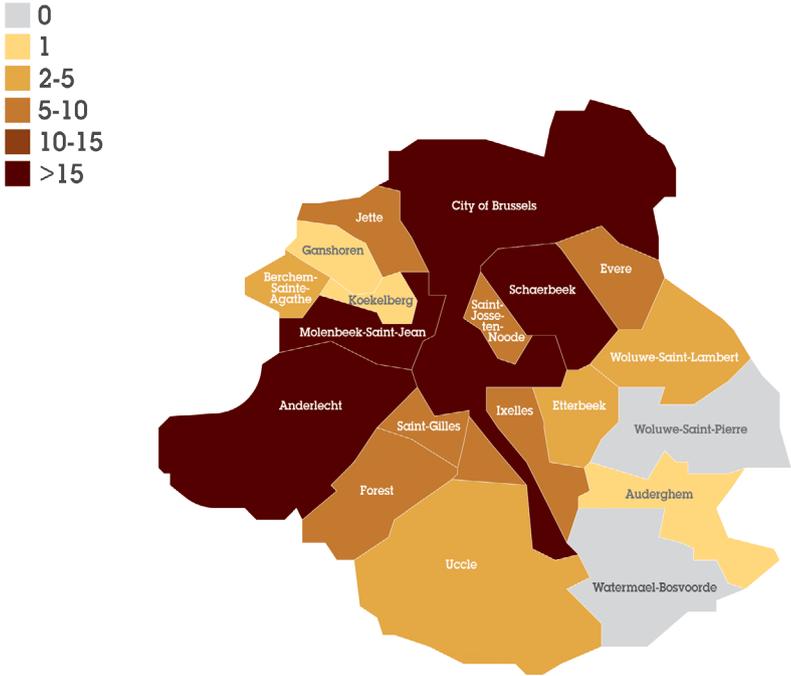
When we mention Brussels, we do mean a larger area than what is officially known as Belgium’s capital. The City of Brussels is only one of 19 municipalities forming the country’s largest population center, visibly not separated but ruled by 19 different mayors and city councils. Together, they are named the Brussels-Capital Region, an entity on the same level as Belgium’s main two parts: Dutch speaking Flanders and French speaking Wallonia. The Brussels-Capital Region has its own regional government, adding to an institutional tangle that often complicates good governance. In regard to foreign fighters, significant differences exist within Brussels, as Table 2 and Figure 2 show. Most come from the old industrial, impoverished and Muslim-rich northwestern part, with the now notorious Molenbeek-Saint-Jean on top.

TABLE 2

	Number of foreign fighters	Estimate of Muslim population ³⁸	Foreign fighters per 10,000 Muslims	Number of inhabitant ³⁹	Foreign fighters per 1 million inhabitants
Molenbeek-Saint-Jean	47	36,454	12.9	94,653	496.6
City of Brussels	47	50,261	9.4	168,576	278.8
Schaerbeek	31	48,453	6.4	130,587	237.4
Anderlecht	19	32,419	5.9	113,462	167.5
Saint-Josse-ten- Noode	7	11,895	5.9	27,207	257.3
Saint-Gilles	7	12,457	5.6	50,377	139.0
Ixelles	7	12,245	5.7	84,216	83.1
Evere	6	6,205	9.7	37,364	160.6
Jette	6	7,671	7.8	49,411	121.4
Forest	6	11,812	5.1	54,024	111.1
Berchem- Sainte-Agathe	3	3,431	8.7	23,410	128.2
Etterbeek	3	5,495	5.5	46,228	64.9
Uccle	3	4,930	6.1	80,487	37.3
Woluwe-Saint- Lambert	2	3,433	5.8	52,592	38.0
Koekelberg	1	5,853	1.7	21,025	47.6
Ganshoren	1	3,502	2.9	23,664	42.3
Auderghem	1	1,810	5.5	32,350	30.9
Woluwe-Saint- Pierre	0	1,627	-	40,535	-
Watermael- Bosvoorde	0	948	-	24,467	-

³⁸ J. Hertogen (2014).³⁹ Although more recent data exist, for reasons of continuity we stuck to the figures used by J. Hertogen (2014).

FIGURE 2. BRUSSELS' AREA



4. Hotbeds of Extremism: the UK Experience

Douglas Weeks

The United Kingdom (UK), like most other European countries, is struggling to manage some segments of society where young Muslims are perceived to be at risk of religious radicalism leading to extremism and violence. Exacerbated by the rise of the Islamic State (IS), the security environment in the UK is decidedly tense. The fear is that individuals will radicalise, travel to places like Syria and Iraq, and then return to the UK to carry out attacks within the country. Managing that threat has taken centre stage in the UK's political landscape, has led to more security legislation, has caused additional tension in the government/community relationship, and in some cases facilitated more radicalism, not less.

The rise of The Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) including the announcement that the Caliphate had been re-established on 29 June 2014, is more appropriately the newest in a long history of fears associated with "Islamic extremism"¹ in the UK. To understand radicalisation in Britain, including those that join IS, requires an understanding of the government/Muslim community relationship. That is not to suggest that radicalism in the UK is the fault of the government but rather to say it is the result of a complex relationship that has been influenced by domestic and international events.

¹ The term "Islamic extremism" is understood to be a colloquial term used by government, the media, and in common use. The term is often disputed by Muslims who argue that groups such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State do not follow the tenets of Islamic faith and therefore are not "Islamic".

Understanding radicalisation in Britain

The migration of radicalised Islamic preachers into the UK dates back to the mid-1980s when individuals like Abu Hamza al Masri, Abu Qatada, Omar Bakri Mohammed, and Abdullah el Faisal all began preaching their interpretation of strict Islamic orthopraxy in London. Abu Hamza, Abu Qatada, and Omar Bakri Mohammed, collectively characterised as “The Unholy Trinity”, all coalesced around the Finsbury Park Mosque in north London while Abdullah El-Faisal focussed his efforts at Masjid Ibn Taymeeyah in south London². The four capitalised on a growing number of disenfranchised second- and third-generation Muslim youths who didn’t fit wholly into white British society, didn’t fit into the religious practices of their parents, and were uncomfortable with the more culturalised versions of Islam that were surfacing around that time. Marketed as Salafyaah³, the four promoted a narrowed interpretation of Islam whereby Muslims could practice their faith more appropriately and more purely by following the ways of the Prophet and his companions in a literal or near literal sense. In order to do so, it meant rejecting many of the ways of the West, which was seen as corrupt⁴.

The arguments that Hamza, Bakri, Qatada, and el-Faisal used all highlighted the ills of domestic British society and were exemplified by things like drinking, drugs, prostitution, gambling, pornography, and poverty to suggest that the political and social order was broken⁵. On the international front there was also the Afghan/Soviet War, and later the Bosnian War, the First Gulf War, and later the War on Terror whereby foreign policy could easily be added to the rhetoric⁶. This not only created a bedrock position that a new political and social order was needed, it created an identity where

² Interview with subject 1.11.1, 2014.

³ Using the term *Salafyyah* in conjunction with these radical preachers is disputed by current *Salafis* who assert that *Salafyyah* embodies a much wider understanding than the narrowed interpretation used by these preachers.

⁴ Interview with subject 1.8.1, 2014.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Interview with Omar Bakri Mohammad, 16 April 2012.

those that subscribed to this line of reason could see themselves as more righteous because they followed the purest form of Islam: that of the Prophet and his companions. The output of that identity was a Manichean view of the world and those in it whereby all could be conveniently categorised in one of two camps: good and evil, light and dark, righteous and Godless, *iman* (faith) and *kufr* (disbeliever), *tawhid* (oneness of God) *shirk* (polytheism). This Manichean notion is classically stated in a 2012 interview with Omar Bakri Mohammed.

I believe in the clash of civilisations, it is inevitable. That is part of my belief [...] I am pro clash of civilisations because we believe the truth and falsehood must confront each other⁷.

Although those preaching their ultra-conservative view of Islam were able to find some traction with some of Britain's disaffected young people and convert them into religiously motivated activists, their numbers initially remained generally small. As a consequence, the police paid little attention to them⁸. However, things began to change beginning with the Salmon Rushdie Affair in 1988. Up until that point, clashes between British Muslims and others in UK society were dominated by race, not religion⁹. When Rushdie's book *The Satanic Verses* was released in 1988, Muslims reacted strongly and demanded the book be banned in the UK. Margaret Thatcher refused based on the principle of free speech. However the *fatwah* (religious ruling) by the Ayatollah Khomeini that Rushdie should be killed, along with the generally tepid response by most Arab governments already perceived as corrupt provided the traction needed where more extreme individuals could manipulate the issue into one of identity politics. The result was that large numbers of British Muslims perceived that Britain and the despotic Muslim regimes in

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Interview with police officer 2.2.2, 2012.

⁹ A. McRoy, *From Rushdie to 7/7: The Radicalisation of Islam in Britain*, London, The Social Affairs Unit, 2006.

Asia and South Asia were simply co-conspirators against Islam¹⁰. Adding insult to injury Muslims in the UK realised that they lacked the political influence to make any meaningful change¹¹. This provided a viable platform of dissent that the radicalised preachers took full advantage of.

When the First Gulf War began in 1990, British Muslims who were now more sensitised to the issue of religion concluded that the West was far too selective about which Muslim conflict it should engage in. The perception was that the protection of Kuwaiti and Saudi oil assets trumped other conflicts like Israel/Palestine or Kashmir¹². That perception was further solidified by the Bosnian War (1992), when the British government refused to send troops to intervene despite evidence of systematic ethnic cleansing of Bosnian Muslims by the Serbs¹³. Even though there were protests and a substantial amount of public outcry, nothing substantially changed. Again, Muslim political agency appeared to be absent and the domestic government/Muslim relationship in Britain continued to erode¹⁴. In response young British males began taking matters into their own hands and travelled abroad to support and fight alongside their Bosnian Muslim counterparts. Something the British government neither supported nor prohibited.

Beginning in the mid-1990s, the “Troubles” of Northern Ireland were winding down but simultaneously replaced by other international threats such as al-Qaeda and the Second Intifada in Palestine. The Northern Ireland security provisions had always been “temporary” in nature and required periodic renewal by Parliament. The British Government determined that legislation was necessary to address the evolving threats and sought to consolidate those provisions into one piece of permanent legislation¹⁵. In response, the British Government adopted *Terrorism Act 2000 (TA 2000)*. Among

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ UK Parliament, *Explanatory Notes to Terrorism Act 2000*, London, Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 2000.

other things *TA 2000* redefined terrorism as the “threat of action... designated to influence the government or to intimidate the public... for the purpose of advancing a political, religious, or ideological cause”¹⁶. The previous definition was limited to “...the use of violence for political ends...”¹⁷. Thus, the definition was significantly broadened.

The 9/11 attacks in America became a watershed moment in the UK as well and especially so after Britain joined the American-led coalition coined the Global War on Terror (GWOT). This was highly criticised by Muslims, protests were common, and the issue of Muslim political agency was again at the forefront. Equally important was that 9/11 embedded the idea that Muslims were a potential security risk. Combined, the community/government relationship continued on its downward spiral¹⁸. As one source stated

Pre 9/11, Muslims generally associated themselves with and were in support of the government. We didn't shy away from being critical but it was much more of a partnership. Post 9/11, Muslims feel like the government is trying to vilify us¹⁹.

Fuelled by a succession of disrupted or actual terror attacks in Britain and other locations across Europe, the British government began drafting additional legislative action to meet the threat. Between 2001 and 2005 two additional pieces of “counter-terrorism” legislation were adopted. Muslim communities were securitised with additional police officers, arrests rose, and random stop and search tactics by police became commonplace. Following the 7/7 bombing in London, British authorities passed more security legislation while simultaneously coming to the realisation that securitisation was not enough. To be successful, they would need to prevent people from adopting radical views. In response, the Prevent

¹⁶ UK Parliament, *Terrorism Act 2000*, London, Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 2000, p. 1.

¹⁷ UK Parliament, *Prevention of Terrorism (Temporary Provisions) Act 1974*, London, Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1974, p. 7.

¹⁸ Interview with Muslim Council Britain (MCB) representative 3.3.3, 13 December 2011.

¹⁹ Interview with IFE representative 3.16.3, 13 October 2011.

workstream was added to the 2006 version of CONTEST (United Kingdom's counter-terrorism strategy)²⁰.

Prevent became operational in 2007 and the stated aim was "to stop people becoming or supporting violent extremists"²¹. In order to achieve that goal, the government embarked on a mission to engage with Muslim communities. In doing so, it gave nearly all of that responsibility to the police. Empowered with the idea that engagement was the key to success, additional police officers were infused into Muslim communities with a mission to engage with religious and community leaders²². However, the securitization of Muslim communities through the Pursue workstream of the CONTEST had already begun to take its toll. Arrests were up but not convictions, detention without charge was increasingly common, there appeared to be a disproportionate number of police officers on the streets, and most [Muslim men] had either experienced stop and search or knew of a close friend or family who had²³. Moreover, Prevent did not address any other forms of radicalism or extremism other than al-Qaeda inspired terrorism and made clear the government focused on one thing: Muslims.

CONTEST, including Prevent, was revised in 2009 and again in 2011. In each successive iteration, the community perception was that the goal posts were being narrowed. Whereas the first Prevent policy focused on challenging ideology, disrupting those that support violence and extremism, supporting vulnerable individuals, increasing community resilience, and addressing grievances, the 2011 version focused on just three elements: people, ideology, and institutions²⁴. One notable omission was that there was no longer a stated need to address grievances. In each iteration, the government defined more explicitly which religious beliefs and practices were acceptable and which were not. As an example, soon after the Con-

²⁰ UK Parliament, The Home Office, *Countering International Terrorism: The United Kingdom's Strategy*, London, Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 2006.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

²² Interview with police officer 2.12.2, 2011.

²³ Interview with citizen 4.13, 12 October 2011.

²⁴ UK Parliament, The Home Office, *The Prevent Strategy*, London, Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 2011.

servative Liberal Democrat Coalition Government came to power in 2010, David Cameron took aim at what he referred to as “non-violent extremists”, namely Salafis. Although the previous Labour government had partnered with a wide range of civic groups including Salafis, Cameron drew a line in the sand saying he thought they were part of the problem and would no longer fund or interact with them²⁵. Cameron reinforced his commitment saying that “instead of ignoring this extremist ideology, we – as governments and as societies – have got to confront it, in all its forms”²⁶.

In addition to defining what religious beliefs and practices were acceptable and which were not, who it would associate with and who it would not, since 2011 the government has used “British values” as its guiding principle. The definition of “British values” changes slightly depending on who is defining them but they are listed in the 2011 version of Prevent as “democracy, rule of law, equality of opportunity, freedom of speech and the rights of all men and women to live free from persecution of any kind”²⁷. The full impact that Prevent has had on the community/government relationship is difficult to measure but a [Muslim] community leader summed up his assessment of Prevent saying

The first Prevent policy targeted AQ suspects. The second Prevent policy began to target political voices. But now the third Prevent policy has tried to define which Muslims were acceptable and which were not. The result is that the entire Muslim community is now targeted²⁸.

In all, between 2000 and 2015, the UK government passed six major pieces of counter-terrorism legislation. Collectively, they have expanded police powers and allowed prosecution of even those possessing certain written materials in an effort to control internal

²⁵ David Cameron, Munich Speech, 5 February 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pms-speech-at-munich-security-conference> (last retrieved 4 May 2016).

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Interview with IFE representative (2011).

and external threats²⁹. Although justified politically, there is a broad sense in British Muslim communities that they have been progressively vilified, marginalised, and dictated to as to what religious practices and beliefs are acceptable and which are not. The toll has been enormous on the government/community relationship.

Muslim demographics

Muslims in the UK are largely immigrants who came to the UK in the 1970s onward from mostly commonwealth countries seeking economic advantage. Most are of south Asian decent with Pakistanis representing the largest majority (43%), followed by Bangladeshis, Indians and other Asians (16%), and black Africans (6%)³⁰. Within that demographic, the Muslim population in Britain can be roughly split into two groups; those that are first generation Muslims and those that are second- and third-generation Muslims. The reason that distinction is made is that historically first-generation Muslim immigrants tend to practice their faith in the same way they did in their countries of origin. In many cases that means more conservatively and privately so as not to bring attention to themselves³¹. In contrast, second – and third – generation immigrants often find themselves caught between two worlds; the traditional ways, values, and expectations of their parents, and the society that they belong to. Critically, they are not wholly vested in either³². For many, that means they are left to define their own Muslim identity and how they fit into the world around them. A 2009 report characterized those individuals saying “Muslim youth are not only alienated from the politics at the national level, but also at the com-

²⁹ See *TA 2006* and *Operation of Police Powers under the Terrorism Act 2000 and Subsequent Legislation*, London, Home Office, 2015.

³⁰ J. Dobbs, H. Green, and L. Zealey, *Focus on Ethnicity and Religion*, London, Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 2006.

³¹ J. Preece, “Cultural Diversity and Security After 9/11,” in W. Bain (ed.) *The Empire of Security and the Safety of the People*, London, Routledge, 2006.

³² O. Lynch, “British Muslim Youth: terrorism and the construction of the ‘other’”, *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2013, pp. 241-261.

munity level... where community elders... are often of a different makeup... to those they seek to represent”³³. The report asserts that the lack of political agency is reason for some to seek identity and belonging with radical movements and groups³⁴. Thus, within the broad demographic that constitutes ‘Muslim youth’, some will follow the traditional ways of their parents, some will define their own unique identity, and others may seek identity through radical movements and groups.

Gangs and religion

Britain like other countries has seen gang culture thrive in certain communities. Irrespective of race or ethnicity, one of the mechanisms that gang members have used to exit gang life is the adoption of a religious identity. As an example, a former gang member who struggled to find meaning in his life recalled his conversion while he was in prison saying

I was given a Quran, I began to read and it wasn’t long before I felt that Islam really was [...] the most comprehensive and made the most sense. That was what started me off. Similarly, the whole gun and gang involvement was something that I was trying to get out of anyway³⁵.

His story is neither unique nor surprising but rather highlights the path that some use to exit gang lifestyle. During the conversion process, whether transitioning from gangs or another pathway in life, there is some limited data to suggest that converts may have a greater degree of vulnerability to being drawn into extremist groups or radical movements compared to individuals who were raised Muslim, ventured from their faith, and then re-embraced their religion

³³ M. Al-Lami, *Studies in Radicalisation: State of the Field Report*, London, University of London, 2009, p. 7.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Interview with former gang member 1.16.1, 2014.

again (reversion)³⁶. Although the evidence to support that theory is largely anecdotal, one thing that does seem to transfer when gang members convert or revert is they often retain the gang culture and toughness³⁷.

Radicalism, jihadism, and the IS message in Britain

It is highly problematic to generalize about the makeup of any Muslim dominated community in Britain. Although the UK has established Muslim communities in various parts of London, Birmingham, and Bradford to name a few, to say that one area is more receptive to the IS message than another is equally problematic. The reason is that Muslim communities are extremely heterogeneous. Although the majority of residents may share the same faith, communities are inherently ethnically, culturally, racially, and economically diverse. That said, when considering radicalisation in Britain, including those that have gone abroad to fight, rather than associating them with a particular geographic region there are other ways to typologise them.

Without question, IS has targeted disaffected young people through an expertly crafted media campaign. The promise of adventure, marriage, and being a part of a new society where housing, food, and electricity are free finds resonance with those drawn to the pop jihadist culture³⁸. Moreover, there are large numbers of young adults across Britain who are not wholly vested in British society, are looking to define their own Muslim identity, and some are embracing IS. Acknowledging the lure of IS, David Cameron characterised the IS influence on young people saying “They are watching videos that eulogise ISIL as a pioneering state taking on

³⁶ D. Weeks, *The Victimisation Experience and the Radicalisation Process: An Understanding of the Perpetrator Victim Cycle Amongst Individuals Involved in Terrorism*, Brussels, The European Union (forthcoming 2016).

³⁷ Interview with intervention provider 1.5.1, May 2016.

³⁸ See *Reuters*, “IS Offers Fighters Free Honeymoon, Housing Bonus, and Cash to Start Family”, story republished on RT 27 May 2015, <http://on.rt.com/9afh1j> (last retrieved 3 May 2016).

the world”³⁹. For someone in search of adventure or to establish a meaningful identity, that message is arguably an effective recruitment tool. As one intervention provider explained “There are a lot of young, angry, pissed off people out there and it doesn’t take much to offer them something better. As a result, radicalisation is escalating even though low level narratives are being used”⁴⁰.

Another tier of individuals can be found in those that are already radicalised but need the additional pull by someone they know or recognise. For instance, since the emigration of Siddartha Dhar (Abu Rumaysah) to IS, he has authored *A Brief Guide to Islamic State*, continues to be active on social media sites relaying his experiences, and urges others to make the journey⁴¹. Another example of facilitation by familiar faces can be found in Omar Bakri Mohammed (OBM), the founder of Al Muhajiroun. In March 2016 an IS fighter defected and delivered a memory drive containing the Sinjar record of thousands of identities of Daesh (IS) fighters. OBM was found to be a prolific sponsor of those travelling to IS⁴².

As mentioned, conversion to Islam is one of the ways that individuals are leaving gang life behind. Although gang culture and jihadist culture do differ, there is some crossover that makes conversion for some a relatively simple process. Conversion offers quick salvation and the ability to reformulate one’s identity in a positive way⁴³. That doesn’t mean that they have necessarily left all of their old ways behind but rather they modify their activities in a way that reinforces their new Muslim identity⁴⁴. Thus, the same insular community sub-culture can remain while simultaneously taking on a new Muslim identity. As one individual characterized them, “Islam changes your character but doesn’t change

³⁹ D. Cameron, “Extremism Speech,” 25 July 2015, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/extremism-pm-speech> (last retrieved 5 May 2016).

⁴⁰ Interview with intervention provider #3, May 2016.

⁴¹ Interview with intervention provider #1, April 2016.

⁴² C. Ellis and R. Pantucci, “Friends Sponsors and Bureaucracy: An Initial Look at the Daesh Database,” Royal United Services Institute, May 2016, <https://rusi.org/commentary/friends-sponsors-and-bureaucracy-initial-look-daesh-database> (last retrieved 8 May 2016).

⁴³ Interview with intervention provider #2, April 2016.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

your personality”⁴⁵. IS exploits that identity by being tough, insular, and Muslim, something the gangster jihadist crowd can easily relate to.

