Al Qaeda in the West as a Youth Movement:
The Power of a Narrative

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Why do we bother, in Europe, about 'Islamic radicalisation'? The answer seems obvious. There are at least two good reasons: one is terrorism, with its security implications; the other is the issue of integrating second-generation migrants in Europe, apparently the most fertile ground for recruiting terrorists. For most observers, the link between terrorism and integration is a given fact. Al Qaeda-type terrorist activities carried out either in Europe, or by European residents and citizens abroad, are seen as the extreme form, and hence as a logical consequence, of Islam-related radicalisation. There is a teleological approach consisting of looking in retrospect at every form of radicalisation and violence associated with the Muslim population in Europe as a harbinger of terrorism.

This approach is problematic, not so much because it casts a shadow of suspicion and opprobrium on Islam as a religion and on Muslims in general, but because it fails to understand the 'roots of violence' and it arbitrarily isolates 'Muslim' violence from the other levels of violence among European youth. This, in turn, has two negative consequences: it does not allow us to understand the motivations for violence among people joining Al Qaeda (who are far from being, as we shall see, devoted Muslims fighting for their Middle Eastern brothers), and it unduly concentrates on "what is the problem with Islam", precisely playing on Al Qaeda's own terms, and spawning a debate that will have little or no impact among the segments of the population who are susceptible to joining Al Qaeda. As we shall see, comparing *good Islam* to *bad Islam* does not make sense, not because Islam is all bad or all good, but because the process of violent radicalisation has little to do with religious practice, while radical theology, as salafisme, does not necessarily lead to violence.

Any counter-terrorist policy has to be based on an analysis of the roots of terrorism. If not, such a policy could not only be ineffective, but also counter-productive, by inducing some of the phenomena it claims to combat.

Roughly speaking, there are two approaches: one vertical, one horizontal. The vertical approach involves establishing a genealogy of radicalisation from the Koran and the first Islamic community to the present Islamist radicals, going through radical theology (Ibn Taymiyya), ideologisation (Hassan al Banna and the Muslim brothers) and the history of Middle Eastern conflicts, from Bonaparte's campaign in Egypt to the present conflicts in Palestine, Iraq and Afghanistan. This approach tends to lump together all kind of violence linked with Muslim populations, for example ethno-cultural tensions affecting migrants (crimes of honour), petty delinquency and terrorism. The horizontal approach, by contrast, consists of putting the 'leap into terrorism' into the context of the contemporary phenomena of violence affecting our societies in general, and specifically youth. The two approaches are not exclusive of course, but I will argue that the link between them is to be understood less in sociological and political terms than in terms of a narrative. The success of Osama Bin Laden is not to have established a modern and efficient Islamist political organisation, but to have invented a narrative that could allow rebels without a cause to connect with a cause.

We examine the two views below.

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1. The debate on the roots of terrorism

The vertical approach

Al Qaeda is a revolutionary organisation in the continuation of the Middle Eastern Islamist movements (Muslim Brothers, Said Qotb, Ayman al Zawahiri). Its strategy is defined by a precise ideology: to topple the existing regimes in the Middle East and replace them with a Caliphate based on *sharia* law. Hence the political radicalisation is part of a process of theological radicalisation, known as salafisme. Islam is at the core of Al Qaeda legitimacy and thinking. It plays on the nostalgia of the Muslim community for a Golden Age.

Ideology is the key: people join Al Qaeda because they share its ideology and political goals. Indoctrination is the basis of recruitment: militants do read books and leaflets, even if they use the internet more than the street corner bookshop. Conflicts in the Middle East are at the core of the 'Muslim wrath'; Muslims living in Europe do identify with their oppressed brothers of the greater Middle East.

To counter Al Qaeda, one should address the political grievances of the sympathisers. Whatever different conceptions exist about a settlement of conflicts in the Middle East, there will be no de-radicalisation without improving the situation in the Middle East. A global war on terrorism makes sense because similar trends and ideas are at work among most of the Muslims involved in local as well as global conflicts.

