



Department of Political Science  
Master's Degree in International Relations - Major in Security

*Chair of Sociology of Terrorism and Political Violence*

# **Terror on the Internet: A Study on Online Jihadi Radicalization**

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*Ai miei genitori, il mio porto sicuro.*

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*It is obvious that the media war in this century is one of the strongest methods; in fact, its ratio may reach 90% of the total preparation for the battles.*

Osama Bin Laden, in a letter to Taliban Leader Mullah Muhammad Omar, 2002.

## Introduction

This master's degree thesis aims to analyze the phenomenon of online radicalization in relation to Islamic terrorism. The dissertation wants to draw attention to this highly current phenomenon, widely recognized as one of the most urgent challenges to be faced in ensuring the security of Western democracies. Indeed, although the birth of the Internet has often been associated with democratization, knowledge sharing, and social connection in the *global village*, its subsequent use by jihadist terrorism for strategic purposes has opened the way to new perspectives and opportunities in the path of metamorphosis that leads individuals to accept political violence. The intrinsic characteristics of the virtual world have allowed the development of a series of mechanisms that, in conjunction with sociological and psychological dynamics, can cause, promote, and facilitate radicalization processes.

This first chapter provides an analysis of the strategic use of the Internet by Islamic terrorist organizations to radicalize and recruit followers. Indeed, researching online radicalization comprehensively requires knowing how these organizations utilize the Internet to spread their ideologies and instructions. Islamic jihad is not only an act of violence; it is a set of educational concepts that is constructed and propagated via every possible means. The examination of Internet usage permits to understand how terrorist groups promote online hate education and enter Western communities unnoticed, disseminating ideological violence. In particular, this chapter will analyze the relationship between media and terrorism, the benefits that terrorist organizations have gained from the Internet, the leading online platforms used, the widespread content of jihadi propaganda online, and the challenges for Western democracies in confronting this phenomenon. In the literature used in this first chapter, three monographs that deal in detail with the jihadist use of the Internet acquire a primary role: *Terror on the Internet: The New Arena, the New Challenges*<sup>1</sup> by Gabriel Weimann; its updated 2015 edition, *Terrorism in Cyberspace: The Next Generation*<sup>2</sup>; and *Inside Terrorism*<sup>3</sup> by Bruce Hoffman.

The second chapter will present the main academic studies in the field of radicalization processes and in online radicalization. Indeed, in order to comprehend this phenomenon, it is indispensable, in the first place, to understand the major academic studies about radicalization. The role of the Internet cannot be comprehended without knowing the psychological and sociological dynamics underlying the use of political violence, regardless of the sphere of action, be it virtual or physical. For this

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<sup>1</sup> Gabriel Weimann, *Terror on the Internet: The New Arena, the New Challenges*. United States Institute of Peace, Washington, 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Gabriel Weimann, *Terrorism In Cyberspace: The Next Generation*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2017.

reason, the first paragraph of this chapter proposes to present these contributions. In particular, this section will use the article *What Everybody Should Know About Radicalization and the DRIA Model*<sup>4</sup>, in which Alessandro Orsini reconstructs the *milestones* in radicalization studies. In order, the contributions of Fathali M. Moghaddam, Silber and Bhatt, Marc Sageman, John Horgan, Quintan Wiktorowicz, Lawrence Kuznar, McCauley and Moskalenko, Donatella della Porta, Alessandro Orsini, and Arie W. Kruglanski, Jocelyn J. Bélanger, and Rohan Gunaratna will be presented.

Once these *milestones* are examined, the next section of the chapter will analyze the mechanisms and dynamics of the online world that can affect, cause and accelerate a radicalization process. In this sense, the relevant academic literature will be presented. The starting point are the articles *Options and Strategies for Countering Online Radicalization in the United States*<sup>5</sup> by Peter Neumann and *Rethinking Online Radicalization*<sup>6</sup> by Joe Whittaker, which offer a natural gateway to major academic studies on the links between the Internet and radicalization processes. Leading academics will include contributions from Marc Sageman, Tom Pyszczynsky, Edwin Sutherlands, John Suler, Benjamin Ducol, Daniel Koehler, and Gabriel Weimann.

The following section of the second chapter will investigate the relationship between the phenomenon of lone wolves and online radicalization. In particular, based on the monograph *The Age of the Lone Wolf Terrorism*<sup>7</sup> by Hamm and Spaaij, the phenomenon will be defined. Later, the online radicalization model of lone wolves developed by Israeli academic Gabriel Weimann will be examined.<sup>8</sup>

The second chapter's concluding section will offer some pertinent quantitative studies<sup>9</sup> to better comprehend the threat level of online radicalization compared to traditional radicalization processes.

The third chapter will use the theoretical notions presented in the first two sections of the thesis to analyze three case studies of Islamic extremists who have embarked on a path of online radicalization. These are: Roshonara Choudhry, responsible for the attempted murder of Labour MP Stephen Timms

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<sup>4</sup> Alessandro Orsini, *What Everybody Should Know about Radicalization and the DRIA Model*, in "Studies and Conflict in Terrorism", 46 (1), 68-100, 2023.

<sup>5</sup> Peter R. Neumann, *Options and Strategies for Countering Online Radicalization in the United States*, in "Studies in Conflict and Terrorism", 36(6), 2013, 431-459.

<sup>6</sup> Joe Whittaker, *Rethinking Online Radicalization*, in "Perspective on Terrorism", 16(4), 27-40, 2022.

<sup>7</sup> Mark S. Hamm, Ramon Spaaij, *The Age of Lone Wolf Terrorism*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2017.

<sup>8</sup> Gabriel Weimann, *Virtual Packs of Lone Wolves: How the Internet made Lone Wolf Terrorism a Misnomer*, The Wilson Center, 25/02/2014. <https://medium.com/its-a-medium-world/virtual-packs-of-lone-wolves-17b12f8c455a>

<sup>9</sup> Cfr. M. Costello, R. Barrett-Fox, C. Bernatsky, J. Hawdon, K. Mendes, *Predictors of viewing online extremism among America's youth*, in "Youth Soc.", 52, 710-727, 2020. Cfr. K. Saha, E. Chandrasekharan, M. De Choudhrouy, *Prevalence and Psychological effects of hateful speech in online college communities*, in Proceedings of the 10<sup>th</sup> ACM conference on web science, 255-264, 2019. In Jens F. Binder, Jonathan Kenyon, *Terrorism and the Internet: How dangerous is online radicalization?*, in "Frontiers in Psychology", 13, 2022.

on 14 May 2010 in London; Zachary Chesser, an American jihadist propagandist who attempted to join as a foreign fighter Al Shabaab in 2010; and Sayfullo Saipov, responsible for the attack carried out with a truck on 31 October 2017 on a bike path in New York.

In particular, this section will combine two radicalization models that give ideology a key role, the DRIA<sup>10</sup> model and the concept of “terrorist by vocation”, theorized by Alessandro Orsini, and the model developed by Mitchell Silber and Arvin Bhatt<sup>11</sup>, with some of the leading academic studies in the field of online radicalization. Peculiarly, much space would be devoted to the publications of Elizabeth Pearsons, Peter Neumann, Benjamin Ducol, Brachman and Levine, Mealeagrou Hitchens, and Gabriel Weimann.

The union of these two fields of study allows for a complete vision, able to emphasize both the psychological and social dynamics and the role of the internet in the radicalization processes of Roshonara Choudhry, Zachary Chesser and Sayfullo Saipov. The analysis will follow a precise pattern for each one of the extremists. Firstly, the dynamics and planning of terrorist attacks or online extremist activity, and the legal consequences will be examined. Afterwards, an analysis of the personal background and the online radicalization process of each of the three case studies will be proposed.

In conclusion, the entire thesis is also assisted by an interview granted to me by Professor Eitan Azani, a former colonel of the Israeli Defense Forces, Research Director at the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT) and Head of the BA and MA specialization in Counter-Terrorism at Reichman University in Herzliya (Israel).<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>Alessandro Orsini, *What Everybody Should Know About Radicalization and the DRIA Model*, in “Studies in Conflict and Terrorism”, 46(1), 68-100, 2023. Cfr. Alessandro Orsini, *La radicalization des terroristes de vocation*, in “Commentaire”, 156, Hiver, 2017, 783-790. Cfr. Alessandro Orsini, *Anatomia delle Brigate rosse. Le radici ideologiche del terrorismo rivoluzionario*, Rubbettino, Soveria Mannelli, 2010. Cfr. Alessandro Orsini, *L’Isis non è morto ha solo cambiato pelle*, Rizzoli, Milano, 2018.

<sup>11</sup> Mitchell Silber, Arvin Bhatt, *Radicalization in the West: the Homegrown Threat*, New York City Police Department, 2007.

<sup>12</sup> Eitan Azani, Interview by Ettore Saladini, 12/02/23, ICT Reichman University (IDC Herzliya)  
[https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1bXFYKFM8O5\\_K9pkxQEsyr7eF2XHAypSB?usp=share\\_link](https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1bXFYKFM8O5_K9pkxQEsyr7eF2XHAypSB?usp=share_link)



## Chapter I

### Strategies and Tools: How Islamic Terrorist Organizations use the Internet to Radicalize and Recruit Operatives.

#### An Introduction to the Method

Over time, the analysis of radicalization processes has led to the emergence of a wide and varied literature. Nevertheless, as highlighted by Alessandro Orsini in his article *What Everybody Should Know about Radicalization and the DRIA Model*, it is possible to trace a series of milestones in the academic literature within the processes of radicalization. In particular, the Italian academic identified the following authors: Fathali M. Moghaddam, Silber and Bhatt, Marc Sageman, John Horgan, Quintan Wiktorowicz, Lawrence Kuznar, McCauley and Moskalenko, Donatella della Porta, Arie W. Kruglanski, Jocelyn J. Belanger, and Rohan Gunaratna.<sup>13</sup>

Based on this academic contributions, this master's thesis aims to study the phenomenon of online radicalization concerning Islamic terrorism. Also, academic literature has produced essential studies in this field of research. As highlighted by Bruce Hoffman, Rohan Gunaratna, and Marc Sageman<sup>14</sup>, one of the most essential monographs concerning the use of the internet by terrorist organizations is *Terror on the Internet: The New Arena, The New Challenges*<sup>15</sup>, written by Israeli academic Gabriel Weimann in 2006 and adapted to recent technological developments in another monograph, entitled *Terrorism in Cyberspace: The Next Generation*, published in 2015.<sup>16</sup>

However, the literature on online radicalisation is constantly evolving, and many other important articles have been published in this area. The most recent, published in 2022 in the journal *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, was written by Kenyon, Binder and Baker-Beall and is titled *Understanding the Role of the Internet in the Process of Radicalization: An Analysis of Convicted Extremists in England and Wales*.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Alessandro Orsini, *What Everybody Should Know about Radicalization and the DRIA Model*, in "Studies and Conflict in Terrorism", 46 (1), 68-100, 2023.

<sup>14</sup> The statements of these authors were released in different contexts and can be found on the back cover and in the foreword of *Terror on the Internet: The New Arena, The New Challenges*.

<sup>15</sup> Gabriel Weimann, *Terror on the Internet: The New Arena, the New Challenges*. United States Institute of Peace, Washington, 2006.

<sup>16</sup> Gabriel Weimann, *Terrorism In Cyberspace: The Next Generation*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2015.

<sup>17</sup> Jonathan Kenyon, Jens Binder, Christopher Baker-Beall, *Understanding the Role of the Internet in the Process of Radicalisation: An Analysis of Convicted Extremists in England and Wales*, in "Studies in Conflict & Terrorism", 1-25, 2022. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1057610X.2022.2065902>

In order to understand this phenomenon in detail, this first chapter analyzes the use of the Internet by Islamic terrorist organizations to radicalize and recruit followers. Indeed, understanding how these groups use the Internet to disseminate their message is crucial for analyzing in-depth online radicalization. In today's digital age, the Internet has pervaded our reality and has become a powerful tool to spread jihadi propaganda and recruit new members. Terrorist organizations use a variety of online platforms such as social media, blogs, forums and messaging apps to fulfil their aims and reach a worldwide target. By studying their Internet use, it is possibly better to grasp valuable insights into the mechanism of online radicalization.

In order to reconstruct how individuals can start their path of radicalization it is crucial to analyze living documents, oral testimonies and written documents. The analysis of the use of the Internet makes it possible to understand the dissemination of written and, in some cases, oral documents. The Internet allows terrorist organizations to spread hate education and penetrate Western societies undisturbed and, in such a way, disseminate ideological violence. Before being an attack, Islamic jihad is a set of educational principles, which are built and diffused with all the means available.<sup>18</sup>

In particular, this chapter will analyze the relationship between terrorism and media, the benefits that terrorist organizations have gained from the Internet, the leading platforms used, the widespread content and the challenges for Western democracies in confronting this phenomenon. The study is based on the previously illustrated literature, other critical academic articles and monographies, reports of government agencies, anti-terrorism centres, and International Organizations and analysis of images and graphic content extracted from jihadist propaganda materials online. In addition, the analysis is assisted by an interview granted to me by Professor Eitan Azani, a former colonel of the Israeli Defense Forces, Research Director at the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT) and Head of the BA and MA specialization in Counter-Terrorism at Reichman University in Herzliya (Israel).<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Alessandro Orsini, *ISIS: I terroristi più fortunati del mondo e tutto ciò che è stato fatto per favorirli* (Terza edizione), Rizzoli, Milano, 2017, pp. 128-129.

<sup>19</sup> Eitan Azani, Interview by Ettore Saladini, 12/02/23, ICT Reichman University (IDC Herzliya)  
[https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1bXFYKFM8O5\\_K9pkxQEsyr7eF2XHAYpSB?usp=share\\_link](https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1bXFYKFM8O5_K9pkxQEsyr7eF2XHAYpSB?usp=share_link)

## 1.1 Terrorism and Media: From the Mass Media to the Internet and the World Wide Web

As Bruce Hoffman states in his seminal book *Inside Terrorism*, terrorism and the media are «bound together in an inherently symbiotic relationship, each feeding off and exploiting the other for its own purposes».<sup>20</sup> All terrorist organizations, despite the ideological and strategical differences, have one trait in common: they want to subject and terrorize its targets, and to gain the most exposure possible from its actions.<sup>21</sup> Using the words of the psychiatrist and well-known expert on terrorism Dr Frederick Hacker, terrorists seek to «frighten and, by frightening, to dominate and control. They want to impress. They play to and for an audience and solicit audience participation».<sup>22</sup>

As a result, terrorist attacks aim to generate a strong media response to sway public opinion. Indeed, if from the international law point of view the attack often only results in little physical harm; when the media polishes and amplifies the attack's message, its explosive reverberation only gets louder. In terrorists' aims, the media are essential for engaging in psychological warfare on three target audiences: the constituency population, the targeted population, and international public opinion. The first target receives a message of power from the media. The group attacked a powerful enemy despite having fewer people and resources and less advanced technology. This message also serves as a call to action for the target audience to support the organization, join its ranks, and boost their morale. The message is the contrary regarding the target population of terrorism. The intention is to undermine and demoralize their security perception, conveying vulnerability, regardless of location or circumstance, and the absence of state protection. Specific operational or political requests typically accompany the message. Finally, the message to global public opinion serves as a tool to draw attention to its condition and highlights the suffering of the native people of the terrorist group.<sup>23</sup>

As Brian Jenkins stated in his seminal paper *International Terrorism: A New Mode of Conflict*, terrorism is theater. Terrorists carefully choreographed the play, they prepare a script (the plan), the scenography (the place in which the attack is carried out), they find a stage (the media) and select a target audience.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2017, p. 192.

<sup>21</sup> *Ivi*, p. 182.

<sup>22</sup> Frederick J. Hacker, *Crusaders, Criminals, Crazyies: Terror and Terrorism in our Time*, Norton, New York, 1976, p. XI.

<sup>23</sup> Boaz Ganor, *Terrorism as a Strategy of Psychological Warfare*. In "Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma, 9(1-2), 33-43, p.235-236, 2004. [https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1300/J146v09n01\\_03?journalCode=wamt20](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1300/J146v09n01_03?journalCode=wamt20)

<sup>24</sup> Brian Michael Jenkins, *International Terrorism: A New Mode of Conflict*, in "International Terrorism and World Security", ed. David Carlton and Carlo Scharf, Croom Helm, 1975, London.

However, even if also today the traditional mass media continue to be a prominent platform, the cyberspace have given to terrorists organizations a new ubiquitous and timeliness global stage.

The beginning of the Internet can be traced to the early 1970s, when the US Department of Defense, during the height of the Cold War, sought to lessen the susceptibility of its communication networks to nuclear assault. The Defense Department decentralized the entire structure and built a web of computer networks that were connected to one another. The Internet was made available to business customers in the late 1980s, and by the mid-1990s, more than 18,000 private, public, and national networks were connected to the Internet. Nowadays, the number of users is around 5 billion.<sup>25</sup>

The Internet and World Wide Web are among the most influential technical advancements ever. They have transformed communications in a very short period of time, enabling a ubiquitous and timeliness interchange of information globally. From its inception, the Internet has been hailed for its ability to bridge cultural divides and facilitate dialogue between businesses, consumers, and governments. It seemed to offer the unparalleled potential for creating a platform where the *global village* could assemble, exchange ideas, and promote democracy globally.<sup>26</sup> In terms of political activism, they gave organizations a powerful tool to advance the *global dialectic*, which describes a condition in which radicalism and activism may be sparked locally and then organized into a larger process of opposition.<sup>27</sup> Whatever size group, the members «can reach each one other and use the Net to promote an agenda. Their members can come from any geographical region on the Net and can attempt to influence foreign policy everywhere in the world».<sup>28</sup>

Paradoxically, more than fifty years after its creation, the network that served the US security services to beat the URSS and seemed to promote and preserve democracy worldwide, is now in the hand of one of the main enemies of the West and its liberal values: international terrorism.<sup>29</sup>

One of the first official governmental sources regarding the terrorist's Internet use was provided in July 2004 by the independent National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the US, which published its conclusions in a significant report. The committee conducted more than 1,200 interviews with people in 10 different nations to carry out its task, which involved reviewing more than 2.5 million documentation pages. The report outlines how al-Qaeda operators used the Internet,

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<sup>25</sup> Gabriel Weimann, *www.terror.net: How Modern Terrorism Uses the Internet*, Special Report 116, "United States Institute of Peace" (USIP), 03/2004, p.3. <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/sr116.pdf>

<sup>26</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>27</sup> Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2017, p.209.

<sup>28</sup> Denning, *Activism, Hacktivism, and Cyberterrorism: the Internet as a tool for influencing Foreign Policy*. In "Networks and Netwars. The Future of Terror, Crime and Militancy", 239-88 p.243.

[https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monograph\\_reports/MR1382/RAND\\_MR1382.pdf#page=253](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monograph_reports/MR1382/RAND_MR1382.pdf#page=253)

<sup>29</sup> Gabriel Weimann, *www.terror.net: How Modern Terrorism Uses the Internet*, Special Report 116, "United States Institute of Peace" (USIP), 03/2004. <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/sr116.pdf>

including their research on American flight schools and flight information, their use of email to communicate and plan their attacks, and their download of anti-American web pages.<sup>30</sup> The commission stated that:

*«Terrorists, in turn, have benefited from this same rapid development of communication technologies [...] The emergence of the World Wide Web has given terrorists a much easier means of acquiring information and exercising command and control over their operations».*<sup>31</sup>

Since then, there has been a rapid increase in the number of terrorist's activities on the Internet. According to Gabriel Weimann, one of the most well-known authorities in the field of the Internet and terrorist communication, two essential variables contribute to this pattern's continual growth: «the democratization of communications driven by user-generated content on the Internet and the growing awareness of modern terrorists of the potential of using the Internet as a tool for their purposes»<sup>32</sup>.

In fact, its nature makes the virtual realm the ideal reality for terrorist's activities. Due to the cyberspace, the options for terrorists to get attention and spread their thoughts have dramatically increased. Indeed, before the Internet, terrorists' ability to influence large scale audiences depended heavily on their capability to carry out terrorist actions that had an impact on public opinion and media attention. Furthermore, radio, print media and television are characterized by selection thresholds established by editors, journalists and news professionals that reflect certain ethical and technical standards.<sup>33</sup> As the actual Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu stated «unreported, terrorist acts would be like the proverbial tree falling in the silent forest».<sup>34</sup> Instead, the terrorist's internet's platforms do not have any such restrictions and give them the complete control of the so called *perception management*. Namely, they can exploit the Net to accurately present themselves and their acts in the way and context they choose, free from the filters and thresholds of mainstream media.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Gabriel Weimann, *Terrorism In Cyberspace: The Next Generation*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2015, p.30.

<sup>31</sup> National Commission on Terrorist Attack upon US, *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attack upon US*, 2004, p.88 <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GPO-911REPORT/pdf/GPO-911REPORT.pdf>

<sup>32</sup> Gabriel Weimann, *Terrorism In Cyberspace: The Next Generation*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2015, p.30.

<sup>33</sup> Gabriel Weimann, *www.terror.net: How Modern Terrorism Uses the Internet*, Special Report 116, "United States Institute of Peace" (USIP), 03/2004, p.6. <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/sr116.pdf>

<sup>34</sup> Benjamin Netanyahu, *Terrorism: How the West can win*, p. 109.

<sup>35</sup> Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2017, pp. 209-210.

As a result, the spread of video productions, the accessibility and availability of distribution channels, have all helped usher in a new era. A period in which terrorist groups' reliance on institutional distribution channels and traditional media outlets has greatly weakened.<sup>36</sup> Films celebrating the victories of Islamic fighters, such as those that frequently emanate from the Middle East, were hard to find in traditional media before the invention of the Internet. Nevertheless, these days, terrible footage of beheadings and assaults are coming from Islamist conflict zones directly to our electronic devices.<sup>37</sup>

As communications tools improved, terrorist groups were able to operate more autonomously and spread their message to larger audiences. Multimedia communications, ideological, political, and religious beliefs, and the promotion of their activities provide them with a more significant opportunity to shape the perceptions of their audiences' and opponents' perceptions.<sup>38</sup>

Moreover, terrorists can blend into the background thanks to the anonymity provided by the Internet, which also allows for easy, all-encompassing access and the use of chat rooms, mobile devices, social media, online video sharing, and virtual worlds. As technology advances, so does terrorism. Its practitioners have become highly skilled at using the most recent tools, such as encryption, software anonymization, and dead dropping, namely the generation of an unsent draft message, which users may view with the required password. Terrorist organizations use this practice to reach a large, anonymous audience, leaving virtually no traces behind.<sup>39</sup>

Furthermore, the Internet offers previously unheard-of ways for clandestine organizations to improve significantly funding operations. Up to the present time, financial donations are only a «click away», thanks to many websites offering banking information for cash and transfers.<sup>40</sup> In a nutshell, the Internet has shown to be a particularly useful communication tool for terrorists, a crucial tool for both internal command and control and informational needs as well as outward propaganda.<sup>41</sup>

According to research conducted by Gabriel Weimann, in 1998 less than 50% of the Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs) designated by the US State Department had a website. Later that year,

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<sup>36</sup> Bruce Hoffman, *The Use of the Internet by Islamic Extremists*, Testimony presented to the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, in “RAND Corporation Testimony Series”, 2006.

[https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/testimonies/2006/RAND\\_CT262-1.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/testimonies/2006/RAND_CT262-1.pdf)

<sup>37</sup> Evan F. Kohlmann. *The real Online Terrorist Threat*, in “Foreign Affairs”, 85/2006, v. 5 (pp.115-124), p.117.

<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/world/real-online-terrorist-threat>

<sup>38</sup> Gabriel Weimann, *www.terror.net: How Modern Terrorism Uses the Internet*, Special Report 116, “United States Institute of Peace” (USIP), 03/2004, p.6. <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/sr116.pdf>

<sup>39</sup> Gabriel Weimann, *Terrorism In Cyberspace: The Next Generation*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2015, p.33.

<sup>40</sup> Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2017, p.210.

<sup>41</sup> Ibidem.

, almost all of them had established their online presence.<sup>42</sup> This trend has boosted radically in the following years, in 2003 the Israeli academic had classified 2600 sites.<sup>43</sup> In 2013, Weimann was keeping tabs on almost 10,000 sites, having quadrupled that amount from 2011.<sup>44</sup> This ever-increasing trend reflects an essential condition of contemporary reality, expressed significantly by a phrase of a researcher from the US government Open-Source Center (OSC) in 2000, reported by Bruce Hoffman: «these days, if you are not on the web, you don't exist»<sup>45</sup>.

In particular, Salafi-Jihadi groups have gained notoriety as prominent Internet exploiters due to their demonstrated proficiency in using IT for offensive operations and their ability to successfully mimic the more conventional propaganda, fund-raising, and recruitment aims.<sup>46</sup> Indeed, as Eitan Azani declared in the interview he granted to me, radical islamists groups strategy evolved during time, and it was extremely influenced by technological development. Using his words, «the Internet or the *electronic jihad*<sup>13</sup>, as they call it, because they need to justify the use of the Internet for their purposes, was one of the most important issues that changed dramatically the nature of the operations of the global jihad and leverage the ability of this organization to recruit people. The more the technology advanced, the more it was encrypted, and the more it was utilized to reach people and audiences all over the world. In addition, because Jihad went worldwide and the organizations shifted from a hierarchical to a decentralized structure, the Internet was the only instrument that allowed them to communicate with one other».<sup>47</sup>

As Weimann reports in his *Terrorism in Cyberspace*, nowadays, all active terrorist organizations have at least more than one website in different languages. Among the most prominent examples of jihadi organizations, there are: ISIS, Hamas, Hezbollah, Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, Fatah Tanzim, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, Al-Shabaab and numerous al-Qaeda affiliates, including groups in Syria, Lebanon, the Gaza strip, Sinai, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Maghreb, Sudan, Algeria and Lybia.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Gabriel Weimann, *Terror on the Internet: The New Arena, the New Challenges*. United States Institute of Peace, Washington, 2006, p.15.

<sup>43</sup> Gabriel Weimann, *Terrorism In Cyberspace: The Next Generation*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2015, p.10.

<sup>44</sup> Gabriel Weimann, *Terrorism In Cyberspace: The Next Generation*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2015, p.25.

<sup>45</sup> Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2017, p.214.

<sup>46</sup> *Ivi*, p.215.

<sup>47</sup> Eitan Azani, Interview by Ettore Saladini, 12/02/23, ICT Reichman University (IDC Herzliya)

[https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1bXFYKFM8O5\\_K9pkxQEsyr7eF2XHAypSB?usp=share\\_link](https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1bXFYKFM8O5_K9pkxQEsyr7eF2XHAypSB?usp=share_link)

<sup>48</sup> Gabriel Weimann, *www.terror.net: How Modern Terrorism Uses the Internet*, Special Report 116, "United States Institute of Peace" (USIP), 03/2004, p. 5. <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/sr116.pdf>

## ***1.2 Jihadisphere: What are the platforms in the service of electronic jihad?***

When it comes the discussion of the terrorist's use of Internet it is crucial to make a first distinction between two different ranges of action: cyberterrorism or cyberwarfare and organizational and propaganda purposes. On one hand, when we deal with cyberterrorism an organization launches its attack through the Internet on sensitive infrastructure, individuals, computer networks, companies or state archives, for example. On the other, the Net is used to spread messages of hatred and violence, disseminate ideology, radicalize, recruit people, plan attacks and interact with supporters. Nowadays, according to Gabriel Weimann, terrorist groups utilize the Internet more for communication, propaganda and organization than for actual attacks, but cyberterrorism is still on the terrorists' agenda and is expected to replace other forms of terrorism as their primary means of attack.<sup>49</sup>

However, the terrorists' Internet use is not always easy to classify. Indeed, there are also instances where the distinction between terrorist operations committed online and those committed on the battleground is so hazy that it is practically impossible to make one out of the other. One example is the Army of the Victorious Sect (AVs), a Sunni militant group in central Iraq. The AVS launched an open competition to create the group's new official website at the beginning of November 2005. The creator of the winning contribution would be awarded an extraordinary reward, as decided by the heads of the AVS military and media divisions. In fact, by clicking a button on his computer, the winner would have been given the authority to launch three long-range missiles at an American military facility in Iraq from anywhere in the globe. Days after the announcement, the AVS said that it had chosen to extend the deadline for applications due to the enormous reaction it had received. In the end, the contest was suspended in 2006, when AVS merged in Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI).<sup>50</sup>

The previous example depicts the extreme difficulty scholars, and governmental agencies face in defining the terrorist's use of the Internet, which is exceptionally complex, connected and multifaced. Indeed, since the 1990s, the Internet has allowed Jihadi-Salafi Organizations to create an extremely varied and multifaced virtual world made up of different platforms. As Gary Bunt suggests in his *Islam in the Digital Age*, Islamic groups have responded to the digital era by heavily refocusing their efforts online and favoring online communication over conventional routes. The Internet has become a vital tool in disseminating Islamic propaganda.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Gabriel Weimann, *Terrorism In Cyberspace: The Next Generation*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2015, p. 34.

<sup>50</sup> Evan F. Kohlmann. *The real Online Terrorist Threat*, in "Foreign Affairs", 85/2006, v. 5 (pp.115-124), p.122. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20032074>

<sup>51</sup> Gary R. Bunt, *Islam in the Digital Age*, Pluto Press, London, 2003.



The landscape of the Cyber Islamic community is constantly shifting as new websites and platforms appear on a regular basis. In particular, the most influential event in this trend was the birth of the *Web 2.0*. Tim O'Reilly invented this term to describe the technological advancements that infused the Internet after the dot-com bubble crashed in 2001.<sup>52</sup> This revolution transformed the so-called Web 1.0, which spread until the 1990s, and was composed mainly of static websites, without any possibility of interaction with the user except standard navigation between pages, the use of emails and the use of search engines, in a totally different and innovative reality. New media emerged as one of the various expressions of Web 2.0's features. As Amble stated, they are «a nebulous conceptualization that encompasses a growing array of interactive communications systems facilitated by a rapidly expanding set of platforms».<sup>53</sup> In other words, the Web 2.0 has led to the birth of blogs, forums, chats, systems such as Wikipedia, social media such as YouTube, Facebook, Myspace, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp, Telegram all interconnected together in new means, forming the «new media landscape».<sup>54</sup>

This evolution has resulted in the development of the neologism *Jihadisphere*, coined in 2012 by Benjamin Ducol. The scholar defined the concept as «an online community of militants and sympathizers united by their common adherence to a global Salafi jihadi ideology; a virtual space where one can easily share thoughts and ideas and thus an important channel for jihadi proselytization and violent radicalization».<sup>55</sup> This virtual realm had developed since the middle of the 2000s when most jihadi websites were published only in Arabic and hence unavailable to most internet users, to what Magnus Ranstorp described as *virtual migration*. Namely, they started to share their ideology and thoughts in multiple languages directed to different kind of targets opening a huge amount of new possibilities.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Tim O'Reilly, *What is Web 2.0*, 2005. <https://www.oreilly.com/pub/a/web2/archive/what-is-web-20.html>

<sup>53</sup> John Curtis Amble, *Combating Terrorism In the New Media Environment*, in "Studies and Conflict in Terrorism, 35 (339-359), 2012, p.339. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/1057610X.2012.666819?journalCode=uter20>

<sup>54</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>55</sup> Benjamin Ducol, *Uncovering the French-speaking Jihadisphere: An Exploratory Analysis*, in "Media, War and Conflict, 5(1), 51-70, 2012, p.52.

<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1750635211434366?journalCode=mwca>

<sup>56</sup> Magnus Ranstorp, *The Virtual Sanctuary of Al Qaeda and Terrorism in an age of Globalization*. In "Eriksson J. Giacomello G (eds) International Relations and Security in the Digital Age, Routledge, London.

The people who make up this Jihadisphere can be split into three categories: passive participants who mostly just consume internet content; creators of material affiliated with various media wings of jihadist organizations; and the *Jihobbyists*.<sup>57</sup> This last term was coined by Brachman<sup>58</sup> to depicts the milieu's structural foundation, the ones feel more in control and committed in the movement since they are probably aware of the crucial role they are playing.<sup>59</sup>

In reconstructing the evolution of Jihadi media spreading is extremely meaningful the classification in four phases provided by Zelin and Fellow. According to the scholars, the first phase, which spanned the middle of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, saw terrorist operations depend on conventional oral and written materials, including pamphlets, periodicals, and lectures. The most notable instances were Abdallah Azzam's trips to Europe and the US to speak at mosques and the numerous video cassettes produced in the former *Theater of Jihad* (most of all in Afghanistan, Bosnia, and Chechnya). Beginning in the middle of the 1990s and pausing until the middle of the 2000s, the second phase saw jihadists employ top-down websites to disseminate material. This second generation entirely controlled the content and its dissemination. In the third phase, from the middle of the 2000s until the creation of social media platforms, terrorists shifted to interactive forums where the top-down dynamic was inverted, and users might share resources, ideas and opinions. Finally, the dynamic was again cultivated toward the individual in the late 2000s with the introduction of social networks. In this last stage, individuals may upload, write, and create videos without interference from organizations.<sup>60</sup>

Nowadays, the most important platforms in the service of electronic jihad are static websites, forums and chat rooms, social networks, social messages encrypted applications, pasting sites and the dark web platforms.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens, Nick Kaderbhai, *Research Perspectives on Online Radicalization: A Literature Review, 2006-2016*. International Center for the Study of Radicalization (ICSR), Vox Poll, 2017, p. 41.

[https://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/ICSR-Paper\\_Research-Perspectives-on-Online-Radicalisation-A-Literature-Review-2006-2016.pdf](https://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/ICSR-Paper_Research-Perspectives-on-Online-Radicalisation-A-Literature-Review-2006-2016.pdf)

<sup>58</sup> J. Brachman, *Global Jihadism: Theory and Practice*, Routledge, London, 2005, p.19.

<sup>59</sup> Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens, Nick Kaderbhai, *Research Perspectives on Online Radicalization: A Literature Review, 2006-2016*. International Center for the Study of Radicalization (ICSR), Vox Poll, 2017, p. 41.

[https://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/ICSR-Paper\\_Research-Perspectives-on-Online-Radicalisation-A-Literature-Review-2006-2016.pdf](https://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/ICSR-Paper_Research-Perspectives-on-Online-Radicalisation-A-Literature-Review-2006-2016.pdf)

<sup>60</sup> Aaron Y. Zelin, Richard B. Fellow, *The State of Global Jihad Online. A Qualitative, Quantitative, and Cross-Lingual Analysis*, "The Washington Institute for Near East Policy", 01/2013, p. 4. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/state-global-jihad-online>

<sup>61</sup> Eitan Azani, Nadine Liv, *A Comprehensive Doctrine for an Evolving Threat: Countering Terrorist Use of Social Networks*, in "Studies in Conflict and Terrorism, 43(8), 728-752, 2020, pp. 731-733.

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1057610X.2018.1494874>

**Static Websites:** The official or “top-down” websites, as described by Zelin, were the first virtual platforms used by Salafi-Jihadi organizations to communicate their goals. These sites reflected a hierarchic structure where only the admin could share content, and there was no room for dialogue and relationships between producers and consumers.<sup>62</sup> These first platforms allowed terrorist organizations to disseminate their ideas and provide a store of the documents produced as a database. Nowadays, these platforms are declining for a variety of reasons, including being banned or taken down. users’ raising suspicion that governments were tracking them, and the overall migration of online activity to social networks.<sup>63</sup>

**Forums and Chat Rooms:** Online forums and Chat Rooms were created due to the growth of the Internet, enabling members of radical organizations to communicate and debate with supporters in relative safety and independence provided by online anonymity. With these media’s potential for engagement, they quickly outgrew and replaced static websites owned by jihadist groups as the primary venues to disseminate jihadist propaganda and build online linkages.<sup>64</sup> Furthermore, Jihadist content became more widely available to consumers because many new platforms employed English and other Western languages instead of Arabic, traditionally the dominant language of jihadist websites.<sup>65</sup> The anonymity provided by these platforms fostered the connection of people who, without these tools, would have never risked a direct connection with these organizations in the physical world.<sup>66</sup> As Suler pointed out in 2005, this anonymity created an “online disinhibition”.<sup>67</sup> Individuals feel confident evading accountability for their virtual proclamations, which might make these groups more antagonistic, divisive, and possibly violent.<sup>68</sup> In addition, terrorist organizations often utilize online forums to exchange tactical knowledge.

