THE PHENOMENON OF FOREIGN FIGHTERS. THE CASE OF THE ISLAMIC STATE IN THE SYRIAN AND IRAQI CONFLICT

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"A man leaves his home
to fight for the oppressed people
sounds heroic
until you add in 'Muslim man'.
Then he's a terrorist."

Iftekhar Jaman, a British national killed fighting in Syria

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Introduction

Nowadays, the phenomenon of foreign fighters represents one of the most complex, multifaceted and highly debated matters of global security in many international forums and counter-terrorism centres. Citizens from all different nations decide to deliberately join someone else's war. Today this phenomenon is receiving growing attention from the international community especially within the framework of the Syrian conflict, which is insofar characterized by the highest level of mobilization of foreign fighters. Nevertheless, the phenomenon is characterized by a high degree of complexity that still today appears as blurred and suffers from several ambiguities.

For these reasons, the aim of this dissertation is to explore all the different aspects related to the phenomenon in order to understand why people decide to travel and participate in a foreign conflict that apparently does not pose a direct threat on them. The focus will be dedicated to the reasons behind the decision of Muslim foreign fighters to travel to the Syrian-Iraqi region to join the ranks of the Islamic State.

The first chapter is dedicated to the analysis of the theoretical as well as the historical framework of the phenomenon. For what concern the former, there is the need to recall existing theories in order to define who a foreign fighter is. It is a real difficult task especially because in the field of political science the phenomenon of foreign fighters has remained pretty unexplored. There has been a tendency to not consider it as a single phenomenon, but it was rather confined within broader terrorism studies. Furthermore, it is opportune to explore the historical framework in which foreign fighters found its origins. Indeed, the phenomenon is relatively new. Starting from the analysis of scholar David Malet, I will report two historical conflicts examples, which have been characterized by a relative mobilization of foreign fighters: the Spanish Civil War and the first Arab-Israeli War. Then, I will mainly focus on the origins of Muslim foreign fighters (MFF) starting from the extensive work of Thomas Hegghammer with a particular focus on the Afghanistan invasion from the Soviet Union in 1979, which represents the very first conflict with a considerable presence of MFF. Additionally, thanks to charismatic leading figures of the Palestinian preacher Abdullah Azzam and the Saudi wealthy businessman Osama Bin Laden, the war attracted 20.000 foreign fighters, mostly coming from Arab countries. Azzam and Bin Laden were able to develop a completely new jihadi

ideology. Moreover, I will focus on the threat MFF pose. Indeed they proved to be dangerous and decisive actors for the state of the conflict zone in which they fight, for their state of origins in case they return home to perpetrate a terrorist attack or for other states in which they decide to operate. The two case studies reported in this paragraph are the Bosnian War and the Chechen Wars in order to show how MFF have proved to give an outstanding contribution on the battlefield by worsening the conflict, by affecting its duration and by organizing propaganda recruitment and training camps.

Most studies concerning the phenomenon of foreign fighters have been linked to those concerning the process of radicalization in order to better comprehend the reasons behind the decision to fight abroad. Assuming a sociological perspective, the second chapter is completely dedicated to the process of radicalization in order to try to give an answer to the famous question of why people turn to violence. The key findings of this research are that radicalization is a multifaceted and complex process, which occurs at different interactive levels of analysis. Furthermore, there is no single cause root able to explain why the process emerges and how it works nor a single possible outcome, but rather it can cover a wide spectrum of political actions. First, the focus is posed on extensively defining radicalization even if it is a challenging task because the scholarly literature is still struggling in finding an agreed definition of radicalization even if it seems to agree at considering it at its most basic level as a process, which involves an increased use of violence. Radicalization may be understood as a process leading towards the embracement of radical ideas, radical behaviours or both. Following, in order to better comprehend its true meaning I will explore the complicated relationship between radicalization and the related expression of radicalism, extremism and terrorism. Then, I will analyse the existing theoretical framework surrounding the process, concentrating on both models and theories developed according to the main interactive levels of analysis: the individual one, the internal group one and the international together with the intra state level. The last part will exploit all the theoretical tools available from the previous analysis in order to explore and understand Islamist radicalization. This last part will attempt at reporting the major trigger factors and events that seem to boost Islamist radicalization. The aim is to explain why today apparently well-integrated Muslims, especially those living in the West, radicalized and embrace such a radical

interpretation of Islam, the Salafi-Jihadist one, that encourages and justify the use of violence.

Nowadays, the phenomenon of Muslim foreign fighters has become a central topic of international security, especially after the emergence of the Syrian war. After having analysed the key reasons behind the decision first to embrace such a radical interpretation of Islam and second to fight abroad, it is time to understand why the Syrian war, especially with the influence of the Islamic State has completely transformed and boost the process of Islamist radicalization. Indeed, the Islamic State is considered to be a primary responsible for the highest mobilization of MFF ever occurred in history.

First I will briefly provide an overview of the Syrian conflict, which started in spring 2011 as non-violent manifestations by Syrian people against the *Alawite* government of President Bashar al-Assad. The combination of increasing protests with their relative violent suppression of the Syrian army turned the civil war into a conflict. Shortly after, more than thousand non-state armed groups emerged and began to actively operate in order to gain control of the Syrian state, with the Islamic State being the most brutal one. Following, I will explore the historical roots of the Islamic State in order to understand its development from being an ordinary branch of the major terrorist group al-Qaeda to become the most dangerous entity threatening the international stability as well as security. Moreover, I will analyse the ideology behind the actions and sayings of the Islamic State in order to deeply comprehend the true nature and meaning of the message that it is constantly sending throughout its violent attacks, beheadings, kidnappings, rapes and military assaults conducted towards selected targets. Finally, the focus is dedicated to one of the primary reason behind the increasing level of attraction to foreign fighters of the Islamic State: its media strategy. The Internet and social media have completely transformed the process of radicalization as well as propaganda and recruitment campaigns. The overall media strategy of IS has deeply understood the infinite opportunities social media can provide in reaching such a widespread audience, that was never reached before. For all these reasons it becomes clear the urgent need for the international community, national governments and security agencies to develop effective counter-radicalization measures in order to halt this ongoing foreign fighters mobilization.

Following this entire analysis, it becomes crystal clear that foreign fighters, at current time mostly Muslim foreign fighters, are posing a serious threat to international security as well as stability of Middle East first, but also of Western countries and neighbouring zones if they decide to return home and perpetrate an attack or if they decide to enlarge the scope of the fight in closer countries.

As previously stated, I recall the aim of this dissertation that is to deeply explore all the different aspects related to the phenomenon in order to understand why people decide to travel and participate in a foreign conflict that apparently does not pose a direct threat on them. Mainly based on a sociological approach the focus will be dedicated to the process of Islamist radicalization, of which a potential outcome is to choose to travel to the Syrian-Iraqi region to join the ranks of the Islamic State. Moreover, it is of significant importance to address this phenomenon because the Syrian conflict is proven to be a very dramatic one in terms of casualties, refugees and duration. Following this line of reasoning, an extensive research on the reasons and ideology behind the decision to join someone else's war is the only possible mean for national governments to develop accurate and effective counter-radicalization measures.

1. The rise of Foreign Fighters

The phenomenon of foreign fighters represents a complex and multifaceted matter of global security. Citizens from all different nations decide deliberately to join someone else's war. The international threat they pose is that "foreign terrorist fighters increase the intensity, duration and intractability of conflicts, and also may pose a serious threat to their States of origin, the States they transit and the States to which they travel, as well as States neighbouring zones of armed conflict in which foreign terrorist fighters are active and that are affected by serious security burdens […]"[1].

Foreign fighters have recently received increasing attention from the international community especially in the framework of the Syrian conflict, which is insofar characterized by the highest level of mobilization of foreign fighters. In the first chapter the focus will be on the theoretical and historical framework of foreign fighters. The phenomenon is characterized by a high degree of complexity that still today appears blurred and suffers from several ambiguities. First, there is the need to resort to existing theories in order to define who a foreign fighter is. This has been a real difficult task especially because in the field of political science the phenomenon has remained pretty unexamined. Second it is opportune to explore the historical framework in which foreign fighters found its origins. Indeed, the phenomenon of foreign fighters is not a recent one. Starting from the analysis conducted by the scholar David Malet, I will analyse two historical conflicts examples, which have been characterized by the presence of foreign fighters: the Spanish Civil war and the first Arab-Israeli war. Then, I will mainly focus on the origins of Muslim foreign fighters (MFF) recalling with the extensive work of Thomas Hegghammer with a particular focus on the Afghanistan invasion of 1979, which represents the very first conflict with a considerable mobilization of MFF. The third part of the chapter is dedicated to the threat Muslim foreign fighters pose. Indeed, the figure of mujaheddins has proved to give an outstanding contribution on the battlefield by worsening the conflict, by affecting its duration and by organizing propaganda

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[1] UN Security Council, *Statement of the President of the Security Council*, S/PRST/2015/11, May 29, 2015, http://www.un.org/en/sc/ctc/docs/2015/N1515667_EN.pdf.

recruitment and training camps. The two case studies presented in this section are the Bosnian war and the Chechen wars. Consequently, I will analyse the problem of those MFF who decide to leave the conflict zone in order to organize and perpetrate terrorist attacks back to their home countries as well as in other states.

At the end, I will report all the attempts made by international organizations and research centres in estimating foreign fighters today. It is an important task in order to not underestimate the scale of the phenomenon, which is steadily growing day after day with the persistent Syrian conflict.

1.1. The theoretical framework for defining Foreign Fighters

Nowadays, in the international community the phenomenon of foreign fighters is one of the most highly debated topics. In the field of political science there has been a concrete lack of studies and researches on this subject, especially there has been a trend to not consider this phenomenon as a singular one, but rather to confined it under more broader terrorism studies. Indeed, many different theories attempted to analyse and explain the dynamics of a conflict, how the mobilization processes work and a subpart of these researches, mainly sociological ones, tried to give an answer to the important question why people turn to violence. All these theories differ from their starting points, subjects, means and findings. What they have tried is to give an answer on why people decide to turn to violence.

In 1970, Robert Gurr gave a first comprehensive analysis on this topic with his book "Why People Rebel"[2]. He analysed the social phenomenon of turning to violence, focusing his research mainly on the use of political violence. He affirmed that individuals turn to violence because of the "frustration-aggression mechanism"[3]. What happens is that an individual experiences frustration when he has specific expectations on what he ought, but he finds to be unable to attain it. This sentiment can lead him to use violence. According to Gurr, this sort of explanation can fit not only for individuals, but also for group violence. Other studies, such as the one of

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[2] Ted Robert Gurr. *Why Men Rebel*, Princeton NY: Princeton University Press, 1970, pp.36-37.
[3] *Ibidem.*

David Keen[4], believe that a major role in why people decide to use violence is played by grievances. From these examples can be easily drawn that all these theories significantly differ from one another. What they have in common is to analyse why an individual resort to violence in its own country, but what is missing is a focus on why someone should radicalize to violence and join a conflict in another state, which is the core of the phenomenon of foreign fighters. It is impossible to be analysed from a rational approach, according to which individuals are rational actors who will follow the best path in order to maximize their gains and achieve their goals. It is obvious that the voluntary decision to join a conflict in which a person does not have a direct stake seems not rational. What is missing in all the above-mentioned theories is a focus on the transnational nature and on identity matters concerning the phenomenon of foreign fighters. For reaching our goal to define foreign fighters and to analyse the motivations behind their decision to join a far away conflict is best to resort to studies and researches which concentrate directly to the phenomenon, which could be more general and concerning foreign fighters or more particular focusing on Muslim foreign fighters. As already said, in the field of political sciences only few studies were dedicated to the analysis of this phenomenon, especially those considering foreign fighters as a singular actor category operating in a conflict. The scholar David Malet, Senior Lecturer in International Relations and Associate Director of the University of Melbourne explains one of the main reasons behind this trend. Indeed, for almost two decades the term "foreign fighter" has been poorly used. Malet resort to the Lexis-Naxis database to look for the origin of the term. On 21th March 1988 the "Times" first used this expression for "[…] covering a story about a victory by Afghan mujahidin 'aided by Saudi, Egyptian and Pakistani fighters' against pro-Soviet government forces: 'Khost Outpost Falls to Mujahidin Led by Foreign Fighters' ''[5]. In the following years the term continued to be poorly used. Eventually, the trend changed after 9/11. Indeed, "[…] by the end of [2001], the term ''foreign fighter'' had appeared at least 313 times"[6].

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[4] 7 David Keen, *Greed and grievance in civil war*, International Affairs, vol. 88, no. 4 (2012), pp.757-777.

[5] David Malet, *Why Foreign Fighters? Historical Perspectives and Solutions*, Foreign Policy Research Institute, 2009, p.107.

[6] *Ibidem*, p.108.

In one of the most comprehensive work the same Malet provided one of the first definitions of the expression. According to the scholar, foreign fighters are "non-citizens of conflict states who join insurgencies during civil conflict"[7]. It is important to note that this definition immediately does not consider those foreign fighters joining inter-state wars. Indeed, he concentrates on their participation in insurgencies, whose definition has been taken by the work of George Modelski (1964). He defines an insurgency as "a faction in an internal war that does not control the legitimate (i.e. internationally recognized) machinery of the state, and is therefore (at least initially) in the weaker position"[8]. In his work Malet analysed several conflicts, which differ in terms of ideology, timing and location, but he believed that the recruitment process has always followed a pretty regular path. "Recruitment occurs when local insurgents, who always begin conflicts as the weaker faction because they do not control the instruments of the state, attempt to broaden the scope of conflict so as to increase their resources and maximize chances for victory"[9]. This weaker side attempts to gain support from individuals outside the interested country and the recruitment process is the key for achieving the goal of expanding the scope of the insurgency. Individuals from other countries can entertain with the threaten and weaker side of the conflict a kind of relationship, which differs from case-to-case. They can share a particular religion, ethnicity or other kinds of links. The recruitment process highlights these ties by making individuals perceiving that they may be subject to the same threat as the community with which they have the relationship is suffering from. " […] recruiters manipulate identities to make them salient, strategically using messaging to activate a sense of appropriate obligation or duty to the common group"[10]. The recruitment process tries to install in the minds of people the necessity of a joint defensive actions in order for that particular community to survive. From a historical analysis it seems obvious that foreign fighters are predominant in asymmetric conflicts, in which at least on fighting faction is a non-state entity while nations have always preferred to resort to official and professional armies. These receive a standard military training, which

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[7] David Malet, *Foreign Fighters: Transnational Identities in Foreign Conflicts*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, p.9.
[8] *Ibidem*, p.10.
[9] David Malet, *Why Foreign Fighters? Historical Perspectives and Solutions*, Foreign Policy Research Institute, 2009, p.100.
[10] *Ibidem*, p.101.

permits them to acquire appropriate knowledge and capabilities to survive in such an uncertain environment, which is war, and to proper respond to any kind of situations. From the work of Malet, Thomas Hegghammer, director of terrorism research at the Norwegian Defence Research Establishment (FFI) in Oslo[11], built another relevant definition. He affirms that a foreign fighter is "an agent who a) has joined, and operates within the confines of an insurgency; b) lacks citizenship of the conflict state or kinship links to its warring factions; c) lacks affiliation to an official military organization and d) is unpaid"[12]. As already mentioned above the figure of the foreign fighter has always been limited within the category of international terrorists or local rebels. Hegghammer tried and succeeded thanks to all four criteria in defining foreign fighters as new discrete actors. The first criterion serves to mark the difference with international terrorists who mainly conduct violent actions against non-combatants and civilians. The second from exiled rebels who possess a stake in the conflict before militarily joining it. Criterion c) differs them from actual soldiers who are part of organized and official armies. The last one serves to mark the difference with mercenaries who receive an actual remuneration for their services. Nevertheless today, many new Islamist armed groups such as IS and Al-Nusra provide financial reward to their affiliated. For this reason it is best to not consider the payment criteria as a necessary one.

Barak Mandelson, Assistant Professor of Political Science at Haveford College and FPRI Senior Scholar, conducted another important analysis on the complex phenomenon of foreign fighters[13]. First, he affirms that the term "foreign" can lead to the misleading address of the phenomenon in the right way. He recognized the direct link of the word with the concept of nationality. Nevertheless, he believes that resorting only to the dichotomy foreign – non-foreign, in the sense that a foreign fighter does not have the citizenship of the country in which he is fighting and the non-foreign fighter does, is simply not enough. He stresses the importance of analysing the sense of identity of foreign fighters. Of course the nationality is one of the primary aspect of the phenomenon but the sense of identity permits to better understand especially those foreign fighters who decide to join a war very far away

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[11] Informational website for Thomas Hegghammer, http://hegghammer.com.
[12] Thomas Hegghammer, *The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters: Islam and the Globalization of Jihad*, International Security, Vol. 35 No. 3, 2011, pp. 57-58.
[13] Barak Mandelson, *Foreign Fighters-Recent Trends*, Foreign Policy Research Institute, 2011, pp. 189-202, https://www.fpri.org/docs/media/mendelsohn.foreignfighters.pdf.

from their home countries. He believes in the existence of different levels of "foreignness". "Different identity markers—province of origin, ethnic group, tribe, sub-clan or any other—can determine one's level of foreignness"[14]. He continues by arguing that the higher the number of common and shared identity markers, the higher the chances for individuals to decide to join a particular conflict involving a certain community. Indeed, he affirms that the phenomenon of foreign fighters should not be comprehensively analysed according to a specific religion or ideology, in the sense that it changes case-to-case. "Foreign fighters have been involved in conflicts based on diverse religious identifications, ethnic identities, and ideologies"[15].

Just few studies focused on the different types of foreign fighters mostly there is a tendency to consider them all together within the same category. This distinction is highly important especially for national governments and counter-terrorism centres in order to choose the best policy actions. Mandelson has given a very important contribution with the "distinction between two manifestations of ''foreign fighter'': a foreigner fighting in a local conflict that is not his own country's war; and a foreign trained fighter, a local who goes to another area, receives training only, and comes back to carry out attacks elsewhere, normally in his own country"[16]. Keeping this distinction as a relevant factor in foreign fighters studies has always been a difficult task especially because individuals do not always follow similar patterns. There has been cases in which someone decided to move to a conflict zone in order to provide humanitarian assistance and then decided to militarily join the conflict. A very recent example is the one of the 25 years-old Italian Marcello Franceschi[17]. In November 2014 he decided to join the project "Rojava Calling", a humanitarian program, which provides medicines, clothes and other aids to the Syrian refugees camps. In one of these he met two little refugees, who had been severely wounded by the Islamic State (IS)'s attacks and in that precise moment he affirmed he had radicalized and decided to get militarily involved in the conflict within the ranks of the Curds against IS.

The same Hegghammer provides a similar definition in which "a 'domestic fighter' is a person who perpetrates or tries to perpetrate violence in [his home country],

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[14] *Ibidem*, p.192.

[15] *Ibidem*, p.189. Historical examples will be analysed in the next paragraph.

[16] *Ibidem,* p.193. Mandelson drew this distinction from the comments made by the scholar Marc Sageman in the panel "*Recent Trends of Foreign Fighters Source Countries and Transit Networks*".

[17] See full interview at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Drquxg4oYzA.

whereas a 'foreign fighter' is someone who leaves or tries to leave [his home country] to fight somewhere else"[18]. Hegghammer focused his analysis on Muslim jihadists, on those who leave the West to fight in other countries and on those who perpetrated violent actions at home. Another important distinction to consider concerns the different roles that foreign fighters can play in a specific conflict zone. It can lead to a misperception to believe that foreign fighters can give just a contribution on the battlefield. A considerable part joins the actual fighting, but others cover supporting roles such as doctors, some provide humanitarian assistance, others may become propaganda activists and recruiters for other conflicts. Another little part could plot terrorist actions to be perpetrated in their home countries.

In this dissertation the focus is dedicate to the phenomenon of Muslim foreign fighters, whose common sense of belonging to the Muslim community Ummah seems to appear as the common identity in almost every current conflicts involving foreign fighters. As already mentioned above, the task of this work is to understand Muslim foreign fighters, which appear to be a specific sub-category of foreign fighters.

1.2.   Origins of Muslim Foreign Fighters

As already mentioned above the goal of this work is to understand the phenomenon of Muslim foreign fighters in order to comprehend its current scale and to explain why the Syrian-Iraqi region has become the most attractive theatre. The second necessary step in order to achieve this goal is to consider our subject in a historical framework. First, I will dedicate a brief part to a general analysis considering some cases, which differ from religion, identity and ideology, which proved to be affected by foreign fighters. The rest of the paragraph will focus on the origin and rise of Muslim foreign fighters, analysing the key aspects of some relevant conflict cases.

The phenomenon of foreign fighters is not a new trend, as it seems. Indeed, the scholar David Malet has conducted an extensive research on the roots of it[19]. At the

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[18] Thomas Hegghammer, *Should I Stay or Should I Go? Explaining Variation in Western Jihadists' Choice between Domestic and Foreign Fighting*, American Political Science Review, February 2013, p.1.
[19] See Malet, *Foreign Fighter Project*.

beginning of his work he mentioned one of the very first examples of the involvement of foreign fighters. It happened "[d]uring the Greek War of Independence of the 1820s, [when] Lord Byron [20] and other Britons led a transnational effort to funnel arms and reinforcements to local insurgents based on appeals to liberate the suffering descendants of Classical Greece from Ottoman oppression"[21]. Later he analyses the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) as one of the first examples in which emerged the presence of foreign fighters on both sides of the conflict. The war erupted in 1936 when a military fascist faction led by General Francisco Franco attempted to overthrow the socialist republican government. The uprising turned into a civil war in which the two main factions were on one side the Republicans, loyal to the government, and on the other side the Nationalists of Franco. Both parties received major support from other countries. The Republicans were mainly aided by the Soviet Union while the Nationalists received an increased amount of equipment and direct military assistance especially from Italy and Germany. Mallet described the Spanish Civil war as "a type of transnational insurgency, a non-ethnic intrastate war in which Foreign Fighters were non-co-ethnic with the local insurgents"[22]. Indeed, for what concerned the Republicans, around 35.000 volunteers coming from more than 50 states decided to join the war in the ranks of the International Brigades (IB), these military units whose membership was on a voluntarily basis. It was a transnational insurgency because most of these volunteers were not even Hispanophones. But Malet described their common identity as their "duty to be an antifascist"[23]. The major contribution of the IB was the successful siege of Madrid in 1936 and they helped the Republicans to put the Nationalists on the defence for the several following months. Nationalists were able to attract around 1.000-1.500 foreigners, mainly Catholics and Fascists. Indeed, "nationalist recruits shared the conviction that the Republic was Communist-dominated and that it must be militarily destroyed in order to prevent the establishment of a Soviet-style regime in Western Europe"[24].

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[20] George Gordon Byron (1788-1824), later known as Lord Byron, was an English poet and of the most influential figure of the Romantic movement.
[21] David Malet, *Why Foreign Fighters? Historical Perspectives and Solutions*, Foreign Policy Research Institute, 2009, p.101.
[22] David Malet, *Foreign Fighters: Transnational Identities in Foreign Conflicts*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, p.93.
[23] Ibidem, p.107.
[24] *Ibidem*, p.115.

The second relevant example is the first Arab-Israeli war in 1948. Both sides received a relevant support from foreigners coming from many other countries. Israel declared its independence in 1948 and "[o]nce the State […] was established, the General Staff of the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) created the Machal department"[25]. It was a bureau with a limited role to administrative affairs related to armed forces. The Prime and Defence Minister David Ben Gurion attempted to modernize the Jewish militias by approaching veterans from the IIWW who fought under the Allies. It has been estimated that after the Israel's declaration of independence approximately 3.500 volunteers arrived in the country. "The name chosen, in the autumn of 1948, to designate this group was – 'Machal', an acronym of the Hebrew words, '*Mitnadvay Chutz La'aretz*', 'Volunteers from Abroad', Overseas Volunteers, or Machalniks, as they came to be known"[26]. They were mainly Canadian and American citizens who were moved by a strong sentiment of brotherhood and solidarity, especially because most of them were Jewish. It is important to note that the Israeli government regularly paid these volunteers. On the other side of the conflict, the international organization of the Arab League created and financially supported the military militia of the Arab Liberation Army. Around 6.000 volunteers from neighbouring countries joined the conflict supporting Palestine. Also in this case the fighters received a financial reward and shared a strong sentiment of compassion towards the Palestinian population and of resentment towards the Jewish.

The scholar Hegghammer is the author of one of the most outstanding research on the origin of Muslim Foreign Fighters (MFF)[27]. He attempted to explain why, according to historical and demographic data, the mobilization of such type of volunteers was extremely rare before the 1980's. Hegghammer believed that in those years the emergence of a new ideological Islamist movement, what he calls new pan-Islamism movement, is one of the predominant and suitable reasons behind the rise of MFF. This new ideology differed significantly with the already existing jihad doctrines.

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[25] Nir Arielli, *When are Foreign Volunteers useful? Israel's Transnational Soldiers in the War of 1948 re-examined,* Journal of Military History, 2014, p. 704.
[26] Yaacov Markovitzky, Machal: Overseas Volunteers in Israel's war of Independence, Tel Aviv, World Machal, Jerusalem Post, Vol. 5763, Internet Edition 2007, p.5.
[27] Thomas Hegghammer, *The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters-Islam and the Globalization of Jihad,* International Security, Vol.35, N.3, Winter 2010/2011, pp.53-94.

First, it is important to stress that the Arabic term *Jihad* means struggle or striving in the path to God[28]. Nevertheless, within the Muslim community there has always been a wide range of disagreement on the true meaning of the word. This sense of ambiguity surrounding the term is responsible for the emerging of different interpretations of Jihad with its related doctrines. It is for sure that the meaning of jihad as a violent action to protect the Ummah community towards Non-Muslims enemies attracted increasing followers as the infiltration of the West was rising. It all started in the XVIII century when the Russians defeated the Turks for the first time, then when Napoleon Bonaparte invaded Egypt and finally when in the XX century it was created and established the Independent State of Israel. A considerable part of Muslims did not accept Western influence and rejected its values such as modernization, secularization and industrialization. It followed the rise of a strict ideology based on the rigid following of the Sharia law (the divine law) that today is known as Islamism or Fundamentalism. Its primary aim is the return to the true Islam, the one ruled under Prophet Muhammad and the ultimate goal is to defeat the West, perceived as the enemy. The first expression of this new sentiment was the creation in 1928 by Hassan-al-Banna in Egypt of the Muslim Brotherhood, a Muslim organization rejecting Western's secularization and its interference in Egypt and invoking traditional and pure Islamic values. This is just one of the several examples of affiliations and organizations of Muslim fundamentalists that shortly after widespread in Middle East creating a successful network. These radical Muslims are those who believe jihad to be "physical, violent form of struggle to resist what they see as cultural, economic, military, and political assaults from outside the Ummah and oppression and injustice within"[29].

The most controverting point concerning jihad is whether to interpret it as an individual duty (*Fard ayn*) for every Muslim or more a community duty (*Fard Kifaya*). Indeed, this represents one of the major differences between the already existing jihadi doctrines and the new ideology described by Hegghammer. The former tried to prevent Muslim people to go and fight abroad and focused more on an internal enemy, generally corrupted governments and elites. Islamic scholars

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[28] Michael G. Knapp, *The Concept and Practice of Jihadi in Islam*, Parameters, Us Army War College Quarterly, Spring 2003, Vol. 33, n.1, p.82.

[29] Michael G. Knapp, The Concept and Practice of Jihad in Islam, Parameters, US Army War College Quarterly, Spring 2003, Vol 33, No. 1, pp. 82-94.

believed that jihad was permitted only in cases in which a Muslim country was facing a clear external aggression by a non-Muslim state and that it was more a collective obligation of local population to be responsible for the fighting and protection of their own country. Nevertheless, Hegghammer recognizes that prior 1980's some foreign fighters mobilization occurs and he explained that in some limited cases it was accepted as for example when volunteers received the permission of parents or from other political authorities to join a foreign conflict. In all other cases, religious authorities believed it to be a sin. The new Islamic ideology was more focused on the outside enemy and believed that jihad represents an individual duty to participate in foreign conflicts in which Muslims are threaten by outside powers. As already mentioned above, Hegghammer believes that the emergence of this new pan-Islamism movement it the core of the origin of MFF. He considers that the establishment in the 1960's of several Islamic institutions, such as the Muslim World League (1962) or the Organization for the Islamic Cooperation (1969), represents one of the roots of the new ideology. These institutions employed many high-educated man, especially members of the Muslim Brotherhood who were exiled first from Egypt, then from Iraq and finally from Syria. Because they were also members of the most relevant Islamic international organizations they enjoyed the opportunity to operate at the international level by wide spreading Muslim affairs and increasing public awareness. They were able to expand the importance of Muslim issues, to attract more attention and to receive more donations. It is thanks to these Muslim activists that a solid pan-Islamism identity was created especially by emphasizing the sense of belonging to the Ummah and the need to defend it from outside powers. National governments did not oppose to this new kind of propaganda because it did not involve them directly and it was rather useful to distort the population's attention from domestic issues. This network between Islamic countries increased the already existing sentiment of solidarity whose best expression is the case in 1979 of the Afghanistan's invasion by the Soviet Union.

