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Take Away Jihadism:
Radicalization Processes in the
West

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Abstract:

This essay examines the radicalization phenomenon as a pathway to Islamic terrorism in the West. Throughout this essay the radicalization process is analysed, drawing from existing literature while paying special attention to the factors that facilitate it and refuting some of the myths that surround it. Biographic data from Islamic terrorists, drawn from original studies, is used as evidence to reveal that radicalization is the result of complex interaction of factors, of which socialization is a prominent one, which render the message of radical Islamism more attractive. The essay suggests a basic model of radicalization in order to better understand this phenomenon. The conclusion will include a series of recommendations which have been formulated to address the risks posed by radicalization in a more effective manner.

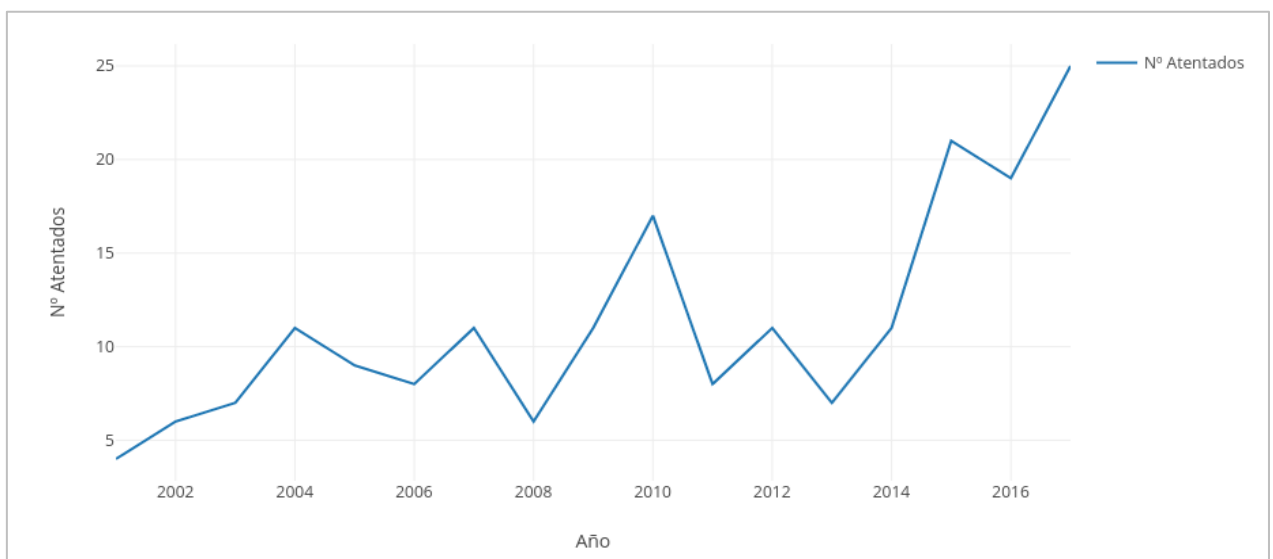
Keywords:

Radicalization, Violent Extremism, Islamism, Jihadi Terrorism, Western World, Europe and North America.

***NOTE:** The ideas contained in the Opinion Documents are the responsibility of their authors, without necessarily reflecting the thinking of the IEEE or the Ministry of Defense.

Introduction

Over the last years, there has been a build-up of Islamic terrorist activity in Europe and North America. Since 2001 only the EU has the number of individuals arrested for activity related with Islamic extremism increased fivefold.¹ Furthermore, although the exact figure remains unknown, the number of EU citizens that have travelled to known areas of conflict to join Islamic insurgencies has increased from the hundreds in 2010 to thousands as of recent.² Both the number of terrorist attacks and the resulting victims have in conjunction, increased considerably, as shown in figures 1 and 2.

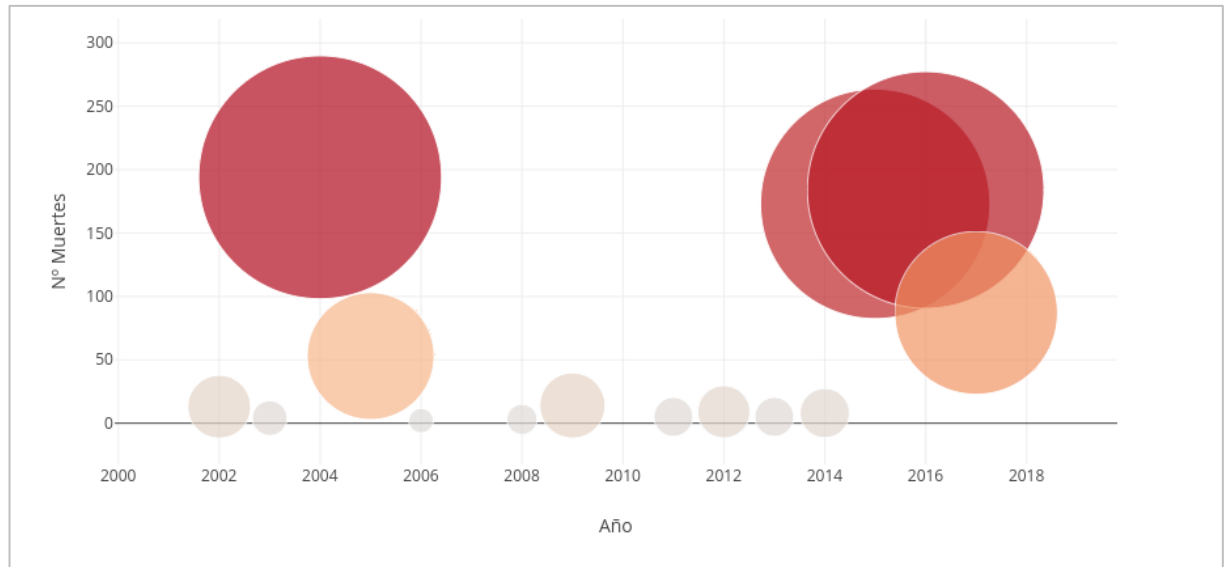


Original Source³

¹ From 122 in 2011 to 718 in 2016 with a progressive increase yearly. Source: “TE-SAT 2014: EU Terrorism Situation and Trend Report”, Europol, The Hague, Netherlands, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017.

