
Op-ed**Subculture: The third wave of European jihad****By: Dr. Daniela PISOIU¹**

The number one concern on the agenda for most European intelligence services has been, for the last couple of years, the issue of the so-called ‘foreign fighters’: individuals travelling from Europe to Syria in order to take part in the holy war – mostly filling the ranks of IS (Islamic State, formerly known as ISIS – Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) and Jabhat al-Nusra (The Support Front, an al Qaeda affiliate in Syria). Evidently, the worry of the intelligence services is not so much the fact that these individuals leave, but rather that they might come back, and in particular what they might do when they return. Historically, foreign fighters have not been deemed a potential danger to their country of origin. If at all, their stories would rather be placed in the context of romantic narratives of idealism and sacrifice for the right cause – be it the anti-fascist fight in Spain, or the establishment of the state of Israel. The experiences of Europeans taking part in the Yugoslavian war, be it on the side of the Serbian, Bosnian or Croat military forces almost passed unnoticed and certainly did not unleash the kind of panic ‘Syrian’ fighters currently do.

Primarily, what has changed is the overall framing and perception of the kind of conflict foreign fighters are involved in. If in previous wars the question of who were the ‘good guys’ and the ‘bad guys’ was a matter of perspective, the brand of radical Islamism promoted by IS appears to decidedly position itself outside any attempt to characterize their doings as a ‘good cause’. Given the increasingly gruesome atrocities perpetrated by this group against civilians, religious minorities, and not least fellow Muslims, this is not surprising. While the

¹ Dr. Daniela PISOIU is a researcher at the Institute for Peace Research and Conflict Studies (IFSH) at the University of Hamburg and currently writing a book on subculture and radicalization. This Op-ed is based on her field research in the area of right-wing extremism and Jihadism.

idea of a caliphate might not necessarily appall some audiences, the way in which the group intends to achieve it certainly does. The much discussed beheadings of Westerners have perplexed viewers around the world and there is also a sense of novelty to this particular treatment of hostages or ‘enemies’. But this perception is skewed, most probably due to the fact that these cases involve Western victims *and* Western executioners. As scholars of jihadi imagery in general, and IS in particular will know, this is only the continuation of a long trail of bloodshed and, when compared to other beheading videos, not even the most extreme examples.

What has also changed compared to past decades is the nature and impact of this conflict. It is in the nature of terrorism for it to publicize its cause through deeds, and often beyond national borders. Contemporary terrorism is furthermore boosted by the gains of modern technology and communications, with a rapid and broad potential impact not just at the point where a terrorist act emerges, but around the world. The reverberations of international Islamist terrorism in Europe are illustrated by evidence that the more successful plots here were directed or at least influenced by returnees from jihad battlefields – the so-called ‘veterans’. The concern is therefore now that the foreign fighters in Syria will return with the training and expertise gathered on the frontline of international terrorism and use it to prepare terror attacks in Europe, or at least inspire others to radicalize. Needless to say, with the increasing numbers of European nationals and converts filling their ranks, the perspective of local knowledge, easy travel and inconspicuousness must also be included in the equation. This alarming scenario is however only one of the many possible outcomes of the foreign fighters’ combat activities abroad and is not even the most probable. Based on previous experience with soldiers at war, returnees tend to come back traumatized or tired of fighting or indeed scarred for life by the kinds of atrocities experienced. It is well known that the reality of war usually does not match the idealized images that usually drive young men onto the battlefield. Additionally, in this particular

case, it might be argued that inexperienced, spoiled young men from Europe would either quickly give in to the hardship of war, or simply be thrown in the front lines as ‘cannon fodder’. On the other hand, from the experience with war returnees it is also known that every now and then one will throw a tantrum and shoot aimlessly in a school yard or at home. The recent episode of Islamist terror in Brussels, where several people were killed in a Jewish museum, was the act of a returnee from Syria. Mr. Nemmouche is one of out of the 2,000 plus European foreign fighters currently estimated to have gone to Syria. It is not at all clear whether his radicalization occurred in Syria, or at an earlier point in time, or whether indeed his decision to commit the attack can be meaningfully linked to events, ideas or an assignment he might have received there. Yet the fact that he came back and perpetrated a terror attack seems to be sufficient proof of the thesis: foreign fighters pose a potential danger on their return. For the ones who, for various reasons, failed to achieve the anticipated glory on the battlefield and are still convinced that they believe in the right ideology, the prospect of redemption through an attack in Europe, or at least a career as recruiter or preacher, might in fact appear attractive. In yet another scenario, if IS might decide to switch to the ‘distant enemy’ strategy, European individuals might be purposefully sent back home for more efficient exploitation of human resources; they are already being employed now with a view to influence Western audiences. Should the promised European support for anti-IS forces materialize and have some palpable effect on the ground, such a strategy might well be considered. All in all, even if the majority of foreign fighter returnees are harmless, it suffices for only one or two to decide to, or be prompted to do something once back home. Probabilities usually escalate with the increase in total numbers, and the numbers of Europeans travelling to Syria is on the rise.