The Afghanistan War

The Afghanistan war represents the shift from theory into practice of this new ideology based on the individual duty to engage in jihad. Indeed, the Afghanistan's invasion represented the conflict involving the higher mobilization of Muslim

foreign fighters with around 20.000 between Arabs and other Islamist *mujaheddins* (literally "those who engage in jihad")[30]. Only the current Syrian conflict surpassed it. The key figure of the mobilization of such a high number of volunteers is the Palestinian preacher Abdallah Azzam. This theologian and scholar of the Sunni Islam is also known for being the father of this new pan-Islamism ideology and one of the founder of Al-Qaeda. Azzam is the key figure in the Muslim recruitment for the Afghanistan war. He spent several years in Jordan, later in Saudi Arabia and Egypt where he began to entertain relations with the Egyptians Muslim Brotherhood. In 1981 the preacher travelled to Pakistan where he began outstanding recruitment propaganda especially thanks to the important connections created in the previous years. It is important to note that in his closer circles Azzam was the mentor of Osama Bin Laden. His teaching position at the Islamic University of Islamabad permitted him to have an additional platform to deliver his ideas and messages. First, as Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, Azzam produced a *fatwa* "Defence of Muslims Lands: The First Obligation after Faith"[31], calling upon all Muslims to fulfil their individual duty of engaging jihad to defend the Ummah. Second, in 1984 he opened in Peshawar an office, called Maktab al-Khadamat (MAK), responsible for coordinating the finance, weapons and transfer of mujaheddins for the Afghanistan war. In addition, in 1987 he published a book "Join the Caravan"[32] in which he indicated 16 reasons for engaging jihad. Azzam tried to attract also American citizens by opening affiliated offices in Boston and New York and by regularly visiting the country. The scholar John Berger gives an estimation of approximately 150 American volunteers who travelled to Afghanistan[33].

The reasons behind such a high personal involvement of the preacher should be traced in the origins of Azzam's life. Born in an occupied territory he lost trust and faith in neighbouring governments as well as in outside nations. For sure he tried "to encourage the creation of a transnational fighting force that could eventually support

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[30] See full explanation at http://www.britannica.com/topic/mujahideen-Islam.
[31] Abdullah Azzam, *Defence of the Muslim Lands; The First Obligation After Faith*, English translation work done by Brothers in Ribatt.
[32] Abdullah Azzam, *Join the Caravan*, 1987, see full document translated at http://ebooks.worldofislam.info/ebooks/Jihad/Join%20the%20Caravan.pdf.
[33] John M. Berger, *Jihad Joe: Americans who go to war in the name of Islam*, Dulles: Potomac Books, 2011, p.8.

other Muslims under occupation, such as those in his native Palestine"[34]. Azzam served as the main platform for resources findings and recruitment process of Arab Afghans in the war. The reasons behind the attraction of the conflict to most mujaheddins were first the messages launched by Azzam for the need of every Muslim to assume the individual duty to perform jihad to protect the Ummah from an outside power, second the increasing amount of financial aid by other countries such as US and Saudi Arabia and by Islamic International Organizations and third the assistance provided by the Islamic charitable network created in the 1960's.

Once the war ended the overall picture got complicated. First the death in 1989 of Azzam produced internal disorientation and divisions within the movement. It was not sure if the further steps should have been taken towards jihad in other countries or towards conducting a global jihad. In addition, most of MFF did not leave the country once the conflict ended and in 1993 the Pakistani government pressured for all mujaheddins to leave Afghanistan. Many were afraid to return to their home countries because they would face possible arrests, executions and incarcerations. Others decided to move to other conflict theatres to continue fighting.

The Afghanistan war shows the importance of addressing foreign fighters also once the fight ends. This war predated the creation of tons of Islamist networks all around the world and the mujaheddins who became veterans played an important role in worsening further conflicts, such as in Bosnia and Chechnya.

1.3. The Threat posed by Muslim Foreign Fighters

The phenomenon of foreign fighters is constantly attracting increasing concerns from most national governments, but why? According to historical and current examples, foreign fighters have proved to be a decisive actor in conflicts. "Indeed, the current worries about foreign fighters seem to centre around the threat of a ''bleed out'' as […] veterans, equipped with new knowledge of fighting, training, recruitment, media and technical skills in building bombs, take their skills elsewhere—potentially

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[34] Thomas Hegghammer, *The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters-Islam and the Globalization of Jihad,* International Security, Vol.35, N.3, Winter 2010/2011, p.87.

facilitating the initiation or escalation of terrorism in their home country or in other arenas, and enhancing the power of insurgencies and terrorist groups"[35].

In this section I will first consider two case studies, Bosnia and Chechnya, to analyse the role mainly played by Arab-Afghans veterans in worsening these insurgencies. Second, I will examine some examples of former foreign fighters who decided to stop fighting in conflict zones preferring to plot and perpetrate terrorist attacks in their home countries as well as in other states.

Bosnia

As already said before, once the Afghanistan war ended in the newly movement of MFF a complex picture arose. First with the death of Azzam a leading figure was missing. Second the fear of facing possible detentions and executions convinced a significant part of the fighters to remain in Afghanistan and the other part to look for a new conflict zone in which to continue their jihad duty.

In March 1992 the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina declared through a referendum its independence from the dismantled Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Bosnia represents a key element of the escalation of the phenomenon of MFF. There is an existential link between the mujaheddin movement and both the Afghanistan and Bosnian War. On one hand, without the war in Afghanistan, the MFF group operating in Bosnia would not have reached its scope, size and relevance. On the other hand, without the theatre of Bosnia the future of mujaheddins would have not been so certain and it would have never achieved what it did in the following years. As the scholar Evan Kohlmann affirmed, the Bosnian War is where "the cream of the Arab-Afghans tested their battle skills in the post-Soviet era and mobilized a new generation of hardened guerrilla zealots with only two unswerving priorities: armed combat and Islamic fundamentalism"[36].

The Bosnian war started in 1992 after the disaggregation of the former Republic of Yugoslavia. After the successful secessions of Slovenia and Croatia, the multi-ethnic Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina declared its independence. The country was populated by a majority of Muslim people, mainly Bosnians, by a considerable part of Serbs Orthodox and by a minority of Catholics Croats. The neighbouring Serbian

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[35] Barak Mandelson, Foreign Fighters-Recent Trends, Foreign Policy Research Institute, 2011, p.191.
[36] Evan F. Kohlmann, *Al-Qaida's Jihad in Europe: the Afghan-Bosnian Network*, Bloomsbury Academic, 2004, p. xiii.

government of Slobodan Milošević did not accept the newly independent government. Indeed, he immediately mobilized in the country Serbian armed forces to secure the territory for the Serb minority. The conflict was primarily fought between the official forces of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Bosnian Serbs and the Bosnian Croats. The last two parties were supported respectively by Serbia and Croatia national governments. The conflict formally ended in 1995 after the intervention of NATO with the Operation Deliberate Force and with the adoption of the Dayton Peace Agreement[37]. It stated the immediate withdrawal of the Serbian army and it provided international support in building democratic and federal basis in order for all ethnicities to peacefully co-live.

The Bosnian War is the second example after Afghanistan characterized by a high mobilization of mujaheddins. Indeed, it represented the new theatre in which MFF perceived the necessity to join the conflict and fulfil the individual duty to perform defensive jihad. This concept is at the core of our analysis of MFF in order to study current conflict cases in which MFF feel the obligation to intervene and participate. Mujaheddins perceive that the Ummah is being threatened by a non-Muslim entity and in order to make the community survive, jihad represents the only effective instrument. In Bosnia, the first wave of MFF arrived already in 1992 and mostly joined the Bosnian Civil Defence forces. These first mujaheddins were not well-trained but were highly motivated to fight. Only after 1992 and 1993, the Arab-Afghans veteran joined the conflict. They possessed significant military skills, experience and a strong determination to defeat the infidels. Indeed, most of them were incorporated within the ranks of the regular Bosnian army. It was created a particular "unit 'El Mudžahid', [which] became known for its ruthless behaviour such as demolishing Catholic churches and committing indiscriminate killings"[38]. The conflict also attracted a small section of self-recruited foreign fighters, who voluntarily decided to join after remaining shocked by the atrocities of the war divulgated by international media through videos and images. Another small part of mujaheddins was recruited within European countries, especially in mosques, which were used as propaganda platforms.

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[37] See full text of the agreement at http://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/BA_951121_DaytonAgreement.pdf.
[38] Evan F. Kohlmann, *Al-Qaida's Jihad in Europe: the Afghan-Bosnian Network*, Bloomsbury Academic, 2004, p. 85.

It has been estimated that the overall number of foreign fighters operating in Bosnia reached approximately 5.000 volunteers. Once the conflict ended, as for Afghanistan, many MFF decided to remain in the Bosnian territory. The government decide to overcome this problem by issuing the necessary documents to make them obtain the citizenship. Many others decided to return to their home countries to plot terrorist attacks to be perpetrated in Western countries.

Chechnya

In this section, the focus will be on the case study of Chechnya and its two wars fought against Russia. They both represent two main examples of conflicts involving mujaheddins waging jihad. The particular feature of this case is that the Salafi-Jihadi[39] ideology of the MFF had more influence in shaping the Chechen society rather than bringing an actual advantage on the battlefield.

Already during the 1980's across the region of North Caucasus a political dissent towards the Soviet Union and an Islamic revivalism began to emerge. It is important to stress that Chechnya has always been a Muslim majority country of Sufi Islam[40]. It represents the most mystical and inner dimension of Islam. The two main Sufi orders in Chechnya are the al-Naqshabandiya and the al-Qadariya. Chechnya declared its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991 and the newly elected President, Dzhokhar Dudayev, immediately tried to redirect the country towards Islam through several visits to Muslim countries, such as Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Iraq and Libya and by building new mosques. In 1994 the Russian army invaded Grozny, the capital of Chechnya. The intense conflict lasted for two years having as an outcome the defeat of Russia and the withdrawal of its troops, established by the Khasavyurt Accords. A Jordan-Chechen community mainly conducted the recruitment of mujaheddins for the first Russian-Chechen war. Indeed, few decades before many Chechens migrate to other countries such as Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Jordan. Only in the latter country the community was able to protect and maintain its

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[39] Salafism is a conservative sub-current of Sunni Islam. Its beliefs are based on literal interpretation of the holy books, Quran and Sunna, and the aim is to restore the Caliphate, to defeat the infidels, to return to pure Islamic principles and to apply Sharia Law. Salafi-Jihadis are those Salafist who believe violent jihad the only instrument to reach all the above-mentioned goals.

[40] Sufism is a sub-current of Sunni Islam. Its beliefs are strictly based on orthodox Islam and on the text of the Holy Book Quran. According to Sufism, Muslims should seek to achieve knowledge and true divine love through a personal and direct contact with God. Sufism is divided into distinct Sufi orders.

identity[41]. Within this community emerged the important figure of Fathi Mohammed Habib (also known as Ahaykh Fathi), a Chechen electrical engineer. In 1982 Fathi moved to Afghanistan to wage jihad but because he was affected by a heart condition he could just provide support assistance. In 1993 he decided to move back to Chechnya where he established a Salafi Islamic *jamaat*[42]. It served as the main platform to call upon all mujaheddins to come to fight in Chechnya for preserving the survival of the Muslim community. He became the most influential figure in the recruitment of MFF in North Caucasus. Fathi was also responsible for having personally called Samir Salih Abdallah al-Suwaylim (also known as Khattab). He was originally from Saudi Arabia and was an Arab-Afghan veteran. After the Afghanistan war he moved to Tajikistan to fight against Russian forces but in 1995 he received the call from Fathi who convinced him to travel to Chechnya, where he brought around 80 other high experienced Arab-Afghans. If on one side, Fathi is considered to be the father of the recruitment of MFF in Chechnya, on the other side Khattab is the key figure responsible for giving the mujaheddins a formal military structure. He increased his prestige thanks to his high military skills and tactical innovations. In 1996 Khattab established also several training camps for newly arrived MFF. "The most important of Khattab's early exploits was to win the acceptance of the local resistance movement, a key facet allowing the foreign fighters to operate"[43].

Scholars tried to give several explanations to the increased success of Salafi-Jihadism in Chechnya, especially within the ranks of its government. Some believed that declaring the shift towards Islam meant to receive substantial donations and funding from Islamic charities and organizations[44]. Others think that the main reason is the growing Chechen disappointment towards Western countries, which were unable to secure them the right of self-determination, especially when compared to the help provided to other eastern countries, such as Bosnia[45].

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[41] Cerwyn Moore and Paul Tumelty, *Foreign Fighters and the Case of Chechnya: A Critical Assessment*, Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, Vol.31, N. 5, 2008, p.416.
[42] *Ibidem.*
[43] *Ibidem*, p.417.
[44] Murad Batal al-Shishani, *The Rise and Fall of Arab Fighters in Chechnya*, Jamestown Foundation, Sept., 2006, p.10.
[45] Cerwyn Moore and Paul Tumelty, *Foreign Fighters and the Case of Chechnya: A Critical Assessment*, Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, Vol.31, N. 5, 2008.

For what concern the first Russian-Chechen war (1994-1996), the role played by the mujaheddins was primarily marginal. Indeed, the conflict was more nationalistic-inspired rather than religion based. Only after the end of the first war MFF began to play a major role. In 1996 the situation in which the country found it-self portrayed a dramatic picture: economic depression, high rate of unemployment and destroyed infrastructures. The Salafi-Jihadist ideology began to be seen attractive among those frustrated young Chechen men. With the death of President Dudayev, the newly appointed ad interim President, Yanderbaev, declared that Chechnya would become a Sharia Law based country. Immediately, this announcement attracted several Islamic charity organizations and Muslims to the state. The spread of this new ideology within the government, administration and society will be the basis for the next Russian-Chechen war. Indeed, in 1999 Chechnya invaded the region of Dagestan to secure help to few villages, which proclaimed the implementation of the Sharia Law. Russia immediately understood that this invasion could be the perfect pretext to regain control over the Chechen territory through a new invasion (1999). The success of the new Russian President Putin was to make perceive to the rest of the international community that this new invasion in the Chechen territory was a necessary measure of counter-terrorism. Russia was able to regain control over the country and to install a new pro-Russian government.

According to a research conducted by the scholar Murad Batal al-Shishani, in Chechnya most foreign fighters were Arab and they covered an age range that goes from 20 to 40 years old[46]. They can be divided in three distinct categories. The first main category comprehends the Arabs, especially those who had previous fighting experiences in Afghanistan, Tajikistan and Bosnia. Second, there were young volunteers who were mainly either self-recruited or recruited by Islamic recruitment networks. Chechnya for them represented the first jihad experience. Third, the final category comprehends young Chechens who were mainly motivated by nationalist sentiments rather than religious ones. "In analysing the ethnic background of Arab fighters in Chechnya, [it is possible to] notice that they [were] 59% Saudis, 14%

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[46] Murad Batal al-Shishani, *The Rise and Fall of Arab Fighters in Chechnya*, Jamestown Foundation, Sept., 2006, pp.1-22, http://www.jamestown.org/fileadmin/Recent_Reports/Trans_amd_Speaker_NCC09142006/Al-Shishani-14Sep06.pdf.

Yemenis, 10% Egyptians, 6% Kuwaitis and 11% from other countries"[47]. Between all these MFF the level of military experience and training differed significantly. "[…] 51% participated in the Afghan war, 11.7% began their experience in Bosnia and Tajikistan, while 13.7% of them are participating in Jihad for the first time in Chechnya"[48]. Once Russia regained effective control over the territory of Chechnya, also by successfully modifying the public opinion towards the need of counter-terrorism measures in the area, the MFF influence began to gradually decline. The scholar al-Shishani provides four main reasons for their fall[49]. First, he believes that even if the Salafi-Jihadi ideology attracted many Chechens, it was impossible to defeat the already existing and well-established Sufi orders. Second, there has been an increasing lack of funding, especially from the Gulf countries. After the 9/11 attack the international community started a war on funding channels for fundamentalist groups. Indeed, countries and organizations were extremely reluctant to continue the financial help. The absence of resources prevented MFF to continue fighting. In addition, funding represented a sort of legitimation factors for the conflict and once they were missing the mujaheddin phenomenon decreased in its scope. Third, it is important to recall the successful attempt of the Russian President Putin to gain control over all borders of Chechnya and impeding anyone to get into the country completely isolating the country. Finally, the differences between the agendas between on one side the Chechen who wanted to expelled the oppressor Russia and on the other side the Salafi-Jihadists who aimed at broaden the scope of jihad to other countries such as the US or Israel. From the analysis of the Chechen case, it is possible to see how broader is the scope of the MFF phenomenon. This movement does not only provide military assistance on the battlefield, but in this particular scenario the major contribution was in shaping the Chechen society views towards a different ideology, the Salafi-Jihadist one. The proof of their success was the invasion of Dagestan in 1999 to support self-proclaimed Sharia Law based villages.

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[47] *Ibidem*, p.3.
[48] *Ibidem*, p.4.
[49] *Ibidem,* pp.12-15.

The threat of returnees

In the first part of the paragraph the focus has been mainly based on the role that foreign fighters play once they reach the conflict zone. In the case studies of Afghanistan, Bosnia and Chechnya, MFF proved to be dangerous actors capable of worsening the conflict. They did not only provide an effective military contribution on the battlefield, but they also increased the atrocities of the war, they affected its duration, they shaped societies' ideology, they conducted extensive recruitment propaganda and they organized training camps.

In this section, the analyses will be on the threat that MFF pose when they return back to their home countries. Because the ongoing number of foreign fighters is increasing day after day, this phenomenon has attracted growing concerns. It is at the centre of most security and counter-terrorism activities of national governments. Indeed, "[t]here are growing concerns that these fighters might return battle-hardened, radicalised and with extensive radical networks that might inspire or even encourage them to attack the home country"[50]. It is important to note, that according to a study conducted by Hegghammer on Western foreign fighters between 1990 and 2010 only a small part of jihadists decide to return back home and get engage in terrorist attacks[51]. He concluded that the majority prefers to continue fighting abroad. Despite this conclusion, he also affirmed it is erroneous to underestimate the dramatic consequences of a possible attack. For this reason, the international community as well as national governments should address foreign fighters also once the fight ends. But "[i]t is simply impossible to systematically trace all returning fighters or even a large proportion of them"[52]. Indeed, many recruiters remain unknown to the authorities, they cover their identity and traces and they reach conflict zones by travelling on unconventional routes.

As already mentioned above, "[t]here are practical reasons why returnees can pose a danger; even those who have not fought on the frontline might have received training

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[50] Jeanine de Roy van Zuijdewijn and Edwin Bakker*, Returning Western foreign fighters: The case of Afghanistan, Bosnia and Somalia*, International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, Hague, June, 2014, p.1, http://www.icct.nl/download/file/ICCT-De-Roy-van-Zuijdewijn-Bakker-Returning-Western-Foreign-Fighters-June-2014.pdf.

[51] Thomas Hegghammer, *Should I Stay or Should I Go? Explaining Variation in Western Jihadists' Choice between Domestic and Foreign Fighting*, American Political Science Review, February 2013, pp. 1-15.

[52] Jeanine de Roy van Zuijdewijn and Edwin Bakker*, Returning Western foreign fighters: The case of Afghanistan, Bosnia and Somalia*, International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, Hague, June, 2014, p.9.

or engaged in military exercises providing them with operational competency to mount an attack, and they will have made numerous valuable international contacts"[53]. Janet Napolitano, the former US Secretary of Homeland Security, also commented that "[i]n their roles as terrorist planners, operational facilitators, and operatives, these individuals improve the terrorist groups knowledge of Western and American culture and security practices, which can increase the likelihood that an attempted attack could be successful"[54].

For our analysis, it is very useful to resort to an important research conducted by the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, based in Hague [55]. It studies three different case studies involving MFF, those of Afghanistan, Bosnia and Somalia, and it individuated 8 possible pathways that foreign fighters can follow once the fight ends. Some of these possible outcomes may be the result either of unpredictable consequences of the fight or of rational choices. The first possible pathway is that foreign fighters get killed on the battlefield, or get murdered by the same radical organization for which they operate either because they have expressed the will to abandon the fight or because they have criticized it. Second, foreign fighters can decide, once the conflict ends, to remain in that country and obtain its citizenship in order to conduct a 'normal' life. Third, they can choose to remain in that country but to continue being involved in violent activities. The fourth possible outcome is to choose to reintegrate in the society of the home country or of other Western country. Fifth, they can decide to be involved in terrorist plots back in their home country or in other Western country. The sixth pathway is to look for new conflict zone in non-Western countries in which they can fight and fulfil their duty of jihad. Seventh, they can decide to move to non-Western countries and to be engaged in violent activities. The last possible outcome is to reintegrate and live a peaceful life in the society of a non-Western country.

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[53] Rachel Briggs Obe and Tanya Silverman, *Western Foreign Fighters: Innovations in Responding to the Threat*, Institute for Strategic Dialogue, London, 2014, p.37.
[54] Department of Homeland Security website www.dhs.gov/news/2010/09/22/statement-secretary-janet-napolitano-united-states-senate-committee-homeland.
[55] Jeanine de Roy van Zuijdewijn and Edwin Bakker, *Returning Western foreign fighters: The case of Afghanistan, Bosnia and Somalia*, International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, Hague, June, 2014, pp.1-12.
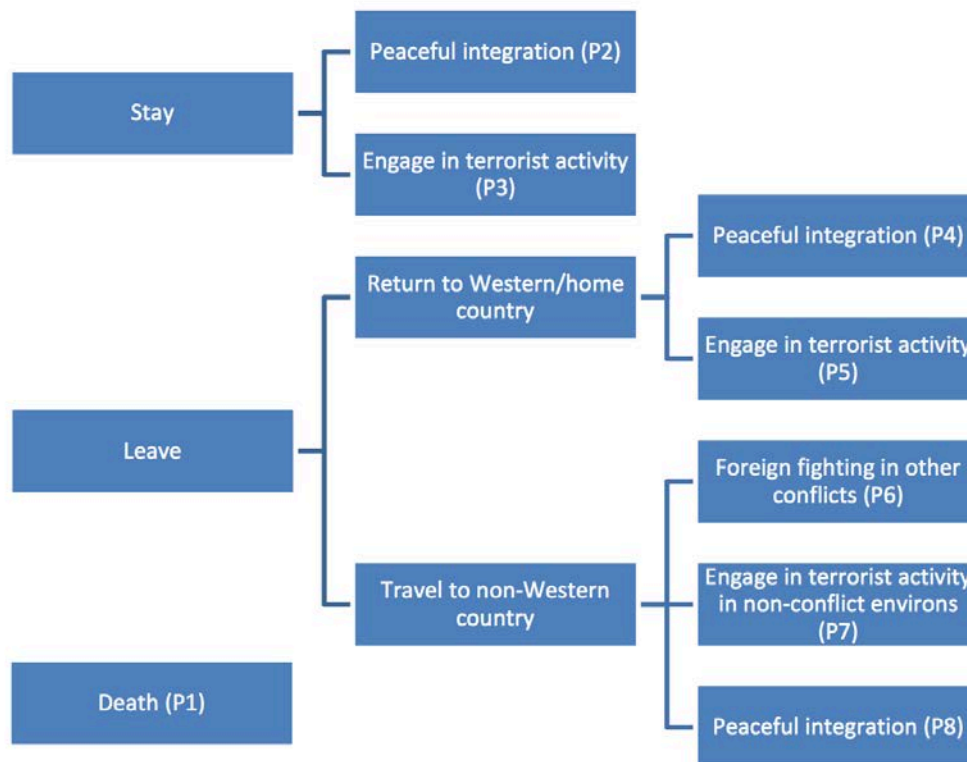
Figure 1 International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (2014)

Our analysis of the three case studies of Afghanistan, Bosnia and Chechnya proved the existence of concrete examples of foreign fighters who fit under each of these 8 different categories. Nevertheless, the main focus will be posed on those mujaheddins who decide to leave the battlefield in order to plot and perpetrate terrorist attacks.

Starting from the Afghanistan war, as already stated, once the conflict ended part of MFF decided to stay in the country to continue fighting while another consistent part decided to find new conflict zones in which to operate. Furthermore, a small number of MFF decided to return to their home countries to organize and perpetrate terrorist attacks. Among these figures, there was the American Muslim Clement Rodney Hampton-el[56], a hospital technician from Brooklyn, who was found to be responsible for the plot of the World Trade Centre Bombing (1993). During the Afghan war he was brutally wounded to both one of his arm and leg, and decided to travel back home. Another relevant figure was Daniel Boyd, an American convert from North

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[56] Francis X. Clines, *Specter of Terror; U.S.-Born Suspect in Bombing Plots: Zealous Causes and Civic Roles*, New York Times, June 28, 1993, http://www.nytimes.com/1993/06/28/nyregion/specter-terror-us-born-suspect-bombing-plots-zealous-causes-civic-roles.html.

Carolina who spent 3 years fighting in Afghanistan[57]. Once he returned back home, it seemed he decided to conduct a 'normal' life even though he was raising his family according to a very strict and military interpretation of Islam. Indeed, in 2012 Boyd was arrested under the charges of conspiracy, of having recruited his sons for the jihad and for having provided help and material support to other terrorist networks.

For what concerns the Bosnian case, the overall picture does not appear any less dramatic. The adoption of the Dayton Agreement in 1995, which formally signed the end of the war, produced a growing sentiment of disappointment between MFF towards the outcome of the conflict. In October 1995, John Fawzan, a Canadian citizen, blew up himself in a police headquarter of the Croatian city of Rijeka[58]. Another example of MFF who decided to move to another Western country to perpetrate a terrorist attack was the British-Jamaican Andrew Rowe[59]. In 2003 while he was going back to the UK from Germany, he was arrested by the French authorities in the Channel tunnel for having high explosives in his socks.

Also the Chechen war served as a main platform for shaping mujaheddins' plots towards Western countries. It is important to note that most of the terrorist attacks perpetrated by MFF who fought in Chechnya were directed towards Russia. In December 2002, the French Police arrested a group of 4 terrorists who have decided to perpetrate a bombing attack to the Russian Embassy in Paris[60]. Among these 4 individuals, there was Merouane Benahmed, a French-Algerian of 29 years old, Menad Benchellali, 28 years old and Noureddin Merabet, 28 years old. The French authorities discovered that these three young individuals fought in Chechnya with the resistance movement where they received military and toxic substances trainings.

Chechen Islamist terrorists conducted other massacres and mass hostage takings. "In 2002, a group of 40 Chechen terrorists, broke into the Moscow's Dubrovka Theatre

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[57] U.S. Attorney's Office, Eastern District of North Caroline, North Carolina Resident Daniel Patrick Boyd Sentenced for Terrorism Violations, August 24, 2012, http://www.fbi.gov/charlotte/press-releases/2012/north-carolina-resident-daniel-patrick-boyd-sentenced-for- terrorism-violations.

[58] Michael Taarnby Jensen, *Jihad in Denmark: An Overview and Analysis of Jihadi Activity in Denmark 1990-2006*, , Working paper 2006:35, Danish Institute for International Studies, November, 2006, p.18.

[59] John Steele, *Jihadi Warrior given 15 years for terror offences*, The Telegraph, September 24, 2005, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1499093/Jihadi-warrior-given-15-years-for-terror-offences.html.

[60] Stéphanie Albouy, *Les islamistes visaient l'ambassade de Russie à Paris*, Le Parisienne, December 28, 2002, http://www.leparisien.fr/faits-divers/les-islamistes-visaient-l-ambassade-de-russie-a-paris-28-12-2002-2003689576.php#xtref=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.it%2F.

during the popular musical show "Nord-Ost" and took more than 900 people hostage"[61]. After three days of siege, the Russian authorities decided to intervene by using unidentified gas within the halls of the theatre and all the terrorists with 130 hostages died. "The most notorious attack shook the world in 2004 where over 30 Chechen [Islamist] terrorists captured 1.128 people as hostages in Beslan's secondary school in North Ossetia, on the first day of the school year […]"[62]. This siege also lasted for three days, in which the lack of water, food and medical care provoked the death of 334 people, 318 of those were hostages of which number 186 were children. One of the prominent figures behind the organization of terrorist attacks towards Western countries is the Chechen Islamist Doku Umarov, who declared to be responsible also for the two suicide bombers who perpetrated the attack in the Metro of Moscow[63].

Today, the fear of returning MFF to their home countries is mainly fuelled by the current Syrian conflict. Thousands of individuals have abandoned their homes to fight along their fellows against the both Syrian and Iraqi regimes. "The overwhelming majority of foreign fighters who have gone abroad to join the fight in Syria and Iraq have come from the Arab world"[64]. Nevertheless, the Syrian conflict is the one that has successfully attracted the highest level of foreign fighters mobilization coming from all over the world[65]. The most particular feature of this conflict is the involvement of such an increasing number of Western foreign fighters. This is the reason behind the growing concerns of Western governments towards possible returnees. Indeed, since the beginning of the Syrian conflict, a first successful terrorist attack in Western country, in Brussels, Belgium, has already taken place. On May 24, 2014, a French citizen Mehdi Nemmouche walked into the Jewish Museum with a pistol and an AK-47 opening fire and killing four innocent people. Once he was arrested, the Belgium police found out that Nemmouche spent the previous year fighting in Syria. He was an IS veteran. "[…] this attack appears to have been the very first instance of spill-over of the Syrian civil war into the

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[61] *A bloody history: Overview of terrorist events in modern Russia*, RT Question Live, April 29, 2013, http://www.rt.com/news/terror-attacks-chechen-rebels-115/.
[62] *Ibidem.*
[63] *Ibidem.*
[64] Daniel Byman and Jeremy Shapino, *Be Afraid. Be a Little Afraid: The Threat of Terrorism from Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq*, Foreign Policy at Brooklings, Policy Paper N.34, Nov., 2014, p.2.
[65] Accurate estimation will be provided in the next paragraph.