This vertical approach is at present largely dominant among politicians, journalists and experts of the Middle East. It can lead to two different conceptions, both based on the premises of the clash of civilisations theory. The first assumes that there is a definitive gap between Islam and the West, and the only policy is 'authoritarian integration' (banning the burqas and even the veil, enforcing acculturation, limiting religious freedom). Personalities as different as Daniel Pipes, Fadela Amara, Fritz Bolkenstein and far rightists are on this line. The second approach is to promote 'good Islam', through the so-called 'dialogue of civilisation', bringing together Western thinkers and Middle East religious authorities, as well as European authorities and Muslim community leaders, and promoting some sort of multi-culturalism or 'reasonable accommodation', in order to try to establish a common ground between East and West. The 'Alliance of civilisations' project and the interfaith conferences recently promoted by the Saudi government are along these lines.

The horizontal approach

This approach is based on the analysis of the individual biographies and trajectories of people who have been actually involved in terrorist activities in the West or who left the West to perpetrate terrorist activities in the Middle East. It concludes that the vertical approach does not help to understand the process of radicalisation, and considers it more productive to establish a transversal comparison between the different forms of violence existing among the various milieus that could support terrorists. It tends to downplay the impact of Middle Eastern conflicts and Islamic religious radicalisation. The arguments run as follows:

- There is a break between Al Qaeda and the traditional Islamists movement: Al Qaeda has no real political programme of establishing a territorial Islamic state based on *sharia*. There is a clear gap between islamo-nationalism (Hamas, Hezbollah, Iran) and the global de-territorialised jihad of Al Qaeda. AQ's references to Islam are for the sake of creating a narrative, not of establishing a genuine political agenda. Ayman Zawahiri, Bin Laden's deputy, is an exception (the only AQ member coming from the elite of the Muslim Brothers) and is unduly seen as the ideologist of Al Qaeda.

- Instead of promoting a territorial Caliphate in the Middle East, Al Qaeda is committed to a global struggle against the world power (the US) in the continuation of the radical anti-imperialist struggles of the 1960s and 1970s (Che Guevara, the Baader-Meinhof gang). It stresses political activism and addresses a wider audience than just the Muslim community (hence the converts).

- Al Qaeda does not play a vanguard or a leading role in the conflicts of the Middle East, but is trying to impose its own agenda even against the local Islamists (Hamas). There are continuous tensions between internationalist fighters and local insurgents in Iraq, Afghanistan and even Lebanon.

- The West should address the different Middle Eastern conflicts from a political perspective (a struggle for territorial control from different actors) and not by ascribing to them an ideological perspective (Caliphate and *sharia*).

- Ideology plays little role in the radicalisation of the jihadist internationalist youth: they are attracted by a narrative not an ideology.

- The process of radicalisation is to be understood by putting it into perspective with the other forms of violence among European youth.

- Any process of de-radicalisation should address youth populations, and not an elusive Muslim community, which is more constructed (particularly by government policies and by self-appointed community leaders) than real.

This perspective is undoubtedly a minority view. But it is finding more ground among police and intelligence practitioners, who now have an important database of radicals coming from or acting in Europe, and see the discrepancy between the individual profiles of the radicals and the motivations that are attributed to them from outside.

If we adopt the first version, the Middle East is at the centre of the process of radicalisation and hence should be at the centre of the de-radicalisation policy. There is no real difference between islamo-nationalists and de-territorialised movements such as Hamas on the one hand and internationalist jihadists of Al Qaeda on the other. We should study radicalisation essentially from the top down: How do ideas and propaganda spread from AQ headquarters to would-be radicals? What is AQ's strategy of recruiting? In this sense the young radicals are picked and manipulated by the organisation.

If we adopt the other view, we should, as a necessary first step, delink territorialised and nationalist conflicts from supra-national jihadism, both in the Middle East (such a policy has been the basis of the *surge* strategy initiated by General Petraeus in Iraq) and in Europe (by stopping the mixing-up of radicalisation and the Middle East). We should also acknowledge that ideology has little to do with radicalisation. We should study radicalisation essentially at the individual level, addressing the reasons why young people who are not linked with a given conflict would join AQ. The main de-radicalisation objective is to destroy Al Qaeda's narrative, not to provide an ideological or theological alternative, because both dimensions (ideology and theology) are simply not relevant.

Is there a general concept of terrorism?

The general category of 'terrorists' or 'suicide bombers' is not very helpful. We should put terrorist actions into their political and strategic contexts.