² See Rachel Briggs & Obe Tanya Silverman “Western Foreign Fighters: Innovations in Responding to the Threat” Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2014, p. 9-10. The Soufan Group, “Foreign fighters: An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq” (2015) p. 7-10. Edwin Bakker & Mark Singleton “Foreign Fighters in the Syria and Iraq Conflict: Statistics and Characteristics of a Rapidly Growing Phenomenon” in *Foreign Fighters under International Law and Beyond*, (The Hague, T.M.C. Asser Press, 2016).

³ (In Western Europe, U.S. and Canada) The data has been collected from Javier Jordan’s work in “Impact of jihadist terrorism in the United States and Western Europe: a comparative analysis,” also from the START Global Terrorism Database, Jane’s Terrorism & Insurgency Center and the Rand Database of Worldwide Terrorism incidents, along with media publications. These are not exact numbers, since there is often a lack of consensus around the classification of a violent act as a terrorist attack.

Original Source⁴

Unlike previous waves of terrorism, where most attacks relied on outside direction and could be linked to a specific organization, a significant number of the most recent attacks have been carried out independently without significant links to any terrorist organization other than being inspired by the same ideology.⁵ Additionally, a large number of terrorists are 'homegrown' meaning they had been born or raised in the West, and often strike in the same country later on.⁶

This raises several questions, each more pressing than the other: What drives a person, apparently well integrated, to dedicate himself/herself to a cause like Islamic terrorism, a cause that prescribes indiscriminate violence, that forces its followers underground, and even demands the sacrifice of one's own life?

This essay attempts to examine the radicalization dynamics that contribute to swelling of the ranks of Islamic terrorism in Europe and North America, specifically, in relation to homegrown terrorism.⁷

⁴ The data comes from START Global Terrorism Database, Jane's Terrorism & Insurgency Center and the Rand Database of Worldwide Terrorism incidents.

⁵ On this matter, Javier Jordán identifies the increasing importance of independent actors which do not belong to large terrorist organizations. See "Impact of jihadist terrorism in the United States and Western Europe..." p. 99-102.

⁶ Specifically, 73% of Islamic terrorists who have perpetrated attacks in Europe or North America (Us and Canada) over the last three years (From June 2014 to June 2017) were citizens of the country where the attack took place. See: Lorenzo Vidino, Francesco Marone and Eva Entenmann, "Fear thy neighbor: radicalization and jihadist attacks in the West" *ISPI, ICCT* (June 2017) 101.

⁷ terrorism perpetrated by individuals who have been born or have spent a considerable number of their formative years in the West See: Daveed Gartenstein-Ross y Laura Grossman, "Homegrown terrorists in the US and UK: an empirical examination of the radicalization process" FDD's center for terrorism research

For practical reasons the scope of the study is limited geographically to western Europe (EU member countries, in addition to Switzerland and Norway, but excluding the Balkans) and North America (US and Canada). The time axis goes from 2001 (Post 9/11) to 2017 both included, although events outside of that frame might be covered as well. As for the methodology, a variety of studies regarding Islamic terrorists who were active during that time, will be examined. Special attention will be paid to biographical details around their radicalization, in order to identify any patterns or similarities that allow for the construction of a model that contributes to a better understanding of radicalization dynamics (the why and how). This will all be done under the light of existing literature.

Premises

Most of the studies on violent extremism resort to the concept of radicalization to describe how an individual becomes involved in political violence.⁸

Albeit there is no consensus on the meaning of the term “radicalization”, the most extended definitions refer to a progression towards extremism,⁹ which in turn is defined as the sets of values and attitudes in diametrical opposition to society’s most basic principles.¹⁰ It is, this last concept, a rather ambiguous term that must be contextualized and one that is used in the West to describe ideas or conducts which are clearly incompatible with democracy and the rule of Law, without them being necessarily violent. It is here where the academic distinction between cognitive radicalization (acquiring extremist ideas) and behavioral radicalization (violent action resulting from those ideas) becomes relevant. While it might seem intuitive that these are entwined phenomenon, if we understand violent action as an immediate consequence of the adoption of extremist ideas, in reality these two do not always go hand in hand.¹¹ Evidence of that is that only a few of those who sympathize with radical Islam actually become involved in Islamic terrorism, which is true of other ideological affiliations.¹²

(2009) 11.

⁸ See Randy Borum “Radicalization into Violent Extremism I: A Review of Social Science Theories” *Journal of Strategic Security* Vol 4, Issue. 4, January 2011.

⁹ See David R. Mandel, “Radicalization: What does it mean?” in *Home-grown terrorism: understanding and addressing the root causes of radicalisation among groups with an immigrant heritage in Europe*, ed. Thomas. M. Pick, Anne Speckhard, Beatrice Jacuch (Amsterdam: IOS press, 2009) 111.