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<sup>62</sup> Aaron Y. Zelin, Richard B. Fellow, *The State of Global Jihad Online. A Qualitative, Quantitative, and Cross-Lingual Analysis*, “The Washington Institute for Near East Policy”, 01/2013, p. 5. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/state-global-jihad-online>

<sup>63</sup> Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens, Nick Kaderbhai, *Research Perspectives on Online Radicalization: A Literature Review, 2006-2016*. International Center for the Study of Radicalization (ICSR), Vox Poll, 2017, p. 42. [https://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/ICSR-Paper\\_Research-Perspectives-on-Online-Radicalisation-A-Literature-Review-2006-2016.pdf](https://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/ICSR-Paper_Research-Perspectives-on-Online-Radicalisation-A-Literature-Review-2006-2016.pdf)

<sup>64</sup> Aaron Y. Zelin, Richard B. Fellow, *The State of Global Jihad Online. A Qualitative, Quantitative, and Cross-Lingual Analysis*, “The Washington Institute for Near East Policy”, 01/2013, pp. 2-5. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/state-global-jihad-online>

<sup>65</sup> Benjamin Ducol, *Uncovering the French-speaking Jihadisphere: An Exploratory Analysis*, in “Media, War and Conflict, 5(1), 51-70, 2012, p.52. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1750635211434366?journalCode=mwca>

<sup>66</sup> Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens, Nick Kaderbhai, *Research Perspectives on Online Radicalization: A Literature Review, 2006-2016*. International Center for the Study of Radicalization (ICSR), Vox Poll, 2017, p.43

<sup>67</sup> John Suler, *The Online Disinhibition Effect*, in “International journal of Applied Psychoanalytic studies, 2(2), 184-188, 2005. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/15257832/>

<sup>68</sup> *Ivi*, pp. 42-44.

Operatives have been known to answer inquiries on jihadist message boards and chatrooms on, for instance, the preparation of poisons for chemical attacks, the ambush of troops, the execution of suicide strikes, and the penetration of computer systems.<sup>69</sup> One of the most utilized chatroom services is Paltalk which allows the share of audio and video capabilities. In particular, one chatroom in the Paltalk index, with an ever-so-slightly modified but still recognizable name, has been widely advertised on Jihadi message boards, and links to al-Qaeda propaganda videos and terrorist manuals are often posted there. However, there are also several exclusive forums such as *Qalah*, *Al-Shamikh*, *Majahden*, and *Al-Faloja*, which seem to be very famous within terrorist groups.<sup>70</sup>

**Social Networks:** In the current digital landscape, the birth of social media, fostered by the Web 2.0 revolution, changed the Jihadi organization's strategy dramatically. While password protection for chat rooms and forums has decreased, radicals increasingly turn to open and free social media platforms to spread their message and find recruits. As Evan Kohlmann states

«Today, 90 percent of terrorist activity on the Internet takes place using social networking tools. [...] These forums act as a virtual firewall to help safeguard the identities of those who participate, and they offer subscribers a chance to make direct contact with terrorist representatives, to ask questions, and even to contribute and help out the cyberjihad».<sup>71</sup>

Social media vary from traditional media due to «interactivity, reach, frequency, usability, immediacy, and permanence»<sup>72</sup>. In contrast to conventional media, defined as “one-to-many”, where solely a handful of individuals convey data to an almost limitless public, social networks allow anybody to upload or acquire material. These platforms provide highly participatory experiences for people and communities to exchange, co-create, and debate. Terrorists use social media for many reasons. Firstly, these canals happen to be the most well-liked among their target audience, allowing terrorist groups to participate in mainstream culture. Secondly, social media platforms are user-friendly, trustworthy, and free. Then, in contrast to prior websites, which needed terrorists to wait for people to approach them, social networks enable terrorists to reach

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<sup>69</sup> Gabriel Weimann, *Terror on Facebook, Twitter, and Youtube*, in “The Brown Journal of World Affairs, XVI (II), 45-54, 2010, p. 47. <https://bjwa.brown.edu/16-2/terror-on-facebook-twitter-and-youtube/>

<sup>70</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>71</sup> Cited in Gabriel Weimann, *New Terrorism and New Media*, The Wilson Center, Washington D.C., 2014, p.1.

[https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/publication/STIP\\_140501\\_new\\_terrorism\\_F.pdf](https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/publication/STIP_140501_new_terrorism_F.pdf)

<sup>72</sup> *Ivi*, p.2.

out to their target audiences.<sup>73</sup> Finally, social networks provide a substantial benefit owing to the simplicity with which a new account may be created and the relative protection they give from Internet Protocol (IP) address tracking.<sup>74</sup> In a nutshell, social media have maximized accessibility; nowadays, Jihadi contents are no more in what Neumann called the «darkest corners of the Internet».<sup>75</sup>

An essential point in social media is the phenomenon of the so-called *echo chambers*. The premise underpinning these phenomena is that social media users prefer to convey with like-minded persons and material that is ideologically aligned, meaning that they are rarely exposed to the contrasting viewpoints that compose the adversarial public sphere. Echo chambers are presumed to be amplified by the algorithmic selection of content on social media platforms determined by users' previous activity, which restricts the variety of the content that users are exposed to and, rather than contributing to viewpoint diversification, results in online clustering and polarization.<sup>76</sup> These factors enable the uncontested endorsement and amplification of a community's most extreme viewpoints.<sup>77</sup> As a consequence, as stated by Neumann, «people acquire a skewed sense of reality so that extremist attitudes and violence are no longer taboos but – rather – are seen as positive and desirable».<sup>78</sup>

As Gabriel Weimann argues, Facebook is one of the most utilized social networks by jihadi organizations. The scholar, in his article *New Terrorism and New Media*, reports a post written in a jihadi forum: «Facebook is a great idea, and better than the forums. Instead of waiting for people to [come to you so you can] inform them, you go to them and teach them! [I] mean, if you have a group of 5,000 people, with the press of a button you [can] send them a standardized message. I entreat you, by God, to begin registering for Facebook as soon as you [finish] reading this post. Familiarize yourselves with it. This post is a seed and a beginning, to be followed by serious efforts

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<sup>73</sup> Gabriel Weimann, *New Terrorism and New Media*, The Wilson Center, Washington D.C., 2014, p.1.

[https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/publication/STIP\\_140501\\_new\\_terrorism\\_F.pdf](https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/publication/STIP_140501_new_terrorism_F.pdf) pp. 2-3.

<sup>74</sup> Ines Von Behr, Anais Reding, Charlie Edwards, Luke Gribbon, *Radicalisation in the digital era: the Use of Internet in 15 cases of terrorism and extremism*, RAND Europe, 2013, p.34.

<sup>75</sup> Peter Neumann, *Countering Online Radicalization in America*, “Bipartisan Policy Center”, “Homeland Security Project”, Washington DC, 2012, p.17. <https://bipartisanpolicy.org/download/?file=/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/BPC-Online-Radicalization-Report.pdf>

<sup>76</sup> Ludovic Terren, Rosa Borge, *Echo Chambers on Social Media: A Systematic Review of Literature*, in “Review of Communication Research”, Vol. 9, 100-118, 2021, p.100. <https://rcommunicationr.org/index.php/rcr/article/view/94/90>

<sup>77</sup> Rachel Briggs, *Radicalisation, the Role of the Internet*, Institute for Strategic Dialogue: A Working Paper of the PNN, London, 2011, p. 6. [https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/StockholmPPN2011\\_BackgroundPaper\\_FOR20WEBSITE.pdf](https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/StockholmPPN2011_BackgroundPaper_FOR20WEBSITE.pdf)

<sup>78</sup> Peter Neumann, *Countering Online Radicalization in America*, “Bipartisan Policy Center”, “Homeland Security Project”, Washington DC, 2012, p.18. <https://bipartisanpolicy.org/download/?file=/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/BPC-Online-Radicalization-Report.pdf>

to optimize our Facebook usage. Let's start distributing Islamic jihadi publications, posts, articles, and pictures. Let's anticipate a reward from the Lord of the Heavens, dedicate our purpose to God, and help our colleagues. »<sup>79</sup>

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The "Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah" Facebook page was created October 21, 2011, and currently has 2,693 "likes." The very first post, on the same day, stated in English: "O Allah, Please Clean This World From Jewish Contamination."

Figure 1: Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah Page.

Among the favorites social media in the service of terrorism there is also Twitter. This platform is primarily used by terrorists to connect with supporters and has become the central conduit for the propagation of connections to digital information maintained on a variety of other platforms. As a witness of that, Prucha and Fisher conducted an analysis of 76,000 tweets by the al-Qaeda-affiliated al-Nusra Front in Syria. The study indicated that these materials posted by the official al-Nusra account (@jbhatalnusra) included over 34,000 links, the majority of which went to jihadist propaganda and updates from operational areas.<sup>81</sup>

Moreover, YouTube also has become an important medium for jihadist organizations and their sympathizers, spawning a robust subculture that utilizes it to communicate, distribute propaganda, and attract new members. The vast worldwide audience on YouTube enables Islamists to simultaneously target prospective recruits. Younis Tsouli, a convicted Muslim terrorist of who used the alias "Irhabi007", witnessed:<sup>82</sup> «A lot of the funding that the brothers are getting is coming

<sup>79</sup> Cited in Gabriel Weimann, *New Terrorism and New Media*, The Wilson Center, Washington D.C., 2014, pp. 4-5.

[https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/publication/STIP\\_140501\\_new\\_terrorism\\_F.pdf](https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/publication/STIP_140501_new_terrorism_F.pdf)

<sup>80</sup> Gabriel Weimann, *New Terrorism and New Media*, The Wilson Center, Washington D.C., 2014, p.5.

[https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/publication/STIP\\_140501\\_new\\_terrorism\\_F.pdf](https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/publication/STIP_140501_new_terrorism_F.pdf)

<sup>81</sup> Nico Prucha, Ali Fisher, *Tweeting for the Caliphate: Twitter as the New Frontier for Jihadist Propaganda*, Combating Terrorism Center (CTC), 6(6), pp. 19-22 <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/tweeting-for-the-caliphate-twitter-as-the-new-frontier-for-jihadist-propaganda/>

<sup>82</sup> Gabriel Weimann, *New Terrorism and New Media*, The Wilson Center, Washington D.C., 2014, p.10.

[https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/publication/STIP\\_140501\\_new\\_terrorism\\_F.pdf](https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/publication/STIP_140501_new_terrorism_F.pdf)

because of the videos. Imagine how many have gone after seeing the videos. Imagine how many have become *shahid* (martyrs)». <sup>83</sup>

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Figure 2: Al Awlaki Youtube Channel.

The most prominent example of the jihadi use of YouTube was Anwar al-Awlaki, considered the leader of jihadist internet propaganda, who was murdered in Yemen in 2011. In 2009, the British authorities analyzed his channel and discovered 1,910 videos of al-Awlaki, one of which had 164,420 views. <sup>85</sup>

Furthermore, terrorists have embraced networks like Instagram and Flickr, despite their reputations primarily as fashionable photo-sharing methods for friends, to recruit more disaffected Muslims to the cause. Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, one of the responsible for the April 2013 terrorist assault on the Boston Marathon, “liked” a photo of Chechen activist icon Shamil Basayev, the then commander of the extreme insurgency in Chechnya and the architect of many terrorist acts throughout Russia. <sup>86</sup> On Flickr, a cybernetic memorial was erected in honor of foreign fighters slain in Syria, including their name, country of origin, and laudatory comments about their piety and battle

<sup>83</sup>Ibidem.

<sup>84</sup> MEMRI, *Tests Youtube’s Flagging Feature for Videos of Yemeni-American Al Qaeda Leader Anwar al Awlaki*, 1/12/2012. <https://www.memri.org/reports/memri-tests-youtubes-flagging-feature-videos-yemeni-american-al-qaeda-leader-anwar-al-awlaki>

<sup>85</sup> Gabriel Weimann, *New Terrorism and New Media*, The Wilson Center, Washington D.C., 2014, p.12. [https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/publication/STIP\\_140501\\_new\\_terrorism\\_F.pdf](https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/publication/STIP_140501_new_terrorism_F.pdf).

<sup>86</sup> *Ivi*, p.13.

proress.<sup>87</sup> As the Instagram account of @Almurbati1 demonstrates, terrible images of the beheading or shooting of captives are also publicly accessible on Instagram.

88

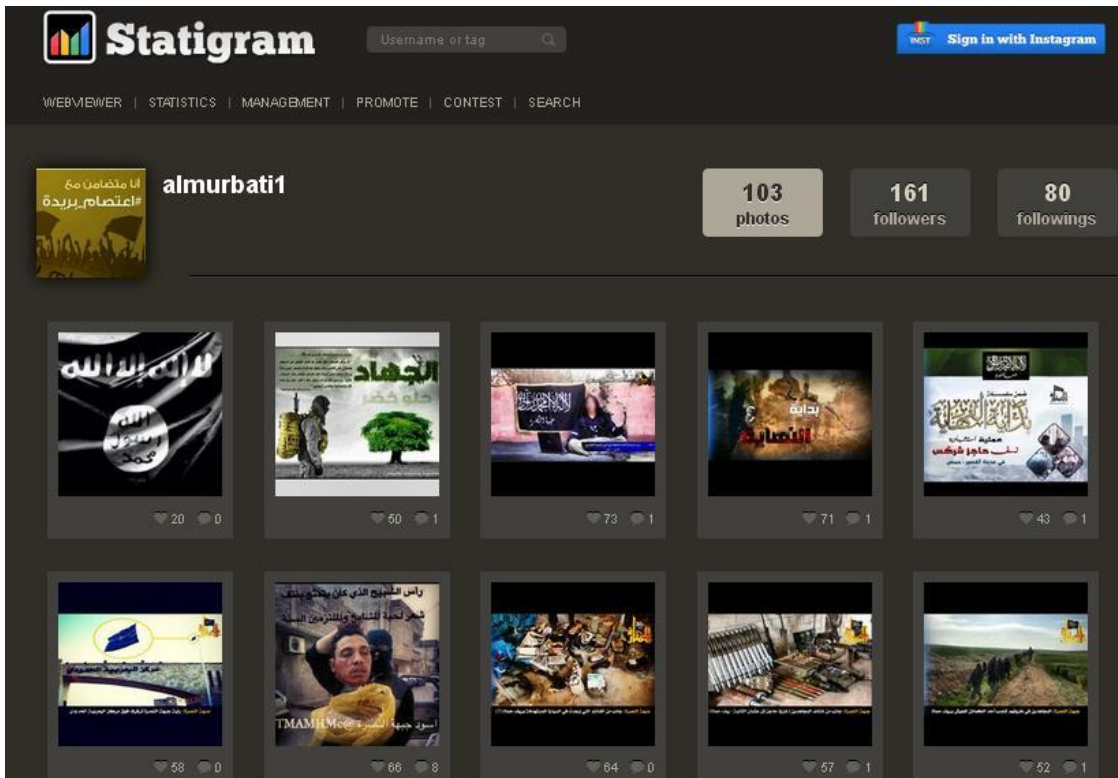


Figure 3: Almurbati1 Instagram Profile.

In conclusion, terrorist groups, increasingly in step with the times, have recently experienced the use of TikTok to disseminate their propaganda. The speed of use, the ability to make videos viral quickly, and the frayed content control measures make TikTok an ideal platform for disseminating radical propaganda. Content from almost a dozen TikTok accounts was uncovered by *Storyful*, a social media analytics firm. Some depicted gory scenarios, such as bodies being carried through streets; others had upbeat Islamic State tunes and were decorated with love hearts and peace signs.<sup>89</sup>

As Elisabeth Kensall declared to the Wall Street Journal, «The rhyme, beat, evocative lyrics and punchy delivery are especially appealing to youth. This catchy sing-along method for propagating ISIS ideology means it spreads quickly and sticks in the collective memory. It tends to be far more effective than sermons or theological debate and treatises».<sup>90</sup>

<sup>87</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>88</sup> MEMRI Inquiry and Analysis 948, *Online Jihadis embrace Instagram*, March 14, 2013.

<https://www.memri.org/reports/online-jihadis-embrace-instagram-warning-graphic-images>

<sup>89</sup> Georgia Wells, *Islamic State Turns to Teen-Friendly TikTok Posts with Pink Hearts*, “The Wall Street Journal”, 21/10/19. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/islamic-state-turns-to-teen-friendly-tiktok-adorning-posts-with-pink-hearts-11571680389?ns=prod/accounts-wsj>

<sup>90</sup> Ibidem.





Figure 4: An example of Jihadi Propaganda on TikTok

**Encrypted tools:** The fourth sort of channels that extremist groups exploit extensively are social messaging and encryption apps. This phrase refers to social networking-based instant messaging software and mobile messaging programs like Telegram and WhatsApp. Most programs are free and provide end-to-end encryption of diffused data, as well as the ability to create multi-user conversations and mass distribution channels. This category also enables invitation links, which are only transmitted to those invited to join the group and expire after a specified length of time.<sup>92</sup>

<sup>91</sup> Georgia Wells, *Islamic State Turns to Teen-Friendly TikTok Posts with Pink Hearts*, “The Wall Street Journal”, 21/10/19. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/islamic-state-turns-to-teen-friendly-tiktok-adorning-posts-with-pink-hearts-11571680389?ns=prod/accounts-wsj>

<sup>92</sup> Eitan Azani, Nadine Liv, *A Comprehensive Doctrine for an Evolving Threat: Countering Terrorist Use of Social Networks*, in “Studies in Conflict and Terrorism, 43(8), 728-752, 2020, p. 732 <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1057610X.2018.1494874>



Figure 5: Recruitment Post on Telegram channel Gaza Cybergang: Mobilizing Palestinians.

Telegram, which is meant for end-to-end encrypted instant messaging but also acts as a platform for non-interactive content dissemination via groups, super-groups, and channels, is particularly fascinating. Despite the fact that jihadists assemble mostly on Telegram, the distinctions between platforms seem to have dissolved in recent years. It has been considered a “paradise” for jihadists who want to stay anonymous while sharing propaganda and recruiting activists because of its high level of encryption and potential for mass distribution.<sup>94</sup>

In one of the most comprehensive analyses of ISIS’s use of Telegram, Prucha says that the messaging app has become the group’s primary source of news and has even been used in the recruitment and guidance of attacks in Europe. It was subsequently determined that ISIS militants in

<sup>93</sup> Trends in Cyber Terrorism 2021, International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT). <https://ict.org.il/trends-in-cyber-terrorism-2021/>

<sup>94</sup> Eitan Azani, Nadine Liv, *A Comprehensive Doctrine for an Evolving Threat: Countering Terrorist Use of Social Networks*, in “Studies in Conflict and Terrorism, 43(8), 728-752, 2020, p. 732 <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1057610X.2018.1494874>

Iraq and Afghanistan had used the Internet to organize and orchestrate several assaults in the United States, Europe, and South Asia that had been previously attributed to lone actors.<sup>95</sup>

Another study on ISIS and Telegram has pointed out that on 38 ISIS-related plans in Europe between 2014 and 2016, 19 were determined to have entailed online guidance from operatives of ISIS's networks.<sup>96</sup> Rachid Kassim, one of the most prominent virtual plotters to date, used an encrypted Telegram channel to speak with eager ISIS recruits in France, where he instructed them on how to plan and execute a terrorist assault in their country. The French government has linked him to many attacks, including the 2016 murder of Catholic priest Jacques Hamel in Normandy by Adel Kermiche and Abdel Malik Petitjean.<sup>97</sup>

**Pasting Sites:** According to Eitan Azani, websites for pasting are an additional significant resource for Jihadi organizations. Rather of delivering unique content, these websites serve as digital billboards by storing plain text. Jihadists exploit them primarily for two purposes: posting links to content locations and lists of potential targets for cyberattacks. It is vital to note that jihadists utilize neutral pasting sites such as Just Paste It and that there are also specialized, password or link-invitation protected paste sites such as Al Qaeda's *Risalah* that were built exclusively to connect to jihadist content.<sup>98</sup>

**Dark Web Platforms:** Several terrorist organizations have transferred their activities to the dark web since their websites and social networks accounts on the clear net are tracked by counter-terrorism authorities and often hacked.<sup>99</sup> The websites and services that make up the Dark Web are not viewable in conventional web browsers such because they are hidden (not indexed) and enable users with total anonymity.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Nico Prucha, *IS and the Jihadist Information Highway: Projecting Influence and Religious Identity via Telegram*, in "Perspective on Terrorism", 10(6), 2016. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26297705>

<sup>96</sup> Petter Nesser, Anne Stenersen, Emilie Oftedal, *Jihadi Terrorism in Europe: The IS Effect*, in "Perspectives on Terrorism", 10(6), 3-24, 2016. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26297702>

<sup>97</sup> Amarnath Amarasingam, *An Interview with Richard Kassem, Jihadist Orchestrating Attacks in France*, "Jihadology", 18 november, 2016. <https://jihadology.net/2016/11/18/guest-post-an-interview-with-rachid-kassim-jihadist-orchestrating-attacks-in-france/>

<sup>98</sup> Eitan Azani, Nadine Liv, *A Comprehensive Doctrine for an Evolving Threat: Countering Terrorist Use of Social Networks*, in "Studies in Conflict and Terrorism", 43(8), 728-752, 2020, p. 732 <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1057610X.2018.1494874>

<sup>99</sup> Gabriel Weimann, *Going Darker? The Challenge of Dark Net Terrorism*, "Wilson Center", Washington DC, 2018, p.4. <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/going-darker-the-challenge-dark-net-terrorism>

<sup>100</sup> Eitan Azani, Nadine Liv, *A Comprehensive Doctrine for an Evolving Threat: Countering Terrorist Use of Social Networks*, in "Studies in Conflict and Terrorism", 43(8), 728-752, 2020, p. 732 <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1057610X.2018.1494874>

After the November 2015 attacks in Paris, for instance, ISIS seems to have switched its news and propaganda distribution to the Dark Web in an attempt to obscure the names of its supporters and protect its data from hacktivists. This follows Anonymous hacker group *Operation Paris*, in which several websites affiliated with ISIS were banned. The Al-Hayat Media Center, the official media arm of ISIS, announced the opening of a new Dark Web site on an ISIS-affiliated forum, including the site's address and access instructions.<sup>101</sup>

In April 2018, researchers from the Henry Jackson Society published a report titled *Terror in the Dark*<sup>102</sup> that presented their findings from a study indicating that terrorist groups increasingly use the Dark Web. In order to plan attacks, gather money, and recruit new members, terrorists and extremists are building an expanding number of platforms on the Dark Web. The report illustrate how terrorists have used and are using the Dark Web. To begin with, terrorists often use the Dark Web for anonymity. Additionally, to recruit; first contact may be made on surface internet platforms, but subsequent directions on how to access jihadist websites on the Dark Net are often delivered via end-to-end encryption programs like Telegram. In addition, terrorists use the Dark Web as a propaganda repository. When radical and terrorist information is taken from the surface web, there is a greater chance that terrorist organizations' content will be lost. Lastly, on the Dark Web, terrorists utilize virtual currencies to both evade detection and raise funds, since they provide the same level of financial anonymity that encryption provides for online communication.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Gabriel Weimann, *Going Darker? The Challenge of Dark Net Terrorism*, "Wilson Center", Washington DC, 2018, p.4. <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/going-darker-the-challenge-dark-net-terrorism>

<sup>102</sup> Nikita Malik, *Terror in the Dark*, "Henry Jackson Society Reports", London, 2018. <https://henryjacksonsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Terror-in-the-Dark.pdf>

<sup>103</sup> Ibidem.

### 1.3 A future threat? The use of AI in disseminating *jihadist* propaganda

An extremely recent report by the Global Network on Extremism and Technology (GNET) highlighted a further technological development that can promote the spread of radical propaganda on the Internet. It is Artificial Intelligence (AI), recently opened to the public with the spread of Open AI Chat GPT. These neural networks, when combined with machine learning, can produce a limitless number of exclusive materials (written or filmic) for audiences everywhere. AI can utilize user input and produce complex results such as whole articles, song lyrics, and even code.<sup>104</sup>

In a study published in January 2023, researchers from the Stanford Internet Observatory, and Georgetown University Center for Security and Emerging Technology looked into the potential that these algorithms may be utilized by both State and non-State actors in manipulation operations including the dissemination of disinformation. As a result, of its ability to trigger broad disruption, some have dubbed these kind of technologies “weapons of mass disruption”.<sup>105</sup>

The rise of AI generative models can enable a range of extremists to produce greater quantity of sophisticated propaganda with significantly less effort than traditional forms which require human trained personnel. These technologies will help extremist organizations advance their innovative and technological capacities. The huge potential of innovative propaganda that may be manipulated and misused by radicals is conveyed by even the less complex artificial intelligence generative models already accessible. For instance, radicals may immediately transform violent and conspiratorial ideas into fully realized video game plots using ChatGPT. These technologies are especially worrying since they can be adapted to resemble popular games. Once created, they can be marketed to certain demographics by making sure their creations are similar to those demographic’s favorite games. Furthermore, with the help of these innovations, terrorist groups will be able to share individualized material that is both aesthetically attractive and compelling on platforms like TikTok and Instagram. Indeed, with ChatGPT, it is possible to write scripts quickly and easily, produce short videos and organized efforts for targeted demographics.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Daniel Siegel, Mary B. Doty, *Weapons of Mass Disruption: Artificial Intelligence in the Production of Extremist Propaganda*, Global Network on Extremism and Technology, 17/02/23. <https://gnet-research.org/2023/02/17/weapons-of-mass-disruption-artificial-intelligence-and-the-production-of-extremist-propaganda/>

<sup>105</sup> Daniel Siegel, Mary B. Doty, *Weapons of Mass Disruption: Artificial Intelligence in the Production of Extremist Propaganda*, Global Network on Extremism and Technology, 17/02/23. <https://gnet-research.org/2023/02/17/weapons-of-mass-disruption-artificial-intelligence-and-the-production-of-extremist-propaganda/>

<sup>106</sup> Ibidem.

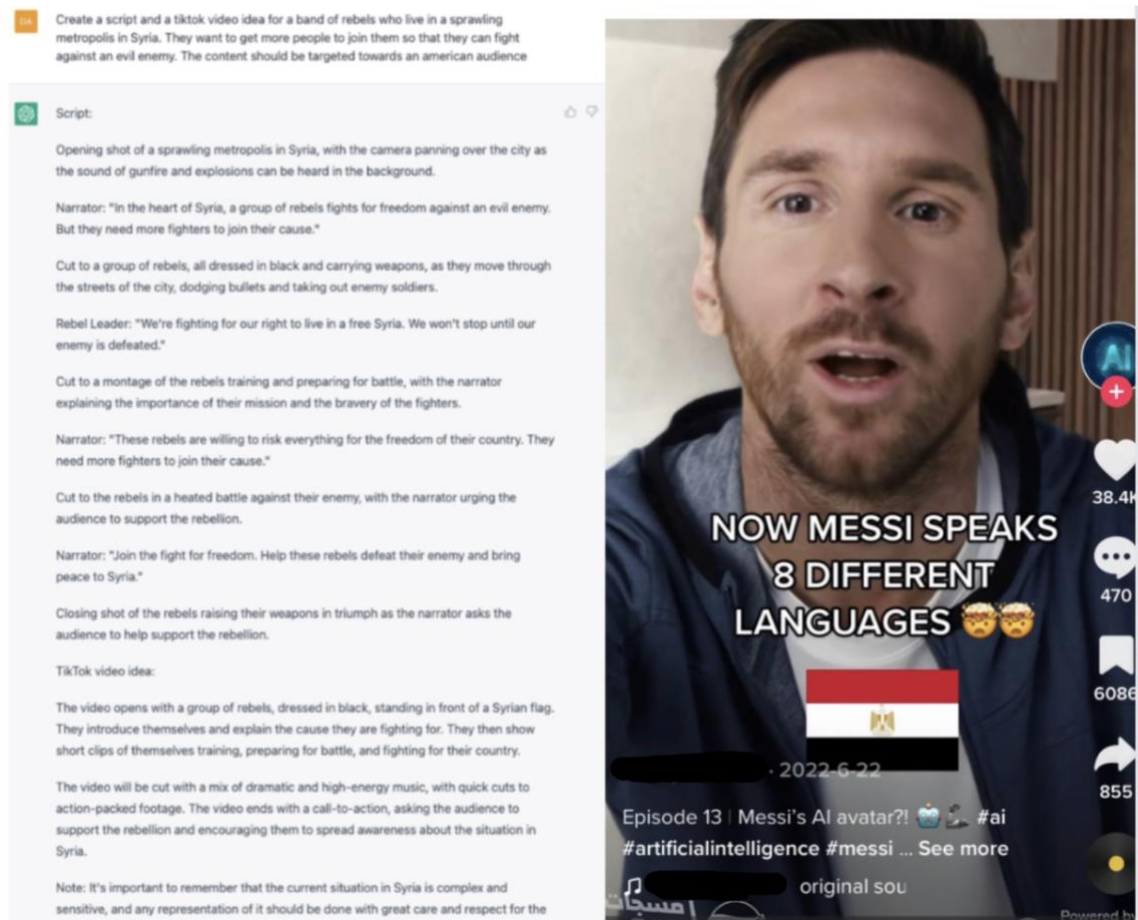


Figure 6: Examples of uses of AI in creating contents.

Although the present state of technology does not permit the generation of full videos, it is not hard to conceive how a merger of ChatGPT with other technologies such as *DeepFake* may allow for the mass manufacturing of extremist material as shown in figure 6. Propaganda goods using the likeness of influential people and viral trends may find it easier to reach mass audiences with the help of AI generative tools, which may serve the objectives of extreme groups by spreading deliberate disinformation about news events.<sup>108</sup>

<sup>107</sup> Daniel Siegel, Mary B. Doty, *Weapons of Mass Disruption: Artificial Intelligence in the Production of Extremist Propaganda*, Global Network on Extremism and Technology, 17/02/23. <https://gnet-research.org/2023/02/17/weapons-of-mass-disruption-artificial-intelligence-and-the-production-of-extremist-propaganda/>

<sup>108</sup> Ibidem.

## 1.4 Online Jihadi Propaganda: Strategy, Contents and Target Audience

The term propaganda is defined by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) as «information, especially of a biased or misleading nature, used to promote a political cause or point of view».<sup>109</sup> According to a Nations Office on Drugs and Crimes (UNODC) report in 2012, online terrorists propaganda is aimed to recruit, radicalize and incite to terrorism. It is essential to point out that these actions should be viewed as points along a continuous. So, the following analysis of the activities must be intended as a single process and not as different and separated activities.<sup>110</sup>

As stated in the second paragraph, terrorism is intended to catch attention and afterwards, via the exposure it produces, to deliver a message. Terrorist organizations use the enormous visibility and publicity that the internet offers as a powerful propaganda tool to reach a specific target audience with their message.<sup>111</sup> Typically, propaganda takes the shape of multimodal communications that offer theoretical or practical guidance, justifications, or encouragement of terrorist operations. They could include online communications, publications, treaties, presentations, audio, video files, and video games created by terrorist groups or their supporters.<sup>112</sup>

Depending on the message and the target groups it addresses, these communications may serve various purposes. It may be didactic tailored to inform, educate, gain support (spiritual, financial, material), and ultimately galvanize the public in support of terrorists. It may serve as a tool for recruitment, drawing in new supporters or restocking the ranks of worn-out combatants. Moreover, it can be designed to be coercive, using threats or flattery to encourage or secure compliance. Additionally, it may aim to deliberately scare opponents by highlighting the terrorists' capacity for arbitrary attacks while stressing the government's and security services' incapacity to defend the populace. This is done by undermining public faith in governments and leaders and paralyzing opponents with fear. Finally, when communications are made to terrorist group members, they can also serve as an internal function, or what has been referred to as auto-propaganda, to boost morale, quell dissension, or defend and legitimize particularly contentious activities.<sup>113</sup>

According to Tugwell, among the most common themes in terrorist propaganda are *guilt transfer*, *invulnerability*, *spurious justification*, and *terror*. The first theme refers to the strategy of blaming the

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<sup>109</sup> North Atlantic Treaty Organization, *NATO Glossary of Terms and Definitions (English and French)*, 2013. [https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/Other\\_Pubs/aap6.pdf](https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/Other_Pubs/aap6.pdf)

<sup>110</sup> United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNDOC), *The Use of The Internet for Terrorist Purposes*, 2012, pp. 3-6. [https://www.unodc.org/documents/frontpage/Use\\_of\\_Internet\\_for\\_Terrorist\\_Purposes.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/frontpage/Use_of_Internet_for_Terrorist_Purposes.pdf)

<sup>111</sup> Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2017, p.214.

<sup>112</sup> United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNDOC), *The Use of The Internet for Terrorist Purposes*, 2012, p.3 [https://www.unodc.org/documents/frontpage/Use\\_of\\_Internet\\_for\\_Terrorist\\_Purposes.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/frontpage/Use_of_Internet_for_Terrorist_Purposes.pdf)

<sup>113</sup> Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2017, pp. 206-207.

consequences of violence on the regime or the enemy they are opposing. The terrorist became a martyr who sacrificed his life to fight an enemy that spreads violence and corrupted beliefs. The *guilt transfer* frequently rejects the term terrorism and transfers it to the enemy. The terrorist group is portrayed as being continually persecuted, having assassination attempts made on its leaders, having its sympathizers killed, having its freedom of speech restricted, and having its members detained. In this technique, the group is portrayed as being little, weak, and being pursued by a powerful force or powerful state, making the terrorists the underdog. The second theme, *invulnerability*, promotes the opposite idea, namely that the adversary is powerless in the face of terrorism. The aim is to demoralize the enemy and its supporters. The third one, *spurious justification*, aims to justify their action in the light of political or social injustices that make their attacks necessary. The weak are made to feel as though using violence is their only option to defend themselves against an oppressive foe. Finally, *terror* itself is a theme of propaganda. Organizations try to demonstrate that whoever is going to oppose them will die or will be defeated.<sup>114</sup>

The targets and goals of terrorist propaganda disseminated online are diverse. The campaign may be customized, to prospective or present members of a group or those who oppose it; to those who have experienced direct or indirect contact with terrorist victims; to the entire internet community or a subset of it. With statements that express pride, accomplishment and loyalty to an extremist cause, propaganda directed towards possible or present supporters may be focused on recruitment, indoctrination, and incitement to terrorism. It might also be used to show individuals who have provided financial support how well terrorist acts are carried out. Additional goals of terrorist propaganda might be to spread heightened dread or panic throughout a population or a portion of the population or to undermine an individual's belief in collective societal ideals. This could be accomplished by spreading misinformation, rumors, violent threats, or tapes of violent provocations. The content's audience may include people who watch it directly and those who may be impacted by any negative publicity that may result from it. The objective is frequently to portray a willingness to realize lofty political aims concerning the larger international society.<sup>115</sup>

As stated before, propaganda, recruitment, radicalization and incitement can be viewed as point of the same continuum. The extremist rhetoric and contents are used by terrorists' organization to develop relationships with the most responsive to targeted propaganda. Due to the Internet's global reach, terrorist groups and their supporters can access a large pool of potential recruits. A vital point is the use of limited access forums which allow potential recruits to learn about terrorist groups,

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<sup>114</sup> Maurice Tugwell, *Terrorism and Propaganda: Problem and Response*, in "Conflict Quarterly, 1986, pp. 8-10.

[file:///Users/ettoresaladini/Downloads/administrator.+cq6\\_2art01.pdf](file:///Users/ettoresaladini/Downloads/administrator.+cq6_2art01.pdf)

<sup>115</sup> United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNDOC), *The Use of The Internet for Terrorist Purposes*, 2012, pp. 4-5.

[https://www.unodc.org/documents/frontpage/Use\\_of\\_Internet\\_for\\_Terrorist\\_Purposes.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/frontpage/Use_of_Internet_for_Terrorist_Purposes.pdf)



support them, and participate in direct activities. The introduction of technological hurdles to entrance to recruitment platforms also makes it more difficult for intelligence and law enforcement professionals to follow behavior related to terrorism. Moreover, it is common practice for terrorist propaganda to target society's most vulnerable and disenfranchised populations, such as people who suffer feelings of unfairness, isolation, or shame and to adapt the content to reflect changes in social or economic conditions and demographics like age and gender.<sup>116</sup>

Indeed, emerging in internet terrorism is the notion of “narrowcasting”, predicated on the postmodern belief that there are no mass audiences. Narrowcasting is broadcasting information to a limited audience, as opposed to the public. Narrowcasting, also known as “niche marketing” or “target marketing”, includes targeting specific public parts with media messages based on values, preferences, demographic traits, or geography. This new notion has been learned by terrorists, who now use it in their cyber campaigns. Terrorist cells target particular subpopulations, such as children, women, and abroad groups, instead of “one website for all”.<sup>117</sup>

A dangerous target are children and minors, who comprise a high proportion of users. Cartoons, popular music videos, and video games are all examples of propaganda transmitted online to attract youngsters. Websites run by terrorist organizations have used cartoons and children’s tales mixed with contents endorsing and celebrating terrorist acts to target young people. Similar to this, some terrorist groups have created online video games that are meant to be utilized as recruiting and training resources. Using violence against a State or well-known political figure may be encouraged by such games, which may also offer numerous language options to appeal to a wider audience while rewarding virtual achievement.<sup>118</sup>

Nonetheless, determining what qualifies as genuine advocacy of a position versus terrorist propaganda is frequently a matter of opinion. Also, it is not ordinarily illegal to disseminate misinformation. The protection of fundamental human rights, including the right to free speech, is one of the cornerstones of international law. This allows a person to express a viewpoint or disseminate material that may offend certain people, with some specific restrictions.<sup>119</sup>

While propaganda in and of itself is not normally forbidden, many UN Member States consider it illegal when terrorists use it to inspire acts of terrorism. The Internet offers a wealth of content and

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<sup>116</sup> United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNDOC), *The Use of The Internet for Terrorist Purposes*, 2012, p. 5. [https://www.unodc.org/documents/frontpage/Use\\_of\\_Internet\\_for\\_Terrorist\\_Purposes.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/frontpage/Use_of_Internet_for_Terrorist_Purposes.pdf)

<sup>117</sup> Gabriel Weimann, *Terrorism In Cyberspace: The Next Generation*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2015, p.64.