If we consider terrorist activities in the Muslim world, there is clearly a difference between territorialised violence (Palestine, Chechnya) and de-territorialised violence (Al Qaeda). The first is linked with a struggle for national liberation and is part of a broader use of politically motivated violent means with a precise objective: to free a territory from what is perceived as a foreign occupation. This violence does not spill over in other countries except occasionally into the territory of the occupying country. It goes along with other forms of violence (from *intifada* to guerilla warfare) and is hinged on a precise political agenda; the violence thus could be suspended or triggered according to the circumstances and the expected results.

By contrast, global terrorism is defined by the following criteria:

- The terrorist action is not part of a broader spectrum of political and military actions; it is relatively isolated from the local political context.

- There is no concrete political agenda (although there might be, as we shall discuss, a strategy of confrontation with the dominant power).

- Terrorists are not rooted in a given society (even if they are integrated): they don't fight in their country

of origin (with the possible exception of Saudi Arabia), and they have no or little background of militancy or participation in communal works. They are often circulating between three countries: country of origin of their family, country of residence and radicalisation and country of action, although the last two could coincide (the London bombings in 2005).

2. Al Qaeda as a global de-territorialised movement

The first and probably more common explanation of radicalisation, as we saw, is to understand it as a consequence of the conflicts in the Middle East, and of the sense of humiliation they create among Muslims. But, if we refer to the bios of terrorists from Europe, it is clear that the motivating factor for violence is not based on personal humiliation or oppression experienced by the terrorists. There is an almost radical discrepancy between the map of the actual conflicts in the Middle East and the map of recruitment. Terrorists operating in the West are home-grown terrorists. When they have a foreign familial or personal background, it is North Africa, Pakistan, East Africa, the Caribbean islands or just … Europe. There is also a significant proportion of converts. Al Qaeda is not only the sole 'Islamic' political organisation to have a very high level of converts (estimates range from 9 to 20%), but it is the only one to give them positions of responsibility (both Muslim Brothers and the Islamic revolution of Iran attracted some converts, but none of them was ever to be found in a position of responsibility; Hizb ut-Tahrir has many converts but, until now, none is in the leadership). Let's mention the French Christophe Caze, Jean-Marc Grandvisir, Jérôme Courtailler and the German Christian Ganczarski (Djerba attack in 2002), and more recently the Frenchman Willie Brigitte (tried in 2007 in Paris), the British Yeshi Girma (born in Ethiopia), wife of a man convicted for the 21 July 2005 failed attempt in London, the British Andrew Rowe (arrested in 2005) and Dhiren Barot, the Dutch (and former policewoman) Martine van der Oeven, member of the Hofstadt group, Abdallah Andersen sentenced in Copenhagen (2008), Fritz Gelowicz, arrested in Germany in 2007, Anthony Garcia (also known as Rahman Benouis), sentenced in 2007 in London, and Pascal Cruypeninck, sentenced in 2008 in Brussels. Many converts are of Caribbean origin (French and British): they find in the Islamist milieus a fraternity free from racism and may recast the anti-racist and anti-colonial struggle in 'Islamic' terms; within Al Qaeda they achieve positions of responsibility that they would not have access to elsewhere. We may mention Grandvisir, Brigitte, Jermaine Lindsay (London 2005) or Abu Izzadeen (born Trevor Brooks) (sentenced in April 2008 by a British court). Here traditional anti-imperialism merges with Islamism.

The Europeans in Al Qaeda tend to take one of two routes to conversion: there are those who have pursued a personal path and joined AQ after having converted in a

mosque, and those who followed their Muslim 'buddies', when, often after a story of petty crimes, they decide to 'go for action', usually under the influence of a group leader, seen as a guru. The 'group effect', as Marc Sageman[1] calls it, is far more effective in terms of triggering radicalisation than reading propaganda books. Dhiren Barot, born a Hindu from parents who left East Africa to settle in Great Britain, and who went to Kashmir, married a Malay woman from Thailand and was involved in different plots both in London and New York, embodies the perfect example of the de-territorialised jihadist. A remarkable case is that of the Belgian Muriel Degauque (who carried out a suicide bombing in Iraq with her husband in 2005), for it signals a recent development: the arrival of a generation of women in Al Qaeda, which until now has tended to be misogynistic (which shows that the converts also bring another form of deculturation).