¹⁰ Roger Scruton, *The Palgrave Macmillan dictionary of political thought*, 3rd ed. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2007)

¹¹ Peter Neumann, “The trouble with radicalization” *Journal of International Affairs* Vol 89, Issue 4 (2013) p.879.

¹² Crenshaw, Martha (2003) Thoughts on Relating Terrorism to Historical Contexts, p.4. en Crenshaw, Martha (ed.) *Terrorism in Context*.

In order to define the concept, for the purpose of this essay, radicalization can be defined as the adoption of beliefs belonging to Islamic extremism which results in a disposition to exercise or actively collude with violence. The reality is that Islamic terrorism can hardly be understood without referring to the system of beliefs that sustains it. Although it is true that not all radicals are terrorists, and not all terrorists are ideologues, ideas are an essential element in their drift towards violence.¹³

Ideology

When talking about Islamic terrorism a distinction should be made between religion and ideology. Radical Islamism, the term generally used to describe the current of thought that prescribes terrorism, responds to a specific version of Islam which is the result of minority interpretations. Without going into the different currents that can be placed within Islamism, it's obvious that there is some sort of gap between the latter and mainstream Islamic belief. This is proven by the fact that a majority of Muslims do not agree with the premises of Islamism¹⁴, and the existence of numerous widespread doctrinal currents that stand against it. Nonetheless, it is a complex issue that gives way to frequent debate.¹⁵

While it is true that Islamism derives its core principles from religious sources, referencing traditional Islamic foundations,¹⁶ its interpretations come with a series of political beliefs, some of which resemble conspiracy theories, which makes Islamism look more like a totalitarian ideology.¹⁷

Like other ideologies, Islamism works on three levels: First it identifies problems with the status quo, assigning blame. Secondly, it suggests solutions, framed as a vision. Third it provides with a rationale for action, which is framed as a struggle. Although Islamism is a complex ideology, with plenty of nuances, the core of its message is deliberately articulated in a loose manner, so it can resonate through different circumstances.¹⁸

¹³ Neumann, "The trouble with radicalization" p.892.

¹⁴ Such are the findings of some of the most comprehensive studies Pew Research Center (See Michael Lipka, "Muslims and Islam..." Agosto, 2017) y los de Gallup World Pow. See John L. Esposito y Dalia Mogahed, *Who speaks for Islam? What Muslims really think* (New York, Gallup Press, 2007).

¹⁵ M.E. Yapp "Islam and Islamism," *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol 40:2 (2004) 176-182.

¹⁶ Javier Jordán, "Las raíces doctrinales del terrorismo yihadista" *Safe Democracy* (2006)

¹⁷ Randy Borum "Radicalization into Violent Extremism II: A Review of Social Science Theories" *Journal of Strategic Security* Volume 4, No. 4, (2011) p10.

¹⁸ Neil Smelser, *The Faces of Terrorism* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2007), p.48-56.

Broadly speaking, Islamism's basic premises are: the existence of a community of believers, the Ummah,¹⁹ subjugated and threatened by a global conspiracy against Islam. According to this narrative, the injustices suffered by Muslims, including a perceived decay of Islam, can be blamed on the workings of a western coalition led by the U.S. and Israel. Placed alongside the West are the regional actors that give way to its policies. Accepting these premises derives the duty to defend the faith and the community, a struggle that is framed as jihad or "holy war".²⁰ In addition, the indiscriminate nature of terrorism, something that might seem incompatible with Islamic rulings on violence, is justified assigning collective responsibilities and using arguments of retribution.²¹

These premises provide the theoretical framework of Islamic terrorism and appear in the rhetoric and the reasonings of radicalized individuals. For instance, in his video testimony, Mohamed Sidique Khan, head of the cell that carried out the London bombings in July 2005, explicitly rejects his British citizenship, preferring instead to identify with the Ummah. Throughout the video he portrays his actions as revenge for the attacks against his "brothers and sisters,". He argues that, in a democracy, citizens are responsible for the actions of their government, which makes them all legitimate targets.²²

This narrative presents terrorism as a religious imperative. The rhetoric used aims at the victimization of the group and the demonization of the other, turning complex realities in dichotomies such as "us" v. "them". Similarly, grievances of all sorts are portrayed as deliberate aggressions of an omnipresent enemy, exploiting feelings of rage and humiliation.²³ With this purpose, Islamist propaganda can be particularly graphic, using images of atrocities in places like Palestine, Syria or Iraq. At the same time violence is normalized and the notions of armed struggle and martyrdom are glorified. These messages appeal both to reason and emotion, constituting an invitation to think, but also to feel a certain way.²⁴

¹⁹ Olivier Roy, *Globalized Islam: The Search for a New Umma*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004)

²⁰ Jarret M. Brachman, *Global Jihadism: Theory and Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2008) p.10-14.

²¹ Peter Neumann. *Joining al-Qaeda: Jihadist Recruitment in Europe*, Taylor and Francis, 2009. ProQuest EBook Central, 51.

²² Similar testimonies were left by the rest of the members of the cell. See: Aidan Kirby, "The London Bombers as Self-Starters: A Case Study in Indigenous Radicalization and the Emergence of Autonomous Cliques," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 30:5 (2007) 421.

²³ Neumann. *Joining al-Qaeda: Jihadist Recruitment in Europe*, 46.