The last typology of those receptive to the IS message are those that are ideologically aligned. These individuals tend to be the fewest in number but also have the highest religious understanding. That should not be taken to mean that religion is the cause. In fact, some that have adopted some of the most observant and conservative religious practices attribute their resilience to the IS message because of their religion⁴⁶. It simply means that the allure of adventure, identity, and belonging are not motivating factors. Rather, they believe in the cause.

Conclusion

Radicalisation in Britain is the product of a long history of events that have challenged Muslim identity, worldview, and agency. For those that have radicalised, the journey has had a complex array of influences. Although well intended, government programmes have not always provided the results that were hoped for. The IS message and others will continue to find resonance with those that seek identity, belonging, and meaning. The four typologies offer one way of understanding the individuals that IS has been able to find traction with.

⁴⁵ Interview with intervention provider #3, May 2016.

⁴⁶ D. Weeks, *The Victimisation Experience and the Radicalisation Process* (forthcoming 2016).

5. Beyond Gornje Maoče and Ošve: Radicalization in the Western Balkans

Florian Qehaja

This chapter looks into possible links between certain locations of Islamic conservatives and jihadists in the Western Balkans¹. So-called “jihadi hotbeds” in Europe, and the concept of a hotbed itself, remains one of the most underexplored phenomena in the context of rising violent extremism. According to various media reports and analysis, the most prominent jihadists are “produced” in some neighbourhoods of Western Europe, inhabited by immigrants coming from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. While the existence of these neighbourhoods in Western Europe is nominally observable due to a cultural lifestyle differing from that of other neighbourhoods, this is not the case in the Western Balkans. Whereas, in the Western Balkan region there is no obvious difference from one neighbourhood to the next, there may, however, be an observable difference between urban and rural areas. This is because of the cultural mix of national and religious values.

The situation slightly changed with the fall of communism as societies became open towards externally driven agendas. These agendas brought new ways of practicing Islam – such as Salaf-

¹ The Western Balkans is a geographic and political term originally indicating all former Yugoslav countries, excluding Slovenia while including Albania. The focus of this study is on the countries implying majority as well as significant percentages of Muslims based in countries such as Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia (western part) and Serbia (Sandzak region).

ism² – which posed a challenge not only to secular societies but also to the traditional practisers of Islam in the region. This led to the recruitment of alienated individuals, aligned to an ideology of being distinctively different from the rest of society, often using violent means to spread this ideology. Some of these individuals embraced the core of jihadism, with most of them participating in armed conflict in Syria and Iraq. However, on the whole, the spread of religious extremism remained very marginal and could not penetrate the vast majority of neighbourhoods to the same extent as allegedly conservative Islamic hotbeds in Western Europe or the United States.

In this chapter, I argue that there are neither jihadi hotbeds nor typical conservative Islamic hotbeds in the Western Balkans. Some of the reporting is often fuelled by the media and especially by political circles in the region, aiming to portray a sensationalist picture that does not exist in reality, usually at the expense of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BH) and/or Kosovo, in light of ongoing political and ethnic tensions between the states. There are, indeed, supporters of this ideology spread across the countries, with the predominant concentration in northeastern Bosnia and Herzegovina, southeastern Kosovo, northwestern Macedonia, and southwestern Serbia. This concentration is found in mixed locations, implying conservatives, traditional practisers and seculars. The concentration of Islamic conservatives is much higher in, for example, some regions than others. As a result, in the context of the Western Balkans, it is more accurate to refer to these regions as simply having more individuals that would identify with a Salafi ideology rather than referring to them as a hotbed or ghetto, due to the heterogeneous nature of these neighbourhoods. I argue that there are three types of locations in the Western Balkans: heavily concentrated locations, moderately concentrated locations and less concentrated locations.

The areas listed in this chapter belong to a period of the last 10 to 15 years, meaning that the potential for their increased con-

²This chapter refers to Salafism as an umbrella ideology of rising conservative Islam. It is often interchangeably applied to Wahhabi or other ideologies.

centration may have been either reduced or diminished as a result of police raids and increased awareness in recent years. The data was gathered from the author's first-hand research in the Albanian-speaking countries such as: Albania, Kosovo and the western part of Macedonia as well as desk research for Bosnia and Herzegovina and southern Serbia³. There are generally limited sources on the topic while the credibility of some is questionable. The chapter is intended to help the prospective endeavours of researchers in further deconstructing extremism in the region.

Islamic conservatives in the Western Balkans: where and how?

The Western Balkans (WB) are strategically located in the southeastern part of the European continent, usually considered as being on the periphery of Europe itself. They are simultaneously considered to be under Russian as well as Turkish influence⁴. Practicing Islam in the WB is indigenous. It was brought to the region during the rule of the Ottoman Empire, which was present in these territories for almost five centuries. Islam co-existed for centuries with other cultures and religions of the region. The indigenous Islamic practisers did not pose any security or societal challenge to other religions or secularism. In fact, the development of secular societies in the region started especially during communism, when religion was either belittled (former Yugoslavia) or banned completely (Albania). From a cultural perspective, there was little difference in lifestyle between secularists and traditional Islamic practisers: rather, the way both communities co-existed led to the creation of a hybrid society.

³ Most of this data was gathered in 2014 and 2015, during an extensive research conducted for the purpose of a Report Inquiring into Causes and Consequences of Kosovo Citizens' Involvement as Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq. The report is largely referenced throughout the chapter.

⁴ V. Surroi, *Ambasadori i Melkizdedekt* [Melkizedect Ambassador], Prishtina, Koha Print, 2015, pp. 57-58.

Traditionally, the majority of Muslims in the region belonged to the Sunni branch of Islam, based (largely) on the Hanafi school of thought⁵. This is widely known as a moderate interpretation of Islam. Despite being nominally Sunni, Muslims in the WB never felt any hostility towards other branches of Islam⁶, namely the Shia and Alawite communities, viewed most negatively by the Muslim communities in the MENA region. The situation started to shift with the collapse of the Eastern communist block and, particularly, the eruption of inter-ethnic conflicts among the WB countries. This meant that the countries became open to different externally driven agendas that were attempting to embed non-traditional Islamic practices among the community. These externally driven agendas had similar goals across the region, although their causes were different from one country to another. These differences can be delineated along two lines: the Albanian-speaking countries – namely Albania, Kosovo and Macedonia (western Macedonia) – and southern Slavic Muslims (namely Bosniaks living in BH and the region of Sandzjak in Serbia)⁷. In other words, there is an organic division between promoters of the conservative agenda within Albanian-speaking communities on the one hand, and Bosniak-speaking communities, on the other. This division can be described as the most distinctive cultural difference between the communities, that of language. There is, hence, no *lingua franca* that binds the Muslim communities of the Balkans together⁸.

The first elements of conservative Islamic promoters in the region emerged during the Bosnian conflict in 1992 with the jihadists of the El-Mujahid military unit fighting alongside the Bosniak

⁵ Sh. Kursani, *Report Inquiring into Causes and Consequences of Kosovo Citizens' Involvement as Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq*, Prishtina, Kosovar Centre for Security Studies (KCSS), 2015, pp.14.

⁶ V. Azinovic and M. Jusic, *The Lure of Syrian War: Bosnian Contingent*, Sarajevo, Atlantic Initiative, 2015, p. 19.

⁷ Albanians and Bosniaks are the two main communities, although it should also be mentioned that there are minorities of Turks and Roma practicing Islam as well.

⁸ K. Öktem, "Global Diyanet and Multiple Networks: Turkey's New Presence in the Balkans," *Journal of Muslims in Europe*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2012, pp. 27-58. However, one cannot exclude individual relationships between, for example, certain Wahhabi supporters in Sarajevo and Prishtina.

Armed Forces⁹. A number of these individuals stayed after the war in BH and therefore served as a bridge with others who would push a conservative Islamic agenda in post-conflict BH. Simultaneously, although in a different security and political environment, elements of conservative Islamic cells, namely Salafi groups, gradually emerged in the immediate post-authoritarian period in Albania and Macedonia¹⁰. This was in a covert role as missionaries and charities aimed at reducing poverty. In post-conflict Kosovo (1999 and onwards), there were some non-governmental organisations, namely from Saudi Arabia, using the widespread poverty to disseminate a Salafi agenda within practisers of Islam¹¹. However, unlike in Bosnia, there was no involvement of mujaheddin elements in the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) because the cause of Kosovo liberation rallied around secular nationalism.

In a post-conflict and post-authoritarian environment, the externally driven agenda attempted to fragment the practisers and pose a challenge to the Islamic community across the region. This had some consequences in creating three types of practisers: *liberal practisers*, implying the traditional Islamic community (the majority of congregations), *non-violent conservative practisers* of Islam, implying the community which recently developed with the agenda of promoting conservative Islam (Salafi), and *violent conservative practisers*, which represents the hard core of individual conservatives but with the potential to use force, often surrounded by *tekfiri* ideology¹².

While non-violent and violent elements of Islamic conservatives are categorised into two separate groups, only a thin line divides them, that being their perspective on whether or not the use of violence is acceptable. Hence the reference to their locations will imply no difference as to the ideology among them. The conservative practisers, or what has been defined as the “Salafi-

⁹ V. Azinović and M. Jusić (2015), p. 8.

¹⁰ ICG, *Bin Laden and the Balkans: The Politics of Anti-Terrorism*, Brussels, International Crisis Group, 2001.

¹¹ Sh. Kursani (2015), p. 7.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 51-58

Wahhabi Intermezzo”¹³, have attempted to “implant their seeds” across the region yet their supporters have remained marginalised to specific areas or as individuals, aligned through youth organisations and sometimes families. As a result, the WB does not share the experience of a major community of Islamic conservatives nor their concentration in any specific neighbourhood. Conservative individuals and families are common in a heterogeneous society, are not necessarily large groups or hotbeds but are still observable in such a heterogeneous society. There are few cases connecting entire families to conservative Islam; the predominant cases are individuals who, for example, ended up by adhering to conservative Islam although coming from traditional secular families¹⁴.

Since the WB do not have locations comparable to some neighbourhoods of Western Europe in being culturally and religiously different from the rest of society, this chapter instead discusses the existence of the most concentrated locations of individual Islamic conservatives and jihadists. Location implies a set of neighbourhoods or particular areas having more supporters of the Islamic community than the rest of the regions. The empirical evidence helps to categorise three levels of Islamic conservative locations in the WB: a.) heavily concentrated locations such as: Gornje Maoče and Ošve, in BiH¹⁵; b.) moderately concentrated locations such as: Gazibaba in Macedonia and c.) less concentrated locations such as the districts of: Kaçanik (Kosovo), Pogradec (Albania) and Sijenica (Serbia). The categorization is mainly viewed from the perspective of recruitment of foreign fighters and their potential to harm national security.

¹³ K. Öktem (2012).

¹⁴ D. Phillips and F. Qehaja, “Countering Islamic Radicalisation and Violent Extremism in Kosovo”, *The Huffington Post*, 14 March 2015.

¹⁵ There are also indications referring to Zavidevići but the chapter could not find sufficient sources placing this location along Gornje Maoče and Ošve.

Most concentrated locations

In the WB region, BH appears to have the two most concentrated locations of Islamic conservatives: Gornje Maoče and Ošve. These are villages located in the northeastern part of Bosnia and Herzegovina, situated within the Federation of BH, along the administrative boundary with the Republika Srpska of BH. These two villages underwent major displacement of their populations during the conflict, with many of them never returning to their hometowns. This has helped the concentration of the Salafi community, as they have come from all over BH, thereby creating a hybrid community of indigenous inhabitants and other people who came to live there. They have the same goal: living a lifestyle in line with the ideology of the Salafi community and similar conservative ideas.

Gornje Maoče has been reported to be isolated compared to other nearby villages and it is not friendly towards strangers. At the entrance, the so-called Islamic State emblem greets people and there is also a symbol painted on a sign in the village¹⁶. Its members are reported to be attempting to enforce Sharia law¹⁷ and continuously contesting the authority of the BH Islamic community and their members as elected representatives¹⁸. The Salafi supporters have attempted to exert influence on the curriculums of primary and secondary schools as well as banning radio broadcasts and music. In other words, there is evidence that there have been actions publically promoting rules that derive from Sharia law. Part of the population that refused to be subjected to the ideology was constantly under pressure to comply with the lifestyle of other community members.

Ošve, another village, has patterns similar to Gornje Maoče, despite being a smaller location. Unlike Gornje Maoče, Ošve is known more for strategic importance because it is considered to

¹⁶ J. Stanton, "Inside the Bosnian mountain village where locals fly the black flag of ISIS above their homes as jihadists' influence spreads", *Daily Mail*, 4 February 2015.

¹⁷ I. Merdjanova, *Rediscovering the Umma: Muslims in the Balkans between Nationalism and Transnationalism*, Oxford, 2013, Oxford Scholarship Online.

¹⁸ N. Panos, *The Political Impact of the Rising Salafi-Wahhabi Influence in Bosnia-Herzegovina*, Virginia, Blacksbourg University, 2015, p.9

have a very good geographic position that allegedly (though not entirely confirmed) may have served as a training centre for jihadists¹⁹ before their potential departure to Middle Eastern conflicts. Ošve is also reported to be challenging the existing rule of law and order in BH. It has attempted to practice other educational methods, against the legislation of BH, hence posing a challenge to traditional practisers of Islam and seculars.

The two villages “provided” a number of foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq. From Ošve alone, for example, up to 12 jihadists were reported to have joined the conflicts in Syria and Iraq while an even larger number may have joined from Gornje Maoče as well. Some of the principal jihadists of the so-called Bosniak contingent in Syria and Iraq come from the two villages, often inviting people to join IS through social media. Nevertheless, the two villages are not considered the only recruiting zones in the territory of BH because the jihadists have been reported as joining conflicts from the key BH cantons, namely Zenica-Doboj, Tuzla, Sarajevo and Una-Sana²⁰. This shows that conservative locations, such as Gornje Maoče and Ošve, are not the only “suppliers” of jihadists and that the causes of violent extremism and terrorism are not always grounded around concentrated locations of Islamic conservatives. If we take the existing figures of BH, not more than 30% of foreign fighters appear to originate from the two locations.

The recruitment of jihadists is often done through the Internet where the individuals come from mainstream society and often have no links to religious conservatives, having fallen into the trap of the recruiters and promoters of IS as well as other terrorist organisations²¹. The machinery of recruitment therefore should not be depicted only through the perspective of conservative locations (hotbeds) where these people live but rather from frequent propaganda in the media, which mostly the younger generation are subjected to. In the case of BH, while most of the foreign fighters recruited

¹⁹ Dz. Galijasevic (cited), “250KM from Belgrade: Before Serbian village, now inhabited by jihadists”, *B92*, 28 May 2015.

²⁰ V. Azinovic and M. Jusic (2015), p. 7.

²¹ Sh. Kursani (2015).

through the Internet may be younger, the group of older individuals that have joined are those either coming from the most conservative locations or those having direct or indirect links to the former El-Mujahid group²².

In terms of internal security, there were two known terrorist attacks involving individuals with affiliations to the two villages. The first one is linked to a case that occurred on 28 October 2011, when Mevlid Jašarević fired at the U.S. embassy in Sarajevo for over 40 minutes, wounding a local policeman. He had a juvenile criminal record and spent some time in the Salafi community in the northern Bosnian village of Gornje Maoče²³. In the second case the suspect was involved in the attack on the military airport of Rajlovac in which the assailant killed two members of the BH armed forces. While it is not fully confirmed, the attacker, named Enes Omeragić, may have had links to the Islamic conservative groups operating in their locations and across the country.

Moderately concentrated locations

The moderately concentrated locations imply mixed neighbourhoods inhabited by religious conservatives and traditional practicers. More precisely, they feature Salafi elements usually organized around influential mosques, leading to fragmentation within the village or city neighbourhood. The difference from the two locations in BH is that they do not have influence over all the inhabitants and there is no cohesion in embracing the conservative lifestyle. This research has identified a typical moderately concentrated location as Gazibaba, in Macedonia²⁴.

Gazibaba is one of the municipalities of Skopje, the capital of Macedonia. This location is believed to attract the Salafi community,

²² V. Azinovic and M. Jusic (2015), p. 8.

²³ International Crisis Group, "Bosnia's Dangerous Tango: Islam and Nationalism", *Eurobriefing*, no. 70, 26 February 2013, p. 14.

²⁴ It should be noted that there might be other cases similar to Gazibaba. This is a typical example, briefly analysed which does not exclude potential other locations.

including those openly supporting tekfiri ideology, the most violent of Islamic conservatives. Although Gazibaba is considered to be inhabited by citizens historically practicing traditional Islam²⁵, it is specific for the strong role of its mosque, publicly known for the promotion of hate speech and calls for widespread violence as part of the conservative ideology. The “Tutunzus” mosque has been led and organized by a well-known extremist imam who has managed to gather a significant number of followers not only within the municipality of Gazibaba²⁶.

Unlike the two villages in BH, in Gazibaba there is no welcome sign related to any terrorist organization. There are also no reports indicating attempts to affect the curriculum or overall secular order in the municipality, with the exception of those conservative community members who privately behave and act in line with the preaching of conservative imams. Nevertheless, the influence of the controversial imams has led to the creation of a small but robust congregation of conservative believers. The calls of the imams, especially in Gazibaba, inviting people to boycott the elections because “this is against Islamic culture” and a Western-based democratic tool, delineates one of the problems²⁷.

While the concentration of this community appears to be more visible in Gazibaba, its leaders are reported to have influence among some other individuals and groups operating in other neighbourhoods of Skopje and some Kumanova municipalities, residing with other members of society, be they traditional practisers, seculars or those in Macedonia’s majority orthodox community²⁸. Reports have identified an organic relationship between conservative elements in Macedonia and Kosovo, due to very close, longstanding familial and friendship relationships. They have used the lack of security cooperation between

²⁵ Albanians in Macedonia practiced religion more during the former Yugoslavia period than their fellows in Kosovo. See A. Shtuni, “Breaking down the ethnic Albanian foreign fighters phenomenon”, Penn State University Press, vol. 98, no. 4, 2015, pp. 460-477.

²⁶ Rexhep Memishi and Shukri Aliu have been reported to be the key protagonists. For more see Sh. (2015).

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 51

²⁸ There are in the city of Kumanovo but also in some of its biggest municipalities such as Likova.

Kosovo and Macedonia to operate freely and exchange materials²⁹. Some of the Albanian Internet content supporting the terrorist attacks throughout Europe and inviting people to join IS, is supposedly coming from some members of these communities in Macedonia³⁰.

The representatives of the Islamic community of Macedonia have indirectly confirmed the presence of Salafi elements³¹, whilst unofficially it has been alleged that the Salafis control more mosques in Skopje than is publicly known³². The rise of overall extremism has political connotations³³ and this is one of many factors contributing to the continuously tense inter-ethnic environment in Skopje and other municipalities of Macedonia.

Gazibaba, is considered to have provided dozens of jihadists in the wars in Syria and Iraq. According to The Soufan Group, there are 146 jihadists from Macedonia who went to Syria and Iraq³⁴. There is no exact data indicating the number of people that came from Gazibaba; most are reported to have come from Skopje and Kumanovo. In academic and policy circles, there is a frequent confusion of the citizenship and profile of jihadists from Macedonia and Kosovo, perhaps due to family and friendship ties. According to one of the Kosovo returnees from the Syrian conflict, who is currently under investigation by state authorities, he ran across some Albanian-Macedonian leaders in the terrorist formation of Jabhat al-Nusra, in Syria³⁵.

In terms of internal security, there are two cases involving the leaders of this community, including the imams of “Tutunzus” mosque. The first had to do with an imam who allegedly threat-

²⁹ F. Qehaja, “The Global Efforts of Counter Narration to Violent Extremism”, *Gërmia Hill*, 3 February 2016.

³⁰ For example, one of the most active portals is called “Hilafeti Islam”, supposedly maintained by IS supporters in Skopje

³¹ A. Vrangalla, “BFI lufton radikalizmin Islam” [Islamic Community of Macedonia is countering Islamic radicalisation], *Alsat M*, 31 January 2016.

³² K. Testorides, “Radical Islam on Rise in the Balkans”, *The Boston Globe*, 2010.

³³ G. Krasniqi, “The ‘forbidden fruit’: Islam and politics of identity in Kosovo and Macedonia”, *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, vol. 11, no. 2, June 2011, pp. 191–207.

³⁴ The Soufan Group, *Foreign Fighters: An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq*, New York, The Soufan Group, December 2015, p. 8

³⁵ A. Berisha, “Info Magazine”, *KLAN Kosova*, 23 March 2016.

ened the Macedonian Islamic community with an automatic rifle. This case forced him to leave the country, fleeing to Kosovo³⁶. The second case involved of the one of the strongest tekfiri supporters, who had an armed confrontation with the Macedonian police force and was killed during the “Storm” operation in Brodec in 2005. The suspected leaders of the conservative Islamic community supporting IS and recruiting jihadists were arrested in a police raid that took place in mid-2015³⁷.

Less concentrated locations

The less concentrated locations imply a county or region having conservative Islamic individuals living among traditional practisers or seculars. These are the regions with a higher number of individuals from the Salafi community rather than groups, and so, compared to the other regions, they have a lower proportion of supporters. The activities of these individuals are usually performed through a number of illegal associations or private gatherings. Here we list the three best -known regions in Kosovo, Albania and Serbia.

Kaçanik (Kosovo)

Kaçanik is one of the poorest municipalities of Kosovo, situated in the southeastern region, bordering with Macedonia. It has an administrative and societal relationship with another smaller municipality, Hani i Elezit, both part of the county of Ferizaj. Kačanik city and some of its villages are known for having individuals who support the Salafi ideology. Unlike Gazibaba in Macedonia, practicing this ideology has not been that common in the mosques, but rather in other locations, often private houses. These private premises were even called “mosques”, thereby challenging the authority of the Islamic community of Kosovo. In fact, as the case with BH and Macedonia, the individuals belonging to the Salafi ideology are also found in other neighbourhoods of Kosovo such as: Gjilan, Fer-

³⁶ International Crisis Group, *Macedonia Wobbling towards Europe*, Brussels, 2011

³⁷ S. Marusic, “Macedonia arrests 9 ISIS suspects”, BIRN, 7 August 2015.

izaj, Mitrovica and Prishtina itself. It is simply that in Kaçanik the individuals are more organized and rather vocal.