Interestingly enough, very few Western Muslims from Iraqi or Palestinian origin are involved, not only in terrorist actions perpetrated in Europe, but also in their countries of origin (the argument that it is because they are fighting in their own country does not make sense: during the 1970s, Palestinians were heavily involved in international terrorism). By the same token the jihadists who travelled inside the Middle East to fight in Iraq are presently mostly Saudis and North Africans (including Libyans), and not people who have experienced a direct Western form of aggression. Furthermore Al Qaeda has seldom attacked Israeli or Jewish targets (contrary to more 'secular' Palestinian movements like Abu Nidal), with of course some exceptions (Istanbul and Casablanca). And finally, with the exception of some Pakistanis, no second-generation radicalised Muslim has gone back to the country of origin of his or her family to fight a local jihad.

To sum up, the process of radicalisation in Europe is not a direct consequence of the conflicts in Middle East, although these conflicts are re-interpreted through the 'narrative' of Al Qaeda.

I consider that a dominant characteristic of Al Qaeda's type of violence is de-territorialisation: specific conflicts play a role only as narratives and not as geo-strategic factors; the radicals are not involved in actual conflicts, but in an imaginary perception of the conflicts. The de-territorialisation factor might also explain new forms of radicalisation among Middle Eastern Muslims. The third generation of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon for instance (insurgents of the Nahr al Barid camp in Northern Lebanon) have experienced a process of de-Palestinisation; they are no more geared towards Palestinian politics, have no hope of ever coming back, but did not receive a new identity or citizenship in exchange. They may jump from a desperate national struggle into identification with the global *ummah*. The phenomena may happen in Palestine itself because the hope to achieve a viable statehood is receding (as illustrated by the unexpected breakthrough of the Hizb-ul Tahrir party in the West Bank in 2007-08, for which the Caliphate is more important than the nation-state).

Al Qaeda's senior figures, grassroots cells, transnational networks and chain of command are thus rooted in personal bonds, forged either in Afghanistan or at the local level in the West, and which are then transposed to a transnational, 'de-territorialised' dimension (trips, moving to other countries, multiple nationalities, etc.). The West is the key place of radicalisation. Interestingly enough, many of the North Africans involved in radical violence in North Africa had at a time a project of migration to Europe. An FBI team sent to Kabul in 2001 to fingerprint all arrested insurgents made a surprising discovery: hundreds of arrested people in Afghanistan who were supposed to be local fighters (1% of the total) were already in the FBI's database for arrests ... in the US. Many arrests were for drunken driving, passing bad checks and traffic violations. That means that there were probably a far higher percentage of arrested 'insurgents' who went through the US without being arrested, and that the already arrested guys had 'normal' delinquency, not related to Islam.[2]

A second factor supposed to explain international terrorism (after the reaction against the conflicts in the Middle East) is Al Qaeda's strategy and ideology, embodied in the 'far enemy/near enemy theory'. It defines Al Qaeda as the ultimate stage of an ongoing Islamist revolutionary movement that strived to create Islamic states in Muslim countries, and then to establish a Caliphate based on *sharia*. The subsequent failure to establish an Islamic state in a given country (whatever the reason: pressure of imperialism, lack of support among the population, strength of the ruling regimes or acknowledgement that utopia does not work) is supposed to have pushed the Islamists to go 'global', leading to the prevalence of the *ummah* on the nation, and putting jihad against the West on the forefront, because there was no way to defeat the near enemy (the Arab regimes) as long as the distant enemy was not checked or destroyed. Jihad is defined as a personal compulsory duty.

But in fact few of the present radicals have been involved in domestic Islamic radical activities in their country of origin (with the notable exception of Ayman al Zawahiri). Bin Laden himself turned against the Saudi monarchy *after* joining the global jihad. Meanwhile the strategy of AQ is to entrap US troops in protracted local conflicts and to parasite these local conflicts, without defining a coherent political strategy to attract the local population. There is no political blueprint from Al Qaeda

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[1] Marc Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks*, Philadelphia, PA: Philadelphia University Press, 2004.

