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# Jihadism Transformed

*Al-Qaeda and Islamic State's  
Global Battle of Ideas*



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## THE IMPACT OF EVOLVING JIHADIST NARRATIVES ON RADICALISATION IN THE WEST

*Akil N. Awan*

In announcing the re-establishment of its so-called Caliphate in June 2014, IS also revealed its global pretensions by declaring that it was now incumbent on all Muslims worldwide to swear fealty to its leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, or Caliph Ibrahim, as his new regnal moniker demanded he be addressed. Unsurprisingly, the backlash from within the Islamic world against this flagrant usurpation of power and authority has been overwhelmingly negative, with the vast majority rejecting any such claim to legitimacy. Nevertheless, the resurrection of even a notional Caliphate has resonated with a small but significant minority of Muslims, leading to many thousands of young men, in search of a cause, flocking to the IS banner. Indeed, IS has drawn foreigners from every corner of the globe, willing to fight and die for its nascent Caliphate. Some estimates place the number of foreign fighters who travelled to Syria and Iraq to join violent extremist groups (the overwhelming majority of whom will have joined IS) to be anywhere between 27,000 and 31,000

individuals, originating from no less than 86 different countries—a truly globalised mobilisation on an epic scale.<sup>1</sup>

As realisation gradually dawns upon the international community of the grave consequences for both state and society, should citizens decide to take up arms with brutal and extreme outfits like IS, the international community has scrambled to instate strategies for dealing with this worrying recruitment of fighters. Most prominently, in September 2014, US President Barack Obama chaired a special meeting of the UN Security Council in which he asked member states to pass a resolution establishing an international legal framework to help prevent the recruitment and transport of would-be foreign fighters from joining terrorist groups. As expected, United Nations Security Council Resolution 2178 on Foreign Terrorist Fighters passed unanimously.<sup>2</sup>

Many states have shown grave concern about their own citizens joining IS, but understandably also about the dangers inherent in the inevitable influx of returnees once the conflict is over. Fighters returning from the front lines, brutalised by the ravages of war and potentially suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, may prove incapable of easily slipping back into their respective host societies. More ominously, some will also have engaged in horrific sectarian or other violence or egregious human rights violations that have become hallmarks of the conflict. The social media accounts of some Western jihadists, Tweeting images of grisly executions and selfies with severed heads, or the prominence of individuals like Jihadi John, the Briton who became infamous for brutally beheading American and British hostages, are testament to the barbarity many fighters have not just been immersed within, but have positively relished. Naturally, these revelations will prove all the more troubling should these men choose to return home. Indeed, a small minority have already brought violence back with them, as recent examples have shown. Mehdi Nemmouche carried out sadistic violence in Syria before returning to Belgium, where he carried out an anti-Semitic attack on a Jewish museum in Belgium that left four people dead in May 2014.<sup>3</sup> But most strikingly, the multiple attackers who wrought carnage in Paris in November 2015, and Brussels in March 2016, appear to have been French and Belgian natives who had been directed by IS, and some of whom had recently returned from Syria.<sup>4</sup>

This attendant surge in terrorist activity amongst Western jihadists has understandably caused great concern in their host countries, as signs of foreign fighter blowback brings the violence of Raqqa, Homs and Mosul to the streets of London, Brussels, Paris and New York. Potential solutions have ranged from revoking citizenship, exclusion and prosecution, to deradicalisation and

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rehabilitation, with many Western states showing uncertainty over precisely how they should deal with their errant sons and daughters who choose to return home once the conflict has lost its glamour and appeal, or indeed might have been directed to return and attack their home soil.<sup>5</sup>

However, these measures are by their very nature reactive, dealing with the consequences instead of addressing the underlying root causes of the problem. Rather, in order to stem the flow of willing young recruits to IS, we must understand and address the appeal that IS holds for impressionable youth in Western societies. Why does the narrative of IS appear to resonate with them? However, considering that recruitment in the West by militant Islamist groups is certainly not a new phenomenon, and that IS has simply usurped al-Qaeda's role as the organisation of choice for Western jihadists today, we must also consider the narrative's appeal in its broader context, highlighting in particular the continuity and change within the narrative peddled by both groups. This chapter attempts to answer precisely these questions by providing a fuller, more nuanced understanding of some of the motivations for joining jihadist groups, and explores the relationship between individual motivations and larger jihadist narratives, particularly as those narratives have shifted with the ascension of IS.