According to official data, there are 23 foreign fighters from the Kaçanik municipality alone that have joined terrorist organizations in Syria and Iraq. The official number of Kosovars who have gone to Syria since the beginning of the war is 232³⁸, meaning that around 10% are from just this small municipality. In fact, Kaçanik is home to the leader of Albanian jihadists, Lavdrim Muhaxheri, who has appeared several times on social networks killing young civilians. Additionally, some individuals from Kaçanik were revealed to be the key organisers of the violent protests in Prishtina³⁹ including an assault on an event promoting a magazine published by the LGBT community⁴⁰. There were a number of non-governmental organisations in Kaçanik openly supporting extremist ideologies: most of those were shut down in recent years.

Pogradec (Albania)

In Albania, the region of Pogradec in the southeast is reported to have some individual Salafi supporters. The three villages described as having radicals are: Leshnicë, Zargoçan and Rrëmenj, all in the county of Pogradec⁴¹. The group has attempted to challenge the predominantly secular environment in this part of Albania. In particular, the strong influence of the imam of Leshnicë, has drawn a number of individual supporters. Conservative Islamic elements have also been identified in other parts of the country, namely in the central part of Albania such as: Cerrik, Durrës and in a suburb of Tirana as well.

From this region there was a significant number of jihadists who ended up in Syria and Iraq. According to media reports, there have supposedly been 24 fighters (including women and children) origi-

³⁸ Sh. Kursani (2015), p. 7.

³⁹ Gj. Erebara, "Kosovo's New Cathedral Stirrs Muslim Resentment", *BIRN*, 4 October 2010.

⁴⁰ D. Demolli, "Attack on Kosovo 2.0 Widely Condemned", *BIRN*, 17 December 2012.

⁴¹ A. Bogdani, "Fshatrat e xhihadit: Si u rekrutuan të rinjtë për të luftuar në Siri" [Jihadi villages: how did the young people got recruited for fighting in Syria], *BIRN*, 6 April 2016.

nating from the broader region of Pogradec⁴². Most of them are reported to have direct links with the controversial imam. If compared with the official number of total Albanian foreign fighters – which is estimated as 90⁴³, it appears that representatives from this region alone account for around 30% of the Albanian jihadi contingent in Syria and Iraq. These figures show that these three villages served as strong recruiting zones and that the causes of recruitment were based on an ideology promoted by Salafi leaders in this zone.

Sijenica (Serbia)

Sijenica is a town in the southwestern part of Serbia, in the region of Sandzak, which is predominantly populated by a Bosniak minority. There are some individual supporters of Salafi ideologies in the city and in some of the villages. Here, like Kačanik in Kosovo and Pogradec in Albania, there are some individuals who behave in accordance with Salafi ideology, but in a tiny minority compared to traditional practisers and seculars. However, these individuals are challenging society and usually creating insecurity among indigenous citizens⁴⁴. They have strong ties to some individuals in BH as well as Kosovo.

There is no official data indicating the number of foreign fighters from Serbia overall. According to The Soufan Group, there are unofficial estimates of 50 to 60 individuals from Serbia⁴⁵. The numbers may differ since the sources often mix up the origins of individuals, sometimes putting into the same group the so-called “Bosniak contingent”, in the same way as all ethnic Albanians are put into either the “Albanian contingent” or the “Kosovo contingent”. It is also believed that at least one of the foreign fighters belongs to the ethnic Albanian community from the Presevo Valley⁴⁶.

Some of the Salafi supporters in Sandzak appear to be challenging society and security in this region. In 2007 there was a police

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ The Soufan Group (2015), p. 7.

⁴⁴ A. Corović, “Sandzak se boji vahabija” [Sandzak is afraid of Wahhabis], *Sandžakpress*, 30 April 2015.

⁴⁵ The Soufan Group (2015), p. 9.

⁴⁶ A. Shtuni (2015).

raid on a suspected training camp in the village of Zabren, near Sijenica, in which the alleged leader of the Salafis was shot and killed while two other people were arrested⁴⁷.

Conclusion

The rise of conservative and extremist Islam in the Western Balkans does pose a challenge to secular order. Furthermore, it tries to fragment the Islamic community itself, by often considering traditional practisers to be unbelievers (kufar) or illiterate. However, the externally driven Salafi agenda, despite some attempts, has not created any stronghold or hotbed that could gather together all individuals into embracing this ideology. These individuals operate in a heterogeneous environment, made up of traditional practisers and seculars. Some of them are organized into groups and small communities, often directed by controversial imams.

The family and ethnic ties between individuals do not recognise state borders. This is particularly the case between certain ethnic Albanians and groups in Kosovo and Macedonia, having operated freely with suspicious violent and political agendas. The vacuum in security cooperation between Kosovo and Macedonia has been used for some time by the supporters of Salafi and Tefkiri movements in order to spread their ideologies and recruit people to join foreign conflicts in Syria and Iraq. Family and ethnic links are also observed between certain individuals in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Sandzak in Serbia.

The research showed the locations with the most concentrated numbers of individuals supporting Salafi ideology, including the most violent extremists, such as tekfiri supporters. The evidence showed that Gornje Maoče and Ošve are the two most prominent villages having the highest concentration of individuals belonging to conservative Islamic ideologies. Similar locations, though with lower density, are observed in Macedonia (Gazibaba), Kosovo (Ka-

⁴⁷ K. Morrison and E. Roberts, *The Sandžak: A short history*, London, 2013, Oxford University Press, p.195.

čanik), Pogradec (Albania) and Sijenica (Serbia). The evidence provided in this and other credible contributions portrays a rather more realistic picture compared to the tendencies of some policy circles. In particular, the destructive role is observed to derive from policy-makers in Serbia and some other countries, aiming to deliberately exaggerate potential, usually at the expense of Muslim majority countries, such as Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina. These attempts do not only create confusion among international public sphere but also damage political and regional stability.

With respect to “producing” jihadists, the regions inhabited by Islamic conservatives have managed to “supply” foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq. But the ratio is between 10 to 30% of individuals who are believed to have joined the conflicts in the Middle East in recent years. This shows that the potential recruitment of jihadists from these communities is only one part of the story. Other individuals have reportedly been recruited through Internet, with a significant portion coming from traditional secular families.

Jihadist Hotbeds –
MENA and the Caucasus

6. The Libyan Radicalization Hotbeds: Derna and Sirte as Case Studies

Arturo Varvelli

Libya's contemporary history has been dominated by the interplay between the perpetual dynamics of religion, tribalism, oil, nationalism and ideology, further aggravated by 42 years of rule by an oppressive, pervasive and sometime irrational regime¹. With Libya hidden behind its regime's curtain, it has been difficult from outside to understand the religious changes often happening under its surface.

Apparently, its social fabric shows little changes: Libya – despite a fragile national identity – remains a very homogenous country from a religious point of view – with a huge majority of Sunni Muslims, following the Maliki *madhhab*. Islamic identity arose as a preponderant element after the fall of the Qaddafi regime. With everyone recognizing themselves as Muslim and little conflict in the doctrinal sphere, Islam emerged as a legitimizing element in society and also in politics. At the same time, as representatives of this element of legitimacy, competition arose between new political parties, renewed religious figures (such as the Grand Mufti) and radical groups of various origins. Among these, jihadist groups, trying to impose the creation of a caliphate in Libya even by using force, have found fertile ground due to the semi-anarchic situation.

Libya's current crisis has deep causes and distant origins, ranging from a weak national identity to legacies from the civil war of 2011, which did not end with the killing of Colonel Qaddafi². The

¹ Y.M. Sawani, "Post-Qadhafi Libya: Interactive dynamics and the political future", *Contemporary Arab Affairs*, vol. 5, no. 1. 2012.

² Regarding the fragile Libyan national identity, see A. Baldinetti, *The Origins of the*

fall of Qaddafi opened up new spaces for Libya's Islamist groups, even those at the more extreme end of the spectrum. Libya is experiencing a very worrisome phenomenon: it has rather quickly become a safe haven for local, foreign and international jihadist groups. The political process towards creation of a united government in Libya is still moving slowly, despite the new pace set by the UN negotiator Martin Kobler and the arrival in March 2016 of the Prime Minister-designate of the General National Accord (GNA), Fayez Serraj, in Tripoli. The Tobruk-based parliament, the only one internationally recognized, has yet to approve a list of ministers presented by Sarraj.

The consequence of this stalemate is that Libya is still a sort of failing state – and failed states are the perfect place for the rise of jihadist movements and radicalization processes. The group that is most clearly opposed to any agreement between political forces in Libya is the Islamic State (IS). IS is only the most recent terrorist group to have found a place in Libya and the Maghreb, but today appears to be the most dangerous. The number of IS fighters is often exaggerated by the media as well as by the Libyans fighting them. Reliable and quite up-to-date sources estimate the overall presence of militants in Libya as around 5,000 to 6,000. This chapter will try to analyse the reason for its rise in Libya, taking into consideration two particular hotbeds: Derna and Sirte.

Radicalization's genesis in Libya

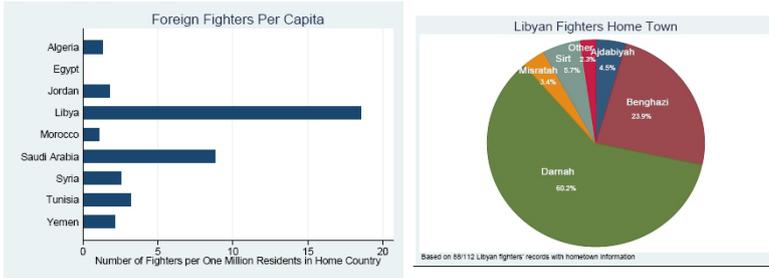
Thanks to the religious moderation of most Libyans, up to now the Islamic mainstream has been relatively “temperate” from a doctrinal point of view. The definition of Libyans as religiously moderate may appear debatable, considering the high numbers of Libyan jihadists that fought outside Libya. Under Qaddafi's regime, jihadism

represented one of the few practical responses available to personal religious or political dissatisfaction with the existence of a strongly illiberal system that prohibited activities by Islamist groups. In fact, global jihad outside Libya became a sort of substitute for Islamic activities within the country. This explains the high numbers of Libyan citizens (especially from Derna and eastern Libya) amongst al-Qaeda (AQ) groups or Salafi jihadist movements in Iraq and Afghanistan, where Libyan mujaheddin form one of the most numerous national groups of foreign fighters.

It is interesting to note that this “jihadist attitude” is linked more to a traditional way of expressing discontent and dissatisfaction with the domestic situation (rooted in the Qaddafi period) than to real theological extremism³. As has been shown, it seems to be a sort of “functional jihadism” more than a doctrinal one. However, there are indications that Libyan jihadists active in Afghanistan and Iraq – who have been exposed to the message and proselytism of Eastern movements such as the Deobands and the Tabligh al-Jamaat – represent a channel of diffusion for the ideas of these radical movements, strictly based on their dogmatic approach to Islamic orthopraxis. At the same time, their rigid approach to ritual personal purity and absolute adherence to a very strict interpretation of sharia principles may further radicalise their activism and their militancy. According to documents seized by US forces in Iraq, Libyans formed the second-largest group among seven hundred foreign fighters who joined the al-Qaeda offshoot Islamic State in Iraq (ISI) between August 2006 and August 2007. In relation to national population, the Libyans were first. More than half Libyan foreign fighters originated from the city of Derna (see Figure 1).

³ S. M. Torelli and A. Varvelli, “New Trends in North African Jihadism, Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia and Libya”, in A. Plebani (ed.), *New (and Old) Patterns of Jihadism: Al-Qaida, the Islamic State and Beyond*, Milan, Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale, 2014, pp. 51–59.

FIGURE 1. LIBYAN MUJAHEDDIN IN IRAQ, AS OF 2005



Source: J. Felner and B. Fishman, *Al-Qa'ida's Foreign Fighters in Iraq: A First Look at the Sinjar Records*, Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, New York, 9 and 12; accessed at <http://library.uoregon.edu/ec/e-asia/reada/felner.pdf> on 14 May 2015.

Consequently, Libyan jihadists form the largest group per capita of foreign fighters supporting AQ and the other militias in Iraq and, most recently, Syria. The important role of returnees in expanding the jihadist network across the Middle East (and in Western countries, too) is well known and has been widely studied. Jihadists returning from the front line to their towns and tribes are generally afforded greater status as mujaheddin. They are, therefore, in a position to radicalise their original environment, with extremist proselytism being the favoured methods; to create new jihadist groups and cells; to carry out the training of new members and upgrade local militants' combat capability; and to enlarge extremist networks, with the diffusion of Salafi jihadist ideology, thus delegitimising traditional local authorities.

According to Wolfram Lacher⁴, in the last 20 years “three successive generations of Libyan jihadists have been shaped by very different experiences” and consequently responded differently to the possibilities opened up by Qaddafi's demise. The first generation began its formative experiences” with the armed struggle in Afghanistan dur-

⁴ W. Lacher, “Libya: A Jihadist Growth Market”, G. Steinberg, A. Weber (eds.), *Jihadism in Africa. Local Causes, Regional Expansion, International Alliances*, SWP Research Paper 2015/RP 05, June 2015.

ing the 1980s and 1990s. The second generation of Libyan jihadists was radicalized during imprisonment at Abu Salim prison or during the 2003 Iraqi war. Here they came into contact with what was then the most radical current in jihadism. During the 2011 revolution and after the fall of the regime the third generation mobilized. Their radicalization largely occurred during the struggle against Qaddafi when they came in contact with the other two generations and with other revolutionaries. After the fall of Qaddafi, jihadists benefitted from relationships created during the revolution: for example many of them found places in parastatal units inside the new Libyan administration.

A good example of this merger is Ansar al-Sharia, the group responsible for the murder of American ambassador Christopher Stevens in 2012. From its “birth” in 2011, Ansar al-Sharia has been not just a terrorist group: it also seems to be striving to gain the population’s support through *da’wa*, or charitable works, and control of the territory as a replacement for the state, welfare state and Libyan institutions, with the aim of becoming something very similar to Hamas in the occupied Palestinian territories or Hezbollah. Since the 11 September 2012 attack, for example, Ansar al-Sharia has shown some openness and willingness to work within the boundaries of the state, trying to distance itself from accusations of being a member of al-Qaeda’s network or even being merely a cover name for al-Qaeda. Although thousands of people took to the streets in Benghazi after the September 11 attack to demand the removal of the radical militias and show solidarity with the U.S., it is also true that Islamist militants in Libya are perceived as legitimate actors thanks to the role they played in the revolution. These militias also have an important role in territorial control and the provision of security in the power vacuum created by the collapse of the regime. During the post-Qaddafi period the Libyan governments utilized many of them as part of security forces, even if they were acting and operating quite independently⁵.

Between 2012 and 2014 Ansar al-Sharia groups expanded their activities in Derna, Benghazi, Ajdabiya and Sirte. Although the re-

⁵ S. M. Torelli and A. Varvelli (2014).

relationship between IS branches in Libya and Ansar al-Sharia is very controversial, the dividing line between them was progressively seen as fluid. Both Ansar al-Sharia and its various allied militias, especially those with younger members, appeared to admire the rise of IS in Iraq and Syria, creating ideal conditions for its diffusion in Libya. Between 2014 and 2015 parts of Ansar al-Sharia joined forces with returnee jihadists to work under the flag of the Islamic State, especially in Sirte and Benghazi. Elsewhere it continued to exist as an autonomous group.

Currently, two very different types of large IS-affiliated groups exist in Libya: the first one in Derna, the second in Sirte.

The case of Derna

In Cyrenaica and Derna, a city of 80,000 on the Mediterranean coast, radicalization has become well established over the past decade. However, the Syrian/Iraq campaign has significantly boosted it, creating a wave of veteran fighters that is having a disastrous effect on the security situation in Libya. In October 2014 a local jihadist group, the Islamic Youth Shura Council (Shabaab al-Islam), claimed Derna in the name of IS, thus showing IS' ability to break with traditional notions of territorial contiguity by creating an enclave outside of its "borders" in Syria and Iraq. The Islamic Youth Shura Council was composed of elements of Ansar al-Sharia's Derna branch and several other militias: the Rafallah Sahati Brigade; the February 17th Martyrs Brigade; The Shield of Libya; and Jaish al-Mujaheddin.

IS leadership accepted the proclamation a few weeks later and formally annexed the city. This seems to be the result of an expansion plan formulated in Syria and Iraq: Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's first militants arrived in Libya in the spring of 2014, when the men of the al-Battar Brigade, composed entirely of Libyan volunteers, began returning from the war in Syria and Iraq. In Libya the brigade was composed of three hundred jihadists who had previously been

deployed in Deir Ezzor (Syria) and Mosul (Iraq). The Derna branch of IS was composed of about eight hundred fighters and operated in half a dozen camps on the outskirts of the town, having larger facilities in the nearby mountains as well⁶.

In September 2014, aiming to help the al-Battar Brigade, al-Bagh-dadi sent to Derna one of his senior aides, Abu Nabil al-Anbari, an Iraqi veteran⁷. The city had an autonomous administrative organisation governed by a little-known Saudi (or Yemeni) preacher, Mohammed Abdullah, whose *nom de guerre* is Abu al-Baraa el-Azdi. Like many militiamen who founded the “Province of Cyrenaica” (Wilayat of Barqa), al-Anbari and el-Azdi fought in Syria. Derna has become the major new hub where fighters from North Africa, primarily Tunisia, are recruited. Out of the at least three thousand Tunisians who have joined IS, many have found protection in Libya⁸.

However, under the name of the Mujaheddin Shura Council (MSC), local Islamist militias, including the strong Abu Salim Martyrs’ Brigade, created a coalition in order to confront and defeat IS⁹. The Abu Salim Martyrs’ Brigade mainly consists of Libyan fighters and was formed during the revolution. Its stance and ideology are very clear: it wants to establish an Islamic government in a Libya ruled by Islamic law. The Brigade provides and secures fuel supplies, protects banks from robberies and was led by Abdel Hakim al-Hasidi and Salim Derby¹⁰. From a general point of view, the disputes between the groups are based, of course, upon ideological differences:

⁶ According to Noman Benotman, a former Libyan jihadist terrorism analyst at the Quillam Foundation, interviewed by CNN. P. Cruickshank, N. Robertson, T. Lister and J. Karadsheh, “IS comes to Libya”, CNN, 18 November 2014, accessed at <http://edition.cnn.com/2014/11/18/world/IS-libya/> (last retrieved 14 May 2015).

⁷ Al-Anbari and al-Baghdadi met in a prison camp in Iraq prior to fighting together in the ranks of IS. *Ibid.*

⁸ UN Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, “Preliminary findings by the United Nations Working Group on the use of mercenaries on its official visit to Tunisia – 1 to 8 July, 2015”, <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=16219&LangID=E>

⁹ N. Heras, “Libyan Islamist Militia Leader Salim Barrani Darbi Forms New Coalition in Derna”, The Jamestown Foundation, Washington DC, December 2014, http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=43227&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=381&cHash=bd474a8d1e337146eb3e49c0286218df#.VL_H9SuG-Lg.

¹⁰ Derby was killed in fighting with IS militants in June 2015.

“local jihad” versus “global jihad”. The Abu Salim Martyrs’ Brigade is a local movement that seeks to establish an Islamic government in Libya, while the Shura Council of Islamic Youth in Derna is part of a global movement, “exogenous” to the Libyan tradition¹¹. In June 2015, Nasir Atiyah al-Akar, a prominent al-Qaeda-linked jihadist in the Mujaheddin Shura Council was murdered. The assassination, claimed by the IS, set off a round of fighting. The MSC assaulted Islamic State positions around the city: a few of the Islamic State’s key leaders in Derna were reportedly killed or captured. The two groups repeatedly clashed in the following months in disputes over power and resources. In July 2015, IS was driven out of a large part of Derna and, finally, in April 2016, definitively expelled from the area¹².

The case of Sirte

The context of the Islamic State’s rise in Sirte is to a certain extent similar to the one that initially favoured IS’ expansion in Iraq. The Iraqi government under Nouri al-Maliki marginalised large segments of the Sunni Iraqi population, which caused many Sunni tribes to initially consider IS as the lesser of two evils. In this context, mounting sectarian strife has created favourable conditions for the noticeable return of sectarian violence in Iraq’s already divided society. Although Libya is not characterised by such a deep-rooted sectarianism, it is no coincidence that IS has expanded its activities in Sirte, the hometown of Muammar Qaddafi. On the beach of Sirte IS beheaded twenty-one Egyptian Christians, as shown by the video circulated on the web in mid-February 2015. Sirte is a cradle of the Qaddafa tribe. Since Qaddafi’s fall, the tribe has been ruled out and ostracized by the Tripoli-based government, as well

¹¹ The Maghrebi Note. “ISIS in Libya, the Origins of ISIS in Libya and Its Methodology”, February 2015, <https://themaghrebinote.files.wordpress.com/2015/03/isis-and-its-origins-in-libya-themaghrebinote.pdf> (last retrieved 15 May 2015).

¹² A. Sehmer, “Libya: Islamic State forced out of Derna”, Jamestown Foundation, Terrorism Monitor vol. 14, no. 9, 29 April 2016, http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=45373&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=7&cHash=b21308f2831251226bf6e563b15459d2#.VytE_oSLTct

as accused by the other militias of conspiracy with the former regime, and was eventually severely struck down for this reason. Part of the regime's rearguard as well as some tribal youth have thus joined the Islamic State cause mostly for political rather than ideological reasons¹³. A consensus emerged about the evidence that IS attracted members from Ansar al-Sharia and from the segments of the population that have been marginalised in the "new" Libya. However, as is evident in the case of Derna, some local armed factions and jihadists regard the Islamic State as an infiltrator and competitor.

In August 2015 tribal fighting in Sirte began after the Islamic State assassinated Khalid bin Rajab Ferjani, a prominent imam from the local al-Farjan tribe, a substantial force in many of Libya's central coastal cities. Although the al-Farjan tribe "has traditionally been strongly represented in the region's Sufi orders, the assassination came after local Salafists and al-Farjan tribesmen had refused to pledge allegiance to the Islamic State"¹⁴. Hassan al Karrami, one of the Libyan leaders of the Islamic State in Sirte, has family ties with and belongs to the clan of Ismail Karrami, head of the anti-drug agency during the Qaddafi regime and a Qaddafi militia leader during the revolution. This seems to confirm the fact that some supporters of the Colonel were recycled in the Islamic state¹⁵. He appears in some video-propaganda of the Islamic State in Libya: preaching to the crowd in Derna in December 2014¹⁶; patrolling the market of Sirte; speaking at a public meeting in which 40 officers of the Interior Ministry ask forgiveness for their lives¹⁷.