European Union"[66]. What mostly scares Western authorities is that in reality French counter-terrorism forces already knew Nemmouche. Once he came back from Syria, especially because he was coming from such a country, they decided to place him under surveillance. In addition he acted alone and "[…] he apparently had no idea how to operate as an undercover terrorist in Europe"[67].

In January 2015 France faced one of its worst security crisis[68]. In the morning of Wednesday January 7th "two masked gunmen, dressed in black and armed with Kalashnikov assault rifles got out and approached the offices"[69] of the satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo headquartered in Paris. French authorities identified the two suspects as Said and Cherif Kouachi, two French born brothers with Algerian parents. Two days later after the attack they were both killed by French Police in the printing factory where they were hiding in Dammartin-en-Goele, a small village 35 km away from Paris. "Charlie Hebdo was known to be a highly controversial satirical publication that regularly mocked sources of power in society, including religion"[70]. French authorities found out that one of the two brothers, Said Kouachi 34 years old, visited Yemen in 2011 spending several months training with one of the most powerful al-Qaeda affiliates, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). While the other brother "Cherif was jailed for 18 months for trying to travel to Iraq a decade ago to fight as part of an Islamist cell"[71]. Furthermore, on August 22nd 2015, a heavily equipped gunman opened fire on a high-speed train travelling from Amsterdam to Paris[72]. Fortunately, 3 American citizens, two of whom are soldiers, were able to block him and only two people were injured.

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[66] Daniel Byman and Jeremy Shapino, *Be Afraid. Be a Little Afraid: The Threat of Terrorism from Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq*, Foreign Policy at Brooklings, Policy Paper N.34, Nov., 2014, p.1.

[67] *Ibidem*, p.2.

[68] Rashad Al, *Blasphemy, Charlie Hebdo, and the Freedom of Belief and Expression*, Institute for Strategic Dialogue, February, 2015.

[69] Charlie Hebdo Attack: Three Days of Terror, BBC News Europe, January 14, 2015, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-30708237.

[70] Andre Oboler, *After the Charlie Hebdo Attack: The Line between Freedom of Expression and Hate Speech,* Kantor Center Position Paper, July, 2015, p.3.

[71] Mark Hosenball, *Said Kouachi, Suspect in Charlie Hebdo Attack, Trained in Yemen: Reports, The World Post, January 8, 2015, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/01/08/said-kouachi-yemen_n_6439300.html.

[72] Angelique Chrisafis, *France train attack: Americans overpower gunman on Paris express*, The Guardian, August 22, 2015, http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/aug/21/amsterdam-paris-train-gunman-france.

Authorities found out that the gunman is the Moroccan Ayoub al-Khazzani who was immediately arrested and who depicted himself as a loner, denying any affiliations to terrorist organizations[73].

For all these reasons, it is of highest importance that the international community as well national governments and their counter-terrorism offices conduct extensive researches and analysis in order to achieve an accurate number of their national foreign fighters fighting abroad. Only by knowing the exact scope of today's phenomenon, suitable and counter-terrorism policies can be developed and shaped accordingly and produce effective results.

1.4. Estimating today's Foreign Fighters

As already mentioned, today foreign fighters remain at the core of international security debates. It is important for our analysis to recall some of the contribution of the UN Security Council on foreign fighters. In 2014, it adopted a resolution (S/RES/2178) in which it provided a definition of foreign fighters as "nationals who travel or attempt to travel to a State other than their States of residence or nationality, and other individuals who travel or attempt to travel from their territories to a State other than their States of residence or nationality, for the purpose of the perpetration, planning, or preparation of, or participation in, terrorist acts, or the providing or receiving of terrorist training"[74]. The international community is struggling in attaining on a global level the overall number of foreign fighters. Lately, on 29th May 2015, the UN Security Council held an important meeting on "Terrorist attacks and threat to international peace and security", debating also the issue of foreign fighters. The gathering produced a relevant outcome, a statement from the President of the UN Security Council (S/PRST/2015/11), the Lithuanian Foreign Minister Linas Linkevičius. "The Security Council expresses its grave concern that there are now

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[73] Michael Birnbaum, *A change of seats for 3 Americans led to saved lives on Paris-bound train*, The Washington Post, August 24, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/as-french-train-suspect-is-interrogated-questions-mount-on-europes-security/2015/08/23/088ff2fe-4923-11e5-9f53-d1e3ddfd0cda_story.html.
[74] UN Security Council, Res. 2178, S/RES/2178, Sep. 24, 2014, http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_res_2178.pdf.

over 25,000 foreign terrorist fighters from over 100 countries who have travelled to join or fight for terrorist entities […]"[75]. The statement is based on the information provided on 19th May 2015 in a report written by Gerard van Bohemen, Chair of the Security Council Committee[76].

In the case of the Syrian conflict the estimation of the actual number of foreign fighters has proved to be a difficult task too. Most national governments struggle to provide the exact number because many of their citizens who left for the Syrian region succeeded in covering their identities. Others were reluctant to publicly declare estimations and some were unaware of nationals joining the conflict until recent date. For all these reasons there is evidence of a possible underestimation of the overall number of foreign fighters in the Syrian and Iraqi conflict. The International Centre for the Study of Radicalization and Political Violence (ICSR), based in London, provided the latest data, which were collected from the second half of 2014[77]. This information were then used by the Munich Security Conference, an annual independent forum in which heads of state and governments, ministers, international and non-governmental organizations and other experts gather together to discuss vital international security challenges. The latest conference took place in January 2015, which publishes the first Munich Security Report[78]. It included the data provided by the ICSR. According to this last estimation, there are 20,730 foreign fighters worldwide from at least 80-90 countries that have travelled to the Syrian-Iraqi region. "This makes the conflict in Syria and Iraq the largest mobilization of foreigner fighters in Muslim majority countries since 1945. It now surpasses the Afghanistan conflict in the 1980s, which is thought to have attracted up to 20,000 foreigners"[79]. The Middle East remains the primary source of foreign fighters with around 11.000 men, coming especially from Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Tunisia. The Syrian conflict represents also the first example of such a high

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[75] UN Security Council, *Statement of the President of the Security Council*, S/PRST/2015/11, May 29, 2015, http://www.un.org/en/sc/ctc/docs/2015/N1515667_EN.pdf.
[76] UN Security Council, *Letter dated 19 May 2015 from the Chair of the Security Council Committee pursuant to resolutions 1267 (1999) and 1989 (2011) concerning Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities addressed to the President of the Security Council,* S/2015/358, May 19, 2015, http://www.un.org/en/sc/ctc/docs/2015/N1508457_EN.pdf.
[77] Peter R. Neumann, *Foreign fighter total in Syria/Iraq now exceeds 20,000; surpasses Afghanistan conflict in the 1980s,* International Centre for the Study of Radicalization, London, 2015.
[78] See full Munich Security Report 2015, http://www.eventanizer.com/MSC2015/MunichSecurityReport2015.pdf.
[79] Peter R. Neumann, *Foreign fighter total in Syria/Iraq now exceeds 20,000; surpasses Afghanistan conflict in the 1980s,* International Centre for the Study of Radicalization, London, 2015.

mobilization of Western foreign fighters. For what concerns the United States, "intelligence officials believe that over 150 American citizens and residents have travelled or attempted to travel to Syria as foreign fighters, [as] the director of the National Counterterrorism Centre, Nick Rasmussen, told a congressional hearing on [February] 2015"[80]. This estimation has been later confirmed from the data collected by the ICSR. Western Europe represents the second dominant source of foreign fighter contributing with around 4.000 people[81]. This estimation doubled the one predicted in December 2013. The countries from which most European leave for Syria are France, UK and Germany but also other less populous countries contribute considerably such as Denmark and Belgium. For what concern Eastern Europe, there are around 3.000 people who have left for Syria and most of them are from Chechnya.

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[80] Charlotte Alfred, *How many Americans travelled to Syria to join ISIS*, The Huffington Post, February, 2015, available at http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/02/25/american-foreign-fighters-isis_n_6753854.html.
[81] These data are based on the information collected from 14 Western European countries by the ICSR.

Foreign fighters with Islamic State militants — Thousands of people from more than 90 countries have gone to wage Muslim holy war in Iraq and Syria in the last few years and most have joined the Islamic State.
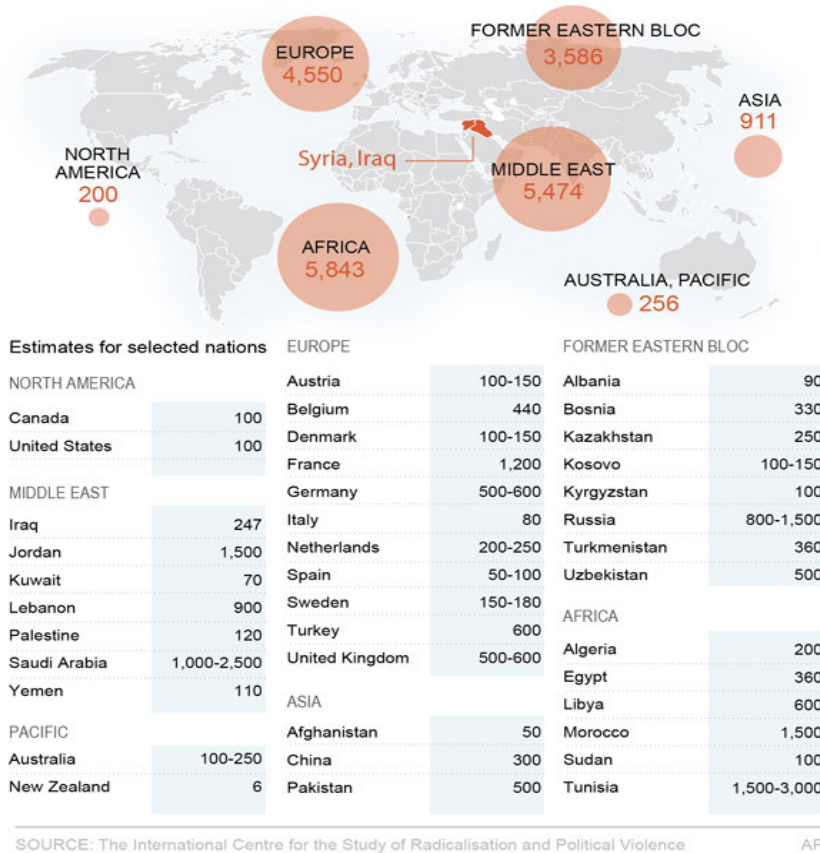
EUROPE 4,550
FORMER EASTERN BLOC 3,586
ASIA 911
NORTH AMERICA 200
Syria, Iraq
MIDDLE EAST 5,474
AFRICA 5,843
AUSTRALIA, PACIFIC 256

Estimates for selected nations

NORTH AMERICA		EUROPE		FORMER EASTERN BLOC	
Canada	100	Austria	100-150	Albania	90
United States	100	Belgium	440	Bosnia	330
		Denmark	100-150	Kazakhstan	250
MIDDLE EAST		France	1,200	Kosovo	100-150
Iraq	247	Germany	500-600	Kyrgyzstan	100
Jordan	1,500	Italy	80	Russia	800-1,500
Kuwait	70	Netherlands	200-250	Turkmenistan	360
Lebanon	900	Spain	50-100	Uzbekistan	500
Palestine	120	Sweden	150-180		
Saudi Arabia	1,000-2,500	Turkey	600	AFRICA	
Yemen	110	United Kingdom	500-600	Algeria	200
				Egypt	360
PACIFIC		ASIA		Libya	600
Australia	100-250	Afghanistan	50	Morocco	1,500
New Zealand	6	China	300	Sudan	100
		Pakistan	500	Tunisia	1,500-3,000

SOURCE: The International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence   AP

Figure 2 Source: The International Centre for the Study of Radicalization and Political Violence (2014)

This charter is based on the data collected from the second half of 2014 provided by national governments and it has been edited and published in December 2014 by the ICSR. Only the information about Middle East and Africa has to be re-conducted to the last updates provided by the governments in 2013. The overall number comprehends the total aggregation of people who have travelled to Syria since 2011, including those who have returned back to their home countries and those who have died in the fighting. The ICSR also conducted for one-year period an important research analysing 190 social media profiles of Western foreign fighters [82]. According to their posts on Facebook or Twitter it was able to reach important

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[82] Joseph Carter, Shiraz Maher, Peter R. Neumann, *#Greenbirds: Measuring Importance and Influence in Syrian Foreign Fighter Networks*, ICSR, London, April, 2014, http://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/ICSR-Report-Greenbirds-Measuring-Importance-and-Infleunce-in-Syrian-Foreign-Fighter-Networks.pdf.

results, especially for what concern the organizational affiliation. Most foreign fighters once they arrive in Syria have joined extremist Islamist groups. According to the research around 55% affiliated it-self with the Islamic State and 14% with the other Islamist group Jahbat al Nusra[83]. Only a minority of foreign fighters joins groups with a more relatively moderate ideology and behaviour. Generally, Western foreign fighters cover an age range that goes from 18 to 29, even though the conflict is characterized by a high presence of underage guys and more grownup men. These data contribute to the peculiarity of the Syrian war compared to other conflicts. The majority of foreign fighters are male, but there is an increasing number of Western women leaving for Syria to either follow their husbands and families or alone to take up arms and join the war.

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[83] More information about the ideology, composition and internal organization of extremist Islamist groups will be provided later.

2. The Radicalization Process

The phenomenon on foreign fighters became a central topic of most terrorism studies as well as of counter-terrorism policymakers because it refers to an increasing tendency of individuals to join a war, which apparently seems to not pose a direct threat on them. All the studies related to this phenomenon have been linked to those concerning the process of radicalization in order to better comprehend the reasons behind the decision to go to fight abroad. Additionally, radicalization is considered to be one of the primary roots of terrorism.

This chapter is completely dedicated to the process of radicalization in order to try to give an answer to the famous questions of why people turn to violence. Through this analysis it will become clear that radicalization is a multifaceted and complex process, which occurs at different interactive levels of analysis. Furthermore, there is no single cause root able to explain why the process emerges and how it works. Moreover, the radicalization process has incalculable outcomes that cover a wide spectrum of political actions.

The first paragraph is dedicated to extensively defining radicalization. The scholarly literature is still struggling in finding an agreed definition of radicalization even if it seems to agree at considering it at its most basic level as the process that involves an increase use of violence. Following, in order to better comprehend its true meaning, I will explore the complicate relationship between radicalization and the related expressions of radicalism, extremism and terrorism.

The second paragraph deals with the existing theoretical framework surrounding radicalization. Because academic researches seem also to agree on considering radicalization as a process, many scholars attempt at formulating comprehensive models for explaining the different phases involved. Furthermore, several important theories, which differ in terms of theoretical approach, will be discussed. The three main focus areas concern the individual level, following the internal group dynamics and finally the influence of the macro-environment.

Combining together these two previous paragraphs, all the necessary tools to explore and understand Islamist radicalization are in our hands. This last part will attempt at reporting the major influential factors boosting the Islamist radicalization process in order to comprehend why today the majority of radicalized people embrace such a

radical interpretation of Islam that encourages and justifies the use of violence and how it became so attractive also to initially Western non-Muslims and apparently well-integrated Muslims living in the West.

2.1. Defining Radicalization

The phenomenon of foreign fighters has become the central topic of most terrorism studies as well as for counter-terrorism policymakers. The reason behind this relatively new trend is that foreign fighters involve the process of radicalization, which is seen as one of the primary roots of terrorism. As Donatella Della Porta briefly summarized "[r]adicalization may be understood as a process leading towards the increased use of political violence, while [the related concept of] de-radicalization, by contrast, implies reduction in the use of political violence"[84]. Consider them together it is easy to see why these two concepts received increasing attention. They are central for understanding the roots of political violence and how it can be prevented or contained once it emerges.

Unfortunately the literature, which, focus on radicalization, is pretty young and highly controversial especially because the concept is characterized by complexity and ambiguousness. Trying to give extensive answers to the questions of who, where and when radicalization involves and occurs has proved to be a very difficult task.

The concept became very popular within Western countries especially after the 9/11 attacks. In particular, in Europe it gained growing attention since the metro bombings of Madrid (2004) and of London (2005). But because of the high level of complexity, the concept results to be profoundly controversial and it received several different definitions. Indeed, a universally agreed definition has not been achieved yet. As the scholar Peter Neumann affirms, "[d]efinitional issues […] are the principal source of many controversies and misunderstanding that surround radicalization […]"[85]. The only key point on which all radicalization theories seem to agree on is that they define it as a process. It is widely accepted that no individual will radicalize

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[84] Donatella Della Porta and Gary LaFree, *Guest Editorial: 'Processes of Radicalisation and De-Radicalisation*, IJCV, Vol. 6, No. 1, 2012, p.5.
[85] Peter R. Neumann, *Trouble with Radicalization*, International Affairs, 89: 4, 2013, p.2.

overnight, but rather it would occur in a specific period of time alongside the influence of several factors and assuming different dynamics.

Scholar Neumann claims that "[a]t the most basic level, radicalization can be defined as the process whereby people become extremists"[86]. As it is possible to note radicalization is described as a process. It is the last part of the latter definition that is more ambiguous, in the sense that extremism can assume different meanings. First, it can refer to specific political ideas, which appear to be opposed to the core values of a specific society, which can be considered in terms of religion, race, ethnicity, or democracy. Second, extremism can refer to methods, which are used by actors to achieve particular political aims. These methods often include the use of violence. From this very basic definition it is possible to drew the principal conceptual distinction concerning radicalization. On one side, there is 'cognitive radicalization', where theorists "[…] consider radicalization to be a purely cognitive phenomenon that culminates in radically different ideas about society and governance […]"[87]. On the other side, there is 'behavioural radicalization', which focuses more on the often-violent actions through which actors express these ideas and try to achieve the related aims. These two different dimensions are closely interlinked but they should not be considered as always depending one from another. If an individual embraces radical ideas, this does not always mean that he will engage in violent actions. And an individual who perpetrated violent actions or is member of violent groups does not necessarily adhere to radical ideas. For example people can become involved because of personal relationships with an already member of the group. Consequently, governments and academic scholars take into account this relevant distinction when they formulate different definitions. They can either choose to emphasize attitudes or behaviours. For this reason, as already stated, today there are countless definitions of radicalization. Scholar Charles Allen provided a very important and extensive one. He defined it as "[t]he process of adopting an extremist belief system, including the willingness to use, support, or facilitate violence, as a method to effect societal change"[88].

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[86] *Ibidem.*
[87] *Ibidem*, p.3.
[88] Charles E. Allen, *Threat of Islamic Radicalization to the Homeland*, Written Testimony at the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, March 14, 2007, p.4.

Another important comprehensive analysis of radicalization is the one of Donatella Della Porta and Gary LaFree[89]. In their article, they provide by formulating or quoting, seven different definitions of radicalization.

1. "In research on political violence in advanced democracies in the 1970s, the term radicalization emerged to stress the interactive (social movement/state) and processual (gradual escalation) dynamics in the formation of violent, often clandestine groups[90]. In this approach, radicalization referred to the actual use of violence, with escalation in terms of forms and intensity"[91];

2. "Radicalization may be understood as a process leading towards the increased use of political violence [...]"[92];

3. "[...] radicalization is understood as an escalation process leading to violence"[93];

4. "Many researchers conceptualize radicalization as a process characterized by increased commitment to and use of violent means and strategies in political conflicts. Radicalization from this point of view entails a change in perceptions towards polarizing and absolute definitions of a given situation, and the articulation of increasingly 'radical' aims and objectives [...]"[94];

5. "Radicalization may more profitably be analysed as a process of interaction between violent groups and their environment, or an effect of interactions between mutually hostile actors"[95];

6. Quoting McCauley and Moskalenko[96] "Functionally, political radicalization is increased preparation for and commitment to inter-group conflict. Descriptively, radicalization means change in beliefs, feelings, and

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[89] Donatella Della Porta and Gary LaFree were in 2011 guest editors of a special issue of the International Journal of Conflict and Violence. Their article is titled "Processes of Radicalization and De-Radicalization, available at http://www.ijcv.org/issues/ijcv6(1)2012.pdf.

[90] Donatella Della Porta, Social Movements, Political Violence, and the State: A Comparative Analysis of Italy and Germany, Cambridge University Press, 1995.

[91] Donatella Della Porta and Gary LaFree, *Guest Editorial:'Processes of Radicalisation and De-Radicalisation*, IJCV, Vol. 6, No. 1, 2012, p.6.

[92] *Ibidem.*

[93] *Ibidem.*

[94] *Ibidem*, pp.6-7.

[95] *Ibidem.*

[96] Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko, *Mechanisms of Political Radicalization: Pathways Toward Terrorism*, Terrorism and Political Violence, 20:3, July 3, 2008.

behaviours in directions that increasingly justify intergroup violence and demand sacrifice in defence of the group"[97];

7. "[r]adicalization may be an expression as well as a trigger of larger social change"[98].

In addition, also the international community and national governments tried to provide useful definitions of radicalization. From these, it is possible to continue see the trend to either focus on behaviours or on ideas. First, in 2005 the European Commission gave a very basic formulation of violent radicalization, defining it as "[t]he phenomenon of people embracing opinions, views and ideas which could lead to acts of terrorism"[99]. Such a definition leads to misleading conclusions. First, the implication of the word 'could' does not explicit all the possible pathways through which the process of radicalization can occur. Second, the role played by ideology remains too vague. Lastly, according to historical examples, radicalization does not lead inevitably to terrorism but it covers a wide spectrum of political violence. Western security agencies gave a major contribution in this field. A first example is the one of the US Department of Homeland Security which defines radicalizations as "[t]he process of adopting an extremist belief system, including the willingness to use, support, or facilitate violence, as a method to effect social change"[100]. It clearly shows that the emphasis has been put on the adoption of an extremist belief. The second example is the one of the Netherlands General Intelligence and Security Service (AIVD). It defines radicalization as "[t]he pursuit of and/or support to far-reaching changes in society which may constitute a danger to the democratic legal order, which may involve the use of undemocratic methods that may harm the functioning of the democratic legal order"[101]. Lastly, a third example is the one of the Swedish Security Service (Säpo). It stated that "[r]adicalisation can [either be] a process that leads to ideological or religious activism to introduce radical change to society [or] a process that leads to an individual or group using, promoting or

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[97] *Ibidem.*

[98] Donatella Della Porta and Gary LaFree, *Guest Editorial: 'Processes of Radicalisation and De-Radicalisation*, IJCV, Vol. 6, No. 1, 2012, p.6.

[99] Report of the European Commission's Expert Group on Violent Radicalization, *Radicalisation Processes Leading to Acts of Terrorism,* submitted to the European Commission, May 15, 2008, p.5.

[100] Homeland Security Institute, *Radicalisation: An Overview and Annotated Bibliography of Open-Source Literature.* Final Report, Arlington: HSI, 2006, pp. 2 and 12.

[101] AIVD [Dutch Intelligence and Security Service], *From Dawa to Jihad: The Various Threats from Radical Islam to the Democratic Legal Order*, The Hague: AIVD, 2004.

advocating violence for political aims"[102]. All these heterogeneous definitions firmly confirm the previous affirmation that radicalization is quite a controversial and multifaceted concept. For this reason a general overview on the theoretical framework surrounding radicalization can represent a useful tool to understand all the different level of analysis involved in the process.

Radicalism, Extremism and Terrorism

As previously stated, a universally agreed definition of radicalization has not been formulated yet. Above all, it cannot be analysed on its own but it enjoys special relations with the other concepts of radicalism, extremism and terrorism. In this paragraph, I will briefly analyse the interrelations between radicalization with the three above-mentioned terms.

First, in order to better grasp the true meaning of radicalization it is useful to analyse its relationship with the concept of 'radicalism'. During the 18th century the latter was mainly linked to the emergence of the Enlightenment period and to the two main revolutions of France (1789-1799) and of the United States (1775-1783). In the 19th century the expression increased its popularity by referring to a particular political agenda, which advocates political and social reforms. Some political parties were called radical because they were advocating republican ideas rather than imperialistic ones. Part of them was struggling for the adoption of a democratic regime, for the introduction of a particular set of political rights, including the one of universal voting. This short historical analysis demonstrates that the concept of radicalism is a relative one, in the sense that it changes according to where, when it takes place and to whom it is referred. Those who were considered radical in the 19th century, because they were promoting democratic values, would not be considered radical today. Indeed, "[…] while in the 19th century radical referred primarily to liberal, anti-clerical, pro-democratic, progressive political positions, contemporary use [especially when referred to radical Islam] tends to point in the opposite direction

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[102] Swedish Security Service, '*Radikalisering och avradikalisering*', 2009; You may also see, Magnus Ranstorp, P*reventing Violent Radicalisation and Terrorism. The Case of Indonesia,* Stockholm: Center for Asymmetric Threat Studies, 2009, p. 2.

[by] embracing an anti-liberal, fundamentalist, anti-democratic and regressive agenda"[103]. To report a more contemporary example, "[i]n the 1980's, the idea of gay marriage used to be seen as radical if not outrageous, yet nowadays it is those who oppose it, not its supporters, who are portrayed as fundamentalists and radicals"[104]. This is clearly demonstrated by the ruling of the US Supreme Court, which in June 2015 declared the same-sex marriage a legal right all across the country[105]. The primary key lesson that can be drawn from this first analysis of radicalism is that in order to define something or someone as radical there is the persistent need of referring to its spatial and timing contexts. This means, that a comprehensive study on radicalization should dedicate a large part to the context in which the radicalization emerges because it plays an important role in shaping the process. In addition, the historical background has shown that radicals are not intrinsically violent. "It does not follow that a radical attitude must result in violent behaviour"[106].

Nevertheless, academic researches were convinced on the contrary as they were consistently equating radicalization with violent extremist behaviour. As reported above, scholar Neumann defined radicalization "[a]t the most basic level […] as the process whereby people become extremists"[107]. What is important to stress is that there is a thin dividing line between extremists: those involving violence, who are defined as violent-extremists and those who does not, defined as non-violent extremists. Extremists in general can be considered as political actors who seek to establish a homogenous society based on a rigid and dogmatic ideology, who tend to suppress pluralism and to dismantle the rule of law. Even though extremist groups, movements and parties have proved to prefer the use of violence over persuasion, governments do take into account the above-mentioned distinction when they need to decide where to address their counter-extremism efforts.

The common error that government as well as academics make is to believe that the only possible outcome of the process of radicalization is terrorism. It has been shown

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[103] Alex P. Schmidt, *Radicalization, De-Radicalization, Counter-Radicalization: A Conceptual Discussion and Literature Review*, ICCT Research Paper, Hague, March, 2013, p.7.
[104] Peter R. Neumann, *Trouble with Radicalization*, International Affairs, 89:4, 2013, p.4.
[105] Article, US Supreme Court rules gay marriage is legal nationwide, BBC News, Section US&Canada, June 27, 2015, available at http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-33290341.
[106] Alex P. Schmidt, *Radicalization, De-Radicalization, Counter-Radicalization: A Conceptual Discussion and Literature Review*, ICCT Research Paper, Hague, March, 2013, p.8.
[107] Peter R. Neumann, *Trouble with Radicalization*, International Affairs, 89: 4, 2013, p.2.

that radicalization has to be considered as one of the primary roots of terrorism. Nevertheless, the process does not follow just one single pattern. "In reality there are many forms of political violence short of terrorism or (civil) war that are quite different from terrorism as practiced currently by certain non-state actors who conduct campaigns of violence or use illegitimate violent methods against unarmed civilians for the purpose of intimidating, coercing or otherwise influencing conflict parties and other significant audiences"[108]. Indeed, there is a need to focus on the distinction between terrorism on one side and the other forms of political violence on the other side.

First, terrorism is such a high complex concept with all its different forms, that today the international community, in particular the UN, has not reached a universally legal definition of the term. Nevertheless, other regional organizations attempted to formulate one. In 2002, the EU Framework Decision on Combating Terrorism provided a definition considering it as "[c]riminal offences against persons and property that, given their nature or context, may seriously damage a country or international organisation where committed with the aim of: seriously intimidating a population; or unduly compelling a Government or international organisation to perform or abstain from performing any act; or seriously destabilising or destroying the fundamental political, economic or social structure of a country or an international organisation"[109]. In the academic literature, scholars Gurr and Marshall in 2005 provided an important definition of "[t]errorism, as a political act, stands at once at the nexus between individual and collective action, the emotional and the rational, the conventional and the unconventional. It can be the strongest form of protest, the weakest form of rebellion, or a specialized tactic in a broader process of tyranny or warfare"[110]. What we have to draw from these definitions of terrorism is that historical examples have proved that radicalization can lead to other forms of political actions and some of these might be violent including terrorist actions. But when concerns these other forms and not terrorism, a distinction according to their morality, legitimacy and legality needs to be developed. Indeed, terrorism is

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[108] Alex P. Schmidt, *Radicalization, De-Radicalization, Counter-Radicalization: A Conceptual Discussion and Literature Review*, ICCT Research Paper, Hague, March, 2013, p.13.
[109] Council Framework Decision on Combating Terrorism, 2002/475/JHA, JULY 13, 2002, available online at http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:32002F0475.
[110] Monty G. Marshall and Ted Robert Gurr, *Peace and Conflict*, College Park, University of Maryland, Center for International Development & Conflict Management, 2005, p. 63.

considered to be a type of violent action, alongside with genocide, war crimes, torture and crimes against humanity that cannot receive any justifications under any circumstances. On the contrary, "there are certain forms of violent resistance to political oppression that, while illegal under national law, are accepted by international humanitarian law"[111]. It is misleading to consider terrorism as the only possible outcome of the process of radicalization.