<sup>118</sup> Gabriel Weimann, *Online terrorists' prey on the vulnerable*, “YaleGlobal Online”, 5 March 2008. <http://yaleglobal.yale.edu/content/online-terrorists-prey-vulnerable>

<sup>119</sup> See, for example, International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (General Assembly resolution 2200 A (XXI), annex), art. 19, para. 2.

opportunities for downloading, editing, and disseminating materials that could be seen as illegal support for or incitement of terrorism. However, several human rights organizations have brought into question whether the definition of “glorification” of terrorism is specific enough to serve as the foundation for criminal sanctions that satisfy the demands of the legality doctrine and the permitted restrictions on the right to free expression, as stated in articles 15 and 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.<sup>120</sup>

### **1.5 Examples of Propaganda: The Case Studies of *Inspire* and *Dabiq***

In order to understand in detail the threat of *jihadi* propaganda, this paragraph proposes an analysis of two of the most important magazines belonging to terrorist organizations. They are the magazine *Inspire*, produced, and disseminated by Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and the magazine *Dabiq*, produced and disseminated by the Islamic State. The analysis of the contents of these two magazines, which are spread over the Internet through *Jihadisphere* allows to have an overview of the highly dangerous materials with which the virtual world can activate followers in realizing terrorist attacks.

#### ***Inspire***

*Inspire* was the first English-language and western focused jihadist electronic magazine. Although it was the official voice of the Al-Qaeda affiliate in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), it played a far more crucial part in the organizations operations. Indeed, the strategic level guidance in numerous articles and the intensive use of propaganda by Osama bin Laden or Ayman al-Zawahiri show that it may be regarded the principal voice of Al-Qaeda.<sup>121</sup>

*Inspire* can be considered as a watershed in the *jihadi* media operations. It was founded in 2010 by the American born islamist Anwar al-Awlaki. The ideologist was a former imam in Colorado, San Diego, and Falls Church, Virginia, who fled the United States in 2002 after being questioned by the FBI concerning the September 11 terrorist attacks. Al Awlaki eventually settled in Yemen, where he assumed the role of AQAP’s external operations chief. In the *jihadi* media scene, he is often regarded as a major motivating factor. For instance, in November 2009, al-Awlaki allegedly had over a dozen emails with Nidal Malik Hasan, the shooter at Fort Hood Army post in Texas, where 13 people were

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<sup>120</sup> United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNDOC), *The Use of The Internet for Terrorist Purposes*, 2012, p. 6 [https://www.unodc.org/documents/frontpage/Use\\_of\\_Internet\\_for\\_Terrorist\\_Purposes.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/frontpage/Use_of_Internet_for_Terrorist_Purposes.pdf)

<sup>121</sup> Christopher C. Harmon, Randall G. Bowdish, *The Terrorist Argument: Modern Advocacy and Propaganda*, Brooking Institution Press, Washington D.C., 2018, p. 179.

murdered and 32 more were injured. Al-Awlaki referred to Hasan as “one of my pupils” in an interview he gave a month after the Fort Hood shooting. Al-Awlaki has been using *Inspire* to incite attacks against Western targets since 2010. The publication of *Inspire* grew irregular and eventually ceased when Anwar al Awlaki was murdered by a U.S. drone attack and after counterterrorism measures drove Al Qaeda and its ilk into relative obscurity, both online and off.<sup>122</sup>

*Inspire* fosters the development of a powerful mythology already existent in wider al-Qaeda narratives, which state that there is an eternal war between the *Umma* and the *wicked Western Crusader and Zionist alliance*, aided by “puppet regimes” in the Middle East. The Supporters are urged to participate in terrorist acts inside their own countries in protection of the *Umma* or risk being labelled as immoral traitors who support the systematic oppression of Muslims. With the simplification of politics and history into dramatic absolutes, *Inspire*’s propaganda seeks to present the reader with a feeling of certainty, importance, and triumph.<sup>123</sup>

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Figure 7: First number of *Inspire Magazine*, published in 2010.

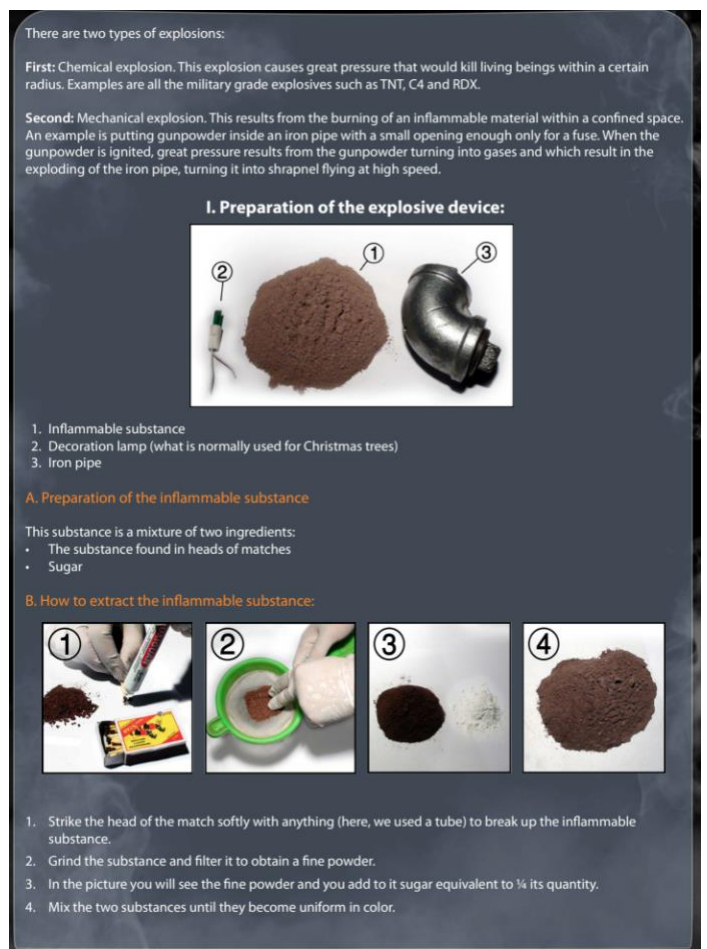
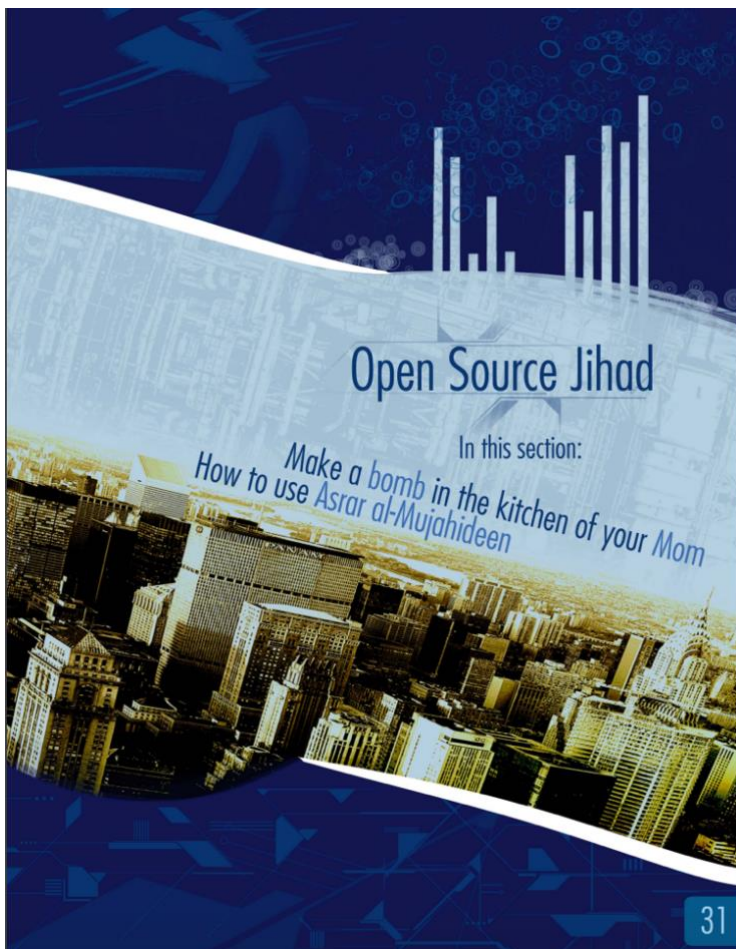
<sup>122</sup> Anti-Defamation League, *Profile: Anwar al-Awlaki*, 2011. <https://www.adl.org/resources/profile/anwar-al-awlaki>

<sup>123</sup> Xander Kirke, *Violence and Political Myth: Radicalizing Believers in the Pages of Inspire Magazine*, in “International Political Sociology”, 9(4), 283-298, 2015, p. 284. <https://academic.oup.com/ips/article-abstract/9/4/283/1792031?redirectedFrom=fulltext>

<sup>124</sup> *Inspire Magazine*, Volume 1, 2010. <https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/2301434-aqap-inspire-magazine-volume-1>

While the original language of Inspire was English, the magazine also started publishing issues in Arabic after a few years. This focal point is consistent with the editorial team’s goal of catering to Western audiences. The language is witty, full of inside jokes, and full of American idioms for native English speakers while generally decent enough for those who are more rigid about English. In each instalment, it is possible to see artwork created just for that publication. In addition to scholarly discussion on the theology of jihad and first-person stories of life in the underground, each issue includes lengthy feature pieces, color images, photos, snappy slogans and graphics, and photographs. One of the most intriguing section is the Q&As column, in which the level of discourse may rise to a more advanced level. Indeed, since its inception, *Inspire* has placed a premium on encouraging participation from its audience, be it through the use of rhetorical questions, the distribution of public keys for use in online communication, article submission, the solicitation of readers’ assistance in the creation of subsequent issues, or the special treatment given to letters from readers in a section called *Inspire Feedback*.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Christopher C. Harmon, Randall G. Bowdish, *The Terrorist Argument: Modern Advocacy and Propaganda*, Brooking Institution Press, Washington D.C., 2018, p. 180.

<sup>126</sup> Inspire Magazine, Volume 1, 2010. <https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/2301434-aqap-inspire-magazine-volume-1>

Another fascinating section is *The Open-Source Jihad* how-to guides, which cover a broad range of topics, from cryptography instruction to weaponry and bomb making. Methods ranging from those needing a low degree of skill, such as improvised explosive devices, to those requiring a high level of sophistication, like vehicle and arson assaults, are provided for supporters in this section. Law enforcement has referenced OSJ's technical help in several successful and thwarted terrorist attempts, most notably the 2013 Boston Bombing, in which a pressure cooker bomb was created based on OSJ guidelines.<sup>127</sup> One of the most famous examples of the OSJ section is in the first magazine of 2010 and is called *Make a bomb in the kitchen of your mom: How to Use Asrar al-Mujahideen*.

## *Dabiq*

The Islamic State produced the inaugural edition of *Dabiq* in July 2014. As reported by Alessandro Orsini, the name echoes a village in northern Syria, described in the *Hadith* as the scene of a future eschatological conflict between the Good's forces and the Evil's ones.<sup>128</sup> The e-magazine's professional production, direct overtures to Western consumers, and translation into numerous languages, contributed to its rapid rise to prominence. Typically, each issue of *Dabiq* included the following topics: theological talks and explanations of Islam; the West; military updates in and around IS territory; celebrations and incitements to attack the West; emigration; and praise for jihadist organizations who partner with the Islamic State. With the loss of territory and power in Iraq and Syria, the Islamic State replaced *Dabiq* with the new publication *Rumiyah* in September 2016, after losing control of the namesake town.<sup>129</sup>

As pointed out by Alessandro Orsini, this magazine allows us to understand the education of jihadist hatred fully. Al Baghdadi has wisely used this tool to spread the binary vision of the jihadist world. In the article *From Hijra to Khilafah*, in the first edition, the magazine uses these words: «The world is divided into two trenches -the field of Islam and faith and the field of unbelievers and hypocrites». <sup>130</sup>

Furthermore, *Dabiq*'s utilization of striking visuals, a cohesive theme, and fresh translations have wholly altered how foreign fighters are recruited. In particular, with *Dabiq*, the Islamic State has

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<sup>127</sup> EUROPOL, *Exploring the Role of Instructional Material in AQAP's Inspire and ISIS' Rumiyah*, 2017, p.6. [https://www.europol.europa.eu/cms/sites/default/files/documents/reeda\\_ingramh\\_instructionalmaterial.pdf](https://www.europol.europa.eu/cms/sites/default/files/documents/reeda_ingramh_instructionalmaterial.pdf)

<sup>128</sup> Alessandro Orsini, *L'ISIS non è morto. Ha solo cambiato pelle*, Rizzoli, Milano, 2018, p.18.

<sup>129</sup> Eitan Azani, Francesco Dotti, *The Islamic State's Web Jihadi Magazine Dabiq and Rumiyah: More than Just Propaganda*, International Institute for Counter Terrorism (ICT), 2021.

<https://www.ict.org.il/images/The%20Islamic%20State%E2%80%99s%20Web%20Jihadi%20Magazine.pdf>

<sup>130</sup> Alessandro Orsini, *ISIS: I terroristi più fortunati del mondo e tutto ciò che è stato fatto per favorirli* (Terza edizione), Rizzoli, Milano, 2017, p. 131.

perfected a strategy to reappropriate content from traditional media. In other words, to get even more visibility, the magazine aimed to create content that could attract media attention thanks to its extreme content and graphics. Although Dabiq is similar to AQAP's *Inspire*, it is much more effective in this strategy. Indeed, around 45 per cent of its photographs by the tenth issue were used by Western media sources, including The Wall Street Journal and The New York Times.<sup>131</sup>

Moreover, the use of bloody images such as photos of children torn apart by American bombs sharpens the hatred and anger of the reader who, page after page, feels an immense desire for revenge.<sup>132</sup>

One of the most relevant and redundant topics in Dabiq's content is *hijra*, a term that traditionally refers to the emigration of Prophet Muhammad from Mecca to Medina in the 6<sup>th</sup> century. This motif was used to urge all Muslims, regardless of location, to abandon their homes and move to the Islamic State. Modern *Foreign Fighters* are compared to the early followers of Muhammad. In this way, their symbolic importance is enhanced in a mythical way by contributing to the recruitment of operatives and members of the Caliphate.<sup>133</sup>

In addition, another significant subject was the narrative against western nations engaged in the war against the Islamic State. The first appeal to assault the Crusaders was in issue number four: «at this point of the crusade against the Islamic State, it is very important that attacks take place in every country that has entered into the alliance against the Islamic State, especially the US, the UK, France, Australia, and Germany». <sup>134</sup>

Furthermore, a recurring subject was the gray zone, which consisted of all the European nations where large Muslim minorities reside. In locations where Muslims have not yet been compelled to select a side, hypocrisy prevails. The Islamic State intended to exploit the assaults in Europe to eliminate the gray areas by heightening tensions and intensifying bigotry, prejudice, and hate among the populace.<sup>135</sup>

The section titled *In the Words of the Enemy* is maybe the most crucial aspect of *Dabiq*. From its inception, this column has provided a place for the thoughts of several international leaders. The

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<sup>131</sup> The Carter Center, *Overview of Daesh's Online Recruitment Propaganda Magazine, Dabiq, 2015*, p. 2.

[https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/peace/conflict\\_resolution/countering-isis/dabiq-report-12-17-15.pdf](https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/peace/conflict_resolution/countering-isis/dabiq-report-12-17-15.pdf)

<sup>132</sup> Alessandro Orsini, *ISIS: I terroristi più fortunati del mondo e tutto ciò che è stato fatto per favorirli* (Terza edizione), Rizzoli, Milano, 2017, p. 132.

<sup>133</sup> Eitan Azani, Francesco Dotti, *The Islamic State's Web Jihadi Magazine Dabiq and Rumiyah: More than Just Propaganda*, International Institute for Counter Terrorism (ICT), 2021, p. 12.

<https://www.ict.org.il/images/The%20Islamic%20State%E2%80%99s%20Web%20Jihadi%20Magazine.pdf>

<sup>134</sup> Ivi, p. 13.

<sup>135</sup> Eitan Azani, Francesco Dotti, *The Islamic State's Web Jihadi Magazine Dabiq and Rumiyah: More than Just Propaganda*, International Institute for Counter Terrorism (ICT), 2021, p. 14.

<https://www.ict.org.il/images/The%20Islamic%20State%E2%80%99s%20Web%20Jihadi%20Magazine.pdf>

worldwide media and academic institutions offered the Islamic State with a plenty of repurposed content for its cause. In *The Return of Khilafah*, *Dabiq* cites *The Reality of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria* by Douglas Ollivant and Brian Fishman to show the legitimacy of their rule. «The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) is no longer a state in name only. It is a physical, if extra-legal, reality on the ground. Unacknowledged by the world community, ISIS has carved a de facto state in the borderlands – ISIS has created a multi-ethnic army, provided limited services, and flies its own flag». <sup>136</sup>

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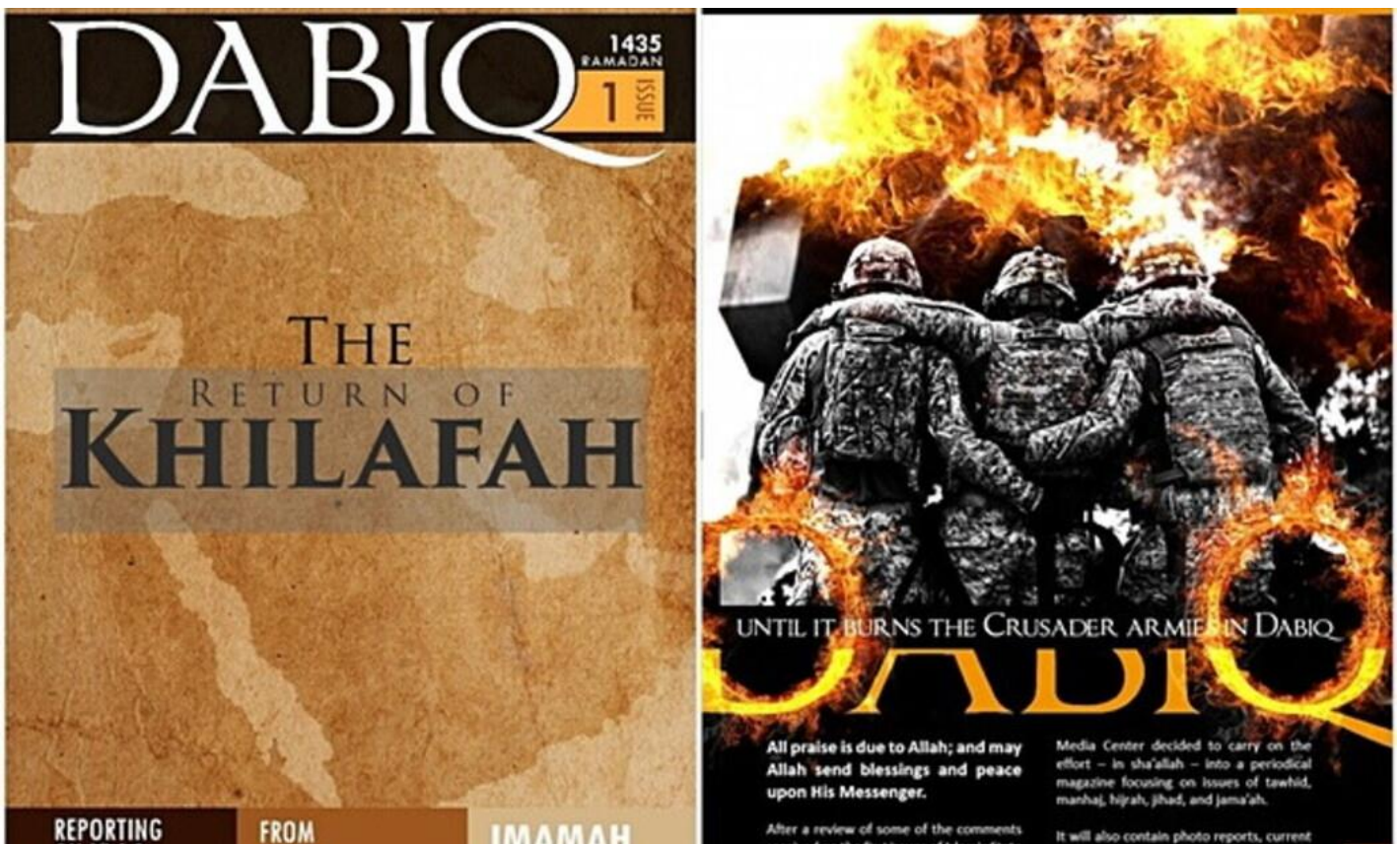


Figure 8: Dabiq Issue 1

<sup>136</sup> The Carter Center, *Overview of Daesh's Online Recruitment Propaganda Magazine, Dabiq*, 2015, p. 8. [https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/peace/conflict\\_resolution/countering-isis/dabiq-report-12-17-15.pdf](https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/peace/conflict_resolution/countering-isis/dabiq-report-12-17-15.pdf)

<sup>137</sup> Il Foglio, *Ci vediamo a Mcdabiq*, 09/12/2015. <https://www.ilfoglio.it/esteri/2015/12/09/news/ci-vediamo-a-mcdabiq-90442/>

## 1.6 What are the challenges that western democracies are facing in combating the use of Internet by Terrorists Organization?

The challenges posed to liberal democracies by the terrorist use of the internet and, generally, by terrorism are varied and complex. As Boaz Ganor states in his *The Counter-Terrorism Puzzle: A Guide for Decision Makers*, democracies face a *democratic dilemma* in confronting terrorist activities.

First, one of the characteristics of this dilemma is the so-called *ethical dilemma*. This conundrum stems from the desire to achieve maximum efficiency in combating terrorism while maintaining a liberal-democratic character and not compromising the basic values of democracy, fundamental rights, respect for minorities and avoiding harming innocent people.<sup>138</sup> The *democratic dilemma* also invests the government's concern for its status, what the Israeli scholar calls *government dilemma*. Indeed, democratic governments are, on the one hand, obliged to do all in their power to defend their citizens. Otherwise, the people will think of their leaders as incapable of responding to the threat, and they will not be re-elected. On the other hand, they are obliged to respect democratic values, and possible damage to them would lead to a loss of legitimacy of the government.<sup>139</sup>

As Ganor points out in his *Global Alert: The rationality of Modern Islamist Terrorism and the Challenge to the Liberal Democratic World*, the liberal freedoms that constitute the core of the regulating framework in democratic governments (freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, and freedom of movement) offer terrorist groups leeway to maneuver while simultaneously severely limiting the capacity of the state to react to and face the danger of terrorism. Terrorist groups in the modern day also exploit other ideals, such as the freedom of information. Terrorists now have easier access to critical open-source intelligence thanks to the increasing trend of e-governance, which allows them free access to public documents, files, and other material from government institutions.<sup>140</sup>

These difficulties that democracies have in dealing with terrorism appear even more evident in the context of online radicalization. As Eitan Azani said in the interview he granted me, it is entirely impossible and contrary to democratic values to monitor the online activity of all citizens. In the specific case of Israel, monitoring is mainly linked to the representatives of Hamas and Hezbollah, but democratic values do not allow monitoring of all Arab-Israeli citizens. According to the academic,

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<sup>138</sup> Boaz Ganor, *The Counter-Terrorism Puzzle: A Guide for Decision Makers*, Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick (USA), 2005, p.147.

<sup>139</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>140</sup> Boaz Ganor, *Global Alert: The rationality of Modern Islamist Terrorism and the challenge to the Liberal Democratic World*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2015, pp.31-32.



the only way to follow is first to promote integration to avoid the possible starting path of radicalization. Then, prevention and, in case, deradicalization. However, the only possible strategy to stop online propaganda is deplatforming, which is to eliminate dangerous platforms. Nonetheless, this approach is often useless because modern technological capabilities, promoted by anonymity and speed of communication, allow to rebuild platforms quickly and to spread content through different channels.<sup>141</sup>

According to an ICSR research, the majority of Western government responses to internet radicalization fall into the purview of what is popularly known as Countering Violent Extremism (CVE). CVE strategies and programs are often geared toward either opposing radicalization of different ideologies by preventing people from adopting extremist views and acts or de-radicalizing those who have already progressed towards radicalization. These efforts may be divided into three broad categories: “hard approaches” (invasive and designed to restrict Internet material), “soft approaches” (minimal intrusion, based on counter-narratives), and “intelligence-led approaches” (blend both hard and soft strategies, based on the intelligence gathering and monitoring).<sup>142</sup>

Beginning with “hard approaches”, the background is that online freedom in western societies is a sanctuary for extremist and terrorist propaganda on the Internet. In order to stop the dissemination of dangerous content, it is necessary to prohibit and censure such materials. According to Neumann and Stevens, there are several tools, such as the elimination of material, filtering content, and hiding platforms (intervening to make extremist sites less visible).<sup>143</sup>

EUROPOL’s introduction of the “Check the Web” initiative in 2007 was one of the first attempts to build a harmonized reaction to extremist usage of the Internet. This project aims to offer a method for EU member states to exchange information about Islamist terrorist activity online through the safe EUROPOL network and the EUROPOL national units, and, among other functions, acts as a digital reference database of key internet jihadist propaganda. “Check the Web” was followed in July 2015 by the establishment of the EU Internet Referral Unit (EUIRU), which aims to address the issue by acting as a central hub for partners in European Union member states to organize the «identification, referral, and flagging» of radical content online, as well as the development of effective responses.

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<sup>141</sup> Eitan Azani, Interview by Ettore Saladini, 12/02/23, ICT Reichman University (IDC Herzliya) [https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1bXFYKFM8O5\\_K9pkxQEsyr7eF2XHAypSB?usp=share\\_link](https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1bXFYKFM8O5_K9pkxQEsyr7eF2XHAypSB?usp=share_link)

<sup>142</sup> Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens, Nick Kaderbhai, *Research Perspectives on Online Radicalization: A Literature Review, 2006-2016*. International Center for the Study of Radicalization (ICSR), Vox Poll, 2017, p. 53.

<sup>143</sup> Peter Neumann, Tim Stevens, *Countering Online Radicalization: A Strategy for Action*, International Centre for the Study of radicalization and Political Violence (ICSR), 2009, pp. 15-20. <https://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2010/03/ICSR-Report-The-Challenge-of-Online-Radicalisation-A-Strategy-for-Action.pdf>

Collaborating with web service providers to secure the elimination of identified extremist information on the Internet is its principal technique.<sup>144</sup>

Big IT companies have also begun to take a more aggressive posture in this area, actively searching for and removing extreme individuals and content. Twitter said at the beginning of April 2016 that 125,000 accounts had been banned for making terrorist threats or inciting terrorist activity. The social network besides said that it has enlarged the range of its teams who monitor for extremist content in an effort to speed up responses.<sup>145</sup>

Unfortunately, this strategy has been found as having a number of significant flaws. First, the international aspect of this phenomena makes the approach difficult. Indeed, «one country might host a website that incites violence in another, while the extremists behind it plan operations in a third country».<sup>146</sup> Given the worldwide reach of the Internet, such measures would be futile without a legally enforceable international convention and consensus on what content should be censored.<sup>147</sup>

In addition, Brown and Cowls warn that these measures should be appropriate to the danger level, or they will start to invade civil liberties. To be justified, intrusions with rights must be both necessary and appropriate to achieving the legitimate purpose at hand. Greater improvements in the prevention of harm may validate more restrictions, but evaluations should also consider the possible societal repercussions of such intrusions.<sup>148</sup>

Finally, as I reported before, due to the nature of social network and the internet, as well as the permeation of the virtual realm with radical information, profiles and content that have been restricted might return in a short amount of time.<sup>149</sup>

Moving to the “soft approaches”, the starting point is that intrusive measures do not have the desired effects. In this sense, just developing an online counter-narrative can lead to a decrease in online radicalization. It is a response based on the users' role in reporting extremist material. For this reason, users should be taught about the phenomenon through government policies in an approach that unites civil society and the state level. These measures protect freedom of expression and the great opportunities that Web 2.0 has provided. In other words, Web 2.0 should be used to counter

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<sup>144</sup> Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens, Nick Kaderbhai, *Research Perspectives on Online Radicalization: A Literature Review, 2006-2016*. International Center for the Study of Radicalization (ICSR), Vox Poll, 2017, p. 55.

<sup>145</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>146</sup> *Ivi*, pp. 56.

<sup>147</sup> Anthony Bergin, *Special report Issue 22- Countering Internet Radicalization in Southeast Asia*, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 2009, p.15. <https://www.aspi.org.au/report/special-report-issue-22-countering-internet-radicalisation-southeast-asia>

<sup>148</sup> Ian Brown, Josh Cowls, *Check the Web: Assessing the Ethics and Politics of Policing the Internet for Extremist Material*, Vox-Pol, 2015, p.11. <https://www.voxpol.eu/assessing-the-ethics-and-politics-of-policing-the-internet-for-extremist-material/>

<sup>149</sup> Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens, Nick Kaderbhai, *Research Perspectives on Online Radicalization: A Literature Review, 2006-2016*. International Center for the Study of Radicalization (ICSR), Vox Poll, 2017, pp. 57-58.

radicalisation and not be censored. The nature of this virtual world can create vulnerabilities for extremists, as they can be exposed to most users who reject this content.<sup>150</sup>

For instance, the European Union, in 2011, started the Radical Awareness Network Internet and Social Media Working Group (RAN). As it describes itself «the RAN is a network of frontline practitioners who work daily with both those vulnerable to radicalisation and those who have already been radicalized. As civil society representatives, social workers, youth workers, teachers, healthcare professionals, local authority representatives, police officers and prison officers, they are engaged in both preventing and countering violent extremism in all its forms and rehabilitating and reintegrating violent extremists. Since it was founded in 2011, the RAN has attracted over 6,000 practitioners, who collectively represent all EU Member State».<sup>151</sup>

Also in the private sector there have been important project. One of them was promoted by Alphabet which created *Jigsaw*, a unit inside Google that investigate potential online dangers and develop strategies that might serve as models of operation. In particular, one of its features is related in countering violent extremism and online radicalizations. This project utilizes «research and technology to help identify and intervene in the online recruiting process of violent extremist group» through the *Redirect Method*, namely an open-source program «which uses targeted ads and curated YouTube videos uploaded by people around the world to confront online radicalization. By focusing on those already searching for extremist content on Google Search. Redirect serves at-risk individuals content that debunks extremists' recruiting messages».<sup>152</sup>

Furthermore, *Jigsaw* also supports online initiatives such as *Abdullah-X*, a project led by an ex-extremist which «aims to provide innovative and robust animated/multimedia content to build resistance to extremist narrative and the allure of radicalisation [...] The objective of Abdullah-X is to radically challenge online extremist messaging using hard hitting, robust and specialist, subject based knowledge. But also, in light of much of the extremist content, deliver entertainment, engagement and feed young people's curiosity. Abdullah-X is seen as a prevention method, not only online but also offline in schools».<sup>153</sup> The project employs the narrative of a fictitious Muslim child named Abdullah X to provide an alternative to radical Islam by exploring the themes of identity, religion, belonging, grievance, and injustice through the lens of a young Muslim man coming of age.<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>150</sup> Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens, Nick Kaderbhai, *Research Perspectives on Online Radicalization: A Literature Review, 2006-2016*. International Center for the Study of Radicalization (ICSR), Vox Poll, 2017, pp. 59-63.

<sup>151</sup> RAN, 2023. [https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/networks/radicalisation-awareness-network-ran/about-ran\\_en](https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/networks/radicalisation-awareness-network-ran/about-ran_en)

<sup>152</sup> Jigsaw, <https://jigsaw.google.com/issues/#extremism>

<sup>153</sup> Abdullah X Project, <https://www.congress-intercultural.eu/en/initiative/184-abdullah-x-project.html>

<sup>154</sup> Ibidem.

The outcomes of such a strategy, however, remain unknown since it is almost hard to measure their efficacy, even if counter narrative efforts are replete with positive content advocating integration and cultural cohesion.<sup>155</sup>

Finally, those who support “intelligence approaches” are determined by the conviction that the Internet must be utilized to monitor terrorist networks and identify their leaders and supporters. These methods highlight the significance of close coordination between law enforcement, social media platforms, and intelligence agencies. Intelligence may be broken down into two distinct categories in this way: strategy and tactics. Strategic intelligence, on the one hand, is the process of gathering information on extremists' online activities, such as the websites they frequent and any possible changes in their strategy. Network analysis is also useful in this context since it reveals the links between recruiters and supporters and pinpoints pivotal nodes in the dissemination of information. In contrast, gathering tactical information entails learning details about an impending or planned assault. Terrorists will likely be more circumspect in disclosing their intentions online, making this information harder to get.<sup>156</sup>

However, the monitoring of transnational websites, the fuzziness of the public and private divide, and the inherently illegal and invasive nature of monitoring are just a few of the risks that have been outlined by numerous scholars, along with the possible legal hurdles that could arise from taking such an approach. Concerns also center on the insufficient funding for law enforcement and the potential unintended consequences of stigmatization among vulnerable community members.<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>155</sup> Rachel Briggs, Sebastien Feve, *Review of Programs to Counter Narratives of Violent Extremism: What Works and What are the Implications for Government?*, Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2013, p.1.

<https://core.ac.uk/reader/30675430>

<sup>156</sup> Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens, Nick Kaderbhai, *Research Perspectives on Online Radicalization: A Literature Review, 2006-2016*. International Center for the Study of Radicalization (ICSR), Vox Poll, 2017, pp. 68-70.

[https://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/ICSR-Paper\\_Research-Perspectives-on-Online-Radicalisation-A-Literature-Review-2006-2016.pdf](https://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/ICSR-Paper_Research-Perspectives-on-Online-Radicalisation-A-Literature-Review-2006-2016.pdf)

<sup>157</sup> Ibidem.

## Chapter II

### Online Radicalization: What role does the Internet play in the path towards political violence?

#### An Introduction to the Method

The investigation of the reasons and the ways in which an individual can undertake an existential metamorphosis towards the use of political violence is complex and articulated. Many academics and researchers have produced essential contributions to the study of the processes of radicalization, woven with psychological and sociological dynamics. Nevertheless, the advent of the Internet and its subsequent use by terrorist organizations for radicalization and recruitment have opened up new perspectives regarding the role of the virtual sphere in promoting radicalization processes. In fact, the characteristics of the online world have allowed the development of a series of dynamics and mechanisms that can facilitate and accelerate these processes.

However, it is necessary first to grasp the critical academic research regarding radicalization to comprehend its online counterpart. Indeed, when reconstructing the Internet's involvement, it is essential to recognize the psychological and social factors that give rise to political violence. In light of this, the first paragraph of this chapter will introduce these contributions. This section will specifically utilize Alessandro Orsini's article *What Everybody Should Know About Radicalization and the DRIA Model*<sup>158</sup> to retrace the development in the field of radicalization studies.

In order, the contributions of Fathali M. Moghaddam, Silber and Bhatt, Marc Sageman, John Horgan, Quintan Wiktorowicz, Lawrence Kuznar, McCauley and Moskalenko, Donatella della Porta, Alessandro Orsini, and Arie W. Kruglanski, Jocelyn J. Bélanger, and Rohan Gunaratna will be presented.

The subsequent section will examine the mechanisms and dynamics of the online world that may influence, cause, or accelerate a radicalization process. Consequently, the relevant academic literature will be presented. Articles such as *Options and Strategies for Countering Online Radicalization in the United States*<sup>159</sup> and *Rethinking Online Radicalization*<sup>160</sup> by Peter Neumann

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<sup>158</sup> Alessandro Orsini, *What Everybody Should Know about Radicalization and the DRIA Model*, in "Studies and Conflict in Terrorism", 46 (1), 68-100, 2023.

