

EGMONT PAPER 97

**ANTICIPATING THE POST-DAESH
LANDSCAPE**

RIK COOLSAET



EGMONT

October 2017

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rik Coolsaet is Professor Emeritus of International Relations at Ghent University (Belgium) and Senior Associate Fellow at Egmont – Royal Institute for International Relations (Brussels). He was appointed a member of the original European Commission's Expert Group on Violent Radicalisation (established 2006) and the subsequent European Network of Experts on Radicalisation (ENER). In the 1980s and 1990s, he held several high-ranking official positions, such as deputy chief of the Cabinet of the Belgian Minister of Defence and deputy chief of the Cabinet of the Minister of Foreign Affairs. His areas of expertise are terrorism and radicalisation, international relations, diplomacy and foreign policy.

ABOUT THE EGMONT PAPERS

The Egmont Papers are published by Egmont – The Royal Institute for International Relations. Founded in 1947 by eminent Belgian political leaders, Egmont is an independent think-tank based in Brussels. Its interdisciplinary research is conducted in a spirit of total academic freedom. A platform of quality information, a forum for debate and analysis, a melting pot of ideas in the field of international politics, Egmont's ambition – through its publications, seminars and recommendations – is to make a useful contribution to the decision-making process.

Table of Contents

Introduction	2
Dire predictions come true?	5
The challenging art of anticipation	8
Jihadism, the revolutionary paradigm of this age	10
The waxing and waning of jihadism	15
The causes of Daesh’s success – Martha Crenshaw revisited	18
Conducive environment	19
Opportunity	22
Ideology	24
Group dynamics	26
Concluding.....	27
Windows of opportunity	28
Second half of the 2000s – an opportunity missed	28
The link between Salafism and jihadism reconsidered?	33
The 2017 landscape – choosing a future.....	37
Epilogue	47

INTRODUCTION

Daesh, ISIS, or the Islamic State, as it prefers to call itself, is not what it used to be. The organisation peaked between the second half of 2014 and early 2015, controlling large swaths of Iraq and Syria and attracting tens of thousands of volunteers. But its brutal and ultraviolent tactics not only forced the international community to intervene militarily, they also alienated the local Sunni tribes and communities, including those which had once supported its emergence.

Islamic State has now lost much of its territory. Many of its fighters have been killed. It no longer inspires the sheer terror that made an Iraqi force of 60,000 soldiers and policemen hurriedly flee Mosul in the face of a few thousand Daesh fighters. The battle for Mosul in Iraq is now officially over, and the fall of Raqqa in Syria will possibly follow before the end of 2017. Daesh's global media output has decreased significantly, and the golden age of its Twitter presence has definitely passed. Its revenue has dwindled to a trickle. Daesh, as we used to know it, with its proto-state and its shining aura of invincibility and unstoppable expansion, attracting myriads of foreign volunteers to the Levant, is rapidly coming to an end, even as fighting still rages in the Islamic State's last redoubts.

This logically raises the question: what happens next? At least one assumption seems to be self-evident: the military defeat of Daesh will not signal the end of jihadism as a transnational movement, nor the end of jihadi terrorism itself. Daesh might well remain a lingering global threat if no adequate response is devised to address the instigating circumstances that permitted the emergence of jihadism in general and the success of Daesh in particular.

But beyond this, consensus remains elusive. Authorities and media now routinely react to terrorist attacks with warnings that absolute security cannot be guaranteed and that such attacks will be the 'new normal' for the foreseeable future. Such statements are not very helpful. They don't make sense of where terrorism is heading. They mainly result in uncertainty and anxiety, neither of which are welcome allies in the fight against terrorism. Fear does not result in positive action. Prospects do. They are the antidote to anxiety. A straightforward and intelligible elucidation of the dynamics of terrorism is therefore needed.

This Egmont Paper is intended to provide some guidance for the future by fostering better public understanding of the dynamics at play. Attempting to answer the question of what happens next, however, is as hazardous as trying to assess the popularity of Daesh itself. This paper will nevertheless attempt to answer both questions. In doing so it will concentrate on the European scene, not because it is the most vital or the only one, but because contexts are different in different places around the world. The shrinking of Daesh's territory will affect different regions in

different ways. Therefore, any global assessment has to be based upon differentiated regional perspectives. We also have to bear in mind that significant variances exist between the contexts surrounding jihadism in different European countries.

Trying to come to grips with the dynamics of jihadism and its successive sub-waves has always been controversial. The initial American reaction to the European insistence on exploring the root causes of 9/11 was to claim that excuses were being made for terrorist acts. Recently, confronted with bloody terrorist attacks on their home turf, European leaders have also opined that trying to explain terrorism implies somehow excusing it.

The contrary is true. The better and earlier we deal with the conducive environment that allows the persistence of jihadi terrorism, the more capable we will be of preventing new generations from falling under its spell, and the more lives can be saved.

Dire or worst-case predictions often grab the headlines when hypothetical futures are considered. This Egmont Paper will argue that ominous predictions are not inevitable. Their likelihood of coming true also depends on the way we seize the opportunity offered by the decline of Daesh's self-declared caliphate. This is the first core argument: there is an opportunity to seize. The fascination with Daesh will die out, at least temporarily, as a result of the failure of its state project, since this constituted a critical part of Daesh's appeal. The second argument may sound more gloomy: many of the conducive environments, or preconditions, that permitted Daesh's success in widely different locations around the world, including Europe, are still very much in place. Some respite is now offered in which to address the conducive environment. If we fail to seize this moment, at some point in the future it might again be difficult to address the re-emergence of a fresh jihadi wave in time.

The scenarios in this Egmont Paper are based upon an analysis of the causes of Daesh's success and are informed by lessons learned from the previous jihadi sub-waves, but also from historical experiences with this particular brand of terrorism.

Searching for answers on the question of what is coming next, I conducted interviews with people from widely different backgrounds in various European countries – social workers and prevention officials, law enforcement and intelligence services, academics and civil society activists, imams and Muslim theologians, and youths in vulnerable neighbourhoods – with the aim of getting a sense of what's going on under the radar. I was also fortunate to be invited by Dr. Virginie Andre (Deakin University, Melbourne) to present the thrust of this research at an international conference in Bangkok at the end of July. This conference was attended by a similarly diverse audience. The lively discussions definitely also inspired this paper.

Finally, a special word of gratitude to some colleagues and friends who were willing to review parts of the final draft of this paper. None of them can be held responsible

for any of the arguments developed here. I alone am responsible for not heeding some of their smart comments and canny criticisms. My thanks in particular go to Daniel Heinke, Clark McCauley, Paul Pillar, Michael Privot, Naveed Ahmad Shinwari, and Jessika Soors. And to those who preferred to remain anonymous.

DIRE PREDICTIONS COME TRUE?

Daesh has lost much of its territory and its income has dropped drastically. Many of its fighters have been killed (recently, the American military estimated at 60,000 – 70,000 the number of Daesh fighters killed since 2014).¹ Daesh forces once had a reputation for barbarity that saw 60,000 Iraqi soldiers and policeman vacate Mosul rather than taking on a few thousand IS fighters. Mosul has since been recaptured by anti-Daesh troops, and the IS stronghold of Raqqa in Syria is expected to fall before the end of 2017. The proto-state's global media reach has withered, and the old, intimidating Daesh with its self-declared caliphate, its irresistible appeal to foreign fighters, and relentless series of victories is gone.

This logically raises the question: what happens next? It often looks as if it's prudent – or realistic – to favour gloomy predictions so as not to be labelled naïve. Dire predictions indeed predominate in the assessments of what might follow after the territorial defeat of Daesh in Syria and Iraq. Many ominous scenarios were advanced as soon as it became obvious that the military campaign against Daesh was gaining ground. Observers cautioned (correctly) that a military victory would not signal the end of the decades-long jihadi terrorist campaign.

This paper will mostly concentrate on the European scene, not because it is considered the most vital, but because regional in-depth perspectives are the best way to make a global assessment of how the disappearance of Daesh's territory will affect each region.

Throughout 2016, there was a good deal of speculation about whether foreign fighters would return en masse to their home countries as a result of the increasing misfortunes of Daesh on the battlefield. These veterans would then plot against their respective homelands, constitute sleeper cells, and groom a new generation of jihadi warriors. As far as Europe is concerned, this outrush has not yet materialised. Some seasoned European fighters have indeed left Syria and Iraq, but this has not amounted to the anticipated mass return. Recent returnees turned out to be mostly women and children. It now seems likely that most remaining European fighters have decided to fight to the death in the last Daesh bastions. A unknown number have been killed in these battles, but others have been captured by Kurdish or Iraqi forces and are now being debriefed by their respective intelligence services.

A second likely outcome often suggested, is the increase in homegrown plots in Europe as a direct consequence of Daesh's loss of territory. Some even imagine that this could be a deliberate Daesh strategy to uphold the illusion it is still on the offen-

¹ Gen. Raymond Thomas (Commander US Special Operations Command) at the Aspen Security Forum, 21 July 2017. Interview available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=wCqCnLjSx7M.

sive, thus bolstering its recruitment efforts. For some time, this gloomy scenario looked credible as a result of the string of attacks in Europe during 2015 and 2016. But in June 2017, Europol reported that the number of failed, foiled and completed attacks had declined in 2016. This was a continuation of a downward trend that started in 2014. The number of fatalities also dropped in 2016 in comparison to 2015, but only slightly.²

Another much touted scenario that failed to happen was the anticipated relocation of Daesh's seat of power to some other location in the world. In 2016, Daesh itself started to call upon its followers to travel to the group's franchises in Libya, the Sinai, West Africa, or Afghanistan, since the routes to the Levant were rapidly shutting down. Some foreign fighters have indeed left the Levant to join other jihadi theatres, but this didn't amount to a planned refocus of Daesh's caliphate. Prudence is, of course, warranted. Nobody saw the worldwide Syria mobilisation coming in 2012. But still, it is hard to identify at this moment a jihadi theatre exerting the same force of attraction as Daesh did between 2013 and 2016.

A fourth widely circulated scenario revolved around the 'virtual caliphate'. According to some, following its defeat in the physical battlefield, Daesh would retreat to 'a virtual safe haven – a "virtual caliphate" – from which it will continue to coordinate and inspire external attacks as well as build a support base until the group has the capability to reclaim physical territory'.³ Thanks to Daesh's massive use of social media and Hollywood-style warrior videos, its narrative would live on and continue to inspire new generations of wannabe terrorists. It's too early to dismiss or validate this scenario, since the effects of this massive propaganda effort will play out – or not – over the long term. But still, one should keep in mind that every narrative needs a context to blossom. (We will return to the importance of this conducive context later.)

Many observers warned of yet another likely prospect: the exploitation by Daesh on a massive scale of refugees and displaced people, either by using them to smuggle in seasoned fighters tasked with plotting attacks in Europe, or by transforming into new jihadi recruits the vulnerable young people frustrated by the hostile environment they encountered in Europe. The irregular migrant flow was certainly exploited by Daesh in 2015 in order to dispatch terrorist operatives clandestinely to Europe. But, according to Europol, there is no firm evidence that terrorist travellers systematically use the flow of refugees to enter Europe unnoticed.⁴ Moreover, this prospect has resulted in increased vigilance in many of the destination countries, making it more difficult for any terrorist organisation to exploit this opportunity. Finally, as is also the

² *TE-SAT 2017. EU Terrorism Situation and Trend Report*. The Hague, Europol, 2017.

³ Gen. Joseph L. Votel (Commander US Central Command) et al., *#Virtual caliphate. Defeating ISIL on the physical battlefield is not enough*. Center for a New American Security, 12 January 2017. Available at www.cnas.org/publications/reports/virtual-caliphate.

⁴ *Changes in Modus Operandi of Islamic State (IS) revisited*. The Hague, Europol, November 2016.

case for some of the other scenarios, this prediction overestimates the capacity of Daesh for long-term planning when faced by significant military setbacks. Its leadership is more preoccupied with its own security than with any long-term planning, as was the case with al-Qaeda after its defeat in Afghanistan following the 9/11 attacks.

Finally, some observers already predict the eventual re-emergence of a Daesh 2.0 or even 3.0. Many Daesh sympathisers and scholars would agree. According to some, it could develop into a transnational umbrella group with a number of more or less autonomous franchises, operating alongside a similarly organised al-Qaeda, with lingering competition for jihadi primacy. Others envisage a new global jihadi realignment as a result of the merger between a re-energised al-Qaeda, led by Osama bin Laden's son Hamza, with the remnants of Daesh. In the past, al-Qaeda has indeed attempted several times to overcome the rift between both organisations.⁵ But all attempts have failed due to differences over strategy, tactics, and personalities. The eventual death of Daesh's leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi might induce some of its affiliate leaders to rescind their *bay'ah* (oath of allegiance) and return to the fold, especially if al-Qaeda is successful in its attempts to re-assert itself again as the vanguard of global jihadism.

Again, these prospects can neither be disregarded nor validated at present. Conflicting factors will play a role. On the one hand, at the grassroots level, the merger of the two main jihadi organisations might be more feasible than at the leadership level. On the other hand, Daesh official organs, clerics and supporters have been engaged for over a year in an intense internal dispute, the outcome of which will be crucial for the future course of what remains of Daesh. A small but strident camp of hardliners consider Daesh's official ideology insufficiently radical and are pushing for an even more extremist stance that would exclude all possible cooperation with other jihadi groups, including al-Qaeda. This seemingly doctrinal dispute hides a leadership conflict within Daesh, that is bound to linger on as the organisation has to deal with the collapse of its state project.⁶ Ultimately, however, it will be the preconditions that permitted the emergence of the jihadi wave of terrorism that will decide the fate of the jihadi organisations themselves.

⁵ Ali Soufan, *Anatomy of terror. From the death of bin Laden to the rise of the Islamic State*. New York/London, W.W. Norton & Company, 2017, pp. 188 and 257.