### *What is the narrative? Join the caravan*

At the heart of IS's appeal is the alluring simplicity of its narrative, which is composed of two main strands. The first strand, which sits at the core of all jihadist narratives and originates with al-Qaeda, compels Muslim audiences to view contemporary conflicts through the prism of a wider historical global attack on Islam and Muslims by a belligerent 'Zionist—Crusader Alliance', in response to which the jihadists claim to serve as the sole and crucial vanguard.<sup>6</sup> This narrative, as many commentators have recognised, has remained remarkably coherent and consistent over time.<sup>7</sup> As bin Laden put it:

The people of Islam had suffered from aggression, iniquity and injustice imposed on them by the Zionist-Crusaders alliance and their collaborators; to the extent that the Muslim's blood became the cheapest and their wealth as loot in the hands of the enemies. Their blood was spilled in Palestine and Iraq. The horrifying pictures of the massacre of Qana, in Lebanon are still fresh in our memory. Massacres in Tajikistan, Burma, Kashmir, Assam, Philippine, Fatani, Ogadin, Somalia, Eritrea, Chechnya and in Bosnia-Herzegovina took place, massacres that send shivers in the body and shake the conscience.<sup>8</sup>

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In addition to making the case for the legitimacy of a violent response, bin Laden also offered the opportunity to reply to the enemy in kind, often presenting his own role as merely an instigator who had *awakened* the *ummah* to the reality of their predicament. At the end of 2001, Osama bin Laden concluded after his escape from Tora Bora in Afghanistan that ‘God willing, the end of America is imminent. Its end is not dependent on the survival of this slave to God. Regardless if Usama is killed or survives, the awakening has started.’<sup>9</sup>

It is not difficult to see why bin Laden’s emphatic challenges to the *ummah* in the past, to recognise the assault and stand up in defence of their faith, lands and people, might strike powerful emotional chords with Muslim audiences everywhere. Indeed, the hundreds of individuals who have heeded bin Laden’s fervent calls thus far are surely testament to the alluring potency of this narrative. However, beyond the involvement in violence and terrorism, AQ were unable to offer any other real motivation for ‘joining the caravan of Jihad’.<sup>10</sup> There were some attempts made at offering armchair jihadists the opportunity of contributing to the war effort, without actively fighting on the battlefield—what I have previously referred to as the ‘virtual jihad’.<sup>11</sup>

In 2002, Osama bin Laden famously wrote to Mullah Omar that ‘[i]t is obvious that the media war in this century is one of the strongest methods; in fact, its ratio may reach 90% of the total preparation for the battles’.<sup>12</sup> With this increasing recognition by the jihadist leadership of the critical need for engaging in the ‘media battle’, various jihadist ideologues attempted to legitimise this activity, often by drawing upon historical or religious precedents. Abu al-Harith al-Ansari’s categorisation of the types of warfare sanctioned by the Prophet Muhammad, for example, cites ‘media warfare’ as a legitimate endeavour,<sup>13</sup> whereas Muhammad bin Ahmad al-Salim’s highly popular text, ‘39 Ways to Serve and Participate in Jihad’, extols ‘performing electronic jihad’ as ‘a blessed field which contains much benefit’.<sup>14</sup> Perhaps the most infamous jihadist ideologue in the Anglophone sphere, Anwar al-Awlaqi, also offered alternative opportunities for engaging in jihad. These included ‘fighting the lies of the Western media,’ ‘following the news of jihad and spreading it,’ ‘spreading the writings of the mujahidin and their scholars’ and ‘establishing discussion forums that offer a free, uncensored medium for posting information relating to jihad’.<sup>15</sup>

The contemporary jihadist strategist and a key proponent of a decentralised, leaderless jihad, Abu Mus’ab al-Suri, even acknowledged the underlying reasons why this mode of action might be appealing in his seminal *The Global Islamic Resistance Call*. Al-Suri conceded the existence of large numbers of individuals

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within the ideological support base who were nevertheless unwilling to engage in actual violence themselves. Addressing these individuals directly, al-Suri proposed a number of alternative modes of non-violent action to support the jihad, one of which entailed the ‘media or informational battle.’<sup>16</sup>

However, despite these lacklustre attempts at accommodating other modes of non-violent jihad, the appeal of jihadism remained limited. Indeed, Muslim audiences have largely remained immune to the cajoling messages of violent global jihad, with large swathes of the Muslim world in fact having repudiated the message outright.<sup>17</sup> As al-Zawahiri laments, ‘we should realize the extent of the gap in understanding between the jihad movement and the common people.’<sup>18</sup> Al-Qaeda did attempt to provide some sort of distant utopian vision of an aspirational future caliphate, as a means of justifying and drawing supporters to their violent excesses:

we should work to establish the Caliphate that does not recognise the national state, national religions, borders that were put in place by the occupiers. We should establish a righteous Caliphate that follows the path of the Prophet and believes in the unity of Muslims’ lands, encourages brotherhood between Muslims in their religion, makes everyone equal, removes borders that were put in place by the enemies, spreads justice, imposes sharia, supports vulnerable people, and liberates all Muslim countries, including the usurped Palestine, and the threatened al-Aqsa.<sup>19</sup>