The relationship between radicalism, extremism and terrorism is rather complex. As scholar Horgon summarized "[n]ot every radical becomes a terrorist [and n]ot every terrorist needs radical views"[112]. This short paragraph tried to clarify the complex concepts of radicalism, extremism and terrorism and their interrelation. This seems to represent a further step towards the understanding of the process of radicalization.

2.2. Theoretical Framework

The scholarly literature seems to agree on the idea that radicalization is best defined as a process, which leads towards the use of violence. This paragraph will explore the vast theoretical framework surrounding the concept of radicalization. The first part will be dedicated to a general overview of some of the most popular existing models of radicalization. Most of these elaborations share the predominant assumption that radicalization is divided into different steps, for some scholars it is a linear process, while for the majority it is more casual. The second part of the paragraph is focused on the most popular existing theories of radicalization. Because it is such a multifaceted and complex topic, most of these studies differentiate among themselves in terms of theoretical approach and focus area. In addition, "[d]ifferent waves of violence have been addressed by specialists of different geographical areas, using different toolkits and often bringing to bear idiosyncratic explanations"[113]. What all these theories should take into account is the complex interrelations between the three levels of analysis of the process of radicalization. Indeed, the

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[111] Alex P. Schmidt, *Radicalization, De-Radicalization, Counter-Radicalization: A Conceptual Discussion and Literature Review*, ICCT Research Paper, Hague, March, 2013, p.13.
[112] John Horgan, at START conference at the University of Maryland, College Park, September 1, 2011.
[113] Donatella Della Porta and Gary LaFree, *Guest Editorial: 'Processes of Radicalisation and De-Radicalisation*, IJCV, Vol. 6, No. 1, 2012, p.5.

second part of the paragraph, dedicated to radicalization theories, will attempt at explaining the interaction between these three levels: the micro one, in the sense of what happens in the individual life-experience; the group one, in order to understand internal violent groups dynamics and the macro one, analysing the influential role of the political, social and economic environment in which the process of radicalization takes place. Many scholars agreed that elaborating a single theory able to explain every single radicalization process is unreachable. The reason behind this affirmation is that it is such a complex and subjective phenomenon and mostly it is the result of the interaction of all the three above-mentioned levels, which are difficult to comprehend. Even if theories concentrate all the efforts towards a single focus area, such as jihadist radicalization, those who radicalize would not fit under just one profile. It seems easily obvious that a single pathway towards radicalization does not exist. In my brief analysis, I will report the most popular theories, which focused respectively on the three different levels in order to clear which possible interactions can occur.

Models of Radicalization

 The academic literature agrees in defining radicalization as a process divided in different phases, "[…] charting the transition from early involvement to becoming operationally active"[114].

One very basic way of understanding radicalization is as a linear process through a pyramidal-type model. In 2007, the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) of United Kingdom presented this model in the government Prevent Strategy[115]. It aimed at containing terrorism and violent-extremism and at stopping people to become radicalized.

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[114] Kris Christmann, *Preventing Religious Radicalization and Violent Extremism. A Systematic Review of the Research Evidence*, Youth Justice Board for England and Wales, 2012, p.10.
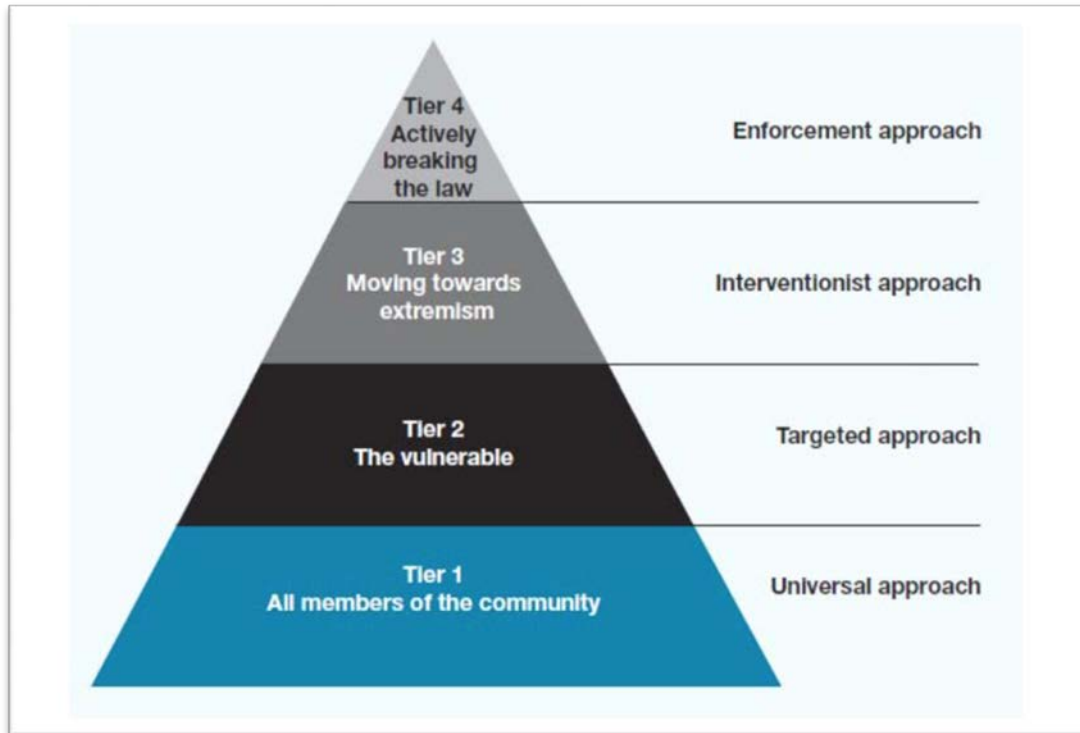[115] *Ibidem.*

Figure 3 Source: Youth Justice Board for England and Wales (2012)

As the figure shows, the pyramid is divided in four different tiers. Following the linear path from the bottom to the top, the level of radicalization increases, but at the same time the numbers of people decreases. The very lower level of the pyramid represents the entire community, even though it is not specified whether it represents the society of a country or a more specific community. At tier two, there is a numerous group of people considered as vulnerable individuals, who can be easily targeted and influenced by recruit and indoctrination messages. At the third level there are the so-called sympathisers, who do not commit violent acts personally, but they rather prefer to tacitly support the apex of the pyramid. The latter refers to those individuals who can be defined as active terrorists who constantly break the law. This group is relatively smaller in size compared to the other three tiers. This model cannot be considered as extensive in the sense that it describes the process of radicalization as linear, which is not. It leaves unresolved questions, such as how people decide to move from the bottom towards the top. It lacks of a strong psycho-sociological background. In addition, it recognizes an implicit relation between

radicalization and terrorism. As already stated, terrorism does not represent the only possible outcome of this process.

Scholar Marc Sageman was one of the major critic of this pyramid model. Indeed, he believes that the process of radicalization follows more casual patterns. He conducted an extensive research on Islamist radicalization in which he came "[…] to think about the process of radicalization as consisting of four prongs: a sense of moral outrage; a specific interpretation of the world; resonance with personal experiences and mobilization through networks"[116]. He argues that these four prongs are not phases of a linear process, nor are necessarily sequential. According to his findings, they are rather recurrent steps that can occur at any time during the process of radicalization.

1. **Moral outrage.** It is considered as "a reaction to perceived major moral violations [such as] killings, rapes or local actions"[117]. These sources of outrage such as the Muslims killed in Afghanistan, Bosnia and Chechnya fuelled the process of radicalization by increasing the perception of the specific community of being maltreated.

2. **Interpretation.** Sageman found that the sentiment of moral outrage must receive a certain interpretation in order to boost radicalization. Indeed, not all Muslims are radicalized. In the field of Islamism "[t]he common interpretation is that all these global and local moral violations are examples of a unified Western global strategy, namely a 'A War against Islam'"[118].

3. **Resonance with personal experience.** The interpretation of the West engaged in a war against the Muslim world must find a personal experience in which it can be fostered. All political, economic and social factors and a perception of discrimination are crucial for boosting radicalization. An individual's personal condition characterized by unemployment, social exclusion, loneliness and boredom, can easily worsening his perception and make him shift towards illegal activities.

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[116] Marc Sageman, *Radicalization of Global Islamist Terrorists*, Testimony to the US Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, June 27, 2007, p.2.
[117] *Ibidem.*
[118] *Ibidem.*

4. **Mobilization through Networks**. Today's astonishing change in ways of communication amplified the frustration feeling of the Muslim people in the sense that it permitted them to create cohesive and active groups or organizations capable of attracting more and more followers. This new type of interactivity helps especially young Muslims to be subjected to indoctrination messages and get radicalized. The main achievement is that these networks offer a completely new platform for divulgating ideas and promote certain actions.

Scholars Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko formulated another way of conceiving radicalization. They describe it as "[the] changes in beliefs, feelings, and behaviours in directions that increasingly justify intergroup violence and demand sacrifice in defence of the intergroup"[119]. The authors believe that radicalization is a process, which occurs at three different levels: the individual, the group and the mass ones. In addition, they stress that their aim is not to provide a comprehensive conceptual framework of such a complex and multifaceted phenomenon. They rather want to identify and explore those social psychological processes occurring at the three levels of analysis, which they believe to be accountable for political radicalization. The two scholars endorse the predominant view of the existence of several pathways leading individuals as well as groups towards terrorism. In their work they identify 12 possible mechanisms of political radicalization. For mechanism they recall the definition employed by the Dictionary of Psychology of J.P. Chaplin, which defines it as those "[…] means or manner in which something is accomplished"[120]. First, they embrace the idea that radicalization can be described through a pyramidal model. Each level is associated to different levels of radicalization, but what they try to examine is "[h]ow individuals move from the base to the extremes of terrorist violence at the apex"[121].

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[119] Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko, *Mechanisms of Political Radicalization: Pathways Toward Terrorism*, Terrorism and Political Violence, 20:3, July 3, 2008, p.416.
[120] J. P. Chaplin, *Dictionary of Psychology*, 8th ed., New York: Dell, 1975, 285.
[121] Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko, *Mechanisms of Political Radicalization: Pathways Toward Terrorism*, Terrorism and Political Violence, 20:3, July 3, 2008, p.417.

Level of radicalization	Mechanism
Individual	1. Personal victimization 2. Political grievance 3. Joining a radical group—the slippery slope 4. Joining a radical group—the power of love
Group	5. Extremity shift in like-minded groups 6. Extreme cohesion under isolation and threat 7. Competition for the same base of support 8. Competition with state power—condensation 9. Within-group competition—fissioning
Mass	10. Jujitsu politics 11. Hate 12. Martyrdom

Figure 4 Mccauley, Moskalenko (2008)

1. **Individual Radicalization by Personal Victimization.** The first mechanism focuses on the role played by personal grievance in the process of radicalization. They report several examples in which the loss of a beloved one transforms into seek of revenge. This is the most common reason behind the decision of becoming suicide bombers.

2. **Individual Radicalization by Political Grievance.** The second mechanism differs from the first one only because the grievance is caused by a specific political trend or event.

3. **Individual Radicalization in Joining a Radical Group – the slippery slope.** "Typically an individual's progress into a terrorist group is slow and gradual, with many smaller tests before being trusted in more important missions and with many non-violent tasks before being asked to use a gun or bomb"[122]. This training period will increase the excitement of the individual in perpetrating more 'relevant' attacks and he will look forward to become more radicalized in order to increase his personal status.

4. **Individual Radicalization in Joining a Radical Group – the power of love.** According to this mechanism the process of radicalization occurs through personal ties, in the sense that an individual is recruited in a specific group where his family, friends and lovers are already members or have pre-

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[122] *Ibidem*, p.419.

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existing relations. Experts have shown that when a group is characterized by a high degree of cohesion, the members' commitment will increase as well.

5. **Group Radicalization in Like-Minded Groups.** This mechanism refers to "an experimental model of group radicalization, that has been referred to variously "as 'risky shift' or 'group polarization' [where g]roups of strangers brought together to discuss issues of risk taking or political opinion show consistently two kinds of change: increased agreement about the opinion at issue, and a shift in the average opinion of group members."[123]. The finding is that the side of the opinion, which was favoured by the majority before beginning the discussion, will decide the shift in violent group towards the decision of increased extremism.

6. **Group Radicalization under Isolation and Threat.** Small groups, which under certain circumstances felt a threat or experienced isolation, tend to present specific features. They are characterized by a high degree of cohesion, by a higher internalization of values and consensus, which put increasing pressure for reaching an agreement between the members.

7. **Group Radicalization in Competition for the same Base of Support.** According to this mechanism groups, when competing for the same base support, will tend to increase their status by engaging in more radical and violent actions to support their cause.

8. **Group Radicalization in Competition with State Power – Condensation.** This mechanism describes the so-called dynamic of condensation. "[…] the result of the interaction between state and non-state group is often a mutual escalation of violence between group and police, with further peeling off of individuals whose radicalization is not sufficient to face increasing state pressure"[124]. Even if it might seem a negative outcome, the real result will be that those who have resisted to that pressure will form a very deeply radicalized and cohesive group.

9. **Group Radicalization in within – Group Competition – Fissioning.** The internal dynamics of a violent group can be easily affected by personal animosities, competition and disagreements. Some observers believe that

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[123] *Ibidem*, p.422.
[124] *Ibidem*, p.425.

only a common action towards the state or another targeted enemy group can avoid the violent group to split into multiple smaller sections.

10. **Mass Radicalization in Conflict with an out – Group – Jujitsu Politics.** This mechanism describes mass radicalization as a process that occurs in situations in which there are threats and enemies out of the specific mass. These will increase the internal mass cohesion, the respect towards the leadership and the fear towards the sanctions for the dissidents.

11. **Mass Radicalization in Conflict with an out – Group – Hate.** The process of dehumanization of the enemy characterizes this pathway towards radicalization. It will occur especially in situations of prolonged conflicts and it will boost he radicalization process.

12. **Mass Radicalization in Conflict with an out – Group – Martyrdom.** According to the last mechanism radical groups can become more radical where they successfully keep salient sand glorious the memory of witnesses and of martyrs. It will serve as a crucial and pushing factor in the process of mass radicalization.

It is possible to note that the majority of these mechanisms are more reactive consequences to a specific factor, rather than autonomous decisions.

Radicalization Theories

"The professional literature on radicalization, though rather limited, has primarily concerned itself with the question of why (and to a lesser extent, how) someone comes to adopt beliefs and behaviours that support his or her engagement in subversive and terrorist activity, particularly violence toward civilian non-combatants"[125]. In this section, the focus will be posed on the attempts of the academic research community of analysing radicalization as a process occurring at three different levels: the individual level, the group level and the political, social and cultural context of both the international and interstate level together. For each of them I report some of the most popular existing theories of the radicalization process

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[125] Randy Borum, *Radicalization into Violent Extremism I: A Review of Social Science Theories*, Journal of Strategic Security 4, N.4, 2011, p.14, available at http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1139&context=jss.

in order to explore the complex question of how someone should first embrace radical beliefs and then move towards assuming radical and violent behaviours.

The Individual level

Most early radical theories tended to focus on the individual level starting from the assumption that an individual violent behaviour was a result of some mental or personality diseases. The figure of the terrorist was considered to fit under the category of mentally instable or simply 'crazy' persons[126]. "This line of thinking prompted some clinical explanations for terrorism and a multitude of attempts to identify a unique terrorist profile"[127]. Fortunately, later studies moved beyond these first and naïve assumptions.

The first theory to be reported is the one of scholars Alex S. Wilner and Claire-Jehanne Dubouloz. They wrote an article in which "[t]he purpose is to investigate the individual psycho-cognitive process associated with radicalization [in order to explore] […] the transformation of meaning-perspective – the individual's psycho-cognitive construction of new definitions of self – that is necessarily associated with radicalization and changes in behaviour"[128]. They focus on what they call the 'ideological learning', which is the process through which individuals internalize new ideas and beliefs, which can in specific cases justify violent behaviours. The authors define radicalization "[as] a process of incremental change to an individual's personal belief system and involves internalizing a particular set of ideas"[129]. In addition, they recognize that radicalization does not lead to just the single outcome of terrorism, but its study is central to identify the legitimation for some individuals to engage in violent actions. They address the process of radicalization within the framework of theories of adult learning, which assess that "individuals participate in the development of personal knowledge and that learning is an interactive process of interpretation, integration, and transformation of personal experience"[130]. In particular, the authors resort to and apply a specific approach first developed in the

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[126] Andrew Silke, *Holy Warriors. Exploring the Psychological Processes of Jihadi Radicalization*, European Journal of Criminology, Vol.5, n.1, 2008.
[127] *Ibidem.*
[128] Alex S. Wilner and Claire-Jehanne Dubouloz, *Transformative Radicalization: Applying Theory to Islamist Radicalization*, Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, 34:5, 2011, pp.418-419.
[129] *Ibidem*, p.419.
[130] *Ibidem*, p.420.

1990s by Jack Mezirow, named the transformative learning theory[131]. Mezirow identified 5 different concepts related to the theory.

Meaning Schemes	The beliefs, value judgments, and feelings that shape interpretations of experience and act as a frame of reference in determining personal meaning and perceptions over experiences.
Meaning Perspectives	A structure of assumptions (created by personal ideologies, learning style, and neurotic self-deceptions) and constitute codes (paradigms and personal frameworks) that govern the activities of perceiving, comprehending, and remembering. They filter perceptions and shape comprehension of new experiences.
Distortions (or "distorted assumptions")	A meaning perspective that no longer fits the individual's current reality.
Critical Reflection	An individual's ability to reflect on distortions. Reflection begins with a *disorienting dilemma* triggered by a crisis (i.e. personal loss, conflict, illness).
Process of Transformation	A personal change that can be either abrupt or gradual.

Figure 5 Mezirov (1991)

This theory has been widely used in the field of healthcare to investigate the process of transformative learning in those patients suffering from such disabilities and illnesses, which required them to embrace a completely new way of living. According to the "transformative learning theory an individual's personal change is a product of cognitive and emotional processes of transformation"[132]. During someone's life a crisis can occur, which serves as the 'transformative trigger'[133]. Followed the crisis, the affected individual attempts at interpreting and overcoming such an event through his pre-existing meaning perspectives. Despite the fact that in the majority of cases these previous interpreting experiences succeed, under other circumstances they dramatically fail. At this point, the individual engages in a process of critical reflection of the situation. The individual experiences a gradual increasing doubtfulness of what he took for granted in his whole life. In the cases in which this process of critical reflection is fuelled by indoctrination, new knowledge and skills, it can lead to a change in the pre-existing meaning perspectives. The

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[131] Jack Mezirow, *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning*, San Francisco Jossey-Bass, 1991.
[132] Alex S. Wilner and Claire-Jehanne Dubouloz, *Transformative Radicalization: Applying Theory to Islamist Radicalization*, Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, 34:5, 2011, p.421.
[133] A transformative trigger can either be immediate and occur in a specific time or be a more gradual process. The gradual transformation is the most preferable pathway toward radicalization, as many scholars have already suggested that it is a process not happening overnight.

individual will assume a new set of values, beliefs and ideas that can lead him to engage in new behaviours and to assume a new role. "Eventually, the individual establishes a competence and self-confidence in his new role, which leads to novel behaviours that is reflective of the individual's changed personal worldview"[134]. Lastly, he will reintegrate in the society assuming his new role.

When the transformative learning theory is applied to the process of radicalization, the authors identified three distinct phases: the trigger-phase, the process of change phase and the outcome phase. The first one, as already stated, is a more gradual sub-process, which is highly influenced by the political, social, cultural, historical and economic environment in which the individual lives. Crises occur and the individual feels disoriented. Consequently, "[…] individual radicalization takes place during the changing phase in which a combination of reflection, knowledge acquisition and identity reassessment occurs"[135]. Lastly, the outcome phase describes the changes in the individual's behaviours and embracing violent actions represents one of the possible outcomes. It is important to stress that this theory applied to the process of radicalization can be further deeply analysed according to the interaction with the other two levels of analysis.

Another important branch of the psycho-sociological researches are the so-called conversion theories. Of course these researches are largely drawn from the field of studies of sociology as well of psychology of religion. The common point is the focus on the individual's process of conversion toward a new spiritual option, which can lead to the adoption of new justified behaviours, including violent ones.

Scholar Lewis Rambo developed a sort of model composed by 7 distinct components, enjoying interactive relations[136]. His conclusions are extremely similar to the one of the two previous-mentioned scholars. He first considers the *context* described as the political, social, cultural and historical environment, which deeply influences the conversion process. Second, he believes that a *crisis* can occur which is "[…] typically caused by personal and social disruption"[137]. Third, following the crisis there is the *quest*, during which the individual will seek for solutions able to

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[134] Alex S. Wilner and Claire-Jehanne Dubouloz, *Transformative Radicalization: Applying Theory to Islamist Radicalization*, Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, 34:5, 2011, p.421.
[135] *Ibidem*, p.422.
[136] Lewis Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, New Haven Yale University Press, 1993.
[137] Randy Borum, *Radicalization into Violent Extremism I: A Review of Social Science Theories*, Journal of Strategic Security 4, N.4, 2011, p.23.

restore the status quo. Fourth, he refers to the *encounter* as the first contact between the so-called seeker and a new religion or a proponent of a new spiritual option. Fifth, he describes the process of *interaction* between the two. Sixth, follows the phase of *commitment*, which requires two distinct elements. The first one is the decision of the individual to manifest his willingness to join or his faithfulness to the particular religion. Second, there is the need of an act from the religious community, which assures and guarantees the individual membership to the movement. Lastly, Rambo analysis the phase of the *consequences* in the sense of all the individual's actions, decision, sayings and commitments made in the name or according to the new embraced religion. Within the framework of the conversion theories, the main role is played by religion and the focus is posed on how it can shape individual's behaviours by offering a new set of beliefs and values. Most of these theories focus on Islamism to better comprehend how it can attract such a high number of people from all around the world and how it can justify his adherents to commit violent actions.

The last theory I want to report, which focuses on the individual level of the process of radicalization, is the one of scholar and US colonel Matt Venhaus[138]. He identifies a new pathway towards individual radicalization. After having interviewed and listened to personal histories of 2.032 foreign fighters who joined al-Qaeda affiliated movements he discovered that the radicalization process could also been boost by individual's need to seek. Indeed, he identified 4 distinct pathways of these so-called seekers. First there is the *revenge seeker* who is a frustrated angry man who seeks revenge toward the entity (group, person, government), which he finds to be responsible for his dissatisfaction or grievance. It follows the *status seeker*, the individual who radicalize and engage in radical actions to increase his personal status and attract recognition from others. Third, there is the *identity seeker*, who is primarily driven by the need of fulfilling his sense of belonging, to define his identity through becoming part of a group. Lastly, there is a minority of *thrill seekers*, who radicalize in order to experience excitement, glory, fun and adventure.

Even though radicalization is an individual process, which starts in the psycho-cognitive dimension of an individual's mind, it can be significantly practical to

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[138] John Venhaus, *Why Youth Join Al-Qaeda*, United States Institute of Peace, May, 2010, pp.1-20, available at http://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/SR236Venhaus.pdf.

analyse the role that violent groups play in boosting radicalization and in shaping someone's attitude towards violent behaviours.

The Group Level

The take into consideration within the process of radicalization of the group level is of significantly practical utility "[b]ecause violent extremism is more often a group-related phenomenon [and] the sub-discipline's empirical lessons about group dynamics help to illuminate the behaviour of terrorist collectives"[139]. The major discipline, which achieved important findings in this context, is the one of socio-psychology. It is defined as "a sub-discipline of psychology concerned primarily with relationships, influences and transactions among people, and particular group behaviour"[140]. One of the early pioneers in this field was Gordon Allport, who defined it as "an attempt to understand and explain how the thought, feeling, and behaviour of individuals is influenced by the actual, imagined, or implied presence of others"[141].

According to some of these studies, a primary finding concerned the group context, which tends to modify individuals opinions and behaviours transforming them as more radical and extreme. In addition, the process of decision-making becomes less rational compared to the individual one. Indeed, the necessity for reaching an agreement within the group overrides the aim of choosing the most rational and appropriate decisions related to the goal. Moreover, the fact that accountability for the actions is shared within all the members of the group, individuals have a propensity to engage in more violent actions because they feel less responsible[142]. Additionally radical groups offer means and ways for individuals to seek for revenge[143] against a targeted entity or to expire the feeling of humiliation[144] they are

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[139] Randy Borum, *Radicalization into Violent Extremism I: A Review of Social Science Theories*, Journal of Strategic Security 4, N.4, 2011, p.20.

[140] *Ibidem.*

[141] Gordon W. Allport, *The Historical Background of Social Psychology*, in G. Lindzey and E. Aronson (eds.), Handbook of social psychology, New York: Random House, 1954, p.5.

[142] Clark R. McCauley and Mary E. Segal, *Social Psychology of Terrorist Groups*, in C. Hendrick (ed.), *Group Processes and Intergroup Relations: Review of Personality and Social Psychology*, Newbury Park: Sage, 1987, pp. 231–256.

[143] Jeff Victoroff, *The mind of the terrorist. A Review and Critique of Psychological Approaches*, Journal of Conflict Resolution, vol. 49, no 1, 2005, pp. 3-42.

[144] Sverre Varvin, *Humiliation and the Victim Identity in Conditions of Political and Violent Conflict*, Scandinavian Psychoanalysis Review n. 28, 2005, pp. 40-49.

subjected to on a daily basis. Recalling Us Colonel Venhaus[145], people tend to join radical groups because moved by perceived incentives and rewards. Groups can offer to these individual seekers the sense of belonging and social affiliation [146], excitement, a personal sense of meaning but also more practical means such as basic needs for the survival. Finally, internal norms and rules play a very important role. Indeed, in groups characterized by a high degree of internalized norms, by an increase cost for dissidents, by more cohesion and by experiencing isolation, tend to have stronger group conformity as well as members' compliance.

"One of the most promising theoretical frameworks applied to [the] understanding [of] radicalization processes and violent extremism is Social Movement Theory (SMT)"[147]. A social movement is defined by scholars Zald and McCarthy as "[a] set of opinions and beliefs in a population, which represents preferences for changing some elements of the social structure and/or reward distribution of a society"[148]. In the 1940s emerged the very first interpretation of social movement theory, which assumed that the idea of joining a movement was the result of an irrational process of collective behaviour under certain context conditions, which produced a sentiment of mass discontent capable of pushing people together in movements. Nevertheless, contemporary SMTs declared that rather than the product of an irrational process the decision to join and form a movement depends on a more rational and strategic decision. Indeed, "[i]n the past 15 years, social movement theory has coalesced around 3-fold framework of theoretical perspectives, which can be called mobilizing resources, political opportunities, and framing"[149].

First, according to the Resource Mobilization Theory one of the main problems behind the survival and effectiveness of collective action is the finding of available resources for the mobilization. One successful solution is to set up such an organization capacity able at attracting supporters, material contribution and funding that will help the establishment of the collective action into a proper and formal

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[145] John Venhaus, *Why Youth Join Al-Qaeda*, United States Institute of Peace, May, 2010, pp.1-20.
[146] Rex A. Hudson, *Sociology and Psychology of Terrorism: Who Becomes a Terrorist and Why?*, Guilford, C.T.: The Lyons Press, 1999.
[147] Randy Borum, *Radicalization into Violent Extremism I: A Review of Social Science Theories*, Journal of Strategic Security 4, N.4, 2011, p.16.
[148] Mayer N. Zald and John D. McCarthy, *Social Movements in an Organizational Society*, New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1987, p.2.
[149] Colin J. Beck, *The Contribution of Social Movement Theory to Understanding Terrorism*, Sociology Compass, 2:5, 2008, p.1567.

movement. "Once established, organizations tend to formalize themselves, resulting in a highly professionalized core that manages and directs collective action, which allows them to persist and adapt to changing environmental conditions"[150]. This finding is relevant also for terrorism related-studies. Indeed, terrorism is such a high expensive collective action that in order to sustain high-cost campaigns, such as suicide bombings, it needs to find resources and support.

Political opportunity and external constraints represent the second dimension of this tripartite model of SMT. Still today, there is an ongoing debate concerning the true and concrete meaning of political opportunity and especially around the question of why one of these should generate a movement and another should not [151]. Nevertheless, this argument has been used to deeply explore the wide political environment in which social movements operate. Indeed, "[m]ovements arise not only because they are able to successfully mobilize resources, but because overall political and social conditions are ripe for successful and sustained contentious"[152]. The Theory of Political Process claims that these political opportunities linked to the organizational capacity for mobilization permit the development of social movements. First, the wider the political environment is, the larger the mobilization spectrum can be. Second, specific events can produce opportunities for contentious actions.

The third and last aspect of the tripartite model is the process of framing. The scholar Anja Dalgaard-Nielsen[153] from the Danish Institute for International Studies was the one to suggest such an approach within the context of SMTs. The expression' sense is based on the definition of Goffman[154] who employed it "[…] to describe the justifications and appeals movements use to mobilize support"[155]. Indeed, "[r]ooted in constructivist assumptions, Framing Theory focuses on how movements and

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[150] *Ibidem*, p.1568.
[151] David S. Meyer, *Protest and Political Opportunities*, Annual Review of Sociology 30, 2004, pp.125–45.