⁶ R. Green, *Dispute over takfir rocks Islamic State*. Memri Inquiry & Analysis Series 1324, 4 August 2017. Available at www.memri.org/reports/dispute-over-takfir-rocks-islamic-state; Thomas Joscelyn, 'Islamic State rescinds one of its most problematic religious rulings'. In *Long War Journal*, 20 September 2017. Available at www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/09/islamic-state-rescinds-one-of-its-most-problematic-religious-rulings.php?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+LongWarJournal-SiteWide+%28FDD%27s+Long+War+Journal+Update%29.

THE CHALLENGING ART OF ANTICIPATION

It must be said that past attempts to anticipate the future of terrorism have resulted in unimpressive results. Two examples illustrate this. The first shows the tendency to underestimate the threat and the second shows the exact opposite.

Around 2010, many observers predicted the beginning of the end of jihadism. Al-Qaeda had by then been replaced by a patchwork of local groups lacking strategic coordination. Many local cells and support networks were being dismantled, especially in Europe. The legitimacy of jihadism had been in decline in the Middle East since Daesh's predecessor al-Qaeda in Iraq, led by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, staged an attack in Amman in 2005, causing the death of 60 people who were mostly Jordanian Sunni Arabs.⁷ Global terrorist attacks seemed to have peaked. In the EU, the number of attacks and arrests steadily declined from 2007 onwards to reach their lowest point in 2011, according to the successive *Terrorism Situation and Trend Reports* by Europol. On top of this, the Arab Spring succeeded in doing what al-Qaeda had pursued in vain for over 20 years: toppling Arab governments one by one. Finally, in 2011, Osama bin Laden himself was killed.

Dr. Fareed Zakaria echoed a widespread view when he asked in early 2011: 'So can we all take a deep breath, stop cowering in fear of the impending caliphate, and put the problem of Islamic terrorism in perspective? It's real. But it is not going to take over the world any time soon.'⁸ Within intelligence services too this upbeat anticipation was considered realistic. In 2010 the Dutch intelligence service AIVD portrayed the jihadi movement as a number of small and isolated networks, or rather a handful of individuals, with hardly any international interaction. Most networks were inactive, and several had fallen apart. There was hardly any recruitment going on. As in other European countries, such as Belgium, chatter about joining a foreign war zone persisted, but in practice this seldom resulted in concrete action.⁹

The civil war in Syria put an end to this gridlock in the jihadi scene in Europe and elsewhere. Daesh became a new magnet for foreign fighters, as its predecessor had been following the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Clearly, many observers had underestimated the persistence of underlying circumstances that allowed for the emergence of a new jihadi wave, surpassing the al-Qaeda wave by all possible standards.

⁷ *Islamic terrorism: common concern for Muslim and Western publics*. Washington, Pew, 14 July 2005 (<http://pewglobal.org/reports/pdf/248.pdf>). Ipsos-Stat conducted a survey in Jordan after the November 2005 Amman attacks. For results see www.alghad.jo/index.php?news=56817.

⁸ Transcript available at <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/1103/06/fzgps.01.html>.

⁹ *Local jihadist networks in the Netherlands*. The Hague, AIVD (General Intelligence and Security Service), 1 July 2010. Available at <https://english.aivd.nl/publications/publications/2010/07/01/local-jihadist-networks-in-the-netherlands>.

At the end of the 1980s, the contrary happened. For over 20 years the world had been facing a similar wave of transnational terrorism – not jihadi, but left-wing. In an excellent collection of contributions by leading terrorism experts, the concluding chapter by the outstanding RAND scholar Brian Jenkins addressed ‘future trends in international terrorism’. He warned against expectations that terrorism would diminish gradually. Very depressingly he predicted that terrorism ‘in its present form’ was not only likely to persist, but also to grow, both in volume and in bloodshed. Recent technological developments, increased global mobility as a result of ‘modern air travel’, ‘instantaneous access to a world-wide audience through the modern news media, particularly television [...] and remote satellite broadcasting capabilities [...] and the increasing availability of arms to anybody with the money to buy them’ had created a semi-permanent infrastructure of terrorism. A doubling of terrorist activity by the end of the 1980s was not ‘an inconceivable prospect’. He called his conclusions ‘depressing but conservative’: ‘Terrorists will escalate their violence, their attacks will become more indiscriminate, we may see political demands based upon threats of food contamination [and] the extraordinary security measures taken against terrorism will have become a permanent part of the landscape, of our lifestyle.’ The only bright spots he foresaw: ‘[...] the world does not end in terrorist anarchy [and] terrorists will probably not enter the Armageddon world of mass destruction’.¹⁰

Indeed, a terrorist Armageddon did not become reality, but Jenkins’ dire predictions were obviously excessively pessimistic. The exact opposite happened. The 1990s witnessed a significant decrease in global and regional terrorist activity. It took a decade and a half before a new wave of terrorism would emerge under the now familiar form of jihadism. Anticipating the worst tended to overlook the lifecycle dynamics that characterised earlier transnational terrorist campaigns: they emerge, reach their peak and then start to wane.

Predicting what seems possible has always been easier (and safer) than anticipating what is most likely. Moreover, the future is never written in stone. Anticipation inevitably influences the way forward and thus contributes to shaping the future. Trying to assess what might come after the territorial defeat of Daesh in Syria and Iraq will inescapably result in anticipations that are as divergent as the analyses of Daesh itself. The scenarios in this Egmont Paper are based upon an analysis of the causes of Daesh’s success and informed by lessons learned from the previous jihadi sub-waves but also from historical experiences with this particular brand of terrorism.

¹⁰ Brian Jenkins, ‘Future trends in international terrorism’. In Robert O. Slater, Michael Stohl, *Current perspectives on international terrorism*. New York, St. Martin’s Press, 1988, pp. 246-266.

JIHADISM, THE REVOLUTIONARY PARADIGM OF THIS AGE

Ever since the 9/11 attacks, Western officials have heavily insisted upon the existential threat jihadi terrorism represents to the West. More than 15 years after the start of the Global War on Terror the same arguments are still being made. In May 2017, the US Department of Homeland Security released its regular bulletin with a familiar warning of the dangers posed by homegrown terrorists: ‘The US is engaged in a generational fight against terrorists, who seek to attack the American people, our country, and our way of life. [...] We are facing one of the most serious threat environments since the 9/11 attacks [...].’ In the same month, Homeland Security Secretary (and now White House chief of staff) John Kelly told a Fox News host that Americans would ‘never leave the house’ if they knew what he knew.¹¹

For some Western observers, the West is at war with ‘radical Islam’, as it was with Nazism and Communism. To some on the radical right, jihadi plotters constitute the vanguard of an advancing army of Islamic fundamentalists bent on destroying civilisation as we know it and replacing it by a global sharia-led caliphate. This clash-of-civilisations paradigm has been omnipresent in one form or another in many debates and statements since 9/11 and has found an echo in the Western public’s anxiety over Islam and migration.

If governments can be suspected of politicising or overselling the magnitude of the threat, scholars too arrive at conclusions that are as dire and alarming as these official statements. The astute Norwegian political scientist Brynjar Lia recently noted:

The dramatic expansion of jihadism as an ideology and a global rebel movement in recent years is one of the most remarkable developments affecting the Middle East [...] jihadism represents a global rebel movement with several territorial proto-states, a huge popular base of geographically scattered and dedicated supporters around the globe and an unprecedented capacity to rally fighters and resources to new conflict areas [...] The common conceptualization of Jihadism as a terrorist underground without popular support belies today’s reality and is a dangerous misconception.¹²

¹¹ NTAS Bulletin, 15 May 2017. Available at www.dhs.gov/ntas/advisory/ntas_17_0515_0001; John Kelly quoted in *Newsweek*, 26 May 2017. Available at www.newsweek.com/terrorism-america-knew-what-i-knew-you-d-never-leave-house-kelly-dhs-616317.

¹² Brynjar Lia, *Jihadism in the Arab world after 2011: Explaining its expansion*. NewME, University of Oslo, 2016.

Thomas Hegghammer, the Norwegian terrorism scholar and expert on Saudi Arabia, also acknowledges his pessimistic outlook for the future of jihadi terrorism in Europe: 'I cannot see any light at the end of the tunnel. Jihadism is fueled by conflicts in the Muslim world, and I don't see it end – at least not in my lifetime.'¹³

To others, however, Daesh and its jihadi precursors represent only a 'deviant fringe', as Ahmed Rehab of Chicago's Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) put it at a recent international terrorism conference in Bangkok. This echoes earlier European surveys showing that Europe's Muslims are part of the social mainstream, 'side with Islamic moderates, not fundamentalists, and overwhelmingly reject extreme tactics'.¹⁴ The same applies to Arab countries. If anything, support for jihadi groups has been declining over the years to reach a point where only tiny minorities are said to have positive views of groups like Daesh.¹⁵

J. M. Berger, fellow at the The Hague-based International Centre for Counter-Terrorism and co-author with Jessica Stern of *ISIS: The State of Terror* (2016), concurs: 'The Islamic State's ideological sympathizers make up less than 1 percent of the world's population [...] and [its] active, voluntary participants in its caliphate project certainly make up less than a tenth of a percent.'¹⁶ John Mueller of Ohio State University and author of *Overblown* (2009), decrying the 'apparently unanimous alarmist mentality after 9/11', is of the same opinion: 'The alarm over al-Qaeda has been substantially misplaced [and] history may now be repeating itself with ISIS.'¹⁷ Barack Obama himself is said to have frequently reminded his staff that terrorism takes far fewer lives in America than handguns, car accidents, and falls in bathtubs do.¹⁸

Alex Schmid, also a longtime terrorism scholar with a wealth of expertise gained from his extended UN counterterrorism involvement, warns against rushing to conclusions based upon opinion polls: 'Given the superficial nature of questions in most public opinion polls, it is often not possible to gauge exact reasons behind verbal support' [for terrorism]. They can range from 'emphatic understanding for some of the grievances that motivate terrorists, to passive sympathy for this ideology and ultimately active support for, and participation in, their indiscriminate armed struggle in defence of a particular interpretation of Islam'. But still, he concedes:

¹³ Quoted in *Weekendavisen*, 24 May 2017. Available at www.e-pages.dk/weekendavisen/466/article/581355/8/1/render/?token=a363cb3e7359a41b7dea05c3287aeedb.

¹⁴ *Conflicting views in a divided world*. Pew Global Attitudes Project, 22 June 2006, p. viii.

¹⁵ *Inside the hearts and minds of Arab youths*. 8th annual ASDA'A Burson-Marsteller Arab Youth Survey, 12 April 2016; *2016 Arab Opinion Index*, Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, Doha, 13 March 2017. Available at <http://english.dohainstitute.org/release/5cbeed44-ec34-4eb2-a507-195d5e86099a>.

¹⁶ J. M. Berger, 'ISIS is not winning the war of ideas'. In *The Atlantic*, 11 November 2015.

¹⁷ John Mueller and Mark G. Stewart, 'Misooverestimating ISIS: Comparisons with Al-Qaeda'. In *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 2016, 10:4, pp. 32-41.

¹⁸ Jeffrey Goldberg, 'The Obama Doctrine'. In *The Atlantic*, April 2016.

It is hard to avoid the conclusion that there is a sizeable undercurrent of sympathy and support in both Muslim-majority countries and in Western Muslim diasporas where jihadist propaganda is accepted and a certain freedom of action for recruitment and mobilisation continues to be present. This conclusion coincides with one reached by Professor Brynjar Lia [...] Hence, far from being an isolated terrorist underground or an extremist fringe, hated and despised by the surrounding populations, the jihadi movement has managed to insert itself as an insurgent movement with a foothold among the masses.¹⁹

Such widely diverging assessments of the jihadi threat have always co-existed, as the respected former US intelligence official Paul R. Pillar perceptively noted:

Any attempt to gauge the severity of the threat from jihadi terrorism encounters the problem that there is no single and reliable measurement for doing so [...] Perhaps the most fundamental complication in attempting to assess the seriousness of the threat is that ultimately such seriousness is a state of mind in us, the intended audience of the terrorist. That mental effect is, after all, most of what terrorism is about.²⁰

A gulf of mutual incomprehension separates the two tenets. Proponents of the former accuse the latter of naïveté, and the latter respond with accusations of needless hyperbole. There is truth in both positions, however. To summarise a view developed elsewhere,²¹ Daesh represents a new episode in the history of a particular terrorism brand: transnational revolutionary terrorism without state sponsorship. Jihadism is often erroneously compared to Nazism and Communism. These were state-led expansionary projects that represented an existential threat to the very foundations of the global polity. Jihadism, however, is more akin to the earlier manifestations of non-state transnational terrorist campaigns that have emerged at irregular intervals in modern times: the anarchist terrorism of the late nineteenth century, the separatist-fascist wave of the 1920s and 1930s (overlooked in almost all terrorism research, surely because it was gradually absorbed by Italian Fascism and German Nazism), the radical left wave starting in the 1960s and lasting until the mid-1980s, and finally the jihadi wave that began at the end of the 1980s.

Despite their different discourses, these transnational revolutionary terrorism movements emerged from similar conducive environments and motivations: all were pursuing a non-negotiable agenda in their attempt to seize political power from

¹⁹ Alex Schmid, *Public Opinion Survey Data to Measure Sympathy and Support for Islamist Terrorism: A Look at Muslim Opinions on Al Qaeda and IS*. The Hague, ICCT, February 2017.

²⁰ Paul R. Pillar, 'Jihadi terrorism: A global assessment of the threat'. In Rik Coolsaet, *Jihadi Terrorism and the Radicalisation Challenge. European and American Experiences*. Farnham, Ashgate, 2011, p. 8.