¹³ A. Varvelli "Libya's fight for survival – Defeating Jihadist networks", EFD Report, September 2015, <http://europeandemocracy.eu/2015/09/libyas-fight-for-survival-defeating-jihadist-networks/>

¹⁴ J. Brandon, "Libya Faces Deepening Chaos", *Terrorism Monitor*, vol. 13, no. 17, 21 August 2015.

¹⁵ The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, "ISIS in Libya: a Major Regional and International Threat", 20 January 2016, <http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en/article/20943>

¹⁶ See the video at https://archive.org/details/Moltaqa_1 (last retrieved 31 August 2015).

¹⁷ D. Raineri, "La catena di comando dello Stato islamico in Libia", *Il Foglio*, 19 March 2015, accessed at http://www.ilfoglio.it/esteri/2015/03/19/libia-la-catena-di-comando-dello-stato-islamico___1-v-126821-rubriche_c329.htm (last retrieved 31 August 2015).

It is likely that IS will try to replicate the Sirte model in similar communities across Libya, where there will be a perception of exclusion from the UN-led negotiations. However the “tacit alliance” between IS and tribal/local members appears to be very fragile. In April-May 2016 IS executed several Qaddafi tribe members in Sirte, demonstrating that tribes are not a monolith and support for IS reversible.

On 5 May 2016, in Sirte IS launched an offensive in eastern Tripolitania, named “Abu Ali Al-Anbari” after a senior IS leader, who was killed in an American raid at the end of March 2016 in eastern Syria. The attacks began with several suicide vehicles targeting checkpoints manned by militias from Misrata. Altogether, IS committed up to 2,000 jihadists to this offensive. According to Wolfgang Pusztaï, “the relatively low number of IS fighters in Libya makes it necessary to concentrate forces for offensive operations while accepting a calculated risk on other frontlines”¹⁸. However, in June the counter-offensive of Misrata forces seems to have dealt a serious blow to IS in Sirte. Currently the “caliphate” seems to navigate troubled waters, having lost much of the territory in the city.

IS in Libya: exogenous or endogenous radicalization?

The ambivalence in relations between local communities and jihadist/IS groups is a central question in analysing the Libyan radicalization process. For a large part of Libyans the rise of IS in Libya was totally devoid of popular support. For a long time the Tripoli government did not recognize the presence of IS in Sirte and Tripolitania, accusing former Qaddafi militiamen of fomenting jihadist groups favouring foreign infiltration.

¹⁸ W. Pusztaï, “Situation Assessment: Islamic State (IS) offensive in eastern Tripolitania”, 7 May 2016. See also L. Sizer, J. Pack, “ISIS Fuels Discord in Libya. Using Oil to Weaken the Unity Government”, *Foreign Affairs*, 17 May 2016; https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/libya/2016-05-17/isis-fuels-discord-libya?cid=nlc-twofa-20160519&sp_mid=51416474&sp_rid=YXJ0dXJvLnZhcncZlBzGxpQGhvdG1haWwuaXQS1&spMailingID=51416474&spUserID=NTA0ODY1MzkyODES1&spJobID=922408674&spReportId=OTTyNDA4Njc0S0

Some experts¹⁹ maintain that Libyan tribes have proven to be the strongest counterweights to radicalism or Salafism. In the first post-conflict phase tribal elders (known in the local dialect as *wujaha*) had engaged in outreach to the Salafists, attempting to encourage them to join local councils and incorporate their brigades into the formal security services. According to this interpretation the tribes have also been a source of limitation of radical Islam.

Although the tribes have significance in today's Libya, their role should not be over-estimated. The notion of tribe (*qabila*) in Libya should not be associated with a sort of ancient static social structure but instead explained as a sort of wide range of forms of social organizations. Mobilization of the revolutionary militias largely occurred on the basis of towns and cities rather than along tribal/familial lines, even though the distinction between local and tribal drivers was very complex in many cases, especially in the smaller towns²⁰.

According to Farej Najem²¹, the tribal system is very much credited for managing to preserve Islam in Libya for more than 14 centuries, and it helped to create a sense of belonging to the wider Arab world. It also consolidated Libyan identity on the basis of Islam and Arabism. Tribal politics played a major role in the creation of Libya. Tribes were also ready to put up fierce resistance to the colonial powers in the last three centuries. As in the case of Derna, IS could be perceived by a large part of the local and tribal community as an external agent, a new attempt at "colonization".

The difficulties the Islamic State has encountered in expanding beyond its local strongholds are striking: Libya's marked localism appears to be not only a limit to the democratization process but also to jihadist expansion. It is exemplary that the IS leadership or-

¹⁹ See for example F. Wehrey, "The Struggle for Security in Eastern Libya", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, September 2012.

²⁰ See more: A. Varvelli, *The Role of Tribal Dynamics in the Libyan Future*, ISPI Analysis no. 172, ISPI, Milan, 31 May 2013.

²¹ F. Najem, "Tribe, Islam and State in Libya: analytical study of the roots of the Libyan Tribal Society and interaction up to the Qaramanli rule (1711-1835)", School of Social Science, Humanity and Language, PhD thesis awarded by the University of Westminster, 2004.

ganigram in Libya is mainly made up of foreigners (see Figure 2), in particular from Iraqi, Saudi Arabia, Yemen e Tunisia²².

FIGURE 2. IS ORGANIGRAM IN LIBYA

<https://www.docdroid.net/0JUtYun/qayimat-english.pdf.html>

In February 2016 the U.S. airstrike on a training camp in Sabratha, targeting IS militants accused of planning two major attacks on Western tourists in Tunisia last year, revealed the high number of Tunisian fighters in Sabratha and the West's growing concern over Libya as a new base for Islamic State militants from North and sub-Saharan Africa²³. It is very difficult to identify how many IS members are foreigners and how many Libyans. Some sources reported that about 80% of total IS fighters in Libya consists of foreigners. Forty to 50% of them are Tunisian²⁴. In that sense, Sabratha could be a third model of IS development in Libya. The aim of the IS group in Sabratha is to launch attacks in neighboring Tunisia, not in Libya, which proliferated in hiding, without the typical proclamations.

IS seems to demonstrate a special attention to attracting new foreign fighters to Libya. The International media reported a growing presence of radicalized Western Africans coming to Libya²⁵. Although American military officials recently revealed that Islamic State in Libya and Boko Haram (IS branch in Africa, Wilayat Gharb Ifriqiyyah) have begun to collaborate more closely²⁶, as

²² M. Arnaboldi and D. Raineri, "Operational Chart of the Islamic State in Libya", published at <https://www.docdroid.net/0JUtYun/qayimat-english.pdf.html>

²³ D. Walsh, B. Hubbard and E. Schmitt, "U.S. Bombing in Libya Reveals Limits of Strategy Against ISIS", *New York Times*, 19 February 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/20/world/middleeast/us-airstrike-isis-libya.html?_r=0

²⁴ Author interview with Italian Special Envoy for Libya, Giorgio Starace, Rome, 12 May 2016.

²⁵ N. Barr and D. Greenberg, "Libya's Political Turmoil Allows Islamic State to Thrive", Jamestown Foundation, *Terrorism Monitor*, vol. 14, no. 7, 1 April 2016, http://www.jamestown.org/programs/tm/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=45269&cHash=c783b403d90a116ae4656b7675943838#.VzxGIPmLTct

²⁶ H. Cooper, "Boko Haram and ISIS Are Collaborating More, U.S. Military Says", *New York Times*, 16 April 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/21/world/africa/boko-haram-and-isis-are-collaborating-more-us-military-says.html?smid=tw-share>

International Crisis Group experts also pointed out²⁷, the revelations regarding significant reinforcements of Boko Haram must be cautiously considered.

Conclusion

Islamic State's hotbeds in Libya appear to be the product of two different drivers: on the one hand, a process of personal radicalization, deeply rooted in the traditional way of expressing discontent with the domestic situation in the Qaddafi period; on the other, the political marginalization of a part of Libya's population in the post-revolutionary period. Derna is a good example of the first type of radicalization, Sirte of the second. Generally, political rather than ideological reasons seem to prevail.

Islamic State in Libya has experienced difficulties because sometimes the group is perceived as "exogenous" to the Libyan tradition and its "global goal" is identified as instrumental to al-Baghdadi's leadership. This does not mean that there is a complete rejection of jihadist ideology: in Derna, the Mujaheddin Shura Council, an umbrella group of local Islamist militias, includes the Abu Slim Martyrs Brigade and other militia, openly jihadist with strong links to al-Qaeda members. A key point of the success of IS (and more generally of jihadists) in Libya remains the relations between local communities and jihadist/IS groups. In Sirte the exclusion of a part of the people from political participation favoured the initial installation of jihadist militias (become IS) as a form of revenge against the new central authority. However it is not at all clear if this connection will be long-lasting. This is why it is key to return to a political process based on inclusion (and not on retaliation)²⁸.

²⁷ J.L. Le Touzet, "Daech a une capacité d'attraction infiniment plus importante que celle d'Aqmi", 16 December 2015, http://www.liberation.fr/planete/2015/12/16/daech-a-une-capacite-d-attraction-infiniment-plus-importante-que-celle-d-aqmi_1420938

²⁸ K. Mezran and A. Varvelli, "Libya and the West: Intervention without a Cause?", 22 February 2016, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/libya-and-the-west-intervention-without-a-cause>

A counterterrorism policy necessitates the return to a political process based on nation-building. Unity government talks do not inspire optimism considering the many hurdles they still face, but the ultimate goal should be the stability of Libya. Failing to outline the political goal will contribute to protracted conflict with little political effectiveness, as in the cases of Iraq and Afghanistan. In some Western and other regional capitals, the emphasis on rapid, direct attacks against IS – rather than on strengthening the Libyan political process – could backfire and negatively affect international security interests. Bombings cannot eradicate IS in Libya, as they haven't in Syria and Iraq. Since IS is an effect of a crisis and not a cause of it, eliminating extremism in Libya necessitates ending the state of anarchy, which requires uniting Libyans in their quest for stability and participation.

7. Multiple Layers of Marginalization as a Paradigm of Tunisian Hotbeds of Jihadism

Valentina Colombo

Tunisia, just like Belgium in Europe, has the highest number per capita of foreign fighters going to Iraq and Syria in order to join the Islamic State. According to the latest Soufan Group survey, as of October 2015, almost 6,000 people, in a total population of 11 million inhabitants, have left the country for the Caliphate¹. Most of Tunisian jihadists are between 15 and 25 years old. Tunisia is also experiencing, more than any other country in the region, the recruitment of young women, mainly in the jihad al-nikah business, and according to Tunisian Minister of Family Samira Meraï, 700 Tunisian women left the country to join the Islamic State or other organizations². Tunisian jihadists also play a key role at the regional level and have close links and contacts with Libya, which provides both a closer training base and a foothold for active and potential Tunisian recruits.

This tragic record is apparently in contrast with the “Tunisian exception” in the post-revolutionary period and also seems unjustified due to the fact that the country has no deep sectarian or ethnic divisions, has a strong civil society, a local tradition of Islamic reform and a higher rate of literacy than other countries of the region³.

¹ The Soufan Group, *Foreign Fighters. An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq*, The Soufan Group, New York, 15 December 2015.

² N. Jelassi, “Elles sont 700 femmes tunisiennes à avoir rejoint des groupes terroristes en Syrie”, *Webdo.tn*, 4 December 2015, <http://www.webdo.tn/2015/12/04/700-femmes-tunisiennes-a-rejoint-groupes-terroristes-syrie/> (last retrieved 6 May 2016)

³ For the Tunisian exception see V. Colombo, *Tunisia A Nascent Democracy Under*

However, Tunisia is not new to the phenomena of radicalization and jihadism. In the 1980s and 1990s, that is, during the Habib Bourguiba era, Tunisians were already fighting in Afghanistan, along with other so-called “Afghan Arabs”, against the Soviet Union and in Bosnia against the Serbs. Around 2000, under Ben Ali’s regime, Afghanistan was the birthplace of the Tunisian Combat Group, an Al-Qaeda affiliate that aimed to overthrow the Tunisian government. Also post-Saddam Iraq was another destination for Tunisian fighters, to the degree that Abu Mus’ab al-Zarqawi, founder of al-Qaeda in the region, reportedly said: “if Ben Guerdane had been near Faluja, we would have liberated Iraq”⁴.

In the pre-revolutionary period, Ben Ali’s repression of Islamists led to the arrest of many of them and Tunisian prisons thus became a place of proselytizing and recruitment to jihadi ideology⁵. As Abu Muqatil al-Tunusi confirms in an interview published in issue 8 of *Dabiq Magazine*:

“Our brother Ahmad ar-Ruwaysī was killed recently in a battle against the apostates. He had been imprisoned in Tunis for issues from his past, and alhamdulillah, Allah guided him in prison and his practice became good. He began making the adhān in prison and attending the lessons given by the brothers despite the harassment from the tawāghīh. When the revolution happened in Tunisia, he was able to escape with the brothers from prison. He then joined the brothers in Libya and took part in some battles with the brothers” and “This tyrant and fool, Ben Ali, would not leave an opportunity for someone to practice the religion even if it were ‘practice’ according to a false manhaj. He would wage war against them all and throw them into prison. This was good for the brothers and led to the spreading of the correct manhaj in Tunisia”⁶.

Siege, European Foundation for Democracy, Brussels 2015, pp. 26-33.

⁴ N. Hamedi, “Tunisian Jihadists Fighting in Syria”, *Al-Monitor*, 24 March 2013, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/03/tunisian-jihadists-syria.html> (last retrieved 6 May 2016).

⁵ For Ben Ali’s view on Islam see M.S. Kazmi, *Tunisie. L’islam local face à l’islam importé*, L’Harmattan, Paris 2014, pp. 47-55.

⁶ “Interview with Abu Muqatil”, *Dabiq Magazine* 8, pp. 60-61.

Abu Muqatil al-Tunisi also refers to his imprisonment in France: “Prison was difficult. We would face humiliation and discomfort from these kuffār. But at the same time, it was a great gate for da’wah to Allah (*‘azza wa jall*) and to explain this manhaj and this path to the imprisoned youth”⁷.

It can thus be inferred that Ben Ali’s repression of Islamists was at least one of the factors that prepared the background for the present spread of radical ideas, that should, however, be regarded, as will be shown, more as a consequence of many layers of marginalization than a consequence of “extremist secularism”.

Where? The Tunisian hotbeds

Since the beginning of the Arab Spring in the country, which spread to Egypt and soon to Syria, some jihadis managed to escape from Tunisian prisons. In February 2011 the government voted an amnesty that also freed prisoners with a past linked to terror organizations and not just suspected opponents of the regime of Ben Ali. Among them Abu Iyadh al-Tunisi – the co-founder of the Tunisian Combat Group – was freed and in two months he would found the Ansar al-Sharia group⁸. Besides this, since the beginning of the upheaval in Syria and Libya, the number of Tunisian foreign fighters in Syria and in Libyan Islamist strongholds has been constantly growing. Last but not least, the transition to democracy gave Tunisian young people the freedom to act on their disillusionment and rage and to ask for the implementation of the main motto of the revolution, which began as a social movement, mainly apolitical, only asking the government for “jobs, dignity, freedom”. However, if in the past a street vendor like Mohamed Bouazizi could only desperately protest against the government through his self-immolation, after the revolution his peers could also choose different paths, among them jihad against “unbe-

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ See the interview with Abu Iyadh in H. Yahmed, *Tabta raya al-‘uqab. Salafiyun jibadiyyun tunisiyyun*, Al-Diwan li-al-nashr, Tunis, 2015, pp.165-182.

lievers”, “tyrants” and “unjust rulers” proposed by the Islamic State and its affiliated organisations. In some way, the revolution opened the gates to an imported view of Islam that clashed with local, reformed Islam.

Suburbs such as Douar Hicher and Ettadhamen in greater Tunis, towns like Bizerte north of Tunis, Kasserine and Djebel Chaambi near the Algerian border and Ben Guerdane, twenty miles west of the Libyan border have seen many young people recruited by jihadi networks as foreign fighters in Iraq, Syria and Libya, but also as perpetrators of terror attacks in their own country.

Bizerte, Douar Hicher and Ben Guerdane have a long history of exporting young jihadis that started during the war in Iraq. All the above-mentioned places represent the pillars of the Tunisian jihadi network and have as least common denominator the fact of being geographical peripheries and hosting social, economic, psychological human peripheries, which share the same feeling of disappointment with the revolution and society. On the other hand, it also seems that the aforesaid peripheries, while they feel totally disconnected from political and social centres, are well connected among themselves, as the recent press release of the Ministry of Interior about the arrest of a group of terrorists involved in attacks in Ben Guerdane confirms. The terrorists were arrested in Mnihla in the Ariana governorate, but “some elements liquidated or arrested were involved in the attacks on Bardo, the ‘Imperial’ hotel in Sousse, the explosion of the presidential guards bus, and the attacks on Ben Guerdane recently. These terrorists were active among the groups that are in the mountains of Kasserine, Kef and Sidi Bouzid, and were in contact with Tunisians belonging to Daesh in Libya, Syria and Iraq”⁹.

Tunisian peripheries have also become centres of action, reaction and revolt, as Abdelwahhab Meddeb in his book *The Tunisian Spring: the metamorphosis of history* wrote:

⁹ Press release of Tunisian Ministry of Interior, 12 May 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/ministere.interieur.tunisie/posts/1266836483343725> (last retrieved 6 May 2016).

It all started in Sidi Bouzid. A revolutionary process in the Arab world was ignited from this decentralised place. We are in a squared decentralization, in the decentralization of decentralization: Tunisia itself is already double-decentralized. From the vertical point of view, it is decentralized both with regard to Mediterranean Europe and sub-Saharan Africa. From the horizontal point of view, it is decentralized with regard both to Maghreb and Mashrek. [...] Any periphery runs away with the status of centre [...] and Sidi Bouzid discovers its vocation of being a reference with Bouazizi's sacrifice¹⁰.

Following the same pattern, Tunisian peripheries have thus turned into the centres and pillars of Tunisian jihadism that surrounds and threatens the heart of politics and power, namely Tunis. Their inhabitants, namely their disappointed, poor and disillusioned young people, have become the leading actors of the reaction against the Tunisian establishment.

Addressing the description of Tunisian peripheries assumes the very definition of the term. It goes without saying that the primary meaning of the term is that of periphery understood as “the outer limits or edge of an area or object”, that is, a physical location far from the centre, but it also refers to any “marginal or secondary position in, or aspect of, a group, subject, or sphere of activity”, in other words any kind of marginalization.

The roots of Tunisian radicalization process

An analysis of Tunisian hotbeds of jihadism and the roots of radicalization in the country points out that there is an overlap of multiple layers of marginalization and exclusion as a consequence of decentralisation and the lack of a sense of belonging to the state, even after the revolution. There are realities of urban centrality and

¹⁰ A. Meddeb, *Printemps de Tunis. La métamorphose de l'Histoire*, Albin Michel, Paris, 2011, p. 33.

marginality whose characteristics are often closely linked to the conditions, history and specific characteristics of the urban realities that produced them and, therefore, are hard to typify, or to put into relation with more or less homogeneous categories or models of interpretation, both in peripheral locations when compared to main centres and therefore mainly out of control.

If the periphery is understood as physical distance from a centre or reference point it is thus fundamental to identify the centre to implement a possible mapping. In the case of Tunisia, the main political centre is Tunis where institutions reside and the main political and social activities are held, but when the so-called greater Tunis area is considered, peripheries are to be found. However, as already mentioned, besides the geographical and physical periphery opposing city centres and suburbs, urban and rural areas, psychological and mental periphery and/or isolation have to be taken into account. Unfortunately the gap with the rest of the country has widened since 2010 and young people are the part of society that has been mostly involved in and hit by this negative trend.

A report, published in 2014 by the World Bank Group, about young people in Tunisia analyses the principal dimensions of their exclusion in the country: that is economic, political, social and cultural exclusion. At the same time it highlights that “young people who are not in education, employment or training may be simultaneously disengaged from community life, originate from a poor household, and lack social networks, which in turn precludes their access to opportunities in the labour market. These may be the most marginalized and disempowered youth”¹¹. According to the European Training Foundation, Tunisia also has one the highest NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) rates in the region, estimated at 33% of the total number of people aged between 15-29 years. The rate is generally higher in rural areas and for women.

A survey, conducted after 2011, among young people in Douar Hicher and Ettadhamen, highlighted that exclusion is one of the

¹¹ World Bank Group, *Breaking the Barriers to Youth Inclusion*, Washington, 2014, p. 5.

main concerns. During an interview a 21-year-old man living in Ettadhamen declared:

There are too many problems [...] unemployment, marginalisation (*tahmich*) [...] young people do not find leisure facilities or any other kind of facility as in classy quarters where you can find everything! Those young people can easily change their way but here, when a young person cannot find anything [to do] to spend his time, there is a vacuum that pushes him towards other things¹².

In a sort of domino effect a suburb, which is not felt to be an integrated part of the urban space, is thus likely to host non-integrated inhabitants.

The Tunisian 2014 Census offers further details about the situation in the areas involved in the jihadi network¹³. The following places show similar characteristics: Ettadhamen in the Ariana governorate, Douar Hicher in the Manouba governorate, Kasserine governorate, Ben Guerdane in the Medenine governorate. If in Tunisia people between 20 and 29 years old represent 17.23% of the population, in Ettadhamen they represent 18.08%, in Douar Hicher 18.43%, in Kasserine 18.14%, in Ben Guerdane 19.51%. The Tunisian average age for people between 30 and 39 is 16.05%, while in Ettadhamen it is 18.46%, in Douar Hicher it is 17.31%, in Ben Guerdane it is 16.80%. Here the only exception is Kasserine, whose average goes below the national one with 15.21% but it is compensated for by the higher rate of pre-teens and teens. The Tunisian illiteracy rate is 13%, while in Ettadhamen it rises to 17.27%, in Douar Hicher to 19.61%, in Kasserine to 21.62% and in Ben Guerdane to 18.99%. The same discrepancy is to be found as far as unemployment is concerned. The Tunisian average rate of unemployment is

¹² O. Lamoum and M.A. Ben Zina (2015), p. 23.

¹³ All data and reports are to be found at the following link <http://www.ins.tn/fr/resultats>; for Ariana governorate see http://census.ins.tn/sites/default/files/2_ariana-1_0.pdf; for Manouba see http://census.ins.tn/sites/default/files/4_mannouba-1_0.pdf; for Kasserine see http://census.ins.tn/sites/default/files/17_kasserine_0.pdf; for Medenine see http://census.ins.tn/sites/default/files/20_mednine_0.pdf (last retrieved 6 May 2016).