²⁴ Smelser, *The Faces of Terrorism* p.68

For recruits who are radicalized in the West, Islamist propaganda presents two major action pathways. On the one hand there is the perpetration of attacks, against a wide range of objectives, and on the other hand there is the emigration to the various frontlines of global jihad (Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan...) either to participate directly in the fight, or to support it, like the women who have travelled to become jihadi brides.²⁵ Historically, the commission of attacks in the West used to be regarded as a secondary option, prioritizing the needs of regional jihad in different conflict zones.²⁶ However, this option has increased its appeal, and as a result of the defeats undergone by the Islamic State and the rest of the groups with territorial presence to the point that the most recent Islamist propaganda has turned to emphasize it.²⁷

Radicalization Dynamics

The vast majority of theories regarding radicalization describe the phenomenon as a process, in other words a sequence which follows an order towards a result.²⁸ A significant segment of the literature distinguishes a similar series of stages within the process. One of the most well-known models, Moghadam's Staircase to Terrorism, portrays stages as steps, each higher than the previous one, until the end of the process when the suspects overcome barriers against violence.²⁹ Other authors like McCauley or Moskalenko use pyramidal figures where the vortex represent mobilization as the final stage of the process.³⁰

What can be inferred from these models is that each stage of the process requires some sort of pressure from within or from above, that drives someone forward in the

²⁵ This last case is a little more special and has taken place mainly at the territory under control of the so called Islamic State Estado Islámico. See Elizabeth Pearson & Emily Winterbotham, "Women, Gender and Daesh Radicalisation," *RUSI* Vol 162:3 (2017) p. 63-67.

²⁶ See Fernando Reinares y Carola García-Calvo "Actividad yihadista en España, 2013-2017: de la Operación Cesto en Ceuta a los atentados en Cataluña," *Real Instituto Elcano* (2017) p.28-32.

²⁷ That can be inferred, from publication associated with the Islamic State and from the rhetoric of its spokespersons. See Abu mohamad al adnani, Speech May 21, 2016. This is the tendency in other groups, for instance, in 2016 Al Qaeda introduced a new propaganda format, called "Inspire Guides", which comments attacks perpetrated in the West. The Guides point out evidence of success and failure in both the planning and execution of attacks, while giving indications and suggestions for future attacks. See TE-SAT "EU Terrorism Situation and Trend Report", Europol, (2017) p. 27

²⁸ Neumann, "The trouble with radicalization" p. 874

²⁹ Fathali M. Moghadam, 'The staircase to terrorism: a psychological exploration', *American Psychologist* Vol. 60: 2, (2005) pp. 161-9.

³⁰ Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko, 'Mechanisms of political radicalization: pathways toward terrorism', *Terrorism and Political Violence* 20: 3 (2008), pp. 415-33

radicalization process³¹. This explains why, amongst those who begin the process, only a few actually become radicalized while most either drop out or are left somewhere in between³². Nonetheless, the problem with these theories is that they presuppose a lineal order in the radicalization process, something that is hardly the case in reality, thus questioning the viability of applying them in practice. This had led other authors, like Sagesman, Vidino, and Bakker to place the focus on the factors which contribute to radicalization rather than the stages of the process itself³³.

Radicalization Factors

Socioeconomic Factors

There have been many attempts to explain radicalization in relation with material deprivations, unemployment, lack of opportunities, level of education, etc. However, the reality is that most of these arguments are myths that respond to a desire to understand radicalization process in terms of cause and effect without there being conclusive links between socioeconomic factors and radicalization.

At the socioeconomic level, several studies place homegrown terrorists mostly in the lower middle class, nonetheless there are several cases of terrorists coming from privileged backgrounds.³⁴ A study covering over 200 individuals involved in Islamic terrorism in Europe places 41% in the middle class, 54% in the lower working class, and 4% in the upper class. This often reflects the overall situation of the Muslim diaspora in each country. For example, in the UK and France the Muslim community is made up mostly of immigrants of second and third generation, some of whom have been able to thrive, while, in other countries like Spain and Italy the Muslim community, composed mainly of first and second-generation immigrants and finds itself in a lower social milieu.³⁵

³¹ See Neil J. Smelser. *The Faces of Terrorism: Social and Psychological Dimensions*, Princeton University Press, 2007. ProQuest Ebook Central, 14-16.

³² See Ryan Hunter; Daniel Heinke, Radicalization of Islamic Terrorists in the Western World, 80 FBI L. Enforcement Bull. 25 (2011) p. 27 y Randy Borum "Radicalization into Violent Extremism II: A Review of Social Science Theories" p.37-62

³³ Ibid. P. 46-52.

³⁴ See: Edwin Bakker "Jihadi terrorists in Europe" *Netherlands institute of international relations*, (2006) 38. Similarly a study covering the UK and the US. places 54% in the lower class 26% in the middle class and 16% in the upper class. See: Gartenstein-Ross y Grossman, "Homegrown terrorists in the US and UK: an empirical examination of the radicalization process"

³⁵ King's College London, "Recruitment and Mobilisation for the Islamist Militant Movement in Europe" International Center for the Study of Radicalization and political conflict (2007) p.15-16.