²¹ Rik Coolsaet, 'Cycles of revolutionary terrorism'. In *Jihadi Terrorism and the Radicalisation Challenge*, o.c., pp. 83-98.

established regimes, both domestic and global, and bring about fundamental political and social change; the (both real and perceived) marginalisation and subjugation of large groups in society motivated individuals and groups to resort to all sorts of upheaval and violence; they were self-proclaimed vanguards of the oppressed, judging the march of history too slow for their stated goals, and consequently turning to violence as the sole engine capable of bringing the change they heralded; they shared an overarching narrative (or ideology, if one prefers) that convincingly stated that change was at hand – one had only to look how events unfolded in their desired direction – and that their ‘propaganda by the deed’ – attacks against the symbols of authority – would kindle the spark among the masses, so that these would rise against their oppressors.

This concept of consecutive terrorist waves is reminiscent of David C. Rapoport’s comparable account of modern terrorism.²² His analysis was a very timely and much needed attempt to revive the grand theory approach in the field of terrorism studies. However, the major difference between the two analyses lies in the nature of the key driving forces behind the successive waves. Rapoport uses ideology as the defining marker, whereas in this analysis similarities in contexts are identified as the determining factor and thus the main reason why these transnational terrorist campaigns are brought together in the same category of revolutionary terrorism. A second difference is that Rapoport brings all varieties of terrorism into each of his waves, whereas here only the transnational revolutionary brand of terrorism is selected due to this writer’s choice to privilege the instigating circumstances that permit the emergence of a terrorist wave. A final difference resulting from the dissimilar paradigms is the quasi-generational character of Rapoport’s waves as contrasted with the lifecycle dynamics of emergence, consolidation, and demise that each wave of revolutionary terrorism undergoes.

Jihadism is the revolutionary paradigm of our age. It’s the sole game in town for those who believe that only violence and revolt can radically transform the world. Jihadism started almost three decades ago in the aftermath of the Afghan war. Like its predecessors, jihadi terrorism could pretend to side with history as both local and global developments seemed to suggest. This time, these historical developments were the successful overthrow of the Shah of Iran, the defeat of the Soviet Army in Afghanistan, and America’s humiliating Black Hawk Down experience in Somalia. Islamism was to become the politics of the future. Al-Qaeda’s Osama bin Laden succeeded in offering an overarching pan-Islamist and anti-hegemonic narrative to a host of existing insurgencies, rebellions, and local terrorisms, that up till then had pursued a largely local agenda. He successfully stitched them together into a common global jihadi movement by dividing the world in two irreconcilable factions,

²² David C. Rapoport, ‘The Four Waves of Modern Terrorism’. In A.K. Cronin, J. M. Ludes, *Attacking terrorism: Elements of a grand strategy*. Washington, Georgetown University Press, 2004, pp. 46-73.

Muslims and non-Muslims. He was able to project the *Ummah* as a political identity, uphill against national movements, by pointing to the common suffering of Muslims worldwide under a triumphant West.

THE WAXING AND WANING OF JIHADISM

One of the factors distinguishing jihadi terrorism from its historic predecessors has been its capacity to mobilise foreigners to join faraway war theatres. Foreign fighters are not a novel phenomenon, however; precedents can be traced back to ancient times. But the adherence of large numbers of individuals to transnational terrorist organisations based abroad is a quintessential characteristic of the jihadi wave. Earlier transnational terrorism campaigns were mostly fought by like-minded nationals within their own country. Discourse, symbols, and opportunistic links established the unifying transnational framework among groups and individuals.

Several waves of jihadi foreign fighters can be identified.²³ The first wave fought against the Soviets in Afghanistan and became the companions-in-arms of Osama bin Laden. The second wave were often elite expatriates from the Middle East who went to the West to attend universities. Motivated by the suffering of Muslims in Bosnia, Chechnya, Kashmir, and the Philippines, they volunteered to fight in those hotspots. By 2004-2005, the first two waves of truly global jihadi travellers had reached their limits. But the American invasion of Iraq in 2003 breathed new life into the decaying jihadi terrorist scene. A fresh wave of foreign fighters emerged. They entered the jihadi scene mostly through kinship and friendship bonds, and were often connected to the global context via the internet. Since they couldn't physically link up with the remnants of al-Qaeda or other jihadi organisations, they formed bottom-up, fluid networks, that were self-financed and self-trained. The motivations of this 'home-grown' wave ranged from outrage about Iraq to thrill seekers to individuals seeking meaning and belonging. But by 2008-2010, the third wave too had run its course.

The start of the civil war in Syria in 2012 and the emergence of potent jihadi groups in the Levant, in particular Daesh, once again reinvigorated the jihadi movement. It gave rise to a new, fourth wave of foreign fighters, more numerous than the earlier waves and this time with a significantly larger European component, some 4,000 – 5,000.

Waves of jihadi foreign fighters have waxed and waned on the rhythm of jihadism itself. Jihadism was originally incarnated by al-Qaeda, an organisation that had its own ups and downs.²⁴ What some considered its high-water mark – the 9/11 attacks – pushed the organisation into disarray following its breakdown, the loss of its

²³ For the successive waves of foreign fighters, see Marc Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad. Terror networks in the twenty-first century*. Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008; Rik Coolsaet, *Facing the fourth foreign fighters wave. What drives Europeans to Syria, and to Islamic State? Insights from the Belgian case*. Brussels, Egmont – Royal Institute for International Relations, March 2016. Peter Neumann uses a slightly different yardstick to distinguish successive jihadi waves (including foreign fighters), based upon David Rapoport's 2004 model in his *Radicalized. New jihadists and the threat to the West*. London/New York, I.B. Tauris, 2016. For historical data on foreign fighters, see <http://davidmalet.com>.

²⁴ Soufan, o.c., *passim*.

training camps in Afghanistan, the gradual erosion of its Afghan networks, and insubordination within its own ranks. The once highly disciplined al-Qaeda organisation fragmented into a nebula of franchises, home-grown terror groups and freelance jihadis, each going their own way without much of a central command. With hindsight, this fragmentation is seen by some observers as a deliberate strategy developed by one of the founding members, Abu Musab al-Suri. Whatever the validity of this assessment, the fact remains that al-Qaeda was no longer able to mount its trademark spectacular transnational attacks. Its centre of operational gravity effectively shifted to its affiliates, with varying fortunes. In 2003, Iraq became the heartland of global jihadi activity, centred around Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's al-Qaeda in Iraq. Notwithstanding the shared name, al-Qaeda found itself utterly sidelined in this theatre. But after some years, al-Zarqawi's movement in turn lost its premier position among jihadi groups as a result of the combined efforts of the American military and the Iraqi Sunni tribes alienated by Zarqawi's utter brutality.

Jihadism was once again reinvigorated by the Syrian civil war and the Sunni marginalisation by the Iraqi government of Nouri al-Maliki. This conducive environment transformed Syria into a theatre of competing jihadi and Syrian rebel groups. A successor group to Zarqawi's al-Qaeda in Iraq – Daesh – rapidly emerged as the new premier global jihadi group, surpassing al-Qaeda by all possible standards. Daesh was able to do so by cannibalising territory liberated by other rebel groups (while avoiding combat with the Syrian army), by converging with remnants of the Iraqi Baath regime, and by adopting al-Zarqawi's indiscriminate terror tactics to inspire fear in all who opposed its advance. It gradually expanded areas under its total control with the ultimate intention of establishing a caliphate, as al-Zarqawi had always intended. Through this seemingly ever increasing territory, Daesh soon became the wealthiest and best equipped of all jihadi groups in the region, and also the most vicious, siphoning off fighters from other jihadi groups.

It also attracted many more fighters from more countries than al-Qaeda was ever able to do. For the first time, Europeans constituted a substantial contingent among the jihadi foreign fighters. Daesh inspired and supported a series of franchises all over the world, just like al-Qaeda, but its narrative largely outdid al-Qaeda's as a point of reference and inspiration for lone wolves and small cells. Its series of directed networked plots made al-Qaeda's scoreboard look unimpressive. On 29 June 2014 it formally announced the return of the caliphate. By then, Daesh controlled a vast territory where it created a proto-state that attracted tens of thousands of people willing to make *hijra* to what they considered the ideal Muslim state.

But what exactly was Daesh's 'USP', the unique selling proposition that allowed it to outbid al-Qaeda and to attract so many people with widely different motivations from vastly different locations around the world? Former US Special Operations commander in the Middle East, Major General Michael K. Nagata, acknowledged

being puzzled by Daesh's appeal: 'We do not understand the movement, and until we do, we are not going to defeat it. [...] We have not defeated the idea. We do not even understand the idea.'²⁵

Identifying Daesh's USP is a critical stepping stone in the search for an answer not only to the question of what will follow Daesh's military defeat in Iraq and Syria, but also the question of how the lifecycle of jihadi terrorism itself might eventually come to an end.

²⁵ Quoted in *New York Times*, 29 December 2014.

THE CAUSES OF DAESH'S SUCCESS – MARTHA CRENSHAW REVISITED

Daesh's success and the continual reinvigoration of jihadism in successive sub-waves are the result of the persistence of a conducive environment that provides situational factors that motivate and direct groups and individuals to use violence. This general formula originates from the early terrorism studies in the 1970s and 1980s and was coined by one of its pioneers, Martha Crenshaw.

In a landmark 1981 contribution on 'The Causes of Terrorism'²⁶ Martha Crenshaw already acknowledged that answering the question of why specific individuals engage in political violence was a complicated problem. Context, Crenshaw urged, is of the essence in understanding terrorism. Its causes lie in a facilitative or conducive environment that permits its emergence and in direct motivating factors that propel people to violence. Together with colleagues such as Ted Gurr, Crenshaw thereby insisted early on upon the need to look into the interplay between this societal context, psychological considerations, and group dynamics to understand terrorism – never an automatic reaction to given conditions.

Fraught with methodological difficulties and confronted with a seemingly endless stream of factors to be taken into consideration, the 'why-terrorism-occurs' research failed to gain traction. Instead, the focus shifted to more practical policy-orientated studies only to be resuscitated with the advent of jihadi terrorism. The early, somewhat deterministic, root-causes approach after the 9/11 attacks has now given way to nuanced portrayals of interlinking dimensions, but this has never resulted in a model on which scholars and practitioners could agree. The same applies to novel concepts that were introduced after 2004, such as radicalisation and violent extremism. Many drivers have been identified, from ideology and religion to socio-economic deprivation to personal and cultural characteristics, but their exact sequencing and relative importance have failed to achieve a consensus. Increasingly complex formulas and intricate schemes have tended to obfuscate rather than enlighten our understanding of terrorism.

We are thus still at a loss when attempting to elucidate the causes behind the emergence of jihadi terrorism, let alone to propose a more granular analysis of the successive sub-waves within this broader jihadi wave.

Now, perhaps, is the time to revisit Martha Crenshaw's model and integrate some recent findings into her framework. Terrorism might thus be conceptualised as the interplay between a conducive environment, opportunities, ideology, and group

²⁶ Martha Crenshaw, 'The Causes of Terrorism'. In *Comparative Politics*, 1981, 13:4, pp. 379-399.

dynamics.²⁷ Take away any of these dimensions and no terrorism campaign will be able to emerge and certainly not to sustain itself.



How can the interplay between these four dimensions help to explain in simple terms Daesh's success and the unparalleled speed and scale by which foreign volunteers flocked to its proto-state in the Levant? Again, in answering this question, the European scene is privileged, but undoubtedly the same framework is applicable to other locations as well.

Conducive environment

An alternative phrasing for 'conducive environment' is 'push factors'. What factors have pushed so many, often young, people from Europe to travel to Syria and end up with Daesh?

Law enforcement officials have been more willing than elected officials or the general public to acknowledge that specific factors in European societies have influenced some citizens to answer Daesh's call. The consideration that a societal context plays a significant role in radicalisation inevitably entails a hard look at shortcomings in one's own society. It is more comfortable to put the blame exclusively on alien

²⁷ This conceptualisation of the emergence of terrorism and terrorist campaigns follows the lines of the 'puzzle' metaphor introduced by Mohammed Hafez and Chreighton Mullins ('The radicalization puzzle: A theoretical synthesis of empirical approaches to homegrown extremism'. In *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 2015:38, 958-975) as an alternative to the idea of a radicalisation 'process' (with however some rearrangements). It also encapsulates, albeit in a mutually interactive mode, the 'kaleidoscope of factors' systematically enumerated by the longtime Swedish terrorism scholar Magnus Ranstorp (*The root causes of violent extremism*. RAN Issue Paper, 4 January. Available at https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/ran-papers/docs/issue_paper_root-causes_jan2016_en.pdf).

factors, such as an imported narrative (some would say religion) or diasporic communities. In a recent interview, however, Belgium's highest police official Catherine De Bolle did not hesitate to take an inward look:

What really shocked me, before the attacks and with all that has happened since, is that society has failed to include people. There are many who live with us for years, even decades. We didn't succeed in devising a common denominator. They do not really feel as if they are being included, as if they are part of our society, of Belgium.²⁸

In a similar vein, the Belgian federal prosecutor in charge of terrorism, Frédéric Van Leeuw, not only refuted the popular belief that the West was 'at war', but also readily admitted that:

[...] our Western society is part of the problem. [...] If young people leave here and are not afraid to be bombarded in Raqqa, that means that they have no prospects here. They have an age where they seek a strong commitment, but apparently do not find it in our society. It is to us to offer these youngsters strong and challenging projects [...] Incidentally, these are only about men with Islamic roots. We also see a large percentage of women and converts that leave. Individual, human problems are of course involved.²⁹

This echoes Marc Trévidic, France's well-known anti-terrorism judge, who once quipped that jihadism had become 'hyped' (*'un phénomène de mode'*):

Ninety percent of those who leave, do it out of personal reasons: they are looking for a fight, or for adventure, or revenge, because they do not fit in society [...] and only 10% out of religious beliefs [...]. Religion is not the engine of this movement and that's precisely its strength.³⁰

His assessment of the personal motivations at the core of the push factors for Europeans joining the jihadi movement had already been documented at the time of the third, home-grown wave of foreign fighters in the post-Iraq era. Europeans did not travel extensively to Iraq in this phase. Moreover, most of them originated from just two countries: France (some 30 nationals) and Belgium (10-15).³¹ Testimonies and life stories are therefore less abundant than for the Daesh generation. Nevertheless, contemporary analyses allow for a look into the environment underlying radicalisation at that time. In 2005, I showed how a specific group of youngsters appeared

²⁸ Quoted in *Le Soir* (Belgian French-language daily newspaper), 5 August 2017.