14.82%, while in Ettadhamen it rises to 17.32%, in Douar Hicher to 19.15%, in Kasserine to 22.35% and in Ben Guerdane to 18.58%.

It has been proved that the jihadi network in Tunisia involves young people from any social and economical background and also educated people, but with the common feeling of being unsatisfied with society. As a matter of fact, a survey in Douar Hicher and Ettadhamen reveals that youths during the revolution longed for freedom of expression (8.7.1%), better police behaviour (83.6%), a job (83.4%), a change in the way of life of their family (82%). They also longed for a better image of their neighbourhood (65.1%) and the promulgation of a new constitution (57.4%). However the survey also highlights that after the revolution 44% of Tunisian young people believed that conditions had not changed and 46% believed that conditions were even worse than before January 2011¹⁴.

Another example is offered by the history of Zied, a 22-year-old foreign fighter, and confirms that the feeling of “not belonging” is pivotal. His father said that he used to be a student of engineering, a soccer fan, but in two years he got radicalised and started to “reject the army, the police, the state in general”¹⁵. Ons Ben Abdelkarim, head of the al-Bawsala civic organization, refers that he heard people of the villages near Djebel Chaambi declaring their feelings of not belonging to Tunisia and of being abandoned by the institutions¹⁶.

The same disappointment about institutions is witnessed in Douar Hicher and Ettadhamen. Young people condemn corruption of public officials (95.2%), absenteeism of local managers (94%) and, last but not least, deplore their marginalisation in the decision-making process (92.3%) and disregard for them (89.43%)¹⁷.

Jihadi recruitment in Tunisia, as anywhere else, can be described as the result of the above-mentioned feelings. However in the country of the Jasmine revolution, the inactivity of young people can be highlighted as one of the main issues when dealing with the feeling

¹⁴ O. Lamoulou and M.A. Ben Zina (2015), pp. 119-120.

¹⁵ E. Auffray, “Ben Guerdane, vivier tunisien du jihad en Syrie”, *Libération*, 16 May 2013.

¹⁶ G. Packer, “Exporting Jihad”, *The New Yorker*, 23 March 2016, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/03/28/tunisia-and-the-fall-after-the-arab-spring>

¹⁷ O. Lamoulou and M.A. Ben Zina (2015), p. 120.

of exclusion from society. As described above, jihadi hotbeds have the highest rates of unemployment when compared to the whole country. As a matter of fact, one in three men in rural Tunisia and one in five in urban Tunisia are NEET (not in education, employment, or training). Besides this, “system-wide nepotism, together with regional disparities in the labour market, have convinced many potential job seekers lacking the wherewithal for bribery, or family connections, or certain regional affiliations, that seeking employment is an exercise in futility”¹⁸. Disappointment about society and the state mainly regards the largest group of inactive people, that is, less educated groups. An unemployed graduate from Sidi Bouzid declared: “For us, unemployment is a kind of blasphemy; an unemployed is not a person, society itself does not accept him, he is not a part of the circle of society. That is the true meaning of “unemployed”: a person who is not active in the heart of the society. Tell me, what use is that person”¹⁹?

Dropping out of school, without completing upper secondary school, is another widespread phenomenon that has contributed to the high rate of unemployment. About 140,000 Tunisian students drop out school annually, 80,000 of whom have not completed basic education²⁰. Among them young people living in Douar Hicher and Ettadhamen stand out. Moreover, early school drop-out leads to juvenile delinquency.

On the other hand, among Tunisian foreign fighters also figure graduates, proving that a key feeling leading to radicalization is helplessness in facing difficult and disappointing social conditions, rather than low economic standards. For instance, Nabil Selliti, who left Douar Hicher for Syria and blew himself up in July 2013, used to be an unemployed telecommunications engineer and before leaving declared: “I can’t build anything in this country. But the Islamic State gives us the chance to create, to build bombs, to use technology”²¹. Selliti’s statement highlights that the Islamic State,

¹⁸ World Bank Group (2014), p. 26.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

²¹ G. Packer (2016).

having a territory and making the utopia of jihadi ideology come true, having strong ideals, offers both a sense of belonging and makes the dream of being active and working for a cause true, and has become a tempting alternative to a meaningless life. Another reason for disappointment among employed educated young men is the low salary and the frustration that “the rich in Tunisia get richer, and the poor get poorer”²².

Unemployment and juvenile delinquency, together with social and geographical marginalization, are factors of radicalization leading to jihadism. However, another fundamental issue, which is still highly debated, is the role of religion, namely Islam and/or Salafism, in the process.

The debate on radicalization and the Tunisian case

The secular history of pre-revolutionary Tunisia and the hard repression of Islamists especially during Ben Ali’s regime have given the country a background that is in some ways similar to the French. This is the reason why the debate between the two main French scholars, Olivier Roy and Gilles Kepel, about the roots of radicalization might be useful to better understand the Tunisian case and, at the same time, the Tunisian case might turn out to be enlightening in order to find an answer to the question of whether we are facing a radicalization of Islam or an Islamization of radicalization.

Olivier Roy argues that the causes of radicalization in Europe are neither structural nor the consequence of Salafism, nor, for that matter, the result of a “revolt of Islam” or “Muslim anger” against imperialism. He describes the origins of radicalization as the effect of a generational, cultural and political schism of young people fascinated by violence and in search for a cause for their personal revolt as in the case of Tunisian youths. Disillusionment about the future and “lack of a culturally inserted religion” conveyed by their parents is what would push young converts and second-generation

²² *Ibid.*

Muslim immigrants to adhere to an “Islam of rupture”²³. As was shown, in the case of young people living in Tunisian peripheries, disillusionment and disappointment are widespread feelings and are no doubt pillars of radicalization; however the lack of a culturally inserted religion is not a valid explanation in the Tunisian case. Although during Ben Ali’s regime religion was put aside, Tunisia has a long and deeply rooted tradition of “Tunisian Islam” that could have been an antidote to radicalization, but was not²⁴. It has also to be taken into account that the inclusion of Islamist parties, such as Ennahdha, either did not contribute to the prevention of radicalization, or “Ennahdha’s focus on political activities at the expense of religious activities” has increased the “religious vacuum that has made it easier for religiously radical ideas to spread”²⁵.

On the other hand Gilles Kepel contrasts Roy by emphasizing the importance of understanding jihadism through an analysis taking Islam as the starting point. In Kepel’s opinion, the logic of jihadist terrorism should be reframed in terms of a Salafi dynamic that has its roots in the Middle East and is the “carrier of a schism of values”²⁶.

Badra Gaaloul, president of the Centre International des Études Stratégiques, Sécuritaires et Militaires in Tunis, confirms that the above-mentioned theories do not exclude each other and could apply to Tunisia. Marginalization and exclusion of young people from society pave the way to the first level of recruiters who use a very soft religious discourse mixed with social services. As a matter of fact, Ansar al-Sharia started as a social service organisation, operating from the bottom up and mixing charitable activities with

²³ O. Roy, “What is the driving force behind jihadist terrorism? – A scientific perspective on the causes/circumstances of joining the scene”, Bundeskriminalamt, November 2015, http://www.bka.de/nn_195186/EN/Publications/AutumnConferences/2015/autumnConferences2015__node.html?__nnn=true (last retrieved 6 May 2016).

²⁴ V. Colombo (2015), pp. 34–36.

²⁵ G. Fahmi and H. Meddeb, *Market for Jihad. Radicalization in Tunisia*, Carnegie Middle East Center, Washington, October 2015, p. 11

²⁶ C. Daumas, “Gilles Kepel: ‘Il faut écouter les prêches du vendredi’”, *Liberation*, 14 April 2016, http://www.liberation.fr/debats/2016/04/14/gilles-kepel-il-faut-ecouter-les-preches-du-vendredi_1446225 (last retrieved 6 May 2016).

proselytising, acting like the Muslim Brotherhood did in Egypt's rural areas. Only at the end of 2011 did Salafi hard-liners start to come out and ask for sharia-compliant behaviours. In November 2011, for instance, a group of Salafists, enraged at the university's enforcement of the niqab ban, took Habib Kazdaghli, dean of the College of Letters at Manouba University, as a hostage. In the following months, Salafists of the so-called "Manoubistan" also dared to replace the Tunisian flag on the roof of the university with the black Salafi one as a sign of defiance and of patent refusal of the notion of state and nation²⁷.

Olfa Lamoulou highlights that in Douar Hicher, which is in the Manouba governorate, and in Ettadhamen, a sound political policy of social and economic inclusion of youths is missing and that public assistance is the only instrument to help young people²⁸. It is into this vacuum of an institutional social strategy that organisations like Ansar al-Sharia have infiltrated, found fertile ground for recruitment and become a breeding ground for jihadism. It is thus not surprising that even in 2014, that is, after Ansar al-Sharia had been included in the list of terrorist organisations in Tunisia, 17.3% of youths in Ettadhamen and 10.3% in Douar Hicher still had confidence in Abou Iyadh and that three quarters of youths in Ettadhamen and 50.4% in Douar Hicher were against the classification of Ansar al-Sharia as a terror organisation²⁹. It is also noteworthy that 77.8% of illiterate youths were against the classification, while the percentage "dropped" to 50.9% among people who had a university degree. As a matter of fact, Abu Iyadh declared that "Ansar al-Sharia is not an organization, but a symbol under which youths act, it is not an organization in the political and activist sense. In Tunis there is no organization for jihadis in a structural sense"³⁰.

Badra Gaaloul also points out the importance of the mosque as a further level of indoctrination and recruitment. However, like the psychologist Fethi Benslama, she also points out the psychological

²⁷ H. Mellakh, *Croniques du Manoubistan*, Ceres Éditions, Tunis 2013.

²⁸ O. Lamoulou and M.A. Ben Zina (2015), p. 123.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 134.

³⁰ H. Yahmed (2015), p. 178.

attraction of the Islamic State proposal³¹. The “pink philosophy” of the Caliphate calling for social justice easily attracts teenagers who are in search of themselves, of justice and of God³². Also Lamloum highlights not only that the common denominator of youths in Ettadhamen and Douar Hicher leaving for Syria is their young age, but also that their radicalization process has been very short³³.

Fethi Benslama points out the importance of the term radicalization in describing the reasons why Arab youths are seduced by the jihadi ideology: “the fact that the term ‘radical’ means ‘root’ is very interesting. Radicalization is the attempt to find a root. And youths caught by radical Islamism are first of all in search of roots”³⁴.

Lamloum confirms Benslama’s position and the role of marginalization in the radicalization process when she points out that “it is impossible to understand Salafism without taking into account the feeling of proximity and solidarity that it has been inspiring and attracting youths since the revolution”³⁵. In other words, Salafism brought some Tunisian youths back to their religious roots and offered them inclusion and a sense of belonging in the name of religion.

Conclusion

To conclude, the Tunisian case shows that radicalization is the consequence of multiple layers of marginalization, including political, social and religious marginalization. The feeling of being a victim of different kinds of exclusion ultimately leads (after the disillusion of the revolution) to belief in another dream: the utopia of the Islam-

³¹ Fethi Benslama carefully analyses the psychology of contemporary foreign fighters and suicide bombers in F. Benslama, *La guerre des subjectivités en Islam*, Lignes, Fécamp 2014 and *Un furieux désir de sacrifice. Le surmusulman*, Seuil, Paris, 2016.

³² N. Dejoui, “Tunisie: ces jeunes qui basculent dans le terrorisme!”, *L’Economiste Maghrebien*, 31 December 2015, <http://www.leconomistemaghrebien.com/2015/12/31/jeunes-terrorisme-tunisie/> (last retrieved 6 May 2016).

³³ O. Lamoum and M.A. Ben Zina (2015), p. 141.

³⁴ M. Lemonnier, “Le “surmusulman” et la mort, par Fethi Benslama”, *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 5 May 2016, <https://www.fichier-pdf.fr/2016/05/09/le-surmusulman-et-la-mort/le-surmusulman-et-la-mort.pdf> (last retrieved 6 May 2016).

³⁵ O. Lamoum and M.A. Ben Zina (2015), p. 135.

ic State. Here, as can be read in the first issue of *Dabiq Magazine*, young people will find a state where “the Arab and non-Arab, the white man and black man, the easterner and westerner are all brothers”, where “the Caucasian, Indian, Chinese, Shami, Iraqi, Yemeni, Egyptian, Maghribi (North African), American, French, German, and Australian [come together]. Allah brought their hearts together, and thus, they became brothers by His grace, loving each other for the sake of Allah, standing in a single trench, defending and guarding each other, and sacrificing themselves for one another”³⁶.

In other words, inclusion in the Islamic State has taken the place of exclusion and marginalization in society, the sense of not belonging to humanity has been replaced by a stronger sense of belonging to an ideal “ummanity” and human injustice has made way for justice in the name of Allah. The weakness of the three pillars of counterterrorism, namely education, economy and national unity, that were highlighted by the Egyptian intellectual Farag Foda, who was killed by Islamists in June 1992, has empowered the appeal of the Caliphate and jihadism³⁷.

Radicalization in Tunisia can thus be described as a result of multiple layers of exclusion and marginalization that gradually ended up in a search for an inclusion in the global container of the utopian and Manichean ideology of jihadism where Ali Mezghani’s “unaccomplished State”, that is, Tunisia or any other Arab State, has been replaced by the apparently just and perfect State of Allah³⁸.

³⁶ *Dabiq Magazine 1*, p. 7.

³⁷ F. Foda, *al-Irbab*, Cairo, 1987, p. 115.

³⁸ A. Mezghani, *L'État inachevé. La question du droit dans les pays arabes*, Gallimard, Paris, 2011.

8. Insurgency or Terrorism? A New Front in Sinai¹

Giuseppe Dentice

Historically, Sinai is a strategic *pivot* for Egypt. Through the Suez Canal transits around 8% of global trade (including 3% of global oil supplies) and along the north coast runs the Arab Gas Pipeline, which supplies gas to Jordan and, until April 2012, to Israel. Although this territory was presented as a land of opportunities, since the Israeli withdrawal from the Peninsula in 1982, Egyptian authorities perceived Sinai only as a buffer zone useful to ensuring peace and stability between Egypt, Israel and the Gaza Strip. The historical pledges of developing projects – in particular, for the tourism industry in Sinai’s south – remained empty promises and local communities were isolated and excluded from the socio-economic developmental processes. In just a few years the Peninsula has become a lawless territory, with deep inequality and critical conditions of social, economic and political marginalization, in particular towards local minorities (Sinai Bedouins and Palestinians) and its youth population. All of these factors have favored a growing radicalization of its inhabitants, a deep proliferation of forms of illicit business (human trafficking and arms/drug smuggling) and an increasing inflow of Salafi-jihadist groups that promote an upsurge of violence/conflict against Cairo’s central authorities. On this background the jihadist recruiters had no

¹ This article is partially a follow-up to the author’s original article “Sinai: Next Frontier of Jihadism?” published in October 2014 in A. Plebani (ed.), *New (and old) patterns of jihadism: al-Qa’ida, the Islamic State and beyond*, Italian Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI), 2014.

problem in convincing local Bedouins that radical Islam was the right option. This situation fostered the growth of a cultural broth of ever-shifting criminal phenomenon that is leading both to the Bedouins' adoption of radical ideology closest to Salafi-jihadism and to the transformation of the Sinai Peninsula into a hotbed of violent Islamic extremism.

Have terrorist groups opened a new chapter in the local insurgency? Is the Sinai a significant challenge for the central government? What is the Egyptian government's response to the violence? The essay is aimed at investigating the roots of Sinai instability, the evolution of the violence from insurgency to terrorism and, finally, defining the new steps in the "Sinai Question" and its regional spill-over threats.

Marginalization, inequality and repression: at the origin of the "Sinai Question"

To understand the present situation in the Peninsula, it is important to analyse the root causes of the "Sinai Question", considering the major factors of crisis. The radicalization of local populations, the direct or indirect phenomena like smuggling or trafficking in Sinai and the difficult relations between Bedouins and the Cairo government will be discussed in the following section. All these factors are very significant because they have created a deep sense of dissatisfaction and discomfort in the local populations against the Egyptian state, which gave rise to an armed insurgency also known as "the Sinai bombings (2004-2006)".

FIGURE 1. SINAI PENINSULA AND HISTORICAL DISTRIBUTION OF BEDOUIN TRIBES



Source: Chatham House

The Bedouin Question – Divided among some 20 tribes, in the Sinai live approximately 300,000 Bedouins, representing 70% of the local population. Many of them are concentrated in the north, along

the coast, while the more densely populated governorates straddle the Suez Canal. Bedouin populations – historically nomadic tribes – share closer historical and cultural ties with the Levant, the Arabian Peninsula and the Egyptian mainland, reflecting the fact that Sinai is a “geographical crossroads”². The weakness that characterizes the Peninsula has its roots in issues created over time well before the latest decades. The gap in security is partly due to the complex relations between the Cairo government and local Bedouin populations. The Bedouins, in fact, have always been accused by the Cairo authorities of being a “potential fifth column”³ for or collaborators with Israel. Many Bedouins accused the Egyptian government of pursuing discriminatory policies against them and of promoting the socio-economic and political marginalization of the local communities. Many Bedouins have been denied citizenship, as well as forbidden to perform military service. Like the Negev Bedouins in Israel, the Egyptian government refused to recognise their ownership of Sinai Bedouin lands and seized them as its own to develop its tourism projects. Furthermore, local populations were totally excluded from tourism and energy development projects – the two main industries developed by the Mubarak regime – and from government positions and political participation⁴. Finally, some Bedouin tribes have suffered from a discriminatory policy of “Egyptianization” declared by the Cairo regime in the 1990s in order to assimilate them “not only in economic and demographic terms but also, symbolically, in cultural and identity terms”⁵ with the rest of the population of the Egyptian mainland. According to the International Crisis Group report, Bedouins are “socially, culturally and economically discriminated against and constrained, on a daily basis, by security measures: in the north, because of the

² “Egypt’s Sinai Question”, Middle East/North Africa Report N°61, International Crisis Group, 30 January 2007, [http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/North%20Africa/Egypt/61_egypts_sinai_question.pdf](http://www.crisisgroup.org/~/media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/North%20Africa/Egypt/61_egypts_sinai_question.pdf), p. 9.

³ N. Pelham, *Sinai: The Buffer Erodes*, Chatham House, September 2012, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/public/Research/Middle%20East/pr-0912pelham.pdf>, p. 2.

⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵ “Egypt’s Sinai Question” (2007), p. 19.

problematic border with Gaza and, in the south, in order to protect foreign tourists”⁶. The socio-economic marginalization, the political grievances and the loss of cultural identity has altered the fragile balance in the region and stimulated strong resentment in the native population against the government. At the same time, the discrimination and repression of the Sinai Bedouins became the drivers of a first step towards a radicalization process of the local population, in rebellion against the Egyptian government. A focal point in this process of radicalising the local Bedouins were the attacks against the resorts in southern Sinai during the two-year period 2004-2006 and the subsequent Egyptian government’s harsh crackdown towards Bedouins in particular and Salafi-jihadist perpetrators in general⁷.

Trafficking, smuggling and Islamic radicalization – Although there is no clear correlation between violence and trafficking, the emergence of illicit phenomena was a reality during the last decade of the Mubarak regime, in particular exacerbated by the exclusion of local Sinai populations from key formal economic sectors. As confirmed by many reports of the International Crisis Group or Chatham House, the socio-economic exclusion of the local Bedouins and their marginalization has favoured the emergence of an informal economy, based on illegal activities such as human trafficking and arms and drugs smuggling, making Sinai an important regional hub from and to North Africa and the Levant⁸. This situation worsened in particular after the Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip during the two-year period 2005-2007, which provided more opportunities for illegal activity, escalating further after Hamas seized power in Gaza in 2007 and Egypt and Israel closed their borders. This situation soon led to increased tensions between Egyptian authorities and the local Bedouins, which have occasionally led to violent confrontations. The Bedouins became a key factor in this illegal industry. Some northern local

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

⁷ H. Breen, *Violent Islamism in Egypt from 1997 to 2012*, Norwegian Defence Research Establishment (FFI), 3 June 2013, <http://www.ffi.no/no/publikasjoner/documents/01703.pdf>.

⁸ N. Pelham, *Sinai: The Buffer Erodes...*, cit., pp. 4-5.

tribes (Sawarka, Tarabin and Rumaylat) conducted smuggling operations into Gaza or Israeli Negev through tunnels or by controlling border territories. They found big business opportunities in the traffic of cannabis and narcotics production, gunrunning and contraband⁹. At the same time, the Bedouin involvement in arms and goods smuggling between Gaza and Sinai has also contributed to an increased inflow of Salafi preachers from abroad (in particular from the Gaza Strip) and jihadist militants, many of them linked to or inspired by al-Qaeda's ideology. The emergence of these networks has been promoted by direct connections with the Palestinian organizations in the Gaza Strip in turn connected with the old smuggling gangs. These groups were largely composed of Bedouin tribe members adhering to Salafi jihadist doctrines. Nevertheless, in many cases the Bedouins have chosen to join militant groups rather than help the Egyptian government, perceived as an outsider and a military occupant. In this sense, the local Bedouins support extremism and armed insurgency in response to the discrimination inflicted by the Egyptian government. Bedouins and Salafi-jihadi resentment against Cairo encourages a mutual process of radicalization of the Sinai Bedouin tribes¹⁰. Local communities began to undergo a process of Islamization that has been clearly directed towards a large number of their young people. According to Ehud Yaari,

young Bedouins were largely influenced by Salafi trends and ideology. More of them were growing beards, changing their clothes, replacing women's traditional headwear with the stricter niqab and allowing marriages between members of rival tribes. They also pursued a partial boycott against dealings with Egyptian officials, challenged the supremacy of sheikhs in Bedouin society, and launched a campaign of Islamist education and preaching¹¹.

⁹ M. Sabry, E. Dyer and O. Kessler, *Terror in the Sinai*, The Henry Jackson Society, London, 7 May 2014, pp. 21-23, <http://henryjacksonsociety.org/2014/05/07/terror-in-the-sinai/>

¹⁰ J. Gleis, "Trafficking and the Role of the Sinai Bedouin", *Terrorism Monitor* vol. 5, no. 12, The Jamestown Foundation, June 2007, http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=4246

¹¹ E. Yaari, *Sinai: A New Front*, Policy Notes 9, The Washington Institute for the Near

In other words, many of them saw in the Islamic religion and Islamist radicalization processes the only ways to counter Egyptian interference in their local affairs¹².