Similarly, the education level varies significantly. Most of the Islamic terrorist radicalized in the West have completed at least secondary education. A significant percentage has gone onto university. On both sides of the spectrum a minority has finished postgraduate studies, (Master's or PhD's) while others abandoned their studies at an early age.³⁶ A recurring incidence is radicalization during their formative years which often leads to halt in their studies.³⁷

As for the incidence of criminality, this is not as recurring as we are often led to believe. However, it is true that a significant minority of individuals radicalized in the West have a record of petty crime such as theft, fraud, and small-time drug trafficking.³⁸ Generally, it's those who come from a lower social milieu that tend to be radicalized in a context like prison or involvement in street gangs.³⁹

When it comes to employment the percentage of unemployed amongst radicalized individuals tends to be higher than the national average. Another pattern, that is quite common is holding low skilled jobs, often below their level of studies.⁴⁰ This has led some to point out the disparity between opportunities and qualifications as a source of frustrations that propels radicalization.⁴¹ However, these circumstances are often generalized, even more so when it comes to ethnic minorities of foreign origins.⁴² Albeit there is a possibility that certain perceptions, like the belief that Muslims are discriminated against in the job market, can contribute to an individual's radicalization, however, there is no evidence that it is generalized in the available biographies of homegrown terrorists.⁴³

³⁶According to Baker "Jihadi terrorists in Europe" 56% had a school diploma and el 31% had graduated from University (Note that often there is no available data). Also, Gartenstein-Ross y Grossman found that 23% had dropped out of secondary education, 53% at least a school diploma and 16% were university graduates, 3% only had a Master y el 2% a PhD.

³⁷ Some individuals leave their studies as their commitment increases, others are arrested or killed during the school year as a result of their activities

³⁸ See Bakker "Jihadi terrorists in Europe" p.40

³⁹ See Lorenzo Vidino, 'The Hofstad Group: The New Face of Terrorist Networks in Europe', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 30 (7) (2007), pp. 579-92.

⁴⁰ See Gartenstein-Ross y Grossman, "Homegrown terrorists in the US and UK" p. 56. This was particularly marked, for instance up to 2006, 90% of jihadi terrorists arrested in Spain worked in unskilled jobs. See Javier Jordan & Nicola Horsburgh "Mapping Jihadist Terrorism in Spain," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 28:3 (2005) 180.

⁴¹ See "Are home grown Islamist terrorists different? Some UK evidence," <https://www.ukdataservice.ac.uk/media/428546/altunbas.pdf>

⁴² See Bakker "Jihadi terrorists in Europe" p.39. En la misma línea "Saisir les mécanismes de la radicalisation violente : pour une analyse processuelle et biographique des engagements violent" Rapport de recherche (2017) p.89.

⁴³ Jytte Klausen, Selene Campion, Nathan Needle, Giang Nguyen & Rosanne Libretti Toward a Behavioral Model of "Homegrown" Radicalization Trajectories, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 39:1 (2016) 67-83 y Stijn Sieckelincka, Elga Sikkensb, Marion van Sanc, Sita Kotnisd, & Micha De Wintere "Transitional

Looking at all the above, radicalization can hardly be attributed to the circumstances mentioned, at least in terms of direct causation. Islamic terrorists radicalized in the West come from a broad social spectrum, which includes all sorts of people like petty criminals who barely hold a high school diploma to university students, employed workers and small business owners. Their situation is no different than that of millions of people around them who however, don't show any signs of radicalization which proves that socioeconomic factors do not have explanatory capacity.

Religion

Similarly, religiousness is not a cause of radicalization, contrary to what some would have us believe. In fact, several study's find that religious formation prevents radicalization rather than promote it.⁴⁴ This is because religion provides arguments, based on different interpretations of religious sources, which counter the Islamism's narrative.

Experts in terrorism, like Sagesman have studied extensive samples of individuals involved in Islamic terrorism and have found that many came from secular backgrounds where religion played a secondary, sometimes a non-existent role. Often, they did not receive a traditional religious upbringing, and instead their contact with faith was very superficial until they became exposed to Islamic propaganda.

In most cases, exposure to the premises of Islamism comes from group discussions, often online and with other self-taught individuals, along with radical preaching's, propagandistic videos and so on rather than reading texts by the movement's ideologues or studying religious sources.⁴⁵ As a consequence, homegrown terrorists are individuals with little ideological sophistication, so much so that they often incur in contradictions of all sorts. For instance, Omar Mateen, lone perpetrator of the attack at Pulse Nightclub in Florida which left 49 dead in June 2016, alleged to be acting on behalf of the Islamic State. However, on social media he had expressed his support for both the I.S. and Jabhat al Nusra, two groups which are theoretically confronted. He had also declared to be a member of Hezbollah, all of which are incompatible affiliations.⁴⁶

Journeys Into and Out of Extremism. A Biographical Approach" *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, p. 1-21.

⁴⁴ Entre otros: Bakker "Jihadi terrorists in Europe" p. 39. Klausen, Campion, Needle, Nguyen & Libretti "Toward a Behavioral Model of Homegrown Radicalization Trajectories" 74-78. See, tambien Faiza Patel, "Rethinking Radicalization" *Brennan Center for Justice* p.10.

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶ Vidino, Marone & Entenmann, "Fear thy neighbor...": 70-71

Normally religion acts as a tool of mobilization and provides for justification in the frame of the ideological message but it can't be considered a radicalization cause in itself. In Juergensmeyer words, "Religion is seldom the problem, but the role of religion can be problematic"⁴⁷.