<sup>159</sup> Peter R. Neumann, *Options and Strategies for Countering Online Radicalization in the United States*, in "Studies in Conflict and Terrorism", 36(6), 2013 ,431-459. <https://www.start.umd.edu/publication/options-and-strategies-countering-online-radicalization-united-states>

<sup>160</sup> Joe Whittaker, *Rethinking Online Radicalization*, in "Perspective on Terrorism", 16(4), 27-40, 2022.

and Joe Whittaker provide a natural entry point for more in-depth scholarly investigations into the Internet's role in radicalization. Notable academicians such as Marc Sageman, Tom Pyszczynsky, Edwin Sutherlands, John Suler, Benjamin Ducol, Daniel Koehler, and Gabriel Weimann will be included in the analysis.

The following section will examine the relationship between lone wolf terrorism and online radicalization. Remarkably, the phenomenon will be defined based on Hamm and Spaaij's monograph, *The Age of Lone Wolf Terrorism*<sup>161</sup>. Later, the online radicalization paradigm of lone wolves designed by Israeli scholar Gabriel Weimann<sup>162</sup> will be analyzed.

The final section will present some relevant quantitative studies<sup>163</sup> to help understand, in concrete terms, the threat level that online radicalization represents in comparison to conventional radicalization processes.

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<sup>161</sup> Mark S. Hamm, Ramon Spaaij, *The Age of Lone Wolf Terrorism*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2017.

<sup>162</sup> Gabriel Weimann, *Virtual Packs of Lone Wolves: How the Internet made Lone Wolf Terrorism a Misnomer*, The Wilson Center, 25/02/2014. <https://medium.com/its-a-medium-world/virtual-packs-of-lone-wolves-17b12f8c455a>

<sup>163</sup> Cfr. M. Costello, R. Barrett-Fox, C. Bernatsky, J. Hawdon, K. Mendes, *Predictors of viewing online extremism among America's youth*, in "Youth Soc.", 52, 710-727, 2020. Cfr. K. Saha, E. Chandrasekharan, M. De Choudhrouy, *Prevalence and Psychological effects of hateful speech in online college communities*, in Proceedings of the 10<sup>th</sup> ACM conference on web science, 255-264, 2019. In Jens F. Binder, Jonathan Kenyon, *Terrorism and the Internet: How dangerous is online radicalization?*, in "Frontiers in Psychology", 13, 2022.

## 2.1 Radicalization Debate: The Path towards *Jihadism*

As stated in the previous section, this paragraph aims to present the main theories of radicalization and the most influential monographs and articles in the academic debate, starting from Alessandro Orsini's article *What Everyone Should Know About Radicalization and the DRIA Model*<sup>164</sup>. In this regard, it is relevant to stress that this thesis conceives jihadi radicalization as a resocialization process in which a strict interpretation of *Sharia* law replaces and reshapes an individual's set of social norms, beliefs, and values through an intensive social process that can occur in different contexts.<sup>165</sup>

### 2.1.1 Fathali M. Moghaddam: The “Staircase To Terrorism”

Moghaddam's model was theorized in 2005 in the article *The Staircase to Terrorism: A Psychological Exploration*.<sup>166</sup> This approach falls into the genre of “processual radicalization” theories, which seek to rebuild the sequential and existential route that distinguishes an ordinary person's metamorphosis into a terrorist. The academic expanded on the metaphor of a staircase that represents a resocialization process in which, as the subject progresses, the odds of abandoning the change decrease, primarily because, at a certain point, turning back is impossible. The staircase has six floors characterized by distinctive psychological processes that follow a narrowing pace leading to the final step, namely, the terrorist act. In other words, the bottom level is the largest, and as the person advances, the subsequent tiers get progressively smaller, reflecting the decrease in the likelihood of quitting the climb.<sup>167</sup>

The ground floor, *Psychological interpretation of Material Conditions*, is occupied by the massive preponderance of individuals and it is characterized by perceptions of fairness and just treatment. In this level, a feeling of perceived injustice and relative deprivation describes the members. They are individuals who believe that they have not reached what they deserved, and it is relative due to the fact that is elaborated in comparison with the other people.<sup>168</sup> As stated by

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<sup>164</sup> Alessandro Orsini, *What Everybody Should Know about Radicalization and the DRIA Model*, in “Studies and Conflict in Terrorism”, 46 (1), 68-100, 2023.

<sup>165</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>166</sup> Fathali M. Moghaddam, *Staircase to Terrorism: A psychological Exploration*, in “American Psychologist”, 60(2), 2005, 161-169. <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2005-01817-002>

<sup>167</sup> Alessandro Orsini, *What Everybody Should Know about Radicalization and the DRIA Model*, in “Studies and Conflict in Terrorism”, 46 (1), 68-100, 2023, p. 69.

<sup>168</sup> Fathali M. Moghaddam, *Staircase to Terrorism: A psychological Exploration*, in “American Psychologist”, 60(2), 2005, 161-169, p. 163. <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2005-01817-002>

Moghaddam, « this groundswell of frustration and anger has given rise to greater sympathy for extremist “antiestablishment” tactics among the vast populations on the ground floor. Every year, a number of those who feel unjustly treated are motivated to march along alternative paths, even desperate and radical ones, to address their grievances». <sup>169</sup>

The first floor, *Perceived Options to Fight Unfair Treatment*, is populated by those seeking redress for unfair treatment. In this stage, two psychological elements influence the beginning of radicalization. The first one, is the individual’s need to improve his or her social position by means of personal abilities. The second component is the perception of procedural fairness, in other words, if the individual perceives society as fair in offering upward mobility. When this requisite is not met, the individual may move up a level. <sup>170</sup>

The second floor is defined by the *Displacement of Aggression* onto out-groups. At this point, the individual starts to absorb an educational set of values which teach a rigid “us-versus-them” thinking, typical of several radical ideologies, such as *Salafia*, whose fundamentalist movement started in and is currently funded by Saudi Arabia. From that moment on, people who feel ready to physically displace aggression and who seek an opportunity to do so, climb up another level in order to attack the enemy. <sup>171</sup>

The third floor is characterized by a *Moral Engagement* by the individuals towards terrorism, which is perceived as legitimate and necessary. Terrorist groups may draw people into their world of secrecy, terror, and allegiance. The illegality of the organization, government persecution, and the belief that societies are becoming more restricted and hostile all lead to isolation and a sense of real connection with other militants. In this regard, the strategy followed by terrorists is unraveled between two levels. First, on the macro-level, the claim that they can improve society by fighting corrupt and tyrannical regimes. Second, on the micro-level, they advertise themselves as a “home” for dissatisfied people, mostly single and young men. <sup>172</sup>

People seldom survive entering the underground realm of terrorist groups on the fourth floor, *Solidification of Categorical Thinking and the Perceived Legitimacy of Terrorist Organization*. This stage cements the “us-versus-them” mindset. Moghaddam distinguishes between two types of neophytes. The first ones are the new members planning to remain inside the organization for a

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<sup>169</sup> Fathali M. Moghaddam, *Staircase to Terrorism: A psychological Exploration*, in “American Psychologist”, 60(2), 2005, 161-169, pp. 162-163. <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2005-01817-002>

<sup>170</sup> Alessandro Orsini, *What Everybody Should Know about Radicalization and the DRIA Model*, in “Studies and Conflict in Terrorism”, 46 (1), 68-100, 2023, p. 69.

<sup>171</sup> Fathali M. Moghaddam, *Staircase to Terrorism: A psychological Exploration*, in “American Psychologist”, 60(2), 2005, 161-169, p. 164. <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2005-01817-002>

<sup>172</sup> Alessandro Orsini, *What Everybody Should Know about Radicalization and the DRIA Model*, in “Studies and Conflict in Terrorism”, 46 (1), 68-100, 2023, p. 70.



long time. The other ones must fulfill their tasks as soon as possible. In more intense settings, Moghaddam's called them foot soldiers, who are resocialized in small cells of four or five. Foot soldiers are recruited to commit suicide and are solely aware of their unit's identity. The would-be terrorist finds strength in two opposing forces. First, the organization's quest for compliance punishes any deviation. Second, the government persecution strengthens their belief that violence is their only suitable way.<sup>173</sup>

The fifth and last floor is the *Terrorist Act and Sidestepping Inhibitory Mechanism*. The resocialization process is completed, and the individual has acquired a Manichean vision of the world. The ones who represent the evil side, even civilians, do not deserve mercy since they are considered as well as responsible as governments of the degradation in which Islamic society is living.<sup>174</sup>

### **2.1.2 Marc Sageman: The Small Group Resocialization Process**

In Marc Sageman's view, the radicalization process is based in social relationships and dynamics rather than in radical ideology. As for Moghaddam, the *primum movens* is not ideological but it derives from frustration, exclusion and marginalization.<sup>175</sup>

In a resocialization perspective, individuals join terrorist ranks due to kinship and friendship bonds. Faith and fanaticism are based and perpetuated through strong small group dynamics with very close relationships. Small groups and face-to-face contact foster an in-group love that is contrasted with hatred for the outside world. In this perspective, self-interest is transformed into self-sacrifice for the cause and their fellow soldiers.

As a consequence, the roots of radicalization lie in the dynamics of groups, which are intrinsic to the social nature of the human species. Sageman uses the phrase "Global Salafi Jihad" to describe al-Qaeda as a "social movement" reiterating this point. Many terrorists are not directly affiliated with al-Qaeda but are part of the worldwide movement to fight the West and establish an Islamic state. Fostered by these social dynamics, Islamist ideals gradually replace dominant Western material values that sparked the first sense of marginalization. After adopting radical Islamism's spiritual ideals, members no longer suffer from a lack of material needs and feel pleased with themselves after embracing the terrorist cause.<sup>176</sup>

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<sup>173</sup> Alessandro Orsini, *What Everybody Should Know about Radicalization and the DRIA Model*, in "Studies and Conflict in Terrorism", 46 (1), 68-100, 2023, p. 70.

<sup>174</sup> Ivi, p. 71.

<sup>175</sup> Ivi, pp. 72-73.

<sup>176</sup> Ibidem.

Sageman argues that radicalization follows a bottom-up process rather than top down. Indeed, there has never been a formal recruiting effort by Al-Qaeda. Al-Qaeda's biggest issue is not recruiting, but rather selection, given the large number of young individuals interested in joining the worldwide jihadist cause.<sup>177</sup>

Furthermore, the American scholar also wants to challenge the idea that terrorism and poverty are strictly connected. According to Sageman, terrorists are often well-educated young men from middle-class backgrounds who come from loving and religious homes. They are "global citizens" who utilize religion to create a shared identity and then use that identification as a springboard to a more extreme form of fanaticism.<sup>178</sup>

One of the most startling statistics noted by Sageman is that three-quarters of the people in his sample joined the Global Salafi movement as "expatriates". In fact, they were primarily rich young people who had joined while living and studying overseas. They were homesick, lonely, and isolated in large numbers. Despite their intelligence, they were denied a place among society's elite and hence suffered social exclusion. Even if at first they were not very religious, isolation and frustration led them to seek comfort in the mosques. There they made the friends and family that they ended up moving in with. Their radicalization of anti-Western sentiment grew over time as they continued to feel collectively marginalized by Western culture.<sup>179</sup>

### 2.1.3 Silber and Bhatt's Model

In the report *Radicalization in the West: The Homegrown Threat*, Mitchell Silber and Arvin Bhatt elaborated a sequential model of radicalization made up of four phases: Pre-radicalization; Self-identification; Indoctrination; and Jihadization. However, despite of the sequential nature of the model, the individual path change according to personal story and characteristics. As a result, it must not be intended as a rigid linear evolution. The study was conducted on the radicalization processes of 11 jihadi cells in Europe and US between 2004 and 2007 (among them there is the Madrid Railways Attack of 11 March 2004).<sup>180</sup>

The starting point of their analysis is the *jihadist* or *jihadi-Salafi* ideology which is seen as the *primum movens* that motivates individuals born in the west to attack their own countries.<sup>181</sup> In this

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<sup>177</sup> Alessandro Orsini, *What Everybody Should Know about Radicalization and the DRIA Model*, in "Studies and Conflict in Terrorism", 46 (1), 68-100, 2023, pp. 72-73.

<sup>178</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>179</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>180</sup> Mitchell Silber, Arvin Bhatt, *Radicalization in the West: the Homegrown Threat*, New York City Police Department, 2007. <https://info.publicintelligence.net/NYPDradicalization.pdf>

<sup>181</sup> *Ivi*, p. 6.

way and due to the fact that it is focused only on the western context, this model hugely differs from the ones analyzed previously.<sup>182</sup>

The point of origin is the *pre-radicalization* phase, namely the situation before the exposition to the ideology. In the report, the majority of individuals is defined as «unremarkable» and «with ordinary lives».<sup>183</sup> Nevertheless, it is important to underline that these peculiarities may vary. Indeed, as highlighted by Alessandro Orsini, most of the ISIS's attacks in Europe were conducted by people with previous criminal convictions or who had experience radicalization in prison.<sup>184</sup>

During the subsequent phase, *self-identification*, the individuals start to approach the ideology as a consequence of a trauma, which can be economic, social, political or personal, that opens the “cognitive opening” and the consequential questioning of the previous set of values and beliefs.<sup>185</sup>

The third phase, *indoctrination*, is characterized by the strengthening of the individual beliefs and the total adoption of the *jihadi ideology* as the filter through which he or she sees the world. In this phase, the subject is usually helped by a “facilitator”, namely an individual who helps the would-be terrorist in realizing the assault.<sup>186</sup>

In the last phase, *jihadization*, the members believe that *jihad* is a personal duty and start to consider themselves as *mujaheddin*. In this stage, the subject is ready to prepare and conduct an assault. As highlighted by the two scholars «while the other phases of radicalization may take place gradually, over two to three years, this jihadization component can be a very rapid process, taking only a few months, or even weeks to run its course».<sup>187</sup>

In this paradigm, as in Moghaddam and Sageman radicalization is not caused by poverty. Instead, it is the result of an existential crisis that drives individuals to seek a new identity. Since Europe was not successful in integrating second and third generations of muslim immigrants in its social texture, many muslims have become lost and unable to choose between Western secular values and the heritage of their home countries. Because of this internal strife, they are more prone to extremism. However, the scholars underlined that in the US, since muslims are more integrated

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<sup>182</sup> Alessandro Orsini, *What Everybody Should Know about Radicalization and the DRIA Model*, in “Studies and Conflict in Terrorism”, 46 (1), 68-100, 2023, p. 74.

<sup>183</sup> Mitchell Silber, Arvin Bhatt, *Radicalization in the West: the Homegrown Threat*, New York City Police Department, 2007, p. 6. <https://info.publicintelligence.net/NYPDradicalization.pdf>

<sup>184</sup> Alessandro Orsini, *La radicalization des terroristes de vocation*, in “Commentaire”, 156, Hiver, 2017, 783-790.

<sup>185</sup> Alessandro Orsini, *What Everybody Should Know about Radicalization and the DRIA Model*, in “Studies and Conflict in Terrorism”, 46 (1), 68-100, 2023, p. 74.

<sup>186</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>187</sup> Mitchell Silber, Arvin Bhatt, *Radicalization in the West: the Homegrown Threat*, New York City Police Department, 2007, p. 7. <https://info.publicintelligence.net/NYPDradicalization.pdf>

than in Europe, they are more resistant to the temptation of the jihadism. However, this does not imply they are invulnerable to its allure.<sup>188</sup>

Furthermore, Silber and Bhatt attribute to the Internet, the main topic of this dissertation, a huge role that will be described later in the following paragraph.

#### **2.1.4 John Horgan: The IED Model**

The IED (Involvement, Engagement, and Disengagement) model encapsulates the contribution provided by John Horgan. In his view, as articulated in his book *The Psychology of Terrorism*, various motives might lead to a person becoming a terrorist. It might be ideology, following in the footsteps of family or close friends, social marginalization, loneliness, or several other factors. As a result, the focus is on understanding “how” a person becomes a terrorist rather than “why”, rebuilding the paths leading to the transformation rather than the motives.<sup>189</sup>

The critical term in understanding this viewpoint is “allure”. The organization must be appealing, and its attractiveness depends on the ability to ascend the group’s command structures. Horgan summarizes the aspirations of the would-be terrorist as: acquisition of power; acceptance from the group; and improvement of the individual’s status in a community.<sup>190</sup>

Horgan’s approach begins with the individual’s engagement in terrorism and continues with how violence is later shifted. According to the researcher, violence is more devastating when an organization can provide both tangible and immaterial resources. As Alessandro Orsini pointed out, this assertion has been amply validated in recent years, with assaults carried out with the sustenance of ISIS officials being significantly more successful than those carried out by lone wolves or autonomous groups.<sup>191</sup>

The accomplishment of the assault represents the transition from engagement to involvement, specifically when the function in the organization is defined and the four stages of an attack begin. The first step is “decision and search activity”, in which the organization identifies the target after conducting an accurate theoretical study that includes the mission, the political message, and the likely response of security personnel. The second phase, “pre-terrorist activity”, begins with the

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<sup>188</sup> Alessandro Orsini, *What Everybody Should Know about Radicalization and the DRIA Model*, in “Studies and Conflict in Terrorism”, 46 (1), 68-100, 2023, p. 75.

<sup>189</sup> Cfr. John Horgan, *The Psychology of Terrorism*, Routledge, London, 2005. in Alessandro Orsini, *What Everybody Should Know about Radicalization and the DRIA Model*, in “Studies and Conflict in Terrorism”, 46 (1), 68-100, 2023, p. 77.

<sup>190</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>191</sup> Ibidem.

launch of logistical, strategic, and training efforts. In this situation, too, the Internet is an important tool since it may supply pertinent information about both the target, the means and the training.<sup>192</sup>

Everything is now ready for the event execution step. Terrorists must prepare their weapons, control their adrenaline surge, maintain their lucidity, and avoid police checkpoints. When the assault is over, the post-event and strategical analysis phase begins. Terrorists, except for suicide assaults, must flee. The group's assistance is also essential in this scenario.<sup>193</sup>

Disengagement, the last component of the acronym, must be separated from de-radicalization since it implies that people no longer participate in the organization's activities owing to personal decisions or force majeure, such as dissolution or capture. This is important since it emphasizes the contrast between these two processes.<sup>194</sup>

### **2.1.5 Quintan Wiktorowicz: Participant Observation**

Another pillar in the study of radicalization was elaborated by Quintan Wiktorowicz in 2005 in his book *Radical Islam Rising*. The monograph describes the mechanisms that attract potential followers, the tools that radical groups use to present their vision of Islam and the processes of socialization that lead individuals to participate in the dangerous and secret world of terrorism. Wiktorowicz's analysis is based on the sociological technique of participant observation and was conducted in 2002 on al-Muhajiroun, an international Islamist movement located in London which counted 160 members and more than 700 sympathizers.<sup>195</sup>

The question that Wiktorowicz wanted to answer is this: What brings an individual to bear the risks and costs of the mujaheddin's life? The academic's answer is based on Max Weber's comprehensive method. That is, the notion that social reality is only partially recognizable. Every knowledge of cultural reality is always a knowledge of particular points of view. Therefore, the rationality of social action must be assessed using the view of the person acting. The only way to understand the social actions of an individual is to look at the world with his own eyes, observing reality through his interpretative filter.<sup>196</sup>

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<sup>192</sup> Cfr. John Horgan, *The Psychology of Terrorism*, Routledge, London, 2005. in Alessandro Orsini, *What Everybody Should Know about Radicalization and the DRIA Model*, in "Studies and Conflict in Terrorism", 46 (1), 68-100, 2023, p. 78.

<sup>193</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>194</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>195</sup> Cfr. Quintan Wiktorowicz, *Radical Islam Rising: Muslim Extremism in the West*, Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Lanham, 2005. In Alessandro Orsini, *What Everybody Should Know about Radicalization and the DRIA Model*, in "Studies and Conflict in Terrorism", 46 (1), 68-100, 2023, pp. 78-80.

<sup>196</sup> Max Weber, a cura di Pietro Rossi, *Il metodo delle scienze storico-sociali*, Einaudi, Torino, 2003, p.48.

According to the scholar, the militants accept the risks through an intense process of resocialization that creates a strong sense of identification that leads to a coincidence between the individual needs and those of the group. This process leads to a metamorphosis of individual values and the emergence of new ideological criteria. In other words, the individual gets a new mental scheme that allows him to calculate the benefits of militancy and to redefine the concepts of good and evil, right and wrong, and personal interest. All this is exacerbated by the social exclusion that membership in al-Muhajiroun entails.<sup>197</sup>

Later, in explaining why an average individual approaches an extremist group, Wiktorowicz uses the concept of “cognitive opening”. Indeed, Al-Muhajiroun offers its members an ideological basis to avoid the condition of “anomy” theorized by Durkheim. Many young Muslims suffer feelings of exclusion and disorientation towards Western society. What is fascinating is that, while in previous models, the cognitive opening is before entry into the Islamic group, in Wiktorowicz’s analysis, this process can begin within the group thanks to sermons and audiovisual content with high emotional impact that can result in a moral shock. Moreover, another reason identified by the academic is the reputation and authority of the movement given by the charismatic gifts of the leader, Omark Bakri. The fact that an expert in sacred sources can trace unique qualities in an individual can catalyze the process.<sup>198</sup>

In conclusion, Wiktorowicz stressed that membership in Al-Muhajiroun limits any free-riding activity through social control based on negative sanctions. This resocialization, founded on the internalization of Islamic ideology, leads a member to see persecution as an assessment of religious pureness. Eternal salvation and spiritual benefits compensate for any material loss.<sup>199</sup>

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<sup>197</sup> Cfr. Quintan Wiktorowicz, *Radical Islam Rising: Muslim Extremism in the West*, Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Lanham, 2005. In Alessandro Orsini, *What Everybody Should Know about Radicalization and the DRIA Model*, in “Studies and Conflict in Terrorism”, 46 (1), 68-100, 2023, pp. 78-80.

<sup>198</sup> Ibidem

<sup>199</sup> Ibidem.

### 2.1.6 Lawrence Kuznar: Risk Sensitivity

Lawrence Kuznar's contribution combines "prospect theory" with the concept of "relative privation", previously described, and "risk sensitivity". The first concept refers to the decision theory elaborated by Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, describing how individuals decide in dangerous situations.<sup>200</sup> The latter, is defined as «a measure of an individual's attraction or aversion to risk when an individual has some sense of the probability distribution of outcomes that confer satisfaction, or utility, upon the individual».<sup>201</sup>

The central point of his article, *Risk Sensitivity and Terrorism*, is that conditions of poverty are not the starting point of radicalization. Based on the analysis of Palestinian nationalists, Northern Irish and the Tamil Tigers group in Sri Lanka, the scholar states that the predisposition to be part of a terrorist organization is dependent on the opportunity of improving their social status.<sup>202</sup>

In particular, *risk sensitivity*, or the circumstances in which risk aversion turns to risk appetite, has led the scholar to declare that two groups of individuals are likely to become terrorists. The first are people who risk deteriorating their social status due to existing social alterations. The second is those who have a chance to develop their situation. Both clusters are likely to take risks and join terrorist groups, regardless of social class, in order to improve their social position.<sup>203</sup>

### 2.1.7 Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko

*Friction*, written by Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko, is another milestone in radicalization studies. The starting point of their analysis is that radicalization is a complex phenomenon and, therefore, must be divided into three levels: individual radicalization, group radicalization, and mass radicalization. The two researchers do not accord ideology a prominent role since they differentiate between radicalization of ideas and radicalization of behavior, noting that ideology may justify violence but possessing radical beliefs does not imply behaving violently. Indeed, the monograph examines radicalization via a variety of mechanisms.<sup>204</sup>

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<sup>200</sup> Alessandro Orsini, *What Everybody Should Know about Radicalization and the DRIA Model*, in "Studies and Conflict in Terrorism", 46 (1), 68-100, 2023, p. 80.

<sup>201</sup> Lawrence A. Kuznar, James M. Lutz, *Risk Sensitivity and Terrorism*, in "Political Studies", 55, 2007, 341-361, p. 343. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/epub/10.1111/j.1467-9248.2007.00666.x>

<sup>202</sup> Cfr. Lawrence A. Kuznar, James M. Lutz, *Risk Sensitivity and Terrorism*, in "Political Studies", 55, 2007, 341-361, p. 343. In Alessandro Orsini, *What Everybody Should Know about Radicalization and the DRIA Model*, in "Studies and Conflict in Terrorism", 46 (1), 68-100, 2023, p.80.

<sup>203</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>204</sup> Cfr. Clark McCauley, Sophia Moskalenko, *Friction. How Radicalization Happens to Them and Us*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2011. In Alessandro Orsini, *What Everybody Should Know about Radicalization and the DRIA Model*, in "Studies and Conflict in Terrorism", 46 (1), 68-100, 2023, pp. 81-83.

To begin with the first level, McCauley and Moskalenko identified six mechanisms responsible for individual radicalization: Personal Grievance, Group Grievance, Slippery Slope, Love, Status and Risk Seeking, and Unfreezing. However, it is essential to state that individuals can follow different trajectories involving one or more of these mechanisms.<sup>205</sup>

“Personal and group grievance” refer to a sense of injustice and the following desire for retaliation. On the one hand, in the personal scenario, the sense of unfairness is individual and impacts the life of the person in question. Conversely, people might become radicalized due to perceived injustice against others if they identify with the problems of another group.<sup>206</sup>

The third process, the “slippery slope”, refers to increasing and, to some degree, inadvertent radicalization. The individual does not want to become a terrorist, but he or she finds themselves compelled to do so by circumstances.<sup>207</sup>

“Love” is the fourth radicalization procedure. In this situation, the person begins his journey because of a friend, lover, or family member.<sup>208</sup>

The following process is “Status and Risk Seeking”, in which individuals take risks to raise their social standing and become well-known terrorists.<sup>209</sup>

Finally, the “Unfreezing” mechanism refers to instances in which an external factor, such as a civil war, eliminates the old obligations and societal limitations, producing a new condition in which terrorism, its advantages, and its ideology might give an escape option.<sup>210</sup>

Moving forward, the second level of study is based on the social dynamics which characterize small group everyday life and provides three main mechanism of radicalization: group polarization, group competition and group isolation. The former relates the group’s ability to influence the worldview of its members. Indeed, a new member may initially have a modest proclivity for violence, but regular interaction with the other members might drive the adoption of extreme behaviours. Furthermore, certain members, generally those most dedicated to the cause, might inspire adoration and the desire to impress them.<sup>211</sup>

The second process, “group competition”, is concerned with the inherent competition between groups. Indeed, identifying an outside adversary is the beginning point for the “us against them”

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<sup>205</sup> Cfr. Clark McCauley, Sophia Moskalenko, *Friction. How Radicalization Happens to Them and Us*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2011. In Alessandro Orsini, *What Everybody Should Know about Radicalization and the DRIA Model*, in “Studies and Conflict in Terrorism”, 46 (1), 68-100, 2023, pp. 81-83.

<sup>206</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>207</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>208</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>209</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>210</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>211</sup> Ibidem.



viewpoint, which may have a tremendous emotional appeal, promoting the formation of a cohesive and strong identity.

Finally, the third mechanism, “group isolation”, emphasizes the importance of estrangement from the outside world. Becoming a group member entails becoming brothers and sisters, and this story is amplified if the siblings are at odds with the rest of the world. Furthermore, seclusion empowers terrorists to establish values and purpose. This dynamic is reminiscent of Weber’s research on religious sects, which were seen as a “womb” against the perils of outer reality.<sup>212</sup>

The final level of examination focuses on mass radicalization, or the dissemination of a group’s views to the general public to recruit new members. According to McCauley and Moskalenko, there are three mechanisms: Jujitsu Politics, Hatred, and Martyrdom.<sup>213</sup>

The former refers to the strategy of committing terrorist attacks to provoke an indiscriminate response from governments, resulting in the radicalization of formerly opposing individuals. For instance, Al Qaeda employed this tactic to encourage US troops’ deployment in Muslim nations, thereby agitating the local populace against these invaders.<sup>214</sup>

The second process, “Hatred”, generates resentment and aversion towards the adversary to portray it as heinous and justify its slaughter. The most common strategy is to dehumanize the opponent through propaganda, demonstrating they do not deserve mercy.<sup>215</sup>

The third mechanism, “Martyrdom”, focuses on the propagation and acceptance of sacrifice for a more significant and, in some cases, eschatological purpose. This strategy also promotes competition among members and terrorist organizations, increasing activity. The foundation of “Martyrdom” is an emotional response, which can stimulate mobilization and provide cognitive relief irrespective of the opponent’s strength. Indeed, the primary objective is to regain honor while inflicting damage on the opponent.<sup>216</sup>

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<sup>212</sup> Cfr. Clark McCauley, Sophia Moskalenko, *Friction. How Radicalization Happens to Them and Us*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2011. In Alessandro Orsini, *What Everybody Should Know about Radicalization and the DRIA Model*, in “Studies and Conflict in Terrorism”, 46 (1), 68-100, 2023, pp. 81-83.

<sup>213</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>214</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>215</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>216</sup> Ibidem.

### 2.1.8 Donatella Della Porta

The well know italian sociologist Donatella Della Porta, as well as McCauley and Moskalenko, focused on the mechanism of radicalization. According to the academic, these mechanism should be intended as «relatively abstract patterns of action that can travel from one episode to the next, explaining how a cause creates a consequence in a given context».<sup>217</sup>

Della Porta's publication *Clandestine Political Violence* investigates the mechanism at the start of a chain of encounters, defining the three main stages of a violent clandestine movement: onset, persistence, and demise. The sociologist employs a paradigm of actions and responses based on three levels of analysis: the political context (macrosystem), the dynamics between terrorist organizations and the government (mesosystem), and the symbolic and emotional bond within the organization (microsystem).<sup>218</sup>

According to the scholar, three processes cause clandestine political violence. The first dynamic is the “state repression”, reinforced by “escalating policing”. Indeed, when the State persecute a certain type of organizations, the reform-minded ones can become more extreme.

Secondly, the “competitive escalation” involves all sides driving the conflict's continuous intensification. Competition between people on opposite sides of a crisis and those in the same political faction who disagree on the best course of action is intensifying. When things become challenging, moderate activists depart, leaving the most extreme activists to fend for themselves, which promotes extremist behaviours.

The last mechanism is “activation of militant networks”, in which Della Porta relies on Sageman's “small groups” and socialization studies to explain radicalism. Underground organizations recruit friends, family, and political allies. Peer pressure shapes these networks' members' worldviews.

In this context, the italian academic distinguishes between first generation and second-generation militants. First-generation militants are slow to turn to violence due to their upbringing. Della Porta claims that underground group founders were raised by politically active households that taught specific values and narratives. However, since violence is already normalized, the second generation is more prone to engage in severe conduct. Indeed, the first generation's

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<sup>217</sup> Cfr. Donatella Della Porta, *Clandestine Political Violence*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2013, p. 5. In Alessandro Orsini, *What Everybody Should Know about Radicalization and the DRIA Model*, in “Studies and Conflict in Terrorism”, 46 (1), 68-100, 2023, p. 83.

<sup>218</sup> *Ivi*, pp. 83-87.

underground organizations politicize the second. Second-generation militant networks form on strong friendship or family community links during collective actions rather than before them.<sup>219</sup>

Donatella Della Porta also classifies the mechanisms which maintain clandestine political violence. The first process, “organizational compartmentalization”, relates to the emergence of a logic of armed combat against the state and the isolation caused by the authorities’ increasing persecution. In this way, the existence of the clandestine organization is reinforced. The analysis continues with “Action militarization”, namely the promotion of violence. However, extreme covert political violence causes official persecution and public moral outcry. A clandestine organization abandons propaganda for survival as governmental crackdown increases. The third mechanism is “ideological encapsulation”, which develops a rigid social connection paradigm that separates all of life into good and evil. Della Porta believes ideology justifies violence rather than causing it. “Militant enclosure” concludes. The strong affective relationship fostered by clandestinity, and the logic of war promotes emotional ties between the members. As a consequence, the outside world appears as far and the us versus them mindset flourish. The opposition is represented in a hazy, abstract, and unrelenting way, justifying murder.<sup>220</sup>

In conclusion, Donatella Della Porta explores the factors which support the deterioration of the organization. The first is a “de-escalating policy” advocated by the State to dissipate any social confrontation, and therefore the wrath which supports and incites the recruitment of new militants.. The departure from the organization depends on repression and militants’ alternatives to clandestinity. Another key process deals with the problem within the organizations, dubbed “organizational disbandment”. Clandestine groups may create revulsion even among its own members, who might be repulsed by defined sorts of conduct. Lastly, another factor involves the individual de-encapsulation. If fed-up covert people aid and support one other, this is simpler. Fidelity to a covert organization mostly hinges on the emotional relationships developed within the members of the organization. If someone fears the loss of love and esteem from his or her comrades, he or she must balance this concern with love and esteem from an alternative group, allowing them to choose a different track.<sup>221</sup>

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<sup>219</sup> Cfr. Donatella Della Porta, *Clandestine Political Violence*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2013, p. 5. In In Alessandro Orsini, *What Everybody Should Know about Radicalization and the DRIA Model*, in “Studies and Conflict in Terrorism”, 46 (1), 68-100, 2023, pp. 83-87.

<sup>220</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>221</sup> Cfr. Donatella Della Porta, *Clandestine Political Violence*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2013, p. 5. In In Alessandro Orsini, *What Everybody Should Know about Radicalization and the DRIA Model*, in “Studies and Conflict in Terrorism”, 46 (1), 68-100, 2023, pp. 83-87.

### 2.1.9 Alessandro Orsini: The DRIA Model

The DRIA model was theorized by Alessandro Orsini in his *Anatomy of the Red Brigades*<sup>222</sup>, and later broadened in other academic articles and monographs of the Italian scholar, and it is based on the empirical analysis of 39 jihadist terrorists.<sup>223</sup> The acronym DRIA consists of the initial letters of the four phases of a process of interaction in which ideology assumes a key role: Disintegration of Social Identity; Reconstruction of Social Identity; Integration in a Revolutionary Sect; Alienation from the Surrounding World.

This model is not intended to theorize a universal process but is related to a peculiar anthropological type, called by Orsini “terrorist by vocation”. The members of this anthropological category have an existential purpose in the sense that they pursue the objective of feeling part of an *imagined community*.<sup>224</sup> By virtue of an inner image, which represents something social and at the same time symbolic, they want to give meaning to their sad and empty lives.<sup>225</sup> Regardless of the ideology they profess, the terrorists of vocation try to satisfy an internal necessity for redemption. At the same time, they are obsessed with an inner need and a psychological drive aimed at concretizing the punishment of others for their alleged moral corruption.<sup>226</sup>

At the basis of the concept of vocation terrorism, there is the distinction theorized by Max Weber between those who live “off” politics and those who live “for” politics.<sup>227</sup> Those who live “off” politics derive the means to survive from this activity. Those who live “for” politics dedicate their lives to a cause to satisfy inner needs and drives.<sup>228</sup> The terrorist by vocation belongs to this second category and decides to sacrifice his existence, obeying the need to satisfy a spiritual necessity.<sup>229</sup>

The first phase, *Disintegration of Social Identity*, starts from a succession of shocks, traumas and individual fiascos which led the person through a condition of existential discomfort. In

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<sup>222</sup> Alessandro Orsini, *Anatomia delle Brigate rosse. Le radici ideologiche del terrorismo rivoluzionario*, Rubbettino, Soveria Mannelli, 2010.

<sup>223</sup> See Alessandro Orsini, *What Everybody Should Know about Radicalization and the DRIA Model*, in “Studies and Conflict in Terrorism”, 46 (1), 68-100, 2023, pp. 88-89.

<sup>224</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Comunità Immaginate. Origini e fortuna dei nazionalismi*, Laterza, Bari, 2018, pp. 10-12.

<sup>225</sup> Alessandro Orsini, *L'ISIS non è morto: ha solo cambiato pelle*, Rizzoli, Milano, 2018, p. 78.

<sup>226</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>227</sup> Cfr. Max Weber, *Politics as a Vocation*, in Max Weber, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, Translated, Edited, and with an Introduction by H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, Oxford University Press, New York, 1946, p. 84 in, *Interview with a Terrorist by Vocation: A Day Among the Diehard Terrorists*, part II, Alessandro Orsini, in “Studies in Conflict and Terrorism”, 36/2013, pp. 672-673.