[152] Colin J. Beck, *The Contribution of Social Movement Theory to Understanding Terrorism*, Sociology Compass, 2:5, 2008, p. 1568.
[153] Ania Dalgaard-Nielsen, *Studying Violent Radicalization in Europe I: The Potential Contribution of Social Movement Theory*, Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS), Copenhagen, 2008.
[154] Erving Goffman, Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1974.
[155] Colin J. Beck, *The Contribution of Social Movement Theory to Understanding Terrorism*, Sociology Compass, 2:5, 2008, p.1569.

social collectives construct, produce, and disseminate meaning"[156]. The movement engages in this process of attempting to deliver and frame messages and ideas in ways in which they will reflect best with the beliefs, feelings, attitudes and interests of the audience, the potential constituency. Consequently, some individuals will be attracted by the frame of reference of the movement and they will begin to increasingly identify themselves with the movement. The Framing Theory has proved to give relevant contributions to the understanding of the radicalization process, especially because it focuses on a mid-level of analysis. In addition, it can be of practical utility for terrorist groups related studies, because like other movements, they constantly try to justify and explain their actions. "Ideological manifestations, calls to actions, speeches and communiqués to supporters and potential supporters are routine aspects of terrorist campaigns"[157]. Indeed, terrorist groups have always embraced a more symbolic dimension rather than practical and military ones. Furthermore, in several occasions, they have selected their targets according to the potential symbolic and psychological impact rather than according to a more military perspective. "Rhetoric and meaning making are thus basic features of terrorism and presents an opportunity for research that uses the tools of social movement framing theory"[158].

The last step for our analysis is to take into account considerations about the interstate and international level in which these groups operate in order to grasp, which are the most influential factors that boost violence and extremism.

The Interstate and International Level

The process of radicalization is such a complex concept especially because it lacks of a single cause root to clarify its emergence. "[…] it may [be] more profitable [to analyse it] as a process of interaction between individuals, violent groups and their environment […]"[159]. Starting from the assumption that a single root cause to explore radicalization does not exist, in this section the focus is posed on the intra-

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[156] Randy Borum, *Radicalization into Violent Extremism I: A Review of Social Science Theories*, Journal of Strategic Security 4, N.4, 2011, p.18.
[157] Colin J. Beck, *The Contribution of Social Movement Theory to Understanding Terrorism*, Sociology Compass, 2:5, 2008, p.1570.
[158] *Ibidem.*
[159] Donatella Della Porta and Gary LaFree, *Guest Editorial: 'Processes of Radicalisation and De-Radicalisation*, IJCV, Vol. 6, No. 1, 2012, p.7.

state and international levels, which together constitute the environment in which radicalization takes place. This last section should ease the comprehension of how the three levels of our analysis influence and interact with one another within the process of radicalization. It is extremely important to first consider radicalization as an individual circumstance[160], which occurs in a broader context. Thus, the causal factors identified in the surrounding environment, which influence the process of radicalization, only have indirect effects on individual's behaviours. Moreover, because these factors are mainly of political, economic and cultural nature, they only frame and restrain the individual's environment. Indeed, these external factors arise independently from people. This is clearly demonstrate if we consider the actual influence that individuals enjoy towards democratic regimes, political events, and economic and social advancements, such as modernization and globalization. In my opinion it is useful to recall the distinction, which separates these context-related factors in two different categories: "*causes* that set the foundation for radicalization, and *catalysts* that abruptly accelerate the radicalization process"[161]. Following this line of reasoning, it is possible to argue that on one hand causes serve as preconditions contributing in the emergence and boosting of radicalization. Accordingly, individuals are subjects to a gradual influence and increasing pressure. Nevertheless, it is important to stress that external causes do change overtime and consequently they do not always produce radicalizing waves. On the other hand, catalysts are considered as triggers events or recruitment results capable of speeding the process of radicalization, event though they are the most volatile and unforeseeable factors.

It was the discipline of sociology, which first focused on how individuals are influenced by the surrounding environment in adopting violent behaviours. Most scholars referred to this macro-level of analysis when exploring the reasons behind the appearance of political mass violence. Others analysed the influences of these factors on the emergence of other collective actions like protests.

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[160] Tinka Veldhuis and Jorgen Staun, *Islamist Radicalisation: A Root Cause Model,* Netherlands Institute of International Relations Clingendael, October, 2009, pp-1-89, available at http://www.dcism.dk/graphics/_IO_indsatsomraader/Religion_og_social_konflikt_og_Mellemosten/Islamist%20Radicalisation.Veldhuis%20and%20Staun.pdf.
[161] Chuck Crossett and Jason A. Spitaletta, *Radicalization: Relevant Psychological and Sociological Concepts*, The Johns Hopkins University Applied Physics Laboratory, September, 2010, p.9.

A first cause belonging to the political domain which influences the set up of the radicalization process is poor integration[162]. Looking at the historical background, over the past few decades several Western countries experienced a considerable influx of immigrants coming from a high variety of countries, especially from Africa and Middle East. Once they reached the West, it arose the problem for the host countries to deal with the emergence of new minorities within the overall population. Most of host governments attempted to shape their national policies in order to ease the process of integration especially through educational programmes aimed at teaching culture, history and language of the host country. Additionally, they attempt at also guaranteeing these minorities to preserve their identity. Despite all these efforts, some communities perceive a discrimination feeling, which can produce an increasing sentiment of discontent towards the host country and to what it represents in terms of values, traditions and beliefs. Furthermore, this perceived sentiment of discrimination is confirmed by some findings. Indeed, the socio-economic profiles of immigrants most of the times differ significantly from the rest of the national population. "They have lower educational levels, often live in low socio-economic status neighbourhoods and, if they enter the labour market at all, they are confronted with difficulties in getting proper-paid jobs" [163]. Additionally, the feeling of discrimination is fuelled by the lack of chances to enter and influence the political arena, because of their poor-representation.

The second cause of economic-nature considers economic deprivation and poverty as possible roots of radicalization. Nevertheless, there is still an ongoing debate within the scholarly literature on whether such a causal relationship de facto exists. The Relative Deprivation Theory "[…] states that the subjective sense of being deprived of certain needs of freedoms by a domestic or international governing body can result in feelings of frustration, and when individuals can no longer bear this misery or indignity a rebellion ensues"[164]. Scholar Gurr claims that in situations in which this sentiment of frustration does not find a solution through legal means, it will be

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[162] Project, *Radicalization, Recruitment and the EU Counter-Radicalization Strategy*, Financed by the European Commission under the sixth Framework Programme, November 17, 2008, available at http://www.gdr-elsj.eu/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/doc2-WP4-Del-7.pdf.

[163] Tinka Veldhuis and Jorgen Staun, *Islamist Radicalisation: A Root Cause Model,* Netherlands Institute of International Relations Clingendael, October, 2009, p.31.

[164] Chuck Crossett and Jason A. Spitaletta, *Radicalization: Relevant Psychological and Sociological Concepts*, The Johns Hopkins University Applied Physics Laboratory, September, 2010, p.14.

probably manifested through actions of political violence[165]. During the 1970's and 1980's the argument of economic deprivation was predominant among the studies exploring the origins of terrorism[166]. Nevertheless, as already stated, there is still a debate on whether a causal relationship between economic deprivation and radicalization towards violent behaviours actually exists, especially because radical violent individuals can be found across all socio-economic classes[167]. Despite this ongoing debate, it is useful to take this theory into account because some scholars as Brock Blomberg, Hess and Weerapana suggest that there is a negative association between a country's economy and the emergence of violent behaviour[168].

A third external cause that concern more the international level can be found within the process of globalization and of modernization. These two global phenomena, complemented by the increasing development of technological innovations, have relevant impacts on radicalization. The main one is "[…] that [globalization together with modernization] facilitate the emergence of transnational ideological movements that can easily reach large communities and spread messages, recruit new followers and organize collective activities"[169]. These two phenomena offer a completely new platform to reach audiences, which were unapproachable before and to conduct extensive propaganda and recruitment campaigns to attract new members to join radical movements. Additionally, "[g]lobalization is often mentioned as a source of conflict between ethnically, culturally, or religiously diverse groups around the world"[170]. As scholar Benjamin Barber claims, globalization enjoys an aggressive force capable of dismantling economic and social barriers by exporting capitalism and its related values to the whole world[171]. Ethnic or religious communities, such as Islam, which have always rejected capitalism-related traditions, have to deal with

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[165] Ted R. Gurr, *Why Men Rebel*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970.

[166] Ted R. Gurr, *Why Men Rebel*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970; Alejandro Portes, *On the logic of post-factum explanations: The hypothesis of lower-class frustration as the cause of leftist radicalism*, Social Forces, vol. 50, no. 1, 1971, pp. 26-44; Mark Lichbach, *An Evaluation of 'Does Economic Inequality Breed Political Conflict?'*, Studies, World Politics, vol. 41, no. 4, 1989, pp. 431-470.

[167] Marc Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004.

[168] Stephen Brock Blomberg, David J. Hess and Akila Weerapana, *Economic conditions and terrorism,* European Journal of Political Economy, vol. 20, no. 2, 2004, pp. 463-478.

[169] Tinka Veldhuis and Jorgen Staun, *Islamist Radicalisation: A Root Cause Model,* Netherlands Institute of International Relations Clingendael, October, 2009, p.34.

[170] *Ibidem*, p.35.

[171] Benjamin R. Barber, *Jihad vs. McWorld. Terrorism's Challenge to Democracy*, New York: Ballantine Books, 1995.

this daily confrontation, which will only increase discontent and frustration leading to civilizations clashes.

For what concerns catalysts, intended as those factors which operate in the environment of an already started process of radicalization and which are capable to accelerate it, can be divided among two main categories: trigger events and recruitment. First, Martha Crenshaw[172] defined trigger events as "[…] situational factors that immediately precede the occurrence of terrorism […][173]". In our analysis is best to consider them as events, which occur in a specific period of time that serve as trigger for radicalization. As already mentioned above, they accelerate the radicalization process as it was already begun. This category includes the willingness to seek revenge or call for action after acts for example of "[…] violence against in-groups, police brutality, and contested elections, but also provoking acts committed by hostile out-groups or compromising speeches by public figures"[174].

Second, recruitment represents a relevant potential catalyst, which can occur at all the three different levels of analysis. Starting from the assumption that only a radicalized individual or at least an almost-radicalized individual would join a radical group, it follows the implication that recruitment manifests itself mainly in a later phase of the radicalization process. "In itself, recruitment is therefore not believed to be capable of starting radical emotions or beliefs, [but it] can only accelerate radicalization processes"[175]. Concerning the intra-state and the international levels the focus is posed on the top-down process of recruitment. Nowadays, thanks to the advance of globalization and technological innovations, recruitment campaigns designed to attract new members to join their ranks can be conducted on an extensive platform, capable to reach before-unapproachable audiences. A key role is played by social media, which give the possibility to share immediate pictures, posts and videos propaganda-related. This now completed theoretical paragraph can provide our analysis of all the tools needed to explore how the radicalization process toward the embracement of a radical interpretation of Islam works.

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[172] Martha Crenshaw, *The Causes of Terrorism*, Comparative Politics, vol. 13, 1981, pp. 379-99.
[173] Project, *Radicalization, Recruitment and the EU Counter-Radicalization Strategy*, Financed by the European Commission under the sixth Framework Programme, November 17, 2008, p.24.
[174] Tinka Veldhuis and Jorgen Staun, *Islamist Radicalisation: A Root Cause Model,* Netherlands Institute of International Relations Clingendael, October, 2009, p.36.
[175] Project, *Radicalization, Recruitment and the EU Counter-Radicalization Strategy*, Financed by the European Commission under the sixth Framework Programme, November 17, 2008, p.23.

2.3. Islamist Radicalization

Following the tragic events of the assassination of Theo van Gogh in Amsterdam (2004), the Madrid bombing (2004) and the London bombing (2005) it became evident to most national governments and security services that most terrorist activities especially in the West were perpetrated by apparently new independent networks[176]. Consequently, understanding how the process of Islamist radicalization works became central for counter-terrorism studies and policies. The key question is how apparently well-integrated men, Muslims as well as initially non-Muslims, engage in a process of radicalization towards the adoption of a radical interpretation of Islam as well as of violent behaviours. As already stated, radicalization is a gradual process that occurs at different stages in an influencing surrounding environment. Starting from the assumption that both a single cause root and a single pathway towards radicalization do not exist, this section attempts at reporting the most apparent popular reasons, which lie behind Islamist radicalization. The factors that trigger, influence and accelerate this process occur at the three already-mentioned levels of analysis, which constantly interact with one another shaping incalculable Islamist radicalization's pathways.

First, it is of significant practical utility to explore the Muslim ideology behind Islamist radicalization and of particular importance are the related concepts of Jihad and Salafism, the Sunni religious movement that seems to be beneath major terrorist attacks. The term *jihad* literally means struggle or striving towards God[177]. It is a highly questionable expression because within the same Muslim community there are persisting controversies around its true meaning. Nevertheless, the term jihad assumed two predominant connotations. The first one is "[t]he Greater Jihad [which] refers to an individual's personal struggle to live a good and charitable life and adhere to God's commands as understood within Islam"[178]. The second one is Lesser Jihad, which refers to the engagement of a violent-type of struggle in the name of

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[176] Tomas Precht, *Home grown terrorism and Islamist radicalization. From conversion to terrorism*, Research Report funded by the Danish Ministry of Justice, December, 2007, pp. 1-98.

[177] Michael G. Knapp, *The Concept and Practice of Jihadi in Islam*, Parameters, Us Army War College Quarterly, Spring 2003, Vol. 33, n.1, p.82.

[178] Andrew Silke, *Holy Warriors. Exploring the Psychological Processes of Jihadi Radicalization*, European Journal of Criminology, Vol.5, n.1, 2008, p.100.

Islam[179]. Individuals considered as *jihadists* are those who literally engage in jihad. Typically the term is used for indicating those who voluntarily decide to fight in the lesser-jihad. This decision represents the core of the Islamist radicalization phenomenon.

The religious Sunni movement named Salafism predominantly inspires the ideological foundation of this militant Islamism. The term derives from the Arabic word *Salaf*, which means 'to precede'. " In Islamic vocabulary, it is used to describe the followers of (*salaf al salih*) the virtuous fathers of the faith who were the companions of the Prophet"[180]. Salafism emerged in the 19th century as a counter-movement against the Western's spread of traditions, values and ideas. Indeed, its primary aim is to eradicate impurities disseminated by the West and fulfilling their desire to practice the true Islam, the one revealed by Prophet Muhammad. It was especially during the Afghanistan war, that Salafism eventually merged with the violent jihadi ideology. Additionally, Salafism in the 1980's also emerged in the West, in particular within the European Islam. It spread especially in France during the Algerian war. This Algerian diaspora, mainly composed by members of the Algerian Islam Salvation Front, is the most responsible for the emergence of the fighting Salafism in Europe. Overall, the pathway from joining the Salafism movement with its radical ideas toward the adoption of violent behaviour is a sort of easy process. "Support for or justification of terrorism, rejection of integration in host societies, and the creation of an Islamic state in Europe are all ideas shared by those who adopt Salafism as their system of values and behavioural model"[181].

In our analysis the focus is posed on those individuals who radicalize and become Islamist militants and engage in jihad adopting violent behaviours.

As previously stated, there is no single profile valid for all Islamist radicalized individuals but they rather composed a high heterogeneous group. "They can vary hugely in terms of education, family background, age, gender, intelligence and economic classes […]"[182]. Consequently, the pathway through which they engage in

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[179] *Ibidem.*
[180] Juan Josè Escobar Stemmann, *Middle East Salafism's Influence and Radicalization of Muslim Communities in Europe*, Middle East Review of International Affairs, Vol.10, n.3, September, 2006, p.1.
[181] *Ibidem*, p.8.
[182] Andrew Silke, *Holy Warriors. Exploring the Psychological Processes of Jihadi Radicalization*, European Journal of Criminology, Vol.5, n.1, 2008, p.105.

violent activities varies. Nevertheless, academic research has identified a number of factors that seem to be apparently common in most radicalization processes. All these factors are not necessary causes for radicalization, but rather sufficient. Additionally, there can be situations in which radicalization is the result of a combination of these factors or just the product of one of them.

According to existing researches and accessible information released by national security services, it seems that generally the Islamist radicalization process occurs at four distinct stages: the pre-radicalization phase, the conversion and identification phase, the conviction and indoctrination phase and lastly the action phase[183]. It is important to stress that there is no empirical data, which shows a common sequential pattern moving from the first to the fourth phase, nor that the process takes place within a determined period of time, nor that all the four phases occur altogether. Briefly, the first pre-radicalization phase can be described as the set of an individual's background factors that exist before the actual process of radicalization takes place. These represent the main explanation behind a person's positive reception to radical Islam. In the second phase individuals modify their religious identities, which can assume three different forms[184]. First, an individual can change from non-having a specific faith to adopt radical Islam. Second there can be a shift from a more traditional view of Islam towards a more radical interpretation of it. Third, there can be a shift from a certain religion, such as Christianity, towards radical Islam.

In the third phase of conviction and indoctrination individuals who begin to appear as potential Islamist extremists, commence to distance themselves from their previous way of living and further deeply embrace the cause of radical Islam. Lastly, the fourth phase concerns "[…] the critical action […] where focus is on implementation, planning, target selection, surveillance, fabrication of explosives or other means of terrorism and possibly carrying out a test run"[185]. This phase concerns the full acceptance by Islamist militants to perpetrate a violent attack and the process of radicalization ends. As already stated, these four phases do not entertain a sequential relationship, but they rather overlap with each other. This is the

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[183] Tomas Precht, *Home grown terrorism and Islamist radicalization. From conversion to terrorism*, Research Report funded by the Danish Ministry of Justice, December, 2007, p.33.
[184] *Ibidem*, p.35.
[185] *Ibidem*, p.37.

reason behind my decision in this analysis to not consider phase after phase but rather to explore which are the main influential factors beneath the overall process of Islamist radicalization.

First, the personal and public environments both play a crucial role in boosting radicalization. Individuals may experience personal trauma, grievances and crises, which could make them more vulnerable toward radical Islam. Indeed, these grievances could make them seek revenge against those who are perceived as responsible and eventually radical groups can offer ways as well as means to fulfil this need [186]. Additionally, the personal environment of an individual may be characterized by the presence of family members, friends and beloved ones who are already members or in contact with radical Islamist groups. This could easily be responsible for an individual's first approach to the radical interpretation of Islam. Furthermore, the public environment is highly crucial in the radicalization process. As previously stated, to experience of discrimination, alienation, social exclusion or poverty can lead to a growing sentiment of discontent and frustration towards the country and society in which they live and radical Islamist groups can offer ways to seek for revenge. Indeed, it can offer relief from these feelings by offering increasing personal dignity, respect, honour and a sense of belonging. Several statistics found that in most European countries Muslims struggle in finding a job and in achieving higher education[187].

Despite the lack of a considerable amount of empirical data, it has been found that the most susceptible to radical Islam are young people and Western young Muslims of second and third generation[188]. Consequently, another important factor that can push these young Muslims toward radical Islam is their experience of a sort of identity crisis. Those of second and third generation living in the West can face such a crisis when they feel divided between the new secular and multi-cultural society of the country in which they live and the traditional Islamic culture proposed by their parents[189]. This crisis can serve as a motivation to pass from a perceived passive

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[186] Jessica Stern, *The Protean Enemy*, Foreign Affairs, Vol. 82, n.4, July-August, 2003.

[187] Katrin Bennhold, *In Germany, immigrants face a tough road*, International Herald Tribune, December 30, 2005.

[188] Margarita Bizina and David H. Gray, *Radicalization of Youth as Growing Concern for Counter-Terrorism Policy*, Global Security Studies, Vol.5, N.1, Winter 2014, pp.72-79.

[189] Robin Niblet, *Islamic Extremism in Europe*, Statement before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Subcommittee on European Affairs, April 5, 2006.

position in the host society toward a more active role by joining Islamic radical groups, which can offer them opportunities, a new identity and a sentiment of excitement for being active.

This general struggle of belonging that is experienced by a variety of people shows how crucial the Muslim identity is in the process of radicalization. Within Islam there has always been professed a strong sense of Muslim identity, mostly emphasized by radical Islam. Muslims feel a deep sentiment of identification towards the Ummah, the entire Muslim community. Radical Islam strongly underlines this feeling and pushes for the development of a deep sense of responsibility for protecting the Ummah from outside threats, which make them to consider the supremacy of their Islamic identity when compared to the national and ethnic ones[190]. Radical Islamists advocate the necessary fulfilment for every Muslims of the individual duty of engaging in jihad in order to protect and guarantee the survival of the Ummah. Looking at Western countries such a strong religious identity is missing. Western people, especially those who suffer from social exclusion, depression, loneliness and relational issues become very attractive to this deep dimension of radical Islam, which seems to offer a brand new identity and a sense of belonging.

Nevertheless, the above-mentioned factors are not necessary causes of Islamist radicalization. The majority of people, in particular Muslims living in Western countries, do constantly suffer from economic, political, social and cultural deprivation and they do not radicalize. Following this line of reasoning, it is important to continue searching for trigger factors that boost Islamist radicalization. First, it is relevant to analyse the political landscape at the national as well as the international levels. Nowadays, most foreign policies of Western countries contribute significantly to the current perception that the Muslim community is living under a constant threat. The so-called War on Terror is mostly perceived by the Ummah as a War against Islam[191]. Starting from the wars in Afghanistan, Chechnya, Bosnia, Iraq and many others, several images run over the Internet portraying violence, injustices,

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[190] Andrew Silke, *Holy Warriors. Exploring the Psychological Processes of Jihadi Radicalization*, European Journal of Criminology, Vol.5, n.1, 2008, p.102.

[191] Article, *War on Terror, War on Muslims?,* Al-Jazeera Politics Section, October 27, 2014, available at   http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/empire/2014/10/war-terror-war-islam-20141022122932493495.html

rapes and maltreatment conduct on Muslim populations[192]. Additionally, other single aggravating incidents fuelled this perception. A contemporary example happened in 2005 when the Danish newspaper *Jyllandsposten* publicised the provocative cartoons depicting Prophet Muhammad."[These] cartoons were considered blasphemous by many Muslims worldwide and resulted in widespread violence and destruction"[193]. Lastly, the idea that the Muslim community is under a constant attack is fuelled by the ideological propaganda of radical Islam. They emphasized the need for every good Muslim to fulfil the individual duty of engaging in jihad to defeat these hostile outside forces in order to guarantee the survival of the Ummah. They portray this fight as a war between the good and the evil. This constructed representation appeal those Muslims who feel a desire to actively do something to stop all the injustices and threats that their fellow brothers and sisters are currently suffering from. Organizations and groups embracing this ideology become strong appeals for all those who are experiencing frustration, humiliation, boredom, loneliness and who are seeking for a personal Muslim identity. Additionally, the perception of a constantly threatened Muslim community can have a strong attraction to non-Muslim people who are touched and shocked by the images, videos and sayings of preachers referring to the injustices and maltreatments of Muslims.

Thus, the presence of particular charismatic spiritual leaders and of radical imams is crucial for understanding individuals' attraction to the radical interpretation of Islam. These figures thanks to their authoritative religious positions are likely to influence especially young individuals' set of beliefs. They appeared to be a common trigger factor behind most recent terrorist attacks. Of particular relevance was the radical Londoner preacher Abdullah al-Faisal who put into contact the perpetrators of the London bombing[194]. Radical imams and preachers conduct successful radical Islamist propaganda thanks to their presence in the mosques and to all the new available technologies of communication.

Mosques appear to be integral parts of the daily lives of the overall Muslim population. "They are not just centres for the worship and spiritual enrichment, but

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[192] Peter R. Neumann, *Europe's Jihadist Dilemma*, Survival, vol. 48, no.2, 2006, p.76.
[193] Tomas Precht, *Home grown terrorism and Islamist radicalization. From conversion to terrorism*, Research Report funded by the Danish Ministry of Justice, December, 2007, p.52.
[194] Shiv Malik, *Journey into terror of my brother the 7/7 leader*, *Sunday Times*, May 27, 2007.

they host educational activities, perform welfare functions and serve as a gathering place for different generations"[195]. Indeed, from recent studies it was argued that radical Islamists were attempting at transforming local mosques as 'safe heavens' where they could gather together to organize logistics, conduct fund-raising and propaganda campaigns[196]. "However, the increased focus of intelligence services, initiatives in Muslim circles to resist extremism and the banning of radical preachers have had the effect that mosques are not the main hotspots for radicalization"[197]. Moreover, radical Islamists have now contributed to the emergence of the new tendency of gathering in more private environments, such as cafés, libraries, bookshops and private homes.

Furthermore, prisons have long been recognized as places facilitating radicalization. First, prisoners live in isolation from the society as well as from the beloved ones. This way of living can increase frustration, humiliation, depression and discrimination that can make them more vulnerable to search for a religious orientation such as radical Islam[198]. They can increase their need to find a group identity or fulfil a desire of belonging. Second, the combination of a lack of active Imams preaching in prisons with the presence of radical Islamists prisoners can subject the rest of the prisoners to a distort representation of Islam.

Another crucial factor that completely transform the process of radicalization is Internet. The academic research released several findings supporting the thesis that Internet can accelerate the process of radicalization. First, it has become the new platform where to conduct most propaganda and recruitment campaigns. Internet, by being relatively cheap and accessible to everyone, permits individuals from all over the world to interact in an immediate and continuous way. Moreover, it allows radicalization to take place without entertaining any physical contacts. Therefore, Internet limits the set of the overall logistical problems concerned with the organization of gatherings, such as the travel or choosing a meeting place. In

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[195] Peter R. Neumann and Brooke Rogers, *Recruitment and Mobilisation for the Islamist Militant Movement in Europe*, King's College London for the European Commission, December, 2007, p.33, available at http://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/doc_centre/terrorism/docs/ec_radicalisation_study_on_mobilisation_tactics_en.pdf.

[196] AIVD, Recruitment for the Jihad in the Netherlands, The Hague: AIVD, 2002, p.13.

[197] Tomas Precht, *Home grown terrorism and Islamist radicalization. From conversion to terrorism*, Research Report funded by the Danish Ministry of Justice, December, 2007, p.65.

[198] AIVD, Violent Jihad in the Netherlands – current trends in the Islamist terrorist threat, General Intelligence and Security Service in the Netherlands (AIVD), Hague, 2006, P.62.

addition, Internet augments the opportunities for self-radicalization[199]. First, it offers a 'one-stop-shop' for finding every kind of information related to radical Islam. Moreover, individuals can use Internet to share information and suggestions such as manuals on explosives, on how to home-make a bomb or on how to successfully attract new funding for a radical organization. Furthermore, as scholars Yeap and Park observe, "individuals have the comfort of accessing radical context from their own personal space instead of having to go through the inconvenience of physically attending radical religious gatherings"[200]. Internet increases the chances of self-radicalization by putting individuals in contact with each other, without the need of actually socialize and meet radical groups. Within the framework of Internet, social media play a major role. Profiles, posts, images and videos on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube can shape and move individual attitudes towards sympathising radical Islam.

The overall above-mentioned factors demonstrate on how many levels the process of Islamist radicalization is influenced. All these factors increase the changes for individuals to have first an early contact with radical Islam, followed by the adoption of it as a new religious belief and become members of groups, associations and organizations, which constitute the wide network of radical Islam. As previously stated, once an individual radicalize and embrace radical Islamist ideas does not mean that he will immediately engage in violent and radical behaviours. For radicalized individuals to shift from theory into practice other factors might be involved. "It is important to note that the final phase leading to an attack can occur quickly and without warning"[201].

First most people experiencing the process of radicalization at this stage join radical Islamist groups or organizations. These will be the responsible for finally indoctrinating individuals at engaging in jihad. There will be in their home countries an arrangement of sorts of training camps in which the members can perform paramilitary activities in order to strength the internal cohesion as well as

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[199] Ines von Behr, Anais Reding, Charlie Edwards and Luke Gribbon, *Radicalization in the Digital Era. The use of Internet in 15 causes of Terrorism and Extremism*, Report Rand Europe, 2013, availble   at http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR400/RR453/RAND_RR453.pdf.
[200] Su Yin Yeap and Jenna Park, *Countering Internet Radicalisation: A Holistic Approach*, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, 2010.
[201] Tomas Precht, *Home grown terrorism and Islamist radicalization. From conversion to terrorism*, Research Report funded by the Danish Ministry of Justice, December, 2007, p.66.

commitment toward the rest of the group. This training period will provide them with both military and religious education. Furthermore, these camps can reinforce group solidarity but also are useful tools to show who is more a suitable candidate for committing attacks.

Another relevant catalyst that can lead to violent action is overseas travel, which has multiple effects. On one side it can serve as an ideological enhancement mechanism. On the other side it might serve for developing actual military operational capabilities. When individuals experience an overseas travel with the duty to fight, they might develop inspirations to participate in foreign conflict zones. Furthermore, they can receive such a high military training and gaining new experience operational skills that they can return back to their home countries and are able to successfully perpetrate a violent attack. A contemporary example is the one of the Kouachis brothers, who in January 2015 in Paris killed 12 people in the offices of the satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo. It was later found that one of the two brothers spent time training in Yemen over the past five years[202].

In conclusion, we might confirm the previous assumption concerning the complexity of the Islamist radicalization process. It involves so many different levels of analysis, which continuously overlap with one another while being shaped by the constantly changing surrounding environment. A combination of excessive secularism with a decrease of human interpersonal relationships has caused an increase individual's search for a new identity and for a sense of belonging. Radical Islam appears to offer all of this.

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[202] Jason Burke, *The road that led from tough Paris estate to radical Yemen training,* The Guardian, January 10, 2015, available at http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jan/10/charlie-hebdo-paris-attack-yemen-connection.