²⁹ Quoted in *De Morgen* (Belgian Dutch-language daily newspaper), 16 December 2016.

³⁰ *Le Télégramme* (French regional newspaper), 25 June 2015. Available at www.letelegramme.fr/bretagne/le-juge-trevidic-la-religion-n-est-pas-le-moteur-du-jihad-27-06-2015-10682946.php.

³¹ Timothy Holman, 'Belgian and French foreign fighters in Iraq 2003-2005: A comparative case study'. In *Studies on Conflict & Terrorism*, 2015:38, pp. 603-621. (The number of foreign fighters originating from Belgium has been revised in comparison to those mentioned in Holman's article.)

to be more receptive to radicalisation: 15 to 18 years old, mostly born and raised in Europe, in particular second and third generation youngsters of North-African heritage.³²

No longer able to identify with the country of origin of their parents or grandparents, the countries they now live in constitute their sole natural environment for identification. Within this environment however, and to the difference of their non-migrant peers, they are confronted with a number of real obstacles, in particular discriminations on the job and the real estate market and educational deficiencies [...]

Unable to identify with their parents' identities and usually better educated than them, they are more sensitive than their parents to the feeling of being excluded or rejected by their natural environment as second-class citizens. Their father's mosques do not capture their imagination, since the (often foreign) imams do not offer them a message they can identify with. They create their own subculture, withdraw from many social contacts, and sever family ties. [...] Within migrant communities, despair and discouragement nowadays prevail with regard to their youngsters' chances of overcoming these situations in the foreseeable future.

In a vicious circle of frustration and dissatisfaction, youngsters from migrant communities choose the easiest way out and pose themselves as victims, projecting onto society whatever ill-fortune they encounter. They form the hard core of radical groups of Salafist Islamists and rapidly radicalise into self-declared local vanguards of the worldwide jihad, sometimes under the influence of a charismatic individual. By seemingly acting in community with a worldwide liberation struggle they develop a sense of self-esteem. This feeling of commonality with jihadi theatres of war is the ultra radicalised and polarising version of a more general sense of increased solidarity among Muslims worldwide [...]

I quote this 2005 description at some length to highlight the similarities with the much better documented environment of the Daesh-linked foreign fighter wave. Then and now individuals entered the jihadi scene primarily via kinship and friendship bonds, and less via shared religious motivation. Daesh has been the object of all kinds of fantasies for all kinds of people, from thrill- and revenge-seekers to the mentally unstable to those seeking meaning and belonging, all of whom want to be part of Daesh because it offers them a once-in-a-lifetime, instant opportunity to go from zero to hero. Some had a previous life of petty crime, drug trafficking, and other

³² Rik Coolsaet, *Between al-Andalus and a failing integration. Europe's pursuit of a long-term counterterrorism strategy in the post-al-Qaeda era*. Egmont Paper 5, Egmont – Royal Institute for International Relations, May 2005.

forms of juvenile delinquency. Joining Daesh represents a unique opportunity to join a ‘super gang’, from which members derive status, recognition, power, and freedom to use violence to a point they could never have obtained on the streets of their home towns. The same mechanisms create delinquents and jihadis alike. Others were youngsters with no previous sign of deviant behaviour. In social media, wiretaps, or interviews, however, they often mentioned earlier personal difficulties (of various kinds), that left them feeling stifled and discontented. One gets the impression of solitary adolescents, frequently estranged from family and friends, in search of belonging. Often these stories point to a desire to leave this *dunya* behind, to be ‘someone’, to be accepted, to do something ‘useful’. They want to look up to heroes – or to be one themselves. They long for an alternative lifestyle. And they want to believe in ‘something’.

The common denominator here is a lack of prospects, both real and perceived. This does not simply equal socioeconomic deprivation. For some it amounts to quintessential teenage angst, making them receptive to a groomer’s attention. For others, however, it results from a life of broken dreams and harsh daily experiences of being considered second-class citizens in their own country. Lack of prospects is clearly not simply a matter of failing to secure a job or facing discrimination – although one should never underestimate the impact of this on the group of Europeans that left for the Levant. It’s about feeling trapped. ‘*Un sentiment d’abandon*’ (‘a feeling of abandonment’) was the prevailing sentiment Latifa Ibn Ziaten, the mother of one of the soldiers killed by Mohammed Merah in 2012, sensed when speaking at schools in the French *cités*. A recent innovative social mapping of Molenbeek, a municipality in the northwest of Brussels that saw some 50 (mostly young) inhabitants leave for Syria, contained a similar observation: ‘Nobody cared about [the host of problems in] Molenbeek – therefore it is a good place for radicalisation to develop.’³³

This conducive environment produced the no-future subculture that drove a small number of mostly young individuals towards the Levant. This subculture was the key driver behind the journey of hundreds of Europeans to Iraq after 2003. When this wave waned, the subculture remained, waiting for another opportunity.

Opportunity

A conducive environment does not automatically lead to violent extremism or terrorism, Martha Crenshaw asserted in 1981. There has to be an opportunity, a ‘pull factor’. Why was Daesh able to appeal to such a wide variety of individuals, to a degree that al-Qaeda could not (and was unwilling to) or the home-grown wave was unable to sustain?

³³ *Molenbeek and violent radicalisation: a ‘social mapping’*. Brussels, European Institute of Peace, May 2017, p. 49. Available at <https://view.publitas.com/eip/eip-molenbeek-report-16-06/page/1>.

The third wave of jihadi terrorism had indeed largely run its course by 2008-2010. Left to its own devices, without access to technical expertise, the fading of the memories about the original anger caused by the Iraq war, as well as vigorous law enforcement and intelligence efforts dismantled most of the clandestine groups. Daesh picked up where the third wave had stopped. It plugged into the same conducive environment made up by a host of personal motivations and mobilised again the same subculture as the third wave. But now volunteers were even younger than in the third wave, and their decision to leave for a jihadi theatre was even less faith-based. Personal motivations were still more diverse. And, above all, they came in much greater numbers. All this was due to Daesh's unique asset among contemporary jihadi groups: its vast proto-state.

It was through its control over a large territory that Daesh could offer a catalogue of boundless opportunities with a promise of instant satisfaction for anyone seeking to join them, physically or virtually.

To members of street gangs the catalogue offered status, brotherhood, thrill, adventure, respect, and an outlet for their anger to an extent they could only dream of on the streets of their home countries. Daesh offered them a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to join a super gang, heroism, and martyrdom if they wanted. It provided them with power over others, hope of revenge, and even a license for viciousness in the name of a higher goal.

But the pull of Daesh extended beyond those searching for a fight. It offered a new life to those in search of belonging and meaning in life, adolescents and 20- and 30-year-olds alike. Daesh hinted at a new beginning, empowerment, pride, a future, prospects, warm camaraderie, and a feeling of finally being accepted the way they wanted to be. Daesh also offered material wealth: a salary and a villa with a pool. And a spouse.

The self-declared state was not only a warrior nation. It also needed 'normal' people, not bent on violence: doctors and nurses, officials and engineers, mothers and teachers. Daesh went to great lengths to project a new utopia of peace and harmony with simple and straightforward rules, a recovered righteous caliphate to which Muslims worldwide could migrate – a new *hijra*, alluring to all Muslims who felt like *ghuraba*, strangers in their own country. British fighters once described their engagement in Syria as a 'five-star jihad'. Until the international intervention following Jim Foley's beheading in August 2014, Syria was indeed a relatively risk-free location (compared to other jihadi theatres), thanks to Daesh's full control over a large territory.³⁴ Once the West's attacks on the caliphate began, revenge played the same role, if not more so, as anger over the invasion of Iraq had done for the third wave of foreign fighters.

³⁴ Thomas Hegghammer, 'Syria's foreign fighters'. In *Foreign Policy*, 10 December 2013.

It was through its seizure of large swaths of Iraq and Syria and its attempts at establishing a functioning state that Daesh's catalogue of solutions became credible, because these enticements lay within immediate reach. Moreover, it could deliver on a classical jihadi message that there was no place for Muslims in the West and effectively provide a welcoming home. Daesh created a place for *hijra* in a way al-Qaeda had never been able to do (Afghanistan was Taliban country and not an al-Qaeda state. After a very short time, it was chased from Afghanistan).

Ideology

Ideology is a crucial dimension of terrorism. Ideology is what distinguishes terrorism from other crimes. Ever since the adoption of the concept of radicalisation in 2004, the relationship between terrorism and ideology has been hotly debated and has yielded a voluminous literature. This is not a new debate, however. In the 1970s and 1980s there was debate about the role of revolutionary ideologies as drivers of radical left terrorism. A comparable debate also existed at the end of the nineteenth century when the world was facing the anarchist terrorist campaign.

Ideology has many definitions. It can refer to a set of philosophical axioms or to a party programme, but it can also be understood as a 'belief system':

a set of lenses through which information concerning the physical and social environment is received. It orients the individual to his environment, defining it for him and identifying for him its salient characteristics [...] In addition to organizing perceptions into a meaningful guide for behavior, the belief system has the function of the establishment of goals and the ordering of preferences.³⁵

Much energy and creativity has been expended on identifying the exact nature of the link between doctrines and violence, between ideology and terrorism. This paper will not go into these debates in depth. It takes the position that ideology does not equal theology, as the German de-radicalisation expert Daniel Koehler is used to saying. The Daesh generation readily admits its superficial religious knowledge, many testimonies confirm. Rather than doctrinal fine print, ideology is all about the credibility of the narrative. A narrative catches on when it corresponds to a need and is able to make sense and give hope to those who feel attracted by it. Again, to put it simply, Daesh has offered a credible narrative of victory, revenge, and utopia, which clearly corresponded to an existing need. An ideology thus morphs into an identity. Whoever criticises the former, attacks the latter.

³⁵ O.R. Holsti, 'The belief system and national images: a case study'. In James Rosenau, *International politics and foreign policy*. New York, Free Press, 1969, p. 544.

Al-Qaeda was the first to develop an overarching narrative that succeeded in making people believe that jihadism was going to rule the world by defeating all miscreants. It would defeat the West as it had done the Soviet army in Afghanistan. Once the faraway enemy was forced to its knees, apostate regimes in the Middle East would follow. Osama bin Laden symbolised the revolt against the powerful and promised an upheaval of historic dimensions. As the French scholar Olivier Roy argued early on,³⁶ bin Laden succeeded in Islamising the traditional anti-American and anti-imperialist discourse of the left. Roy's French colleague Gilles Kepel agreed: the (initial) support and sympathy Bin Laden's actions enjoyed from sections of public opinion within the Muslim world was not so much a matter of religion or religiosity or of his image as a warrior for Islam, but of his Robin Hood aura.³⁷ But events did not unfold as Osama bin Laden had claimed they would, and the appeal of jihadism waned – only to be revived and reinforced by Daesh.

Daesh also offers an overarching narrative that wraps the variety of individual motivations into a collective storyline that heavily emphasises surpassing oneself, heroism, victory, and apocalyptic revenge. Richard Barrett, the respected UK intelligence official, who also served at the United Nations, commented, 'The extremist groups had been able to wrap individual dissatisfactions with life into a communal narrative about purpose and heroism in defence of religion.'³⁸ Some years ago, Daesh social media messages were said to convey the rhetorical question: 'Why be a loser when you can be a martyr?'

The Daesh brand of jihadi ideology has been all the more credible and alluring since it not only shrewdly appealed to the host of the specific motivations of the individuals and groups it targeted, but also because it promised instant solutions. Its relentless 24/24 and 7/7 online campaigning did the rest. It cemented the conviction among Daesh's followers that they really embodied the vanguard of a global revolution. As Stratfor's Scott Stewart argues, 'there will always be hyperbole in terrorist propaganda. Nevertheless, it tends to clearly state the goals and intentions of terrorist groups, even when they are not capable of achieving them.'³⁹ This hyperbole is clearly at play now that the Daesh fighters in Raqqa are facing inevitable military defeat. Nevertheless, said their communiqué on Telegram on 7 August 2017, 'The mujahideen are standing fast and determined to win the third world war being waged against it.'⁴⁰

The alluring Daesh chimera even led mentally unstable individuals to wrap their psychological difficulties and ensuing action into the Daesh narrative. The gravita-

³⁶ Olivier Roy, *L'Islam mondialisé*. Paris, Seuil, 2002, p. 186.

³⁷ Quoted in *New York Times*, 17 January 2002.

³⁸ Richard Barrett, 'Theresa May's "enough is enough" risks making the extremist threat worse'. In *The Guardian*, 5 June 2017.

³⁹ Scott Stewart, *What drives terrorism part 1: ideology and theory*. Stratfor, 4 May 2017. Available at www.stratfor.com/article/what-drives-terrorism-part-1-ideology-and-theory.

⁴⁰ *Memri Report*, 9 August 2017. Available at www.memri.org/jttm/isis-raqqa-announces-mujahideen-are-standing-fast-and-determined-triumph.

tional pull of Daesh has been so powerful and its message so credible that even individuals who were unable or unwilling to make the journey to the Levant wanted to be part of the project. The hyperboles used in the Western media and in political discourse emphasising the existential threat that Daesh was said to represent to the West further reinforced its appeal among Western youths as a movement of winners. Winners attract winners.

Group dynamics

If terrorism is to gain ground and grow, a link must be established between a conducive environment and an opportunity. It has long been established in terrorism studies that group dynamics play a crucial role in making a terrorist campaign come true, locally and transnationally.