However, this abstract notional Caliphate also lacked any real mobilising potency—at least until IS appeared on the scene. Since June 2014, this second part of the narrative—IS’s own unique addendum to the already heady mix—claims that the Caliphate has now been re-established, thereby restoring glory and honour to the downtrodden Muslims once again. As IS spokesman Abu Muhammad al-‘Adnani ecstatically announced in June 2014:

As for you, oh soldiers of the Islamic State, then congratulations to you. Congratulations on this clear victory, congratulations on this great triumph.... Now the caliphate has returned, humbling the necks of the enemy. Now the caliphate has returned, in spite of its opponents. Now the caliphate has returned; we ask God to make it to be upon the methodology of prophethood. Now hope is being actualized. Now the dream has become a reality.<sup>20</sup>

The obvious corollary to the establishment of the Caliphate was that it was therefore now incumbent on every Muslim to make *hijrah*, or emigrate to the new Caliphate. Hijrah is an important theme in Islamic literature and stems from the emigration of the Prophet Muhammad from Mecca around AD 632 in order to escape religious persecution, and move to Medina where he founded a religious community and burgeoning city state. It is of central

importance in the Islamic canon and indeed is considered such a seminal event that the Islamic or Hijri calendar begins from this date. In the past, a number of Islamist militant groups have also employed the trope of *hijrah* in justifying their secession from mainstream Muslim society. This was most evident in the Egyptian jihadist group founded by Shukri Mustafa, *Takfir wal hijrah*, who chose to secede from wider Egyptian society during the 1970s in order to preserve their religious integrity and avoid moral and spiritual corruption through association with the *jabiliyya*<sup>21</sup> society around them.<sup>22</sup>

The establishment of the caliphate in June 2014 therefore provided compelling alternative narratives to audiences: undertake your own *hijrah*—a journey that paralleled that of the Prophet Muhammad; escape the religious persecution in your own societies; live under Islamic sovereignty and law; help defend the burgeoning state and community; and ultimately restore the state to its long-lost glory. Clearly these multiple narratives moved beyond al-Qaeda's appeals to violence alone, and provided other motivations for joining the jihadist cause. Indeed, many foreign fighters who travelled to Syria prior to the announcement of IS's Caliphate and ended up joining al-Qaeda affiliated groups soon switched sides to IS. Take, for example, the case of Israfil Yilmaz, a former Dutch soldier and one of the oldest and best-known foreign fighters in Syria due to his social media presence, who joined the fight to topple President Bashar al-Assad of Syria in 2013. He remained fiercely 'independent' until mid 2015, when he decided to join IS. When asked by journalists about why he made the choice after previously keeping his distance, he replied:

Ask yourself which other group is implementing the sharia as complete as possible? Ask yourself which group is fully taking care of the affairs of the people as complete as possible? No other group but the Islamic State, so me joining the Islamic State was just a matter of time, for they are able to govern the people and implement the sharia on a large scale—protecting the Muslims, their wealth, health and religion.<sup>23</sup>

In addition to the patent appeal to foreign fighters from the West, we have also witnessed cases of numerous young women travelling to join IS—the 'jihadi brides' phenomenon, as it has been labelled by tabloid media, also a number of families with elderly parents and young children in tow, clearly not drawn by the violence, but something much more profound. This is the utopian narrative of belonging and sanctuary, of new beginnings and state-building which has proven so important to IS's success. Western media have focused almost exclusively on IS's media output, which purveys the pornography of violence, deliberately targeting Western audiences and sensibilities. However,

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the overwhelming majority of IS media content is in fact centred around depictions of blissful civilian life in the ‘utopian’ Caliphate, and therefore offers an additional compelling narrative.<sup>24</sup> Take for example the images in IS’s flagship English language magazine *Dabiq* and elsewhere in IS’s social media catalogue, which focus on presenting a positive utopian image of the Caliphate by highlighting a wide range of activities that take place under its jurisdiction, from health care to taxation, and from festivities to blissful married life and the roles of both men and women who choose to join.

