

External Signs of Radicalization and Jihadist Militancy

Javier Jordan & Fernando M. Mañas

Peter Billerbeck (English translation)

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Introduction

Is it possible to know if we are before a jihadist judging solely by exterior appearances?

It is, in fact, very difficult to respond to this question in a definitive way. **Certain appearances** (referring as much to style of dress as observable behavior) **can indicate a symptom that an individual is experimenting (or has already completed) a process of jihadist radicalization.** That is, a process through which the person incorporates jihadi values and joins active militancy in an individual manner (exceptional “lone wolf” cases) or in a group¹.

But the problem lies in that external appearances usually only constitute weak indications. There is a risk in attempting to catalogue an individual as jihadist through a superficial test for the following reasons:

- ✓ Many Muslims that sincerely reject jihadism also dress in a way similar to or observe the same religious practices as jihadists. Therefore, **certain customs of jihadists are not exclusive to them, but shared with thousands of people who wish to live their beliefs in a pacifistic and coherent way.** For example, it would be unreasonable and erroneous to claim that a particular Muslim is “fundamentalist” (and susceptible to becoming a jihadist) because they fast during Ramadan, abstain from drinking alcohol or observe with regularity the five daily prayer orations. Simply, this Muslim is a person who practices their faith.
- ✓ Certain customs, like letting a beard grow long, dressing in a *jelaba* or even using the *tasbeeh* (Islamic rosary), are not only particular to many Muslims but also to individuals who have nothing to do with Islam.
- ✓ In the cases of authentic jihadists, some symptoms are apparent during the process of radicalization. Nonetheless, normally is **once that individual has been incorporated into a jihadist group** (and especially if this group is planning to execute a terrorist action), **strives to pay special attention to appearances, avoiding all signs that could be related to radicalism.** In extreme cases this could mean the violation of Islamic norms like the drinking of alcohol or the consumption of pork. **The recourse to this strategy does indeed constitute a warning sign,** but to discern if the behavior is genuine, it is necessary that security agencies have conducted surveillance on the individual in question for some time.
- ✓ **The global jihadist movement is not homogenous.** Internally, there exists **diverse doctrinal currents** and as a consequence, the external aspects of their religious and militant practices also vary. At the same time, the behavior of the organizations, networks and subgroups of which they are composed differ from one to another. **The decentralized nature of the global jihadist movement,** at a macro level, **prevents us from talking about a sole *modus operandi*** in what are referred to as “terrorist techniques” and common customs of religious inspiration².

- ✓ Lastly, the application of the norms and customs also **depends on the degree of indoctrination, of radicalization and of actual commitment** of the individuals. It is necessary to add that the jihadists experience the incoherencies, weaknesses and contradictions intrinsic to any human being, therefore, at times some of their actions can go against their inner convictions, but this does not mean that they do not possess them.

In spite of these limitations, the attentive observation of certain signs can be useful at the time of initiating or determining the scope of investigations about processes of jihadist radicalization. Above all, noting if some of these signs occur simultaneously in an individual and, **especially, if they are witnessed in group behaviors** like those that will be detailed in the following pages can be particularly useful. The objective of this Jihad Monitor Occasional Paper consists of compiling and commenting briefly on some of these types of signs.

1. Individual indications

There is a series of signs that have been witnessed in repeated occasions on an individual level. Some make reference to the exterior appearance of the subject and others in relation to their behavior.

1.1 Physical Appearance

In theory these aspects are the easiest to observe but in practice are the least useful when detecting jihadist radicalization, as we have previously mentioned, they can be common to other non-jihadist Muslims or even to persons that have no true relation to Islam. Nevertheless, we mention them because they appear with a certain degree of frequency in subjects that undergo processes of radicalization:

- ✓ The individual begins to let their beard grow long, at times shaving the moustache. It is considered “*salaf*” (ancestors), “returning” thus to the original epoch of Islam. In some cases the length of the beard draws attention, exceeding the length of three fingers which is the maximum that is permitted for example by the *tablighi* (members of a non-jihadist Islamist revivalist movement); the formal appearance of its followers is thus adjusted to that of Islam at its start³.
- ✓ In some cases cutting the hair very close to the head
- ✓ Cutting back the fingernails, avoiding that the upper white part is seen.
- ✓ Employs what is considered “traditional Islamic dress”: *jelaba* or wider pants and a traditional hat or turban. If a job or reasons of another type prevent this, the individual will dress this way on holidays or periods of vacation.
- ✓ Tries to have the pants cover until just above the ankles, folding upwards the bottom part if the length exceeds this.