Assimilation or marginalization? Centre-Periphery relations – After the assassination of President Anwar al-Sadat in 1981 and Israel’s withdrawal from the Peninsula in 1982, the Sinai again lost priority on Cairo’s political agenda. Sadat’s plan for the development of the region was put aside and the new regime headed by Hosni Mubarak viewed the Sinai in part as a useful area for internal displacement from the Nile Valley, in part as a base from which to develop a successful tourism industry, in particular in southern Sinai. While the Nile Valley emigrants had preferential access to land, irrigation and jobs, the Bedouins and other minorities were excluded from these processes, exacerbating tensions with Egyptian communities and Cairo authorities. Moreover, thanks to assistance from American and international financial aid – a result of the Camp David agreement – the Egyptian government created a strategic industry in the tourism sector that provided an important inflow of foreign capital and a general development of the south. On the contrary, the Mubarak regime neglected northern Sinai, favouring a militarization of the area bordering on the Gaza Strip and Israeli in order to monitor threats coming from Egypt’s eastern flank. Unequal development and the government’s neglect and disdain created a situation of profound economic difference between the northern and southern Sinai. All of these factors compounded a deep polarization, sowing the seeds for a spiral of violence and instability in the northern area in the years to come. In short, Sinai’s integration into Egypt led to an authoritarian government response, filling the vacuum with a policing and centralization of local policies that inevitably strengthened Sinai’s self-identity claims¹³.

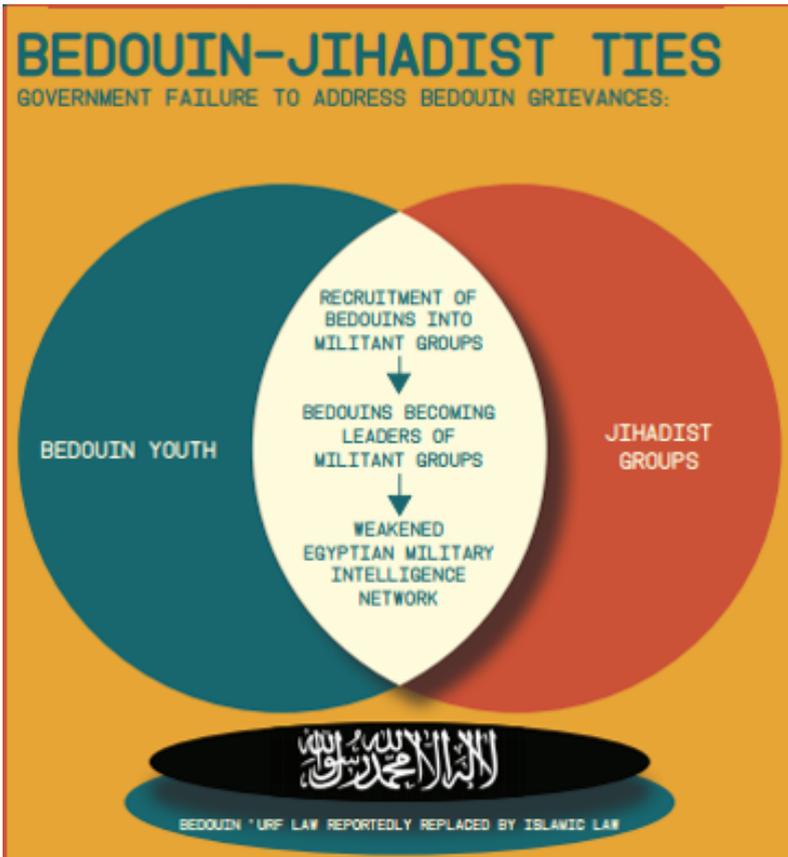
East Policy, January 2012, p. 5, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/sinai-a-new-front>

¹² M. Sabry, E. Dyer and O. Kessler (2014), p. 23.

¹³ See more “Egypt’s Sinai Question” (2007); N. Pelham, *Sinai: The Buffer Erodes...*, cit..

In this way, anti-Bedouin discrimination, the growth of smuggling and lack of integration created a deep sense of dissatisfaction and discomfort in the local populations against the Egyptian state, which gave rise to an armed insurgency also known as “the Sinai bombings (2004-2006)”.

FIGURE 2. BEDOUIN-JIHADIST TIES



Source: *The Henry Jackson Society*

Sinai's insurgency (2004-2006)

During the two-year period 2004-2006, the Peninsula was involved in large-scale simultaneous and sophisticated attacks. Southern Sinai's Red Sea resort towns of Taba, Ras al-Shaitan and Nuweiba (October 2004), Sharm al-Shaikh (July 2005) and Dahab (April 2006) were involved in several bombings¹⁴. The attacks killed 140 people (11 of them Israelis), the worst terror attacks on foreign tourists since the 1997 Luxor massacre¹⁵. These assaults represented a significant divide in the history of Egyptian terrorism because the bombings at the resorts in southern Sinai were the first acts of terrorism involving local Bedouins on Egyptian soil¹⁶.

After months of investigation, Cairo authorities identified the perpetrators such as members of Tawhid wa al-Jihad (TwJ, "Monotheism and Jihad"), an Egyptian-Palestinian jihadist group supported by several local radicalized Bedouins, primarily originating from three northern tribes, Sawarka, Masaïd and Tarabin. The group was founded in 1997 in the district of al-Arish, in northern Sinai, historically a more troubled area and already home to some of the earliest forms of Bedouin protests in the early 2000s. Although TwJ was operating in Sinai, the group has been active in the Gaza Strip, as well as proven to have close ties with Hamas and in particular with its militant branch, the al-Qassam Brigade. The group was heavily influenced by the ideology and *modus operandi* of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the late founder of al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), but although it has close links to Qaedaist leadership in Afghanistan, TwJ has never been formally an Egyptian branch of the al-Qaeda network¹⁷.

¹⁴ For more details about the South Sinai bombings, see H. Breen, *Violent Islamism in Egypt...*, cit., pp. 13-20.

¹⁵ In the November 1997, some gunmen of the al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya opened fire against 58 foreign tourists in the archaeological site of Deir al-Baharit, near Luxor. See A. Cowell and D. Jehl, "Luxor Survivors Say Killers Fired Methodically", *The New York Times*, 24 November 1997, <http://www.nytimes.com/1997/11/24/world/luxor-survivors-say-killers-fired-methodically.html>

¹⁶ J. Gleis (2007).

¹⁷ See "Egypt's Sinai Question" (2007), pp. 4-5; *Tawhid wal-Jihad*, The Tahrir Institute for the Middle East Policy (TIMEP), <http://timep.org/esw/profiles/terror-groups/tawhid-wal-jihad/>

The success of the TwJ strategy in the southern Sinai resort towns had roots in the same causes that favoured the emergence of the so-called “Sinai Question” (deep inequality, Bedouin marginalization and problematic integration between local populations and Egyptians) and in the grievances linked to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. All these factors have ensured the battlefield within which the TwJ appeal’s grew, as well as its capabilities of co-opting the Sinai pariahs: local Bedouins, Palestinian jihadists and other Egyptian Salafists¹⁸.

The Mubarak regime’s response to terrorism in Sinai was a hard-line military crackdown. Many Egyptian Islamist and jihadist members were imprisoned and indiscriminately subjected to the same forms of repression and collective punishment. As underlined by the Human Rights Watch, state security forces detained for several months more than 3,000 suspected terrorists, especially among the Sinai Bedouins. The majority of the arrested were local Bedouins, hailing from al-Arish, Sheikh Zuweid and Rafah. These three towns in the corner of northern Sinai, which were under siege by state security forces, are the poorest districts in the entire Peninsula and one of the largest areas with a high concentration of radical Bedouins¹⁹. In this way, security forces promoted a simplification of the problem, using the same form of repression towards jihadists and Bedouins and playing a significant role in “fusing tribal and jihadi identities and merging Bedouin resistance and Islamist militancy”²⁰.

At the same time, the Egyptian government increased its exclusionist socio-economic policies towards Sinai Bedouins, very much helped by the international blockade on Gaza as well, which favoured the development of their alternative informal economy. In particular, the smuggling of goods and people through the tunnels from and to the Gaza Strip gave local Bedouins revenue worth

¹⁸ See O. Ashour, *Jihadists and Post-jihadists in the Sinai*, Brookings, 5 September 2012, <http://www.brookings.edu/research/opinions/2012/09/05-jihadism-sinai-ashour>

¹⁹ See G. Simoni and R. Ben Barak, *The Sinai Peninsula Threat Development and Response Concept*, Saban Center at Brookings and the Military and Strategic Affairs Program at INSS, Analyses Paper, 31, 28 January 2014, pp. 3-5, <http://www.brookings.edu/research/papers/2014/01/28-sinai-israel-siboni>

²⁰ N. Pelham, *Sinai: The Buffer Erodes...*, cit., p. 4.

\$700-1,000 million a year. In order to combat the proliferation of these illicit traffics, the Mubarak regime developed a number of schemes to counter the tunnel economy. These included flooding the tunnels or their underground destruction and building fences along the border. However, the state security forces never succeeded in smothering the tunnel trade²¹.

Despite some sporadic incidents along the Israeli border, until 2011 the Peninsula did not experience other episodes of violence but these groups prepared the ground for an increase in Islamist attacks (also favoured by Hamas' seizure of power in Gaza in 2007) and for deep cooperation between local Bedouins and Islamist organizations on both sides of the shared border. Moreover, restrictive security policies, economic deprivation and political alienation were the only pillars on which the Mubarak regime's response to the "Sinai Question" was based²².

The return of terrorism and the rise of Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis (2011-2013)

After Mubarak's fall in 2011, the crisis was also escalating in the Sinai. The Peninsula became a no-man's-land, a lawless region in which Egypt's central government could not re-establish its political authority. Police stations, government and security buildings were under attack by militants, border crossings were assaulted by non-state actors – which exacerbated tensions between Egypt and Israel –, many Islamist prisoners were released from prison or escaped from the national jails (among them people accused of involvement in the 2004-2006 Sinai bombings). The Egyptian government gradually slackened its control on the ground. The resulting security vacuum "attracted radical elements from all over the Middle East

²¹ N. Pelham, *Salvaging Sinai*, Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre (NOREF), 1 November 2012, p. 2, <http://www.peacebuilding.no/Regions/Middle-East-and-North-Africa/Egypt/Publications/Salvaging-Sinai>

²² H. Breen, *Egypt: Freedom and Justice to the Bedouins in Sinai?*, University of Oslo, Autumn 2013, <https://www.duo.uio.no/handle/10852/39058>

and has increasingly become a concern for both Egypt and Israel”²³. Moreover, as Heidi Breen states, the instability in the Sinai has been influenced by “several factors, directly or indirectly connected to the Arab Spring, [that] have contributed to making Sinai a more conducive environment for armed militants”²⁴.

During the first months of 2011, Sinai emerged as a “security hotspot”²⁵ for proselytization and the activities of some jihadist and extremist groups. Moreover, Egyptian and Israeli intelligence services registered an increasing presence of foreign fighters operating in Sinai, many of whom were al-Qaeda affiliates arriving from the main crisis areas of the Middle East and North African region. In a few years, many al-Qaeda-inspired groups, Palestinian jihadists and other Salafi-jihadist organizations proliferated in the Peninsula, using Sinai as strongholds, headquarters and operational bases for confronting Israel and Egypt. Although the number of armed groups operating in this area and their real capabilities are uncertain, Israeli and Egyptian security services recognized roughly thirty terrorist organizations operating in Sinai, some of which are allegedly affiliated with Gaza-based jihadist groups, local insurgent organizations or connected to al-Qaeda²⁶.

In this new wave of insurgency/Salafi-jihadist attacks, Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis (ABM, “Supporters for Jerusalem”) emerged as the most prominent Egyptian armed group and a few months later as the most important terrorist organization in the Sinai. The group is an Egyptian-Palestinian organization with deep roots in the Sinai and in the Gaza Strip²⁷. Before declaring allegiance

²³ N. Kovač and T. Guertin, *Armed Groups in the Sinai Peninsula*, Civil-Military Fusion Centre Presents, February 2013, <http://reliefweb.int/report/egypt/armed-groups-sinai-peninsula>, p. 1.

²⁴ H. Breen, *Violent Islamism in Egypt...*, cit. p. 25.

²⁵ On this concept see B. Berti, Z. Gold, *Security Vacuum in the Sinai*, *The National Interest*, 10 August 2012, <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/the-security-vacuum-the-sinai-7317>; E. Yaari, *Sinai: A New Front*, *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, Policy Notes 9, January 2012, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/sinai-a-new-front>

²⁶ B. Riedel, “Al-Qaeda Grows in Sinai”, in *The National Interest*, 10 February 2012, <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/al-qaeda-grows-sinai-6486>

²⁷ There is no convergence on the ABM’s origin. According to Andrew McGregor,

to the Islamic State, ABM was an al-Qaeda-inspired group but it was never an official al-Qaeda offshoot. The group recruits its members in Egypt and in the Gaza Strip among former jihadists (i.e. Egyptian Islamic Jihad and al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya), other Salafi-jihadi groups operating in the Sinai (such as Tawhid wa al-Jihad), some foreign fighters (largely from Libya, the Arabian Peninsula and East Africa) and militants with important experience in jihadism in Afghanistan, Bosnia Herzegovina, Iraq and Syria. However, the hard core of this group are the radical Bedouin members (in particular from the Sawarka, Masaid and Tarabin tribes), such as in the Tawhid wa al-Jihad cases in 2004-2006. These tribes have considerable influence in northern Sinai, controlling key smuggling routes along the Israel-Gaza border. Moreover, ABM also considers Bedouins a primary recruiting tool, given the close knowledge the tribes have of the Peninsula, their illicit traffics and the Egyptian security and military policies there. At the same time, ABM capitalises on the local population's sense of grievance against the central government, presenting "itself as the defender of the local population against alleged abuses of the Egyptian state"²⁸. As with the TwJ, ABM has exploited Cairo's political vacuum in the Sinai and the deep resentment of local populations against central authorities, thus gaining the sympathies of many Bedouin tribes. For some security analysts, Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis consists of no more than 1,000-1,500 fighters. However, while there is little information about its power structure and source of funding it is reasonable to believe that ABM finances its operations with the weapons

Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis is an Egyptian branch of a Gazan Islamist organization, while Joshua Goodman considers ABM an all-Egyptian group. See A. McGregor, "Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis Intensifies Assassination Campaign in the Sinai", *Terrorism Monitor*, vol. XI, no. 22, The Jamestown Foundation, 3 December 2013, http://www.jamestown.org/uploads/media/TM_011_Issue22.pdf; J. Goodman, *Egypt's Assault on Sinai*, Sada Journal, 5 June 2014, <http://carnegiendowment.org/sada/2014/06/05/egypt-s-assault-on-sinai/hcu2>

²⁸ Z. Gold, *Salafi Jihadist Violence in Egypt's North Sinai: From Local Insurgency to Islamic State Province*, The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague 7, no. 3, April 2016, p. 18, <http://icct.nl/publication/salafi-jihadist-violence-in-egypts-north-sinai-from-local-insurgency-to-islamic-state-province/>

smuggling and human trafficking activities that have flourished in Sinai in the last five years²⁹.

ABM is an organization mainly based in northern Sinai and responsible for several attacks against Egypt and Israel. The group appeared for the first time in August 2011, when the core of ABM and another Palestinian group, Majlis al-Shura lil-Mujahidin fil-Quds (MSC), attacked a team of Israeli Defence Forces near the Israeli city of Eilat, not far from the “Philadelphia Corridor”, the long common frontier between Israel and Egypt. In the ambush, the armed group killed eight Israeli soldiers. During the SCAF transition³⁰, ABM’s operations were focused on northern Sinai, particularly the areas next to the Israeli border, near the cities of Rafah, Sheikh Zuweid and al-Arish, bombing economic infrastructures like the Arab Gas Pipeline (attacked 15 times in this period) or military checkpoints, and kidnapping Egyptian army officers. The most lethal attack was the ambush at the Kerem Abu Salem checkpoint (known as Kerem Shalom in Israel) in August 2012, when armed men of ABM attacked a military base in the Sinai Peninsula near the Israeli border, killing 16 Egyptian soldiers. Like the assault in August 2011, in this attack the majority of the perpetrators were ABM members with some Sinai Bedouins and Palestinians in support³¹.

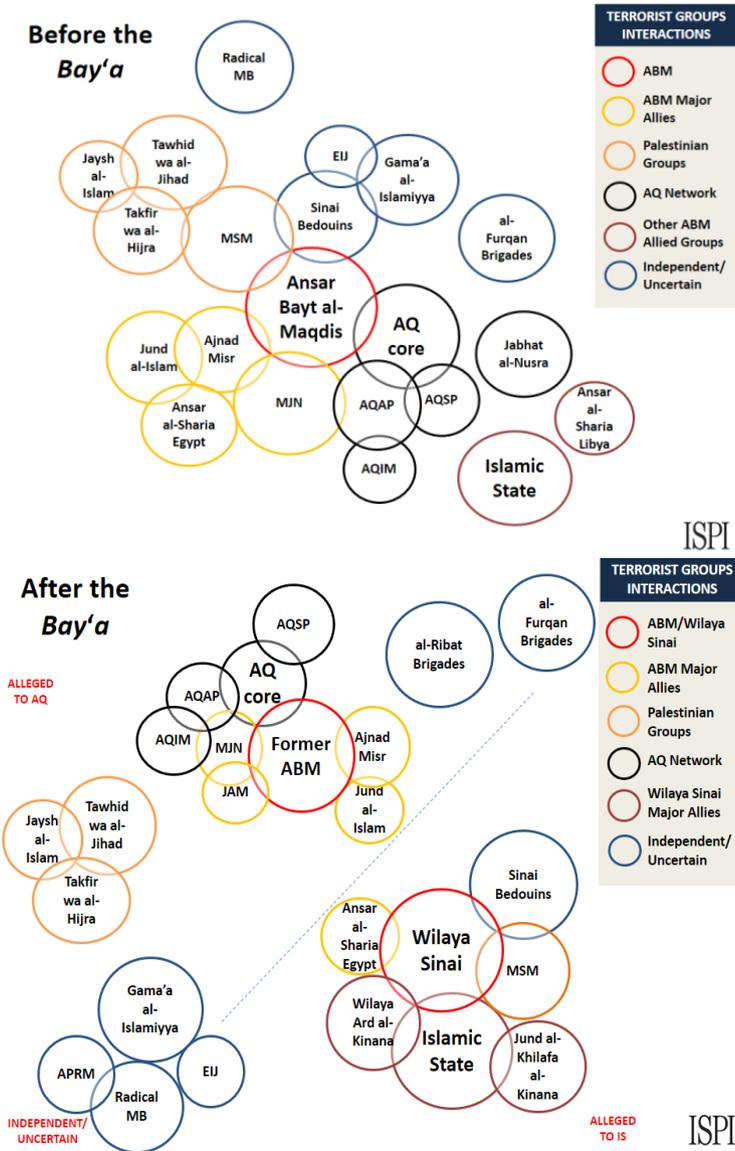
Although the rocket launchings near the southern territories of Israel did not stop, or the growth of the terrorist threat towards Egypt and Israel, during the government of the Muslim Brotherhood member Mohammed Morsi the precarious conditions of Sinai security were, however, characterized by a low level of violence and confrontations. Indeed, it seemed that the situation

²⁹ See R. Tuitel, “The Future of the Sinai Peninsula”, *The Quarterly Journal*, vol. XIII, no. 2, 2014, http://connections-qj.org/system/files/13.2.05_tuitel.pdf

³⁰ After the Mubarak ousting in February 2011, Field Marshal Mohammed Hussein Tantawi was Chairman of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), the military junta charged with guiding the country until the presidential election in June 2012, won by Mohammed Morsi.

³¹ R. Friedman, “Kerem Shalom attack has already led to better security cooperation, says deputy FM”, *The Times of Israel*, 7 August 2012, <http://www.timesofisrael.com/kerem-shalom-attack-has-already-led-to-better-security-cooperation-says-deputy-fm/>

FIGURE 3. ANSAR BAYT A-MAQDIS/WILAYAT SINAI EVOLUTION



Source: Giuseppe Dentice-ISPI

had calmed down after the military offensive (Operation Eagle) announced in August 2012 by the Morsi government intended to contain and to combat the Salafi-jihadi militants. Nevertheless, it is important to note during the Morsi period a rising influence of Salafi ideology, the expansion of illicit traffics and a certain degree of terrorist networks rooted in the territory and the tribal society³².

Morsi's ouster and the new dimensional evolution of the violence in the Sinai (2013-2015)

After the crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood in July 2013, attacks and violence increased exponentially in Sinai and in Egypt. Radical Bedouin members and Islamists in the Sinai quickly used Morsi's ouster to legitimize their ideological and political battles and to win them in a democratic struggle against the corruption of the military regimes in power in Egypt. At the same time, the Morsi ouster in July 2013 was an important divide in the *modus operandi* of the jihadist cells.

In this sense, ABM has radicalized its terrorist activities, increasing military targets and attacks on (civil and military) symbols of Cairo's central powers. In order to expand its action from Sinai to the Egyptian hinterland – especially in the densely populated areas (such as the Nile Delta Valley and Cairo district) and near the Libyan border –, the group has pledged new strategic alliances with other transnational jihadist groups such as the Mohammed Jamal Network, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, Afnad Misr, MSC, Jaish al-Islam, Tawid wa al-Jihad and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant. This change of strategy also led to an escalation in the attacks and the group's increasing sophistication and capabilities³³.

A confirmation of this new trend occurred in November 2014,

³² H. Breen, *Egypt...*, cit. pp. 27-29.

³³ "Will ISIS find fertile ground in Egypt's Sinai?", *Al Monitor*, 23 June 2014, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/06/egypt-sinai-isis-connection-ansar-bayt-al-maqdis.html>

when ABM pledged allegiance (*bayah*) to the Islamic State (IS) and to its Caliph, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, changing its name to Wilayat Sinai (WS) and becoming IS' Sinai offshoot³⁴. After the *bayah* to IS, the group has increased its level of dangerousness again and is emerging as the main threat to Egyptian national security. The group is gradually but continually serving the Islamic State cause, adopting an IS agenda in the Sinai³⁵.