These narratives are important to the recruitment of Western jihadists, but they are not in and of themselves sufficient to account for the rise of the foreign fighter phenomenon, particularly amongst young Muslims in the Western diaspora. One way of conceptualising this problem is to view the narrative as one of the important pull factors that offers something—an appeal—but it is the individual’s context and their personal circumstances that are central to whether or not this narrative resonates on an individual level. The narrative has to find fertile ground to take root. And, of course, we have to consider the role of individual agency here too. Very few individuals whose context and circumstances intersect with a resonant narrative become de facto jihadist automatons. Consequently, it is likely a combination or interplay of these elements that ultimately manifest as a desire to join jihadist groups or move towards violent extremism, and (with a few minor exceptions) these elements have remained largely constant between those who were drawn to al-Qaeda in the past and those who are drawn to IS today, as I will illustrate below.

### *Reconfiguring identities*

To Western audiences inured to depictions of jihadists as either evil, blood-thirsty savages or deranged, religious zealots, there must be something inherently incongruous and deeply unsettling about recognising the essentially altruistic sentiments behind the actions of many jihadists. However, as discomfiting as this revelation may be, it is nevertheless important to recognise that many individuals who gravitate towards jihadism often do so for largely selfless reasons, being sincerely compassionate to those they see themselves as helping.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, empathy for fellow Muslims inculcates many potential radical Islamists with a profound sense of duty and justice, which finds effective expression through the conduit of jihadism. The role and value of altruistic appeals within the broader jihadist narrative has remained remarkably potent and consistent amongst jihadist groups over the years. Indeed, it is perhaps

best illustrated by the detailed cases of numerous young men who were drawn to al-Qaeda's calls to violence. Take for example the case of Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, a Nigerian graduate of University College London, who failed to detonate explosive-lined underwear on a trans-Atlantic flight in 2009, on behalf of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). He justified his actions to US prosecutors by stating: 'I carried with me an explosive device onto Northwest 253, again, to avenge the killing of my innocent Muslim brothers and sisters by the U.S... to save the lives of innocent Muslims.'<sup>26</sup>

Similarly, Mohammed Siddique Khan, the ringleader of the 7/7 bombers in 2005, attempted to justify his actions by pointing to British tacit support for injustices perpetrated against his 'fictive kin'.<sup>27</sup> In his posthumously released 'martyrdom' video testament, later released by al-Qaeda and in which al-Zawahiri also appeared, Khan repeatedly invoked a communal identity in which he identified the subjugation of *his community* as being principal amongst his grievances:

Your democratically elected governments continuously perpetuate atrocities against my people all over the world. And your support of them makes you directly responsible, just as I am directly responsible for protecting and avenging my Muslim brothers and sisters. Until we feel security, you will be our targets. And until you stop the bombing, gassing, imprisonment and torture of my people we will not stop this fight.<sup>28</sup>

We may dispute the notion that Western jihadists comfortably ensconced within the West hail from 'occupied', 'oppressed' or 'subjugated' communities, but to do so would be to ignore the communal and supra-national nature of radical Islamist discourse, and the widely held perceptions of Western domination and hegemony in the Muslim world more broadly. Indeed, one of the cornerstones of jihadist discourse has been the rejection of a more parochial conceptualisation of community that is predicated upon the traditional ambits of ethnicity or nationalism, in favour of a global community of belief instead. As an example of the championing of this global community of belief and purpose, the *ummah*, the *Global Islamic Media Front*, a prominent media organ of al-Qaeda, stated in 2005, 'The [battle]front does not belong to anyone. It is the property of all zealous Muslims and knows no geographical boundaries.'<sup>29</sup>

Clearly it is this radically reformulated global community of belief that many incipient jihadists clearly see themselves as identifying with, first and foremost. But how do we explain this confusing dislocation and melodramatic sense of duty to a nebulous and disparate body of peoples ('my Muslim brothers and sisters', 'our children in Palestine', 'our mothers and sisters in Kashmir'),

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who ultimately become the object of their altruistic sacrifice? This is despite the fact that they often have little direct connection to, or identification with them, in terms of ethnicity, nationality, language, culture or customs, to name but a few salient markers of identity. Moreover, this attitude is all the more perplexing when juxtaposed against the feelings of indifference and open hostility displayed towards their victims, with whom they often *do* actually share many facets of their identity. And this should not simply be dismissed as a type of post hoc rhetoric used retrospectively to justify violent actions. Rather, as the examples of at least the initial influx of foreign fighters to Syria have shown, the profession of humanitarian grounds is often genuinely expressed. Take for example Israfil Yilmaz's response when asked in an interview with CBS about his motivations for fighting:

I would fight anybody, even if it was my own father that was bombing these people, I would fight him and kill him myself... So I felt the need as a person, as a human, and, of course, as a Muslim, because it was the Muslims that were getting crushed in Syria, that I had to stand up and do stuff.