- ✓ Refusing to wear shorts to play sports.
- ✓ Refusing to have tattoos for religious motives. Nonetheless, an individual that is experiencing a process of radicalization may have them on their body from before.
- ✓ Frequently, a small callous is observed on the forehead, which can also serve as proof of strong belief before other Muslims in the practice of *salat* (prayer). (The mark is produced by contacting the floor with force when prostrating).
- ✓ Weight loss, possibly due to changes in eating habits. Some of these individuals practice with more frequency than others voluntary fasting. For example, two individuals implicated in the March 11 plot, Serhane Abdelmajid “the Tunisian” and Moataz Almallah Dabas fasted every Monday and Thursday of the year⁴. In this sense, it is frequent that they fast six additional days in the month of *Chawal* (that which immediately follows Ramadan) ⁴. However, similar to the others that we have noted, this custom can also be practiced by pious Muslims who are not jihadists.

Lastly, we should note again that **it is very frequent that the individual tries to show a much more “Western” aspect and behavior once integrated in an operative cell** or if police surveillance is suspected. One of the manuals of al-Qaeda affirms, citing Ibn Taymiyah, *that if a Muslim is in a combat or godless area, he is not obligated to have a different appearance from (those around him). The (Muslim) man may prefer or even be obligated to look like them, provided his action brings a religious benefit of preaching to them, learning their secrets and informing Muslims, preventing harm, or some other beneficial goal*.

Some consider that this strategy of deception and disguise is particular to the *takfiri* jihadist strain. Within the lexicon, there exists a certain confusion concerning this term. In our judgment, the *takfiri* strain represents the most radical sub-current within *salafist jihadism*. A sub current that considers apostates – and not simply weak or lapsed Muslims— all followers of Islam that do not share their ideology. In consequence, the *takfiris* consider legitimate the killing of the Muslim elderly, women and children which do not support them. It is the most radical derivation which, for example the GIA (*Groupe Islamique Armé*, Algeria) experienced in the mid 1990s⁶. Nevertheless, this disguising is also practiced by less extreme jihadist movements like Al-Qaeda networks and associated groups.

1.2 Individual Behavior

The individual immersed in a process of radicalization intensifies their religious practice. For example, observing the five daily prayers at the appropriate time, leaving everything they may be doing at this time, or when resting or carrying out a non intellectual activity reciting in a low tone the names of God. This behavior in itself does reveal anything and is common among many peaceful Muslims that only try to remain true to their religious beliefs, thus it does not constitute a particularly relevant indication. Nevertheless, it is normal that other more obvious practices are sharpened

- ✓ **Scrupulous attention to that which is permitted (*halal*) and that which is prohibited (*haram*).** It is very common that the individual on the path to radicalization does not enter into establishments where alcoholic beverages are consumed or sold, quits smoking or listening to music, does not gamble, relates less to women (excluding for family reasons), avoiding even looking at them, not going to films, dance halls or other types of public events.

In the case of an individual already integrated in a jihadist group, **any habitual practice would fall under control of the ideological leader.** It is very frequent that the individual consults with the leader regarding the permitted or prohibited nature of various areas of life. If a certain custom violates a religious principal, the individual should abandon it regardless of its importance be it social, familiar, or professional. For example, it is probable that a change in work would be necessary if it obligates the individual to be in contact with prohibited food or drinks. This was the case of Mohamed Bouyeri, the young Dutch man of Moroccan origin who murdered Theo Van Gogh in November of 2004. Throughout the intensification of the radicalization process, Bouyeri began to cause problems in the community center where he worked as a volunteer. He tried to prevent the serving of alcoholic beverages and dissuaded the women from attending activities that it organized. Finally, he ended up leaving the community center⁷. In France, there have even been confirmed cases of young males after frequenting radical *salafist* environments that have left their jobs in post offices because it obligated them to distribute packets which contained catalogues of women's underwear⁸.

- ✓ **Tensions or changes in family behavior.** The subject who experiences radicalization tries to force their familiar environment to adapt to their new beliefs, promoting what they consider correct and forbidding what is prohibited. In some cases the individual obligates their wife or daughters to cover practically their entire body when they leave the house. Also, often urges them not to leave the house without being accompanied by himself or a close relative. When receiving guests in the home, urging the women to remain apart from the men. Additionally, this can include breaking ties with family members that do not share their points of view.
- ✓ **A withdraw and social polarization.** The individual limits their social relations to those persons that share their radical point of view, dividing Muslims in two categories: a first considered "good Muslims" therefore "brothers" (those which share their interpretation) and a second more inclusive category of "lapsed or weaker Muslims" also using terms such as "hypocrites" or "apostates". In some cases, the individual may not have problems confronting them in person, verbally addressing them.