3. The Case of the Islamic State in the Iraqi and Syrian Conflict

Nowadays, the phenomenon of foreign fighters has become a central topic in international security forums as well as in counter-terrorism centres. Despite the fact that it is not a relatively new phenomenon, it has received growing attention only for few years, especially after the emergence of the Syrian Civil War. This conflict erupted in Spring 2011 as revolts against Bashar al-Assad regime. Shortly after, the civil war turned into a proper conflict with the emergence of countless armed groups, armed forces and jihadist organizations seeking the control of the country. A specific organization, known as the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) led by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi immediately understood the opportunity the Syrian conflict represented to expand its territory as well as its ideology. Once ISI reached the Syrian territory, it changed name into Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Only in 2014, the leader decided to definitely change the organization's name in only Islamic State (IS).

In this chapter the attention is focused on the crucial role played by the Islamic State for being responsible of the highest foreign fighters mobilization ever occurred in history. The first paragraph will briefly provide a general overview of the Syrian conflict by outlining the major trigger events. The second one will explore the historical roots of the Islamic State in order to understand its development from being an ordinary branch of the major terrorist group al-Qaeda to become the most dangerous entity threatening the international community. Third, it is of extreme utility to understand the ideology behind the actions of the Islamic State in order to deeply comprehend the true nature and meaning of the message that it is constantly sending throughout its violent attacks, beheadings, kidnapping, rapes and military assaults conducted towards selected targets. Finally, the fourth paragraph will analyse the extensive social media strategy of the Islamic State, which is considered to represent the most effective tool for the recruitment of possible future foreign fighters. The Islamic State has insofar mobilized approximately 20.000 individuals within its ranks and the number does not seem to stop growing. Therefore, attempting to extensively answer to the crucial question of why the Islamic State is so characterized by such a high mobilization is of extreme importance for understanding the foreign fighter phenomenon.

3.1. The Syrian Uprising

The Syrian conflict erupted as non-violent manifestations organized by local Syrian people against the government of President Bashar al-Assad. "Born on September 11 1956, he is the second son of the former Syrian President Hafez al-Assad, who took power in 1970"[203]. For three entire decades his father succeeded in establishing and maintaining a strong military control over the entire Syrian population. Bashar received an international education, first studying medicine at the University of Damascus and then moving to Europe in England to start working. He was raised without taking into account the possibility of his involvement in the Syrian political life. Indeed, his father chose Bashar's older brother to succeed him, but he eventually died in a car accident. Shortly after, Bashar had to return back to Syria and in 2000, when his father passed, through a public referendum he was appointed as the new Syrian President. During the first years of his term, the entire population believed that Bashar could represent a new start, a shift towards a more modern and democratic state. At least this was the common belief and hope after living under a dictatorship for thirty years. At the time of his appointment Bashar had to confront himself with a dramatic situation that characterized the country: a highly corrupted administrative apparatus, a weak international possibility of manoeuvre and a strong economic recession. Despite all the initial promises of adopting modern reforms, the situation did not change. In addition, Bashar was also the chief of the army, which permitted him for a decade to limit and suppress any kind of internal dissention through violent means. In 2010 the revolutionary wave of the Arab Spring spread in many countries such as Tunisia, Libya and Egypt where national populations organized protests to express their dissatisfaction towards their official governments. The aim of these demonstrations was to achieve concrete democratic changes and to overthrow corrupted regimes. The Arab Spring's wave found Syria to be an easy target, especially for the situation of the country, which was characterized by an increasing lack of political freedoms and poor socio-economic conditions. In March 2011 in the southern city of Daraa, close to the Jordanian border, the first anti-government manifestations took place. Around fifteen students drew some anti-

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[203] Bio. website, page Bashar asl-Assad Bibliography, http://www.biography.com/people/bashar-al-assad-20878575#synopsis.

government graffiti on a school's walls. This event is responsible to be the lit of the Syrian flame. Indeed, "[t]hese students were accused of scrawling graffiti that said 'The people want to topple the regime' [...] Such graffiti was becoming so common in the region that it was needed to buy spray cans"[204]. Few days later, the police arrested these boys while the families attempted unsuccessfully to demand the release of their children and consequently local people began to protest. In Daraa the government troops successfully cracked down on the protestors by opening fire and killing four people. Eventually the young boys were released from prison but the immediate and shocking news of their torture during their detention time spread across the country by having a significant impact on all protestors. In March 2011 manifestations spread across Syria, reaching cities like Jassem, Homs and Da'el. The immediate response of the government was to resort to a full-scale siege. The uprising, which began as a non-violent movement protests quickly turned into a real conflict. Syrians were still asking the government to adopt those democratic reforms once promised by the President. In the spring of the same year Bashar declared in a speech his will to take concrete measure in order to listen the protestors' requests. The main promise was to form a complete new cabinet and to finally accept other political parties within the political arena. Nevertheless, the increasing mobilization of armed force equipped with heavy weapons continued producing ongoing clashes with demonstrators and causing a growing number of victims. As a response, Western countries decide to take several actions attempting to stop the conflict resorting mostly to economic sanctions. The EU as well as the U.S. banned oil imports from Syria while the EU alone imposed a strict army embargo. Additionally, Syria lost its status of membership from the Arab League. Despite all these efforts, by the end of 2011 "the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay [claimed that] more than 5000 people have been killed in the Syrian conflict"[205]. Bashar, being the Commander-in-Chief of the army permitted the involvement of affiliated parties such as the National Defence Force and the *Shabiha*, which are unofficial pro-government militias. Both were responsible for several military sieges conducted across the country.

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[204] Joe Sterling, *Daraa: the spark that lit the Syrian flame*, CNN, March 1, 2014, http://edition.cnn.com/2012/03/01/world/meast/syria-crisis-beginnings/.
[205] Thomas Plofchan, *Timeline: Syrian civil war*, The Cairo reviews of global affairs, The American University of Cairo, May 14, 2014, http://www.aucegypt.edu/gapp/cairoreview/pages/articledetails.aspx?aid=579.

From the beginning of the uprising, the anti-government faction has been always highly fragmented and uncoordinated. All different groups were driven by different ideologies, religious beliefs, geographic positions and political aspirations. Indeed, today in Syria it is believed that there are more than thousand of non-state armed groups actively operating. "Many of the groups are small and operate on a local level, but a number have emerged as powerful forces with affiliates across the country or formed alliances with other groups that share a similar agenda"[206]. To better grasp such a complex landscape, the Human Rights Council released in 2014 a Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic. In this work all non-state armed groups are divided in four broad umbrellas: the Syrian moderate nationalists, the Syrian Islamic armed groups, the Radical Jihadist groups and the Kurdish armed groups[207]. It has been of widespread use to refer to the Syrian moderate nationalists as the opposition, while to the other three groups as rebels. The first denomination comprehends "the wide variety of political groups, exiled dissidents, grassroots activists and armed militants, who have not been able to agree on how to overthrow President Bashar al-Assad"[208]. This lack of co-ordination increased the degree of fragmentation of the opposition, limiting its effectiveness and range of action. The most prominent groups are the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, which was created in November 2012 in Qatar; the Syrian National Council, born in October 2011 in Turkey, which has played the major role in being the point of contact with the international community and the National Co-ordination Committee, created in June 2011. All these groups are trying to present their selves as legitimate and credible alternatives to Bashar's government. Of particular attention is the Free Syrian Army (FSA), which has been formed at the end of June 2011 by seven Sunni defecting officers. Because since the beginning this group has been highly fragmented, consisting of many battalions and brigades driven by different agendas, "experts have described FSA as an umbrella term encompassing a range of non-state armed

[206]*Syria Crisis: Guide to Armed and Political Opposition, Guide to the Syrian Rebels*, BBC News, December 13, 2013, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-24403003.

[207] UN Human Rights Council, "Report of the independent international commission of inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic", Paragragh B. Non-State armed groups, p.7, A/HRC/25/65, February 12, 2014, http://www.ohchr.org/en/hrbodies/hrc/iicisyria/pages/independentinternationalcommission.aspx.

[208] *Syria Crisis: Guide to Armed and Political Opposition, Guide to the Syrian Opposition*, BBC News, December 13, 2013, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-15798218.

groups fighting against government forces, rather than a defined military unit"[209]. Of particular attention is the quickly and effective proliferation of Jihadist groups, which were able in a short period of time to expand and reach control over several Syrian territories. A first example is the Al-Nusra Front born in January 2012 and operates already in 11 out of 14 governorates of the country. It began to act as an uncoordinated group, which relied its effectiveness only on suicide bombings, but shortly it disciplined its soldiers enabling them to gain complete control of the northern territory of Syria. Another prominent jihadist group is the Islamic State. It was born in the early years of 2000 in Iraq as Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), but after the appearance of the Syrian Uprising, they publicly announced the will to include Syria in their project to restore the Muslim caliphate reuniting the Ummah. IS is proving to be one of the most violent and outrageous rebel group in the Syrian civil war, especially because it is involved in conflicts with government forces as well as with other opposition groups. Within the last group of the Human Rights Council classification the main actor is the Kurdish Popular Protection Units (YPG), which is "the armed wing of the Kurdish political party, the Democratic Unity Party (PYD), an affiliate of the Kurdish zone in north-eastern Syria"[210].

Turkey as a Gateway

The international community considers the Syrian conflict a matter of global security especially for the high level of foreign fighters mobilization. Syria became the best attractive scenario also because of the easiness of reaching it. Compared to other countries the travel to Syria is less expensive, less dangerous and faster. For example, in the 1980's reaching Afghanistan was not an easy journey. The route comprehended countries such as Iran and Pakistan, making the travel less safe and longer. Today, there are several options to travel to Syria such as to fly, to drive or to take the train. The main role has been surely played by Turkey. From 2011 until 2014 the Turkish President Erdogan adopted a very loose and open door border

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[209] Charles Lister, *Dynamic Stalemate: Surveying Syria's Military Landscape,* Policy Briefing, Brooking Institution, May 19, 2014, http://www.brookings.edu/~/media/Research/Files/Papers/2014/05/19%20syria%20military%20 landscape%20lister/Syria%20Military%20Landscape%20English.pdf.
[210] *Syria Crisis: Guide to Armed and Political Opposition,* BBC News, December 13, 2013, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-24403003.

policy permitting several foreign fighters to cross the long 911 km border with Syria. In addition, the geographic proximity between Europe and Turkey led the latter to become the primary gateway for European foreign fighters to the Syrian-Iraqi region. The European Union and the U.S. State Department are deeply concerned with Turkey's approach towards Syria. Erdogan's presidency has been accused of not adopting immediate measures for impeding the transit to Syria. It is believed for several reasons that in the first years of the Syrian uprising, Turkey deliberately decided to turn a blind eye on what was happening on the shared border with Syria. First, the anti-Assad position of the Turkish government is behind the decision to initially financially support some of the opposition factions to the Syrian regime, such as the Free Syrian Army. Second, once IS reached Syria it has been initially seen by Turkey as a strategic mean to be exploit against the Syrian Kurdish Party, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), which is affiliated with the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK), considered by Turkey as a terrorist organization. An example of this voluntary blind eye is the Turkish approach towards the Islamist group Jabhat al-Nusra. In December 2012 "The United States has formally designated the Al Nusra Front, the militant Syrian rebel group, as a foreign terrorist organization"[211] because of its ties with al-Qaeda. The Turkish government decided to label the Islamist group as a terrorist organization only in 2014, even though "the decision is being seen as a marked change in Ankara's policy towards the Syrian conflict"[212] because more in line with the policy of the other Western countries. The Turkish relaxed border policy is the main reason behind the decision of Islamist organizations, especially IS, for choosing it as the primary transit route. The Turkish-Syrian border is not only used for transferring foreign fighters, but also for oil, weapons and cash transfer. It is important to stress that also the facilitating networks built by IS made travelling through Turkey an easy route. The Islamic State delivered an e-book called "Hijrah to the Islamic State: What to Pickup, Who to Contact, Where to Go, Stories and

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[211] Michael R. Gordon and Anne Bernard, U.*S. places Militant Syrian Rebel Group on List of Terrorist Organizations*, The New York Times, Section Middle East, Dec. 10, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/11/world/middleeast/us-designates-syrian-al-nusra-front-as-terrorist-group.html?_r=0.
[212] Dorian Jones, *Turkey Designates Al-Nusra Front as a Terrorist Organization*, Voice of America, Section Middle East, June 04, 2014, http://www.voanews.com/content/turkey-designates-al-nusra-front-as-a-terrorist-organization/1929675.html.

More!"[213]. It is a comprehensive guide on how to cross the Syrian border indicating practical advices, witnesses of other foreign fighters and a contact list in case of needing help. There are several suggestions in order to not arouse suspicion such as to buy a return ticket or to be prepared on some of the most important touristic Turkish sites to be identified as tourists. In the e-book there is also a list of standard answers to give to the airport police and an entire chapter is dedicated to women travelling to Syria alone without their husbands. How easy is to travel from Turkey to Syria was confirmed in an interview by Huseyin Mustafa Peri, a 25 years old Turkish man who in 2014 joined the Islamic State and was later wounded and captured by the Kurds (YPG)[214]. He gave a 20 minutes long interview to Al-Monitor in which he explains how easy was to cross the border[215]. He said that there are many IS recruiters who give you mobile numbers to call. The people on the line will give you instructions on which city to reach and once you arrive there will be someone who will drive you directly to the border and then you have to run fast. He said that during the actual crossing of the border there was no reason to run because there were no Turkish soldiers, but he run because everyone else did it.

3.2.   Historical roots of the Islamic State

The Syrian Civil War erupted in 2011 is considered by the international community to be the worst conflict and humanitarian crisis after World War II in terms of brutality, involvement of foreign fighters and refugees crisis[216]. The group known as Islamic State (IS) severely contributed to the persistence of insecurity and instability in the Middle East[217]. In order to better comprehend the ideological and political

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[213] The completed text of the e-book is available at
https://thejihadproject.files.wordpress.com/2015/05/hijrah-to-the-islamic-state.pdf.
[214] Amberin Zaman, *Captured fighter details Isamic State's Turkey Connection*, Al-Monitor, June 17, 2015, http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/06/turkey-syria-iraq-isis-new-turkish-unit-lures-kurds.html#.
[215] Full interview available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jOkDoHVdxz0.
[216] European Commission*, Syria Crisis*, Echo Factsheet, Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection DG, August, 2015.
[217] Zana Khasraw Gulmohamad, *The Rise and Fall of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (Levant) ISIS*, Global Security Studies, Vol.5, N.2, Spring 2014.

dimensions of the Islamic State, it is of significant utility to explore its roots that can be traced to the Islamist terrorist organization of Al-Qaeda.

Everything started in the 1980's during the Afghanistan war in which Islamists from all around the world travelled to the country to join the conflict against the Soviet Union's invasion. During this war, all mujaheddins received military training as well as financial support from both states and non-state entities to fight against the Communist Soviets. Furthermore, the charismatic Palestinian preacher Abdullah Azzam was able to lay the foundations of a complete new jihadi ideology. He established in Pakistan the Maktab al-Khadamat (MAK), an office with the duty of administer the funding received by outside donors and of coordinating all foreign mujaheddins. It is important to note that Azzam was the spiritual mentor of Osama Bin Laden who joined MAK indeed. Bin Laden was a wealthy Saudi businessman who "[…] appears to have adopted Islamist militant views while studying at King Abdul Aziz University in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia"[218]. In 1988 Azzam as well as Bin Laden began to call the Islamist network they set up as Al-Qaeda, which literally means 'the base'[219]. At the end of the 1980's, towards the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan (1989), al-Qaeda leaders were contemplating on how and in which terms the organization could be further used once the Afghanistan war ended. On one side, Azzam aimed at consolidating the organization as the new "[…] 'rapid reaction force', available to intervene wherever Muslims were perceived to be threatened"[220]. On the other side, Bin Laden wanted the Islamist activists of al-Qaeda to return to their home countries in order to attempt at toppling pro-Western and secular governments. Nevertheless, in 1989 Azzam was murdered and Bin Laden acquired the leadership of the al-Qaeda network, enabling him to promote his global cause. It is important to note that one of the most important confident of Bin Laden was the Egyptian Ayman al-Zawahiri who became his main strategist.

Bin Laden immediately advocated his new conviction according to which Jihad needed to be conducted on a global level starting by attacking the core of the West, the United States. During the first half of the 1990's al-Qaeda remained largely dormant, especially because Bin Laden travelled to Sudan where he successfully

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[218] John Rollins, *Al Qaeda and Affiliates: Historical Perspective, Global Presence, and Implications for U.S. Policy*, Global Research Service, January 25, 2011, p.5.
[219] *Ibidem*, p.6.
[220] *Ibidem*.

portrayed himself as an Islamist philanthropist, expert of business and agriculture in order to gain support within the region[221]. It was only in 1996 that Bin Laden returned back to Afghanistan where he established the basis of the organization under the sponsorship of the Taliban[222]. He was able to transform al-Qaeda into a transnational organization especially thanks to his personal wealth, to the financial support from other Gulf entities and to an extensive recruitment campaign. In 1996 he proclaimed his first *fatwa* entitled 'Declaration of War Against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Places'[223], in which he claimed that Muslims were "the main targets for the aggression of the Zionist-Crusaders alliance"[224]. Following, he issued another fatwa in 1998 in which he called every Muslim from all around the world to engage in a violent jihad against these Zionist-Crusaders enemies[225]. It is believed that before the 9/11 attacks, al-Qaeda comprehended a contingent of approximately 3.000 men including " a core of about 200 people, a 122 person martyrdom brigade and several dozen foot soldiers recruited from the 700-or-so graduates of its training camps"[226]. Nevertheless, some scholars as Jason Burke argue that al-Qaeda was never so cohesive and coherent as many others thought, but it rather "[…] functioned like a venture capital firm providing funding, contacts and expert advice to many different militant groups and individuals from all over the Islamic worlds"[227].

The key figure and founding father of the Islamic State is the Islamist Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, born in Jordan in the town of al-Zarqwa, northeast of Amman. Al-Zarqawi's process of radicalization was mainly influenced by the jihadi doctrine preached by Azzam. Indeed in 1989 he travelled to Afghanistan to fight the Soviets "[...] where he began a close relationship with Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, from

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[221] Abdullahi A. Gallab, *The first Islamist republic: development and disintegration of Islamism in Sudan*, Ashgate Publishing, 2008, p.127.
[222] Erin Marie Saltman and Charlie Winter, *Islamic State: The Changing Face of Modern Jihadism*, Quilliam, November, 2014, p.17.
[223] Translated text available at http://www.pbs.org/newshour/updates/military-july-dec96-fatwa_1996/.
[224] *Ibidem.*
[225] Osama bin Laden, *Jihad Against Jews and Crusaders*, Federation of American Scientists, 2008.
[226] Thomas Hegghammer, *Global Jihadism after the Iraq War*, The Middle East Journal, Winter, 2006, p.14.
[227] Jason Burke, *Al Qaeda*, Foreign Policy, May/June, 2008, p.18.

whom Zarqawi learned the strict tenets of Jihadi-Salafism"[228]. Once he returned home in Jordan in 1993, he was imprisoned on terrorism charges for being found in possession of explosives with al-Maqdisi and together set up in prison a jihadi missionary group relied upon an inflexible interpretation of Salafi-jihadi doctrine against the well-established Jordanian monarchy. They were released six years after in 1999 with a general amnesty. Because of his constant failure in toppling the Jordanian government, he returned back to Afghanistan creating an Islamist group named Jama'at al-Tawhid wal-Jihad (JTJ), and setting up and running in Herat a military training camp. In these years spent in Afghanistan al-Zarqawi also personally met Osama Bin Laden. Following the 9/11 attacks (2001) and the consequent U.S. invasion of Afghanistan (2001), al-Zarqawi decided to move to the Kurdish areas of northern Iraq. Nevertheless, in 2003 the U.S. invaded and immediately occupied Iraq according to the Bush administration conviction to help the country stabilize and make further steps towards democracy[229]. Once the Saddam Hussein's regime crumbled down the immediate result was the emergence of a serious political vacuum and an insurgency occurred, especially led by the Sunni minorities of the country. JTJ was one of the most predominant insurgent groups. Indeed, al-Zarqawi thanks to his previously established jihadi networks was able to easily manage the arrival of well-trained and experienced Muslim foreign fighters. The JTJ aimed at achieving the complete withdrawal of the US occupying forces from Iraq, to overthrow the new Iraqi interim government and to target also Shiites with the final goal to establish an Islamic State in which Sharia Law reigns supreme. It was in October 2004 that eventually al-Zarqawi officially announced his commitment and loyalty oath (*bay'ha*) to the network of al-Qaeda Central (AQC) based in Afghanistan, defined as the top leadership controlled by Bin Laden with the help of al-Zawahiri. The new organization of al-Zarqawi was renamed as *Tanzim Qai'dat al-Jihad fi Bilad al Rafidayn* (literally meaning Organization in the Land of the two Rivers), otherwise known as al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). Despite this formal affiliation to AQC, al-Zarqawi continued to propose his personal jihadist agenda. "Indeed, his and Bin Laden's relationship was, more than anything else, a marriage

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[228] Cole Bunzel, *From Paper State to Caliphate: The Ideology of the Islamic State*, Analysis Project, The Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World, N.19, March, 2015, p.13.
[229] Ahmed S. Hashim, *From Al-Qaeda Affiliate to the Rise of the Islamic Caliphate: The Evolution of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS),* Policy Report, S. Rajaratham School of International Studies, December, 2004, p.4.

of convenience, a union made primarily for pragmatic reasons: al-Zarqawi clearly needed access to al-Qaeda Central's finances and global infrastructures and, to get this, subordination to Bin Laden was necessary"[230]. During the insurgency AQI reached its peak especially thanks to its well-experienced and high war tactics if compared to other insurgent groups. "Rather than using only guerrilla tactics in ambushes, raids and hit-and-run attacks against the U.S. forces like the other groups did, it relied heavily on suicide bombings, often using car bombs or individual suicide bombers"[231]. This AQI's *modus operandi* increased grave concern among AQC's leaders especially al-Zawahiri. On 9 July 2005, he also sent a letter to al-Zarqawi in which he expressed his concern over these brutal tactics noting that they could move AQI towards decreasing local support and disengagement. It is not verified whether this manifestation of concern had a direct effect or not, however in January 2006 AQI constituted an umbrella organization[232] named the Mujahideen Shura Council (MSC) in order to merge all Sunni insurgent groups together under the leadership of AQI.

Nevertheless, few months later on 7 June 2006 a U.S. airborne attack killed al-Zarqawi. This event turned to represent a critical turning point for AQI. The leadership of the organization was taken by Abu Hamza al-Muhajir, a top AQI operative, who shifts AQI targets against Shiite elements[233]. "Soon after, the organization announced the establishment of the Islamic State of Iraq [*Dawlat al-'Iraq al-Islamiyya*] (ISI) under the leadership of Abu Omar al-Baghdadi[234]"[235]. This first attempt at creating an Islamic State turned to be a failure. A first primary reason was the creation by the other Sunni insurgent groups of the 'Councils for the Awaking of Iraq' to establish an alliance with U.S. troops "[…] to fight ISI in return for promises to integrate the Sunni fighters into the Iraqi security services and for economic largesse to Sunni-majority areas"[236]. This new U.S. approach caused ISI

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[230] Erin Marie Saltman and Charlie Winter, *Islamic State: The Changing Face of Modern Jihadism*, Quilliam, November, 2014, p.29.

[231] *Ibidem*, p.4.

[232] *Ibidem*, p.6.

[233] Can Acun, *Neo al-Qaeda: The Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (ISIS)*, Seta Perspective, N.10, June, 2014, p.2.

[234] Very little is known about Abu Omar al-Baghdadi's early life.

[235] Ahmed S. Hashim, *From Al-Qaeda Affiliate to the Rise of the Islamic Caliphate: The Evolution of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS),* Policy Report, S. Rajaratham School of International Studies, December, 2004, p.6.

[236] *Ibidem*, p.6.

almost a complete lost of power during 2007 and 2009. Moreover, "ISI suffered a significant blow on 18 April 2010, when its top leadership [Abu Hamza al-Muhajir] and Abu Omar al-Baghdadi were both killed in a joint U.S.-Iraqi raid near Tikrit"[237]. By June 2010, 80% of the group's 42 leaders, including recruiters and financers, had been killed or captured, with only 8 remaining at large"[238]. Nevertheless, a former Baath Army Officer named General Haji Bakr became member of ISI and managed to launch a successful re-organizational process. It was Haji Bakr who was also responsible for the emergence of today's most successful leader of ISI. Indeed, Haji Bakr presented to and acquired the approval for the appointment of a new leader for ISI from AQC's new leader al-Zawahiri who replaced in 2011 the assassinated Osama Bin Laden. He achieved the appointment of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, namely Ibrahim. Very little is known about his life prior to his appointment that there are several versions of his biography. It is believed that he spent some years living in Fallujah working as either the imam or assistant of the imam at the local mosque. "He does not appear to have had any track record either as a fighter or as a leader, and one account of his earliest association with al-Qaeda in Iraq was merely in the passive role of a 'live letter box', whereby he would receive a package from an unidentified member of the group and hold it for collection by another"[239]. What is sure is that in 2004 U.S. forces in Iraq captured him and hold him in Camp Bucca because suspicious of a possible affiliation with al-Qaeda. Nevertheless, after 3 years he was released because considered by the U.S. forces as a less interest figure.

Al-Baghdadi successfully reorganized ISI in terms of internal structure, administration as well as of military apparatus. He first established the *al amara*, which functions as the executive organ composed by Abu Bakr himself and his primary advisors. It serves as a governing body for policymaking. Following, the rest of the organization is composed by two distinct echelons. The first comprehends the Shura Council, which covers the second most important role after *al amara*. Al-Baghdadi and other 9 to 11 members constitute this sort of Cabinet. Following, there is also the Military Council, which deals with military policies as well as with military operations conducted in all the provinces (*wilayat*) controlled by ISI. The third and last component of this first echelon is the Security and Intelligence Council,

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[237] *Ibidem*, p.7.
[238] *Ibidem*.
[239] Richard Barret, *The Islamic State*, The Soufan Group, November, 2014, p.25.

which covers a wide range of areas. One of its primary duties is to constantly guarantee al-Baghdadi security for his movements, travels and engagements or to maintain active and protect the communication between the top leadership and the provincial governors (*wulah*). Additionally, it must ensure that these governors implement in their respective province the Caliph's decisions. The second echelon oversees and manages the finances of ISI "[…] especially as it pertains to the funding of its war machine and the running costs of its state-building process"[240].

In addition to this new organizational structure, al-Baghdadi was able to successfully attract new members within his circles. In June 2006 Iraq witnessed the formation of a new government presided by the new Shiite Prime Minister Nun al-Maliki. Immediately after his appointment, the new PM reassured the United States by declaring his willingness of gaining the support of both Sunni populations and insurgent groups, which fought in the Awakening movement. Indeed, "[American] observers of the Iraqi political scene were initially convinced that Iraq was on a path towards growth, development and stability" [241]. Nevertheless, following the establishment of the new government many western Sunni cities engaged in several protests and manifestations demanding for increased political representation, better standards of life and job opportunities. The new PM ignored these demands and began to increasingly marginalize Sunni people from the political arena as well as from the military apparatus and intelligence services. Consequently, Sunni demonstrations escalated and Maliki resort to violence means to crack down on protestors. "The anger with Maliki drove many Sunnis back to the jihadist organization (ISI) they had fought against so fiercely during the 'Awakening'"[242].

The most crucial, which positively influenced the endurance as well as the expansion of ISI is the Syrian Civil War, which erupted in the spring of 2011 against the Bashar al-Assad regime. "The Assad regime is secular; a heterodox sect, the Alawites – whom most in the Islamic world do not view as Muslims – dominated the regime, which was trying to crush Muslims during the civil war"[243]. Al-Baghdadi immediately foresaw the possible great advantages that could result from an intervention in the Syrian war. Fighters could improve their military tactical skills

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[240] *Ibidem*, p.9.
[241] *Ibidem*, p.10.
[242] *Ibidem*.
[243] *Ibidem*, p.11.

against a well-trained army. He decided in order to prepare the arrival of ISI to send a small contingent of operatives in the Syrian territory under the leadership of Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani otherwise known as Golani, an effective military commander. This group of soldiers, that fought under the label of Jahbat al-Nusra or mostly known as al-Nusra Front, was mainly composed by Islamist veterans. Once it crossed the Syrian border it immediately succeeded in most fights against the Assad's army becoming the most effective rebel fighting force. It was also able to gain the population's support in the closer areas of Aleppo for distributing foods and medicines. In order to exploit al-Nusra's ideological and political achievements, on 9 April 2013 al-Baghdadi publicly announced the merge of al Nusra and ISI creating the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (or Levant)[244]. Al-Baghdadi stated:

"It's now time to declare in front of the people of the Levant and world that the al Nusrah Front is but an extension of the Islamic State of Iraq and part of it [...] "!

"We laid for them plans, and drew up for them the policy of work, and gave them what financial support we could every month, and supplied them with men who had known the battlefields of jihad, from the emigrants and the natives"[245].