<sup>228</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>229</sup> Alessandro Orsini, *What everybody should know about radicalization and the DRIA model*, in “Studies in Conflict & Terrorism”, p.21. Cfr. Alessandro Orsini, *A Day among the Diehard Terrorists: The Psychological Costs of Doing Ethnographic Research*, in “Studies in Conflict & Terrorism”, 36/2013, p. 337.

particular, the individual experiences the sociological concept of “social marginality”, that should be intended as a state of mind, independent of social status, which manifests itself when the individual considers that his or her role in society is inferior to the merits and abilities attributed to.<sup>230</sup>

Orsini writes that, as stated by Jose Ortega y Gasset, man is an animal rich in imagination. Living marginality can push an individual into a situation of discouragement or it can direct him towards the search for an exit strategy through its ability to create an alternative utopian vision.<sup>231</sup> The scholar claims, under the influence of Clifford Geertz, that one of the most significant facts about terrorists may be that they are all born with the capacity to live a thousand distinct lives but only end up living one.<sup>232</sup>

The DRIA model emphasizes that those experiencing an identity crisis are not compelled to progress to the second stage of the DRIA model or to reconstruct their social identity through a radical ideology; rather, this is merely one of several possible outcomes.<sup>233</sup>

In the second phase, *Reconstruction of the Social Identity*, the individual experiences a “psychological undertaking” that obliges crucial factors, among them the “will to want”, namely the ability to translate in behaviours the inner need for change. This psychological skill, also known as “cognitive opening”, does not, in and of itself, constitute a path out. It indicates the willingness to accept a new set of concepts and serves as the beginning point for a new existential quest. The Jihadi ideology allows people seeking new existential values to recreate their social identity. People who adopt Jihadi ideology recognize that they have a significant existential purpose and a new role in the world.<sup>234</sup> The terrorist acquires a binary code mentality, cultivating an obsession with purity and hatred for the enemy. The new mental universe, affirms Orsini, is composed of seven fundamental characteristics: a) Radical Catastrophism; b) Waiting for the End; c) Obsession with Purity; d) Identification of Evil; e) Obsession with Purification; f) Exaltation of Martyrdom or Desire to be Persecuted; g) Purification of the Means through the End.<sup>235</sup> The ideology foster the creation of a discourse described by Orsini as follow: «The world has been plunged into an abyss of pain and misery (radical catastrophism) because of the actions of certain categories of people (identification of evil) who deserve to be exterminated (obsession with purification). Before

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<sup>230</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>231</sup> Ivi, p. 104.

<sup>232</sup> Clifford Geertz, *Interpretazione di culture*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 2019, p.66.

<sup>233</sup> Alessandro Orsini, *What Everybody Should Know about Radicalization and the DRIA Model*, in “Studies and Conflict in Terrorism”, 46 (1), 68-100, 2023, p. 90.

<sup>234</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>235</sup> Ivi, p. 91. Cfr. Alessandro Orsini, *Il processo di radicalizzazione dei terroristi di vocazione*, in “Rivista di Politica Rubbettino”, 4/2017, p. 163. Cfr. Alessandro Orsini, *Idéologie et terrorisme*, in “Commentaire”, 153/2016, p. 66.

the world ends (waiting for the end) one must isolate oneself to protect oneself from rampant moral corruption (obsession with purity) and rejoice in being persecuted, because the sacrifice of life is evidence of spiritual purity (desire to be persecuted). The end is such that it justifies the use of murder (purification of the means through the end).<sup>236</sup>

Terrorists, from a sociological point of view analogous to that of Max Weber and Clifford Geertz, are seen as «an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun»<sup>237</sup>. The DRIA model considers ideologies to be these networks. The individual's perception of social reality is transformed by the radical mental world. It seems as if there are only two groups in the world: your allies, who are real people, and your adversaries, who are not real people but symbols to be killed.<sup>238</sup>

The third phase, *Integration in a Revolutionary Sect*, marks the shift from cognitive radicalization to political violence. The individual may find an actual group or feels as a part of an *imagined community*. As stated by Orsini, we can become members of a group, and assume their role models, even if we never meet their members in person. In other words, the phase of Integration in a revolutionary sect may be physical or imagined, but in both cases it is real.<sup>239</sup>

The last phase, *Alienation from the Surrounding World*, is characterized by the physical and mental detachment from reality.

This stage is critical because it helps revolutionary sect members embrace the notion of murdering. The terrorist by vocation must undergo an “anthropological transformation”, aided by the complete social isolation. This phenomenon has two main purposes. The first is “manifest” and it refers to the forbidden relationship with the outside and corrupt world. The second one is “latent”, in other words is aimed at eliminating the moral authority of the out-group. Due to isolation, no one can point out the flaws or contradictions of the radical ideology.<sup>240</sup>

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<sup>236</sup> Alessandro Orsini, *What Everybody Should Know about Radicalization and the DRIA Model*, in “Studies and Conflict in Terrorism”, 46 (1), 68-100, 2023, p. 91.

<sup>237</sup> Clifford Geertz, *Interpretazione di culture*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 2019, p.21.

<sup>238</sup> Alessandro Orsini, *What Everybody Should Know about Radicalization and the DRIA Model*, in “Studies and Conflict in Terrorism”, 46 (1), 68-100, 2023, p. 91.

<sup>239</sup> Alessandro Orsini, *Isis. I terroristi più fortunati del mondo e tutto ciò che è stato fatto per favorirli*, Rizzoli, Milano, 2016, p.172.

<sup>240</sup> Alessandro Orsini, *What Everybody Should Know about Radicalization and the DRIA Model*, in “Studies and Conflict in Terrorism”, 46 (1), 68-100, 2023, p. 92.

### 2.1.10 Kruglanski, Bélanger and Gunaratna: The Motivational Imbalance Theory

In *The Three Pillars of Radicalization*, Kruglanski, Bélanger and Gunaratna provide a psychological view on extremism as a general phenomenon. The three scholars elaborated a model based on the “Motivational Imbalance Theory” and the three “Ns” of radicalization (Needs, Narratives and Networks) in which ideology plays a crucial role as in the DRIA model.<sup>241</sup>

Individuals, according to academics, have certain fundamental requirements. Some are biological in origin, while others are psychogenic (love, esteem, belonging, and self-actualization). People must meet both needs and avoid practices that satiate just certain wants while diminishing others. In this respect, violent extremism is merely one sort of extreme mindset, similar to excessive diets or severe addictions. The contents of the various varieties of extremism diverge, but they all have a psychological core, which is “motivational imbalance”. Individuals in a typical setting operate logically in accordance with their social group. For example, what individuals eat is regulated by diet, health, and taste considerations, but when they are truly hungry, they will consume even repulsive food. «Motivational imbalance verifies itself when one’s sole purpose is to obtain the object of their desire».<sup>242</sup>

One of the most important needs of humanity is the “desire to matter”, what Kruglanski, Belanger, and Gunaratna call “quest for significance.” Namely, a collective stimulus marked as the need for esteem, and achievement. Indeed, the prime obsession of the individual’s life is the hunt of a status recognized by society. As a consequence, the fight for appreciation is essential to comprehend radicalization.<sup>243</sup>

The significance quest, on the other hand, must first be triggered, which may happen in one of three ways: loss of significance or humiliation; expected or feared loss of importance; or a chance to achieve significance. The first trigger is created by a personal failure, dishonor, or an assault on one’s shared social identity with other members of one’s group. The three academics explain, using the idea of “anomie”, that in certain cases, an individual’s loss of importance may be the outcome of prevailing general, economic, social, and political factors in a specific state. Terrorist groups may take advantage of the sense of powerlessness and, as a result, personal meaninglessness that many people feel. They aim to generate a motivational imbalance in people by appealing to

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<sup>241</sup> Cfr. Ariel W. Kruglanski, Jocelyn J. Bélanger, Rohan Gunaratna, *The Three Pillars of Radicalization: Needs, Narratives and Networks*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2019, p. 40. In Alessandro Orsini, *What Everybody Should Know about Radicalization and the DRIA Model*, in “Studies and Conflict in Terrorism”, 46 (1), 68-100, 2023, p. 93.

<sup>242</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>243</sup> *Ibidem*.

principles like as honor, dignity, and duty via propaganda, rhetoric, charismatic leadership, and emotional attractions.<sup>244</sup>

Next, the humiliation of one's community and the violation of its holy principles are the root causes of socially-based importance loss. Because of the local populace's Islamophobia, many Muslim immigrants in Europe feel discriminated and mistreated. Al-Qaeda and its associates are often successful in manipulating the importance loss created by those conditions.<sup>245</sup>

The last mechanism, opportunity for significance, it refers to the possibility to improve the personal situation by engaging in terrorism and becoming a "hero".<sup>246</sup>

However, the quest for significance cannot be alone the source of violence. The confluence of three pillars, the three "Ns" of radicalization: Needs, Narratives, and Networks, drives violence. After discussing the first component in the preceding section, the three experts emphasize the significance of ideological narrative in the production of violent extremism. Radical ideology has the ability to lead people into violent radicalization and satiating the burning need for importance by severe violence.<sup>247</sup>

Moving on to the third pillar, networks act as channels for people to get familiar with, and accept, the radical ideology that governs their efforts to reclaim their feeling of importance. Several strikes conducted by al-Qaeda and Isis in the West have proven the importance of family members in building close-knit extremist networks and participating in violent attacks. In addition to serving as an "epistemic authority", the group also provides a "rewarding function" by giving recognition to those who are looking for importance.<sup>248</sup>

Even while focusing on networks, Kruglanski, Bélanger, and Gunaratna constantly keep ideology in mind, stating that a community can only encourage violence if its followers are supported by a radical ideology. Indeed, groups with a temperate mindset that is irreconcilable with violence have been shown to help people escape violent groups.<sup>249</sup>

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<sup>244</sup> Cfr. Ariel W. Kruglanski, Jocelyn J. Bélanger, Rohan Gunaratna, *The Three Pillars of Radicalization: Needs, Narratives and Networks*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2019, p. 40. In Alessandro Orsini, *What Everybody Should Know about Radicalization and the DRIA Model*, in "Studies and Conflict in Terrorism", 46 (1), 68-100, 2023.

<sup>245</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>246</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>247</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>248</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>249</sup> Ibidem.



## 2.2 Online Dynamics: How the Internet can Promote Radicalization

As demonstrated in the previous section, radicalization processes are complex and are rooted in different psychological and sociological dynamics. The advent of the Internet and its use for radicalization and recruitment by terrorist organizations has opened the way for new developments. On the one hand, court records, interrogations, surveys of current and former extremists, and numerous empirical evaluations of individual radicalization processes attest to the power of online interactions to inspire or promote the adoption of radical beliefs.<sup>250</sup> On the other hand, there is no consensus on what internet radicalization is or how it affects the process towards political violence.

However, several scholars have tried to understand the role of the online realm in supporting and facilitating radicalization processes, potentially independent of any offline exchange. Different dynamics and mechanisms which explain how acting on the internet may exacerbate radicalization were hypothesized by academics. This paragraph aims to present the leading studies on the dynamics that characterize the processes of online radicalization.

Two of the first academics to investigate the importance of the Internet in recruiting individuals in the ranks of terrorist organizations are Bruce Hoffman and Marc Sageman.

On the one hand, Hoffman emphasizes on top-down dynamics that underline the importance of hierarchical relationships above terrorist networks. Focusing on Al Qaeda's use of new media, Hoffman argues that the efforts of the global jihadist leadership primarily influence radicalization processes. According to the scholar, violent radicalization and recruitment depend precisely on the effective communication strategy devised by the leadership.<sup>251</sup> As he stated, «from the start, al-Qaeda's leadership seems to have intuitively grasped the enormous communicative potential of the Internet and sought to harness this power both to further the movement's strategic aims and facilitate its tactical operations». <sup>252</sup>

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<sup>250</sup> Cfr. Mehmet F. Bastug, Aziz Douai, Davut Akca, *Exploring the Demand Side of Online Radicalization: evidence from the Canadian Context*, in "Studies in Conflict and terrorism, 6161-637, 2020. Cfr. Iven Von Behr, Anais Reding, Charlie Edwards, Luke Gribbon, *Radicalisation in the Digital Era: the Use of Internet in 15 cases of terrorism and extremism*, RAND Europe, 2013.

<sup>251</sup> Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens, Nick Kaderbhai, *Research Perspectives on Online Radicalization: A Literature Review, 2006-2016*. International Center for the Study of Radicalization (ICSR), Vox Poll, 2017, p. 22. [https://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/ICSR-Paper\\_Research-Perspectives-on-Online-Radicalisation-A-Literature-Review-2006-2016.pdf](https://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/ICSR-Paper_Research-Perspectives-on-Online-Radicalisation-A-Literature-Review-2006-2016.pdf)

<sup>252</sup> Bruce Hoffman, *The Use of the Internet by Islamic Extremists*, Testimony Presented to the United States House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, 4/05/2006. In Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens, Nick Kaderbhai, *Research Perspectives on Online Radicalization: A Literature Review, 2006-2016*. International Center for the Study of Radicalization (ICSR), Vox Poll, 2017, p. 22. [https://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/ICSR-Paper\\_Research-Perspectives-on-Online-Radicalisation-A-Literature-Review-2006-2016.pdf](https://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/ICSR-Paper_Research-Perspectives-on-Online-Radicalisation-A-Literature-Review-2006-2016.pdf)

On the other hand, Marc Sageman contends for this vision and argues that the main focus is the ability to create face-to-face interactions based on friendship and sharing ideals in a bottom-up logic. The scholar argues that around 2004 this process has largely shifted to the Internet. Whereas previously interactions were physical, they are now largely replaced by virtual ones. This dynamic, however, has not been promoted by a central core, but is the result of the growth of the importance of the virtual sphere in everyday life and the increase of controls in traditional places of radicalization such as mosques. In this sense, the Internet has given the process fresh vitality by facilitating the formation of new networks. This context has led to the birth of a *Leaderless Jihad*, in which the Internet can provide minimal ideological and strategic coherence that can lead each mujaheddin to pursue his own personal struggle regardless of hierarchical relationships. In addition, another significant change given by the Internet has been the promotion of the role of women, traditionally relegated to a secondary role, which on the Internet finds through anonymity a way to approach contexts previously impossible to attend.<sup>253</sup>

Sageman studies have pointed out that online communications can also create greater levels of intimacy than offline communications. Firstly, anonymity leads individuals to share ideas and feelings that could hardly be shared in other contexts. The Internet is a safe entry point to explore terrorist fantasies and aspirations without physically joining an extremist group. As interactions increase over time, feelings of sharing and in-group love arise. As the dialogue intensifies and becomes violent, the group strengthens its beliefs. Thanks to the Internet, individuals search for platforms where they feel comfortable and abandon those where they express incompatible visions.<sup>254</sup>

In this sense, jihad is democratized, and Sageman cites Younis Tsouli (Irhabi007) as an example of an online jihadist. Before being invited to an online forum in 2004, the individual did not have a terrorist history behind him. However, in a short time, he became a highly active member of the online community, and thanks to his virtual abilities, he achieved extraordinary levels of appreciation, to the point of being praised by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. In the end, he was arrested, but it shows how the Internet has reversed power relations and how an unknown to the leaders of organizations can act in an active and influential way.<sup>255</sup>

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<sup>253</sup> Marc Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 2008, Chapter Six, pp. 109-124.

<sup>254</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>255</sup> Ibidem.

Another prominent scholars in radicalization's studies, Peter Neumann, has summarized six dynamics explaining how the online realm can promote radicalization provided by different academics.<sup>256</sup> The first two dynamics deal with the fallout from encountering extremist material. Indeed, at a primary level, the Internet acts as a repository of information that allows terrorist organizations to spread their message and ideology. These radical contents have the potential to initiate processes of radicalization. While on the one side, they can provoke a kind of "awakening" in individuals who approach certain information for the first time. On the other side, those who have already acquired a radical mindset can discover even stronger visions.<sup>257</sup>

Even if no one piece of extreme propaganda can successfully radicalize new terrorists on its own, when people are exposed to extremist information online for long periods, primarily via violent visuals, they become emotionally desensitized and eventually radicalized. This led us to the first dynamic, *mortality salience*, identified by Tom Pyszczynski.<sup>258</sup> It is the scholar's contention that constant exposure to discourses about martyrs and death, paired with films and visuals, may induce an overpowering feeling of one's mortality, hence enhancing engagement in terrorist attacks. Analogously, Marc Sageman identified *moral outrage*<sup>259</sup> as a key trigger for mobilization into violent action, which can be fostered by potent and passionately rousing videos from war areas, such as those representing supposed occasions of agony, rape, and other outrages by Western troops.<sup>260</sup>

The third factor in individuals being radicalized online is the influence of the online community. Members find other individuals who share their interests in online communities such as forums, social media, chat rooms, and websites. According to Edwin Sutherlands' *criminogenic environment* theory<sup>261</sup>, members of like-minded online networks are more likely to engage in criminal conduct and accept radical beliefs as mainstream. When no moderating factors are present in online forums, abusive speech is magnified, and online forums become like echo chambers.<sup>262</sup>

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<sup>256</sup> Peter R. Neumann, *Options and Strategies for Countering Online Radicalization in the United States*, in "Studies in Conflict and Terrorism", 36(6), 2013 ,431-459, p. 435.

<sup>257</sup> Benjamin Ducol et al., *Assessment of the State of Knowledge: Connections Between Research on Social Psychology of the Internet and Violent Extremism*, The Canadian Network for Research on Terrorism, Security, and Society, 16(05), 2016, p.29 <https://www.tsas.ca/publications/assessment-of-the-state-of-knowledge/>

<sup>258</sup> Tom Pyszczynski et al., *Mortality Salience, Martyrdom and Military Might: The Great Satan Versus the Axis of Evil*, in "Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 32(4), 2006, 525-537. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/16513804/>

<sup>259</sup> Marc Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 2008, Chapters 3 and 4.

<sup>260</sup> Peter R. Neumann, *Options and Strategies for Countering Online Radicalization in the United States*, in "Studies in Conflict and Terrorism", 36(6), 2013 ,431-459, p. 435.

<sup>261</sup> See Edwin H. Sutherland and Donald R. Cressey, *Principles of Criminology*, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition, Chicago University Press, Chicago, 1947.

<sup>262</sup> Peter R. Neumann, *Options and Strategies for Countering Online Radicalization in the United States*, in "Studies in Conflict and Terrorism", 36(6), 2013 ,431-459, p. 436.

The algorithms that govern the modern platforms of Web 2.0 cause the creation of virtual spaces in which individuals interact only with people who share the same ideas, with the consequent isolation and ideological segregation that involve a strengthening of visions and ideas in a large group of people. Some users, constantly exposed to identical messages, lose the sense of reality and the possibility of considering different opinions. The result, in several cases, is the adoption of even more radical ideas. Users' opportunities to passively absorb the radical material presented by algorithms and, at the same time, operational decisions to search for virtual communities or other material of the same ideological mold have no comparison with the real world. Social media users can be isolated through these platforms and significantly increase exposure to the desired narrative.<sup>263</sup>

The fourth factor is what John Suler calls *online disinhibition*<sup>264</sup>, which causes groups to become increasingly aggressive and opposed and which may overflow into violent conduct offline. Indeed, Internet's intrinsic traits and qualities, especially the belief that users may disguise their true identities and evade accountability for their acts, are intimately connected to these procedures.

The fifth process, *mobilization through role-playing*<sup>265</sup>, involved in online radicalization deals with the social and interactive nature of the Internet. Cyberspace provides a platform for individuals to play other versions of themselves, displaying qualities they like but do not possess. When individuals discover how much they do not resemble the characters they are portraying, role-playing becomes difficult and sad. The "gamification" of the Internet, including extreme forums, social networks, and hugely multiplayer online role-playing games, is blamed for the desire for emotional relief.<sup>266</sup>

The sixth aspect of online radicalization is connected to the Internet's massive global connectivity. People in rural locations depend on the Internet to connect with terrorist structure and make their terrorist dreams a reality in the absence of radical mosques. For terrorist recruiters, the Internet provides a reservoir of prospective recruits that can be selected into with less danger than contacting an individual in person.<sup>267</sup>

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<sup>263</sup> Alexandra T. Evans, Heather J. Williams, *How Extremism Operates Online*, RAND, 2022, p.9.

<https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PEA1458-2.html>

<sup>264</sup> John Suler, *The Online disinhibition Effect*, in "CyberPsychology and Behaviour", 7(3), 321-326, 2004.

<sup>265</sup> Jarret Brachman, Alix Levine, *You Can Too Be Awlaki*, in "Fletcher Forum of World Affairs", 35(1), 2011.

<sup>266</sup> Peter R. Neumann, *Options and Strategies for Countering Online Radicalization in the United States*, in "Studies in Conflict and Terrorism", 36(6), 2013, 431-459, p. 436.

<sup>267</sup> AIVD, *Jihadism on the Web: A Breeding Ground for jihad in the Modern Age*, 2012, p.17.

Mechanism	Explanation
268 “Mortality Salience” (Pyszczynski)	Sustained exposure to martyrdom and death increases support for excessively brutal, terrorist tactics.
“Sense of moral outrage” (Sageman)	Shocking video, images, and other extremist content trigger mobilization into violence.
Extremist forums as “criminogenic environments” (Sutherland; multiple)	Deviant and extreme behaviors are learnt and normalized, and come to be seen as positive and desirable.
“Online disinhibition” (Suler)	Anonymity and distance promotes group hostility and polarization.
“Mobilization through role-playing” (Brachman and Levine)	Online “role-playing” becomes painful and depressing as people realize the discrepancy between their actual selves and their avatars.
Links into terrorist structures (AIVD; multiple)	Internet helps people find links into terrorist networks; offers pool of potential members to terrorist recruiters.

Figure 9: Table summarizing the mechanisms and their academic sources.

McKenna and Bargh emphasized another critical factor. According to the two experts, the Internet enables individuals to show stigmatized social identities and interact with others with the same stigma. As a result, individuals are more prone to expose their actual selves online due to the anonymity of the Internet.<sup>269</sup>

In addition, the internet plays an important role, particularly during the “self-identification phase” in Silber and Bhatt’s model. Indeed, the internet provides immediate access to terrorist texts and enables individuals to join an organization without the danger of personally meeting its members, while yet benefiting from the acceptance, approbation, unity, and consensus the group provides. Because of the internet, would-be terrorists have more time to learn about the jihadi cosmos and consider the extent of commitment they are comfortable with. During the indoctrination phase, the Internet provides the information necessary to comprehend “perfect jihadist” behavior and numerous anti-western perspectives on world affairs. In addition, the online realm is crucial in the final phases of jihadization because it enables would-be terrorists to learn how to construct explosive devices and orchestrate attacks.<sup>270</sup>

<sup>268</sup> Peter R. Neumann, *Options and Strategies for Countering Online Radicalization in the United States*, in “Studies in Conflict and Terrorism”, 36(6), 2013, 431-459, p. 436.

<sup>269</sup> K. Y. McKenna, J. A. Bargh, *Plan 9 from Cyberspace: The implications of the Internet from personality and social psychology*, in “Personal and Social Psychology”, 4(1), 57-77, 2000.

<sup>270</sup> Mitchell Silber, Arvin Bhatt, *Radicalization in the West: the Homegrown Threat*, New York City Police Department, 2007, p. 7. <https://info.publicintelligence.net/NYPDradicalization.pdf>

Silber and Bhatt's study from 2007 has been corroborated over time. The Islamic State has posted instructions on how to strike people with automobiles on the internet. For example, the Tsarnaev brothers carried out the assault on the Boston Marathon on April 15, 2013, after finding instructions on *Inspire* on how to make the explosive device. During a trial on March 23, 2015, Kevin Swindon, an FBI computer specialist, testified that he discovered a paper titled "How to Make a Bomb in Your Mother's Kitchen" published by *Inspire* on the attackers' computers.<sup>271</sup>

Similarly, John Horgan emphasizes the relevance of the Internet in radicalization processes in his IED Model. According to the scholar, the web domain may supply instructions for making gadgets that militants can test via trials and provide vital information.<sup>272</sup>

Moreover, Benjamin Ducol<sup>273</sup> highlighted how the Internet could open people up to new communities and how anonymity can set off a deindividuation process, leading people to conform their actions to those of the group and spread blame less directly to themselves. Findings suggest that spending time online may raise feelings of affinity for one's in-group while heightening feelings of hostility against one's out-group. According to Ducol, a cognitive bias that supports polarization may be developed by selective exposure while at the same time enabling people to express their true selves by expressing stigmatized identities with others who share such characters. People also tend to look for homophily, which social networks are planned to accelerate, which may create a setting where subcultural anomalies might flourish. The Internet provides these subcultures with privacy and anonymity and a wider variety of locations amenable to collective dynamics, all of which contribute to greater levels of agreement among members.<sup>274</sup>

According to the research of another academic, Daniel Koehler<sup>275</sup>, the Internet can help spread a particular ideology since it provides a low-cost means of disseminating information and a safe, anonymous environment in which people can be more than they are in real life. According to Koehler, "radical contrast societies", which propagate violent ideologies and transform them into political activism, find fertile ground on the Internet because it provides the best environment for

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<sup>271</sup> Mitchell Silber, Arvin Bhatt, *Radicalization in the West: the Homegrown Threat*, New York City Police Department, 2007, p. 7. <https://info.publicintelligence.net/NYPDradicalization.pdf>

<sup>272</sup> Cfr. John Horgan, *The Psychology of Terrorism*, Routledge, London, 2005. in Alessandro Orsini, *What Everybody Should Know about Radicalization and the DRIA Model*, in "Studies and Conflict in Terrorism", 46 (1), 68-100, 2023, p. 78.

<sup>273</sup> Benjamin Ducol et al., *Assessment of the State of Knowledge: Connections Between Research on the Social Psychology of the Internet and Violent Extremism*, Canadian Network for Research on Terrorism, Security and Society, 16(5), 2016.

<sup>274</sup> Joe Whittaker, *Rethinking Online Radicalization*, in "Perspective on Terrorism", 16(4), 27-40, 2022, p.28.

<sup>275</sup> Daniel Koehler, *The Radical Online: Individual Radicalization Processes and the Role of the Internet*, in "Journal of De-radicalization", (1), 2014, 116-134.

learning the crucial ability in order to join groups in the physical realm and progress inside social hierarchies.<sup>276</sup>

In addition, some researchers have provided models to describe the dynamics of radicalization in the virtual space. In particular, a study by Bastug, Douai, and Akca on Canadian foreign fighters shed light on essential aspects of these procedures.<sup>277</sup> First, the “accessibility and proliferation” of information allows individuals to access propaganda materials and establish communication and support networks with like-minded people online. Then, “susceptibility and predisposition” may determine whether or not these materials have an ideological effect on some persons. When this happens, it may lead to “terrorist mobilization”, in which social media plays a crucial part, leading to others “sharing” their personal stories online, which forms a feedback circle to the start by making more information available.<sup>278</sup>

One alternative model was offered by Weimann and Von Knop<sup>279</sup>, who described a process made up of 5 stages. The first phase is the “searching”, in which people look for answers online to satisfy their own personal or spiritual needs, followed by a “seduction” phase in which they are exposed to radical ideas. In their view, this is the most crucial stage since it is at this point that users enter “captivation” and are drawn to blogs, forums, and chat rooms by alluring content. The “persuasion” phase sees individuals fully included in their online community, marking the end of the path for the vast majority. However, only a small percentage will get to the “operative” stage, when they will have access to resources and may be recruited by a terrorist group. They argue that the anonymity provided by the online sphere, the sites’ ability to cater to alienated expatriate populations, and the approval and approbation that adherents acquire while participating in the online environment all contribute to the radicalization that occurs online.<sup>280</sup>

In conclusion, it is relevant to present the classification of online radicals provided by Benjamin Ducol. According to the scholar, there are three possible outcomes of online radicalization. The first one is the *pure online radical*, namely a case «where the Internet not only played a central role in the initial exposure of individuals to radical views, but also in the gradual adoption of belief systems that legitimize violent actions. This trajectory is characterized by the central role of the

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<sup>276</sup> Joe Whittaker, *Rethinking Online Radicalization*, in “Perspective on Terrorism”, 16(4), 27-40, 2022, p.28.

<sup>277</sup> Mehmet F. Bastug, Aziz Douai, Davut Akca, *Exploring the Demand Side of Online Radicalization: evidence from the Canadian Context*, in “Studies in Conflict and terrorism, 4387), 6161-637, 2020.

<sup>278</sup> Joe Whittaker, *Rethinking Online Radicalization*, in “Perspective on Terrorism”, 16(4), 27-40, 2022, p.28.

<sup>279</sup> Gabriel Weimann, Katharina Von Knop, *Applying the Notion of Noise to Countering Online Terrorism*, in “studies in Conflict and Terrorism, 31, 883-902, 2008.

<sup>280</sup> Joe Whittaker, *Rethinking Online Radicalization*, in “Perspective on Terrorism”, 16(4), 27-40, 2022, p.29.

Internet throughout the radicalization process towards violence».<sup>281</sup> The second one is the case in which the Internet acts as a “reinforcer of radicalization”, fostering offline radicalization processes. The last one is the case in which the Internet act as an “initial trigger” of radicalization, where individuals are «first exposed to radical discourse through the internet [...] and is complemented by interactions with similar others in the real world».<sup>282</sup>

## 2.3 Lone Wolf Terrorism and Online Radicalization

The findings of the most recent annual EUROPOL report on terrorism in the European Union have confirmed that «lone actors associated with jihadist extremism remain the biggest threat associated with potential terrorist and violent extremist attacks in the EU and that the online environment plays a key role in this as it facilitates self-radicalisation and the spread of terrorist propaganda».<sup>283</sup>

Due to the actuality of this threat, the existing academic literature on lone wolf terrorism is extensive and varied. Undoubtedly, one of the most important publications in this regard was published by Hamm and Spaaij in 2017 and is entitled *The Age of the Lone Wolf Terrorism*.<sup>284</sup> In this monograph, the two scholars based themselves on a database of individual attacks in the United States between 1940 and 2016. Combining a criminological approach with empirical research, the book has highlighted the characteristics of these phenomena and the social and psychological processes behind them. Although there is no universally recognized academic definition, Spaaij and Hamm have defined the phenomenon as: «political violence perpetrated by individuals who act alone; who do not belong to an organized terrorist group or network; who act without the direct influence of a leader or hierarchy; and whose tactics and methods are directed by the individual without any direct outside command or direction».<sup>285</sup>

This definition emphasizes the individuality and absence of any operational command hierarchy. In this regard, the distinction that Alessandro Orsini identified between the types of attacks by ISIS is relevant. The Italian academic, analyzing and comparing the attacks of the

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<sup>281</sup> Benjamin Ducol et al., *Assessment of the State of Knowledge: Connections Between Research on the Social Psychology of the Internet and Violent Extremism*, Canadian Network for Research on Terrorism, Security and Society, 16(5), 2016, p.3.

<sup>282</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>283</sup> EUROPOL, *European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2022*, 2022, p.3

[https://www.europol.europa.eu/cms/sites/default/files/documents/Tesat\\_Report\\_2022\\_0.pdf](https://www.europol.europa.eu/cms/sites/default/files/documents/Tesat_Report_2022_0.pdf)

<sup>284</sup> Mark S. Hamm, Ramon Spaaij, *The Age of Lone Wolf Terrorism*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2017.

<sup>285</sup> *Ivi*, p. VIII.



Islamic State since 2015, highlighted three types of assaults: attacks organized directly by the leaders of the Islamic State, attacks conducted by autonomous cells and attacks by lone wolves.<sup>286</sup>

The first category refers to attacks directly planned and coordinated by Isis leaders, whose logic is summarized in the expression “hit the ones who hit us”. The then leader Al-Baghdadi and his deputies preferred to concentrate their resources against countries in the first line in the war on Isis. A prominent example of this category is the Paris Attack of 13th November 2015. On that day, a command composed of 9 jihadists divided into three groups assaulted Paris in six different locations provoking the death of 130 people. These attacks are particularly effective since terrorists receive money, training, weapons and contacts from the organization. Furthermore, they have a solid psychological motivation which stems from the fact that they have the appreciation of the leaders by whom they are encharged to complete a crucial act.<sup>287</sup>

The second category, attacks conducted by independent cells, is characterized by a group of jihadists who do not receive orders from Isis leaders. These kinds of assaults are way less dramatic in comparison with organized ones. Indeed, even if they operate in a group, they usually lack a solid base of training and financing. The Italian scholar attributed to this category the London Bridge attack in 2017 and the attacks in Barcelona and Cambrils between the 17th and 18th of August 2017.<sup>288</sup>

The last category, lone wolf terrorism, refers to individuals acting independently without any aid or training from the organization. By not referring to particular hierarchical chains, these individuals use their resources and choose the targets that best suit their condition and situation, and, precisely for these reasons, their actions are unpredictable. This category is divided into two subgroups: trained lone wolves and untrained lone wolves. Despite the impossibility in many cases of foreseeing their attacks, generally, the lone wolves, even if well trained, tend to cause much fewer victims than the attacks carefully planned by the leaders of ISIS. The scholar attributed to this category the Nizza Attack in 2016 conducted by the individual attacker Mohamed Lahouaiej Bouhel.<sup>289</sup>

The lone wolves belong to the anthropological category that the Italian academic calls “terrorists of vocation”, described in the first paragraph of this chapter. In this regard, the virtual world has significantly contributed to the rise of lone wolf terrorism, giving aspiring terrorists a worldwide platforms in which they can find the spiritual need common of an *imagined community*.

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<sup>286</sup> Alessandro Orsini, *L'ISIS non è morto: ha solo cambiato pelle*, Rizzoli, Milano, 2018, pp. 76-88.

<sup>287</sup> *Ivi*, pp. 76-77.

<sup>288</sup> *Ivi*, pp. 85-88.

<sup>289</sup> *Ivi*, p.78.

As stressed before, according to Marc Sageman, the Internet has produced a new breed of terrorists who conduct a *leaderless jihad*.<sup>290</sup> Nowadays, they can participate in virtual communities of like-minded individuals, which foster radicalization of their fellows, education on organizing and performing attacks, without ever materially meeting. Members of these virtual networks and other possible individual attackers exhibited to this information may be motivated to commit terrorist actions in various nations. This tendency is partly fueled by terrorist organizations' problems in carrying out organized attacks. As an example, ISIS's collapse and loss of territory, Al-Qaeda's vulnerability in multiple theatres worldwide, and Hamas' limited capabilities outside the Gaza Strip compelled these organizations to seek out lone wolves to carry out attacks. These groups strive to provoke individual attacks via Internet provocation and propaganda and urge their followers globally to strike locally.<sup>291</sup>

However, the lone wolf phenomenon is not new. Indeed, as Eitan Azani declared in the interview he granted me, this strategy was developed in the 1990s by Abu Musab al-Suri, one of the operatives of Al-Qaeda, to give a strategy that use very low capabilities but can cause a major effect. Indeed, especially in the western stage, *Jihadi* organizations cannot operate in large battalion such as Al-Shabaab is doing in Africa.<sup>292</sup> Furthermore, already in 2001, Ayman al-Zawahiri urged people to assault Jews and Americans with knives, Molotov cocktails, and other improvised weapons. However, it is widely acknowledged that the Islamic State was responsible for bringing the practice into the mainstream of contemporary terrorism. ISIS has exploited social media to influence a large audience and inspire lone-wolf strikes. In contrast to the seasoned terrorists who carried out the September 11 attacks, the Islamic State's lone wolf concept allows anybody to engage in terrorism. ISIS rendered terrorism more accessible by offering instructions on the ways to carry out an attack and by influencing mentally weak people to act.<sup>293</sup>

Indeed, the use of social networks by ISIS has led to the recruitment of over 30.000 fighters from approximately sixty-five countries and radicalized individuals in the west to conduce lone wolf attacks.<sup>294</sup> Sayfullo Saipov, the Uzbek who perpetrated the November 2017 assault in

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<sup>290</sup> Marc Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 2008.