[2] Ellen Nakashima, "Post-9/11 Dragnet Turns Up Surprises: Biometrics Link Foreign Detainees To Arrests in U.S.", *Washington Post*, 6 July 2008.

on what to do the day after. They just don't care. The testimonies of the volunteers who joined Al Qaeda show that they go for jihad and martyrdom, not to create an Islamic State or impose *sharia*.

We tend to over-ideologise Al Qaeda in order to understand its attractiveness.

Although a study of the *takfiri* and *jihadi* thought certainly has its interest, it does not explain the personal radicalisation phenomena (even if it might provide an aftermath rationalisation),

To my knowledge, none of the arrested terrorists or suspects had Zawahiri or other books in their house, while they often have handbooks on how to make bombs or videos about 'atrocities' perpetrated against Muslims. Contrary for instance to the Hizb ut-Tahrir members, who always formulate their positions in elaborate ideological terms, Al Qaeda's members do not articulate before or after having been caught a political or an ideological stand (most of AQ suspects keep silent or deny any involvement during their trial, a very unusual attitude for political militants, who traditionally transform their trial into a political tribune). We should certainly not discard entirely the fact that some quarters in Al Qaeda are writing or thinking in terms of ideology, but this does not seem to be the main motivation for joining Al Qaeda.

A third explanation puts alienation at the core of the radicalisation process. There is certainly some truth in that, but the problem is how to define alienation. The socio-economic definition (deprivation, poverty, racism, social exclusion) is not supported by data. We find people from all backgrounds in Al Qaeda: engineers, former drug-addicts, social workers ... The fringes from where the radicals come are not socio-economic. Another definition of alienation is based on the clash of cultures: the radicals become violent because they are torn between two cultures.

This ethno-cultural approach is reflected in the association of terrorism and crimes of honour under the label of 'Islam-related violence'. Notwithstanding the fact that 'crimes of honour' are a paradoxical proof of integration (they show that young Muslim girls no longer abide by traditional rules), there is no correlation between them and political radicalisation. Crimes of honour are always strictly connected with the ethnic (and often tribal) background: perpetrators are mainly Anatolian Turks (mostly Kurds) and rural Pakistanis, and involve very few North Africans, urban Turks, or Arabs from the Near East. Except for Pakistanis, there is no connection between the map of honour crimes and the map of political radicalisation. Moreover honour crimes are an endeavour to restore the 'integrity' of the family or of the clan; they usually involve a tight-knit family, where sons obey their parents. On the contrary, joining Al Qaeda is usually a posture of defiance towards parents and traditional family. Matrimonial patterns among Al Qaeda members are relatively modern: there is little difference in age between spouses, spouses choose each other, one

often marrying a convert or the sister of comrades in arms, but never a cousin chosen by the family. In the group responsible for the Madrid attack, Serhane Fakhet married his friend Mustapha Maymouni's sister in 2002. In France, Jamel Beghal married Johan Bonte's half-sister. Malika al Aroud, widow of Abdessatar Dahmane, the murderer of commandant Masud in Afghanistan, is a good example: she previously bore a daughter out of wedlock, married a Tunisian, while she was a Moroccan-born Belgian; after the death of her husband, she married Moez Garsalloui, a man younger than her, whom she met through the internet; they live in Switzerland. While perfectly westernised (she writes and speaks in French and does not know Arabic), she behaves as a modern militant of a cause, but more as a dissident from inside the Western society than as a representative of a traditional Muslim culture.

Clearly, pro-Al Qaeda's radicalisation process is not linked with the outspoken condemnation of Western sexual liberalisation that is pervasive among conservative Muslim circles: homosexuality, co-education, sexual promiscuity (swimming pools), specific teachings (sexual education, biology) are never part of the agenda of Al Qaeda. Not to mention the fact that this rejection of loose morality is also on the agenda of many non-Muslim religious communities. AQ recruits are not specifically puritanical and often live or have lived the usual life of western teenagers.

3. Al Qaeda as a violent youth movement

In fact it is more productive to understand Al Qaeda in Europe as a youth movement, which shares many factors with other forms of dissent, either political (the ultra-left), or behavioural: the fascination for sudden suicidal violence as illustrated by the paradigm of random shootings in schools (the 'Columbine syndrome').