The full shift from Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis to Wilayat Sinai has produced an about-face among some radical Bedouins. Indeed, since its foundation, some Bedouins saw ABM as a threat to their demands and their insurgency campaign against the central power in Cairo. However, when ABM rebranded into WS, the “new” group changed its nature in favour of more radical ideology founded on ultra-fundamentalist interpretations of Islam and on a military ground control of the territory.

When WS started to kill Bedouin members accused of being Mossad spies, the most important leaders of the Sinai Tarabin tribe announced their full commitment to restoring security in Egypt's restive northern Sinai region by cooperating with the Egyptian military forces to fight Wilayat Sinai³⁶. Despite these tensions with WS, the majority of the Sinai Bedouin tribes again have continued to confirm their unofficially strategic allegiance with the jihadists. There is a multiplicity of factors behind this choice. First, the Tarabin statement was an isolated decision arising after the beheading of its important leader. More probably, the attempted Tarabin rebellion was based on the growing threat represented by the WS' illicit activities along the Gaza-Israeli borders, the core business of most

³⁴ A. Tolba and S. Bushra, *Egypt's Ansar militants swear allegiance to Islamic State-statement*, UK Reuters, November 3, 2014, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-mideast-crisis-egypt-idUKKBN0IN23S20141103>

³⁵ See more on M. Awad, “The Islamic State's Pyramid Scheme: Egyptian Expansion And The Giza Governorate Cell”, *CTC Sentinel* vol. 9, no. 4, April 2016, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-islamic-states-pyramid-scheme-egyptian-expansion-and-the-giza-governorate-cell>

³⁶ See more on *Increasing tension between ISIS's branch and the Bedouin tribes in Sinai*, in Sportlight on Global Jihad (30 April – 6 May 2015), The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Center, pp. 18-19, <http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en/article/20806>

Sinai tribes. Moreover, other local tribes have partially rejected the Tarabin proposal in fear of the WS' heavy-handed brutality. At the same time, the jihadist group's approach has increased its aggressive tactics toward the local population in the Sinai, deepening tensions with some Sinai tribes. In practise, the lack of alternatives in Egyptian Sinai policies have created some disillusion among tribes, reinforcing the menacing rhetoric of the Wilayat Sinai in the Peninsula³⁷.

The middle-term goals of the WS are the overthrow of the al-Sisi regime and the establishment of an Islamic state in Egypt, while in the long term the main target remains the destruction of the state of Israel. Indeed, according to the article by Oren Kessler and Max Peck, published in *Foreign Affairs*, that cited online communications of the Sinai-based group, the Wilayat Sinai message is based on the urging "to 'wake up and realize [their] salvation is with sharia'. They play up Sinai's location as the 'land of the prophet Moses', denounce Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi as a new Pharaoh, and curse him for 'protecting the Jews'"³⁸. On the other hand, after the *bayah* to IS, WS has sought a full ideological identity with the Iraqi-based group and has begun to move from a mainly local dimension (Sinai and Egypt) to a global/transnational jihadist scenario (Gaza Strip, Israel, Libya and Western countries). The killing of U.S. citizen William Henderson – an employee of an oil company active in Egypt – the beheading of the Croatian inhabitant Tomislav Salopek, the multiple attacks against the Multinational Forces Operation at al-Jura³⁹, the largest offensive in Sheikh Zuweid⁴⁰ and, finally, the shooting down of Russian Metrojet flight 9268 confirmed a change in the ideological

³⁷ See more on "Egypt: Wilayat Sinai" in D. Gartenstein-Ross, N. Barr and B. Moreng (eds.), *The Islamic State's Global Propaganda Strategy*, The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague 7, no. 1, March 2016, pp. 45-56, <http://icct.nl/publication/the-islamic-states-global-propaganda-strategy/>

³⁸ O. Kessler and M. Peck, "ISIS Target Egypt", *Foreign Affairs*, 17 May 2016, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/egypt/2016-05-17/isis-targets-egypt>

³⁹ The MFO is the 12-nation international force that oversees maintenance of the 1979 Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty.

⁴⁰ Y. Faruki, J. Gowell and L. Hoffman, *ISIS's Wilayat Sinai Launches Largest Offensive in Sheikh Zuweid*, Institute for the Study of War, 2 July 2015, <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/isis%E2%80%99s-wilayat-sinai-launches-largest-offensive-sheikh-zuweid#sthash.h3AvUIIo.dpuf>

and military paradigm, a diversification of final targets and a recovery of an economic jihad against the most significant structures of the Egyptian economy (in particular tourism)⁴¹.

Hence, WS has updated and changed its original strategy in favor of a closer link with Islamic State's international agenda, based on a strong trans-nationalization of military operations and, at the same time, on massive anti-Jewish and anti-Western propaganda⁴².

In this sense, WS' new focus is part of the IS' global strategy⁴³, in which North Africa and the Levant are crucial for the re-orientation of the Iraqi-based approach. This kind of strategy also led to an escalation in attacks and nowadays the group is increasing in sophistication and capabilities. The extreme heterogeneity of the attacks has demonstrated once again a new qualitative increase in military strategies by insurgent groups both in the choice and ability to hit targets, in a close military identification between the Islamic State and the WS, replicating in the Sinai the guerrilla models already used by IS in the Mosul campaign. At the same time, these attacks have raised many concerns about the real capabilities of the Egyptian government to ensure political stabilization, democratic transition and security⁴⁴.

The growing instability of the Sinai and the WS' deep roots in Egypt and with the Islamic State's core are thus posing a serious threat to the security of North Africa and the Near East. Therefore, regional destabilization – including a break of the balance of power between Egypt and Israel – could be another WS aim. This situation shows how the Islamic State is increasing its global threat and its strategy of expanding the Caliphate through its regional network. On the basis of Israeli and Egyptian intelligence information, currently the main potential crisis scenario could again be the Gaza Strip. For the Egypt-

⁴¹ Y. Lappin, "Egypt's Islamic State could capitalise on airline bombing claim", *IHS Jane's Defence Weekly*, IHS Jane's, 12 November 2015, <http://www.janes.com/article/55945/egypt-s-islamic-state-could-capitalise-on-airline-bombing-claim>

⁴² See more G. Dentice, "Il Sinai, nuova frontiera del jihadismo globale", in A. Plebani (a cura di), *Jihad e terrorismo*, Mondadori-ISPI, Milan, 2016, pp. 111-135.

⁴³ On the evolution of Wilayat Sinai ideology see "ISIS Campaign In Support Of Its Sinai Branch, Urges Egyptians To Join Its Ranks", Special Dispatch Series no. 6440, *Jihad and Terrorism Monitor*, MEMRI, 19 May 2016, <http://www.memrijtm.org/isis-campaign-in-support-of-its-sinai-branch-urges-egyptians-to-join-its-ranks.html>

⁴⁴ Z. Gold (2016).

tian and Israeli governments, the main threat is a possible connection between the violence in the Sinai Peninsula and the Gaza Strip, as well as the use of these two territories as an operational area to direct attacks against the Jewish state and the North African country⁴⁵.

FIGURE 4. ATTACKS REPORTED IN EGYPT AND NORTH SINAI



Source: *The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy*

Sinai: a new hotspot of terrorism?

Most of the terrorist attacks occurring in Sinai make it a new “hotspot” for global jihad and these phenomena pose a serious problem for the Egyptian security. In order to contain WS and other Sinai-based armed groups, as well as some security threats linked to the Bedouins’ illicit smuggling in the cross border region, Egyptian and Israeli authorities both increased their domestic security measures. In this sense, Egypt has adopted several counter-terrorism packages while Israel is planning to build another defensive fence

⁴⁵ See more G. Dentice (2016); R. Perper, “An unlikely trio: Israel, Hamas and Egypt align against ISIS in Sinai”, *The Jerusalem Post*, 1 May 2016, <http://www.jpost.com/Middle-East/An-unlikely-trio-Israel-Hamas-and-Egypt-reportedly-form-alliance-to-fight-ISIS-in-Sinai-452779>; *How Alienating Bedouins is Compromising Middle East Security*, The Regional Center for Strategic Studies Cairo (RCSS), 30 March 2016, <http://www.rcssmideast.org/en/Article/10773/How-Alienating-Bedouins-is-Compromising-Middle-East-Security#.V0LO1PmLTIU>

along its southern borders and their intelligence services are cooperating, but the results have not been satisfactory. To combat Salafijihadism and local Bedouin radicalization, the Egyptian government should define a new counter-narrative campaign based on a strong political response to the so-called “Sinai Question”. Cairo authorities should calibrate their policies to safeguard their interests in the Sinai, favoring major inclusiveness policies towards local Bedouin, detailing an economic plan of development and protecting the basic civil and political rights of all individuals. A political approach by the Egyptian government could favor a *détente* and a stabilization of the Peninsula. At the same time, it is necessary to better promote a culture of legality and the political legitimacy of the Egyptian government. Finally, Cairo authorities should also promote securitarian policies in this area (especially the counter-radicalization of jihadists, intelligence sharing and security cooperation) and it could be reduced militarization that could be the best way for the Egyptian government to maintain control over the territory. Without any progress along these guidelines, the Sinai could also face further economic losses (mainly in Suez Canal and tourism revenues) and become a hotspot for new forms of crime and terrorism and an area for the political confrontation of new or old non-state actors. For these reasons, the crisis in the Sinai Peninsula represents the main challenge to the stability and legitimacy of the Egyptian state but it is also an important testing-ground for countering an expansion of the Islamic State.

9. Revived Hotbeds in the Caucasus: Pankisi Valley and Dagestan

Mairbek Vatchagaev

The second Russian military campaign in Chechnya complicated the situation in the North Caucasus. Regions bordering on the Chechen Republic were drawn into the conflict. Georgia's Pankisi Valley¹, located on the southern slope of the Great Caucasus Range, was one of the areas embroiled in the struggle.

For the past two hundred years, Chechens from the mountain districts of Chechnya have migrated to settle into the Pankisi Gorge². They were members of the Chantiy, Chinkhoy, Nashkhoy, Dishny, Maystoy, and Myalkhi clans (*teips*)³. They have retained their religion, their language, and their specific Chechen culture⁴, even if, over the years, they have adopted many aspects of Georgian culture.

The Russian onslaught on Chechnya in the fall of 1999 forced many fighters to retreat through the mountains. Weakened and lacking resources or documents to emigrate to a third country, they took refuge in areas inhabited by ethnic Chechens. From the onset combatants, both Chechen and foreign, considered the Pankisi Valley

¹ The Pankisi Valley is situated in the northeastern part of the Republic of Georgia, in the Akhmeta Municipality of the Kakheti Region. Twelve of the thirteen villages of the valley are inhabited exclusively by Chechens. Chechens of the Pankisi are known in Georgia as Kistins.

² L. Margoshvili, "Kul'turno-etnicheskie vzaimootnosheniia mezhdru Gruzicii i Checheno-Ingusheticii", *Mutzpierrezba*, Tbilisi, 1990, p. 27.

³ I. Aliroev, L. Margoshvili, *The Kists*, Moscow, 2006, p. 18.

⁴ M.K. Vatchagaev, "Voprosy o sufiskom elemente Islama v Pankisi (Georgia)", *Review Prometheus*, no. 5, 2010, Paris, <http://chechen.org/archives/149>

as a temporary base until their eventual return to Chechnya. As the Georgian authorities did not take action to regulate the situation, the newcomers between 2000 and 2004 *de facto* controlled the district.

The retreating men came from different political positions and they continued to vie for power in the Pankisi Valley. Some stood for an independent Ichkeria (followers of Maskhadov), others believed Chechnya should be an Islamic state (jihadists). Among the well-known commanders who spent protracted periods of time in the valley were Ruslan Gelaev⁵, Doka Umarov⁶, Akhmed Zakaev⁷, and Abdul-Malik Mejidov⁸, as well as many of their subordinate officers. There were also members of the government and of the parliament of the Republic of Ichkeria⁹. At various times, the number of fighters rose to several hundreds to whom were added several thousand refugees fleeing the bombing of their mountain villages¹⁰.

The Pankisi Valley (Georgia)

The influx of refugees brought major changes to the Pankisi Valley. The newcomers displaced the Georgian and Ossetian communities, altering the ethnic composition of the district, making it almost entirely Chechen. Islam replaced Christianity – except in the one remaining Georgian village of Matani – as the dominating religion,

⁵ Ruslan Gelaev was one of the most important Chechen commanders, a supporter of Ichkeria, and a follower of Sufism. Killed in February 2004 as he was crossing from Chechnya to Georgia for the second time.

⁶ Doka Umarov was secretary of the security council of the government of Ichkeria. In 2006 he headed the armed underground for the entire North Caucasus; in 2007, partisan of an Islamic state, he founded the Caucasus Emirate. Killed in September 2013 in Chechnya.

⁷ Akhmed Zakaev, a well-known politician of Ichkeria, has immigrated to Great Britain. He chairs the Chechen government in exile.

⁸ Abdul-Malik Mejidov, spokesman of the radical Islamic faction in Chechnya, collaborated closely with the Akhmadov brothers of the Chechen *Jamaat*.

⁹ Minister of Education, A.V. Khusainov, Minister of Economics, L.A. Aldamov, Member of Parliament, Doka Amagov, and many more spent time in the Pankisi.

¹⁰ A.V. Sokolov and A.Y. Sokolova, "Iz Chechni v Gruzii: The Argun Gorge, Shatili, Pankisi", Materials of the Human Rights Organization, Memorial, <http://www.memo.ru/hr/hotpoints/N-Caucas/georgia/south00.htm>

and a new trend, Salafism, transformed the existing Muslim community, which until the arrival of the fighters from Chechnya was dominated by Sufism. A greater awareness of their Chechen roots reshaped the sense of identity of local Chechens. And last, the valley became a center of opposition to the central authorities in Tbilisi.

An entire generation of young men grew up mingling with Chechen combatants, in an environment where relations with Tbilisi were tense and Islam had an enhanced role in everyday life. Youngsters began blaming their elders for perverting Islam and drinking alcohol, an integral part of Georgian culture. Conflicts between young and old generations brought about the organization, by local Chechens, of a *jamaat*¹¹, and the Salafi mosque in the village of Duisi drew all those who rejected the traditional belief in Sufism.

To counter the rise of extremism, Georgian authorities made some concessions. For the first time, Tbilisi allowed the teaching of the Chechen language in schools, the establishment of a Chechen radio station, and the publishing of work by historians and philologists from the valley. Nonetheless, Tbilisi remains prejudiced against Chechens and never allocates enough resources to the area; the infrastructure is weak, unemployment is high, there are not enough schools, kindergartens, sport clubs, and other leisure centers for young people.

It should not come as a surprise that a cult of war developed among the young men who grew up in the Pankisi Valley during the Chechen War – in the midst of combatants, many of whom held radical views – and that a number of them wanted to prove their abilities and courage in war. Some joined the Georgian army and conducted themselves well¹², such as Tarkhan Batirashvili¹³, others

¹¹ G. Sanikidze, “Islamic Resurgence in the Modern Caucasian Region: Global and Local Islam in the Pankisi Gorge”, U. Tomohiko Uyama (ed.), *Empire, Islam, and Politics in Central Eurasia*, Slavic Eurasian Studies, no. 14, 2007, Slavic Research Center, pp. 274-276. *Jamaat* in modern North Caucasus is a Salafi armed unit.

¹² A. Cullison, “Tarkhan Batirashvili, Ethnic Chechen, Leads Group Deeply at Odds with Western-Backed Rebels in Syria”, *The Wall Street Journal*, 19 November 2013, p. 6.

¹³ Tarkhan Batirashvili (Amir Umar al-Shishani) is IS minister of war; until 2013 he commanded Jaish al Muhajireen wa Ansar (Army of Emigrants and Helpers); he appeared in Syria in 2012.

sought action in Chechnya, like Muslim (Lova) Margoshvili¹⁴. The success and fame Batirashvili and Margashvili achieved after joining the Syrian conflict pushed many to follow in their steps, and by 2013 more Chechens from the Pankisi commanded their own detachments (*katiba*) in Syria: Ruslan Machalashvili¹⁵, Payzulla Margoshvili¹⁶, Amir Abu Musa¹⁷, Rustam Adjiev¹⁸, and Aslan Sigauri¹⁹. Young Pankisi Chechens or Chechens studying in Islamic schools and colleges in the Middle East, Turkey, Europe, and Russia, who wanted to get involved in Syria and Iraq but did not speak Arabic sought their own kind and clustered around Chechen commanders. In the same way, fighters coming later from various regions of the former Soviet Union tended to regroup around Chechen leaders because they had a language in common, Russian. Since the beginning of the conflict, over a hundred young men have left the Pankisi Valley for Syria. Some lost their life; by 2014, ten had been killed²⁰; today, the number is closer to two dozen.

The departure of young men is fraught with serious consequences. Returning survivors of the Syrian conflict undoubtedly will have an important influence in the Pankisi and their beliefs clash with those of the partisans of Sufism. They would be not only Muslim radicals but would have skills in warfare, a worrisome perspective

¹⁴ Muslim (Lova) Margoshvili (Amir Muslim Shishani) heads the Djunudu ash Shame group. A small contingent of Chechens from Tarkha's group fights with him. He is not part of IS or Jabhat al-Nusra or any other faction, even if in ideology he is close to Jabhat al-Nusra.

¹⁵ Ruslan Machalashvili (Amir Seyfullakh) katiba: Khilafatul Islamiya. At first he joined Umar al-Shishani but in December 2013 left him for Jabhat al-Nusra. Killed in February 2014. After his death, all his Chechen followers enlisted with Umar al-Shishani in ISIS.

¹⁶ Payzulla Margoshvili (Amir Salakhudin Shishani) headed Jaish al Mujahireen wa Ansar after Umar al-Shishani joined ISIS. Was removed from command in 2015 and formed a new group, Jaish al Usrah, claiming to be part of the Caucasus Emirate.

¹⁷ Amir Abu Musa. Real name unknown. katiba: Ansar ash-Sham.

¹⁸ Rustam Adjiev (Amir Abdul-Khakim al Shishani) heads the group Andjad al Kavkaz. A refugee from Chechnya, he lived many years in the Pankisi. Was close to Amir Salakhudin Shishani but in December 2015 joined Umar al-Shishani in IS. His men were all from the Pankisi.

¹⁹ Aslan Sigauri (Amir Khalid) began with Muslim Shishani, moved to Abu Musa and in early 2013, joined ISIS.

²⁰ "V Sirii pogib esheche odin grazhdanin Gruzii" *Informatsionno-Analiticheski Portal Gruzia Online*, 25 December 2014, <http://www.apsny.ge/2014/conf/1419574590.php>

for the Georgian government. There are already in the valley numerous supporters of the four *amirs* – Umar al-Shishani, Salakhudin Shishani, Muslim Shishani, and Abdul-Khakim al Shishani – and in 2015, a Salafi leader, Abu Borchishvili, deputy imam of the Duisi mosque, was arrested and charged with recruiting for IS. However, as the total population of the gorge is only a few thousand, its potential for generating radical Islamists would rapidly be exhausted, accounting maybe for no more than a few dozen. Nonetheless, social tensions brought about by the clash of two cultures, Sufism and Salafism, would remain acute²¹.

Dagestan

The presence of Chechen commanders in Syria influences developments not only in the Pankisi Valley but also in the North Caucasus. The Islamic underground is most active in Dagestan; more than half of all armed incidents, perpetrated by fighters or security forces, occur there²². Dagestan's land mass and population exceed those of Chechnya, Ingushetia, and Kabardino-Balkaria combined. What happens in Dagestan, therefore, is important to understanding the evolution of the Islamic underground and the crisis it is experiencing at present.

Historically Dagestan had been the Islamic center of the North Caucasus. Its religious significance declined with the rise of Salafism, the development of Salafi organizational structures (as early as 1991), and the conflicts between Sufis and Salafists. New trends and ideas came from abroad and people and clergy gained knowledge through direct contacts with the Islamic world. The formation of Ichkeria, its declaration of independence, and its struggle with Russia pushed Dagestan further into the background.

²¹ G. Jasutis, "Explaining the Chechen Schism in Georgia's Pankisi Valley", *Caucasus Survey*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2015, pp. 130-132.

²² In the last two years, 258 armed incidents took place in the North Caucasus, 164 of them in Dagestan "Vooruzhennyye intsidenty i zhertvy na Severnom Kavkaze 2014-2015 gg", http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/perestrelki_vzrivi_2014_2015.html

However, plagued by a complex set of issues – religious, ethnic, clan relations, criminality, and the presence of the Islamic underground – Dagestan is the most problematic republic in the North Caucasus. The country is highly religious; Dagestan was Islamized almost a thousand years ago and Islam in its Sufi form has dominated in the past two centuries. Salafi ideas began to make inroads as the Soviet Union was breaking up. Early Salafi communities exhibited a missionary zeal²³, imposing Sharia in their areas of influence (villages)²⁴, thus reducing to a minimum the power of the authorities.

In August 1999 Salafists made a hopeless attempt to establish an Islamic state, the Islamic Republic of Dagestan. The Russian army crushed their bid then used the event to strike a final blow at Chechnya²⁵ that has refused to recognize Moscow's authority since 1991²⁶. In 2000, by order of Shamil Basaev, their nominal leader, jihadists left Chechnya to open fronts elsewhere in the North Caucasus and draw the Russian army away from Chechnya. Even if it did not change the situation in the Chechen Republic much, the scheme partly succeeded; from that moment on, Islamic radicalism began to grow and unconventional forms of warfare to expand²⁷.

Jihadist armed formations (*jamaats*) in Dagestan outnumbered those in the rest of the North Caucasus. The jihadist organization was a single well-coordinated structure. The country was divided into sectors, each controlled by an *amir*. The amir commanded armed units in the districts and population centers of his sector. Amirs and kadis (Muslim judges) answered to an amir at the top of the system, the Amir of Dagestan. To prevent the destruction of entire *jamaats*, only sectors' amirs had contacts with the Amir of Dagestan; losses among them were at times severe, but they never impaired the functioning of the underground.

²³ E. Kisriev, *Islam and the authorities in Dagestan*, Moscow, 2004, p. 185.

²⁴ A. Yarlykapov, "The Radicalization of North Caucasian Muslims", *Russia and Islam: State, Society, and Radicalism*, R. Dannreuther, L. March (eds.), Routledge, 2010, p. 140.

²⁵ A. Malashenko, *Can Islam strengthen society? Islamic Factor in the North Caucasus*. Moscow, Gendalf, Carnagi Endowment for International Peace, 2001, p. 154.

²⁶ I. Babich, *Anthropology of Power and Islam*. M., 2009, p. 91.