In response, governments have stepped up their criminalization of acts preceding terrorism to include travel and training abroad, while ingenious solutions are being sought to prevent individuals from travelling in the first place. Needless to say, given that it is both easy to

cross the border between Turkey and Syria, and that there is no particular reason why people should be stopped from travelling to Turkey, such measures are doomed to failure. However, there is yet another reason why the current approach to the issue of foreign fighters has little chance of success, namely that the very nature of the phenomenon has not been understood. European governments draw some vague comparisons with returnees from Afghanistan and essentially hope to identify and stop as many as possible before or after their trip to Syria. Following the crisis of the recent beheadings, President Obama announced a more sweeping measure which amounts to nothing less than the destruction of IS. So, while the Europeans are trying to manipulate the supply, the US is aiming to cut down the demand; both are strategies fairly consistent with the tradition of counterterrorism which largely evades the human element. In spite of almost a decade and a half of post 9/11 dealings with radicalization and, more recently, 'violent extremism' there is still little known on the question of why individuals go there to fight, and do so in such a vile manner.

In all fairness, the 'why' question was not a major preoccupation before the emergence of IS, in spite of inflammatory media articles published after each terror attack, expressing time and time again shock and awe at the kinds of acts apparently 'normal' individuals can end up committing. Isolated scholars have deplored the academic ignorance of terrorist subjectivity; while in other formulations it is basically the terrorists' fault that their political objectives are not heard, since the brutality of their acts blindfold governments to their causes. Finally, others accuse governments of willingly and strategically promoting the image of the fanatic criminal, which then allows them to pursue their power politics and justify illegal measures. Only a handful of scholars have seriously inquired into individual circumstances and motives to engage in terrorism. Given the shocking brutality of the most recent IS performances, there is arguably even less temptation to do so.

Yet the subjective reasons behind the choice of some European individuals to join the jihad in Syrian remain relevant, even vital for the understanding of this third wave of European

jihadism. One obvious reason for this is the fact that ‘objective’ root causes are a rather thin basis for explanation. As social movements scholars have long observed, grievance is ubiquitous, while protest and violence are not. A particularly telling and current example here is found in political oppression and the thirst for democracy and human rights. For example, the large majority of individuals leaving Austria to fight in Syria are Chechen refugees, who, paradoxically, are choosing to die in a foreign conflict, after having escaped repression at home and finally arriving in a safe and democratic country. What is it that motivates these individuals, since the pursuit of democracy, human rights, and, in the end personal safety certainly do not?

Some individuals join the conflict out of genuine humanitarian interests or driven by political utopias about building an ideal Islamic state; some see in this an opportunity for material enrichment, particularly if they act in auxiliary roles such as smugglers; some join the bandwagon without knowing much of the realities on the ground only to find themselves caught up in the dynamic of war and unable to leave. These kinds of motivations are essentially not different to the ones that moved the first and second wave jihadis to join local conflicts in Muslim countries or the global jihad proffered by Al Qaeda. The overall subjective understanding of their actions has also not changed; similar in this sense to other types of political activism and professional crime, jihad is something they ‘do’, a type of occupation that unlike other ‘regular’ occupations, demands total commitment and maximum investment of personal time and resources. There is however a major difference; an essential additional and prominent quality that makes contemporary European jihadism a new, and at first sight, an incomprehensible phenomenon. Contemporary European jihadism abroad is first and foremost a subculture. It is about lifestyle, experience and self-performance, and less about politics and religion.

The majority of individuals that go to Syria are notorious for their lack of religious and political knowledge, perhaps not surprising given their increasingly young age. Their

radicalization pathways are more often than not impressively short, and the excitement they express at the prospect of leaving more readily resembles a teenager's fascination with the exotic and the forbidden. The torrent of videos and pictures on the various types of social media serves without a doubt propaganda and recruitment efforts, but for the ones who post them, they are a real chance to project oneself, to perform, to be famous on a world stage with a world audience. This is not to say that other motivations, such as political, humanitarian or spiritual ones might not play any role at all. The subcultural side of it is very prominent though, with selfies, and a mix of mainstream and traditional symbols and style. This also explains why the majority of recruits tend to be male, rather young, and quite eager to show and prove themselves, while maintaining a distinct allure of cool. The Syrian jihad offers the perfect opportunity to do just that.