<sup>291</sup> Boaz Ganor, *Understanding the Motivations of "Lone Wolf" Terrorists*, in "Perspective on Terrorism", 15/2, 23-32, 2021. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27007294>

<sup>292</sup> Eitan Azani, Interview by Ettore Saladini, 12/02/23, ICT Reichman University (IDC Herzliya) [https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1bXFYKFM8O5\\_K9pkxQEsyr7eF2XHAypSB?usp=share\\_link](https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1bXFYKFM8O5_K9pkxQEsyr7eF2XHAypSB?usp=share_link)

<sup>293</sup> Bruce Hoffman, *Lone Wolf: Passing Trends or Terror Threat of the Future*, Washington Institute, 07/08/2017, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/ar/policy-analysis/aldhyb-alwhyd-ahw-mjrd-bdt-abrt-aw-thdyd-arhaby-llmstqbl>

<sup>294</sup> Eitan Azani, Nadine Liv, *A Comprehensive Doctrine for an Evolving Threat: Countering Terrorist Use of Social Networks*, in "Studies in Conflict and Terrorism, 43(8), 728-752, 2020, p. 733 <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1057610X.2018.1494874>

Manhattan in which eight people were murdered, is a pertinent example. The individual attacker's mobile phone had over 4,000 images and sixty films released by the Islamic State.<sup>295</sup>

Nonetheless, this trend is not proper only of ISIS, but of all Islamist terrorist organization. For example, also al-Qaeda, in 2013, released a video justifying and promoting lone wolf attacks: «The virtue of this type of jihad in our religion: following our virtuous predecessors; expansion of the theatre of war; the onslaught of the enemy against the Ummah from all directions; dispersed interests of the enemy, whether in the enemy's own land or Muslim lands; ease of targeting such enemy interests and its relatively huge impact».<sup>296</sup>

As a consequence, based on the role of the internet and this virtual imagined community, as stated by Gabriel Weimann, «the metaphor of the lone wolf is misleading in terrorism as in nature. Wolves never hunt alone; they hunt in packs».<sup>297</sup> Lone wolf terrorists are not entirely cut off from society. Someone else is doing the recruiting, radicalizing, teaching, training, and directing. An aspiring terrorist may find everything he or she needs online, including a community, a means of communication, knowledge, and direction. Anything from detailed plans for making a bomb to schematics of possible assault routes.<sup>298</sup> Indeed, most of the lone wolf cases «were people who had hardly any contact with like-minded individuals in real life but maintained active contact with people on the net. These contacts, as well as extremist propaganda and online discourse, contributed to the radicalization of lone wolves and inspired them to commit their acts».<sup>299</sup>

In support of this trend, a 2022 RAND reports highlights that virtual contacts may inspire the adoption of radical beliefs. This is amply supported by court documents, interviews, investigations of present and past radicals, and other examinations of individual routes to radicalization. According to this research, social networks, and other virtual stages are significant in causing political division, spreading false or misleading information, and strengthening conspiracy theories. Furthermore, exhibition to extremist networks and online information may stimulate the acquisition of radical attitudes, and behaviour, eventually impacting the propensity for violence among individual users.<sup>300</sup>

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<sup>295</sup> Eitan Azani, Nadine Liv, *A Comprehensive Doctrine for an Evolving Threat: Countering Terrorist Use of Social Networks*, in "Studies in Conflict and Terrorism, 43(8), 728-752, 2020, p. 730.

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1057610X.2018.1494874>

<sup>296</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>297</sup> Gabriel Weimann, *Virtual Packs of Lone Wolves: How the Internet made Lone Wolf Terrorism a Misnomer*, The Wilson Center, 25/02/2014. <https://medium.com/its-a-medium-world/virtual-packs-of-lone-wolves-17b12f8c455a>

<sup>298</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>299</sup> Gabriel Weimann, *Virtual Packs of Lone Wolves: How the Internet made Lone Wolf Terrorism a Misnomer*, The Wilson Center, 25/02/2014. <https://medium.com/its-a-medium-world/virtual-packs-of-lone-wolves-17b12f8c455a>

<sup>300</sup> Alexandra T. Evans, Heather J. Williams, *How Extremism Operates Online*, RAND, 2022, p.8.

<https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PEA1458-2.html>

In particular, one study conducted by Gaudette et al. highlighted interesting results. The scholars interviewed ten previous affiliates violent far-right organizations and discovered that «participants overwhelmingly suggested that the Internet played an important role in facilitating their process of radicalization to violence, largely because it provided them with unfettered access to extreme right-wing content and a network of like-minded individuals, which in turn increased their exposure to violent extremist ideologies and violent extremist groups.».<sup>301</sup>

Gabriel Weimann elaborated a model of 4 phases that describes the recruitment of lone wolves through online platforms. The first stage is the Internet, which exposes the whole population to an online message. At the “netting” phase, the target audience is deemed sufficiently homogenous and responsive to be addressed with an undifferentiated arena, to which certain fellows would react favorably and some negatively. At this phase, all internet platforms are used.<sup>302</sup>

The Israeli academic calls the second phase, in which potential recruits are changed into devoted members, the “funnel”. Indeed, when a recruiter feels that a target person is ready for recruitment but needs a considerable alteration in identity and inspiration, employs a strategy that exploits many strategies extensively researched in cognitive, social, and clinical psychology. This step depends on a virtual social connection based on the target's alienation, social dissatisfaction, loneliness, and pessimism. It includes online interactions and additional radical content exposure.<sup>303</sup>

The third phase is “infection”, in which individuals who live in a situation of alienation or dissatisfaction with their social status or feels hate towards the society are guided to self-radicalization. This step often requires seed crystal practice, a metaphor referring to lowering a glass of water's temperature until ice crystals develop as the seeds of a full freeze. Several forms of extra pressures may be utilized in “seed crystal” recruiting to “chill the glass” and improve the “hardness of the freeze”. Continuous exposure to online extremist content and virtual online coaching may contribute to a more advanced stage of radicalization.<sup>304</sup>

The last phase indicated by Weimann, is “activation”, which propels the lone wolf into action. This contain concrete instructions across online guides on using explosives, firearms, chemicals, as well as guidance on target selection, location and time.

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<sup>301</sup> Tiana Gaudette, Ryan Scrivens, Vivek Venkatesh, *The Role of the Internet in Facilitating Violent Extremism: Insights from Former Right Wings Extremists*, in “Terrorism and Political Violence, 2020, p.6. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09546553.2020.1784147>

<sup>302</sup> Gabriel Weimann, *Virtual Packs of Lone Wolves: How the Internet made Lone Wolf Terrorism a Misnomer*, The Wilson Center, 25/02/2014. <https://medium.com/its-a-medium-world/virtual-packs-of-lone-wolves-17b12f8c455a>

<sup>303</sup> Gabriel Weimann, *Virtual Packs of Lone Wolves: How the Internet made Lone Wolf Terrorism a Misnomer*, The Wilson Center, 25/02/2014. <https://medium.com/its-a-medium-world/virtual-packs-of-lone-wolves-17b12f8c455a>

<sup>304</sup> Ibidem.

In conclusion, to underline the threat of online radicalization, a report by Tech against Terrorism has recounted that, during 2022, terrorist and violent extremist operations on the Internet remained a significant trend, both on the clear and the dark web. Islamist terrorist organizations, including ISIS and Al Qaeda, have experienced a resurgence of terrorist operated website, the use of content moderation to evade strategies on Big Tech and translation of propaganda into an extensive variety of languages.<sup>305</sup>

## 2.4 How Dangerous is Online Radicalization?

This section is dedicated to an analysis of a series of quantitative studies on the impact of online radicalization in order to reconstruct how dangerous it actually is for the security of Western democracies.

Based on some essential quantitative studies of radicalization processes, Jens Binder and Jonathan Kenyon argue that two narratives can be traced in defining the threat level of online radicalization.<sup>306</sup>

The first argues that online radicalization represents a low level of threat. According to proponents of this view, the standard model is represented by the combination of offline and online dynamics, with the Internet emerging more as an enabler than a driver. In addition, online radicalization is typically associated with socially isolated individuals who are susceptible to mental illness and associated conditions and less likely to engage in violent behavior. In this perspective, online radicalization appears less dangerous than traditional radicalization, especially in translating online activity into physical violence.<sup>307</sup>

On the contrary, the second narrative assigns online radicalization a much higher threat level. Although few individuals commit acts of violence once they embark on a path of online radicalization, they are extremely difficult to trace, and it becomes complicated to act to stop their intentions. In addition, many active online extremists may be at a primary stage on the road to violence compared to those who already have strong social ties. In the analysis of Binder and

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<sup>305</sup> Tech Against Terrorism, *State of Play: Trends in Terrorist and Violent Extremist Use of the Internet*, 2022. <https://www.techagainstterrorism.org/2023/01/19/state-of-play-trends-in-terrorist-and-violent-extremist-use-of-the-internet-2022/>

<sup>306</sup> Jens F. Binder, Jonathan Kenyon, *Terrorism and the Internet: How dangerous is online radicalization?*, in “Frontiers in Psychology”, 13, 2022.

<sup>307</sup> Cfr. P. Gill, E. Corner, M. Thornton, A. Bloom, J. Horgan, *Terrorist us of the Internet by the numbers: quantifying behaviors, patterns and processes*, in “Criminology and Public Policy”, 16, 99-117, 2017. Cfr. N. Hamid, C. Ariza, *Offline versus online radicalization: which is the bigger threat? Tracing outcomes of 439 jihadists terrorist between 2014-2021 in 8 western countries*, GNET REPORT, 2022. In Jens F. Binder, Jonathan Kenyon, *Terrorism and the Internet: How dangerous is online radicalization?*, in “Frontiers in Psychology”, 13, 2022.

Kenyon, 32% of the sample was engaged in extremist causes, and more than 15% showed a willingness to conduct terrorist attacks. This shows that it is difficult to conclude that online radicalization produces terrorists who are less prone to violence.<sup>308</sup>

Regarding overall prevalence, some studies indicate that online-exclusive radicalization has increased in recent years and will continue in the future. Many studies describe this phenomenon as minor compared to the classic paths, but not for this not dangerous. In this sense, it is essential to underline how the diverse paths that have combined physical and virtual worlds have been the norm in recent years.<sup>309</sup>

In addition, individuals who have been radicalized online and are not yet ready to carry out the attack also contribute to spreading an extremist culture, promoting a harmful climate that could subsequently generate other acts of violence. Given the global spread of the Internet, this point represents a dangerous level that should not be overlooked. Recent studies have shown that encounters with online extremist material, even randomly, have been recorded by 40% of young individuals.<sup>310</sup>

However, it is essential to note that the available empirical evidence comes from accessible databases and that many other data cannot be tracked.

In conclusion, these two narratives can be linked to different forms of contrast and prevention. If the threat level is based on relative risk, resource allocation in prevention must consider that it is not the primary source of threat. On the other hand, relying on absolute risk, it is essential to underline that online radicalization exists and represents a well-established pattern for terrorist activities.<sup>311</sup>

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<sup>308</sup> Jens F. Binder, Jonathan Kenyon, *Terrorism and the Internet: How dangerous is online radicalization?*, in “Frontiers in Psychology”, 13, 2022.

<sup>309</sup> Jens F. Binder, Jonathan Kenyon, *Terrorism and the Internet: How dangerous is online radicalization?*, in “Frontiers in Psychology”, 13, 2022.

<sup>310</sup> Cfr. M. Costello, R. Barrett-Fox, C. Bernatsky, J. Hawdon, K. Mendes, *Predictors of viewing online extremism among America’s youth*, in “Youth Soc.”, 52, 710-727, 2020. Cfr. K. Saha, E. Chandrasekharan, M. De Choudhrouy, *Prevalence and Psychological effects of hateful speech in online college communities*, in Proceedings of the 10<sup>th</sup> ACM conference on web science, 255-264, 2019. In Jens F. Binder, Jonathan Kenyon, *Terrorism and the Internet: How dangerous is online radicalization?*, in “Frontiers in Psychology”, 13, 2022.

<sup>311</sup> Jens F. Binder, Jonathan Kenyon, *Terrorism and the Internet: How dangerous is online radicalization?*, in “Frontiers in Psychology”, 13, 2022.

## Chapter III

### Online Radicalization: The Case Studies of Roshonara Choudhry, Zachary Chesser, and Sayfullo Saipov

#### An Introduction to the Method

In the previous chapters, this master's thesis reconstructed how Islamic terrorist organizations use the Internet to radicalize and recruit individuals, what are the leading academic theories on the studies of radicalization processes, and what are the dynamics of the virtual world in promoting the process towards political violence.

In this third and final chapter, the theoretical notions previously presented and examined are put into practice in the analysis of three Islamic extremists who have experienced an online radicalization process. These are: Roshonara Choudhry, responsible for the attempted murder of Labour MP Stephen Timms on 14 May 2010 in London; Zachary Chesser, an American jihadist propagandist who attempted to join as a foreign fighter Al Shabaab in 2010; and Sayfullo Saipov, responsible for the attack carried out with a truck on 31 October 2017 on a bike path in New York.

These three case studies can be ascribed to the category of “pure online radicals”, theorized by Benjamin Ducol. That is, in all three cases, «the Internet not only played a central role in the initial exposure of individuals to radical views, but also in the gradual adoption of belief systems that legitimize violent actions».<sup>312</sup>

Since radicalization processes, whether offline or online, are always based on complex sociological and psychological dynamics, the analysis will draw on the contribution of two radicalization models analyzed in the previous chapter. In particular, the choice was based on two paradigms that give ideology a key role in radicalization. They are the DRIA<sup>313</sup> model and the concept

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<sup>312</sup> Benjamin Ducol et al., *Assessment of the state of knowledge: Connections between research on the social psychology of the Internet and violent extremism*, TSA: Canadian Network for research on Terrorism, Security and Society, 16(05), 2016, p. 3.

<sup>313</sup> Alessandro Orsini, *What Everybody Should Know About Radicalization and the DRIA Model*, in “Studies in Conflict and Terrorism”, 46(1), 68-100, 2023. Cfr. Alessandro Orsini, *La radicalization des terroristes de vocation*, in “Commentaire”, 156, Hiver, 2017, 783-790. Cfr. Alessandro Orsini, *Anatomia delle Brigate rosse. Le radici ideologiche del terrorismo rivoluzionario*, Rubbettino, Soveria Mannelli, 2010. Cfr. Alessandro Orsini, *L'Isis non è morto ha solo cambiato pelle*, Rizzoli, Milano, 2018.

of “terrorist by vocation”, theorized by Alessandro Orsini, and the model developed by Mitchell Silber and Arvin Bhatt.<sup>314</sup>

In order to produce a punctual and comprehensive analysis, the contributions of the aforementioned scholars will be combined with some of the leading academic studies in the field of online radicalization. Peculiarly, much space would be devoted to the publications of Elizabeth Pearsons, Peter Neumann, Benjamin Ducol, Brachman and Levine, Mealeagrou Hitchens, and Gabriel Weimann.

In the radicalization processes of Roshonara Choudhry, Zachary Chesser, and Sayfullo Saipov, combining the two areas of study enables a holistic perspective that highlights both the psychological and social dynamics and the role of the Internet in the path towards *ihadism*.

In conclusion, the analysis will be committed to a specific pattern for each extremist. First, the dynamics and planning of terrorist attacks or online extremist activity, as well as their legal implications, will be investigated. After that, an analysis of the personal life background and online radicalization processes of each of the three case studies will be presented.

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<sup>314</sup> Mitchell Silber, Arvin Bhatt, *Radicalization in the West: the Homegrown Threat*, New York City Police Department, 2007.



### 3.1 Roshonara Choudhry

On 14 May 2010, Roshonara Choudhry attempted to kill MP Stephen Timms under the ideological influence of Al Qaeda, becoming the first British citizen to carry out an Islamic terrorist attack on UK soil. The British woman has embarked on a path of radicalization exclusively on the Internet, which has led her to a metamorphosis from a model student in one of the most prestigious colleges in the world to a brutal jihadist. In the following sections, the dynamics of the attack, the subsequent penal process, her personal background, and her radicalization process are under investigation.

#### 3.1.1 The Terrorist Attack: Dynamics and Legal Consequences

On the morning of May 14, 2010, Roshonara Choudhry left her parents' home in London's East Ham neighborhood. She was directed to the constituency surgery of Labour MP Stephen Timms, a meeting where British politicians confront voters about concerns and government issues. The young British citizen, however, was unwilling to discuss; her goal was to stab and kill the MP. In her backpack, Choudhry had two kitchen knives, bought three weeks earlier. Once she arrived at the meeting venue, she patiently waited for his turn. When it came to her, she approached Timms as if she wanted to shake his hand. She then pulled one of the two blades out of his backpack and stabbed the congressman twice in the stomach. Choudhry was promptly disarmed and immobilized, waiting for the arrival of law enforcement. Conversely, the MP was rushed to the hospital and survived his injuries.<sup>315</sup>

After being arrested, Roshonara Choudhry stated that she wanted to punish Stephen Timms for voting in support of British involvement in the Iraq war in 2003. Later, the terrorist refused to recognize the court's jurisdiction, to appear physically at the trial, and ordered her lawyer not to contradict the evidences against her. Indeed, the defendant only showed up on video from prison and only spoke to confirm her name. For these reasons, the trial was extremely short, and the jury took about 14 minutes to pronounce the unanimous verdict of life imprisonment with a minimum term of 15 years at Old Bailey jail for *«attempted murder charge and two counts of having an*

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<sup>315</sup> Elizabeth Pearson, *The Case of Roshonara Choudhry: Implications for Theory on Online Radicalization, ISIS Women, and the Gendered Jihad*, in "Policy and the Internet", 8 (1), March 2016, 5-33, p.9.  
<https://doi.org/10.1002/poi3.101>

*offensive weapon*». After the ruling, the video link was interrupted due to a small demonstration outside the court, in which a group of men shouted “Allahu Akbar” and “British go to hell”.<sup>316</sup>

The investigations and the interviews with the accused conducted by the authorities have allowed us to reconstruct the meticulous preparation of the attack and the radicalization process of Choudhry. According to the authorities, the terrorist never had ties or interactions with terrorist organizations, did not frequent places of worship, and had no radical texts in the house. Conversely, many video-sermons by the Islamic cleric Anwar Al Awlaki were found on his computer. Choudhry herself said that these videos were her primary and only source of inspiration. The computer analysis made the authorities understand that the attack occurred six months after the first interest in radical Islamic material. In fact, before the end of 2009, the subject had shown no interest in Islam. The terrorist’s computer analysis showed that it was during this time that Choudhry started downloading radical materials.<sup>317</sup>

As for planning, Choudhry began organizing the attack in April 2010, after she has discovered that Abdullah Azzam assumed that jihad was a personal duty for both men and women. Before that, as she stated to the police, she thought that only men could engage in violent jihad.<sup>318</sup>

The terrorist identified the perfect victim for her attack via *www.theyworkforyou.com*, where she found out that Stephen Timms had voted in support of the British involvement in the Iraq war in 2003. Once the target was chosen, Choudhry opted for the most straightforward means, buying two kitchen knives. The terrorist then made an appointment to talk to the MP during the constituent surgery.<sup>319</sup>

On the day of the attack, Choudhry made sure her choice did not have financial repercussions on her family. In fact, during the morning and early afternoon of May 14, she used the money from an academic scholarship and his savings to pay off her student debt. Furthermore, she emptied her bank account to prevent the British government from freezing her funds in the aftermath of the assault.<sup>320</sup>

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<sup>316</sup> Vikram Dodd, Alexandra Topping, *Roshonara Choudhry jailed for life over MP attack*, in “The Guardian”, 3/11/2010. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2010/nov/03/roshonara-choudhry-jailed-life-attack>

<sup>317</sup> Elizabeth Pearson, *The Case of Roshonara Choudhry: Implications for Theory on Online Radicalization, ISIS Women, and the Gendered Jihad*, in “Policy and the Internet”, 8 (1), March 2016, 5-33, pp. 8-9  
<https://doi.org/10.1002/poi3.101>

<sup>318</sup> Vikram Dodd, Alexandra Topping, *Roshonara Choudhry jailed for life over MP attack*, in “The Guardian”, 3/11/2010. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2010/nov/03/roshonara-choudhry-jailed-life-attack>

<sup>319</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>320</sup> Ibidem.

### 3.1.2 Personal Background and Online Radicalization Process

Before committing the attack, Roshonara Choudhry was «everything a society could want a citizen to be».<sup>321</sup> The eldest of five children in a family of humble Bangladeshi origins living in the East Ham district of London, the terrorist was an example of those who made it without family help, relying only on their abilities. The model that the Western world can give opportunities for integration and social ascension also to immigrants.<sup>322</sup>

Thanks to a successful academic career, she improved her family's status by overcoming racism, islamophobia, sexism and poverty. Indeed, Choudhry was a scholarship student at King's College, London. In the first two years of her studies, she was even awarded for being among the most deserving students in the whole university. Moreover, she was a gifted polyglot, fluent in Arabic, English, French and Bengali. On top of that, she was also very active in volunteering. She was a regular at a school attended by Muslim children who had difficulty dealing with life in the UK. According to "The Guardian," she really wanted to become a teacher to get the best out of her students.<sup>323</sup>

Though, something inside her broke at some point. In a mysterious moment, his inner self took a detour to crime and radicalism. As in the first phase of Alessandro Orsini's DRIA model, *Disintegration of social identity*, Choudhry went through a sociopsychological process, that is, a process that not only concerns ourselves, but also the complex structure of our relationships with others, that is, society.<sup>324</sup> The United Kingdom was no longer the country that welcomed her and helped her to achieve great success. Slowly it was becoming a sordid, grey place responsible for the oppression of Muslims. Roshonara Choudhry could no longer be complicit in this havoc; she had to act. Even if acting meant losing everything: the sacrifices made to study, the pride of his parents, and a career well underway. Nothing made sense anymore.

The pivotal document in understanding this inner change that led to the radicalization of Choudhry is an interrogation conducted four hours after the arrest in the Forest Gate police station and reported by "The Guardian".<sup>325</sup>

During the interrogation, Roshonara Choudhry repeatedly stressed her solitary exploration of the radical Islamic ideology linked to Al-Qaeda. The terrorist stated that her ideas began to change

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<sup>321</sup> Vikram Dodd, *Profile: Roshonara Choudhry*, in "The Guardian", 2/11/2010.

<https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2010/nov/02/profile-roshonara-choudhry-stephen-timms>

<sup>322</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>323</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>324</sup> Alessandro Orsini, *ISIS I terroristi più fortunati del mondo e tutto ciò che è stato fatto per favorirli*, Rizzoli, Milano, 2016, p.152.

<sup>325</sup> Vikram Dodd, *Roshonara Choudhry: Police Interview Extracts*, in "The Guardian", 3/11/2010.

<https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2010/nov/03/roshonara-choudhry-police-interview>

after hearing Anwar al-Awlaki's online sermons. This character, with which the thesis dealt in the first chapter, was a US-Yemeni dual citizen and influential ideologue, propagandist and operative of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). His role, however, was far beyond regional influence in the Arabian Peninsula; in fact, his communication strategies, made of videos, and, above all, his direction of the magazine *Inspire*, has shaped the global communication of Al Qaeda. Through Anwar Al-Awlaki, dozens of young people worldwide converted to radical Islam, including Nidal Malik Hasan, who was responsible for the Fort Hood massacre in which 13 people died on November 5, 2009. Precisely because of its great danger, in 2011, Al-Awlaki was killed by a targeted attack by US drones in Yemen.<sup>326</sup>

Choudhry's encounter with the Islamic ideologue was first random on the web. « I wasn't searching for him. I just came across him [...] I used to watch videos that people used to put up about like how they became Muslim».<sup>327</sup> His figure then became a primary source of inspiration and research to understand the critical concepts of radical Islamism. The terrorist's computer analysis allowed the authorities to understand that the principle of her exposure to these materials can be traced back to the end of 2009 when Choudhry started downloading Al-Awlaki's sermons from youtube.<sup>328</sup>

The Internet encounter with Al-Awlaki marked the beginning of a new individual search, which led to a metamorphosis of the original individuality into a new inner image. In a way, this discovery catalyzed what Silber and Bhatt call "religious seeking", that opened Choudhry's mind to a new worldview. In light of what Al-Awlaki said, the country that had allowed her to study at one of the most important colleges in the world was an executioner of the Muslim population.

The political vision given by the Islamic ideologue opened a crisis of identity in Roshonara Choudry, promoted by Al-Awlaki's innovative communication that generated a moral shock in the young British citizen. The path she had taken up to that time was questioned, as her University was part of a global strategy to destroy and ghettoize Muslim population. As pointed out by Silber and Bhatt, «chronic exposure to these extremist political campaigns (e.g. conflicts of Muslims in Afghanistan, Bosnia, Chechnya, Kashmir, Israel/Palestinians and Iraq) may initiate feelings of moral outrage. This outrage, which usually resonates louder with Muslims who are already experiencing an identity crisis, leads them in a sense to become "born-again" a "religious" renewal

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<sup>326</sup> "The Counter Extremism Project", *Anwar al-Awlaki*. <https://www.counterextremism.com/topics/anwar-al-awlaki>

<sup>327</sup> Vikram Dodd, *Roshonara Choudhry: Police Interview Extracts*, in "The Guardian", 3/11/2010. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2010/nov/03/roshonara-choudhry-police-interview>

<sup>328</sup> Ibidem.

that all too often is shaped by a radical interpretation of what it means to be a Muslim in a non-muslim society». <sup>329</sup>

The social environment in which Roshonara Choudhry has grown has undoubtedly exacerbated this identity crisis. As underlined by Elizabeth Pearson, «Choudhry's background is consistent with Wiktorowicz's theorizing on connections between socioeconomic deprivation, ideology, and radicalization within British-Pakistani and Bangladeshi-Muslim Communities». <sup>330</sup> In particular, New Ham is one of the poorest areas in London, where a large part of the British Muslim community lives in a semi-ghettoized manner. The entrance into a new world, sparkling and elitist as the King's College, has accentuated its inner crisis, placing it before a great contradiction. While the rest of her Muslim brothers and sisters lived in poverty in London and Western troops brutally slaughtered the rest of them in the Middle East, she was there studying and, in a sense, supporting this atrocity.

As confirmed by the authorities and by Choudhry herself, the impact of the Yemeni ideologue was profound and total. The British citizen downloaded and watched more than one hundred hours of sermons. As stated by her: «I became interested in Anwar al-Awlaki's lectures because he explains things really comprehensively and in an interesting way so I thought I could learn a lot from him, and I was also surprised at how little I knew about my religion so that motivated me to learn more». <sup>331</sup>

Video after video, the dominant Western culture did not seem to be able to respond to the contradictions that Al-Awlaki had made her discover. For this reason, Choudhry found an *exit strategy* in radical Islamism, fundamental in the *Reconstruction* of a new social identity. These online sermons became her reason for living. They slowly replaced everything that characterized her previous life, leading her to disinterest in studying. «First I was listening to like two a day but then for a while I stopped because I had coursework to do and then I started back up again because I thought I need to finish listening to these». <sup>332</sup>

At this point, Roshonara Choudhry was abandoning her previous life, and radical ideology prevailed over her academic commitments and goals. Gradually, his beliefs strengthened, and Al-Awlaki's religious and political vision, which justified and encouraged the aggression of infidels

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<sup>329</sup> Mitchell Silber, Arvin Bhatt, *Radicalization in the West: the Homegrown Threat*, New York City Police Department, 2007, p. 30. <https://info.publicintelligence.net/NYPDradicalization.pdf>

<sup>330</sup> Elizabeth Pearson, *The Case of Roshonara Choudhry: Implications for Theory on Online Radicalization, ISIS Women, and the Gendered Jihad*, in "Policy and the Internet", 8 (1), March 2016, 5-33, p. 13. <https://doi.org/10.1002/poi3.101>

<sup>331</sup> Vikram Dodd, *Roshonara Choudhry: Police Interview Extracts*, in "The Guardian", 3/11/2010. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2010/nov/03/roshonara-choudhry-police-interview>

<sup>332</sup> Ibidem.

and the West, began to take shape. College classes do not seem as important as before, and Choudhry alienates himself from his previous life.

As in the *self-identification* phase, the second step in Silber and Bhatt's model, the acceptance of this new political worldview that encourage and justify violence against the west started to take shape. Now, instead of striving to achieve the western's goals of a good career, a big salary, and an important social status, Choudry's objective was centered around the jihadi aim of defending the muslim community around the world.<sup>333</sup>

The role played by the Internet is fundamental and evolves during Choudry's radicalization. In this phase, it was a mean to acquire and understand new knowledge about a radical ideology. Indeed, without an Internet connection Choudhry would not be able to encounter in such an easy way the extremist ideology. As stated by Meleagrou-Hitchens, «communication technologies provide the primary locus for individuals to access radicalizing materials».<sup>334</sup> The Internet, and in particular, Al-Awlaki's use of it, acted as a sort of virtual radical mosque that Choudry could attend to watch sermons not only during certain hours or days, but everywhere and everywhen. As underlined by Gabriel Weimann, the «interactivity, reach, frequency, usability, immediacy and permanence that the virtual world has come to provide now heighten and mimic those processes that took place previously inside place of worship».<sup>335</sup>

Furthermore, another relevant point is the relationship between gender issues and the Internet. As stated by Elizabeth Pearson, «the Internet perhaps provided an alternative space in which Choudhry could perform a less restricted gender identity, more easily engaging firstly with Islam, then Islamism, progressing to a more extreme, ultimately violent position, which confronted Al Qaeda's position on women's roles».<sup>336</sup> Marc Sageman himself argues that the virtual world can act particularly effectively towards women, usually bound to segregation in the Islamic world. To all intents and purposes, the Internet has given Roshonara Choudhry an anonymous and borderless space where gender structures disappear, ensuring an incomparable virtual liberation.<sup>337</sup>

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<sup>333</sup> Mitchell Silber, Arvin Bhatt, *Radicalization in the West: the Homegrown Threat*, New York City Police Department, 2007, p. 36 <https://info.publicintelligence.net/NYPDradicalization.pdf>

<sup>334</sup> Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens, Audrey Alexander, and Nick Kaderbhai, *The impact of digital communications technology on radicalization and recruitment*, in "International Affairs", 93(5), 2017, p.1242.

<sup>335</sup> Gabriel Weimann, *New Terrorism and New Media*, p.2.

<sup>336</sup> Elizabeth Pearson, *The Case of Roshonara Choudhry: Implications for Theory on Online Radicalization, ISIS Women, and the Gendered Jihad*, in "Policy and the Internet", 8 (1), March 2016, 5-33, pp. 8-9 <https://doi.org/10.1002/poi3.101>

<sup>337</sup> Marc Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 2008, p. 14.

The next step in the radicalization process is what Alessandro Orsini calls *Integration in a revolutionary sect*<sup>338</sup> or which Silber and Bhatt call *indoctrination*<sup>339</sup>. On the one hand, in the DRIA model, this phase marks the transition from cognitive radicalization to political violence. On the other, in the model of the two American scholars, jihadist militancy becomes a goal, and the subject transfers its radical vision into the real world. Political events, like the war in Iraq for Choudry, are accused of being evident attacks against Islam and the Muslim world. In both models, it is crucial to join a terrorist group, a community of like-minded extremists, or an *imagined community*<sup>340</sup> in the sense attributed to it by Benedict Anderson.

Given the fact that the authorities have attested that Choudry had no physical ties or contacts with members of Al Qaeda nor with other jihadists, never attended meetings, did not possess extremist literature and did not attend a mosque, the Internet exercised once more a crucial role. Choudry, seeking a group in order to feel part of something bigger, started to visit many extremist forums, including *RevolutionMuslim*.<sup>341</sup> Even if her participation has always been passive (she did not post or give his opinions, she just read and learned), the online realm started to work as a real catalyst of radicalization. Roshonara Choudry, in fact, had concrete evidence of the existence of communities of online associates who shared their beliefs. As countless studies have pointed out, group dynamics intensify the processes of radicalization, and the Internet can act in a manner remarkably similar to a physical milieu in the real world.

This influence can be inferred from Choudry's statements regarding the community that supported Al-Awlaki: « everyone listens to him, and everyone likes him ».<sup>342</sup> Using the word "everyone", Choudry refers to a global and virtual community of individuals who share the beliefs of the aforementioned Yemeni clerics. In this regard, the contribution of Edwin Sutherlands appears as illuminating. The scholar, in his *criminogenic environment*<sup>343</sup> theory, states that participating in online networks of individuals who share radical ideas leads to mitigating their violence and considering them mainstream. Although Choudry never posted on these forums, the simple fact of knowing that there are many people who share his beliefs has strengthened his ideas. The terrorist, constantly exposed to identical messages, has lost her sense of reality.

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<sup>338</sup> Alessandro Orsini, *Isis: I terroristi più fortunati del mondo e tutto ciò che è stato fatto per favorirli*, Rizzoli, Milano, 2016, p.172.

<sup>339</sup> Mitchell Silber, Arvin Bhatt, *Radicalization in the West: the Homegrown Threat*, New York City Police Department, 2007, p. 36 <https://info.publicintelligence.net/NYPDradicalization.pdf>

<sup>340</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Comunità Immaginate. Origini e fortuna dei nazionalismi*, Laterza, Bari, 2010, p.10.

<sup>341</sup> Vikram Dodd, *Roshonara Choudry: Police Interview Extracts*, in "The Guardian", 3/11/2010. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2010/nov/03/roshonara-choudhry-police-interview>

<sup>342</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>343</sup> Edwin H. Sutherland and Donald R. Cressey, *Principles of Criminology*, 4th Edition, Chicago University Press, Chicago, 1947.

In addition, as Duco<sup>344</sup> points out, spending a lot of time online can increase feelings of affinity for the group and, at the same time, strengthen hostility to the outside. Internet, in this sense, acts as an echo chamber, the algorithms that govern the online pages lead to an increase in interaction with like-minded individuals, resulting in a social and ideological isolation with the result of an increase in the radicality of ideas.

Roshonara Choudhry, thanks to the online sermons of Al-Awlaki and the extremists forums, became part of an *imagined community*. «Because as Muslims we're all brothers and sisters and we should all look out for each other, and we shouldn't sit back and do nothing while others suffer. We shouldn't allow the people who oppress us to get away with it and to think that they can do whatever they want to us and we're just gonna lie down and take it».<sup>345</sup> From this statement, it is clear how the British citizen feels part of an “us” and that she has acquired what Orsini calls a *binary code mentality*<sup>346</sup>, a “us versus them” thought scheme, in which reality is simplified in a total way between good and evil. Between those who act on the side of good and those who do not, and who, for this very reason, must be punished. On the one hand, there are the believers, members of the *ummah*, the global Muslim community of «brothers and sisters». On the other, there are «they», the West and the *kuffars* (unbelievers), who continually perpetuate atrocities against the Islamic people. Whether the outrages are done in the Middle East or in a suburb of London, they must still be condemned, and everyone must do what they can to stop it.

The point of no return in his life came shortly after, on April 27, 2010, when, a few months from graduating, Choudhry gave up his studies and left King's College. As she said, the university was once again confirmed as repressive towards Muslims. In the words of the terrorist « they gave an award to Shimon Peres, and they also have a department for tackling radicalisation [...] So I just didn't wanna go there anymore 'cos it would be against my religion. [...] I thought that I should have loyalty to my Muslim brothers and sisters in Palestine and so I should leave King's and that would show my loyalty to them».<sup>347</sup>

From this moment on, Choudhry is in the last phase of the DRIA model, the *Alienation from the surrounding world*. The terrorist definitively abandons the last link with the outside world. Physically and psychologically confined to his ideology and the virtual online world, Choudhry

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<sup>344</sup> Benjamin Duco<sup>l</sup> et al., *Assessment of the State of Knowledge: Connections Between Research on the Social Psychology of the Internet and Violent Extremism*, Canadian Network for Research on Terrorism, Security and Society, 16(5), 2016.

<sup>345</sup> Vikram Dodd, *Roshonara Choudhry: Police Interview Extracts*, in “The Guardian”, 3/11/2010. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2010/nov/03/roshonara-choudhry-police-interview>

<sup>346</sup> Alessandro Orsini, *What Everybody Should Know About Radicalization and the DRIA Model*, in “Studies in Conflict and Terrorism”, 46(1), 68-100, 2023, p. 90.

<sup>347</sup> Vikram Dodd, *Roshonara Choudhry: Police Interview Extracts*, in “The Guardian”, 3/11/2010. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2010/nov/03/roshonara-choudhry-police-interview>



has already justified and accepted murder as a solution. The award to Shimon Peres was the straw that broke the camel's back and once again confirmed his ideas. Using the thought of Clifford Geertz, her *webs of significance*<sup>348</sup>, represented by her ideology, led her to see the award to the Israeli politician as yet another confirmation of Western atrocities. Radical Islamism now obscures his eyes; the world is corrupt, and she has the confirmation.

The last obstacle she must overcome in order to carry out the attack is the religious justification to conduct jihad as a woman. The turning point came thanks to Abdullah Azzam, one of the greatest Islamists in history, among those who helped in the foundation of Al Qaeda, Hamas and Lashkar-e-Taiba. Many academics ascribe the concept of global jihad to him, namely that all Muslims should fight a single jihad against their enemies worldwide. Roshonara Choudhry learned, again thanks to the internet, that the Palestinian ideologue had already clarified in the 80s the role of women in jihad, concluding that the holy war was a duty of both men and Muslim women. In fact, according to police reports, the terrorist believed it was men's exclusive duty.<sup>349</sup> This point is again interesting to understand the link between gender and terrorism in the British extremist. In fact, Azzam is actually very ambiguous in justifying the active role of women in Jihad. Choudhry's personal interpretation makes it possible to find an ideological justification.<sup>350</sup>

At this point, the soil was fertile for the final attack. Steeped in ideology and hatred, Roshonara Choudhry had only to choose the right target, and the means. Once more the Internet represented the main source of inspiration and information. As stated by Silber and Bhatt in the last phase of their model, *jihadization*, the online realm acquires a remarkable role. Indeed, «the Internet has been used extensively by the plotters of terrorist attacks in choosing targets, formulating the mode of attack, and acquire capability».<sup>351</sup>

Thanks to the online world, Choudhry finds the certainties she needs to carry out his attack. First, she identified the right target through the *theyworkforyou* websites, which confirmed Stephen Timms' support for British involvement in the Iraq War. Next, she booked a place at the constituency surgery, and finally, probing various possibilities, she chose the easiest one for her: stabbing.