The generational dimension is obvious: most of the radicals have broken with their families or become estranged. They define for themselves what should be the principles of their lives. They never refer to traditions or to traditional Islam, they don't mention fatwas from established clerics. They act on an individual basis and outside the usual community bonds (family, mosques and Islamic associations). They usually remain aloof from the communal group. The group effect concerns the 'small group': the process of radicalisation takes place in the framework of a small group of friends (they knew each other before, used to have a common place of meeting: campus, local neighbourhood, networks of petty delinquency, etc…). Many travelled together to Afghanistan. It is a movement of age peers, not based on hierarchy.

A 'transversal' approach (comparing youth violence among non-Muslims with Al Qaeda recruitment) sheds much light on the present process of radicalisation among youth, and seems more fruitful than a vertical approach in terms of Islamic intellectual legacy (from the Koran to

Sayyid Qotb, through Ibn Taymiyya). Instead of looking vertically through Muslim history and theology to explain Al Qaeda's violence, one should connect it to the general phenomena of radical violence among youth.

The leap to violence is not the result of a long process of indoctrination and maturation. We have already noted the predominance of activism on ideological and intellectual formation: there is a very short time between religious re-conversion and passage to violent action. Violence is at the core of the fascination for Al Qaeda.

We underline below three aspects of this transversal fascination for violence.

i) The recasting of a traditional leftist anti-imperialism into Islamic terms

AQ is an avatar of the ultra-leftist radicalism. Its targets are the same as the traditional targets of the ultra-left: US imperialism, symbols of globalisation. When Bin Laden referred to Vietnam in his video speech of September 2007, instead of quoting the Koran, he was in fact addressing an audience more sensitive to the political dimension than to the religious one. When AQ executed western hostages in Iraq, it staged the execution by using the same *mise en scène* invented by the Red Brigades when they killed Aldo Moro.

The continuity is indicated by the map of recruitment of radicals in France. The map of radicalisation does not really fit with that of the Muslim population. As expected, there are many radicals coming from the Parisian suburbs, Lille/Roubaix/Tourcoing and Lyon, where there is a huge Muslim population. But why are there so few radicals coming from Grenoble and Marseille, where there is also a huge Muslim population? There has been a tradition of leftist radicalism in the first three places mentioned, which did not really exist in Marseille. Nevertheless Grenoble was also a centre of the ultra-left (Maoists and Action Directe). Why are there so few young Muslim radicals coming from Grenoble? In fact there is a lot of violence related to second-generation Muslims in Grenoble, but it is linked with organised crimes, not with the usual petty delinquency. The issue of the link between Islamic radicalisation and youth delinquency, although far from being systematic, should nevertheless be approached a bit more in depth.

ii) A delinquent generation?

There is a clear connection between radicalisation and petty delinquency, but not with 'high' organised crime. Many radicals have a background of drug addiction and delinquency. Jamal Ahmidan, a mastermind of the Madrid bombings, was a drug dealer (and a womaniser); many of his accomplices from Morocco were also delinquents. It is also a common pattern for many converts, who have ambivalent feelings towards conversion or a return to religious practice. On one hand, it is a way to redeem oneself, but on the other hand, ties are not severed with the less religious-minded former gang members, who are used to find money and logistical support. It is well known that in European jails, second-generation Muslims are overrepresented and may constitute the absolute majority of the inmates, which explains why jails are probably the best recruiting field, including for converts. But on the other hand, it should be kept in mind that Muslims are not responsible for the worst crimes: serial killings, mafia-related murders and armed robberies are more often perpetrated by whites than by Muslims. The generational phenomenon is obvious in these differential patterns of delinquency. But the more second-generation Muslims are aging, the more they tend to integrate 'hard' delinquency, but this time at the expense of their political engagement.