In *Leaderless Jihad* (2008) Marc Sageman re-introduced this dimension. He specifically identified kinship and friendship bonds as key components of the socialisation process that leads individuals into terrorism. Such bonds often precede ideological commitment to the cause of jihadism. He was referring to the home-grown wave of foreign fighters. Earlier studies on neo-Nazi groups had already indicated the same sequence, and Martha Crenshaw wrote exactly the same in 1988.⁴¹

Some have labelled them 'entrepreneurs'. Daniel Heinke, Director of the State Bureau of Investigation and Chief of Detectives at Bremen Police, aptly dubbed them 'radicalization hubs'.⁴² Radicalisation being a catch-all concept, 'socialisation' or 'mobilisation hubs' is perhaps an even better idiom. Such hubs make the difference between street gangs and terrorist groups. An individual joining a given group evolves with the group of which he (or she) is part. Group dynamics push the members into easy moneymaking via drug trafficking or biker gangs (and sometimes both), while a third group can take a completely different track and excel in street art or in a martial arts school. Or join the jihadi scene.

Without such terrorism-oriented hubs, an individual seldom links up with terrorism. Lone wolves do exist, but they represent only a handful of cases. One does not simply become a terrorist by watching social media messages or heroic videos. However important they may be as a means of feeling oneself part of a (virtual) community of likeminded people, in most cases cyberspace bonds need a physical extension in order for an individual to match their actions to their words.

Hubs are most likely to emerge in physical places where the characteristics of the conducive environment that allows terrorism to emerge are discernibly present. In

⁴¹ Martha Crenshaw, 'The subjective reality of the terrorist: Ideological and psychological factors in terrorism'. In Slater, Stohl, o.c., pp. 26 and 37.

⁴² Daniel H. Heinke, 'Countering radicalization and recruitment of so-called Jihadists – Proscription of radicalization hubs'. In *Defense Against Terrorism Review*, 8, 2016:1, pp. 89-97. Available at www.coedat.nato.int/publication/datr/volume8-2016/05-Countering_Radicalization_and_Recruitment.pdf.

simpler terms, this means wherever the no-future subculture is most manifestly experienced.

The presence (or absence) of such hubs explain the differences between foreign fighter contingents in different Member States of the European Union – or differences within these states. Recent research indicates that foreign fighters often travel in clusters, originating from specific locations.⁴³ Belgium offers a case in point. The first wave of foreign fighters, which left the country between April 2012 and July 2013, departed from a limited number of urban neighbourhoods, especially in Antwerp and Brussels, as well as Vilvorde (near Brussels). In these locations, small extremist groups and entrepreneurs had been active for some time: Sharia4Belgium (the Belgian franchise of the London-based jihadi network al-Muhajiroun), Resto du Tawhid in Schaerbeek and a hub clustered around Khalid Zerkani, who acted as a bridge between the small Belgian jihadi scene and the criminal rings of young delinquents. These pre-existing, tight-knit groups played a significant role in connecting push and pull factors in the early stages of the Syrian crisis. Once on the scene, they reached out to their peers in their home country, creating a snowball effect that consequently increased the numbers of foreign volunteers.

Concluding

Daesh's success is attributable to its possession of a proto-state of its own. This is Daesh's unique characteristic among contemporary jihadi groups. This allowed it to propose a credible narrative that provided for the needs of a wide variety of individuals with widely different personal motivations, since it suggested instant satisfaction – a very contemporary shopper's dream. The narrative plugged into the same conducive environment as that of the preceding jihadi wave and mobilised the same jihadi subculture. But it obtained vastly greater success thanks to its proto-state. It even amplified its appeal by offering an utopia for people who felt unwelcome and alienated in their own countries, from ultra-orthodox Muslim families to estranged teenagers.

Can Daesh's unique combination of push and pull factors, supported by kinship and friendship hubs and a credible and alluring narrative, survive the failure of its state project? Probably not. The success of Daesh was intimately linked to the maintenance of territorial and virtual progress, its aura of invincibility, and the sense of inevitable victory within reach. This project now lies mostly in tatters.

What happens next?

⁴³ Nate Rosenblatt, *All Jihad is local*. Washington, New America, 2016; Brian Dodwell, Daniel Milton, Don Rassler, *The Caliphate's global workforce: An inside look at the Islamic State's foreign fighters paper trail*. West Point, CTC, April 2016; Arie Perliger, Daniel Milton, *From cradle to grave: The lifecycle of foreign fighters in Iraq and Syria*. West Point, CTC, November 2016.

WINDOWS OF OPPORTUNITY

It is reasonable to expect that the fascination with Daesh will die out as a result of the failure of its state project, since this constituted a critical part of Daesh's force of attraction. This development corresponds to the waxing and waning dynamics of jihadism. How the waning in this instance will play out in different locations is very much tied to the specific interplay between environment and hubs in each location. Environments in Manchester, Marawi (on Mindanao) and Cairo – all the scene of Daesh-linked bloody attacks in May 2017 – are very diverse, which will result in different reactions to the demise of Daesh.

The waning of Daesh offers some respite and a new window of opportunity to confront the preconditions that have allowed jihadism to thrive in the past. But the existence of a window of opportunity does not imply that chances will be automatically seized or that the outcome is a foregone conclusion. The second half of the 2000s offers a sober reminder that sometimes chances are wasted.

Second half of the 2000s – an opportunity missed

In Europe, negative and positive developments co-existed after the Madrid and London attacks of 2004 and 2005.⁴⁴ As mentioned earlier, in the EU the number of attacks and arrests steadily declined from 2007 onwards to reach their lowest point in 2011. Local cells and support hubs were being dismantled. Threat levels in Europe were lowered: for example, in the Netherlands the authorities decided in 2009 to reduce their outlooks for terrorist attacks from substantial to limited.⁴⁵

In the early 2000s, early efforts to address the conducive environment to jihadi mobilisation were launched as part of the tentative root-causes approach. The Dutch government was very explicit in its emphasis that the 'breeding ground' of terrorism had to be confronted. The conducive environment was also addressed by a high-level panel established by the French President Jacques Chirac in 2002 amid a growing row orchestrated by small activist groups about the veil in schools. Notwithstanding this charged atmosphere, the panel, named after its chair Bernard Stasi, came up with a nuanced report containing a series of recommendations for adapting the century-old French *laïcité* to changed times. But the report also called attention to structural vulnerabilities, rampant discrimination, and the sense of abandonment in French neighbourhoods as key reasons why communities turned inwards:

⁴⁴ Unless otherwise indicated, the description of the European scene in the second half of the 2000s is based upon my 'Europe: Reinforcing Existing Trends'. In Mohammed Ayoob, Etga Ugur (eds.), *Assessing the War on Terror*. Boulder, Lynne Rienner, 2013, pp. 137-159.

⁴⁵ www.nctv.nl/organisatie/ct/dtn/over_dtn/index.aspx.

It's on the breeding ground of wretched living conditions (*le mal vivre*) that communitarianist extremisms flourish: secularism (*laïcité*) only gains sense and legitimacy if at all points of our territory equal chances are assured, the diversity of the histories that make our community, are recognised and the multiple identities respected.⁴⁶

Community relations nevertheless showed some signs of potential positive progress. Surveys pointed toward the emergence of a specifically European Islam, marrying modernity and Islamic values. The same surveys clearly stressed (as did some national surveys) that European Muslims' worries were essentially the same as those of their non-Muslim neighbours: they worried about their future, and they were more concerned about unemployment than cultural or religious issues. As mentioned earlier, the most hopeful news that these surveys brought was that Europe's Muslims:

[...] side with Islamic moderates, not fundamentalists, and the overwhelming majority reject extreme tactics like suicide bombing as a way to win political objectives. These Muslims express more temperate views of Westerners than those in the Middle East or Asia. A majority also express favorable opinions of Christians and have less negative views of Jews. (...) While Europe's Muslim minorities are about as likely as Muslims elsewhere to see relations between Westerners and Muslims as generally bad, they more often associate positive attributes to Westerners – including tolerance, generosity, and respect for women. And in a number of respects Muslims in Europe are less inclined to see a clash of civilizations than are some of the general publics surveyed in Europe. Notably, they are less likely than non-Muslims in Europe to believe that there is a conflict between modernity and being a devout Muslim.⁴⁷

Olivier Roy made a similar observation:

The strength and the weakness of Islamic extremism in Western Europe are precisely that the radicals are not rooted among the European Muslim population. The strength is that they cannot be traced or spotted before going into action by police penetration of the local Muslim population. It is also difficult to enter their networks because they are cut off from the outside world and are highly mobile. The weakness is that they have problems of recruitment and logistics because they do not relate well to ordinary 'civilian' fellow Muslims. [...] European authorities have contributed to isolating the radicals

⁴⁶ Commission de réflexion sur l'application du principe de laïcité dans la République, *Rapport au Président de la République*, 11 December 2003. Available at www.ladocumentationfrancaise.fr/var/storage/rapports-publics/034000725.pdf.

⁴⁷ *Conflicting views in a divided world*. Pew Global Attitudes Project, 22 June 2006.

by responding positively, at least in terms of rhetoric, to the quest for recognition and integration.⁴⁸

The original Expert Group on Violent Radicalisation, established in 2006 by the European Commission, also cautioned against the already palpable tendency of confusing manifestations of increased religiosity among Muslims with political radicalisation:

Today's religious and political radicalisation should [...] not be confounded. The former is closely intertwined with identity dynamics, whereas the latter is boosted by the aforementioned feelings of inequity whether real or perceived. Both expressions of radicalisation processes are thus the result of very different individual and collective dynamics.⁴⁹

But in the end negative developments prevailed.

On the eve of the 9/11 attacks, there were alternative narratives explaining the difficulties of a multicultural society. The culturalist finger-pointing of the radical right was met with warnings about the dramatic socioeconomic position of the immigrant 'underclass', which fuelled a considerable amount of potential discontent waiting to erupt. The attacks of 9/11 produced a real paradigm shift, the impact of which would become apparent in the course of the decade. Topics such as discrimination, disadvantaged socioeconomic position, and unemployment in immigrant communities faded from public and political discourse. The European debate on immigration became firmly anchored around the culturalist paradigm. A social question was now viewed through an essentially cultural lens, even narrowed down to a question of religion and identity. These came to be seen as the major obstacles to the integration of immigrants and their offspring.⁵⁰ The once quintessentially radical right anti-Islam stance was now joined by the rigorous anticlerical stance of the left in some kind of joint anti-Islamic *Kulturkampf*, propelling a polarising debate on the compatibility of Islam with Western values. Even if not all European countries showed the same degree of hostility towards Muslim communities, Muslims were often 'stereotypically portrayed in media reports as a devoutly religious and undifferentiated group sharing a fundamentalist version of Islam'.⁵¹ The significant diversity within diasporic communities from Muslim-majority countries was compacted into a single monolithic entity labelled 'Muslim community', conflating ethnicity with religion.

⁴⁸ Olivier Roy, 'Europe's response to radical Islam'. In *Current History*, November 2005.

⁴⁹ European Commission Expert Group on Violent Radicalisation, *Radicalisation processes leading to acts of terrorism*. Brussels, 15 May 2008. Available at www.clingendael.nl/publication/radicalisation-processes-leading-acts-terrorism.

⁵⁰ Sami Zemni, 'The shaping of Islam and Islamophobia in Belgium'. In *Race & Class*, 2011, 53:1, pp. 28-44.

⁵¹ *Muslims in the European Union. Discrimination and Islamophobia*. Brussels, European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia (EUMC), December 2006. Available at <http://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2012/muslims-european-union-discrimination-and-islamophobia>.

Pre-existing sentiments about the ethnic threat posed by minorities were reinforced. Mainstream politicians such as Chancellor Merkel and Prime Minister Cameron reignited the discussion on integration by calling multiculturalism 'dead', without detailing what this implied for the everyday life of immigrants and natives alike. In 2010, immigration dominated headlines in Europe (and North America) as never before.⁵²

The children and grandchildren of the 1960s and 1970s migrants from Muslim-majority countries have found different ways of positioning themselves in times of enhanced social polarisation. Some choose the easiest way out and position themselves as victims, projecting whatever ill-fortune they encounter onto society. Some withdraw within safe harbours, ranging from family and teahouses to Salafi organisations. In 2005, warnings were already being raised about an introverted generation. Still others chose to emphasise the religious affiliation that society constantly threw in their face.⁵³ Surveys indicated that by the mid-2000s, youngsters started to think of themselves first as Muslims rather than as citizens of their country.⁵⁴ 'Proud to be a Muslim' became the theme in lyrics and Facebook accounts. Anne-Laurence Halford of the popular education association Entre-Autres, based in southern France, also noticed this shift in the mid-2000s: 'In 2005, at the time of the riots in French suburbs, new phenomena of communitarian withdrawal appeared. The rupture was about identity. The youngsters said I do not know who I am but I am not French.'⁵⁵

The 'cartoon' crisis erupted that year. A Danish daily published 12 cartoons of the Prophet Mohammad. Intended as a demonstration of free speech, the gesture initially passed without creating much controversy. A group of Danish Muslim clerics undertook a lobbying tour in the Middle East, after which the issue got caught in geopolitical instrumentalisation. It became a global rift, seemingly pitting a liberal free-speech West against a backward Muslim world, and further poisoned the identity-laden politics that increasingly characterised the European polity.

Around 2008, a 'Cool Islam' movement emerged, developing into a youth subculture with its own rap, designer clothes, and magazines.⁵⁶ Those who could afford it

⁵² *Transatlantic Trends: Immigration 2010*. p. 3. Available at http://trends.gmfus.org/files/archived/immigration/doc/TTI2010_English_Key.pdf.

⁵³ *Intolerance and Discrimination against Muslims in the EU. Developments since September 2001*. Helsinki, International Federation for Human Rights, March 2005, p. 12.