We left everything behind, when we migrated, everything, everything, our families our friends, basically our future.<sup>30</sup>

How then do we explain this appeal? This disconcertingly misplaced identification can be partially explained through a process I describe elsewhere as 'dual cultural alterity':<sup>31</sup> essentially a double alienation or double sense of otherness that results in a staunch repudiation of, or at least a distinct lack of identification with, both *minority* (ethnic or parental) culture, and *majority* (mainstream or host society) culture, as a result of being unable or unwilling to fulfil either group's normative expectations, and thus is likely to inspire feelings of uprootedness and lack of belonging.

Minority culture may be relegated to obsolescence for a number of reasons, including the imposition of conservative socio-sexual mores; a profound sense of alienation from one's family; and the presence of cultural power structures, which can have the ostensive effect of divesting youth of any real tangible control over their own lives.<sup>32</sup>

The disenchantment with majority culture, on the other hand, is less clear-cut, particularly as many, by virtue of being raised in a pervasively Western environment and having imbibed many of its values and cultural norms, display a remarkably easy immersion into majority culture (particular popular, mainstream youth culture), prior to their radicalisation. However, clearly this comfortable embedding is disrupted at some point and is gradually superseded by disillusionment with majority culture, as a result of perceptions of

hedonism, consumerism, racism, inequality and the general imposition of conflicting core value-systems from the 'host' society, which may render the individual unwilling or unable to perpetuate assimilation into the predominant paradigm.

Cherif Kouachi, one of the gunmen in the Charlie Hebdo attacks in Paris, was described by his lawyer in 2005 as 'a confused chameleon',<sup>33</sup> aptly summing up the cultural schizophrenia that can be borne out of a 'dual cultural alterity'. Examining identity through the lens of self-categorisation theory<sup>34</sup> shows that the self may be defined at different levels of abstraction, depending upon differing circumstances; at times it may be in terms of individual uniqueness, whilst at others in terms of specific group membership. The salience of a communal identity, for example, may arise during periods of perceived group crisis or threat. For incipient jihadists, these flashpoints may have been evoked by a range of contemporary events, including the Iraq war and the wider Global War on Terror; the new securitised landscape that places an inordinate scrutiny on Muslim organisations and institutions, or profiles young Muslim men; the banning of the veil and other European sartorial restrictions on Muslim women; the provocative publication of Danish and French cartoons of Muhammad deemed offensive to Muslims; and the resurgence of the Far Right and its convergence with the rise in Islamophobia in the US and Western Europe more generally.<sup>35</sup> In some scenarios, this new communal identity provides an emphatic rejoinder to the experiences of dislocation and lack of belonging in the West, and by extension the identity offered by their own society, which these individuals feel has already rejected them anyway.<sup>36</sup>

IS has shrewdly attempted not just to capitalise on these feelings of alienation, but hopes to nurture them more actively by creating conditions in Western societies that are conducive to these outcomes. In the wake of the January 2015 Charlie Hebdo attacks, the February issue of IS's flagship magazine, *Dabiq*, wrote of polarising the world by destroying its greatest threat, the 'grayzone': that liminal space in which young Frenchmen could be both Muslims and good citizens of the Republic, without any inherent contradiction. IS anticipated that provocative terrorist attacks, like the ones in Paris in January and November of 2015, would goad the French towards over-reaction and create a climate of fear and hostility, further alienating French Muslims from wider society, and 'further bring division to the world and destroy the grayzone everywhere'. Western Muslims would then be forced to make 'one of two choices': between apostasy or IS's bastardised version of belief. The article even cited, rather approvingly, George W. Bush's central dictum that under-

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scored the Global War on Terror: ‘The world today is divided into two camps. Bush spoke the truth when he said, “Either you are with us or you are with the terrorists.” Meaning, either you are with the crusade or you are with Islam.’<sup>37</sup>

Naturally these sorts of confused crises of identity and belonging can prove incredibly useful for jihadist recruiters, as they can easily be co-opted by and yoked to the jihadists’ utopian narrative of a global fraternity or community of believers—the *ummah*—which does not recognise colour, race or nationality, and claims to be equally besieged from all sides. Indeed the Islamic State’s narrative exemplifies this message. Issue 11 of *Dabiq* shows happy brothers in arms alongside the slogan ‘*wala and bara*’ (the concept of loyalty to believers, and disavowal of disbelievers), juxtaposed against its opposite, ‘American racism’. It is this radical interpretation of the religious community of believers then, that becomes the sole locus of identity and belonging. Consequently, in the absence of an appealing cultural paradigm from either parents or mainstream society, the individual simply resorts to a cultural entrenchment that assumes a religious hue by default, transforming religion from religion per se into the principal anchor of identity.