Nevertheless, the leader Golani denied any merger with ISI and reconfirmed its affiliation to AQC and its leader al-Zawahiri. The same al-Zawahiri backed the repudiation of the merger by sending in June 2013 a letter to al-Baghdadi in which he underlined the fact that he had been neither informed nor consulted of such unification and it was a grave disrespectful behaviour. Furthermore, "[…] al-Zawahiri was unable to reconcile the two groups or bring them to arbitration and eventually ordered Abu Bakr to limit his operations to Iraq while appointing Golani al-Qaeda's man in Syria"[246]. Nevertheless, al-Baghdadi refused to accept this compromise and in February 2014 led al-Zawahiri to formally announce that there

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[244] Anthony Shadid, *Iraqi Insurgent Group Names New Leaders*, New York Times, May 16, 2010, available at http://atwar.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/05/16/iraqi-insurgent-group-names-new-leaders/.
[245] Thomas Joscelyn, *Al Qaeda in Iraq, Al Nusrah Front emerges as rebranded single entity*, Long War Journal, September 4, 2013, available at http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2013/04/the_emir_of_al_qaeda.php.
[246] Richard Barret, *The Islamic State*, The Soufan Group, November, 2014, p.12.

was no kind of affiliation or network between AQC and ISIS, so that the former could not be considered responsible for the activities conducted by the latter[247].

Following the gains of many Sunni territories in Iraq as well as in Syria, on 29 June 2014 "[…] ISIS declared the revival of the Caliphate naming it Islamic State (IS) and Abu Bakr as Caliph Ibrahim"[248]. Additionally according "to religious interpretation, it was also requested that Muslims [from all over the world] give allegiance (*bay'ah*) to the Caliphate and its leader, al-Baghdadi"[249]. IS today represents the very first attempt to make revive such a governmental system. Indeed, "[a] caliphate as a system of government is considered by believers to be a divinely sanctioned religious monarchy that invests power in the hands of the caliph, who has the sole authority to declare jihad and interpret Islamic texts"[250]. The Islamic State succeeded in gaining to an extent popular legitimacy. Indeed, in a climate of regional destabilization "[…] IS was able to quietly enlarge its sphere of influence, collect funds, train its fighters and consolidate popularity like no other group before it"[251].

Today, the Islamic State is constantly expanding its territory while it established its two main headquarters in Mosul and Raqqa, respectively in Iraq and Syria. "The exact number of IS fighters is ambiguous; many Baathist groups, Sunni tribes, and other moderate Islamist groups have participated in the fighting against the Iraqi government alongside the Islamic State and may foreign fighters continue to join IS's ranks by crossing the Turkish border into Syria"[252]. A very particular feature of IS is one side the ability in the territories where it detains control to act like any other analogous well-established state. A very key component is the dedication reserved to the social services sector. "IS builds and maintains supermarkets, power lines, roads, religious schools, and post offices. They even have a police force and consumer protection office"[253]. Moreover, "[i]t [also] offers economic incentives such as protection of contraband trafficking activity and a share of the oil trade and

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[247] Thomas Joscelyn, *Al Qaeda's general command disowns the Islamic State of Iraq and the Sham*, Long War Journal, March 2, 2014.
[248] Richard Barret, *The Islamic State*, The Soufan Group, November, 2014, p.13.
[249] Colin Tucker, *The Islamic State. Origins, Goals and Future Implications*, The Eurasia Center, July 13, 2014, p.3.
[250] Elliot Friedland, *The Islamic State,* Special Report, Clarion Project, May 10, 2014, p.22.
[251] Erin Marie Saltman and Charlie Winter, *Islamic State: The Changing Face of Modern Jihadism*, Quilliam, November, 2014, p.32.
[252] Colin Tucker, *The Islamic State. Origins, Goals, and Future Implications*, The Eurasia Center, July 13, 2014, p.5.
[253]*Ibidem*, p.4.

smuggling in eastern Syria"[254]. On the other side IS remains the most brutal and violent organization in terms of mass attacks and number of deaths. "Fearful of ISIS power in the wake of its military success […], a number of local leaders and tribal elders sought to avoid an armed takeover by ISIS forces and agreed to peaceful surrender of their militias and occupation of their towns and villages"[255]. It is this double approach the core of the Islamic State, which on one side shows its barbarous force and inhuman acts in order to clarify what happens at the dissidents but on the other side with a more appeased approach it guarantees a quite standard of life to the joiners.

3.3. The Islamic State's Ideology

Despite the almost daily presence of the Islamic State on most front pages of world-spread newspapers, it is still surrounded by a veil of mystery. Like Major General Michael K. Nagata of the U.S. Central Commander remarked: "We do not understand the movement [intended as the Islamic State], and until we do, we are not going to defeat it". He also continues referring to IS's ideology by admitting: "We have not defeated the idea. We do not even understand the idea"[256]. This constant sense of unknown can be easily linked to the fact that despite IS was established already in 2004 as Islamic State of Iraq, it attracted the international community's attention only few years ago. The international perception was that the movement came out of the sudden. Additionally, "[a]lthough [IS] is an extensive of the global jihadist movement in its ideology and worldview, its social origins are rooted in a specific Jihadi context, and, to a lesser extent, in the Syrian war that has raged for almost four years"[257]. First, it is important to stress that "[i]ndividual members of the Islamic State are of course driven by numerous factors [and that] not all members are

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[254] Fewaz A. Gerges, *ISIS and the Third Wave of Jihadism*, Current History, December, 2014, p.340.
[255] Ahmed S. Hashim, *From Al-Qaeda Affiliate to the Rise of the Islamic Caliphate: The Evolution of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS),* Policy Report, S. Rajaratham School of International Studies, December, 2004, p.14.
[256] Eric Schmitt, *In Battle to Defang ISIS, U.S. Targets Its Psychology,* The New York Times, 28 December, 2014, available at http://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/29/us/politics/in-battle-to-defang-isis-us-targets-its-psychology-.html?_r=0.
[257] Fewaz A. Gerges, *ISIS and the Third Wave of Jihadism*, Current History, December, 2014, p.339.

motivated by – or even aware of – the ideology of the group that they support"[258]. But because the Islamic state is a concrete political entity it cannot be understood without linking it to its driven ideology.

The Islamic State belongs to the Islamic political thought of Jihadi-Salafism. As already analysed in the previous chapter, it is an ideological religious movement within Sunni Islam. "The movement is predicated on an extremist and minoritarian reading of Islamic scripture that is also textually rigorous, deeply rooted in a pre-modern theological tradition, and extensively elaborated by a recognized cadre of religious authorities"[259]. Additionally, the theological movement of Salafism within Sunni Islam highly influenced IS's ideology. It is primarily concentrate on the purification of the faith. It accuses and tries to eliminate those who practice idolatry (*shirk*) because not considered as true Muslims. It affirms its core principle of the oneness of God (*tawhid*). Indeed, they accuse Shiites of practicing *shirk* because of their excessive devotion for the family of the Prophet, while the democrats and seculars for having established a positive legislation in contrast with the supremacy of the divine one. According to these considerations, it is clearer why the Islamic State relies on the excessive and extreme use of *takfir,* which refers to the practice of excommunicating an individual from the Muslim community either by conversion or by death. IS's leaders interpret it as a mean to eradicate all those who do not conform to their particular interpretation of Islam. IS became known for the extreme brutality of these exterminations. The aim is to install fear in people's minds and oblige them to convert in order to avoid death. "The Islamic State therefor claims legitimacy for its violence by arguing that all its actions are in the interest of reviving Islam, returning it to its pure form, uniting all Muslim world under truly Islamic rule, and so restoring the dignity and greatness of its people while fulfilling the orders of God"[260]. "This Islamic State's adoption of this severe version of Jihadi-Salafism is attributable [mainly] to Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi, the founder of al-Qaeda in Iraq who studied theology with the prominent jihadi scholar Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi"[261].

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[258] Cole Bunzel, *From Paper State to Caliphate: The Ideology of the Islamic State*, Analysis Paper, The Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World, N.19, March, 2015, p.7.
[259] *Ibidem.*
[260] Richard Barret, *The Islamic State*, The Soufan Group, November, 2014, p18.
[261] Cole Bunzel, *From Paper State to Caliphate: The Ideology of the Islamic State*, Analysis Paper, The Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World, N.19, March, 2015, p.9.

A particular feature of the Islamic State compared to other Salafi movements, is its emphasis on the offensive form of jihad while traditional jihadi ideology calls Muslims for the defensive one, intended as the engagement in a conflict where a Muslim population is under attack by secular apostate rulers or by Western outside forces. Indeed, the same leader al-Baghdadi underlines the necessity of offensive jihad, which he defines as the practice of "[…] going after the apostate unbelievers by attacking [them] in their home territory in order to make God's word most high and until there is no persecution"[262]. For this reason, IS stipulates that Muslims must fraternize only with those who are considered true Muslims and disassociate from those who do not fit under that category. Moreover, IS fights apostasy, considered to be practiced by those governments, which dramatically fail to rule according to God's divine law. Furthermore, offensive jihad is mainly directed towards Shiites. There is a widespread impression that Shiites do have expansionist views over Middle East and for this reason they need to be fought. On top of that "[t]he Islamic Republic of Iran, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and the Assad regime in Syria all form this crescent [expansionist political aim]"[263]. Moreover, IS considers the historical transition of Iraq towards being a Shiite majority country as a concrete proof of this desire of extension.

As previously said, the Jordanian al-Zarqawi is the founding father of the al-Qaeda in Iraq, the precursor of ISI, but he also played a crucial role in shaping future IS's ideology. He became familiar with the Jihadi-Salafism doctrine preached by Azzam while he was in prison in Jordan. Once he was released in 1999, he moved to Afghanistan in Herat, where he set up a training camp, which served more as a gathering place for attracting and indoctrinating more and more Salafi-jihadists. Al-Zarqawi is also responsible for shaping a strategy, which deliberately targeted Iraqi Shiites in order to fuel a possible civil war against Maliki's government. He always stressed in his communications that Shiite communities could not fit under the category of true Muslims and their expansionist aspiration to create a Shiite state comprehending several Middle East countries needed to be stopped. Al-Zarqawi really believed that Shiites represented the major and primary threat even when compared to Western powers. Indeed, the latters can withdraw in a relative short

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[262] *Ibidem*, p.10.
[263] *Ibidem*, p.11.

period of time, while Shiites will remain there forever unless they are defeated. This first consideration immediately describes one of the main differences between IS and al-Qaeda on which enemy to target and concentrate all the efforts first. On one side al-Zarqawi and AQI, with later al-Baghdadi and IS, "have so far consistently focused on the Shia and the [so-called] 'near enemy' [such as] the Iraqi and Syrian regimes as well as secular, pro-Western regimes in the Muslim world"[264] considered as the primary targets of their attacks. IS believes them to be infidels who need to be either convert or eliminated while it considers the West, especially its core the U.S., as a secondary goal on which to focus once they conquered liberation at home. On the other side, Osama Bin Laden with al-Qaeda already from the mid-1990's launched a strategy transforming the West, intended as the 'far enemy', as the primary target[265]. Bin Laden depicted al-Qaeda's actions as forms of self-defence. "He portrayed al-Qaeda's September 11, 2001, attack on the United States as an act of 'defensive jihad' or just retaliation for American domination of Muslim countries"[266]. Bin Laden always attempted to not brutally target other Muslim populations, as IS is still doing, in order to not loos local support and eventually fail.

"While Zarqawi and the Central al-Qaeda leadership were at odds over the Shi'a, they shared an ambition to found a state in Iraq to serve as the protocaliphate, a goal that was articulated even before Zarqawi's relocation to northern Iraq in 2002"[267]. The same Zawahiri, main strategist of AQC, proposed in July 2005 to Zarqawi a four-phases strategy with the ultimate aim to establish the Caliphate. First, U.S. troops needed to be expelled from Iraq and then they could exploit the political vacuum and establish the caliphate. Following, they could expand in neighbouring countries and ultimately challenging Israel. Perhaps, only in 2006 after the death of Zarqawi, the new leader, the Egyptian Abu Hamza al-Muhajr, established the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) adopting the caliphate as the new form of government and appointing Abu Umar al-Baghdadi as the new caliph. "Significantly, the central al-Qaeda leadership showed only minimal enthusiasm for the establishment of the state that it had previously called for, likely because it lost control of the state-building process and tired of the hardline ideology disposing the [newly] Islamic State to

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[264] Fewaz A. Gerges, *ISIS and the Third Wave of Jihadism*, Current History, December, 2014, p.340.
[265] Fewaz A. Gerges, *The Far Enemy: Why Jihad went Global*, Cambridge University Press, 2005.
[266] Fewaz A. Gerges, *ISIS and the Third Wave of Jihadism*, Current History, December, 2014, p.341.
[267] Cole Bunzel, *From Paper State to Caliphate: The Ideology of the Islamic State*, Analysis Paper, The Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World, N.19, March, 2015, p.15.

ignore orders from the al-Qaeda leaderships"[268]. ISI was considered such an important and historic achievement, that it was compared to the travel (hijra) of Prophet Mohammed when he left from Mecca to travel to Medina in 622 B.C. with the ultimate aim to establish the very first Islamic State. Indeed, "[j]ust as the Salafist-jihadists attempt to replicate the companions and successors of Mohammed religiously and spiritually, rejecting anything they regard as a later innovation (Arabic *bid'ah*), so too they seek to emulate the early Islamic form of political rule"[269]. The Islamic State was for sure considered as a new state for the Iraqi Sunni minorities who were increasingly been marginalized by the Shiite government. But mostly it was viewed as the state for the entire world Muslim community. "The newly proclaimed leader of the Islamic State was titled *amir al-mu'minin* ("The Commander of the Faithful"), the traditional title of caliphs in Islamic history, and he was described as a descendent of the Prophet's tribe of Quraysh, establishing a traditional qualification for the office of the caliphate"[270]. Nevertheless, the establishment of the Islamic State of Iraq turned to be a dramatic failure indeed its announcement also drew little attention. The primary reason was that Iraqis as well as other foreign powers constantly considered ISI as an 'ordinary' branch of al-Qaeda and nothing more. They believed that rather than the creation of a new entity, it was a simple name change. Additionally, ISI did not succeeded in uniting all the other Iraqi Sunni insurgent groups, which lead to a poor popular legitimation.

Despite all the efforts, when on April 18, 2010, both Abu Umar al-Baghdadi and Abu Hamza al-Muhajir got killed, the Islamic State of Iraq stopped to be anything similar to a state. Only with the new appointed leader in 2010 of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and with the emergence of the Syrian Civil War, ISI's ideology became more clear and determined. It is important to note that a major contribution was given by the Syrian Abu Muhammad al-Adnani who became the new official spokesman of the organization. "Drawing on mounting Sunni resentment toward the sectarian policies of Shiite [Iraqi] Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, the speeches (of the re-emerged organization) dwelled on Sunni grievances and the supposed Shi'ite

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[268] *Ibidem*, p.17.
[269] Elliot Friedland, *The Islamic State*, Special Report, Clarion Project, May 10, 2015, p.25.
[270] Cole Bunzel, *From Paper State to Caliphate: The Ideology of the Islamic State*, Analysis Paper, The Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World, N.19, March, 2015, p.18.

expansionist plot"[271]. Following, the eruption of the Syrian Civil War in Spring 2011 represented the advantageous opportunity to expand ISI's control over new territories, to fight the apostate Syrian regime in order to protect the Syrian Sunni population and to bring them within the jurisdiction of ISI. Indeed, in 2013, al-Baghdadi announced the expansion of the organization by renaming it as Islamic State of Iraq and Syria or Sham, Levant (ISIS or ISIL) and it followed the actual breakup with al-Qaeda Central.

In June 2014, eventually ISIS conquered many Iraqi Sunni territories for example the one including the city of Mosul. Following, on June 29, the top leaders announced the last change of the name of the organization as only Islamic State (IS). This occasion had particular impacts on its scope and development. Rather than being confined within a specific territory or region, it now has global aspirations. Moreover, "[t]he removal of the geographic limitations in the name reinforced his challenge to al-Qaeda as the leader of global jihad and gave further reason to foreign fighters to join"[272]. Indeed, "[o]n September 21, 2014, Islamic State official spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani called on all supporters to kill Westerns arbitrarily throughout the world – Americans, Canadians, Australians, and other allies, both civilians and military personnel"[273]. In addition, "[t]he newly proclaimed caliphate called upon all Muslim throughout the world to give al-Baghdadi *bay'a* [oath of fealty] as caliph"[274]. It meant that there was a general expectation of all other existing jihadi groups to join and accept the supreme domination of the Islamic State and that all Muslim individuals would migrate to its territories. Indeed, IS is constantly advocating and pursuing an increasing expansion of its territories wherever it can mainly pushed by the prominent slogan of '*baqiyya wa tatamaddad*', which literally means remaining and expanding. "By calling the group Islamic State, and making a point of bulldozing the berm that separates Syria and Iraq and destroying border posts, Abu Bakr has underlined his rejection of the colonial boundaries established by the Sykes – Picot agreement of 1916"[275]. Moreover, "[b]eyond increasing its territory, the Islamic State aims to […] imposing Sharia-

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[271] *Ibidem*, p.24.
[272] Richard Barret, *The Islamic State*, The Soufan Group, November, 2014, p.22.
[273] Cole Bunzel, *From Paper State to Caliphate: The Ideology of the Islamic State*, Analysis Paper, The Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World, N.19, March, 2015, p.36.
[274] *Ibidem*, p.31.
[275] Richard Barret, *The Islamic State*, The Soufan Group, November, 2014, p.23.

based rule in order to enhance its authority and build its apparent legitimacy, providing education as a form of indoctrination and recruitment, and offering public services and humanitarian assistance in order to win public support"[276].

3.4. Why The Islamic State is the most attractive organization to foreign fighters

It is a well-known fact that in this year the international community increasingly focuses on the developments of the organization Islamic State. Following the historical path it is clear that IS is a linear descendent of the organization al-Qaeda in Iraq, which was established in 2004 by the Jordanian Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi in order to fight U.S. troops in Iraq. Thus at lightening speed the Islamic State began to control increasing territories in Iraq as well as in Syria. Eventually, in 2013 IS's leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi officially distanced itself from al-Qaeda Central top leadership. Indeed, the Islamic State differentiates itself from other terrorist organizations for several main reasons. First, no other terrorist Islamist organization developed in a pseudo-state with the establishment of an Islamic Caliphate. Second, IS is able to greatly sustain itself financially thanks to outside funding and illegal resources appropriation. Following, another striking feature is its ultimate goal to expand the Caliphate worldwide. Finally, IS has transformed terrorism from the general way according to which it was understood in modern time especially because of its innovative and appealing media campaign. Indeed, in this paragraph what we are mainly concern with here is IS's media strategy, which serves as the main tool for its recruitment campaign. As a result, the Syrian and Iraqi conflict is still attracting the highest number of foreign fighters, reaching insofar a mobilization of 20.000 individuals[277]. Added to that, the analysis on IS's media strategy is of significant utility to explore how IS utilizes new technologies and means of communication. This brings up to the question of why an increasing number of

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[276] *Ibidem.*
[277] Peter R. Neumann, *Foreign fighter total in Syria/Iraq now exceeds 20,000; surpasses Afghanistan conflict in the 1980s,* International Centre for the Study of Radicalization, London, 2015.

people from all over the world is so devoted to the organization and deeply embraces its cause that he/she is ready to leave the home country to fight abroad.

Furthermore, "[i]n early 2015 [the same] U.S. President Barack Obama stated that terrorist organizations as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State […] use the Internet and social media to recruit young Muslim operatives to their ranks by radicalizing their views"[278]. He claimed: "The high quality videos, the online magazines, the use of social media, terrorist Twitter accounts – it's all designed to target today's young people online, in cyberspace"[279]. Developing a media campaign is a relatively old phenomenon, but what strike are the recent innovative technological tools that radically transformed the nature of terrorist activities as well as the nature of the threat they pose. What it is important to understand is that "[t]he intensive use that IS makes of cyber jihad as a tool for recruitment, radicalization, and dissemination of propaganda makes the struggle against this element no less important than the physical engagement with its forces and the prevention of its geographic expansion"[280]. Furthermore, IS was able to completely transform the nature of cyber jihad by shifting the efforts away from chat rooms or static website towards a more interactive use of social media. First, it is important to give a definition of cyber jihad, which "refers to the use of 21st century technological tools and cyberspace (the environment in which communication between computer networks occurs) in order to promote the notion of a violent jihad against those classified by its followers as enemies of Islam"[281]. Salafi-jihadist organizations immediately understood the great opportunity that online space and media could offer in order to bypass geographic borders as well as institutional ones established by states as well as by security agencies, in order to reach a global audience. As already stated in the previous chapter, Internet and especially social media radically transformed the process of Islamist radicalization by making every individual who navigates online a possible target who could be touched by IS message calls to engage in a violent jihad against the West as well as against the infidels. In addition, this newly use of social media

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[278] Adam Hoffman and Yoram Schweitzer, *Cyber Jihad in the Service of the Islamic State (ISIS)*, Strategic Assessment, Vol.18, N.1, April, 2015, p.71.
[279] Office of the Press Secretary, *Remarks by the President in Closing of the Summit on Countering Violent Extremism*, The White House, February 18, 2015.
[280] Adam Hoffman and Yoram Schweitzer, *Cyber Jihad in the Service of the Islamic State (ISIS)*, Strategic Assessment, Vol.18, N.1, April, 2015, p.71.
[281] *Ibidem.*

must be understood alongside the current identity crisis that most Muslims are experiencing throughout the world. First, following the waves of the Arab Spring disappointment and anger against the ongoing corruption and extensive use of violence by national governments became daily sentiments felt by the majority of Muslim populations. This cane easily lead individuals seek for means and ways to actively do something that IS seems to offer. Furthermore, Muslims living in Western countries are experiencing an increasing marginalization and discrimination because of their religion that can induce them seek for revenge, a sense of belonging and brotherhood that IS also seems to offer. As a result, the Islamic State through its extensive social media campaign is able to reach and probably attract these vulnerable people towards its radical interpretation of Islam.

"The overall media effort of the Islamic State is overseen by Abu Amr al Shami […], a Syrian born in Saudi Arabia in 1979, who was previously the Islamic State's leader in Aleppo and who also plays an important role in the Shura Council"[282]. He manages to control a mainly anonymous group of bloggers, writers and researchers widespread all across regions of Middle East and North Africa who monitor social media. Their duty is to tweet and post links of video to attract viewers in order to be further shared. This organizational structure represents "[t]he key strength of IS [which] has been the ability to decentralise its social media which has allowed its supporters to operate their own ministries of information"[283]. The ultimate aim of IS's media strategy is to promote a unified message according to which it legitimates the cause and actions of the Caliphate and to further conduct a propaganda and recruitment campaigns in order to enlarge its scope. Indeed, "[t]he media department of the Islamic State is highly productive, churning out a wide range of media material that its supporters can use to attract potential recruits, raise money, promote the image of the organization or just spread fears among its enemies"[284]. The organization's branch known as al Furqan is considered to be the official media wing, which for example produced a series named 'Messages from the

[282] Richard Barret, *The Islamic State*, The Soufan Group, November, 2014, p.52.
[283] Christina S. Liang, *Cyber Jihad: Understanding and Countering Islamic State Propaganda*, Geneva Centre for Security Policy, February, 2015, p.4.
[284] Richard Barret, *The Islamic State*, The Soufan Group, November, 2014, p.53.

Land of Epic Battles' to portray the latest IS's achievements on the battlefield[285]. Furthermore, each province part of the Caliphate owns a media outlet with the purpose of focusing on local matters[286].

In July 2014, the Islamic State decided to produce a magazine named Dabiq, published in several languages starting from English. It mainly focuses on Islamic matters including aspects such as the Muslim unity (*tawhid*), the research of the truth (*manjah*), migration to the Caliphate (*hijra*), *jihad* and everything else related to the Ummah[287]. What is of particular interest is its ability to follow the common structure of Western magazines of current affairs by including editorials, reportage and analysis. Also the name chosen to title the magazine is of particular interest. Indeed, "[t]he name Dabiq itself refers to the place in Northern Syria where the Ottoman Empire had a decisive victory over the Egyptian Mamluck Empire, but the reference is to a hadith often quoted by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi that predicts Dabiq as the place where Islam will win a great victory over the infidels, so leading to world domination and the end of times"[288]. The aim of the magazine is to target a reader who is for sure interested to Islamic matters, but who does not need to be an already convinced jihadist, but a rather one in the process. The magazine explains to the reader with great ability, which are the reasons behind the establishment of the Caliphate. It becomes an explosive content, which can serve as trigger for an individual who is following the path towards radicalization. It represents a sort of inspirational message to dissolve any existing doubts.

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[285] Giuseppe Acconcia, *The social-media strategy of the Islamic State (ISIS)*, East Magazine, September 23, 2014, available at http://www.eastonline.eu/en/opinioni/open-doors/the-social-media-strategy-of-the-islamic-state-isis.

[286] Ali Ashem, The Islamic State's social media strategy, Al-Monitor, August 18, 2014, available at http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/08/is-clinton-atrocities-social-media-baghdadi-mccain.html.

[287] Monica Maggioni, *Lo Stato Islamico: una sorpresa solo per chi lo racconta*, Twitter e Jihad: La Comunicazione dell'Isis, IPSI, 2015, p.79.

[288] Richard Barret, *The Islamic State*, The Soufan Group, November, 2014, p.56.

Figure 6 Soufan Group (2014)

The first issue was published on July 5, 2014 after approximately a month of the conquest of the city of Mosul and it was titled 'The Return of Khilafah', aiming at encouraging people to join the newly established Caliphate. This first issue was most of political nature in which it is clearly outlined the program of the Islamic State. Indeed, the organization aims at stressing that the establishment of the Caliphate is legitimate from a political as well as from a doctrinal point of view.

"In the second issue of Dabiq, which is entitled 'The Flood' a picture of Noas' Ark is shown and an article within describes their dichotic outlook stating it is either the Islamic State or the Flood"[289]. The Caliphate represents the ark in which people can find their salvation from the flood, while the rest of them will drown. It " […] also tells the story of the Islamic State's success in growing the support of the Syrian tribes and reports on the success of recent military operations by geographically portraying the worst excesses and atrocities committed by its enemies"[290]. The third one published in October is entitled 'A Call to Hijra', which compares the migration of the Prophet in 622 B.C. from Mecca to Medina to establish the very first Islamic State to the journey of those who decide to move to the Islamic State. "As such, the magazine calls for scholars, judges and people with military, administrative and other expertise as well as physicians and engineers to come serve in the Islamic State"[291]. The fourth one published on October 22, 2014, presents the most shocking and threatening title 'A Failed Crusade' illustrating the obelisk of Saint Peter's Basilica in the Vatican with the flattering IS's black flag. The title mainly refers to

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[289] Christina S. Liang, *Cyber Jihad: Understanding and Countering Islamic State Propaganda*, Geneva Centre for Security Policy, February, 2015, p.4.
[290] *Ibidem*.
[291] *Ibidem.*

all the failed military actions conducted by Western forces attempting at defeating the Islamic State.

As previously stated, the Islamic State established a media wing, al-Furqan, to deal with social media by posting messages delivered by the top leadership and by sharing other contents from sites related to IS. First, Facebook represents one of the primary social media, especially because from a last report of July 2015 there are 1.49 billions monthly active users and an average of 968 millions daily active users on this social media [292]. In addition, "[i]t has become a decentralized hub for information distribution and a means to show support; numerous groups, individuals and pages can be present under identical or similar names"[293]. Following Twitter is another key social media supported by over 35 different languages. According to Twitter's official site there are 316 millions monthly active users who sent an average of 500 millions tweets per day[294]. At the end of 2014, IS supporters had approximately 45.000 Twitter accounts and around 73% of them have at least 500 followers while others reached also 50.000 followers[295]. It is important to note that "[t]here are several different categories of IS Twitter accounts: official news accounts, unofficial news accounts, regional accounts and individuals giving running commentary of events in Syria and Iraq"[296]. "IS distinguishes itself from other groups on Twitter through hashtags that identify them as an IS production and allow them to hijack trending topics"[297]. Furthermore, the Islamic State exploits Twitter to use the so-called 'twitter bombs', which are fundamental parts of the strategy aiming at using trending hashtags which are able to redirect twitter users to links of website whose content is related to IS's propaganda. For example, "[d]uring the [soccer] World Cup [held in Brazil in 2014], IS tweets imaginatively hijacked hashtags such as #Brazil2014 [or] #WC2014 to gain access to millions of World Cup twitter searches, in the hope the users would follow links to the group's propaganda

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[292] http://newsroom.fb.com/company-info/.
[293] Christina S. Liang, *Cyber Jihad: Understanding and Countering Islamic State Propaganda*, Geneva Centre for Security Policy, February, 2015, p.5.
[294] https://about.twitter.com/company.
[295] John M. Berger, *The Evolution of Terrorist Propaganda: The Paris Attack and Social Media*, Testimony to the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, January 27, 2015.
[296] Christina S. Liang, *Cyber Jihad: Understanding and Countering Islamic State Propaganda*, Geneva Centre for Security Policy, February, 2015, p.6.
[297] *Ibidem*, p.5.

videos"[298]. In addition, the Islamic State was also able through complex coding, to develop an App called 'Dawn of Glad Tidings' supported by mobiles, which for a short period of time was available for downloading in both Google and Apple Store. "Downloading the application allowed IS to take temporary control of the Twitter account of the said user and publish messages in his/her name"[299]. As a result, IS was able to generate an increasing amount of Twitter activities[300]. The app largely reminds the app known as 'Thunderclap', which was used by Barack Obama in his presidential election campaign of 2010[301]. Another particular feature of the overall media campaign of the Islamic State is the widespread use of social media, mostly Twitter, by Western foreign fighters. First, it is of significant utility to use their native language when they tweet in order to gain more Western followers who do not speak Arabic. "The Twitter feeds also contain a great deal of content that distils jihadist dogma in very simple terms, sometimes by means of a picture of the account holder pointing his index finger to the sky, alone or in the company of fellow fighters"[302]. Moreover, according to a research conducted by scholar J. Klausen Western foreign fighters Twitter accounts mainly tweet contents that can be divided into five different categories[303]. First, they post religious instructions by referring to important fatwas, scholars or other charismatic and leading Islamist figures. Second they report from the battlezone posting especially pictures of dead bodies, the location in which they fight or they recall specific fighting events. Third they share matters concerning interpersonal communication. Fourth, they tweet content not related to the fighting but rather to their everyday life. Finally, Western foreign fighters post constant threats against the West.