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<sup>348</sup> Clifford Geertz, *Interpretazione di culture*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 2019, p.21.

<sup>349</sup> Charlie Winter, *Jihad: Breaking With Convention*, in "Tony Blair Institute for Global Change", 13/09/2018. <https://www.institute.global/insights/geopolitics-and-security/isis-women-and-jihad-breaking-convention>

<sup>350</sup> Elizabeth Pearson, *The Case of Roshonara Choudhry: Implications for Theory on Online Radicalization, ISIS Women, and the Gendered Jihad*, in "Policy and the Internet", 8 (1), March 2016, 5-33, p., 12. <https://doi.org/10.1002/poi3.101>

<sup>351</sup> Mitchell Silber, Arvin Bhatt, *Radicalization in the West: the Homegrown Threat*, New York City Police Department, 2007, p. 45. <https://info.publicintelligence.net/NYPDradicalization.pdf>

Once the attack is complete, Choudry does not deny his choice and once again demonstrates the devastating effect that the ideology acquired through the internet has had on her. «I feel like I've ruined the rest of my life. I feel like it's worth it because millions of Iraqis are suffering and I should do what I can to help them and not just be inactive and do nothing while they suffer»<sup>352</sup>, she declared to the authorities.

In conclusion, as declared by McFarlane, «Roshonara Choudry represent the changing face of violent extremism in a younger generation that is increasingly looking toward the Internet for answers».<sup>353</sup> She is, in fact, the classic lone wolf or individual attacker radicalized on the Internet. Choudry can even be ascribed to the concept of pure loner theorized by Pantucci, namely a terrorist who has no connection with an organization and without commands or instructions from above.<sup>354</sup>

However, as described in the previous chapters, modern lone wolves are not entirely cut off from society, instead, they find an *imagined community* on the Internet, able to act as a replacement for the radical social environment that individuals cannot trace in the physical world. Internet and online jihadist propaganda initiated Choudry's radicalization process and promoted and accentuated it in various ways over time. First, the virtual sphere guaranteed access to the radical material. Then, it acted as an anonymous virtual meeting point, ensuring the meeting with a community of like-minded individuals. Finally, it gave the terrorist a chance to plan and lead the attack.

To paraphrase Gabriel Weimann, when it comes to online radicalization, the lone wolf metaphor seems misleading and wrong.<sup>355</sup> Wolves never hunt alone, but always in packs. And that's how Choudry acted, with a virtual pack behind her.

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<sup>352</sup> Vikram Dodd, *Roshonara Choudry: Police Interview Extracts*, in "The Guardian", 3/11/2010.

<https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2010/nov/03/roshonara-choudhry-police-interview>

<sup>353</sup> Bruce MacFarlane, *Online Violent Radicalisation: Challenges Facing Law Enforcement Agencies and Policy Stakeholders*, Global Terrorism Research Centre and Politics Department Monash University, 2010, p.17.

[https://www.cve-](https://www.cve-kenya.org/media/library/McFarlane_2010_Online_Violent_Radicalisation_OVeR_Challenges_facing_Law_Enforcement_Agencies_and_Policy_Stakeholders.pdf)

[kenya.org/media/library/McFarlane\\_2010\\_Online\\_Violent\\_Radicalisation\\_OVeR\\_Challenges\\_facing\\_Law\\_Enforcement\\_Agencies\\_and\\_Policy\\_Stakeholders.pdf](https://www.cve-kenya.org/media/library/McFarlane_2010_Online_Violent_Radicalisation_OVeR_Challenges_facing_Law_Enforcement_Agencies_and_Policy_Stakeholders.pdf)

<sup>354</sup> R. Pantucci, *A Typology of Lone Wolves: Preliminary Analysis of Lone Islamist Terrorists*, in "International Centre for the Study of Radicalization and Political Violence, March 2011. [https://icsr.info/wp-](https://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/1302002992ICSRPaper_ATypologyofLoneWolves_Pantucci.pdf)

[content/uploads/2011/04/1302002992ICSRPaper\\_ATypologyofLoneWolves\\_Pantucci.pdf](https://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/1302002992ICSRPaper_ATypologyofLoneWolves_Pantucci.pdf)

<sup>355</sup> Gabriel Weimann, *Virtual Packs of Lone Wolves: How the Internet made Lone Wolf Terrorism a Misnomer*, The Wilson Center, 25/02/2014. <https://medium.com/its-a-medium-world/virtual-packs-of-lone-wolves-17b12f8c455a>

## 3.2 Zachary Adam Chesser (Abu Talhah al-Amrikee)

Zachary Adam Chesser, known on the Internet as Abu Talhah al-Amrikee, is an emblematic example of how the interactive online experience can accelerate and promote processes of radicalization. Unlike the two case studies analyzed in this thesis, the American citizen did not commit a terrorist attack. Chesser is primarily known to the public for his declared *fatwa* against Matt Stone and Trey Parker, the creators of the *South Park* animated series, and for supporting and attempting to join Al-Shabaab as a foreign fighter.

However, Chesser's extremist activity is complex and multi-faceted, and, according to a report by the US Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, it can be divided into three categories: "propagandist", "strategist", "mobilization".<sup>356</sup>

In the following paragraphs, Chesser's aforementioned extremist activity, the legal consequences, his personal background, and his radicalization process are under investigation.

### 3.2.1 Zachary Chesser's Extremist Activity: Propagandist, Strategist, Mobilization

#### Propagandist

Zachary Chesser has been spreading extremist material online since 2009. As stated by the extremist himself to the Committee Staff of the American Senate, his qualities in digital graphics, video editing, writing, and programming have led to a rapid ascension on the Internet. Chesser has utilized his abilities on various platforms, including forums, websites, YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook, to communicate with influential Islamists around the globe and contribute to global terrorism. Chesser has utilized his abilities on various platforms, including forums, websites, YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook, to communicate with influential Islamists worldwide and contribute to global terrorism.<sup>357</sup>

As for online forums, Zachary Chesser has been a member of at least six platforms. In each of these cases, the American extremist was highly active. His contributions mainly consisted in the sharing of terrorist organizations' videos that aided in desensitizing western society and authorities. The report defines its activity as "obsessive" and aimed at influencing the most significant number

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<sup>356</sup> Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, *Zachary Chesser: A Case Study in Online Islamist Radicalization and Its Meaning for the Threat of Homegrown Terrorism*, 02/2012.  
<https://www.hsgac.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/imo/media/doc/CHESSER%20FINAL%20REPORT.pdf>

<sup>357</sup> Ivi, p.12

of individuals. As stated by himself, «forums are one of the most effective places to market videos and articles. All you have to do is post it, and it will get between 40 and 100 views pretty easily».<sup>358</sup>

In late 2009, Chesser began producing and broadcasting his own propaganda videos on YouTube. Using the words of the extremist, «the most effective platform available for conveying the message of Islam is YouTube». Authorities have identified at least three channels controlled by Chesser: LearnTeachFightDie, AQWAHProductions, and ALQuranWaAlAhadeeth. These channels reached excellent levels of influence among the jihadist community, attesting, according to Chesser, around 1.000.000 views per year. In these channels, in addition to the videos of his production, the US citizen also broadcasted videos of Al-Awlaki and had a particular interest in news about Al-Shabaab.<sup>359</sup>

Chesser's channels received a huge media coverage on April 15, 2010, when the extremist posted a video of Al-Awlaki in which the Islamist invoked the murder of anyone who defamed the Prophet Muhammad. At the end of the video, the American extremist turns to the creators of South Park, Trey Parker and Matt Stone. Referring to the 2004 murder of director Theo Van Gogh, he stated: «By placing the Prophet Muhammad in a bear suit, the creators of South Park sought to insult the sacred [...] we have to warn Matt Stone and Trey Parker that what they are doing is stupid and will probably wind up like The Van Gogh for airing this show».<sup>360</sup>

Furthermore, Zachary Chesser used to operate on both Twitter and Facebook. On the one hand, on Twitter, he managed two accounts: *MujahidBlog* and *AbuTalhah*. His main activity on this social network was to promote and share his YouTube channels and blog posts. On the other hand, on Facebook, the American extremists posted under the name of *Abu Talhaha Al-Amrikee* and shared terrorist content and encouraged communication with other users; among them was Ramy Zamzam, who was arrested in Pakistan for trying to join the Taliban.<sup>361</sup>

In conclusion, as for websites, Chesser was the moderator of a website called *Revolution Muslim*, also frequented by Roshonara Choudhry, and founded the *themujahiblog* site. On this platform, the American extremist published links and books defending radical Islamism and various government agencies' documents in the anti-terrorism field. Before being closed, the site had more than 10,000 interactions.<sup>362</sup>

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<sup>358</sup> Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, *Zachary Chesser: A Case Study in Online Islamist Radicalization and Its Meaning for the Threat of Homegrown Terrorism*, 02/2012, p.12.

<https://www.hsgac.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/imo/media/doc/CHESSER%20FINAL%20REPORT.pdf>

<sup>359</sup> *Ivi*, p. 13.

<sup>360</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>361</sup> *Ivi*, p. 14.

<sup>362</sup> *Ibidem*.

## Strategist

Beginning in March 2010, Zachary Chesser expanded his extremist activity to act as a strategist for the global Islamist movement. In a series of posts on all the previously mentioned platforms, titled *Counter Counter-Terrorism*, the American extremist presented ways radical Islam could win the ideological war with the West.<sup>363</sup>

In one of the most relevant, Chesser outlined the importance of propaganda in four bullet points: «(1) Anytime the *kuffar* (non-believers) have something which is perceived as success it must be hidden, (2) Successes of the mujaheddin must be emphasized, (3) Kill the sympathy factor, (4) Emphasize unpopular actions of the *kuffar*». <sup>364</sup>

In addition to publishing his writings, Chesser frequently tried to initiate online dialogs and strategic discussions with anti-terrorism experts. For example, he commented on a post by expert Jarret Brachman about Colleen Larose, expressing his vision of Al Qaeda strategy: «Both legal and illegal weapons are much easier to obtain here than they are in Europe. For example, I could walk about a mile from the capitol building in DC and buy M16s and grenades off the street. Also, due to the nature of America's infrastructure it is much easier to come by explosives. All one would have to do is go to a construction site or a farm and take them. Eventually Muslims will figure this out. While there may or may not be a period of going for "spectacular" attacks, the typical attack in America will probably look a lot more like Mumbai than 9-11». <sup>365</sup>

This series of posts and contributions have led to great diffusion and success. So much so that a researcher at Brandeis University, Aaron Y. Zelin, interviewed him before his arrest. In the interview, Chesser defends his threats to the creators of South Park and justifies the actions of Al Qaeda that cause the death of Muslims: «collateral damage will naturally occur in any war, and in some scenarios it will be the majority of the deaths. The current wars the Muslims are fighting are within their own territory, so virtually all collateral damage will be of Muslims». <sup>366</sup>

In conclusion, about three weeks before being arrested, in July 2010, Zachary Chesser published a 25-page paper entitled *Raising Al Qaeda: A Look into the Long-Term Obligations of the Global Jihad Movement*. It is a genuine programmatic manual that provides tips and models to recruit and

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<sup>363</sup>Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, *Zachary Chesser: A Case Study in Online Islamist Radicalization and Its Meaning for the Threat of Homegrown Terrorism*, 02/2012, pp. 16-17.

<https://www.hsgac.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/imo/media/doc/CHESSER%20FINAL%20REPORT.pdf>

<sup>364</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>365</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>366</sup> Aaron Y. Zelin, *My Exclusive Interview with Abu Talhaha al-Amrikee (Zachary Chesser) of Revolution Muslim at Jihadology*, in "Jihadology", 29/06/2010. <https://aaronzelin.com/category/zachary-a-chesser/>

sensitize Muslims who have not joined the jihadist cause. In particular, Chesser stresses the role of children and women who, according to him, should be fully involved in the global movement. As for children, Chesser writes that.« The grander picture of jihad is what must be presented as we raise our children [...] The fiqh of jihad must be taught in the masaajid, the schools, and the homes [...] We have to instill the love of jihad in the hearts of our children in a complete manner». <sup>367</sup>

### **Mobilization and the Aftermath**

Chesser's online activity had certainly not gone unnoticed by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). The extremist was subject to a first interrogation in the spring of 2009, then two more, and finally, his arrest. As Chesser himself states in a letter to the staff of the Homeland Security Committee, his violent beliefs were reinforced by FBI intrusive activities. <sup>368</sup>

In November 2009, Chesser and his wife tried to leave the United States to join Al-Shabaab. However, the two could not escape, as his mother-in-law had covert his partner's passport. On June 24, 2010, the FBI issued a search warrant for the extremist's habitation. On July 9, 2010, Chesser organized another attempt to fly to Somalia and join Al-Shabaab. Together with him, his newly born son should have left. In fact, he thought that leaving with an infant would make the authorities less suspicious. Nevertheless, he was forbidden to embark. On July 21, 2010, Chesser was arrested, and his wife, charged with false statements regarding her husband's travels, pleaded guilty and was deported to her home country of Uganda.<sup>369</sup>

Later, Chesser will also plead guilty to the charges against him: «communicating threats to Parker and Stone; soliciting violent Islamist extremists to desensitize law enforcement by placing suspicious-looking but innocent packages in public places; and attempting to provide material support to a designated foreign terrorist organization»<sup>370</sup>. The extremist will then be sentenced to a sentence of 25 years imprisonment in a federal prison.

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<sup>367</sup> Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, *Zachary Chesser: A Case Study in Online Islamist Radicalization and Its Meaning for the Threat of Homegrown Terrorism*, 02/2012, pp. 16-17.

<https://www.hsgac.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/imo/media/doc/CHESSER%20FINAL%20REPORT.pdf>

<sup>368</sup> Ivi, pp. 18-19.

<sup>369</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>370</sup> Ibidem.

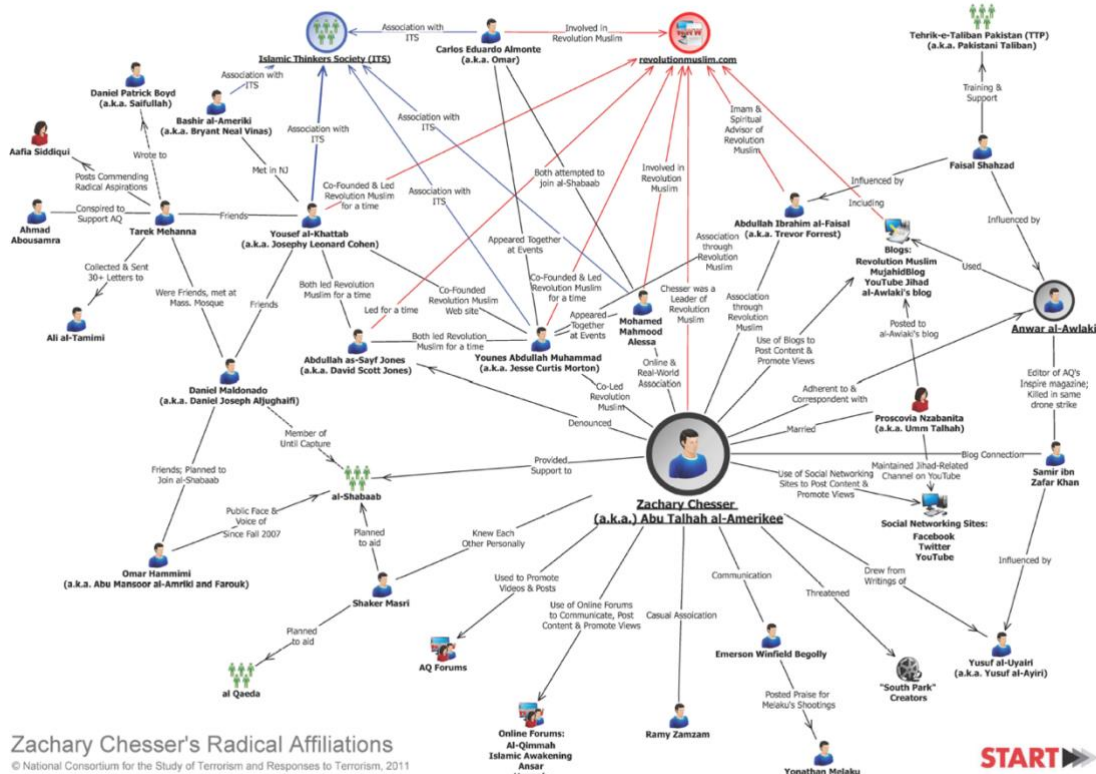


Figure 10: Zachary Chesser's Radical Affiliations

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### 3.2.2 Personal Background and Online Radicalization Process

Zachary Adam Chesser was born on December 22, 1989, in Charlottesville, Virginia, United States. During childhood, the future extremist grew up in a loving and highly patriotic family. In the household, his grandfather, who was a colonel and Vietnam veteran, has always been a role model. As a result, the young Chesser was a fervent patriotic child who, at the age of nine, knew how to name every battle of the American Civil War and wanted to become a general in the American Army. As a testimony to his intense patriotism, on September 11, 2001, at the age of eleven, Chesser even wrote a poem in defence of the United States: *America will stand proud and tall / No matter how hard she's shaken she will not fall, America's the finest out of every country.*<sup>372</sup>

The young Chesser was a brilliant child with a wide range of interests and member of a “gifted and talented” pupil program in both elementary and high school. Animated by a thirst for knowledge and curiosity out of the ordinary, as declared by her mother, Chesser «had a tendency to find something he felt like he was really good at and then dig his teeth in and go full force. He

<sup>371</sup> Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, *Zachary Chesser: A Case Study in Online Islamist Radicalization and Its Meaning for the Threat of Homegrown Terrorism*, 02/2012, p. 36 <https://www.hsgac.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/imo/media/doc/CHESSER%20FINAL%20REPORT.pdf>

<sup>372</sup> Peter Bergen, *United States of Jihad*, “Crown”, New York, 2016, Chapter 7 *Jihadinamerica.com*, p. 131.

might not have been the best at it, but when he thought of himself as one of the best at it, he kept with it».<sup>373</sup>

For example, at the age of eight, he became interested in the environmental movement and decided to boycott *Nike* products because they used animal skin. This passion accompanied Chesser until his high school years, in which he is described as a «long-haired, vocal pacifist and a vegetarian in protest of the slaughterhouse system», who played the guitar, had converted to Buddhism and was fervently discussing how to end world poverty and hunger.<sup>374</sup>

However, like any other teenager, Chesser loved to play video games and watch TV series. Paradoxically, he was a massive fan of the animated series *South Park*, the same series he would condemn a few years later. In addition, Zachary Chesser was also passionate about sports. In particular, he played on the basketball and football team of his high school, and, in eleventh grade, he even began to practice break dance with a group of Korean students.<sup>375</sup>

His encounter with Islam came in 2008, when Chesser attended the 12th grade. Around this time, the young American began dating Fatimah, a Muslim girl of Somali descent, and started playing with the football team of an Islamic Organization, Hizb ut-Tahrir.<sup>376</sup> According to the authorities, there are conflicting results in reconstructing Chesser's conversion to Islam. On the one hand, as per an online post by the same extremist, he converted into the home of a member of Hizb ut-Tahrir, whom he met during a football match. According to other sources, the conversion was born from the meeting with the girlfriend.<sup>377</sup>

Nevertheless, thanks to the Internet, Chesser, in less than two years, has undergone an existential metamorphosis from an average American boy with ecological tendencies to a convinced Islamic extremist about to leave his life behind and join Al-Shabaab in Somalia. As stated by Chesser, «the period between the winter of 2008 and July of 2010 feels to me like a missing puzzle piece in my life. I know that I will spend many years trying to understand why I followed the path that has led me here».<sup>378</sup>

As described above, Zachary Chesser threw himself headlong every time he found a new topic. Although his family was predominantly secular and had never received a proper religious education, the young man began to study Islam. As he stated: «I had very little exposure to religious

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<sup>373</sup> Peter Bergen, *United States of Jihad*, "Crown", New York, 2016, Chapter 7 *Jihadinamerica.com*, p. 132

<sup>374</sup> *Ivi*, p. 131.

<sup>375</sup> *Ivi*, p. 132.

<sup>376</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>377</sup> Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, *Zachary Chesser: A Case Study in Online Islamist Radicalization and Its Meaning for the Threat of Homegrown Terrorism*, 02/2012, p. 7.

<https://www.hsgac.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/imo/media/doc/CHESSER%20FINAL%20REPORT.pdf>

<sup>378</sup> *Ibidem*.



knowledge growing up, so when I learned anything about Islam, I immediately adopted it and tried to practice completely. I did not do a lot of critical thinking about what I learned. I just felt like I had to do everything to the fullest extent, whether it was how I dressed, who I spoke to, or how I prayed». <sup>379</sup>

As in the case of Roshonara Choudry, Chesser's encounter with radical Islam comes through Anwar Al-Awlaki. From the very beginning, the lessons and sermons of the Yemeni cleric exercised a powerful fascination on the extremist, who started to consider him as an appropriate leadership figure. «They had an element of radicalism to them, which served as a gateway for me to other more extreme beliefs. [...] I did not questioned [his] theological arguments», he would later say. <sup>380</sup>

The exposure to this new form of knowledge placed Chesser in front of what Silber and Bhatt call “religious seeking”<sup>381</sup>, namely a cognitive opening which led the young American to acquire a new vision of the world. The radical Islamic ideology has opened a real crisis of identity in his inner self. The values that motivated him earlier are being questioned in light of what appears to be a new truth. Although the reconstructions do not allow highlighting a trauma in Chesser's life, the terrorist enters the first phase of the DRIA model, the *Disintegration of Social Identity*. The constant search for a new path, which characterized the extremist's life, can be considered a constant condition of *social marginality*.<sup>382</sup> In this sense, Chesser believes that his role in society is not consonant with the merits and qualities he believes he possesses and is always looking for an *exit strategy*, eventually found in Radical Islam.

As described earlier in Choudhry's case, online exposure to propaganda materials about conflicts and political dynamics can generate feelings of moral outrage that amplify in a context of an identity crisis, leading to a feeling of rebirth and religious renewal.<sup>383</sup> Immersion in radical and violent material for a long time leads to desensitization and mortality salience. That is, a consciousness of the inevitability of death that leads to the support of terrorist acts and martyrdom<sup>384</sup>. Nevertheless, as pointed out by Winter, the crucial aspect of the influence of online

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<sup>379</sup> Peter Bergen, *United States of Jihad*, “Crown”, New York, 2016, Chapter 7 *Jihadinamerica.com*, p. 132.

<sup>380</sup> *Ivi*, p.209.

<sup>381</sup> Mitchell Silber, Arvin Bhatt, *Radicalization in the West: the Homegrown Threat*, New York City Police Department, 2007, p. 6. <https://info.publicintelligence.net/NYPDradicalization.pdf>

<sup>382</sup> Alessandro Orsini, *What Everybody Should Know About Radicalization and the DRIA Model*, in “Studies in Conflict and Terrorism”, 46(1), 68-100, 2023, p. 21.

<sup>383</sup> Mitchell Silber, Arvin Bhatt, *Radicalization in the West: the Homegrown Threat*, New York City Police Department, 2007, p. 30. <https://info.publicintelligence.net/NYPDradicalization.pdf>

<sup>384</sup> Peter Neuman, *Countering Online Radicalization in America*, Bipartisan Policy Center, Homeland Security Project, Washington DC, 2012, 17-18.

propaganda is not necessarily a cause of union with a jihadist group or the realization of an attack, but «catalyze the Islamist extremist's passage from tacit support to active membership».<sup>385</sup>

During 2008, Chesser's radicalization was taking rapidly shape. The extremist soon asked Fatima to travel together to Yemen or Somalia to study Islam. The girl told him she had no nostalgia for those places and would never return. After a while, the relationship ended, as Chesser felt that Islam could not be consistent with extramarital affairs. He began complaining to his family that they no longer had to use toilet paper because the Koran imposed it. He had also joined Barack Obama's presidential campaign as a hand but rapidly got bored in politics, stating that voting was against Islam. He informed his mother that his religious views made it impossible for him to get health insurance. Her mother went to talk to a local Imam who told her that her son's ideas were completely nonsensical. Chesser replied: «That imam, he does not know what he's talking about».<sup>386</sup>

In fact, the only Imams Chesser wanted to hear were Al-Awlaki and the other Islamic clerics of the *Great Virtual Mosque*. As pointed out in Choudhry's analysis, the comparison between online locus and place of prayer is extremely valid. The qualities of «interactivity, reach, frequency, usability, immediacy and permanence»<sup>387</sup> made available by the Internet imitate the processes that in the past took place within the Mosques. The only difference is that Chesser didn't need to go to the physical place, know the Imam in person, and risk being connected to a network of contacts. All he had to do was turn on the computer to get his sought answers. This worldwide spread and a total simplification of complex issues, such as US involvement in the Middle East or Muslim immigration to the West, helped Chesser acquire a viewpoint that would have been almost impossible to obtain in Virginia. Through carefully designed strategy, the jihadist propaganda, in particular Al-Awlaki's one, convinced the young American citizen that jihad is not a concept far into space and time but that can be conducted anywhere and anytime.<sup>388</sup>

The continuous exposure to online radical materials and the commitment as a propagandist promoted the *Reconstruction* of Chesser's social identity. The exit strategy represented by Islamism was successful; the radical ideology began to permeate his life and replace his previous interests. As in the self-identification phase of the Silber and Bhatt model, previous Western goals and values, such as supporting a Democratic candidate's election campaign, lose meaning in light

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<sup>385</sup> Charlie Winter, *Virtual Caliphate: Understanding Islamic State's Propaganda Strategy*, Quilliam Foundation, 2015, p.6. <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/30671634.pdf>

<sup>386</sup> Mitchell Silber, Arvin Bhatt, *Radicalization in the West: the Homegrown Threat*, New York City Police Department, 2007, p. 30. <https://info.publicintelligence.net/NYPDradicalization.pdf>

<sup>387</sup> Gabriel Weimann, *New Terrorism and New Media*, p.2.

<sup>388</sup> Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens, *Incitement: Anwar al-Awlaki's Western Jihad*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 2020, p. 268.

of a religious, political goal that becomes vocational. Chesser also began to present the main physical traits typical of radical Islam. He grew a beard, started wearing a *kufi*, and ankle-high pants. In addition, he took on a distinctive, slightly foreign accent and quit his Block Buster job, saying he could not work in a store that sold videos of undressed women. He completely stopped attending dance clubs and was adamant that he would not attend Christmas parties and receive gifts during non-Muslim holidays. Furthermore, he told his mother that he could not even be near her partner, due to the fact that she was not married, and his religion precludes him «from being in the same room» with them.<sup>389</sup>

Towards the end of autumn 2008, Zachary Chesser was now imbued with extremist Islamic ideology and began looking for others who thought like him. As in the Alessandro Orsini's *Integration in a revolutionary sect*<sup>390</sup> phase or which Silber and Bhatt call *indoctrination*, the extremist was seeking a group of like-minded extremists to join. His choice was to turn to the Internet because it was «simply the most dynamic and convenient form of media». <sup>391</sup>

In fact, in addition to consuming an enormous amount of Islamic propaganda, Chesser was highly active on forums and chat rooms, always looking for interactions and exchanges with like-minded individuals. He even tried to contact Anwar Al-Awlaki several times via e-mail. Chesser felt part of an *imagined community* thanks to the radical online milieu. He did not need to join physically a terrorist or radical group; the virtual world compensated for the social dynamics in the real world. Although the members of these online groups were far away in space and very often did not know their true identity, Chesser considered them as brothers and sisters of the *ummah*, committed to a common goal. These online social dynamics have acted as face-to-face interactions considered by many academics as fundamental in radicalization processes. Reflecting the group dynamics identified by Sageman in the physical world, the online community allowed Chesser to strengthen his beliefs and make them even more extreme. <sup>392</sup> This dynamic is also supported by Behr, who considers online interactions as a facilitator of radicalization that can lead to an escalation in extremist feelings. <sup>393</sup>

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<sup>389</sup> Mitchell Silber, Arvin Bhatt, *Radicalization in the West: the Homegrown Threat*, New York City Police Department, 2007, p. 30. <https://info.publicintelligence.net/NYPDradicalization.pdf>

<sup>390</sup> Alessandro Orsini, *Isis: I terroristi più fortunati del mondo e tutto ciò che è stato fatto per favorirli*, Rizzoli, Milano, 2016, p.172.

<sup>391</sup> Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, *Zachary Chesser: A Case Study in Online Islamist Radicalization and Its Meaning for the Threat of Homegrown Terrorism*, 02/2012, p. 7 <https://www.hsgac.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/imo/media/doc/CHESSER%20FINAL%20REPORT.pdf>

<sup>392</sup> Marc Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 2008, p. 87.

<sup>393</sup> Ines Von Behr et al. *Radicalisation in the Digital Era: The Use of the Internet in 15 Cases of Terrorism and Extremism*, RAND Europe, Brussels, 2013.

Furthermore, this ideological segregation was fostered by the echo chambers phenomenon. Indeed, forums, chatrooms, and social networks are intrinsically characterized by a promotion of affinity towards their members. As a result, Chesser was submerged in a *milieu* in which his beliefs were magnified and amplified by the other members of the community.

As argued by Sutherland in the *Criminogenic Environment*<sup>394</sup> theory, this dynamic leads to a greater acceptance of violence since it takes on a positive and desirable connotation. The view of reality is completely distorted because it lacks a link with the outside world and the possible refutation of extremist theories. At the same time, as pointed out by Duco<sup>395</sup>, the affinity within the group is reflected in a solid hostility to the outside world, promoting an "Us Versus Them" thought pattern already present in radical Islamism. As in face-to-face interactions in the Sageman model, the radical online milieu and the resulting interactions promote hatred of the outside world and personal sacrifice, in light of the commitment of a virtual community, acquires collective value.<sup>396</sup>

Since the beginning of 2009, Zachary Chesser's online activity has led him to isolate himself physically and spiritually from the outside world. The extremist has entered the final phase of the DRIA model, *Alienation from the surrounding world*. The entry into the virtual jihadist community has led to total exclusion from reality. Chesser spent hours and hours in his room in front of the computer screen on these platforms. Even once enrolled at George Mason University, the extremist avoided contacts with the other students. He used to frequent only the members of the Muslim Student Association, but these friendships did not have the same weight compared to the online interactions. After only one semester, the extremist dropped out of school, while his online activity grew increasingly.<sup>397</sup>

As a testimony to his complete Isolation, in the spring of 2009, he met on Al-Awlaki's blog the one who would become his future wife, Proscovia Nzabanita, daughter of a Ugandan diplomat in the United States. The relationship with the girl was, for most of the time, virtual. The two began to physically attend only a few weeks before the wedding. « I did meet my wife on al-Awlaki's site. I used to send out emails on Islam to all of my contacts, and she had previously emailed me

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<sup>394</sup> Edwin H. Sutherland and Donald R. Cressey, *Principles of Criminology*, 4th Edition, Chicago University Press, Chicago, 1947.

<sup>395</sup> Benjamin Duco et al., *Assessment of the State of Knowledge: Connections Between Research on the Social Psychology of the Internet and Violent Extremism*, Canadian Network for Research on Terrorism, Security and Society, 16(5), 2016.

<sup>396</sup> Alessandro Orsini, *What Everybody Should Know About Radicalization and the DRIA Model*, in "Studies in Conflict and Terrorism", 46(1), 68-100, 2023, p. 70.

<sup>397</sup> Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, *Zachary Chesser: A Case Study in Online Islamist Radicalization and Its Meaning for the Threat of Homegrown Terrorism*, 02/2012, p. 7

<https://www.hsgac.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/imo/media/doc/CHESSER%20FINAL%20REPORT.pdf>

about a protest I was working to organize, so she was on my list. Later she asked me to show her best friend's husband around DC [...] This guy's wife decided to try and set us up, so that eventually led to us getting married [...] The transition from online to real-world came only a couple weeks before we were married».<sup>398</sup>

As pointed out by Levine and Brachman, online extremists create their own virtual alter ego in relation to other members of the online radical milieu and compare their ambitions and activities to those of other members. In this process of creating a virtual self, individuals realize how different their physical persons are from the online extremism they support.<sup>399</sup>

Chesser's alter ego is Abu Talhah al-Amrikee, a recognized online propagandist who shares videos, writes posts and treatises on jihad, and appears uncompromising against any deviation from Islamism. On the Internet, Chesser is not bound by the social and legal restrictions of the physical world. He can say aloud to support the radical Islamic ideology, projecting his image on the web.

Nevertheless, this process becomes an alienating force that illuminates the absurd inconsistency between an online person and a physical person, generating intolerable dissonance.<sup>400</sup> This phenomenon leads Chesser to reproduce his online behaviour in the physical world. The hypocrisy of preaching jihad online and living in peace in the West becomes an unbearable burden. In the words of Chesser, «people watch jihad nashids, and talk about killing Kuffars, but they do little else [...] I was one of such people».<sup>401</sup>

Chesser is, therefore, the standard instance of an individual in which the dissonance between his online and physical self becomes untenable, as the Al Qaeda extremists analyzed by Levine and Brachman, he «eventually wants to become [his] avatar because it embodies all of the hopes, dreams, and goals that [he is] unable to actuate in the physical world».<sup>402</sup>

As a result of this dissonance, Chesser tried to join Al Shabaab in Somalia. Struggling to organize his journey, the extremist, as in the *jihadization* phase of the Silber and Bhatt model, turns once again to the online world: «My sole desire in my heart is to join al-Shabaab in establishing the Khilafa. It is so engraved upon my heart that I began lamenting the time it is going to take to

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<sup>398</sup> Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, *Zachary Chesser: A Case Study in Online Islamist Radicalization and Its Meaning for the Threat of Homegrown Terrorism*, 02/2012, p. 11.

<https://www.hsgac.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/imo/media/doc/CHESSER%20FINAL%20REPORT.pdf>

<sup>399</sup> Jarret M. Brachman, Alix N. Levine, *You Too Can be Awlaki!*, in "The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs, 35(1), 25-46, 2011, pp. 35-38.

<sup>400</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>401</sup> Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens, *Incitement: Anwar al-Awlaki's Western Jihad*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 2020, p. 235.

<sup>402</sup> Jarret M. Brachman, Alix N. Levine, *You Too Can be Awlaki!*, in "The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs, 35(1), 25-46, 2011, p. 35.

raise the money or means and then travel to Somalia. I don't know how to get there, so that is an issue. Another one is based on things I look up and post on the Internet. I am worried that I will be arrested when I try to leave the country. Does anyone know how to help me?». <sup>403</sup>

After the first failure in joining the terrorist group, few months before the arrest, in April 2010, he released the famous condemnation video online against South Park and its creators. At the same time, he revealed to his mother that he knew one of the boys from Northern Virginia who were arrested for going to Pakistan to join the Taliban. Worried, his mother asked him: «You're not hanging out with bad people, are you?». Chesser replied: «I'm not hanging out with bad people». <sup>404</sup>

After all, it was true. Chesser did not frequent the “bad” people he knew but interacted with them only online. In a virtual community that spread, and, at the same time, it strengthened its radical beliefs. The terrorist had explicitly confirmed this dynamic, stating that the strength of radical materials and virtual interactions had not only induced him to be part of the effort but also promoted its extremism, even at the one moment when he was thinking of abandoning the cause. Thanks to the intervention of an acquaintance, Chesser has almost reversed his path. But, as stated by the extremist himself: «One person briefly pulled me away, but this was supplemented by online material». <sup>405</sup>

Chesser is, to all extents, a member of the post-9/11 terrorist generation who has shown the world that there is no need to attend a radical mosque or to train in a dusty training camp in the Middle East to become an extremist. You need just an internet connection, and you are a click away from a jihadist galaxy ready to be discovered.

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<sup>403</sup> Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, *Zachary Chesser: A Case Study in Online Islamist Radicalization and Its Meaning for the Threat of Homegrown Terrorism*, 02/2012, p. 7

<https://www.hsgac.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/imo/media/doc/CHESSER%20FINAL%20REPORT.pdf>

<sup>404</sup> Peter Bergen, *United States of Jihad*, “Crown”, New York, 2016, Chapter 7 *Jihadinamerica.com*, p. 133.

<sup>405</sup> Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens, *Incitement: Anwar al-Awlaki's Western Jihad*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 2020, p. 211.

### 3.3 Sayfullo Habibullaevic Saipov

On October 31, 2017, Sayfullo Saipov used a truck to crush people on a bike path in New York City, killing 8 people and injuring 12 others. As stated in official indictment in the case *United States of America V. Sayfullo Habibullaevic Saipov*, the terrorist was «inspired to carry out the Truck attack by ISIS videos he had watched on his cellular phone».<sup>406</sup>

As a matter of fact, the terrorist is a meaningful example of a lone wolf *mujaheddin* radicalized entirely on the Internet, without any contact with terrorist organizations, mosques, or radical environments. In the following sections, the dynamics of the attack, the subsequential penal process, his personal background, and his radicalization process are under investigation.