Those who buy into this identity reconfiguration narrative should be thought of as the ‘born again’ variety of believer. They have much in common with religious converts found in all faiths. Indeed, it is no accident that Islamic converts are disproportionately represented among Western jihadists.<sup>38</sup> Recent terrorist attacks carried out in Ottawa, Quebec and New York were the work of recent converts to Islam, as was the hostage crisis in the kosher supermarket in Paris in January 2015, which played out alongside the siege that led to the death of the Kouachi brothers and was undertaken by Amedy Coulibaly, who declared allegiance to IS before his death. With little previous religious socialisation, no effective spiritual counterweight in their immediate circle, and a desperate desire to prove their religious credentials, the born again variety are far more likely to accept totalitarian visions of Islam, with the proverbial zeal of the converted.

Consequently, religion not only provides an emphatic rejoinder to Western identity, but is also interpreted *de novo*, without the perceived cultural accretions of the Islam associated with their parental or ethnic identity, thereby constructing a legitimate identity outside both minority and majority cultures. Take for instance the case of Umar Farouk Abdulmuttalab, who wrote in the final text messages to his devout father back in Nigeria, ‘I’ve found a new religion, the real Islam’; ‘You should just forget about me, I’m never coming back’; ‘Please forgive me. I will no longer be in touch with you’; and ‘Forgive me for any wrongdoing,

I am no longer your child.<sup>39</sup> Olivier Roy argues that globalised radical Islam is particularly attractive to diasporic Muslims, precisely because it legitimises their sense of deculturation and uprootedness by refusing to identify Islam with the pristine cultures of their parents, pointing to a strong correlation between deculturation and religious reformulation.<sup>40</sup>

### *Religious Motivations and Rhetoric*

This leads us on very usefully to one of the enduring myths that has surrounded jihadists for many years: the ascendancy of religious motivations over other more ‘worldly’ concerns, and it is easy to understand why this might be the case. Many of these individuals themselves employ starkly religious language, and invoke religious texts that promise ‘other-worldly’ rewards as compensation for ‘this-worldly’ sacrifice, including, amongst other things, the guarantee of eternal Paradise, and most famously, the lascivious offering of 72 heavenly virgins.<sup>41</sup>

Take for example Muhammad Siddique Khan, who tempers his earlier altruistic but ‘secular’ motives by introducing a sacred dimension to his rationale:

I and thousands like me are forsaking everything for what we believe. Our driving motivation doesn't come from tangible commodities that this world has to offer... With this I leave you to make up your own minds and I ask you to make dua to Allah almighty to accept the work from me and my brothers and enter us into gardens of paradise.<sup>42</sup>

Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab presents a similarly curious mix of secular and sacred motives, by first providing a very careful reasoning of his participation in jihad as constituting not only a religious duty, but a virtuous deed:

In late 2009, in fulfilment of a religious obligation, I decided to participate in jihad against the United States. The Koran obliges every able Muslim to participate in jihad and fight in the way of Allah, those who fight you... Participation in jihad against the United States [*sic*] is considered among the most virtuous of deeds in Islam and is highly encouraged in the Koran... If you laugh at us now, we will laugh at you later in this life and on the day of judgement by God's will, and our final call is all praise to Allah, the lord of the universe, Allahu Akbar.<sup>43</sup>

Consequently, it becomes extremely difficult, if not impossible, to delineate that which is genuinely ‘religious’ from other more secular factors, particularly if all we have to base this on is the overtly sanctified and highly-stylised discourse of the individuals themselves. Thus, whilst we must give credence to their stated *sacred* intentions, and their own attribution of meaning to their

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actions, we must crucially also be cognisant of the post hoc attribution of meaning and validation to these acts.<sup>44</sup> To put it differently, religion may not provide the initial motive, but it does provide the motif or stamp of approval. Take the example of a young man who wants to go to Syria to fight for any reason that is *not* explicitly religious. It is not enough just to fight and even die like a jihadist, but to be accepted by that community (and indeed not to end up beheaded as a member of a rival group), you need to walk, talk and behave like one of them too. The highly stylised genre of video ‘martyrdom testaments’ which suicide bombers record prior to their deaths provides a very good example of this sort of conformity. It is no accident that they all look and sound pretty much the same, as they need to display certain religious tropes and conform to established archetypes to be conferred with the status of martyr by the wider community. Amedy Coulibaly had no tangible contact with IS leaders, but nevertheless unilaterally declared allegiance to the group in a hastily assembled ‘martyrdom video’, which bears an uncanny resemblance to ‘officially sanctioned’ videos.