Psychological Factors

Another myth that should be refuted is that of alleged links between radicalization processes and mental health issues. Although there are certain cases where individuals with a history of mental disorders have carried out attacks inspired by jihadi ideology, like Mohamed Lahouaiej Bouhlej, the author of the car ramming attack in Nice on July 14th 2016,⁴⁸ this is not a general rule. Most homegrown terrorists act within a rational framework motivated by solid beliefs.⁴⁹

Demographic Factors

At the demographic level it should be noted that individuals attracted to Islamic extremism are not always young men. Terrorist attacks have been perpetrated by individuals whose ages range from below 18 to over 50⁵⁰. Albeit it is true that most of them are men, there are also many cases of radicalized women to consider this an exclusively masculine phenomenon. In fact, over the last 4 years we have seen a significant increase in the number of women involved in Islamic terrorism.⁵¹

Dislocation through migration is a recurring feature. Most homegrown terrorists come from Muslim diaspora communities settled in the West. Amongst them there are first, second and third generation immigrants. Several studies maintain that identity conflicts, resulting from the cultural shock and integration pressures, can play an important role in the radicalization process. Often immigrants who settle in the West, especially those who are second generation, perceive a distance between a culture that they live in, which they feel is not entirely theirs and their original culture, which also feels alien to them in a way.⁵²

⁴⁷ "Addressing the Causes of Terrorism" *The Club de Madrid Series on Democracy and Terrorism* (2005) 27-30.

⁴⁸ He had previously been treated for psychiatric disorders and was considered mentally unstable. See Vidino, Marone and Entenmann, "Fear thy neighbor..." p. 69-70.

⁴⁹ Ibid, p. 62-63.

⁵⁰ Vidino, Marone and Entenmann, "Fear thy neighbor..." p. 101.

⁵¹, See TE-SAT EU Terrorism Situation and Trend Report", Europol, The Hague, Netherlands, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017. (No se ha accedido a datos precisos sobre EE. UU.).

⁵² Robert Leiken as cited in: *Currents and Crosscurrents of Radical Islam, A Report of the*

Another recurring incident are perceptions of discrimination which reinforce the construction of identities opposed to the host society. This dichotomy between successful structural integration and failed cultural assimilation can be a breeding ground for Islamic extremism which offers an alternative identity, from the idea of the Ummah, which meets the much-wanted feeling of belonging.⁵³

Of course, this does not mean there are no cases of individuals who are entirely rooted in the West becoming radicalized. In this respect, converts occupy a significant place in radicalization statistics, to the point that they tend to be overrepresented.⁵⁴ This can be explained by looking at other, more widespread, factors.

Existential Factors

From his interviews with Islamist militants, social scientist Quintan Wiktorowicz, underlines how, when he inquired about the origins of their radicalization most of them remembered a point in their lives when they found themselves lacking purpose and unsatisfied.⁵⁵ Similarly, most authors agree that radicalization processes begin from a tipping point, a personal crisis or an important event that make an individual reconsider his or her place in society and his attitude vis a vis the world.⁵⁶ In the field of sociology, the term «cognitive opening» is used to name this phenomenon,⁵⁷ which describes the moment an individual sees his convictions, or his lack of convictions shaken by a series of circumstances which turn him more receptive to different worldviews he hadn't contemplated before.

Islamism's message exploits all sorts of dissatisfactions and appeals not just to the Muslim diaspora, but also to all those who feel excluded by a secular individualist system. From a study of over 2000 individuals who travelled abroad to fight for al-Qaeda, the main motivations identified were seeking identity and belonging, and the having an outlet for

Transatlantic Dialogue on Terrorism, Center for Strategic and International Studies (2006).

⁵³ King's College London, "Recruitment and Mobilisation for the Islamist Militant Movement in Europe" p. 16.

⁵⁴ See Vidino, Marone and Entenmann, "Fear thy neighbor..." p. 55-56.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ King's College London, "Recruitment and Mobilisation for the Islamist Militant Movement in Europe" 39.

⁵⁷ Randy Borum "Radicalization into Violent Extremism I: A Review of Social Science Theories" p.18-19, Initially, the term was introduced by Quintan Wiktorowicz in "Joining the Cause: Al-Muhajiroun and Radical Islam"

violent frustrations. It is precisely these aspirations and frustrations, all very common, which find in radicalization an ideal vehicle when they are not channeled elsewhere.⁵⁸

Socialization

Another relevant factor in the radicalization processes is its social aspect. In Spain a study of over 178 individuals involved in Islamic terrorism pointed out that 9 out of 10 had become radicalized along with other individuals and in contact with a radicalization agent, normally an activist or a veteran with experience in the global jihad. Often, in 7 out of 10 cases, such contact resulted from previous social links, of either friendship or family.⁵⁹ Similar patterns are observed in the rest of the western world, in both Europe and North America.⁶⁰

The importance of socialization in radicalization processes has been noted by several authors, from Della Porta who identified socialization as one of the key factors influencing the decision to join a terrorist group, to Sagesman who underlined the collective character of radicalization processes in group. In these types of processes, a group linked by friendship bonds radicalizes collectively, through internal debate and common exploration of jihadi propaganda. The decision to act is taken by the group as a whole, not by the individual. Also, commitment is with the group, rather than the cause, since the bond between members often goes back before their radicalization. Some examples of these groups known as *self-starters*,⁶¹ are: the cell responsible for the London attacks in 2005, the Hofstad network in the Netherlands, the Tsarnaev brothers behind the Boston marathon bombings in 2013, and the cell responsible for the attacks in Barcelona in 2017. Similarly, for individuals who join an already existing organization one of the pull factors is the development or the existence of a bond with other members. This the reason several authors claim that radicalization is a matter of who you know.⁶²

⁵⁸ John Venhaus. *Why Youth join al-Qaeda*. Washington, DC, United States Institute of Peace, May 2010, p. 8-10.

⁵⁹ Fernando Reinares y Carola García Calvo, "Dos factores que explican la radicalización yihadista en España" *Real Instituto Elcano* (2017) 6-11.