²⁷ Dj. Alieva, "The features of politization of Islam in modern Dagestan", *Vlast'*, 2014, no. 8, p. 85.

In the early years, Amirs of Dagestan could hold their position as commander of the entire underground for long periods of time; however, since 2007 none has remained in that role for more than a year. In December 2014, Rustam Asildarov (Mukhamad Abu Usman) – present day leader of the Dagestan Jamaat affiliated with IS – betrayed his allegiance to the Caucasus Emirate and his Amir of Dagestan by announcing his decision to enlist with the Islamic State²⁸. In 2015, the leadership of IS put him in charge of all their forces in the North Caucasus. Many commanders and their fighters followed Asildarov, a move that gave them the long aspired status of members of the world jihadist movement. However, not all combatants shifted their loyalty of to the Islamic State. Some persisted within the framework of the Caucasus Emirate, dividing the Dagestan underground into followers of the Islamic State and supporters of the Caucasus Emirate.

The tactics and strategies of the underground have changed little since its association with the Islamic State. A decrease in the number of armed incidents can be detected, but the most active sector of the Dagestan underground, the Derbent Jamaat (known in the Russian press as Southern Dagestan) still makes the news and even worries the Azerbaijan authorities as a potential source of inspiration for Sunni youth living in the northern part of their republic. The Islamic State is a threat for Russia. The spread of its influence in Dagestan and the rest of the North Caucasus is shown not only in the transformation of the Caucasus Emirate into IS but also in its ability to affect the beliefs of sections of the population, particularly the younger generation, something that does not bode well for the future. Young people are getting radicalized and their views are incompatible with those of the authorities. Most receptive to the ideology of the Islamic State are students in and recently graduated from institutions of higher education.

Since large numbers of fighters have transferred their allegiance to the Islamic State, jihadist violence in Dagestan has diminished.

²⁸ M. Vatchagaev, "The Islamic State Is Set to Replace the Caucasus Emirate", *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 8 January 2015, vol. 12, no. 4, http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=43246&no_cache=1#.Vx05zuaLSuo

The once dynamic unit of the Aukh-Khasaviurt Jamaat composed of Chechens residing in the Khasaviurt district bordering on Chechnya has been quiet. The almost daily jihadist attacks in the capital during the Emirate's sway have trickled down, and weeks go by without any armed incident; similarly, not much is heard of formerly energetic jamaats, such as Bunaisk, and Gimri. The Islamic State's press service has claimed responsibility for the few aggressions perpetrated by the underground in March and April 2016²⁹. It is important for IS's leaders in Iraq to persuade themselves they can mount successful operations on Russian territory. Russia is vulnerable to attacks by IS; its ideology is more radical than that of the Caucasus Emirate and its members have no inhibition about performing extreme acts of terrorism.

However, a year after it announced its presence in the North Caucasus, the Islamic State still has no recognizable structure, no named representative to a supreme council, and no program. Furthermore, its leader in the region, Rustam Asildarov, has yet to make a formal address to his supporters or his command in Iraq. His failure to speak could be construed as silence before the battle (he is reorganizing his forces) or as weakness of the Islamic State in the area; from available information it is probably the latter.

Conclusion

Counterterrorist measures taken by Russian security forces to neutralize the armed underground – the last two leaders of the Caucasus Emirate, Abu Mukhamad and Abu Usman, were killed in 2015 – have undoubtedly played a role in the drop in armed incidents. Another factor contributing to the jihadists' quiescence, that should not be ignored, is the transfer of loyalty from the Caucasus Emirate to the Islamic State. More than a simple change of leadership, the move has created dissention among fighters and has persuaded

²⁹ E.A. Suleimanov and H. Aliyev, "Evaluating the efficacy of indigenous forces in counterinsurgency: Lessons from Chechnya and Dagestan", *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, 2016, vol. 27, no. 3, Special Issue: *Hybrid War in Post-Soviet Spaces*, pp. 392-416.

some to lie low until the future of IS is clarified. At present, the jihadist element in Dagestan is not strong enough to influence social or political developments, but taking into account the concomitant circumstances plaguing the republic it could become an important destabilizing factor in society³⁰.

The situation of the armed underground in Dagestan (Russia) and the Pankisi Valley (Georgia) is linked to the condition of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. Evolution in the Islamic State's situation would influence the state of affairs of the Islamic underground in the entire North Caucasus.

³⁰ V.V. Naumkin and D.V. Makarov, "Islamskii factor v mirovoi politike i interesy Rossii", *Strategiia Rossii*, no. 2007, pp. 53-66.

Conclusions

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Poverty, unemployment, lack of job opportunities, juvenile delinquency, trafficking and smuggling, socio-political, economic and physical marginalization, the role of Salafist ideology as well as the influence of brotherhood networks: all these elements have been frequently highlighted as factors or drivers that could help explain the dynamics of radicalization leading to active violent militancy under the ideals of jihadism. In particular, in recent years there has been an increasing effort to understand how their intertwining and overlapping on single individuals or communities within specific spaces and territories (such as prisons, suburbs or marginal regions), and lay the ground for hotbeds of jihadism. To this aim, it is key to discern and distinguish between root/structural factors and temporary causes, thus highlighting differences and similarities between different cases of radicalization. This analytical framework may contribute to understand the intersection and intertwining between individual pathways, societal contexts and territorial conditions, thus contextualizing the thresholds of radicalization dynamics. At the same time, it could make it possible to identify if and how paths of radicalization have changed in the course of time, and gauge the interplay between the local, regional and international dimensions.

Needless to say, this approach presents multiple challenges. On the one hand, each area or territory has unique contextual factors and histories that need to be carefully analysed in order to concretely understand how and why they can catalyse radicalization processes and under which conditions. However, such a study must avoid criminalizing entire communities, as it may lead to further

marginalization and isolation, and nurture a culture of suspicion. On the other, such analysis cannot avoid confronting the ongoing and broader debate on how the radicalization process works and on the role of religion, namely the radical interpretation of Islam. But in doing so, the study of the hotbeds should proceed free from preconceptions, preconceived theses and culturalism.

In other words, a more focused and comprehensive understanding of the relation between radicalization and socio-economic and political conditions within a specific territory, appears to be the best way to contribute to the ongoing debate on the origin and nature of jihadist movements. Moreover, it can supersede today's divisions between academics and specialists. Over the years, several studies on jihadism and radicalization have been carried out. They use psychological, sociological as well as political and institutional approaches. Different definitions have been proposed with the aim of defining the boundaries of such fluid phenomena. In fact, although today the use of the words radicalization and jihadism is strongly entrenched in political and bureaucratic discourse as well as in daily vocabulary, these concepts are still widely debated and clear-cut definitions have yet to be found¹. In particular, jihadism has been frequently described by pointing out the centrality of the call to armed combat under the ideal of jihad against both external non-Muslim enemies and official rulers in the MENA region, who are considered "apostates"². At the same time, jihadism has been depicted through its radical idea of religion that requires a perpetual war against the West and its allies³. Other approaches have instead sought to describe its logics through chronologies, pointing out its

¹ R. Coolsaet, 'All radicalisation is local'. *The genesis and drawbacks of an elusive concept*, Egmont papers 84, Royal Institute for International Relation, 31 May 2016.

² N.R. Keddie, "The Revolt of Islam, 1700 to 1993: Comparative Considerations and Relations to Imperialism", *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 36, no. 3, July, 1994. F.A. Gerges, *The Far Enemy: Why Jihad Went Global*, Cambridge University Press, second edition, 2009.

³ O. Ashour, "Post-Jihadism: Libya and the Global Transformations of Armed Islamist Movements," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 2012.e, vol. 23, no. 3, 2011. M. Sedgwick, "Jihadism, Narrow and Wide: The Dangers of Loose Use of an Important Term", *Perspectives on Terrorism*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2015.

developments and changes, identifying discontinuities and similarities between the local revolutionary jihadism of the Sixties and Seventies, the separatist and resistance movements of the Eighties and Nineties (respectively in Chechnya and Afghanistan) and, more recently, global jihadism epitomized by al-Qaeda since the mid-Nineties⁴. Finally, according to the interpretation of jihadism as a global ideology, recent analysis has emphasized that it seems to be a “bricolage” resulting from appropriation and manipulation of specific concepts, images, symbols of the Muslim tradition and its combination with the main Western political ideologies of the last century⁵. Accordingly, jihadism is different from other militant radical ideologies for its ambition to give the “believer-militant” a new beginning, a “purer” and more “authentic” identity as well as a clear mission in the present world and in the afterlife.

Moreover, in the wake of the recent terrorist attacks in Paris and Brussels, the French public domain has seen a new round of debate on the causes and origins of today’s radicalism and terrorism. Although it may sometimes seem self-referential – due to its main focus on the French context – it provides relevant insights to the present study.

In his article published in *Le Monde* on 24 November 2015⁶, Olivier Roy resumes and enriches some of his thesis already presented in “The Failure of Political Islam”⁷. To understand the phenomenon of radicalization Roy explains that it is key to distance it from two wrong and false assumptions. On the one hand, in their present condition, Muslim youth and to a large extent Islam are erroneously considered endemically unable to integrate within Western societies and today’s international system. On the other, negative post-colonial legacies, perceptions of being inevitably excluded from Western societies (such that of France), as well as a strong sense of

⁴ T. Hegghammer, “Global Jihadism and the Iraq War”, *Middle East Journal*, vol. 60, no. 1, Winter, 2006. M. Sedgwick (2015).

⁵ B. Tibi, *Islamism and Islam*, Yale University Press, 2012.

⁶ O. Roy, “Le djihadisme est une révolte générationnelle et nihiliste”, *Le Monde*, 24 November 2015, http://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2015/11/24/le-djihadisme-une-revolte-generationnelle-et-nihiliste_4815992_3232.html

⁷ O. Roy, *The Failure of Political Islam*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1994.

identification with the Palestinian cause and opposition to Western intervention in the Middle East, are wrongly believed to be the decisive drivers of jihadism's allure. In reality, these are not the strongest reasons behind new-generation Muslims' fight and militancy against the Western world, especially in Europe.

Indeed, neither culturalism nor post-colonialism legacies fit into the definition of today's jihadism. According to the author, today's jihadism is neither "a revolt of Islam", nor a "revolt of the Muslims". It is a phenomenon that affects two specific youth categories: the second/third generations of immigrants and the converts to Islam. These two groups share the same experiences of breaking with their parents and the "original" culture that they in principle symbolize. This occurs without successfully embracing an inclusive new identity. Accordingly, the terrorist attacks in Europe and the considerable number of foreign fighters reveal the development of a dynamic of "Islamization of radicalism" rather than a "radicalization of Islam". Today's jihadism is the clear expression of a revolt that already exists in the minds of such youths and within our societies, nurtured more by nihilism than idealism.

In an interview published in *Atlantico*⁸ Gilles Kepel refused the notion of radicalization developed by Roy and more generally the capacity of such a concept to identify the essence of current events. In fact, Kepel insists on underlining the relationship between today's jihadism and Salafism. Without full awareness of the impact of such interaction, Islamic radicalization tends to appear a loose concept. Accordingly, similarities between different experiences, such as the Red Brigades, the Baader-Meinhof Gang, or the Abaaoud group, should not be overstated. Kepel underlines that today's terrorism represents the third wave of jihadism. A dynamic that particularly involves second/third-generation Western Muslim youths. This is a fact that needs to be carefully scrutinized. To better understand the

⁸ "La culture politique française championne du monde de la production de terroristes: une surprenante théorie américaine revue et corrigée par Gilles Kepel", *Atlantico*, 1 April 2016, <http://www.atlantico.fr/decryptage/culture-politique-francaise-championne-monde-production-terroristes-surprenante-theorie-americaine-revue-et-corrigee-gilles-2640170.html#eTvERkO2wCjk4SlA.99>

today's jihadist wave, it is first necessary to analyse the intertwining between three distinct key events. First, the 2005 riots within France's *banlieues* brought third-generation postcolonial immigrants to the fore as one of the central political players in French public space. Secondly, in 2004, one of the most famous jihadist strategists, Abu Mus'ab al-Suri, published "The call to global Islamic resistance", theorizing the need to bring the jihadist ideology and struggle to Europe, taking advantage of youths' socio-political malaise in the suburbs. Finally, the development of YouTube and Web 2.0 provided strategic means of communication and recruitment. The convergence of these three key events suddenly showed its impact in March 2012, with the terrorist attack perpetrated by Mohamed Merah. Now, this aggression can be considered the prelude to today's jihadist wave.

Indeed, the two approaches seem to describe widely different phenomena. On the one hand, rethinking jihadism according to the idea of "Islamization of radicalism" sheds light on a dynamic of generational revolt that sees isolated and nihilistic individuals embracing the jihadist fight, going through a sort of re-conversion experience. On the other, focusing on Salafism reveals the importance of the brotherhood dimension, as well as of living environments and conditions, especially those pervaded by radical Islamist ideology and culture.

Nevertheless, if combined and concretely tested on the ground, these theories and approaches can effectively provide a more nuanced analytical framework defining a sort of continuum where different experiences and organizations can coherently be positioned and understood. Moreover, the integration of both psychological and sociological approaches can effectively help expand the analysis, focusing on the intersection between individual pathways and social conditions.

In this framework, the issue of the "quest for an alternative identity" could provide a further useful analytical tool to improve today's knowledge of jihadism. On the one hand, according to several

scholars⁹, these ideologies can answer the question of “Who am I?” Under precise conditions, the response could appear enormously appealing in its simplicity. It offers full and apparently meaningful membership in a global *umma* defined by adherence to a universal (and violent) radical Islamic doctrine that rejects local customs and traditions. Muslim identity thus becomes a matter of inner belief to be militantly expressed on the ground rather than a spiritual expression. Currently the Islamic State seems to offer this form of identity, in particular to young generations both in Europe and the Middle East. On the other hand, the quest for identity can also help explain the fascination exerted by a number of organized groups involved in separatist or resistance struggles as well as IS’ proto-state claims, whose activities are interpreted not only in terms of military confrontation but also as efforts to imagine alternative existences and socio-political futures.

Given the complexity of today’s jihadist galaxy, with its huge variety of individuals, movements, territories and spaces, such multifaceted understanding is much needed. Bearing this in mind, the concept of hotbeds can provide a useful analytical field in which to validate and further develop these insights. The report has clearly shown that different elements and factors traditionally considered as drivers of radicalization can variably intertwine, developing multiple paths of radicalization. This is clearly explained by the fact that all the hotbeds analysed in the volume have unique characteristics that eventually drove the radicalization of their populations. At the same time, the study of different “hotbeds” shows that the presence or absence of one or more of these elements and factors cannot explain radicalization or its absence. It is the intertwining and selective composition of all these aspects that creates the suitable environment for radicalization. Without such comprehensive understanding, these phenomena tend to remain elusive.

When moving to the two macro regional dimensions analysed in the volume (Western and Middle East sections), the study has also

⁹ See for example F. Fukuyama, “Identity, Immigration, And Liberal Democracy”, *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 17, no. 2, April 2006.

identified some constants or major factors within the same specific group. Accordingly, radicalization clearly appears to be a “local” dynamic which, however, loses perspective and projection if analysed independently from the regional and international dimensions.

More specifically, all the cases of this report regarding the Western domain seem to share the common issue of identity and belonging at both the community and individual levels. This implies not only poor and weak concepts at the citizenship level, but more widely in the perception of the right to live and exist within socio-political public space and sometimes in the state itself. Accordingly, radicalization in Great Britain seems to be the product of a long political history that repeatedly challenged British Muslim identity. For those who radicalized, the path developed through a complex array of influences. IS propaganda is just the most recent message that has found resonance among those who sought an alternative identity and inclusion. In this context, the Belgian case proves the double impact of socio-economic deprivation and feelings of rejection. In particular, the perception of being constantly subjected to judgment because non-indigenous citizens has emerged as one of the major drivers of local radicalization. The case of Minneapolis takes the analysis to the other side of the Atlantic. Here, in addition to community-oriented motivations, militant al-Shabaab’s use of an early system of bridging figures – in which fighters on the ground communicated and kept in touch with potential recruits in their own community at home – created a constant flow of information and inspiration able to orient and sustain a durable radicalization process. This experience has been particularly strategic to IS, which relied on al-Shabaab recruitment classes – like Mohammed Abdullahi Hassan and Mohamed Osman’s – to attract and radicalize Minnesotans from Somalia. This case shows that the combination of a strong community network and radical religious ideology with the presence of an open battlefield can be highly effective in sustaining a wider and resilient network of militant jihadists. Partially similar to this last case, in the Balkans family and ethnic ties proved to be of primary importance, easily coalescing into the larger separatist or irredentist movements of the post-Cold War period. In fact, this

has given jihadist groups not only a common cause to fight but also effective support and recruitment networks. This is particularly the case with certain Albanian individuals and groups in Kosovo and Macedonia. The vacuum in security cooperation between Kosovo and Macedonia has been used for some time by the supporters of Salafi and Takfiri movements in order to spread their ideology, recruiting people that today are joining foreign conflicts in Syria and Iraq. Family and ethnic links are also important in Bosnia and Herzegovina as well as in Sandzak in Serbia. More generally, jihadism in the Balkans seems to be triggered by multiple drivers that can be partially considered “traditional”, such as the marginalization of minorities, development of radical ideology, lack of prospects. Today these are reinforced by geopolitical and international dynamics.

When placing the spotlight on the Middle Eastern section, it captures the wider regional socio-political instability, the crisis of the state and of its social contract. In this framework, securitization has a tragic impact, as does the targeting and repression of specific local communities, such as in Sinai. This widens the effects of political and economic marginalization and deprivation. Moreover, this region offers the ideal battleground to feed the jihadist concept of the perfect struggle and to control and manage strategic economic resources. The case of Sinai shows that Egyptian authorities need to calibrate their policies to safeguard state interests, especially in terms of inclusive policies of local Bedouins, economic growth, poverty alleviation and protection of the basic civil and political rights. The Cairo government should reduce its securitization approach while favouring a *détente* and stabilization of the Peninsula and promoting a culture of legality and its political legitimacy.

When it comes to Islamic State’s hotbeds in Libya, they appear to be the product of two different drivers. On the one hand, the process of personal radicalization, deeply rooted in former ways of expressing discontent with the domestic situation in the Qaddafi period. On the other, radicalization seems to stem from the political marginalization of a part of Libya’s population in the post-revolutionary period. Derna is a good example of the first type of radical-

ization, Sirte of the second. Broadly speaking, political rather than ideological reasons seem to prevail.

In Tunisia, IS recruitment has been successful thanks to the exclusion and marginalization that many individuals experience in local society. The sense of not belonging to “humanity” has been replaced by a stronger sense of belonging to an idealized “Ummahity”. Therefore, human injustice has paved the way for justice in the name of Allah. Lack of education, a weak economy and loose national unity has empowered the appeal of the Caliphate and jihadism. Radicalization in Tunisia can thus be described as the result of multiple layers of exclusion and marginalization that gradually ended up in a search for inclusion in the global container of utopian jihadist ideology. Finally, the report focuses on Dagestan and the Pankisi Valley. They are the most problematic areas in the North Caucasus. Both contexts are the product of a complex set of issues: religious, ethnic, clan relations, criminality, and the presence of the radical Islamist underground. Furthermore, the second Russian military campaign in Chechnya made things worse in the North Caucasus and triggered a new wave of radicalization.

An anything but trivial fact is that each hotbed has its own distinctiveness as well as its relative pathways to radicalization. Being locally rooted, any response needs to be tailored to context. Nevertheless, governments, particularly the EU, should take into consideration three general prescriptions.

- **Avoid fomenting political marginalization.** The most important challenge is related to the fact that the security/military dimension of counterterrorism should not be at the expense of the political dimension¹⁰. Tackling the root causes of Islamic radicalism should remain a priority. This should be the common interest of Western and Islamic countries. Excessive military action against extremists in Middle East countries helps them recruit new individuals and foster radicalization proces-

¹⁰ For more detailed options for combatting the jihadist rise in the MENA region, see International Crisis Group, “Exploiting Disorder: al-Qaeda and the Islamic State”, 14 March 2016.

ses in the MENA region, in Western countries and elsewhere. The establishment of hotbeds of extremism in the Mediterranean and Middle East region should be considered one of the multiple symptoms rather than the cause of the contemporary instability and disorder. Jihadist groups not only raise issues related to security, but their progress also highlights the need to develop a comprehensive political response able to assess all the factors of current regional instability. Indeed, it is necessary a longer-term effort to mitigate the root causes driving people or communities toward extremism, by integrating military and security operations with development, equality and inclusion policies.

- **Focus on prevention and inclusion.** Given the importance of territorial and brotherhood networks, prevention and inclusion should be developed both at the individual/community and urban levels. Education to diversity and urban regeneration and renewal could help create a new sense of belonging both within targeted community/spaces and between them and the rest of the society, thus avoiding further isolation and criminalization. At the same time, such a commitment could reduce the risk of securitization, contrasting the radicalization process at a more structural level by involving entire communities not just in de-radicalization but also in projecting their future. At the same time, it is necessary to avoid associating any form of externally strict orthopraxis with proof of extremism and radicalization. These two horizons may frequently touch and intertwine, but considering this as sufficient evidence is misleading and counter-productive.
- **Define a European “countering violent extremism” (CVE) agenda.** The attacks in Paris and Brussels and the many counterterrorism police operations have underlined the danger posed by radicalized individuals, often coming from European hotbeds. Bearing this in mind, European governments and authorities should consider focusing CVE activities on addressing “root causes”, in particular those related to states’ basic obli-

gations to citizens, like education, employment, or services to marginalized communities. This policy should go along with the introduction of specific normative interventions which try to recover radicalized individuals. Indeed, only a few European countries have developed counter-radicalization strategies seeking to de-radicalize or disengage committed militants and, with even greater intensity, prevent the radicalization of new ones or the creation of new hotbeds. For this reason, the EU needs a comprehensive CVE strategy. However, national governments face key challenges: lack of funding, high costs and trouble in empirically determining the effectiveness of CVE programs¹¹. A EU program can overcome these complications, by fostering a common and shared understanding of radicalization processes on a large scale and implementing effective collaboration between intelligence services.

¹¹ L. Vidino and S. Hughes, “Countering Violent Extremism in America”, Center for Cyber and Homeland Security, George Washington University, June 2015, <https://cchs.gwu.edu/sites/cchs.gwu.edu/files/downloads/CVE%20in%20America%20.pdf>

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