This may have unexpected consequences. Paradoxically, the formation of ethnic mafias used to be associated with integration, as illustrated in the US during the first half of the 20th century. When second-generation migrants join organised crime, they are less tempted by political radicalisation. If we go back to the example of Grenoble and Marseille, the lack of political radicalisation may be linked with the rise of an ethnic organised crime, where young (well, less and less!) North Africans are involved: they are superseding the traditional Corsican and Italian gangs. Grenoble is presently (2007-08) the scene of a high-level and bloody mafia war involving second-generation North Africans: the field of potential violence is taken by non-political forms of radicalisation. By contrast, elsewhere in France, second-generation Muslims are more involved in petty delinquency and thus remain in the floating margins of society. But we should add a caveat: in all these sorts of deviant violence (organised crimes, petty delinquency, terrorism), the involved groups are never entirely 'ethnic': mixed ethnicity is a general pattern, although there is usually a dominant ethnic pattern.

iii) Individual suicidal violence

A third category of transversal violence is the sudden leap into suicidal violence, as illustrated by the Columbine syndrome, i.e. the random killing by a student of schoolmates and teachers in his school, before shooting himself or being shot. There are many patterns in common with radical terrorists: a possible history of drug addiction, a lack of social life, the fabrication of a narrative through the internet, the recording of a video before taking action, search for fame, use of the internet, the attribution of a collective responsibility to the targeted random victims. In fact, the stress put on Al Qaeda by politicians, media and public opinion is probably concealing the increase of a more diluted phenomenon of youth terrorism (as illustrated by radical animal defence groups). The figure of the lone terrorist is more and more pervasive (as illustrated by the Frenchman who almost killed himself while making bombs to blow up road radars in June 2008).

4. Al Qaeda and recruitment: The power of a narrative

But there remains a question: if there are common roots and patterns to explain a phenomenon of generational violence that is pervasive in the West, why do many youngsters choose jihad and not the other forms? More precisely, why do some who choose political violence, instead of re-creating ultra-leftist movements, join precisely Al Qaeda? It is because AQ provides a powerful narrative.

Al Qaeda provides not so much an ideology as a narrative. The first part of the narrative is the suffering of the *ummah*. But this *ummah* is a virtual one: all crimes (depicted through gruesome videos) committed against Muslims anywhere in the world are put on the same level. These stories are not contextualised: the picture of a tortured man could come from Bosnia, Chechnya or Kashmir. The *ummah* is presented as an undifferentiated whole.

The second part of the narrative is centred on the individual who is suddenly put in the situation of becoming a hero who would avenge the sufferings of the community. It addresses an individual by combining different elements:

- Self-image: all personal humiliations or shortcomings are redeemed by the act of terrorism. The death is staged as is the self itself (hence the video, declaration, will, etc.).

- Salvation and death: there could be only one definite action that will turn the suicide bombers into a permanent icon; death is the definite seal on the story, it is part of the story.

The third part of the narrative is the religious 'qotbist' dimension, which also plays its role here: jihad is a personal compulsory duty, the vanguard of the *ummah* is made of a few outstanding and devoted heroes; salvation is through sacrifice and death. Sources and authors who were seen by the 'vertical view' as of utmost importance make a comeback here: occasional references to Ibn Taymiyya, Said Qotb or Palestine may be called to illustrate the narrative. The narrative allows the would-be terrorist to connect with history and religious genealogy.

But a fourth part of the narrative is less religious: it is the enactment of the fight against the global order. To people not specifically motivated by religion, Al Qaeda is the only organisation present on the market that seems to be effective in confronting the 'evil' that is the West. The fact that AQ is constantly presented by Western leaders as the biggest threat gives more value to the decision to join it. The narrative is substantiated by the Western reaction to it.

Al Qaeda gives a meaning to the flow of information that comes from the media, describing a world of violence, explosions, blood and wars. Al Qaeda presents its action as some sort of a video game, where youngsters can easily identify themselves as actors. Al Qaeda also makes use of the dominant discourse on the clash of civilisation by inversing the values. It fits with the division of the world into two competing principles, good and evil. AQ plays on the mirror effect: we are what you say we are, that is your worst enemy, and the proof is not what we do, but what you say.

With respect to these four dimensions of the narrative, it is clear that Al Qaeda would not have such an impact without the amplification effect of the media and without its constant assimilation with THE evil alternative to civilisation.

Deradicalisation

The most effective way to combat terrorism is a combination of two levels: one level employs traditional intelligence and legal techniques to trace and neutralise cells and networks. But it is very difficult to prevent young guys from suddenly leaping into violence who have previously shown no inclination to do so. The very nature of AQ-related violence makes it difficult to pre-empt radical action. The second level would hence be to destroy AQ's narrative, that is, to de-legitimise it.