Furthermore, the Islamic State created another media wing, known as al-Hayat Media Centre to deal with video contents in order to release high quality with proficient editing videos. For example "[b]efore IS launched its attack on Mosul, a

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[298] Richard Barret, *The Islamic State*, The Soufan Group, November, 2014, p.51.

[299] Adam Hoffman and Yoram Schweitzer*, Cyber Jihad in the Service of the Islamic State (ISIS)*, Strategic Assessment, Vol.18, N.1, April, 2015, p.73.

[300] John M. Berger, *How ISIS Games Twitter*, The Atlantic, June 16, 2014, available at http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/06/isis-iraq-twitter-social-media-strategy/372856/.

[301] Amina Elahi, *How Social Media Strategy Influences Political Campaigns*, sprout-social.com, September 5, 2013, available at http://sproutsocial.com/insights/ social-political-campaigns/.

[302] Jyette Klausen, *Tweeting the Jihad: Social Media Networks of Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq*, Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, Vol.38, N.1, December 9, 2014, p.10.

[303] *Ibidem.*

city of 1.5 million people, it released a film called 'The Clanging of the Swords IV' with slow motion graphics and aerial drone footage, meant to demoralise Iraqi soldiers before the shooting started"[304]. The al-Hayat Media Centre serves also as a successful multilingual recruitment channel, which releases a significant amount of material with the aim of attracting possible future foreign fighters. "One of its products is a very sophisticated HD propaganda video series known as the 'Mujatweets', which shows various aspects of daily life in the Islamic State, from fighting in Iraq and Syria, to testimonials from Western militants about their joy in joining the Islamic State"[305]. In addition, lately IS organized a new media wing to deal with Islamic women. It is known as Zora Foundation[306], which has already gained approximately 3.200 followers. Women are attracted to the Islamic State mainly for the same reasons of men. They are also experiencing identity crises and seeking a sense of belonging. Because of the growing number of women travelling to the Caliphate, it was established also the so-called Ummah network[307]. The network uses Twitter as the favourite media tool for posting images of kittens or of design handbags in order to softly attract women. "The network gives nursing and cooking advice for those wives who want to keep their jihadists happy, and it provides information on Sharia, weapons use, and social media tools so that they can contribute to the Islamic State recruitment campaigns"[308].

The Islamic State also exploits online space to conduct offensive activities, which are known as *ghazwa* that in Arabic literally means raid and attack. An example of these attacks occurred when "IS supports hacked into the Twitter and YouTube accounts of the United States Central Command (CENTECOM), which is responsible for US military activity in the Middle East and for coordinating the international coalition attacks against IS"[309]. The hackers were able to replace American official emblems

[304] Christina S. Liang, *Cyber Jihad: Understanding and Countering Islamic State Propaganda*, Geneva Centre for Security Policy, February, 2015, p.6.

[305] Richard Barret, *The Islamic State*, The Soufan Group, November, 2014, p.55.

[306] Homa Khaleeli, *Domestic terrorism: Isis housewives told how to prepare battle snacks*, The Guardian, November 5, 2014, available at http://www.theguardian.com/world/shortcuts/2014/nov/05/isis-housewives-told-to-prepare-battle-snacks.

[307] The name refers to an Arabic expression used to consider women as mother figures.

[308] Christina S. Liang, *Cyber Jihad: Understanding and Countering Islamic State Propaganda*, Geneva Centre for Security Policy, February, 2015, p.6.

[309] Adam Hoffman and Yoram Schweitzer*, Cyber Jihad in the Service of the Islamic State (ISIS)*, Strategic Assessment, Vol.18, N.1, April, 2015, p.73.

with the IS black flags. Ironically, that happened while President Obama was holding a conference in Washington on cyber security matters[310].

As previously stated, the Islamic State considers that cyber jihad plays a crucial role in its overall strategy, especially for what concerns the recruitment of future members. Indeed, today's social media represent the most effective tool for conducting recruitment campaigns targeting a world-spread audience. John Horgan, a forensic psychologist specialized in psychology of terrorism claims that today terrorist organizations enjoy new and unique opportunities that never existed before to attract especially young people[311]. Furthermore, IS successfully manages to conduct different and more suitable propaganda campaigns according to the target it aims to reach. On one hand in order to attract men IS exploits high quality images and videos portraying epic victories on the battlefield in order to attract those seeking glory, adventure and revenge. On the other hand, IS developed a more soften approach to attract women, especially by resorting to pictures of kittens mainly through the twitter account @ISILCats[312] or through Tumblr, which is the most used by women[313]. "Alongside the 'softer' images, IS also disseminates messages of female empowerment with photos of armed operatives in the al-Khansaa Brigade (the women's unit of IS named after a female poet from the time of the Prophet Muhammad), which conveys the message that 'in IS, women carry weapons and are able to defend themselves'"[314]. The Islamic State is exploiting every existing channel on the online space and it managed to maximise the scope of the target audience like no other organizations did before. As a result, the process of radicalization and its possible related outcome of being recruited and becoming a foreign fighter were accelerated. Indeed, IS has attracted approximately more than 20.000 individuals,

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[310] Russell Berman, *The Hacking of Central Command*, The Atlantic, January 12, 2015, available at http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/ archive/2015/01/central-command-accounts-are-hacked-centcom-isis- soldiers-obama-cybersecurity-cybercaliphate/384442/.

[311] Christine Petre, *The Jihadi Factory*, Foreign Policy, March 20, 2015, available at http:// foreignpolicy.com/2015/03/20/the-jihadi-factory-tunisia-isis-islamic-state- terrorism/.

[312] Emily Lodish, *ISIL loves terrorism and kitties*, Globalpost, June 25, 2014, available at http://www.globalpost.com/dispatch/news/regions/middle-east/iraq/140625/ISIL-ISIS-Twitter-cats-kitties.

[313] John M. Berger, *How ISIS Games Twitter*, The Atlantic, June 16, 2014, available at http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/06/isis-iraq-twitter-social-media-strategy/372856/.

[314] Adam Hoffman and Yoram Schweitzer, *Cyber Jihad in the Service of the Islamic State (ISIS)*, Strategic Assessment, Vol.18, N.1, April, 2015, p.75.

making the Iraqi and Syrian conflict the one with the highest level of mobilization of foreign fighters in the history. Moreover, "IS activity on social media is ascribed as a key role in this trend and many organizational recruits (as well as people who attempt to join the organization but were arrested by the security agencies of the various countries prior to enlisting) attest that the content on social media affected their decision to join its ranks"[315]. Indeed, social media act as new platform in which individuals can safely from their homes research Salafi-jihadist inspired material, debate and exchange information with other radicalized. For example, "[p]rospective recruits can use Facebook another social media platforms to communicate with foreign fighters engaged in battle to learn what the experience is like, and to contact facilitators who can explain how to join the fight in Syria and Iraq"[316]. In addition, IS in 2015 uploaded on the Internet an e-book entitled 'Hijra to the Islamic State: What to pack up; Who to contact; Where to go; Stories&more!' [317]. It serves as an extensive and practical tool to help to travel safely to the Caliphate by giving suggestions, information and recommendations. Moreover, there are numerous testimonies of foreign fighters who had already crossed the border of the Islamic State, coming from Muslim countries as well as from European ones. Moreover, IS's strategy of cyber jihad is also targeted to people living in Western countries in order to persuade them to perpetrate terrorist attacks. "The message to Muslims in the West is thus that even if they cannot immigrate to the territory of the Islamic State and join its ranks, perpetrating terrorist attacks and attacking Western symbols in their countries constitute a worthy alternative"[318].

All these reasons better explain why the Islamic State represents such an alarming phenomenon that needs to be intercepted and arrested. "[…] the remarkable ability of a relatively weak and largely marginalized group of violent individuals, numbering in the hundreds, to establish themselves as a threat to international peace and security in command of an army of more than 30.000 fighters and controlling territory over a substantial area of two existing countries, is unprecedented in the

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[315] *Ibidem*, p.76.
[316] James P. Farwell, *The Media Strategy of ISIS*, Survuval: Global Politics and Strategy, Vol.56, N.6, November 25, 2014, p.50.
[317] The complete text of the ebook is available at https://archive.org/stream/GuideBookHijrah2015-ToTheIslamicState/7-Hijrah2015-ToTheIslamicState_djvu.txt.
[318] Adam Hoffman and Yoram Schweitzer*, Cyber Jihad in the Service of the Islamic State (ISIS)*, Strategic Assessment, Vol.18, N.1, April, 2015, p.76.

modern age"[319]. Indeed, the Syrian and Iraqi war is therefor playing as a sort of incubator for a completely new generation of terrorists[320]. Especially the Islamic State is constantly developing an effective media campaign based on the widespread of a specific ideological message able to attract more foreign fighters.

As previously stated, one of the most popular reasons behind an individual's decision to radicalize and adopt violent behaviours is the experience of the "[…] so-called tipping point events or crises, which prompts a reassessment of their status in society, political and religious attitudes, and even [their] sense of self"[321]. These crises can be of different types, such as personal, social, cultural or even economic and occurring according different circumstances. In such a context, the Islamic State is proving to be the Islamist organization more capable of exploiting such events aiming at producing cognitive openings. IS is attempting at attracting new foreign fighters especially among young generations by portraying itself as the only entity able at offering means, opportunities and solutions for what they are seeking. The Islamic State is exploiting the Internet and social media to widespread Islamist content and foreign fighters testimonies in order to attract new foreign fighters and justify the legitimate use of violence. This attitude explains why all foreign fighters seem to join the Islamic State driven by different motivations. A significant part of IS's media strategy targets European Muslims, with a particular attention on those of second and third generation. All of them seem to feel a growing sentiment of exclusion combined with frustration and discrimination because of their religion. Despite all the policies adopted for integrating Muslim communities within Western societies, they feel they did not receive full equality and respect they expected. One of the primary mistakes of Western governments trying to shape and develop effective integration policies was to fail in embracing all Muslims differences in terms of ethnicity, cultures, religious interpretation and degree of moderation. "Despite these multi-level differences within the Muslim communities […], Muslims are often portrayed in the media and policy discourses as a single community, as a population that shares common traits and that can be dealt with by the same type of policies, or indeed that cannot be integrated into or assimilated by for the same type

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[319] Richard Barret, *The Islamic State*, The Soufan Group, November, 2014, p.58.
[320] Richard Barret, *Foreign Fighters in Syria*, The Soufan Group, June, 2014, p.22.
[321] Peter R. Neumann and Brooke Rogers, *Recruitment and Moblization for the Islamist Militant Movement in Europe*, International Centre for the Study of Radicalization and Political Violence at King's College London, December, 2007, p.66.

of reasons"[322]. In such a context, the Islamic State media campaign aims at attracting new recruits by exploiting this sentiment of frustration through an extensive use of the Internet, which is especially in Western societies freely accessible to almost everyone. By posting and sharing images, testimonies and videos of atrocities, injustices, killings and conflicts that Muslims in Syria and Iraq are constantly suffering from, IS aims at causing a strong moral outrage or the so-called sense of 'humiliation by proxy' as suggested by Khosrokhavar[323]. Indeed, a strong motivation behind the decision to be enlisted within the ranks of IS is the will to fight in order to protect the Syrian and Iraqi population. Moreover, IS highlights the necessary action to defend the Muslim community, which seems to live under constant threat and suffering from systematic injustices that eventually could lead to its extermination. Consequently, "[…] this kind of [recruitment messages] may become a powerful sense-making device: it suggests that their [Muslim] sense of alienation and personal crisis can be attributed to the same forces that are causing the suffering of Muslims everywhere else, and that, indeed, they are all part of one and same struggle"[324]. In this sense, Muslims from all over the world could perceive Western societies and their related values, traditions and symbols as responsible for not only their personal sufferings, but also for those of Syrian and Iraqi Muslims. Therefore joining the ranks of the Islamic State would offer the means and opportunities to seek revenge. Furthermore, IS is becoming increasingly attractive also for Western born people who decide to convert and embrace a radical interpretation of Islam. They are part of the overall IS's media strategy and they are becoming vulnerable targets because they also experience trigger events, crises and a growing sense of frustration and social exclusion. Indeed, new Western converts may be attracted to IS because they also believe that the socio-economic conditions in which they live are not those which they should deserve. Therefore, they feel a sense of anger and frustration against Western governments for which they seek revenge. Moreover, IS's media campaign by posting videos and images of the atrocities that Syrian and Iraqi Muslims are constantly suffering from, is able to touch and shock Western new

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[322] Anna Triandafyllidou, *European Muslims: Cought between Local Integration Challenges and Global Terrorism Discourses*, Istituto Affari Internazionali, Working Paper 15, May 15, 2015, p.5.

[323] Farhad Khosrokhavar, *Les Nouveaux Martyrs d'Allah*, Flammarion, Paris, 2002.

[324] Peter R. Neumann and Brooke Rogers, *Recruitment and Moblization for the Islamist Militant Movement in Europe*, International Centre for the Study of Radicalization and Political Violence at King's College London, December, 2007, p.70.

converts in a way that makes them decide to go to the Islamic State to fight in order to defend those victims and to stop the current brutalities.

In conclusion, the Islamic State has extensively comprehend why individuals in the 21st century are becoming more vulnerable to the radical interpretation of Islam and therefor they became IS's primary targets of its media strategy. Because individuals are driven by different factors in the decision to engage in jihad, IS is successfully attempting at portraying itself as the only entity able to offer what they are looking for, starting from a sense of belonging. Indeed, its ability to attract such a constantly growing number of foreign fighters with the related threat of those returning home should be the advocated area of concern by international as well as national security agencies, counter-terrorism centres and policymakers. This is why, "[…] the Internet is likely to become one of the key battleground for [Western] policymakers in countering the growth of Islamist militant recruitment"[325].

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[325] *Ibidem*, p.90.

Conclusion

Nowadays, the phenomenon of foreign fighters represents one of the most complex, multifaceted and highly debated matters of global security in many international forums and counter-terrorism centres. Foreign fighters pose a dangerous threat by negatively affecting the intensity, duration and resolution of the conflicts in which they operate. Additionally, they threat the states of origin, the states they cross, the states of the conflict zones they reach as well as the neighbouring zones. Foreign fighters have recently received increasing attention from the international community in the framework of the Syrian conflict, which is insofar characterized by the highest mobilization of foreign fighters ever occurred in history. Indeed, according to the last estimation provided by the International Centre for the Study of Radicalization and Political Violence there are 20,730 foreign fighters from at least 80 up to 90 countries who have travelled to the Syrian-Iraqi region[326].

Because foreign fighters represent such a multifaceted phenomenon it has been useful to start in the first chapter to analyse the theoretical as well as the historical framework of this phenomenon. In the field of political science there has been a concrete lack of studies and researches on this subject, especially there has been a tendency to not consider this phenomenon as a singular one, but rather to confined it under more broader terrorism studies. Recently, the academic literature further analysed it providing several theories differing in terms of starting points, approaches, means and results. Nevertheless, the works of scholars such as Malet and Hegghammer are still today the most extensive researches available. The former defined foreign fighters as "non citizens of conflict states who join insurgencies during civil wars"[327]. While the latter as an "agent who a) has joined, and operates within the confines of an insurgency; b) lacks citizenship of the conflict sate or kinship links to its warring factions; c) lacks affiliation to an official military organization and d) is unpaid"[328].

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[326] Peter R. Neumann, *Foreign fighter total in Syria/Iraq now exceeds 20,000; surpasses Afghanistan conflict in the 1980s,* International Centre for the Study of Radicalization, London, 2015.

[327] David Malet, *Foreign Fighters: Transnational Identities in Foreign Conflicts*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, p.9.

[328] Thomas Hegghammer, *The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters: Islam and the Globalization of Jihad*, International Security, Vol. 35 No. 3, 2011, pp. 57-58.

Analysing the historical framework drove us to the important conclusion that the phenomenon of foreign fighters is relatively new. Already in the Greek War of Independence in the 1820's many English activists including Lord Byron were calling for transnational recruits to free the Greek population from the oppression of the Ottoman Empire. Nevertheless, in this dissertation the focus is posed on Muslim foreign fighters whose origins can be traced in the Afghanistan war (1979) against the Soviet invasion. Indeed, thanks to the charismatic leading figures of the Palestinian preacher Abdullah Azzam and the Saudi wealthy business Osama Bin Laden, the war attracted 20.000 foreign fighters, mostly coming from Arab countries. Azzam and Bin Laden were able to develop a completely new jihadi ideology. Moreover, according to historical as well as current examples, foreign fighters have proved to be a decisive actor both on the battlefield and also as the conflict ends. The Afghan-Arab veterans equipped with new fighting, technical, strategic and recruitment skills reached and worsen later conflicts as the Bosnian war (1992) or the Chechen wars (1994-1996; 1999). Additionally, they have proved to be dangerous actors for their home countries in cases in which they returned back and decided to perpetrate a terrorist attack.

The phenomenon of foreign fighters became a central topic of most terrorism studies as well as of counter-terrorism policymakers because it refers to an increasing tendency of individuals to join a war, which apparently seems to not pose a direct threat on them. This is the reason why all studies related to this phenomenon have been linked to analysis concerning the process of radicalization in order to better comprehend the motivations behind the decision to go to fight abroad. The second chapter provides an extensive research on the process of radicalization starting from the analysis of several popular models and theories. It becomes clear that radicalization is a multi-layered, complex and non-linear process, which occurs at both different interactive stages and levels of analysis. Furthermore, the challenge posed by this process is that a single cause root and a pattern do not exist to explain how the process emerges and how it proceeds. Finally, radicalization has incalculable outcomes that cover a wide spectrum of political actions. It is misleading to consider terrorism as the only possible logical result of radicalization. Starting from these findings, the scholarly literature is still struggling in elaborating an agreed definition of radicalization even if it seems to agree at considering it at its

most basic level as a process, which involves an increase use of violence. Radicalization may be understood as a process leading towards the embracement of radical ideas, radical behaviours or both.

Furthermore, it becomes central for our dissertation on Muslim foreign fighters to understand how the process of Islamist radicalization develops. They key question is how apparently well-integrated Muslim men engage in a process of radicalization towards the adoption of a radical interpretation of Islam as well as of violent behaviours. There is no single profile valid for all Islamist radicalized individuals, but they rather compose a high heterogeneous group. Nevertheless, the predominant Islamist ideology behind such a process is a Salafi-Jihadist one, according to which Muslims should fulfil their individual duty to engage in violent jihad against those who do not embrace such a radical interpretation of Islam and therefore are not considered to fit under the category of good Muslims. Despite the lack of a considerable amount of empirical data there are incalculable factors and events that serve as triggers for the radicalization process. Individuals may suffer from personal, economic, cultural and social identity crises, which make them feel sentiments of anger, frustration, social exclusion, depression and loneliness. Nevertheless, the challenge of Islamist radicalization is that all these factors are not necessary causes. Indeed, the majority of people, in particular Muslims living in the West constantly suffer from economic, political, social and cultural deprivation and they do not radicalize. Nevertheless, radical Islam has found increasing magnet locations where to proliferate, such as mosques, prisons, schools, bookshops, private homes and mostly the Internet. The latter has completely transformed the process of radicalization, becoming the new platform for propaganda and recruitment campaigns.

Today the phenomenon of foreign fighters has received growing attention especially after the eruption of the Syrian Civil War in the spring of 2011 and after the emergence of the Islamic State. The third chapter analysed the case of the Syrian war labelled as the conflict with the highest mobilization of foreign fighters focusing on the role played by the Islamic State, especially through its media strategy able to attract such a high number of foreign fighters.

The conflict arose as non-violent manifestations by Syrian people against the *Alawite* government of President Bashar al-Assad. The combination of increasing protests

with their relative violent suppression of the Syrian army turned the civil war into a conflict. Shortly after, more than thousand non-state armed groups emerged and began to actively operate in order to gain control of the Syrian state. The Islamist organization known as Islamic State severely contributes to the persistence of insecurity as well as instability in the region. Its historical as well as ideological roots can be traced in al-Qaeda. Indeed, in 2004 the Jordanian Abu Musab al-Zarqawi first established the Islamic State of Iraq as an affiliate of al-Qaeda. Its ultimate aim is to restore the Islamic Caliphate worldwide based on a strict and inflexible application of the Sharia law. After the emergence of the Syrian conflict, the new leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi decided to include Syria in its program and changed the name of the organization into the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Later, in 2014 any affiliation with al-Qaeda was dismissed and after conquering several territories in both Syria and Iraq al-Baghdadi announced the establishment of the Islamic State. It shortly became the most attractive Islamist organization to Arab as well as Western foreign fighters especially thanks to an innovative and appealing media campaign. Their extensive use of Internet and social media completely transformed cyber jihad creating a new generation of terrorists. For all these reasons it becomes clear the urgent need for the international community, national governments and security agencies to develop effective counter-radicalization measures in order to halt this ongoing foreign fighters phenomenon.

Because radicalization is such a complex and multifaceted process, with no single cause root and that occurs at different stages it is extremely challenging for governments to choose where to intervene first. Following this line of reasoning, effective counter measures need to be shaped in a way to address every single phase of the process of radicalization. Moreover, "[i]t is useful to differentiate between short term measures aimed at curbing [mostly] recruitment, and long term measures directed at addressing the 'strains' which may provide the breading ground of grievances in which mobilisation can become effective"[329]. An additional remark to take into consideration by Western governments when developing counter radicalization measures is that to not treat Muslims as a special and vulnerable community with particular rights because it will only reinforce their feelings of

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[329] Peter R. Neumann and Brooke Rogers, *Recruitment and Mobilisation for the Islamist Militant Movement in Europe*, King's College London for the European Commission, December, 2007, p.93.

alienation and frustration. Moreover, adopting a 'zero tolerance' approach will therefore strengthen their anger and sense of discrimination. For these reasons, governments should consider Muslims as equal citizens in order to boost their integration process in Western societies. However, the difficulty lies in the fact that there are substantial differences within the Muslim community in terms of ethnicity, interpretation of Islam and geographic provenience that need to be taken into account.

One of the most potentially effective counter measures for Western societies that it still on the process able at curbing Islamist radicalization is to create and offer to individuals an effective counter narrative towards radical Islam. For the purpose of this dissertation "it refers to products, such as films, animations, branded merchandise, or spoken word, that present messages and ideas intended to deconstruct, challenge or ridicule extremist ideas or the use of violence"[330]. These counter narratives can represent alternatives to the one offered by the Islamic State in order to prevent people from joining it. This approach needs to be developed through all the existing channels of communication in order to reach a broad audience. Western countries through this new counter ideology can offer a peaceful alternative to radical Islam and achieve a full integration of Muslim people in the societies. It is still under process because Western governments are still struggling against such extensive recruitment propaganda of the Islamic State for which they were not prepared.

First, Western governments need to individuate who are the main targets of IS's recruitment campaigns. As previously stated, IS mainly select young Muslims from second and third generation living in the West. For this reason the schooling system should be a primary area of concern for demolishing misperceptions and fictitious stories about Islam. Programs including teaching of Islam, of its history, art and literature would provide a well-founded knowledge able at countering extremist perceptions. "In doing so, schools should provide platforms in which issues likely to be raised by violent extremist are discussed openly, questions and contradictions are

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[330] Rachel Briggs Obe and Tanya Silverman, *Western Foreign Fighters: Innovations in Responding to the Threat*, Institute for Strategic Dialogue, London, 2014, p. 27.

highlighted, and alternative courses of action are pointed out"[331]. Moreover, young Muslims of second and third generations are experiencing an identity crisis because of the conflict between the traditional views on Islam offered by their parents against all the new values, traditions and symbols offered by the Western societies in which they are born. After-school activities including sport, music and art groups could offer the sense of belonging they desperately are seeking. Additionally, these activities could be used for individuating those young people who seem influenced by extremist thoughts. Furthermore, "Western countries should push a counter-narrative that stresses the brutality of the [Syrian] conflict and the internecine violence among jihadist"[332]. By showing and outlining the ongoing atrocities between different jihadist factions and the growing casualties of the conflict, the counter narrative aims at convincing to not travel to fight in the Syrian and Iraqi war. Because most of the time Muslim communities perceive Western governments, police and other state agents as repressive actors who believe that all Muslims can be potential terrorists, is of extreme importance on one side to build a trusty relationship and on the other side to involve local leaders, influential imams and preachers of mainstream Muslim communities to divulgate this counter narrative. Indeed, these people possess a deep knowledge of local languages and the society that are essential to better widespread these counter narratives. They also perform an important task when especially imams assure that all the material related to radical Islam does not circulate in their respective mosques. A strong collaboration between governments and mosques is extremely important especially because the latter has proved to be a focal point for the dissemination of propaganda materials. Many countries, including Italy, are severely controlling the flow of foreign money sent to the mosques[333]. The United Kingdom has proposed a very peculiar Muslim community initiative according to which Islamic institutions such as mosques need to respect some

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[331] Peter R. Neumann and Brooke Rogers, *Recruitment and Mobilisation for the Islamist Militant Movement in Europe*, King's College London for the European Commission, December, 2007, pp. 96-97.

[332] Daniel Byman and Jeremy Shapino, *Be Afraid. Be a Little Afraid: The Threat of Terrorism from Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq*, Foreign Policy at Brooklings, Policy Paper N.34, November, 2014, p.24.

[333] Denis MacEoin, *The hijacking of British Islam. How extremist literature is subverting mosques in the UK*, Policy Exchange, 2007.

minimum standards [334]. "The standards include counter-extremist programmes, community relations schemes, support and proper conditions for Imams and greater condemnation of 'un-Islamic' activity"[335].

Furthermore, Internet should be another primary area of concern where to widespread counter narratives, especially because it has completely transformed the process of radicalization. "One of the most striking things about group fighting in Syria and Iraq – especially IS – is the strength of their online presence; they understand the power of information, high production values, story arguments, compelling imaginary and an attractive proposition for their views"[336]. As already stated, Internet plays a crucial role in the recruitment of new foreign fighters. The fact that today Internet is available and accessible from a growing number of different apparatuses, poses several challenges to effectively counter the content uploaded of radical Islam. Countries differ from the approach chosen for their national counter-radicalization programmes. They can vary between a strict regulatory control with blocking access to specific content to a more light approach relied on self-regulation. Nevertheless, to a certain degree every government focuses on the removal of certain contents from the web. However, "[t]his approach is limited due to the speed of upload [and] the fact that extremists have migrated from using their own websites towards hosting their content on social media platforms, and while most material may be offensive it is often not illegal"[337]. According to these challenges, the Internet should be exploit to widespread counter narrative ideological content able to distancing people from Islamist extremism. Therefore, it is of significant utility to upload and share on websites as well on social media such a content that provides a well-founded knowledge of Islam, including its historical and ideological views. For instance, web pages and forums could include statements and moderate viewpoints of popular Muslim scholars. In addition, they could contain testimonies of Muslims who abandoned radical Islam.

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[334] Laura Pitel, *Ministers lose vital link to mosques as pressure alienates Muslim group*, The Times, Politics, August 26, 2014, http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/news/politics/article4186951.ece.
[335] Tomas Precht, *Home grown terrorism and Islamist radicalization. From conversion to terrorism*, Research Report funded by the Danish Ministry of Justice, December, 2007, p.76.
[336] Rachel Briggs Obe and Tanya Silverman, *Western Foreign Fighters: Innovations in Responding to the Threat*, Institute for Strategic Dialogue, London, 2014, p.21.
[337] *Ibidem*, p.22.

Finally, Western counter narratives should include possible peaceful alternatives aimed at helping the Syrian and Iraqi population. "It has been found that one of the key factors in the radicalization of […] Muslims in the West is […] perceived injustice and violence against Muslims around the world"[338]. Pictures and videos reporting the ongoing brutalities from which the Syrian population is suffering from are constantly widespread and uploaded as significant part of the overall media strategy of the Islamic State. Indeed, a relevant part of foreign fighters decided to join the ranks of IS to defend Syrian people from the violence perpetrated by the Assad regime. For this reason Western governments should "[e]ncouraging charitable activities, identifying legitimate channels for assistance, and otherwise highlighting what concerned individuals can do to help alleviate the suffering from the Syrian people [in order to] siphon off some of the supply of foreign fighters"[339].

In conclusion, the counter narrative approach appears to represent an effective policy when including short and long-term measures. Despite all its potential positive results, today there are still several challenges to overcome. The most predominant one is that almost all actors who are more credible to deliver counter narrative messages attracting a growing number of individuals are not those who possess the skills and qualifications needed for. This is the reason why "[t]he challenge requires a more nuanced and multi-layered response [to fully defeat the phenomenon of Muslim foreign fighters] drawing on the full range of talents and capacities of governments, families, communities and the private sector". It is now time to surmount national borders, to share information and lessons to develop an effective response to the threat posed by foreign fighters, which is affecting the entire world. Otherwise, this phenomenon is likely to continue being the predominant topic of counter terrorism forums.

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[338] *Ibidem*, p.23.
[339] Daniel Byman and Jeremy Shapino, *Be Afraid. Be a Little Afraid: The Threat of Terrorism from Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq*, Foreign Policy at Brooklings, Policy Paper N.34, November, 2014, p.25.

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