⁵⁴ *Muslims in Europe: Economic worries top concerns about religious and cultural identity*. Pew Global Attitudes Project, 6 July 2006. Available at www.pewglobal.org/2006/07/06/muslims-in-europe-economic-worries-top-concerns-about-religious-and-cultural-identity; David Masci, 'An uncertain road: Muslims and the future of Europe'. In *The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life*, December 2004. Available at <http://pewforum.org/Muslim/An-Uncertain-Road-Muslims-and-the-Future-of-Europe.aspx>; Martin Walker, 'Europe's Mosque Hysteria'. In *The Wilson Quarterly*, Spring 2006, Vol. 30:2, pp. 14-22.

⁵⁵ Quoted in *Le Monde*, 25 March 2017.

⁵⁶ Maruta Herding, *Inventing the Muslim Cool: Islamic youth culture in Western Europe*. Bielefeld, Transcript, 2013.

started to look for opportunities to emigrate to more welcoming places, like Montreal or New York.⁵⁷

Parallel to this cultural and identity dimension, the perseverance of structural discrimination detrimental to communities with non-European roots, as mentioned in the Stasi report, was reinforced by the economic and financial crisis that began in 2008. Job prospects became even dimmer for individuals with few qualifications. The share of young people in neither employment nor education and training rose sharply, including the 20-24-year-old⁵⁸ age cohort – the typical age range of the European foreign fighters. Even if there isn't necessarily a direct link between social and economic deprivation, these things add up. When young people remain out of the labour market for years to come, they are more likely to become disenfranchised. Historically, economic underperformance (low education, high unemployment, high conviction rate, or some other negative indicator) has been prevalent among European jihadis from the very beginning, as Thomas Hegghammer found out.⁵⁹ As quoted earlier, in those years despair within immigrant families grew over their youngsters' future, much to the ignorance of the outside world.

The 2004 and 2005 attacks eroded much willingness to pursue earlier efforts to address the conducive environment. The Dutch government nevertheless pursued these efforts for a time. It was one of the few governments to explicitly link radicalisation and polarisation in the same action programme. But by the end of the decade its efforts, too, had waned. Moreover, the prevalent feeling that the terrorist threat in Europe was ebbing created a growing sense of 'CT fatigue', according to EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator Gilles de Kerchove.⁶⁰ This not only undermined the drive for further intra-EU cooperation on counterterrorism, it also weakened the sense of urgency over addressing the conducive environment, even if only for security reasons. As for the Stasi report, only the proposals concerning the veil had drawn media and political attention. The report had rapidly fallen into oblivion.

The ascendance of negative developments over positive ones closed the window of opportunity to connect with mainstream opinion within diasporic and Muslim communities. The feverish debates on migration and Islam precluded any meeting of minds. Polarisation went unchecked. This in turn reinforced the feeling among the offspring of migrants from Muslim-majority countries of being considered second-class citizens, if not unwelcome aliens. The culture war over Islamic symbols effectively reinforced the core jihadi message that there was no place for Muslims in the West. A chance was thus missed to make the environment less conducive to the

⁵⁷ Nadia Fadil in *De Morgen*, 15 April 2013.

⁵⁸ http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Statistics_on_young_people_neither_in_employment_nor_in_education_or_training.

⁵⁹ Thomas Hegghammer, *Revisiting the poverty-terrorism link in European jihadism*. Society for Terrorism Research Annual Conference, Leiden, 8 November 2016. Available at http://hegghammer.com/_files/Hegghammer_-_poverty.pdf.

⁶⁰ *Council Note by the EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator*, 15359/09/REV 1, 26 November 2009.

jihadi narrative. A new generation of Islamic missionary organisations, mosques and teachers imparting a radical, ultra-orthodox message emerged, with a highly activist aspect. This represented a significant shift from more traditional ultra-orthodox currents.⁶¹ But violence-prone fringe activist groups also found the environment appropriate for grooming a new jihadi generation. They were manipulated by the British leader of Sharia4UK, Anjem Choudary,⁶² into a deliberate strategy: initially acting through provocative missionary actions, but then increasingly becoming more violence-prone hubs waiting for an opportunity. Syria was to be the first opportunity.

The link between Salafism and jihadism reconsidered?

Ever since the 9/11 attacks the relationship between Salafism and jihadism has been a matter of fierce debate in policy circles as well as among academics. Two opposite views dominated the debate on whether and how Salafism contributed to individuals joining jihadi groups. The first claimed that Salafism was the matrix for jihadism, implying that jihadi terrorism was essentially the result of an ideology-driven process. The key vector in addressing radicalisation would therefore be a war on ideas through the promotion of a 'moderate Islam' to combat the negative influence of 'radical Islam'. The second approach considered radicalisation to be a largely context-driven process, with ideology functioning essentially as justification. The ensuing policy recommendation was then to concentrate on the context, since this was the key driver behind the decisions of groups and individuals to consider using terrorist violence.

Many variances on this relationship have been suggested between these two poles. Even within one and the same organisation views on this topic have shifted back and forth between the two extremes. This has been the case within the Dutch intelligence service AIVD. It had been instrumental in popularising the view that within present-day Salafism, three distinct strands had to be identified: apolitical or quietist, political, and jihadi Salafism. In 2009 and 2010 the AIVD was able to conclude that Salafism was no conveyor belt to jihadism and that, in fact, it represented an alternative which was undermining the appeal of jihadism in the Netherlands. By 2014, however, the AIVD had changed its view. It now considered Salafism had become something of a breeding ground for jihadism in the Netherlands, due in part to the emergence of a group of young preachers operating outside the established non-violent Salafist centres.⁶³

⁶¹ *Radical Dawa Changing. The rise of Islamic neo-radicalism in the Netherlands.* The Hague, AIVD, February 2007. Available at <https://english.aivd.nl/publications/publications/2007/10/09/the-radical-dawa-in-transition>.

⁶² Petter Nesser, *Islamist terrorism in Europe. A history.* London, Hurst & Company, 2015, pp. 269-272 and *passim*.

⁶³ *The transformation of jihadism in the Netherlands. Swarm dynamics and new strength.* The Hague, AIVD, September 2014, p. 31.

Moreover, this relationship seems to differ significantly amongst the EU member states. In Germany an official study of some 800 individuals who left Germany found out that Salafist institutions, including mosques, are a very strong influencing factor in the radicalisation of German foreign fighters.⁶⁴ In other European countries, such as the United Kingdom, France or Belgium, a majority of foreign fighters appear to have entered the jihadi scene without a prior socialisation in Salafi milieus. The Molenbeek social mapping also highlights the ambiguous evidence about the impact of religion in the decision to leave for the Levant. For some, it appears to play a strong role at the start of the violent radicalisation process, while for others it is only a minor component or becomes much stronger when an individual is in the later stages of the process.⁶⁵

During the research for this paper, concerns were expressed by interlocutors from different backgrounds about the impact of Salafism as a result of the emergence and unexpected impact of Daesh. Some expressed worries about the uphill battle faced by imams and mosques confronted with the glaring absence of alternatives to the abundant, Saudi-financed Salafi-Wahhabi literature. For some time now, a number of Muslim scholars have expressed their concerns that this normative production, financed and distributed by the Gulf States, has contributed to the erasure of classical diversified Islamic thought and replaced it with a one-size-fits-all simplified version of Islam that has resisted the natural tendency in Islam to adapt to local environments. Others considered that the Salafists' theological tactics for countering the Daesh narrative had led to blowback by effectively pushing the whole Salafi spectrum into a more intolerant and antidemocratic stance. This conceivably fuels polarisation and social isolation which might in turn contribute to an environment conducive to jihadi mobilisation.

These worries paralleled a growing discussion about the foreign funding of Islamic institutions, in particular in Germany, Austria, Belgium, Italy, and France. Such funding allegedly encourages and propagates ideologies and movements supporting or conducive to violent extremism. But others, including those within intelligence services, make a entirely different assessment: 'In recent years it has also become apparent that several of the Gulf states, which supported these institutions financially, have been trying to encourage moderation out of concern for their own relations with Western governments.'⁶⁶

It is claimed that foreign funding, even from Saudi Arabia, does not equal orthodox exclusivity. At least in some of these institutions debates are real and imams are

⁶⁴ *Analysis of the background and process of radicalization among persons who left Germany to travel to Syria or Iraq based on Islamist motivations.* Bundeskriminalamt (BKA)/Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz (BfV)/Hessisches Informations- und Kompetenzzentrum gegen Extremismus (HKE), 4 October 2016. Available at www.bka.de/SharedDocs/Downloads/DE/Publikationen/Publikationsreihen/Forschungsergebnisse/2017AnalysisOfTheBackgroundAndProcessOfRadicalization.html.

⁶⁵ *Molenbeek and violent radicalisation*, o.c., pp. 11 and 63.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

being appointed who are clearly not Salafists. In some of the EU Member States where this debate is raging, no substantial links have been found between the Daesh wave of foreign fighters and foreign-funded institutions. Quite the contrary: the Daesh foreign fighters' generation mostly stayed (and stays) away from these institutions, even labeling them apostate.

The broader argument that Salafi proselytism increasingly contributes to shaping an environment conducive to isolation and ultimately jihadi mobilisation is not in essence new. It has been at the core of the paradigm in which socialisation to violent extremism is essentially an ideology-driven process. The counter argument has always been that a narrative or an ideology only takes root if it corresponds to a demand and a need. Thus the opposite is true: Salafism is gaining ground because social isolation is real. Salafism offers sense and meaning to those who experience social isolation. Superintendent Alain Grignard, the longest-serving counterterrorism official in the Belgian police and an academic lecturer, drew on his lifelong experience in Brussels to state:

It has long been known that in some districts groups exist who consider themselves discriminated against, probably correctly, who have dissociated themselves from society. They created their own world. A booming society can create this kind of secession. This loathing then meets a kind of religious identity. Salafism is ideal: it is enough to imitate, to make a cloak. The real injustices suffered by the Muslim world, are assimilated. Violence becomes legitimate, redemptive.⁶⁷

An individual is never lured into terrorism by a narrative alone. The narrative needs hubs that suit the action to the word and start mobilisation in its name, opportunities to kick off and to provide perspective, and, above all, a conducive environment to resonate. Even scholars who tend to strongly emphasise the importance of Salafism as an 'unprecedented cultural challenge' insist that it only leads to jihadi violence 'when social, cultural and political conditions are ripe'.⁶⁸

Privileging the war on ideas over context – or simply clamping down on foreign-funded religious institutions – will therefore have at best only a marginal effect on jihadism, as the director of the Bordeaux mosque Tareq Oubrou insists:

Reforming Islam, yes, but to believe that it will eradicate radicalisation among young people is a delusion. It is even a diversion for not willing to address the root causes of this phenomenon. Radicalisation as a preliminary process to

⁶⁷ Quoted in *Le Soir*, 6 June 2017.

⁶⁸ Gilles Kepel, Bernard Rougier, *Addressing Terrorism. European Research in social sciences and the humanities in support to policies for Inclusion and Security. A Policy review*. Brussels, European Commission, Directorate-General for Research and Innovation, 2016.

terrorism can be explained first and foremost by the ill-being suffered by certain individuals who feel disenfranchised in society.

Their recruitment proceeds by selective and demagogic scriptural samplings with a geopolitical goal in the first place. Basically, this recruitment is not really what it seems, because the virtual allegiance that these young people lend to this phantom organization Islamic State is but an alibi to take revenge on their society.⁶⁹

The European Daesh generation has indeed not been swayed by religious discourses. The hubs have always mobilised more on personal and non-religious themes than via the scriptures. This even applies to pre-Daesh jihadism. Rachid, a 32-year-old Algerian jailed in his homeland and living illegally in London, once aptly portrayed al-Qaeda as ‘nothing but a cloak patched from different sources of discontent’.⁷⁰

Finally, overemphasising the potential role of Salafism within the Muslim community tends to overlook the bare fact that this ‘community’ does not correspond to the popular image of a monolithic group. In reality it is a patchy population, divided by language, neighbourhood, family bonds, origins, status, generations – and religion. The great paradigm shift following 9/11 seemingly erased all these divisions and replaced it in political discourse and popular imagination, but also among Muslims themselves, with an overarching abstract and unidimensional *Ummah*.

The Paris-based Montaigne Institute has attempted to portray this mosaic in the French context.⁷¹ This resulted in a nuanced portrayal of three main groups. The ‘silent majority’ feels entirely at ease with the secular state and faces no major problem espousing religious practice and the values of the Republic. A quarter, called ‘conservative’, expresses strong religious beliefs. Proud to be Muslims, they claim the right to express their beliefs in the public sphere. But they are clearly opposed to any form of religious extremism and accept the primacy of the law. The remaining 28%, dubbed ‘authoritarian’, is, on the contrary, adamant about the primacy of religion. This group, mostly young, without many qualifications or job prospects, has adopted values ‘clearly opposed to the values of the republic’. This group is often concentrated in the *cités* in the vicinity of French cities. Their Islam is not so much an expression of conservatism as a signal of their revolt against a society whose laws they are willing to defy.

Within the second, conservative, group in particular, Salafists have succeeded in presenting themselves as the norm and the role model for ‘true Muslims’. This is

⁶⁹ Tareq Oubrou, ‘Croire que réformer l’islam va éradiquer la radicalisation chez les jeunes, c’est se faire des illusions’. In *Le Monde*, 3 August 2016.

⁷⁰ Rachid, ‘Inside the mind of a terrorist’. In *The Observer*, 9 March 2003. Available at www.theguardian.com/world/2003/mar/09/terrorism.

⁷¹ Hakim El Karoui, *Un islam français est possible*. Paris, Institut Montaigne, September 2016. Available at www.institutmontaigne.org/fr/publications/un-islam-francais-est-possible.

turn, however, has stimulated alternative countercurrents that refuse to be associated with this strand of Islam. This was made clear in a survey of the Belgian-Moroccan and Belgian-Turkish communities.⁷² As in the Montaigne report, diverse profiles emerged. These profiles range from strong to weak religious practices, with many ‘tinkering’, which means they develop and improvise an individualised religious practice that corresponds to their lifestyle. Contrary to preconceived theories, imams and religious institutions appear of little influence, while an overwhelming majority of those studied adhere to the democratic system, the separation of religious affairs and state, and more generally embrace democratic values.

