THE RELIGIOUS AND IDEOLOGICAL FACTORS OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM[1]

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Many researchers, journalists and politicians find it difficult to accept that such violence can be politically or religiously based and prefer to explain it as the result of an economic and social situation of discrimination.

Analysing the ideological dimensions of Jihadism is a controversial exercise. While the Euromed Survey was not primarily designed to tackle this dimension, some questions incidentally related to it and respondents were also offered the possibility of expanding on it in the framework of open questions. Many researchers, journalists and politicians find it difficult to accept that such violence can be politically or religiously based and prefer to explain it as the result of an economic and social situation of discrimination and to limit its political aspect to the relatively unfertile ground of indoctrination and crime. The religious factor is generally approached only to indicate its usurpation ("This has nothing to do with Islam") or as an echo of cultural incompatibility ("Paris est une fête") and civilizational incompatibility ("Why do they hate us?") of "religious lunatics".

It is however important to go beyond the idea that Jihadism is just a phenomenon external to our societies, derived from an irrational or constrained attraction of individuals to big ideological labels such as Daesh or Al-Qaeda. Despite the concept of rupture often put forward by the literature on radicalisation, studying how Jihadists build the religious and political dimension of their cause shows us that their particular uses of radicalism, with or without resorting to violence, are based on close interaction with their environment.

Jihadism operates as a political and religious mythology that gives those who identify with it the feeling of reaching truths that would have been concealed to them.

Although the configurations of the Arab world and Europe are different,[2] we can actually see that when political and religious institutions are no longer capable of providing both citizens and believers with the means to resolve the contradictions inherent in the hyper-liberal context in which they evolve, Jihadism operates as a political and religious mythology that gives those who identify with it the feeling of reaching truths that would have been concealed to them, thereby enabling them to resume control of their lives.

At a political level, they see the idea of violent confrontation at the heart of Jihadist ideology as the opportunity to impose a new space of negotiation on policy-makers. Their group of reference thus moves from the status of "manipulated mass" to that of the ultimate enemy feared by the "powerful", not only because of the terror it inspires but also because of its capacity to produce an autonomous criticism of the world and its conflicts. At a religious level, their adhesion to a reading of the Koran in which violence and death organise life enables them to turn their marginality into a religious virtue by becoming *el farqa nadjia*, a small group of people chosen by God to make "Islam triumph". Having the "courage" not to conceal the religious truth represented by Jihadism consequently becomes a sign of divine choice, whereas in their reading of the holy texts most other Muslims would maintain an intentionally ambiguous relationship with the principle of armed struggle, or even regard it as a taboo.

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1. The original version of this article was written in French and is available at www.iemed.org

2. This article is based on different interviews conducted since 2004 with sympathisers with Jihadist ideology, having or not engaged in violence, in the Maghreb and Europe. The quotations in italics are directly taken from them in order to give the reader an insight into their worlds of thought.

A Takeover of the Political Space through the Enemy's Role

One of the most frequent ways of contesting any political project of the so-called radical Muslims consists of introducing them as individuals without a precise goal, fascinated by chaos. Although their reading of the local and global political challenges is sometimes confused, the Jihad is however for them more a means of returning order to the world rather than destroying it. It is even through their fear of the *fitna*, often mentioned through the dislocation of families or the economic and security instability surrounding them, that they justify their attraction to the promise of an Islamic state, the only structure capable of organising and harmonising their life.

While waiting for its emergence, their fascination with the possibility of a new political order is first expressed by the rejection of the modern state. This state would have failed to offer a "better future" to its citizens, and the main project of its political representatives would be to exclude the governed from real political decision and discussion spaces by giving them "the illusion that their vote can change things" in order to better "exploit" them to the benefit of hidden interests.

This crisis of identification with the state and this mistrust regarding the mechanisms of representative democracy is not specific to Jihadists. However, the impossibility of an Islamic political radicalism, even non-violent, finding a place in it (in contrast to other ultranationalist or ethical radicalisms that are more or less tolerated) exacerbates a feeling of iniquity in the access to political criticism, which groups such as Daesh do not hesitate to exploit. Moreover, the fact that the media and decision centres both in Europe and the Arab world do not permit Muslim public opinion to exist other than with the aim of supporting them in their fight against terrorism without being able to show their weak points contributes to a reductionist simplification of the participation of Muslims in good governance and to preventing a citizenship based on democratic disagreement from emerging. This configuration often leads the future Jihadists to reject the "manipulated" political space "imposed" on them, considering that their states just want "yes-men Muslims" and that "violence alone enables you to be respected".