⁶⁰ See Sagesman *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the 21st century* p.66-67. See also Bakker y Vidino subrayan la importancia de la socialización.

⁶¹ See: Petter Nesser. "Jihadist Cell Structures in the UK and Europe." *Norwegian Defence Research Establishment* (2006)

⁶² Vidino, Marone & Entenmann, "Fear thy neighbor...", p. 83.

Although it is true that there are solitary radicalization processes, in other words, those that take place solely from exposure to jihadi propaganda,⁶³ these are clearly a minority. It should be noted that often interaction takes place entirely online. Also, often there is simply not enough evidence to determine the absence social interaction in a certain radicalization process.

In any case, it's safe to say that radicalization has a strong social component. The interaction with individuals who share beliefs and circumstances contributes to the creation of ideological echo chambers⁶⁴ where arguments and motivations are retro-fed. Also, social bonds reinforce cohesion in the ranks of Islamism, in a specific manner for terrorist organization or groups and in a more abstract manner for individuals who act alone, but with the conscience of belonging to a movement.

Practical Implications

Most of the authors who examined the background of homegrown terrorist conclude there is no such a thing as a jihadist profile.⁶⁵ Instead of specific causes which drive radicalization there is a complex interaction of a multitude of factors which allow someone to be more receptive to Islamism's message. This message resonates to the extent that it is capable of integrating social dynamics like, for example, rootless-ness and discrimination perceptions within the Muslim diaspora.

As for the question of what makes an individual be attracted to Islamism's worldview, the different studies examined show that circumstances like a passionate personality or any sort of deficiency can contribute to someone's radicalization just as much as well-known factors like a culture shock, socialization etc. What must be noted is that there are no omnipresent factors, instead there are as many radicalization processes as radicalized individuals. A very revealing case is that of two Danish brothers, both raised in identical circumstances, one of whom grew up to be an active neo Nazi while the other converted to Islam and travel to Syria to wage jihad.⁶⁶

⁶³ Reinares y García Calvo, "Dos factores que explican la radicalización yihadista en España" p. 3.

⁶⁴ Sagesman *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the 21st century* p. 86-87.

⁶⁵ Amongst others Sagesman, Venhaus, Bakker, Gartenstein-Ross y Grossman.

⁶⁶ See Stijn Sieckelink, Elga Sikkens, Marion van San, Sita Kotnis & Micha De Winter "Transitional Journeys Into and Out of Extremism. A Biographical Approach", 7-8.

Although there can hardly be a model that covers every single radicalization trajectory of homegrown terrorists, it's safe to say that throughout every radicalization process there is:

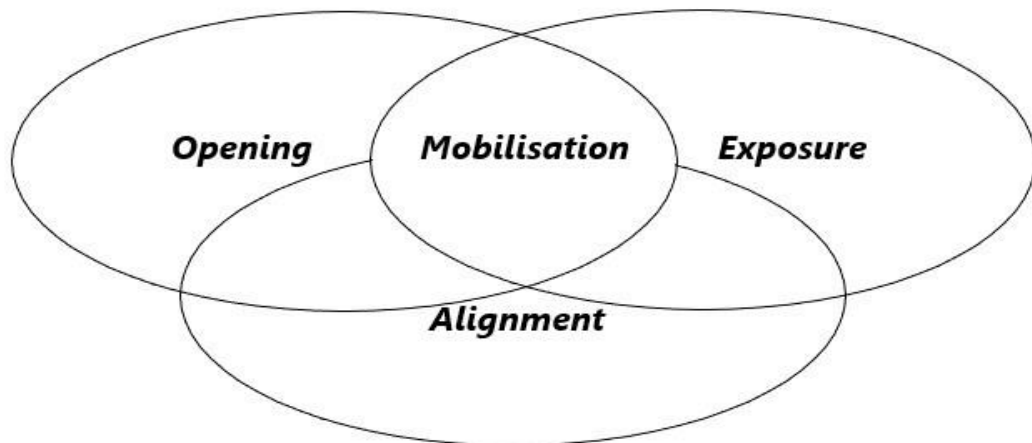
- A cognitive opening, usually the result of a personal crisis during which there are feelings of disenchantment, disillusion and detachment that tend to be redirected to rejection of the system in general and western culture in particular. This motivates a search for answers, often in counter culture, during which the subject is more likely to find Islamism's narrative attractive.
- A progressive exposure to that narrative which can be the result of the subject's own initiative, which is usually the case in self-radicalization processes, or a more passive exposure, coming from the subject's surroundings. In this regard, it is true that there are certain enclaves known as «clusters» or «hubs» where there is a concentration of radicalization with higher levels of activity from militants, already radicalized, and gateway organizations.⁶⁷ However, while historically, ideological exposure in person was a must, today widespread internet access has allowed consumption of ideological content and social interaction at any place or time.⁶⁸
- An alignment that takes place when the subject makes Islamism and its premises his worldview. Generally, this phenomenon, like the previous ones, does not happen suddenly, but progressively. Nonetheless, ideological assimilation can happen at a very superficial level and is not immune to doubts and contradictions, which explains why alignment can be reversible.
- A mobilization. We say there is mobilization from the moment the subject makes effective his or her ideological commitment, usually by exercising violence, starting to collaborate actively with those who do or are preparing to do so. Generally, mobilization can be traced back to a specific moment more or less since it has a factual element.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Organizations dedicated to proselytising which promote radical interpretations of Islam, some examples are al-Muhajiroun y Jama'at al-Tabligh, sharia4. See Neumann. *Joining al-Qaeda: Jihadist Recruitment in Europe*, 31-35. Often the organizations commitment to use only nonviolent means it's not shared by all its members or it's just a facade. See Zeyno Baran "Fighting the War of Ideas," *Foreign affairs* (November 2005) y Athena Intelligence "Movimientos musulmanes y prevención del yihadismo en España: La Yama'a At-Tabligh Al-Da'wa" Athena Paper, Vol. 2, No 1 (2007).