This new quality of jihad already emerged some years ago, before Syria, at the border area between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Scores of Europeans went there to undoubtedly fight the infidels, but primarily to help establish the first 'real' Islamic state. Many of them went there with wives and children, attempted to bond with the locals, but mostly lived in relatively isolated communities – in principle not so distinct to the earlier hippie communes; were it not for the rather strict separation of sexes and rather frequent resort to financial support from parents and families at home. As ideals faded away under drone fire or the prospect of dying an insignificant death, Waziristan lost its appeal and a new promised land appeared at the horizon.

The Syrian jihad presents itself in a much more attractive package than any of the jihads before it. As some commentators have already noted, as opposed to Al Qaeda, IS has not just promised, but also materially delivered on the promise of an incipient Caliphate. This is not surprising, given the significant amount of material resources and weaponry the group can draw upon and the relatively little Western control over both its workings and those of its financiers. For the individual fighter, participating in this 'project' translates into

personal achievement and effectiveness – one is not just fighting for a dream, but can actually see the results of one's actions in real time.

The subcultural side of things has also gained in profile and thus salience. The community of sympathizers and wannabe heroes communicate and act out on the various types of social media, where short and penetrating statements combine with equally penetrating and oftentimes shocking images in overall real time performances. The purpose is to have gone there, done it, and then show it to the world. Selfies depict poses with guns and weaponry and Hollywood style professional pictures with anti-Western and jihadi slogans. Often 'showing' means holding up a severed head, in a pose which has so much become a cliché that the very humanity, pain, and gruesomeness of the act is overshadowed by kitsch. Only by seeing such poses and beheading acts as performances, can it become intelligible why pleasure and excitement have replaced empathy and revulsion. Only in this context, can one begin to understand the excitement of 16 year olds, male and female, at the prospect of joining: to emulate, produce and distribute self-actualizations on the net.

But there is more to the jihadi subculture than just the pictures on the web and the community of enthusiasts. There is the propagation of lifestyle: 'jihadi hipster' with modern clothes and hairdos, gangsta cool, with villas, swimming pools and women, and testosterone kicks captured in lines such as 'real struggles need real men', all wrapped up in religiously inspired recipes encouraging polygamy, the hijab, and martyrdom. And there is an entire arsenal of symbols and clothes that craftily combine the archaic, the religious and the contemporary cool. The sympathizer feels special, part of the community of the chosen, precisely because they bind themselves to antiquated rules, wear and do things that are as far away from European cultural mainstream as it can be. At the same time, the combination of this conscious archaism with Western products, from crew necks, zip jackets and hoodies to American caps or even cowboy hats, trainers and army clothing ensures that they do not have to feel in any way frumpy or give up the benefits of pop culture. It is in a word the

perfect package to ensure the most extreme level of protest, while still freely navigating contemporary coolness. It is perhaps no coincidence that two of the most prominent European jihadis in Syria are two former rappers: Abdel-Majed Abdel Bary from the UK and Deso Dogg (Denis Cuspert) from Germany.

Another subcultural dimension that should not be overlooked in this seemingly harmless production and re-production of excitement and experience is the dimension of violence as pleasure. Not unlike other scenes of extreme political activism, the jihadi scene will also attract individuals who are not only prone to violence, but also who genuinely enjoy committing it. For them, the Syrian jihad is the ideal place to go on the rampage, play with guns and commit all sorts of crimes with impunity, and in fact even enjoy recognition and fame for them. While no precise numbers are known, anecdotal evidence depicts time and time again histories of previous involvement in crime and organized crime before the 'discovery' of the jihadi way.

What to do then about the new jihadi subculture? As a manifestation of contemporary youth culture, and currently enjoying a level of attraction, presence and global circulation without competition, there is not much one can do, except for trying to deconstruct and lay bare the individual dreams of stardom for what they really are, and hoping that it will at some point go out of fashion. Since, however, it could not thrive in the absence of an anchor conflict to supply the opportunity and the justification, it is this very conflict that should be addressed and stopped. Political subcultures grow on conflicts, ideally ones that lend themselves to easy explanations and attribution of blame, and ones whose causes homologically fit with the respective frames of anti-establishment protest. While the necessity of ending the massacre in Syria is beyond doubt, history tells us that this will neither be the first nor the last conflict for foreign fighters to join.