We should stop endorsing the mirror effect that is playing alongside AQ's words. As mentioned earlier, AQ's main assertions are:

1) AQ is the vanguard and the paroxysm of the 'Muslim wrath'.

2) Terrorists are heroes.

3) AQ embodies radical Islam, or more precisely "radically" embodies Islam.

To nullify the first statement, we should stop speaking of Muslims through the lens of terrorism, and should establish a coherent long-term process of integration of Islam as simply a religion in a Western context. To destroy the second assertion, we should stress the real nature of the radicals: not powerful devils, but petty and often unsuccessful delinquents, in a word, losers, who have no future. And by the way, this image already seems to be emerging: the repetitive dimension of AQ's actions diminishes their power of fascination and attraction; the fact that there are more attempts that failed miserably (the attack on Glasgow airport, for example) stresses the growing vacuity of terrorism. For the third element, we should stop promoting 'good' versus 'bad' Islam, because it supports the idea that AQ is a religious organisation. AQ is not a religious organisation; it is not the armed branch of salafisme. And by the way, to promote 'good Islam' through governmental means is to give the kiss of death to 'liberal' Muslim thinkers. If AQ is a modern phenomenon and not the expression of fundamentalist Islam, there is no point in promoting modern liberal Islam against AQ. The process of secularisation or accommodation of Islam in the West may take place, but to be successful it should be undertaken outside the anti-terrorism framework.

We should address the other issues related to second-generation Muslims (crimes of honor, salafisme) as they are, i.e. a socio-cultural transition, and not as harbingers of terrorism. We should de-Islamise AQ – not demonise it as 'bad Islam'. That is what secularism means.

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Founded in Brussels in 1983, the Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS) is among the most experienced and authoritative think tanks operating in the European Union today. CEPS serves as a leading forum for debate on EU affairs, but its most distinguishing feature lies in its strong in-house research capacity, complemented by an extensive network of partner institutes throughout the world.

CEPS' funding is obtained from a variety of sources, including membership fees, project research, foundation grants, conferences fees, publication sales and an annual grant from the European Commission.

Goals

- To carry out state-of-the-art policy research leading to solutions to the challenges facing Europe today.
- To achieve high standards of academic excellence and maintain unqualified independence.
- To provide a forum for discussion among all stakeholders in the European policy process.
- To build collaborative networks of researchers, policy-makers and business representatives across the whole of Europe.
- To disseminate our findings and views through a regular flow of publications and public events.

Assets

- Complete independence to set its own research priorities and freedom from any outside influence.
- Formation of nine different research networks, comprising research institutes from throughout Europe and beyond, to complement and consolidate CEPS research expertise and to greatly extend its outreach.
- An extensive membership base of some 120 Corporate Members and 130 Institutional Members, which provide expertise and practical experience and act as a sounding board for CEPS policy proposals.

Programme Structure

CEPS carries out its research via its own in-house research programmes and through collaborative research networks involving the active participation of other highly reputable institutes and specialists:

Research Programmes

Economic & Social Welfare Policies
Energy, Climate Change & Sustainable Development
EU Neighbourhood, Foreign & Security Policy
Financial Markets & Taxation
Justice & Home Affairs
Politics & European Institutions
Regulatory Affairs
Trade, Development & Agricultural Policy

Research Networks/Joint Initiatives

Changing Landscape of Security & Liberty (CHALLENGE)
European Capital Markets Institute (ECMI)
European Climate Platform (ECP)
European Credit Research Institute (ECRI)
European Network of Agricultural & Rural Policy Research Institutes (ENARPRI)
European Network for Better Regulation (ENBR)
European Network of Economic Policy Research Institutes (ENEPRI)
European Policy Institutes Network (EPIN)
European Security Forum (ESF)

In the context of its research programmes and networks, CEPS organises a variety of activities, involving its members and other stakeholders in the European policy debate, national and EU-level policy-makers, academics, corporate executives, NGOs and the media. These activities include task forces, conferences, lunchtime membership meetings, briefings, training seminars and major annual events (e.g. the CEPS Annual Conference).

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