One recent telling example of this sort of religiosity tacked on at the end is the case of Mohammed Ahmed and Yusuf Sarwar, two young British men from Birmingham who were jailed for travelling to Syria to join and fight alongside a jihadist group in 2013, in response to what they saw as their religious duty. But it was the reading material they purchased to accompany them on their trip, the books *Islam for Dummies* and *The Koran for Dummies*, which prove most revealing about their lack of religious literacy and motivation.<sup>45</sup> This characterisation appears to hold equally true for the violent men who attacked the Charlie Hebdo offices. The Kouachi brothers, as orphaned children of Algerian immigrants, were raised in foster care, and certainly not as pious Muslims. Rather, as the French newspaper *Libération* reported back in 2005, Cherif led a decidedly non-devout and hedonistic lifestyle, smoking marijuana, drinking alcohol, listening to gangster rap, and had numerous girlfriends. Indeed, during his trial in 2008 for helping transport jihadist fighters from France to Iraq, Cherif’s lawyer described his client as an ‘occasional Muslim’.<sup>46</sup> Similarly, a number of those who committed the Paris 2015 attacks showed an equally indifferent attitude towards religion, smoking marijuana, drinking alcohol and partaking in other activities that ran contrary to central tenets of the Muslim faith.<sup>47</sup>

Now, this is not to exonerate religion in any sense. Religion has historically been responsible for a great deal of violence, and religious texts and doctrines often appear to condone death and destruction. However, unlike believers, aca-

demics tend to understand religion in epiphenomenal terms, as products of social, economic, political and other factors that offer solutions to something. So what does religion offer a solution to, in the case of Europe's jihadists?

#### Transforming losers to martyrs

In addition to the timely identity reconfiguration offered in the face of a dual cultural alterity, this particular form of religiosity also offers meaning and purpose to the lives of those who desperately lack it. It appears that for an increasing number of aspiring jihadists the appeal of al-Qaeda or Islamic State does not stem from altruistic identification with a community of victims, but rather results from an egoistical desire to overcome an unbearable ennui born largely of underachievement. In these instances, the turn to jihadism serves as an emphatic rejection of the banality and monotonous inanity of daily life, providing, perhaps for the first time, a sense of being part of an elite group that compensates for the shortcomings of one's own trivial existence;<sup>48</sup> or, as Sageman suggests, 'martyrdom lifts them from their insignificance'.<sup>49</sup>

Anthony Garcia, one of the failed 2004 'Bluewater bomb' plotters, appears to epitomise this motif. Garcia left school at the age of sixteen with few qualifications and no discernible ambitions, instead drifting peripatetically from one menial job to another. Prior to his arrest, Garcia had been working night-shifts stacking shelves at a local supermarket, but spent much of his time day-dreaming about becoming a jihadist fighter, with the jihadist fantasy clearly providing a form of escapism from the daily tedium and drudgery of his otherwise uneventful life.<sup>50</sup> Indeed, for others like Richard Reid, the 'shoe bomber' who tried to detonate an Atlantic flight in mid-air in December 2001, martyrdom offers not just an escape from underachievement, but also from a life plagued by incarceration and petty crime.<sup>51</sup>

In the case of the Kouachi brothers, and the Paris 2015 attackers, jihadism potentially offered a rejection of and escape from the banal and inane drudgery of daily life in the French *banlieues*, which for many French Muslims is a depressing mix of unemployment, crime, drugs, institutional racism and endemic cycles of poverty and disenfranchisement. For example, although France's Muslim population is around seven to eight per cent of the whole, Muslim inmates constitute as much as seventy per cent of the prison population in France.<sup>52</sup> This disparity by a factor of ten is all the more troubling considering that prisons are often cited as being one of the key environments in which radicalisation takes place.<sup>53</sup> Consequently, any attempt to explain

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why France is the largest exporter of Western jihadists to Islamic State has to acknowledge the clear and striking role played by the presence of gross structural and socio-economic inequalities.