The non Muslims are considered *kafir* (non believers or infidels). In general, the individual will avoid dealing with them, though for reasons of being neighbors, work requirements or simply practical matters, they can have a type of limited relation with them, without growing closer. If they have physical contact with the non believer (for example, shaking hands) the individual should purify themselves. Their attitude

towards the non believers – manifested or tacit – is hostile because much in their mind is considered “the fault of the Jews and Westerners”⁹

- ✓ **Religious and Political Rhetoric.** This is an aspect which is also shared with many peaceful followers of Islam, thus this is much less useful as a reliable indicator. The radicalized subject often uses with much more frequency sayings particular to Islam (such as *inshallah*, God willing, *bismillah*, in the name of God, and *alhamdulillah*, praise to God), along with *hadith* about the Prophet Mohammed and textual citations from the Quran. The most striking aspect of this is that in this case, the phrases may be applied to practically all facets of their conversations. However, we insist, this is in no way definitively in and of itself an indicator, as it may simply be a case of a particularly pious Muslim. In addition, it is also very common that an individual with radical ideas close to those of jihadism expresses an obsession in talking about the injustices of the West and Israel against the Muslims in Palestine, Iraq, Chechnya, Afghanistan, etc. In these conversations, the explicit approval of the execution of suicide terrorist acts or acts against civilians can be seen as a form of defending themselves.
- ✓ **Selective exposure to media.** Despite consulting the principal international, national and local news media sources, the greatest part of their time is dedicated to informing themselves through means of communication in accordance with their radical vision of Islam and politics. If this is a young individual with easy access to the internet, it is frequent that they spend dozens of hours every week visiting and reading websites, forums and downloadable files (text, audio and video) of an openly jihadist nature.
- ✓ **Interest for everything related to the period of the beginnings of Islam.** If the individual has a base of intellectual aptitude, they may begin to become interested in the history of Islam, the principal battles (of Mt. Uhud, the battle of the Trench, or the battle of Badr) for the virtues and works of the companions of the Prophet Mohammed and for other details that reflect in their view the splendor of the past. Frequently, they choose one of these companions of the Prophet as a model and even use their name as an alias such as Abu Sufian, Abu Duhana, Abu Talib, Abu Talha, etc. The internet in this sense is an almost inexhaustible source of information.
- ✓ **Aggressive Nature.** In some individuals, an increase in aggressive nature is noted. The obsession with being capable of defending oneself in many cases can lead to an interest in weapons (firearms or other types) and in martial arts.

2. Collective Behavior

In the vast majority of cases, the jihadist **radicalization is a process that the individual experiences with other people**. It is widely observed that the radical friendships that surround the subject serve a crucial function at the time of transmitting the rational, emotional, cognitive-normative and identity elements that contribute to explaining militant jihadism¹⁰.

Collective behaviors, usually observable, **are especially relevant** (much more than the individual ones) **when detecting the existence of jihadist radicalization processes**. Furthermore, they include activities which, different from external signs, cannot be hidden or suppressed. Perhaps they are pursued in a clandestine way or if a police action is feared imminent, they can suspend such activities temporarily. However, **it is something they can renounce without negatively affecting the internal cohesion or motivation of followers**. The vast majority of radicalization and militancy cases are produced in contact with or in the cradle of a group. As we have already mentioned, the “lone wolf” individuals (persons who carry out a terrorist action by their own account and risk) are exceptions to the rule¹¹.

The principal behaviors are the following:

- ✓ **Practicing the prayer oration collectively among the members and sympathizers of the group.** It can be carried out in any mosque or any private residence. The mosques and the prayer rooms are open spaces for all Muslims to come together for diverse reasons (physical proximity, habit, community, etc) without meaning the aforementioned mosque, imam or other Muslims which frequent the site are aware of their radical ideas. It is also frequent that they take advantage of their time in the mosque to distribute *fatwas* (legal judgments) of a radical content that they have obtained through the internet. This last element is often not done on Fridays (the day of highest attendance) because of feeling more controlled. Sometimes these *fatwas* are posted on the wall for those that are curious.

In some cases the jihadists or sympathizers of jihadism have obtained control over a certain prayer room or mosque and in this way have exposed their views with more ease. Often in these cases many people who frequented this site then change to another. In that way, a vacancy of a prayer room or mosque after the change of an imam can constitute an indication that something out the ordinary is occurring, though logically this can also be due to inoffensive or unrelated reasons.

Nonetheless, it is most common for these radical groups to prefer the private residences or stores of merchants who are members as meeting locations, because of the fear that in the mosques there are police informants that can detect their existence. In these private places, they feel freer to express their opinions or design projects¹².