This ‘individualised Islam’ shows itself in a range of different attitudes, not all necessarily positive or emancipatory. Some reflect eclectic mixes of ultra-orthodoxy and liberal personal preferences. Others take an avowed pluralist stance and acknowledge that there is room for multiple interpretations of the teachings of Islam, as a recent Pew survey indicated with regard to American Muslims.⁷³

Taking a bird’s eye view of the evolution of religious practices in Europe since the 1960s, Olivier Roy concluded that rather than witnessing a return of religion, ‘secularism has won’, with individual liberty now being the core value embraced by large majorities all over Europe.⁷⁴

The 2017 landscape – choosing a future

In many respects, today’s outlook in Europe resembles the circumstances which existed in the second half of the 2000s. Chief among them is the presence of negative and positive developments co-existing alongside one other. The main ominous signs today are once more the perseverance of a conducive environment, but also the volume of the post-Daesh hubs, and the turmoil in Europe’s southern neighbourhood. The positive developments, on the other hand, are at least as significant. Firstly, jihadism remains the fringe phenomenon it has always been in Europe. Secondly, it is reasonable to assume that the Daesh brand will wane in turn, as did the earlier sub-waves of Jihadi terrorism. Finally, not only authorities but also civil society seem more eager than before to address (parts of) the conducive environment for jihadism.

⁷² Corinne Torrekens and Ilke Adams, *Belgo-Marocains, Belgo-Turcs: (auto)portrait de nos concitoyens*. Brussels, King Baudouin Foundation, May 2015. Available at www.kbs-frb.be/fr/Virtual-Library/2015/316644.

⁷³ www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/08/28/u-s-muslims-are-religiously-observant-but-open-to-multiple-interpretations-of-islam.

⁷⁴ Olivier Roy, *Rethinking the place of religion in European secularized: The need for more open societies*. Conclusions of the EU Research Project ReligioWest, 2016. Available at <http://cadmus.eui.eu/handle/1814/40305>.

Turning first to the negative features of the post-Daesh landscape, the most prominent probably remains the tenacious feeling among youngsters born and raised in Europe of being considered second-class citizens. This has been a key underpinning of the European subculture that Daesh has succeeded in mobilising. Daniel Alliët, a Catholic parish priest in Molenbeek, readily acknowledges that his neighbourhood had changed for the better since the 2016 Brussels attacks, with many more people than ever before willing to build bridges across communities.

But among youngsters the struggle is not over. They still find misleading messages on the social media, weird conspiracy theories and alternative facts. Inside them anger is still there, disappointment, frustration because they do not count. Because real problems are not tackled with structural solutions.⁷⁵

The feeling of being treated as second-class citizens remains prevalent in discussions with young people. Social polarisation and media stigmatisation undoubtedly contribute to further undermine their self-worth and confidence in their own competences and abilities. ‘We will always remain the “third” or the “fourth” generation. Moroccan Belgians. When does it stop. Are we ever to be simply Belgian?’⁷⁶ The same reactions as in the second half of the 2000s ensue: discouragement among youngsters and families about the ever-changing situation; withdrawal into safe environments; signs of deviant behaviour starting at a very young age. According to a local prevention official in Belgium: ‘We are again seeing the same symptoms arising among 13-14-year-olds as we did earlier among those who ultimately became the Brussels and Paris bombers. Within five years these symptoms risk coming to the surface if nothing is done.’ Some of these youngsters are difficult to reach, even for first-line social workers.

They may one day team up with the Daesh generation, becoming some sort of a ‘jihadi reserve army’.⁷⁷ Indeed, some French jihadis hope to break out of their fringe position and change the balance in their favour by aiming at a 20-25 year effort of ‘educating’ a new jihadi generation.⁷⁸ These grandstanding projects cannot hide the plain fact that they represent a marginal group – albeit a larger one than in the past. This is the second negative development today. In one of the first comprehensive assessments of the post-Daesh era, Thomas Hegghammer argued that:

the number of people who can serve as entrepreneurs and local network-builders may be larger in the coming ten years than it was in the previous decade. This is because the recent jihadi crisis has produced an unprece-

⁷⁵ Quoted in *De Standaard* (Belgian Dutch-language daily newspaper), 22 March 2017.

⁷⁶ Quoted in *De Standaard*, 25 March 2017.

⁷⁷ Farhad Khosrokhavar, ‘L’Europe va vers un djihadisme post-Etat islamique’. In *Le Monde*, 28 March 2017.

⁷⁸ Géraldine Casutt, Hugo Micheron, ‘Le djihadisme tend à se structurer durablement en France comme mouvement social’. In *Le Monde*, 21 February 2017.

dened number of foreign fighters and other activists who will command authority if and when they try to rebuild jihadi networks in the future.⁷⁹

Since the Paris and Brussels attacks of 2015 and 2016, Europe has witnessed a rapid succession of lone actor plots involving individuals and small cells inspired and in some cases directed by Daesh or Daesh-related individuals. Daesh's operational capacity for complex networked attacks and remote-controlled plots in Europe reduces as its territory shrinks. Something similar happened to al-Qaeda after it lost Afghanistan. But the sheer number of people involved in the Daesh episode, the low threshold for Daesh-style attacks, and the unprecedentedly high number of inmates convicted for terrorism who one day will be set free and will probably once more try to link up with their former friends – possibly even more frustrated or networked than before – represent a possibly lethal combination. As with historic examples of revolutionary terrorism, the myth of the Daesh caliphate will continue to inspire even when the terrorism wave has peaked and the organisations have ceased to exist in the real world (which is not yet the case).

It is thus reasonable and, unfortunately, realistic to assume that for some time to come attacks 'in the name of Daesh' will continue to be plotted by all kinds of people: returnees seeking revenge, lone actors and small cells, the desperate and the 15-minutes-of-fame seekers, delinquents in need of justification, and even the mentally unstable wrapping their psychological problems in a Daesh-ish narrative. The vehicular attacks on Barcelona's Ramblas and in Cambrils in mid-August, and the yet again terrorist incident in the London Underground in mid-September 2017 are a sober reminder that Daesh continues to resonate for the time being. This illustrates the need for a continued investment in police and intelligence services, since they constitute the last barrier to terrorist attacks. It also highlights the need for a proximity police that is in sync with the districts it patrols so as to build trust that in turn enhances its information position. The wide variety of motives and possible plotters and the minimal preparation time for Daesh-style attacks, however, makes them hard to prevent. Training to spot indicators of pre-operational terrorist activity is thus of the utmost importance, bearing in mind that if this is perceived as profiling or spying on specific groups, the blowback for counterterrorism efforts will be severe.

The turmoil that will characterise Europe's southern neighbourhood for the foreseeable future marks the last negative factor in the post-Daesh landscape. The Syrian war has demonstrated that, thanks to globalisation, adverse developments outside Europe negatively impact upon Europe itself.

The two countries most affected by Daesh, Syria and Iraq, face a tremendous task of rebuilding infrastructure, recreating city services, providing security for all, and,

⁷⁹ Thomas Hegghammer, 'The future of jihadism in Europe: A pessimistic view'. In *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 10:6, December 2016, pp. 156-170

above all, initiate inclusive governance. In both countries Daesh-linked groups are still operative and able to mount guerrilla-style attacks from its last strongholds or places where they still enjoy some tribal protection. Even when Daesh is finally a spent military force, a re-emergence cannot be not ruled out as long as the instigating circumstances that made the current resurgence possible are not addressed. Iraq has somewhat better omens than Syria. Faced with elections in 2018, many Iraqi political forces, including Prime Minister al-Abadi, are indeed championing nationalism, condemning corruption and rejecting external influence to satisfy popular demand from across sectarian and ethnic groups. Majority Shiite leaders also appear to be making overtures to Arab Sunni and Kurdish parties in hopes of forging deeper ties.⁸⁰ But the challenges are daunting and the Kurdish attempts at independence add further instability to the many existing uncertainties.

In Syria, however, prospects for an inclusive government remain a chimera for the time being, especially for the more than ten million refugees and internally displaced persons.

Beyond these two countries, the whole region is in the throes of regional leadership competition between Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Iran, and, furthermore, a geopolitical competition involving the United States and Russia. The subsequent balance-of-power politics involving local, regional, and global actors and fanned by sectarian instrumentalisation makes the entire region a highly volatile environment. On top of this, the local grievances and lingering tensions that led to the Arab Spring in 2010 and 2011 are still very much in place. In some countries, like Egypt, they have possibly even worsened.

The Middle East and North Africa regions contain multiple sources conducive for many forms of political violence. Predicting how this violence will manifest itself is difficult. Anticipating how it might affect European countries and youth is even harder. But as the Syrian war indicates, this prospect is definitely real and should be kept in mind when decisions are made to intervene (or not) in the region in whatever form.

Fortunately, the post-Daesh landscape also presents positive developments that are often overlooked because of the heavy emphasis on the negative ones.

As in the second half of the 2000s, Europe is witnessing a drop in terrorist attacks. In 2016, the total number of failed, foiled, and completed terrorist attacks in the EU dropped by a third compared to 2015. The number of fatalities in jihadi attacks – the terrorism brand causing the most casualties in Europe – decreased as well, but only slightly since their historic peak in 2015.⁸¹ It is much too early to call this a reversal in

⁸⁰ *Tipping the scales of political power in Iraq*. In Stratfor Worldview, 15 Augustus 2017.

⁸¹ *TE-SAT 2017. EU Terrorism Situation and Trend Report*. The Hague, 2017. For worldwide data, see the National Consortium for Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) at www.start.umd.edu/gtd.

jihadi terrorism in Europe, since annual swings have been seen in past decades. But at least it indicates that ever-increasing terrorist lethality is by no means a foregone conclusion.

The first major positive development in the European post-Daesh landscape is simply the observation that jihadism remains the fringe phenomenon it has always been in Europe, notwithstanding recent misleading generalisations to the contrary.⁸² It is important to continue to highlight this, because of the often implicit (and sometimes explicit) assumption that jihadism is the outcome of a gradual process of increasing religious orthodoxy that morphs, at a given moment, into terrorism. As Olivier Roy opined: ‘The terrorists are not the vanguard of a radicalizing Muslim community.’⁸³ Abid Raja, a Metropolitan Police officer with 25 years of experience in counterterrorism and community outreach concurs:

The point about the community not supporting these individuals is something that I have tried to highlight over many years, and is critical in getting a better understanding of radicalism within these communities. The role of Islam as understood and practiced by these communities is key. Essentially: the people involved in these attacks are doing so to spite their own communities who they see as being part of the problem.⁸⁴

Paradoxical as it may be, jihadi recruiters share this assessment. Rachid Kassim, a French member of Daesh who groomed and directed from Syria several terrorist plots by ‘jihadis next door’ in France (before being presumed killed by an American drone in early 2017) complained about the lack of volunteers. He exhorted French men to follow the example of their sisters:

Women, sisters are attacking. Where are the brothers? [...] She brandished a blade and she hit a policeman like mothers in Palestine. Where are the men? [...] You must understand that if these women have taken action, it is certainly because there are too few men willing to take action. [...] Why do you wait so long, to the point that women have surpassed you in honor? (...) Look at a 16-year-old sister [in fact, 19 years old], she has her whole life ahead of her, she’s gone, she’s gone to undertake a project and they stopped her before she succeeded. But I’m talking intentions here. What is your excuse?⁸⁵

The kin and friendship groups that have constituted the main hubs of mobilisation since 2003 have always been small groups that have developed in the margins of

⁸² www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/islamist-extremists-uk-highest-number-europe-25000-terror-threat-eu-official-isis-islam-britain-a7923966.html.

⁸³ Olivier Roy, ‘Les terroristes ne sont pas l’avant-garde d’une communauté musulmane en voie de radicalisation’. In *Le Monde*, 16 June 2017.

⁸⁴ Personal communication, 30 June 2017.

⁸⁵ Soren Seelow, ‘Derrière l’affaire de l’Essonne, l’importance du djihad des femmes’. In *Le Monde*, 10 September 2016.

their local communities. The numerous arrests since 2015 show a web of personal acquaintances that remains largely tight-knit, and sometimes even geographically circumscribed. Attrition by law enforcement has been a major factor in the unravelling of the post-Afghan al-Qaeda networks. Even though the post-Daesh hubs are larger than their immediate predecessors, they too will be subjected to the same pressures and will ultimately meet the same fate.

The only way for Daesh-inspired groups to uphold their mobilisation capability is through their ability to recruit outside the tight-knit group. The Daesh generation has seen a significant number of ‘jihadis next door’, or do-it-yourself terrorists, more or less connected to the hubs or to Daesh members. Sometimes no real-world connection existed between (would-be) perpetrators and Daesh. Looking at the vast daily flow of online calls for stabbing and vehicular attacks, appeals to kill neighbours, to keep attacking despite failures, to torch buildings in the West (following the Grenfell Tower fire), poison people, and derail trains, one cannot but conclude that these calls are seldom answered.⁸⁶ ‘Jihadis next door’ are not an endlessly renewable resource.

Following the Paris and Brussels attacks in 2015 and 2016, the Brussels municipality of Molenbeek gained a reputation as a hotbed of jihadi activity. Other European cities, such as Birmingham, Luton, Barcelona, Bremen, or Lisleby in Norway have also been dubbed breeding grounds of terrorism, since a number of foreign fighters originated from them. But what made these neighbourhoods stand out? No comparative research has been conducted yet to fully answer this question. But the recent social mapping of Molenbeek has revealed characteristics that have surprised many observers, including city officials who have been struggling to understand the process of socialisation into violent extremism in their municipality.