Contrast these feelings of boredom, purposelessness and insignificance with the offer of redemption through the image of the chivalrous warrior, recasting the individual as some sort of avenging hero. Following the Charlie Hebdo attack, Islamic State's official radio station praised the Kouachi brothers, validating their transformation from petty criminals and nobodies into heroes of Islam: 'We start our bulletin with France. Heroic killed 12 journalists and wounded ten others working in the French magazine Charlie Hebdo, and that was support for our master (Prophet) Mohammad, may Allah's peace and blessings be upon him.'<sup>54</sup>

It is only via the redemptive prism of the chivalrous jihadist warrior, through which his heroic sacrifice recasts him as the community's champion, that the individual then discerns a mechanism to reclaim agency, purpose, self-esteem and manhood. Muhammad Siddique Khan's martyrdom video emphatically refers to his coterie of martyrs as 'real men', pointedly distinguishing them from the emasculated individuals who 'stay at home.'<sup>55</sup>

The appeal to the valiant holy warrior or chivalrous knight is a recurring trope in jihadist literature, and indeed it is no accident that Ayman al-Zawahiri's most important work is entitled *Knights Under the Prophet's Banner (Fursan Taht Rayah Al-Nabi)*,<sup>56</sup> shrewdly seeking to exploit traditional Muslim male sensitivities around chivalry, honour, shame and sacrifice. The astute framing of this loss of dignity as being somehow sinful offers up the prospect of redemption and absolution through sacrifice and martyrdom.<sup>57</sup>

Muhammad Siddique Khan exemplifies the transformative power offered by the martyr's mask, undergoing the ready metamorphosis from children's learning mentor to heroic avenging soldier:

I am directly responsible for protecting and avenging my Muslim brothers and sisters... And until you stop the bombing, gassing, imprisonment and torture of my people we will not stop this fight. We are at war and I am a soldier. Now you too will taste the reality of this situation.<sup>58</sup>

More recently, the Islamic State's propaganda machine has orchestrated a savvy and highly sophisticated media campaign, producing material that shrewdly seeks to exploit these tensions. Recent social media agitprop from IS included the telling phrases: 'Sometimes people with the worst pasts create the best futures' and 'Why be a loser when you can be a martyr?'

*Conclusion*

As IS continues to draw young Muslim men from every corner of the globe to its nascent Caliphate, it is clear that their broader jihadist narratives are continuing to resonate at some level, even with a small but significant minority of young men and women born and raised in the West. This significant exodus of foreign fighters from many European states will no doubt continue to haunt us long after the Islamic State meets its inevitable demise, through the inevitable foreign fighter blowback syndrome. Indeed, it appears likely that as IS loses ground, it will lash out in desperation, as we have already witnessed in the spate of terrorist attacks over the last year.

If we are to address this pressing security issue of recruitment and blowback proactively, rather than simply attempting to deal with the returnees, it is important not just to understand what IS's appeal is, but also crucially to recognise that their narrative only resonates and has potency when it intersects with the very particular context and circumstances that some young Muslims in the West find themselves in today. The heady mix of increasing xenophobia and Islamophobia, alienation and cultural dislocation, socio-economic marginalisation and political disenfranchisement that many young Muslims experience leads them to take solace in faux-religious identities proffered by welcoming jihadists. These new religious identities not only provide a sense of identification and belonging, but also serve as catalysts to transform young people's lives, lifting them from underachievement, marginalisation and criminality or simply even purposelessness and boredom, and in the process cast them as heroes and champions of the new reconfigured community of believers. The internet and its attendant new media environment, which has become the principal platform for the dissemination and mediation of the culture and ideology of jihadism,<sup>59</sup> are also largely responsible for the increasing resonance of these IS narratives. It is in these cloistered yet highly immersive web 2.0 environments that jihadist propagandists rely on emotive imagery and other affective content to venerate the hero, not just through polished jihadist video montages, stirring devotional songs and fawning hagiographies of martyrs, but also through appeals to video games like *Call of Duty* and *Grand Theft Auto* and other popular culture references. These strategies are tailored towards the newer generation of young, diasporic, non-Arabic speaking digital natives,<sup>60</sup> and so it is inevitable that these young people will not just continue to be drawn to the IS narrative, but will also continue to contribute disproportionately to the jihadist demographic.<sup>61</sup>

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In light of the seismic events that have taken place in the MENA region and beyond, jihadist narratives have changed considerably over the last few years. However, these changes represent a gradual shift rather than an abrupt rupture, and the narrative has retained its overall cogence and coherence. In a sense, the establishment of IS's so-called Caliphate has simply followed al-Qaeda's narrative to its logical and inevitable conclusions, changing abstract utopian aspirations to tangible worldly realities. In the process, IS has resurrected the ailing jihadist narrative for a whole new generation.

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