⁶⁸ Ver Maura Conway, "Determining the Role of the Internet in Violent Extremism and Terrorism: Six Suggestions for Progressing Research" *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* Vol 40: 1 (2007) 77-82.

⁶⁹ should be noted that there are instances of, already mobilized subjects who freely choose to abandon which proves that the radicalization path can be walked two ways. However, demobilisation can happen

These phenomena are not differentiated stages of a linear process, but rather events which overlap and do not follow a predetermined order. Nonetheless it is a basic model that can be of use for a better understanding of radicalization processes.



Conclusions

To address the threat of homegrown terrorism in a more effective manner we must, in the first place, reconcile ourselves with uncomfortable truths. The risk of radicalization is real and affects more people than we would like to admit. This is worrying because a single individual or a small group without any formal training and no links with any terrorist organization can inflict severe damage, as shown in regards to recent attacks.

We must therefore, abandon the perception of terrorist groups as closed organizations with a defined structure. The tendency of Islamic terrorism towards decentralization is most likely to continue given the number of external pressures such as police work in the western world and military defeats in the territories that are used as sanctuaries by terrorist groups.

for different reasons without abandoning the beliefs of Islamism, which why disengagement should not be equated with deradicalization. See Doosje, Fathali M Moghaddam, Arie W Kruglanski, Arjan de Wolf, Liesbeth Mann and Allard R Feddes "Terrorism, radicalization and de-radicalization" *Current Opinion in Psychology* Vol 11:7 (2017) p. 82 y Mary Beth Altier, Emma Leonard Boyle, Neil D. Shortland & John G. Horgan "Why They Leave: An Analysis of Terrorist Disengagement Events from Eighty-seven Autobiographical Accounts," *Security Studies*, 26:2 (2017) 305-332

Unfortunately, the surveillance of every single individual immersed in a radicalization process is a task beyond the means of the state security apparatus, both in Spain and in the rest of the Western World. Logically, resources tend to be focused on those individuals or groups, already radicalized and with the capabilities to strike. In this way, one of the most pressing threats is the return of foreign fighters, who have acquired dangerous skills that they could use themselves or teach to others⁷⁰. However, this approach is limited to the immediate risk with the resulting danger that this implies. It wouldn't be the first time that individuals whose radicalization was known by security forces and managed to perpetrate attacks.⁷¹ This highlights the shortcomings of policies that are entirely based on police surveillance.

If we want to avoid constantly lagging behind Islamic terrorism, it is necessary to address its underlying causes, to the extent that is possible. To do that the first step is to get to know and understand radicalization dynamics. Accordingly, it would be convenient to increase research and dissemination in this field, which in turn would contribute to the implementation of consistent policy. For example, knowing that there is no a single profile of homegrown jihadists and that socialization plays an important role, prevention measures should try to isolate individuals who actively contribute to the radicalization of others (activists, veterans, radical preachers) instead of stigmatizing the Muslim community trying to surveil all its members as potential radicals. This requires a counter-terrorism measures and immigration legislation capable of adapting to this phenomenon.⁷²

At the ideological front, no matter how praiseworthy the efforts to eliminate extremist content may be, ideological exposure can hardly be fought without clashing with basic rights and freedoms. Also, Islamic extremism has proven to be capable of surviving underground, presenting itself as a revolutionary and counter-culture movement.⁷³ That

⁷⁰ Christian Nünlist, "Dealing with Jihadist Returnees: A Tough Challenge" *CSS Analyses in Security Policy*, No. 210, 2017.

⁷¹ Ruth Alexander, "Terror watch lists: Can you keep tabs on every suspect?" *BBC*, 2 June, 2013. Laura L. Caro, "España vigila de forma «permanente» a todos los yihadistas con perfil «peligroso»" *ABC*, 11 de junio de 2017. See Anya Bernstein, "The Hidden Costs of Terrorist Watch Lists" 61 *Buffalo Law Review* 461 (2013)

⁷² See Jamie Bartlett & Jonathan Birdwell, "From suspects to citizens: preventing violent extremism in a big society," *Demos*, 2010 y Daniel H Heinke, "Countering Radicalization and Recruitment of so called Jihadists - Proscription of Radicalization Hubs," 2016.

⁷³ See: Eguskiñe Lejarza Illaro, "Terrorismo islamista en las redes – la yihad electrónica," Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos," (2015) p. 8.

is why it is necessary to promote public debate where the contradictions and the vacuity of Islamism are exposed. This is a task that goes beyond the state's competences and requires an active role from civil society. Along these lines, de-radicalization programs and the experience of individuals who have chosen to leave terrorism can be very useful together with local level efforts in affected communities⁷⁴.

What is clear is that there remains a long way ahead in the fight against radicalization. In a plural and inclusive society where, political tensions are a reality, the best strategy is the one that protects all citizens from violent extremism. A better understanding of radicalization dynamics will allow for the development of strategies that tackle this threat in a more effective manner.

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⁷⁴ Several Countries have implemented reintegration programmes for radicalized individuals, such as the Chanel programme in UK.. <https://www.counterextremism.org/resources/details/id/115/channel-process>