Among the striking results of this granular analysis of a local context was the overwhelming rejection of extremism among the population – exactly the point that Abid Raja of the Metropolitan Police quoted above has been making for many years. But the Molenbeek mapping also signals a surprisingly high level of trust in the police (higher than in social workers); the absence of no-go zones; a broad feeling of insecurity among the Molenbeekois for their children; and a clear plea for more dialogue and diversity in order to bring together communities and families. All is evidently not rosy in this municipality, but the views expressed by its inhabitants stand in stark contrast to the views of outsiders who have been accusing them of complacency towards terrorism and extremism. There simply is no community-level support for extremism. How do they themselves explain why some of their children have been attracted by Daesh?

⁸⁶ Peter Neumann makes a similar point about the impact of the American-Yemeni preacher Anwar al-Awlaki on the Somali community in the United States. Many listened to his lectures, but few were willing to take action. Neumann, o.c., p. 143.

Inhabitants of Molenbeek highly disapprove of religious extremism, which is understood as a deliberate distortion of religion. [...] The lack of opportunities and social isolation is perceived as the main driver that permitted the emergence of violent radicalisation in Molenbeek. Its process was described as occurring in response to fundamental vulnerabilities, such as social isolation and the search for meaning in life. Whereas extremist groups offer this meaning to many young Muslims from Molenbeek, they have a much harder time in a society that they perceive as discriminatory and not offering them the opportunities to advance in life.⁸⁷

The crucial lesson from the overwhelming rejection of extremism in this highly affected municipality seems to be that, notwithstanding the extent of the potential for post-Daesh hubs, such hubs will simply lack the pool of support required to remain sustainable – unless the conducive environment is constantly renewed. Paraphrasing Mao Zedong, terrorists must move among the people as a fish swims in the sea. Drain the sea and terrorism will inexorably wane.

Second positive feature of the post-Daesh landscape: it is reasonable and, fortunately, realistic to anticipate that the Daesh brand will lose its appeal. This has happened to al-Qaeda as well. But it also happened to its historical predecessors. As time progresses, and the heroic memories of Daesh's caliphate vanish and the evidence of its brutality and terror lingers, fascination with Islamic State will wear down. The failure of its state project, the dissolution of its aura of invincibility, and the indiscriminate nature of Daesh-style attacks will drain the fascination it originally induced. For terrorism to attract ever-new generations of volunteers, it has to inspire confidence that it stands on the winning side of history.

Again, this very much depends on the environment. Just as terrorism is not an automatic reaction to a given situation, the waning of a terrorist wave depends upon the possibility of alternative ways to resolve the very circumstances that allowed its emergence. Nineteenth-century anarchist terrorism helps put the post-Daesh era into perspective:

The transnational anarchist terrorism wave waned almost everywhere from 1900 onwards. Their violence had led the terrorists into an impasse. Their tactics offered no perspective. With each attack committed, the anarchist terrorists moved further away from the working class in whose name they pretended to act. The impact of anarchist terrorism proved marginal. Instead of weakening the bourgeois state, the attacks led to the reinforcement of the latter. In addition, many of their devoted followers languished in prison.

⁸⁷ *Molenbeek and violent radicalisation*, o.c., pp. 10-11.

The main reason for the extinction of anarchist terrorism was the alternative path that had emerged by the turn of the century. From 1895 the organized labor movement and especially the trade unions exerted an enormous attraction on the anarchists. These offered a more credible solution to the marginalisation and exclusion of the working class than the terrorists. Socialism offered workers a sense of dignity and identity. It was through this gradual evolution that the once despised and feared working class gradually gained its rightful place in the polity. The worker ceased to be a second-class citizen, a pariah. In constitutional regimes, anarchist terrorism thus lost its conducive environment and its legitimacy.

In countries bordering on Europe, anarchist terrorism dragged on. In Russia, the Balkans and Spain, this lasted until the outbreak of the First World War. The reason for this perseverance resided in the harsh repression that these governments continued to exert against the attempts of workers' organisation.⁸⁸

In some European countries, at least, fascination with Daesh had started to fail even before ISIS's military misfortunes became evident. This was at least the case in Germany and Belgium. In both countries monthly departures of volunteers started to drop significantly by the end of 2014 (in Germany) and January 2015 (in Belgium). At that time, Daesh was still in victory mode. The battle for Kobane was raging. Tikrit only fell to Iraqi forces in April, but Ramadi and Palmyra fell to Daesh in May. Daesh's propaganda output was still extremely high. Journeying to the Levant became harder due to the obstacles put up by the European authorities and to changing attitudes towards fighting in Syria and Iraq. But ultimately, this gradual decline in departures (notwithstanding some secondary upticks) can also be attributed to the finite pool of potential volunteers even in Daesh's most successful phase.

If it's true that Daesh's astonishing appeal was due to the catalogue of instant solutions offered by its proto-state to personal motivations, then the loss of its territory cannot but impact on the fascination with Daesh. Its narrative will live on, as did the myth of al-Qaeda after its military defeat in Afghanistan following 9/11. But after a time, this started to wear off in many places. However, it still resonated with disenfranchised groups, and this environment was conducive enough to push the third, home-grown wave into being. The invasion of Iraq in 2003 acted as an opportunity and a trigger.

The same will happen to Daesh. However impressive the online heritage of Islamic State may be, the 'virtual caliphate' will not be able to sustain indefinitely the organisation's dynamic. For a social dynamic to thrive, powerful symbols, a feeling of

⁸⁸ Rik Coolsaet, 'La chasse aux anarchistes aux alentours de 1900'. In *La Pensée et les Hommes*, 54 (79-80), 2010, pp. 39-51.

history on the march, and concrete results in the real world are required. In other words, it needs a conducive environment and concrete opportunities if it is to flourish – or re-emerge.

Finally, in a truly new development since the start of jihadism, authorities, media, and civil society have started to emphasise the necessity of countering polarisation. Since the 1990s and especially since 9/11, observers had warned that polarisation was a key dimension of the conducive environment for jihadi mobilisation. Polarisation provided a recruiting tool for the radical right and jihadis alike. The goal of both is to breed divisions. The asylum crisis of the summer of 2015 again brought it front and centre. Local authorities reported increasing signs of polarisation. Security agencies warned about possible adverse security effects. The risk of seeing radical right parties hijack popular apprehensions about migrants and refugees for their own electoral benefit created a context for finally taking seriously the dangers presented by polarisation to social cohesion and liberal democracy.

The EU has been a leading, but somewhat lonely, actor in raising awareness that polarisation feeds into the conducive environment for jihadi mobilisation. EU officials have been constantly pushing for this issue to be identified as a priority on equal footing with returnees and deradicalisation and integrated into the Member States' prevention strategies. In the European Commission's huge Horizon 2020 research programme, the issue of societal polarisation is now specifically earmarked for funding.

A number of Member States have acted in response to this growing chorus by addressing polarisation head-on. Others followed only reluctantly, and still others rejected it altogether. The jury is still out as to whether the sense of urgency triggered by the possible success of radical right parties will translate into a sustained set of policies in the Member States.

But at least as significant is the increasing number of civil society initiatives, from mothers of foreign fighters to religious and neighbourhood groups to young activists, seeking to bridge the gap between communities and groups of people at the local level. Their impact is difficult to quantify and obviously differs from one Member State to another, but growing awareness that polarisation is a major concern that needs to be addressed – since it is inexorably linked to radicalisation and exclusion – seems to have gained steam among authorities and civil society. Again, the social mapping of Molenbeek offers a case in point. The inhabitants themselves acknowledge the difficulties different population groups have had in understanding each other and in broaching difficult topics such as discrimination, radicalisation, and religion. When asked for solutions, they insisted upon the need to improve dialogue and acceptance of diversity at the local level.

There is no guarantee that these positive tendencies will overcome the parallel negative developments of the post-Daesh landscape. It should also be noted that

polarisation is a key aspect of the conducive environment for jihadi mobilisation, but social exclusion – the feeling of being considered second-class citizens – is another. Here too, the European Commission has been instrumental in pushing the topic onto the agenda, but with less success. There is also a potential danger of short-termism after the eventual military defeat of Daesh, akin to the CT fatigue at the end of 2009, weakening the need to uphold endeavours that address the environment in order to make it less conducive if and when a new jihadi opportunity arises.

But the fact that the anticipated populist wave that might have brought radical right political parties to power in Europe has failed to materialise in the first half of 2017, and that most of these parties have now peaked in recent polls, is a powerful reminder that worst-case scenarios do not necessarily come true, at least not if one is willing and able to create a critical mass to counter them.

EPILOGUE

Transnational terrorist campaigns fizzle out when they are considered irrelevant. Their pool of sympathisers then dries up, attract too few new recruits, and find their tactics delegitimised by the sheer revulsion they arouse. A precursor to jihadi terrorism, anarchist terrorism, largely defeated itself when it proved unable to realise any of the objectives its leaders pretended to advance. If history can serve as a guide, revolutionary terrorism starts petering out once better prospects are provided to communities and segments of the population whose feelings of marginalisation and humiliation served as a justification for terrorist violence.

The same will happen to jihadism. Since its emergence in the late 1980s, it has waxed and waned. It could, however, re-invent itself over and over because of the persistence of a conducive environment that permitted it. Daesh plugged into the same context when it seized a large territory that it transformed into a proto-state. This in turn allowed it to appeal effectively to a wider variety of people with a more diversified set of personal motivations than previous jihadi waves had ever been able to do. Offering a credible prospect of instant satisfaction for these motivations, it emerged as the most potent of all jihadi organisations.

It is unfortunately realistic to assume that for some time to come attacks 'in the name of Daesh' will continue to be plotted by all kinds of people before the fascination with Daesh dies out. But it will die out.

The state project that constituted a critical and central part of Daesh's force of attraction lies in tatters. The news flow about its self-declared caliphate will ebb. Stories about the cruelty of its reign will continue to surface. For the moment no other jihadi theatre seems to be able to exercise the same pull as Daesh did. Political and especially civil society initiatives to combat polarisation and enhance resilience have been increasing in the last couple of years. As a result, a window of opportunity has once again opened to address the very circumstances that allowed Daesh to cast its net wide. Negative and positive developments co-exist alongside each other. The key to addressing the dynamics of jihadism lies in managing the former and locking in the latter. This means breaking the dynamics of terrorism by making the environment less conducive, hubs more marginal, and the narrative less alluring in the event that a new opportunity for jihadi mobilisation arises.

The various dimensions of terrorism are not equally easy to direct or manage. The turmoil to the south of Europe defies easy or quick recipes. Hubs of violence-prone individuals and radical groups (however defined) will always exist in any given society. The narrative is out of the bottle, and putting it back in is an impossible task with social and other media around. It can only be made marginal and unappealing,

as is the case with other revolutionary narratives that are also out there and barely drawing a following.

The way forward is thus making the environment less conducive while resisting the temptation of short termism, as some interlocutors have already sensed.

Five interlinked and mutually reinforcing rough-and-ready rules can help make a difference.

Keep up and enhance the basic prevention work with vulnerable youths. Prevention will always be cheaper than intervention. Efforts should continue to be concentrated on first-line prevention directed at identifying individuals – and youngsters in particular – who seem to be stuck or stranded. We have to be present at the critical junctures in the lives of 13-14 year-olds or else others will jump in with simple solutions. Parents and teachers play an invaluable role here. Beyond them, existing prevention mechanisms and agencies are best equipped to deal with this. Enhancing their expertise will result in better long-term results than creating a separate fully fledged ‘deradicalisation’ policy domain.

It might also help to start de-emphasising deradicalisation as the stated goal of such prevention programmes and return to inclusion and emancipation as goals. Many so-called deradicalisation initiatives have little to do with deradicalisation as such. They are often new names for classical prevention efforts. However, it is important to take into account their perspective and the objective pursued. In the case of deradicalisation, the starting point is a negative one, namely, preventing someone from radicalising and thus becoming a danger to society. Additionally, the ambiguous nature of the concept of radicalisation (and thus also of deradicalisation) rather reinforces the simmering unease about migration, integration, the intricacies of multiculturalism, and the place of religion in secularised societies. Prevention, on the other hand, is based on positive goals, in particular equal opportunities, resilience, inclusiveness and emancipation. It thus offers a perspective on a future.

Address the vexing question of why so many young Europeans feel like second-class citizens and deprived of horizons, and why this feeling has proven to be so tenacious in recent decades. This emotion underpinned the subculture that Daesh has succeeded in mobilising in Europe. Inclusiveness is the key response to the jihadi narrative and mobilisation.

Keep polarisation in check. This has been a recruiting and propaganda tool for the radical right and jihadis alike. Individual deradicalisation efforts will remain of limited use if the conducive environment for extremist mobilisation is not simultaneously addressed. Otherwise it’s like emptying the ocean with a teaspoon. Ultimately, checking polarisation is about making the social cohesion of European societies sustainable.

Foster an environment in which Islam can be anchored and rooted naturally in local environments. This is a common endeavour of Muslims and society as a whole. It might help to remember that individualisation and secularisation are as much ongoing developments among Muslim families as increased religiosity.

And finally, *prefer nuance to sweeping generalisations.* This is perhaps the hardest of all in the current 'one-liner' and 'likes' culture. Conflating terrorism with migration and Islam exponentially increases the perception of its threat. It enhances the stature and pull of jihadism, which is precisely the objective jihadis pursue. Don't give in to terrorists by making statements that we're at war. We're not. Europe is confronted with a fringe phenomenon.

Neither Daesh nor jihadi terrorism represent an existential threat to Europe – unless we choose to see it this way and act upon this perception. Its impact undeniably goes beyond the human suffering it causes. Its attacks have a disproportionately huge societal impact, globally and in Europe, that cannot be explained by the mere numbers of victims.

The better and sooner we deal with the conducive environment that allows the persistence of jihadi terrorism, the more able we will be to prevent new generations from falling under its spell – and the more lives can be saved.

Egmont – Royal Institute for International Relations
Rue des Petits Carmes 15, 1000 Brussels, Belgium
www.egmontinstitute.be

Lay-out: punctilio.be

ISBN 979-10-96843-12-1

© Egmont Institute, October 2017

© Author, October 2017

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise without the permission of the publishers.