Their criticism of the state is also a moral criticism denouncing man for "forgetting" God's laws. This criticism is certainly common to several fundamentalist groups but while quietist Salafis choose a form of passive resistance to the "trials and injustices" by withdrawing from world affairs, Jihadists consider violence, which can also only be expressed at a discursive level, as a means of control and rebalance of their role in the political space. For them, the aim is not to enter this space by placing themselves at the service of Muslims with specific strategies to meet their daily needs. What prevails is the possibility of intervening as an alter-ego of the state by establishing themselves as the enemy, thus subverting the political marginality to which the legitimate institutions confine them. It is also one of the reasons that Jihadists will prefer to burn their passport rather than an Israeli flag, while choosing names of war *(kounya)* that link them to their country of origin (such as Abu X el belgiki, the Belgian, or el firansi, the French) or will even accept the principle of the *hijrah* (the tradition of migrating to "the land of Islam" of persecuted Muslims) but will return to carry out attacks in their native country as soon as they have the opportunity.

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The Legitimising Phantom of the Chosen Group

All Jihadists recognise a religious foundation in their action but this is difficult to interpret through the methodological approaches and the scales of observation currently chosen to analyse violent extremism. For instance the ideological religious dimension does not come through in question 5 of the Euromed Survey as mentioned in some open answers (see Graph 1 and open answers below).

Graph 1: Drivers providing fertile ground for the development of violent extremism.
% of the most significant driver in group of countries
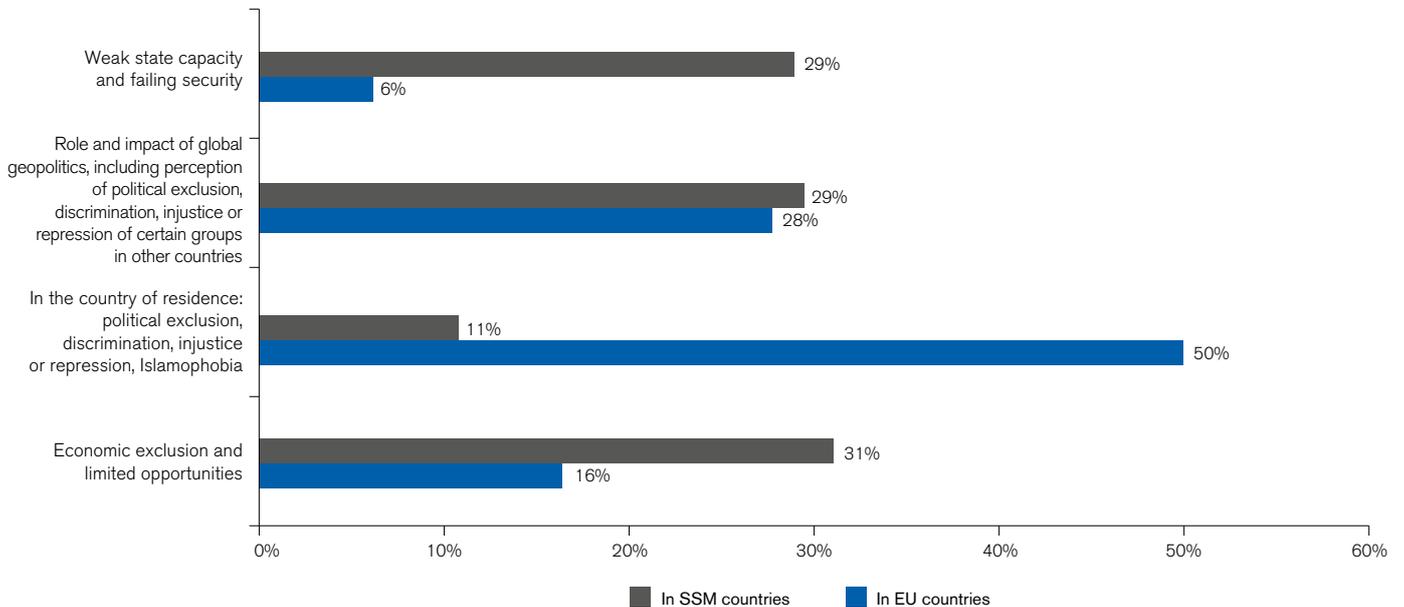
Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 8th Euromed Survey

En principe, les facteurs nommés plus hauts, en soi, ne représentent aucunement une base de radicalisation. Ce sera seulement leurs manipulation et utilisation dans un discours revanchiste ou idéologique (salafism), qui leur donnera un potentiel de justification ou de 'rationalisation' pour commettre des actes terroristes au nom de l'Islam.