- ✓ **Group activities directed to augment the cohesion and awaken desires of adventure.** Frequently, they practice together a sport like soccer, martial arts, fitness or paintball. There have also been cases of groups that meet together to mountain climb¹³. The Syrian with Spanish citizenship, Mustafa Setmarián, was an aficionado of these types of activities and rural excursions. However, in whatever case, it is normal that they meet with regularity spending many hours together during the week or even every day. The places can be very diverse in nature: in residences, mosques, cafes or tea houses, going for a walk, organizing a picnic in an outdoor park or recreational area, etc. Sometimes they may take their families to these events, although the women and men would congregate in separate groups.

- ✓ **Common monitoring and exchanging of propaganda.** The reading, listening or viewing of propaganda materials plays an important role in the formation and activity of the jihadist counter-culture¹⁴. Through this propaganda, their militancy is justified rationally, emotionally and normatively. At the same time, this propaganda leads those individuals not to see themselves as isolated subjects but rather as members of a much wider global community enjoying legal and religious approval of experts in Islamic sciences.

For this reason, the distribution and following of aforementioned materials is an activity that in many instances is carried out in a group: meeting in a flat of a group member to view and comment on jihadist videos downloaded from the internet, lending each other tapes with radical sermons that are listened to with striking frequency (while driving or in free time at home), loaning each other doctrinal books or articles obtained through the internet, etc.

- ✓ **Relation or admission in the group of common criminals.** This is also frequent and quite indicative. It can be surprising that an individual or group of individuals that boasts of its religiousness would have friendship with persons that commit minor robberies, traffic drugs, commit credit card fraud, when these types of practices are against fundamentals of Islam. Nonetheless, for the jihadists, derelict conduct is morally acceptable if it has ends that contribute to the jihad. In this way, the fact that common criminals have a habitual relationship – or are even members – of a group of individuals with characteristics noted in this analysis constitutes an indication to have in mind regarding their possible danger.
- ✓ **Measures of security are put into practice.** Once that a small group of radical individuals has formed, it is common for them to begin to use methods of self protection with the hope of eluding the surveillance of the security agencies: use of an alias, techniques to avoid being monitored, frequent changing of mobile phone cards, use of public phone booths, memorization of the names and phone numbers of the other members of the group so that they are not kept written in any location, employing secret codes when talking to each other, etc. In some cases they are instructed in these types of techniques through jihadist manuals available on the internet¹⁵.

However, as these types of teachings do not replace practical training (through the repetition of professional counter-surveillance techniques and operational security); their practices can be at times too visible to monitoring entities. In this way their effect is counterproductive because they confirm the suspicions of the police and intelligence agencies that this apparent group of friends has something to hide.

In addition, along with their possible operational utility, the methods of group security help develop a clandestine atmosphere which becomes attractive to members. In this way, little by little they begin considering themselves as a community of “chosen” individuals that should be maintained in secret. These elements together thus reinforce internal cohesion and the belief that the individuals are *mujabideen*,

combatants linked together in an atemporal way with those who have fought throughout history in defense of Islam.

About the authors:

Javier Jordan (Ph D) is Lecturer at the Department of Political Science, University of Granada (Spain). Research areas include Jihadist radicalization, recruitment, Intelligence and Counterterrorism. E-mail: jjordan@ugr.es

Fernando M. Mañas is Ph D candidate at the Department of Political Science, University of Granada (Spain). Research areas include Social network analysis, jihadist group's structure, Intelligence and Counterterrorism E-mail: fernandom@ugr.es

Peter Billerbeck is completing a Bachelor of Arts in International Studies and Spanish at the University of St. Thomas He is fluent in English and Spanish and proficient in Arabic. Research areas include political Islam, Middle East studies and global security issues. E-mail: pjbillerbeck@stthomas.edu

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⁴ Indictment 20/2004 of the Spanish National Audience on the Madrid bombings, p. 1217.

⁵ Lorenzo Vidino, *Al Qaeda in Europe. The New Battleground of International Jihad*, (New York: Prometheus Books, 2006), p. 71

⁶ Carlos Echeverría, "Radical Islam in the Maghreb", *Orbis*, Vol. 48, No 2, (2004), pp. 1-13; Dominique Thomas, *Le Londonistan. La Voix de la Djihad*, (Paris: Editions Michalon, 2003), pp. 158-159.

⁷ Petter Nesser, The Slaying of the Dutch Filmmaker – Religiously motivated violence or Islamist terrorism in the name of global jihad? FFI/RAPPORT-2005/00376, p. 12

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Gregory, Shaun, “France and the War on Terrorism”, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol.15, No.1 (Spring 2003), pp.124–147

Book:

Bergen, Peter L., *The Osama bin Laden I Know*, (New York: Free Press, 2006)

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