Finnish respondent

The options in this question are limited and are biased to the deep roots theory. It does not appreciate the power of extremism as an ideological and spiritual force. Of course, it is related to a multitude of socio economic and cultural factors, but it became an independent and self generating force in its own right.

Egyptian respondent

There is no mention of violent religious ideology (Jihadism) and abetting conservative clerics (e.g. Al Qaradawi) who do not get their hands dirty personally, but egg others on. Talking about the elephant in the room..., but for political correctness this point was probably dropped from the menu.

German respondent

IEMed.

Because of difficult access to the field, these approaches favour life experiences limited by situations of repentance or imprisonment and mainly focus on how religious radicalism weakens integration or favours resentment of non-Muslims. Nevertheless, the construction of this religious radicalism is not limited to the relations between believers and non-believers and mainly forms part of the history of their own religious group and its cleavages.

One of the most important issues in Jihadist religiosity is that of the *farqa enadjia* (the chosen group). Many groups have proclaimed themselves as the chosen group in the history of the Muslim world but what justifies divine choice here is the radical nature of the Jihad itself rather than the attachment to a just religious practice. For them radicalism in their discourse and/or action is enough while they await paradise without burdening themselves with the laborious accumulation of good actions. This religious superiority also feeds much more off the context than the norm, given that the outlines of contemporary Jihadism as a religious group are quite vague.

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The concept of the chosen group works first as a ready means for over-valuing individuals (the Jihadist discourses are highly marked by the idea of *'izza*, pride in Arabic). Making the Jihad the condition sine qua non of access to the chosen group enables them to turn their mundane fascination for virility, the appropriation of goods or the culture of arms into religious assets. What interests them most are the passages of the Koran on the armed struggle, and their reflection on their relationship with God in daily life is extremely limited. The benefits of forming part of the chosen group are expected in the hereafter and without too much effort because the multiplication of *aalamat esaa* (the signs of the end of the world) and the martyr's prospect shorten the long path it would have been necessary to take to be recognised by God in normal circumstances. But the privileges down here are also equally important, as shown by how Jihadists appropriate the concept of *ghanima* (the spoils of war) by taking wives, villas with swimming pool or large cars…

The concept of the chosen group is then built upon the criticism of other references to Islam for which the Jihad is not a priority, also contradicting here the idea that Jihadism would emerge outside time, without a link to its environment. The Muslims that abandon the violent struggle are seen as "useless to Islam", as are the community manifestations such as the Friday prayer in the mosque. Islamist parties are for them particularly guilty of only discussing the project of an Islamic state without "having ever managed to impose the sharia". The toughest accusations are paradoxically directed at the religious wise men, accused of "selling false interpretations of the religion just to please their masters the Americans" (the quotation here particularly concerns Saudi Arabia). In a context in which the religion is controlled, if not confiscated, by the state or made more complex by the Ulemas, Jihadism makes it possible to re-appropriate a religious legitimacy based on a simple logic: the marginality of the Muslim's commitment to the Jihad confirms the chosen character of those for whom it is the heart of belief.

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Jihadism: the Mirror of the Political and Religious Taboos of Contemporary Islam

The difficult consideration of the political and religious factors of violent extremism has an impact on the orientation of the current deradicalisation policies. The Arab countries, worried about a weak state authority, mainly call for hardening of security. Europe, made anxious by the potential for revolt of its Muslim citizens, asks them to show loyalty.

These approaches focused on fear of violence, which is certainly justified, do not allow us to see that the attraction of a minority towards Jihadism also acts as a way to reveal the taboos of contemporary Islam, notably that of the religious and political representation of the youths that it is urgent to better apprehend.

It is therefore important to favour a public culture of political debates, particularly among youths, enabling a certain radicalism to be expressed democratically and non-violently.

This will only be possible by abandoning the idea that the questions posed by those who might be tempted by violent extremism are incoherent and totally detached from the political and religious logics of the rest of the world.

In alternative spaces such as the social networks, the Jihadist religious and political readings propose a simplifying way of remedying the disorder of the world but as a secret only revealed to those who are worthy. Indeed, very often we access it by trying to understand subjects that the western and Arab official political and religious actors silence, such as their involvement (or non-intervention) in several conflicts concerning Muslim populations, torture, civilian victims and the economic interests of the countries at war.

It is therefore important to favour a public culture of political debates, particularly among youths, enabling a certain radicalism to be expressed democratically and non-violently, even when the aim is to clarify questions related to the exclusive exercise of power. Religious actors also have a significant role to play in the dissemination and clarification of the religious interpretations of violence and war. However, this will only be possible by abandoning the idea that the questions posed by those who might be tempted by violent extremism are incoherent and totally detached from the political and religious logics of the rest of the world.

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