#### 3.3.1 Terrorist Attack: Dynamics and Legal Consequences

On October 31, 2017, Sayfullo Saipov completed what was defined as the worst terrorist attack in New York since 9/11. On Halloween day, when the majority of New Yorkers pour into the streets to celebrate the feast, the terrorist, an Uzbek with permanent status in the United States, used a rented truck weighing 6,000 pounds to crush people on a bike path in Manhattan. The vehicular attack provoked the death of eight people and the injury of twelve others, including a 14-year-old child.<sup>407</sup> The survivors «suffered amputations, serious brain injuries, life-altering physical injuries, and significant psychological trauma».<sup>408</sup>

After a shootout with police, the terrorist was injured, arrested, and then hospitalized. The officers found inside the vehicle an ISIS flag and a letter in which Saipov declared his devotion to the Caliphate. While in the hospital, the terrorist told the FBI that he carried out the attack in response to the head of the aforementioned organization's orders, and that he was satisfied of what he had done. Over the years, the terrorist has continued to show his allegiance to ISIS, including via declarations in court, taped phone conversations, writings confiscated from his prison cell, and threats to chop the heads off correctional officials in jail.<sup>409</sup>

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<sup>406</sup> United States District Court Southern District of New York, *United States of America v. Sayfullo Habibullaevic Saipov*, 21/11/2017. <https://www.justice.gov/usao-sdny/pr/sayfullo-saipov-indicted-terrorism-and-murder-aid-racketeering-charges-connection-lower>

<sup>407</sup> Department of Justice (U.S. Attorney's Office, Southern District of New York), *Sayfullo Saipov To Be Sentenced To Life In Prison for 2017 Truck Attack For ISIS*, 23/03/2023. <https://www.justice.gov/usao-sdny/pr/sayfullo-saipov-be-sentenced-life-prison-2017-truck-attack-isis>

<sup>408</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>409</sup> Ibidem.

Furthermore, a few days after the attack, on November 2, ISIS claimed responsibility for the assault on the weekly issue of *Al-Naba* magazine, defining Saipov as «one of the Caliphate soldiers».<sup>410</sup>

The criminal complaint filed against Saipov states that the Uzbek was planning the attack since a year before, and the final decisions regarding the means and the target were made two months prior. In the weeks before the attack, the terrorist conducted several checks on the area of the assault, and on October 22, he rented the truck from a home depot to take a test drive. The decision to carry out the attack on Halloween was taken to maximize the number of possible victims.<sup>411</sup>

At around 2:00 p.m. on October 31, Saipov rented a pickup truck from a home depot in Paissac, New Jersey. Initially, the terrorist intended to place ISIS flags on his truck, but to reduce attention, he rejected that idea. He arrived in Manhattan at roughly 3:00 p.m. and drove the truck for about a mile on a packed bike route. After crashing into a school bus, he jumped out of the truck at the cry of “Allahu Akbar”, holding a paintball gun. Subsequently, he was shot by a police officer in the abdomen. In the truck authorities also found a stun gun and a bag containing three knives.<sup>412</sup>

John Miller, New York Police Department deputy commissioner for intelligence and counterterrorism, determined that Saipov followed the directions in the section “Just Terror Tactics” published in the third edition of the ISIS e-magazine *Rumiyah*, which means “Rome” (a reference to a historical prophecy concerning the collapse of the West). In particular, the aforementioned section listed the best vehicles to use, the best targets, and the best events to crash. Under the influence of these instructions, Saipov decided to rent a truck, select a pedestrian zone, and to launch the attack on Halloween in order to maximize its effectiveness.<sup>413</sup>

The Saipov affaire has sparked intense debate in the United States, particularly over the potential of the death sentence being applied. Indeed, it was the first federal death sentence trial under President Biden’s administration, who had campaigned against capital punishment. It was also a rare capital case in New York, where executions are considerably infrequent.<sup>414</sup>

The trial started on January 9, 2023, in a federal court in New York City. According to David E. Patton, attorney of the terrorist, Saipov was convinced that he was carrying out God’s will to

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<sup>410</sup> “Fox News”, *ISIS claims responsibility for New York truck attack, report says*, 3/10/2017.

<https://www.foxnews.com/world/isis-claims-responsibility-for-new-york-truck-attack-report-says>

<sup>411</sup> “The Counter-Extremism Project”, *Sayfullo Habibullaevic Saipov*.

<https://www.counterextremism.com/extremists/sayfullo-habibullaevic-saipov>

<sup>412</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>413</sup> Robin Wright, *What the New York Attack Says about Isis Now*, in “The New Yorker”, 2/10/2017.

<https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/what-the-new-york-attack-says-about-isis-now>

<sup>414</sup> Benjamin Weiser, Lola Fadulu, *Bike-Path Attacker Will Get Life in Prison, Escaping Death Penalty*, in “The New York Times”, 13/03/2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/13/nyregion/sayfullo-saipov-death-penalty.html?searchResultPosition=1>



carry out a martyrdom attack in revenge for the deaths of Muslims around the world and, as a consequence, “ascend to paradise”.<sup>415</sup> On January 26, the terrorist was convicted on all 28 charges against him, including murder and attempted murder to gain entry to ISIS, and providing material support to a terrorist organization. On March 13, 2023, the Manhattan federal jury failed to achieve a unanimous conviction required to impose the death penalty, and the terrorist was sentenced to life in prison without parole.<sup>416</sup>

### 3.3.2 Personal Background and Online Radicalization Process

According to the FBI, and the US Court of the Southern District of New York, Sayfullo Saipov started and completed his radicalization path in the United States under the influence of ISIS’ online propaganda.

On the one hand, the official indictment in the case *United States of America V. Sayfullo Habibullaevic Saipov*, states that the terrorist was «inspired to carry out the Truck attack by ISIS videos he had watched on his cellular phone».<sup>417</sup> On the other, according to the FBI and reported by Robin Wright on the *New Yorker*<sup>418</sup>, the authorities could not find any type of communication between the Uzbek and ISIS, or any other terrorist organizations. Instead, his radicalization process started when he was already in the United States, and «Saipov fell under the ISIS spell by viewing some ninety ISIS-related videos and almost four thousand images on his (at least two) cell phones».<sup>419</sup>

As a matter of fact, the life of Sayfullo Saipov before he arrived in the United States, does not show any breaking point or the start of a radicalization process. Born in an affluent family in Tashkent, the Uzbek capital, he is described by his sister, Umida Saipova, as a *golden boy* who attended private schools, loved to play football, and wore elegant shoes that made him «look like a gentleman».<sup>420</sup> His family has always been Muslim but has never accepted extreme positions.

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<sup>415</sup> The Counter-Extremism Project”, *Sayfullo Habibullaevic Saipov*.

<https://www.counterextremism.com/extremists/sayfullo-habibullaevic-saipov>

<sup>416</sup> Benjamin Weiser, Lola Fadulu, *Bike-Path Attacker Will Get Life in Prison, Escaping Death Penalty*, in “The New York Times”, 13/03/2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/13/nyregion/sayfullo-saipov-death-penalty.html?searchResultPosition=1>

<sup>417</sup> United States District Court Southern District of New York, *United States of America v. Sayfullo Habibullaevic Saipov*, 21/11/2017. <https://www.justice.gov/usao-sdny/pr/sayfullo-saipov-indicted-terrorism-and-murder-aid-racketeering-charges-connection-lower>

<sup>418</sup> Robin Wright, *What the New York Attack Says about Isis Now*, in “The New Yorker”, 2/10/2017.

<https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/what-the-new-york-attack-says-about-isis-now>

<sup>419</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>420</sup> Mansur Mirovalev, *Sayfullo Saipov: from golden boy to ISIL supporter*, “Al-Jazeera”, 29/10/2017.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2017/11/29/sayfullo-saipov-from-golden-boy-to-isil-supporter>

Even the local Imam, his neighbours, the Uzbek police, and others close to the family have never noticed any factor that could lead to suspicion.<sup>421</sup>

After finishing high school in a private school, Saipov studied at the Tashkent Financial Institute, one of the largest and most important Uzbek universities, from 2005 to 2009. After graduation, he worked as an accountant for the Sayokhat Hotel in the capital. His performances have always been appreciated and described as professional.<sup>422</sup>

The turning point in his life came shortly after, in 2010, when Saipov won the green card lottery, which means he was among the very few lucky people in the world who could legally immigrate to the United States. In March of that year, the future terrorist was 22 when he descended to New York's Kennedy Airport and never returned to Uzbekistan.<sup>423</sup>

Saipov's first home was a friend of his father's in Cincinnati. As soon as he arrived, given his experience and curriculum, the Uzbek was planning to join the hotel business. However, he never managed to find a job without a good knowledge of English and no connections. After a year of unemployment, his father's friend chased him out of the house and urged him to find a job and a new home. In late 2011, Saipov found his first job as a truck driver and moved to Cuyahoga Falls, Ohio.<sup>424</sup>

In early Ohio period, Saipov is not described as an extremist. Conversely, he loved to wear fashionable and expensive clothes. He only went on Fridays to the Islamic Society of Akron and Kent, where frequenters described him as uninterested in faith and with limited knowledge of the Quran. The first changes in his personality began three years after the move and were witnessed by Mirrakhmat Muminov, an Uzbek truck driver and local community activist. According to the witness, Saipov began to become an aggressive brawler, and started to grow a beard. Muminov describes him as a person «with monsters inside» and «a vulgar character» he also stated that «has always thought deep in [his] soul that he would be jailed for beating someone or insulting someone».<sup>425</sup>

During this time and throughout his American experience, Saipov had little contact with his family. According to testimony, his grandfather visited him several times, while his parents never went to the United States. In 2013, he married Nozima Odilova, an Uzbek immigrant with whom

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<sup>421</sup> Mansur Mirovalev, *Sayfullo Saipov: from golden boy to ISIL supporter*, "Al-Jazeera", 29/10/2017.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2017/11/29/sayfullo-saipov-from-golden-boy-to-isil-supporter>

<sup>422</sup> Kim Barker, Joseph Goldstein and Michael Schwartz, *Finding Rootless Life in the U.S., Sayfullo Saipov Turned to Radicalism*, "The New York Times", 1/10/2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/01/nyregion/sayfullo-saipov-truck-attack-manhattan.html>

<sup>423</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>424</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>425</sup> Ibidem.

he settled in Ohio after a first meeting in Las Vegas. They had a family and two daughters. In the hope of improving its economic condition, Saipov founded two transport companies: Sayf Motors and Bright Auto. Despite this, his projects never took off, and he always worked for other companies.<sup>426</sup>

His work as a truck driver led him to travel miles throughout the United States; thanks to nine fines in Iowa, Missouri, Nebraska, Pennsylvania and Maryland, authorities could reconstruct the way Saipov lived on the road. In April 2014, he was stopped by the police and fined for some technical problems with the truck. In addition, he was repeatedly stopped at the weigh station on Interstate 80 in Nebraska, where he was fined for driving too long without the required rest and carrying a higher load than allowed.<sup>427</sup>

As witnessed by Muminov, in late 2015, Saipov moved to Tampa, Florida. The witness stated that the future terrorist sought a change after his problems escalated. He had difficulty finding work, ran out of money, and his pent-up anger had exploded.<sup>428</sup> As reported by the BBC, Muminov also stated that very often Saipov pointed out that he did not follow some Islamic dictates, and that one of his favorite topic was American policy toward Israel.<sup>429</sup>

Another relevant testimony comes from the imam of the local community of Tampa, Abdul, who declared that at the end of 2015, Saipov was going through a difficult period in which his misinterpretation of Islam was evident. He became obsessed with Islamic physical traits, particularly his beard becoming longer and longer, and often wore ankle-high pants. Despite this, the imam stated that he was never actively involved in the life of the Mosque, which was very rare, and that, however, he had never spoken of violent actions.<sup>430</sup>

In March 2016, Saipov moved again. He found a new job as a truck driver at IIK Transport in Illinois. An anonymous witness described him as a «regular guy». It is at this time that Saipov faces the most serious problem with the law of his career. After not paying a fine, he was arrested while at a highway station in Missouri. He will spend 40 minutes in jail in St. Charles County Jail, where he will post \$200 bail with his credit card. In the following period of time, Saipov was not

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<sup>426</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>427</sup> Kim Barker, Joseph Goldstein and Michael Schwartz, *Finding Rootless Life in the U.S., Sayfullo Saipov Turned to Radicalism*, “The New York Times”, 1/11/2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/01/nyregion/sayfullo-saipov-truck-attack-manhattan.html>

<sup>428</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>429</sup> “BBC”, *Sayfullo Saipov: I saw little signs of radicalisation*, 1/11/2017. <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-us-canada-41838396>

<sup>430</sup> Kim Barker, Joseph Goldstein and Michael Schwartz, *Finding Rootless Life in the U.S., Sayfullo Saipov Turned to Radicalism*, “The New York Times”, 1/10/2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/01/nyregion/sayfullo-saipov-truck-attack-manhattan.html>

particularly noted except for his fines. Michael Mckee, the lawyer who represented him in one of these cases in Pike County said that «nobody recalls him».<sup>431</sup>

In the spring of 2016, Saipov and his family moved to Paterson to approach his wife's relatives in New York City. During this time, Saipov quit his truck driver job and started working as an Uber driver. However, he was far from happy. Although his wife was pregnant again, this time with a boy, the future terrorist has repeatedly stated that he wanted to return to Uzbekistan. This purpose was never realized. He had arrived in the United States as a moderate Muslim who hoped for the American dream, but things had not gone as he wanted. He failed to find a job in his field, developed an aggressive temperament, lost countless jobs, and was even arrested. He travelled far and wide in the United States. He was looking for friends in Ohio, a new life in Florida, and a better place for family in New Jersey. However, things were getting worse each time.<sup>432</sup>

The failures suffered during Saipov's stay in the United States have made him a *marginal individual*, a situation that represents the starting point in Alessandro Orsini's DRIA model. Indeed, the process that leads to political violence begins with a feeling that turns into an existential drama. Saipov qualifies as an individual filled with frustration and resentment because of the marginality from which he is struck. Graduated in economics and with experience in the hotel business, the Uzbek is forced to work as a truck driver. Despite his commitment and the founding of two transport companies, his activities never took off. It is precisely from these failures that a mental process began to develop in the terrorist that, starting from the denial of reality, gradually led him to invent a fantasy world. This psychological shelter became indispensable for questioning itself with regard to its concrete difficulties.

As described above, Saipov's education and life had little to do with radical Islam. Moreover, the context in which he lived was utterly devoid of radical environments. The Imams and other members of the Uzbek community frequented by the terrorist have always distanced themselves from his interpretations and his choice. The turning point, what Silber and Bhatt call *religious seeking*, or the discovery of a new truth that leads to a cognitive opening, has happened thanks to the Internet.

As stated by David Patton, Saipov's lawyer in the trial for the attack, and reported by *The Guardian*, his life has changed dramatically since he arrived in the United States. And it was precisely during these years that he began to take an interest in extremist materials. «He was drawn into an online world of grievance and conspiracy, conspiracy theories [...] He was swayed by IS's

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<sup>431</sup> Kim Barker, Joseph Goldstein and Michael Schwirtz, *Finding Rootless Life in the U.S., Sayfullo Saipov Turned to Radicalism*, "The New York Times", 1/10/2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/01/nyregion/sayfullo-saipov-truck-attack-manhattan.html>

<sup>432</sup> Ibidem.

extensive messaging, much of which was produced to look like legitimate, informative news programming». <sup>433</sup>

The investigations were supported by Saipov himself, who declared that he was inspired to accomplish the attack by several ISIS' propaganda videos. Among them, the terrorist gave particular relevance to one in which Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi incited Western Muslims to respond to the killing of Muslims in Iraq. Among the other relevant audio-visual contents, the authorities highlighted videos dealing with bomb making instruction, beheadings, shootings of prisoners, and prisoners run over by a vehicle. Among the images, there were many related to ISIS, including images of al-Baghdadi. <sup>434</sup>

As in the cases of Choudhry and Chesser, online propaganda had a devastating effect on Saipov and was instrumental in reconstructing the social identity of the Uzbek citizen. According to Silber and Bhatt, prolonged exposure over time to radical political campaigns about conflicts in Muslim states of belief, the war on ISIS in the case of the Uzbek, can lead to feelings of moral outrage. These feelings gets an even stronger echo in individuals like Saipov, who already experience identity crises, leading them to a feeling of "born again" and "religious renewal", which is often based on a radical interpretation of what it means to be a Muslim in Western society. <sup>435</sup>

As argued by Peter Neumann, «no single item of extremist propaganda is guaranteed to transform people into terrorists. Rather, in most cases, online radicalization results from individuals being immersed in extremist content for extended periods of time, the amplified effect of graphic images and video, and the resulting emotional desensitization». <sup>436</sup> In this way, Saipov's online immersion in violent and radical materials has guaranteed a "mortality salience". That is an acquisition of knowledge that leads to considering death as inevitable and simultaneously makes martyrdom more desirable. <sup>437</sup>

As a matter of fact, the Internet has acted as a repository of knowledge and information never heard before. Without the Internet connection, Saipov would hardly have acquired such comprehensive and lasting exposure to extremist material. The online world acted as a *Virtual Mosque*, placing Saipov in front of questions that led him to redefine his life. As wrote earlier, «interactivity, reach, frequency, usability, immediacy and permanence that the virtual world has

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<sup>433</sup> Victoria Bekiempis, *Trial of man behind New York's worst terror attack since 9/11 details path to radicalization*, in "The Guardian", 29/01/2023. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2023/jan/29/sayfullo-saipov-trial-portrait>

<sup>434</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>435</sup> Mitchell Silber, Arvin Bhatt, *Radicalization in the West: the Homegrown Threat*, New York City Police Department, 2007, p. 30. <https://info.publicintelligence.net/NYPDradicalization.pdf>

<sup>436</sup> Peter Neumann, *Options and Strategies for Countering Online Radicalization in the United States*, in "Studies in Conflict and Terrorism", 36(6), 2013, p. 435.

<sup>437</sup> Peter Neuman, *Countering Online Radicalization in America*, Bipartisan Policy Center, Homeland Security Project, Whashington DC, 2012, 17-18.

come to provide now heighten and mimic those processes that took place previously inside place of worship».<sup>438</sup>

Thanks to the Internet, Saipov has found its *exit strategy*, fundamental in the *Reconstruction of social identity*, second phase of the DRIA model. The jihadist ideology has allowed to obtain new existential values and to rebuild his social identity.<sup>439</sup> Adopting ideology, Saipov recognized an existential goal and a new role in the world. Video after video, photo after photo, the United States, which before appeared as a promised land able to guarantee the American Dream, became a gray and sordid place, which not only isolated Saipov, but has perpetuated and continues to perpetuate atrocities against Muslims around the world. In this sense, ISIS has taken on a contrary and resistance value. Thanks to the desensitization of violence and mortality salience Saipov acquires a *binary code mentality*<sup>440</sup> that distinguishes the world in good and evil, and those who are in this second group do not deserve mercy.

A similar dynamic is also found in the *self-identification* phase, the second step in the Silber and Bhatt model. Accepting a new political vision that encourages and justifies violence against the West leads to a radical change in Saipov's goals. Obtaining economic success now takes second place with respect to the defence of the Muslim Community.<sup>441</sup>

In this regard, the ethnic origins of Saipov have led the authorities to question the possible role that the condition in Uzbekistan may have competed in the radicalization of the terrorist. As pointed out by Rohan Gunaratna, in recent years, attacks by individuals from Central Asia have increased significantly. For example, the Halloween attack was preceded in April 2017 by the attack of another Uzbek, Rakhmat Akilov, who, like Saipov, used a truck to hit a crowded street in Stockholm.<sup>442</sup> Other attacks by Uzbeks include Abdulkadir Masharipov in Istanbul on 1 January 2017; and the attack by Akbarjon Jalilov in the Saint Petersburg metro on 3 April 2017.<sup>443</sup>

Despite this ethnic link, no real or significant connections with Uzbekistan have been found. Historically the Asian nation has been home to some Islamic organizations such as The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, affiliated with Al Qaeda, and *Hizb-ut-Tahrir*. Obviously, as in all

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<sup>438</sup> Gabriel Weimann, *New Terrorism and New Media*, p.2.

<sup>439</sup> Alessandro Orsini, *What Everybody Should Know About Radicalization and the DRIA Model*, in "Studies in Conflict and Terrorism", 46(1), 68-100, 2023, p.91.

<sup>440</sup> Ivi, p. 91.

<sup>441</sup> Mitchell Silber, Arvin Bhatt, *Radicalization in the West: the Homegrown Threat*, New York City Police Department, 2007, p. 36 <https://info.publicintelligence.net/NYPDradicalization.pdf>

<sup>442</sup> Rohan Gunaratna, *Global Threat Forecast*, in "Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses, 10(1), 2018, pp.1-6, p.4. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26349852>

<sup>443</sup> Bennet Clifford, *Radicalization and the Uzbek Diaspora in the Wake of the NYC Attacks*, Program on Extremism The George Washington University, 10/2017.

<https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs5746/files/CliffordRadicalizationandUzbekDiaspora.pdf>

contexts, also in Uzbekistan some factors can promote processes of radicalization, but in most cases, they have been irrelevant. As pointed out by a report by the George Washington University, especially in the case of the Uzbek-Americans, the factors linked to immigration and the consequent individual grievances are the starting point for political violence. In the case of Saipov, in addition to the contributions mentioned above, also the then Governor of the State of New York, Andrew Cuomo, declared that the process of radicalization of the terrorist began after arriving in the United States.<sup>444</sup>

Therefore, Saipov never met with ISIS members or other jihadists, never read extremist material, never went to a radical mosque, and never had links with islamists groups in Uzbekistan, suggesting that the Internet played a critical role once again.

Alessandro Orsini refers to the following stage of radicalization as *Integration in a revolutionary sect*, whereas Silber and Bhatt use the term *indoctrination*. The DRIA model, on the one hand, identifies this stage as the moment when individuals go from intellectual radicalization to violent political action. On the other hand, under the paradigm presented by the two American academics, jihadist militancy is the end objective, and the radical ideology of the subject is externalized. Participation in a terrorist organization, a community of like-minded fanatics, or an imagined community, as defined by Benedict Anderson, is central to both conceptions.

Saipov fulfilled this need thanks to the Internet. As stated by his attorney, the terrorist never had a real connection to ISIS but was inspired by their propaganda in various chats and other types of channels. «He watched hours and hours of video and audio and consumed other material and was convinced that ISIS was fighting for a righteous cause and that they were right in their version of Islam, and that in fact it was God’s will that he should become a martyr and commit an attack, be a mujaheddin, a warrior for Islam». <sup>445</sup>

In this regard, Internet acted as «contact point [...] a social nexus that facilitates the formation of relationships among previously unrelated entities». <sup>446</sup> The chats and forums where Saipov tracked and downloaded Islamist videos allowed an isolated and marginal individual to experience membership in a virtual community. Saipov managed to feel part of an imagined community. He felt involved in the ummah, along with his Muslim brothers and sisters, in conflict with the Western world. In addition to strengthening his beliefs, this new group identity acted as a source of dignity

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<sup>444</sup> Bennet Clifford, *Radicalization and the Uzbek Diaspora in the Wake of the NYC Attacks*, Program on Extremism The George Washington University, 10/2017.

<https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs5746/files/CliffordRadicalizationandUzbekDiaspora.pdf>

<sup>445</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>446</sup> J.R. Halverson, A.K. Way, *The curious case of Colleen LaRose: Social Margins, new media, and Online Radicalization*, in “Media, War and Conflict”, 5(2), 2012, p.240.

and personal meaning. The Internet allowed Saipov to connect and gain new knowledge in a supportive environment. Using the words of Halverson e Way in relation to another terrorist, Colleen LaRose, «easy access to ideological structures that provide some semblance of order, a renewed sense of self, and greater meaning to troubled realities». <sup>447</sup> In support of this dynamic, Pantucci's contribution is illuminating. «Many of the [lone-wolves] demonstrate some level of social alienation – within this context, the community provided by the Internet can act as a replacement social environment that they are unable to locate in the real world around them». <sup>448</sup>

Furthermore, as in the cases of Choudhry and Chesser, the contribution of Edwin Sutherlands and his *criminogenic environment theory*<sup>449</sup> is relevant. The academic claims that engaging with communities of people who share radical ideologies might help to moderate their violence and normalize their perspectives. The knowledge that there are many individuals who share his convictions has bolstered his thoughts, even though Saipov never commented on these boards. The terrorist has lost touch with reality due to her repeated exposure to the same propaganda. As Duco<sup>450</sup> also notes, spending a lot of time online may bolster both group solidarity and hostility for those outside it. In this way, the internet serves as an “echo chamber”, whereby users are more likely to engage in conversations with others who share their views due to the way that online platforms are structured.

As in the last phase of the DRIA model, *Alienation from the Surrounding World*, Saipov is spiritually isolated from reality. Imbued with ideology and a member of an imagined virtual community, he is ready to make his attack. Once again, the Internet plays a crucial role. As in the last phase of Silber and Bhatt model, jihadization, the Internet is highly relevant in organizing the attack. Saipov, in fact, as mentioned in the previous paragraphs, bases his entire project on the Issue Number 3 of the ISIS e-magazine *Rumiyah*. In particular, he referred to an article titled “Just Terror Tactics”, which focused on using a vehicle to attack civilians during major events. And what vehicle could be more suitable than the symbol of its marginality and frustration in the United States?

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<sup>447</sup> J.R. Halverson, A.K. Way, *The curious case of Colleen LaRose: Social Margins, new media, and Online Radicalization*, in “Media, War and Conflict”, 5(2), 2012, p.148.

<sup>448</sup> R. Pantucci, *A Typology of Lone Wolves: Preliminary analysis of lone Islamist terrorists*. International Center for the Study of Radicalization and Political Violence, 2011, p.34. [http://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/1302002992ICSRPaper\\_ATypologyofLoneWolves\\_Pantucci.pdf](http://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/1302002992ICSRPaper_ATypologyofLoneWolves_Pantucci.pdf)

<sup>449</sup> Edwin H. Sutherland and Donald R. Cressey, *Principles of Criminology*, 4th Edition, Chicago University Press, Chicago, 1947.

<sup>450</sup> Benjamin Duco et al., *Assessment of the State of Knowledge: Connections Between Research on the Social Psychology of the Internet and Violent Extremism*, Canadian Network for Research on Terrorism, Security and Society, 16(5), 2016.



In conclusion, Saipov represents an emblematic case of online radicalization, free of social dynamics occurring in the physical world. Starting from a social and psychological condition vulnerable to a process of radicalization, the Uzbek terrorist found everything he needed on the web. Initially, the virtual world acted as a repository of information in a sense given to it by Meleagrou Hitchens, that is, a «primary *locus* for individuals to access radicalizing materials»<sup>451</sup> essential in building a new social identity. Later, he allowed the terrorist to feel part of an imagined community capable of strengthening his beliefs and making him feel part of an “us”. Finally, it allowed Saipov to organize the attack efficiently.

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<sup>451</sup> Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens, Audrey Alexander, and Nick Kaderbhai, *The impact of digital communications technology on radicalization and recruitment*, in “International Affairs”, 93(5), 2017, p.1242.

## Conclusion

This master's degree thesis aimed to study online radicalization concerning Islamic terrorism by presenting, analyzing, and critically applying the primary academic studies regarding this phenomenon.

The research has highlighted the close link between *jihadism* and the Internet, demonstrating that the virtual world has expanded the sphere of action of terrorist organizations and allowed them to diversify their activities and adapt their strategies effectively to different contexts and target audiences. Moreover, the practical application of the academic literature to the case studies of Roshonara Choudhry, Zachary Chesser and Sayfullo Saipov provided an example of the functioning and the level of danger of online radicalization.

From the analysis, it emerged that, in a globally connected world, where virtual social interactions have primarily replaced the social processes previously developed in physical places, individuals no longer need to materially attend terrorist organizations, radical mosques, or dusty training camps in the middle of a desert in the Middle East. To date, an internet connection is all it takes to be attracted and dragged into a parallel world that can provide an ideology, an *imagined community* to feel part of, and instructions to become a *mujaheddin*. Considering this, it seems appropriate to underline the most important results from the study.

In the first place, the technological revolution that led to the birth of the Internet and the World Wide Web has radically changed the symbiotic relationship between terrorism and the media. Although the traditional media are still an essential tool for terrorist organizations to target public opinion and engage in psychological warfare, the virtual sphere has provided a ubiquitous, timeless, and global stage for jihadists' propaganda. The dependence on traditional media has weakened, and terrorist organizations can act independently, exploiting the anonymity, global diffusion and the enormous communicative power of the Internet. This trend, as demonstrated by Gabriel Weimann, began to grow in the late 1990s when less than half of the terrorist organizations recognized by the US State Department had established an online presence. To date, each terrorist group is present on a different number of virtual platforms.

In particular, radical Islamic organizations have proved extremely advanced in using new technological means. The current global nature of *jihad* and the change from a hierarchical to a decentralized structure has found in the Internet an essential tool for communicating and organizing collective efforts. Moreover, the analysis has shown that Islamists are highly effective in using any more advanced form of technology. Indeed, the more complex and encrypted technology becomes, the more it is an essential strategic tool.

The cyber-Islamic landscape, also called *Jihadisphere*, is constantly evolving in a dynamic that reflects an increasingly active role of users. While during the 1990s, the leading platforms used were static websites with top-down dynamics, in the early 2000s, the situation began to reverse, promoting websites with bottom-up dynamics, where users could share and upload materials and ideas of their production. This trend has increased further after the birth of social networks and the revolution of Web 2.0. Up to the present time, the most used platforms by Islamic terrorist organizations are social networks, forums, chat rooms, and encrypted social message applications. A special mention is given to the Dark Web, which, given its extraordinary level of anonymity and security, represents a virtual paradise for the proliferation of platforms of various types.

The analysis made it possible to understand how the emergence of these platforms and their strategic use by terrorist organizations opened new perspectives in radicalization studies. Although there is no universal agreement in the academic literature on what online radicalization is and how the virtual world affects the process towards political violence, many scholars have theorized some dynamics that can cause, promote and accelerate radicalization processes. Indeed, this phenomenon should not be understood as a homogeneous and univocal process but as a set of virtual mechanisms that, together with sociological and psychological dynamics, can lead to individuals' acceptance of political violence.

First of all, the Internet's role can be complementary or substitute to the offline world. On the one hand, as argued by Ducol, it is possible to theorize the presence of a category of extremists in which the Internet has a fundamental role in the whole radicalization process and does not need external support in the physical world. This category is called *Pure Online Radicals* and is characterized by the presence of the Internet not only in the initial exposure to radical material online but also in the gradual adoption of a set of beliefs to justify political violence. On the other hand, the Internet can act as a "reinforcer of radicalization", promoting processes of radicalization already begun in the physical world, or as a "trigger", that is, it can start the process that will later be completed in the real world.

At the first level, the spread of jihadist propaganda online has allowed the achievement of world exposure. Individuals socially and psychologically predisposed to radicalization processes can be reached and attracted by radical materials that could hardly have been found in their physical or social context. Although, as Neumann points out, no propaganda material alone can lead to radicalization, prolonged exposure to radical propaganda for long periods can lead to emotional desensitization and later radicalization. In this regard, two psychological dynamics acquire a relevant role: *moral outrage* and *mortality salience*.

Then, the Internet has led to the birth of a radical virtual milieu that reproduces the same interactive features as the one in the physical world. Virtual platforms can replace contacts of mutual support among extremists, and, in this way, the Internet can create new opportunities for radicalization, breaking down social and geographical barriers and allowing the association of individuals worldwide.

These virtual groups promote the feeling of belonging to an *imagined community*. Individuals are immersed in virtual social contexts of like-minded people in which violence and radical positions are widely accepted, and the interactions promote processes of group membership and hostility to the outside world. In this regard, *echo chambers* play a crucial role. Indeed, web algorithms promote the affinity of content and interactions, resulting in virtual spaces where radical ideology is spread and magnified. The external world and the resulting alternative visions are cut off, promoting alienation and the adoption of radical beliefs.

Furthermore, the Internet also provides all the information necessary to conduct an attack. As demonstrated in the thesis, the web is full of instructions and strategies to carry out attacks according to various levels of complexity depending on the abilities of the aspiring *mujaheddin*.

As a result, the Internet can cause, promote and accelerate radicalization processes, as it offers all the necessary information in a single virtual space, significantly reducing exposure time and acceptance compared to the physical world. Furthermore, the analysis of some relevant quantitative studies at the end of the second chapter has provided data on the level of danger posed by online radicalization. The conclusion is that although the online process seems less dangerous (regarding levels of radicalized individuals and the effects of their attacks) than traditional radicalization processes, it remains a consistent and current threat to Western democracies.

The analysis of the case studies of Roshonara Choudhry, Zachary Chesser and Sayfullo Saipov gave a practical example of the phenomenon under analysis. The union of two models of radicalization (Alessandro Orsini's DRIA model and the concept of "terrorist by vocation"; and Silber's and Bhatt's model) with the studies on online radicalization has provided a precise reconstruction of the subjects' path of radicalization. In particular, despite the differences in personal stories, the encounter with online jihadist propaganda guaranteed the birth of a *cognitive opening* in all three cases. Starting from social marginality, the virtual world has allowed the three individuals to find an *exit strategy* in radical Islamic ideology. Choudhry, Chesser and Saipov were dragged into a radical virtual world where their certainties were questioned, and their social identity was reconstructed due to the information found on the net. Later, the virtual radical milieu provided them with an *imagined community* to feel part of and a place of interaction where their radical visions were

strengthened in a virtual context of total alienation from reality. Finally, the Internet has provided strategic instructions to follow in order to complete their extremist activity.

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## Summary

This master's thesis, entitled *Terror on the Internet: A Study on Online Jihadi Radicalization*, aims to analyze the phenomenon of online radicalization concerning Islamic terrorism. The study applies the relevant academic literature to understand this highly current phenomenon's strategic, social, and psychological dynamics. The purpose of this analysis is to give an overview of the current state of research on a topic that is widely considered to be a significant threat to Western democracies.

The first chapter reconstructs the strategic use of the web by jihadist organizations for the purpose of radicalization and recruitment. Indeed, assessing online radicalization comprehensively requires knowing how these organizations utilize the Internet to spread their message. Although the advent of the virtual realm has often been linked to positive trends such as democratization, knowledge sharing, and social connection, the subsequent use of the Internet by jihadist terrorism has opened new strategic scenarios. Terrorist groups use the Net to quietly propagate hate teaching and infiltrate Western communities, spreading their ideology of violence. Islamic Jihad is not only an act of violence, but a set of educational concepts constructed and propagated by whatever methods possible.

As Bruce Hoffman argued in his seminal book *Inside Terrorism*, terrorism and media are linked in a symbiotic and intrinsic relationship. Every terrorist organization, whatever its ideology, aims to engage in psychological warfare with its enemies, and media coverage is crucial. Before the advent of the Internet, they used to rely extensively on their capacity to carry out terrorist acts that impacted public opinion and media attention if they wanted to reach a broad audience. However, traditional media have barriers that terrorist organizations cannot overcome. Indeed, journalists and news professionals have developed radio, print media, and television selection criteria that reflect specific ethical and technical standards.

Conversely, online platforms have no such constraints, allowing terrorist organizations full power over "perception management". To rephrase, they bypass the norms and constraints of conventional media and instead present themselves and their deeds on the Internet as they see fit. In this way, cyberspace has given terrorist organizations a new ubiquitous and timeliness global stage.

Terrorist organizations gained autonomy and reached a wider audience as their means of communication became more sophisticated. Terrorism has evolved with technological progress. Its practitioners have grown adept at employing cutting-edge technologies like encryption, software anonymization, and dead dropping. In addition, terrorists may remain covert because of the Internet's anonymity, which facilitates their use of forums, chatrooms, social networks, online video platforms, and simulated realities. Terrorist groups use these methods to communicate with many people without revealing their identities.



One of the first official governmental sources regarding terrorists' Internet use was provided in July 2004 by the independent National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the US, which published its conclusions in a significant report. Al Qaeda, and terrorists in general, according to the document, have significantly benefited from the development of the World Wide Web since it has made it simpler for them to gather intelligence and maintain control of their activities.

There has been a dramatic rise in terrorist online activity since then. Gabriel Weimann found that in 1998, only about half of the FTOs listed by the US Department of State had a functioning website. Nearly all of them had a web presence by the end of that same year. In 2003, the Israeli scholar found 2600 sites, and this number has expanded over the following years; in 2013, Weimann kept tabs on almost 10,000 sites. Up to the present, all currently active terrorist groups have been set up on the web using many available channels.

Salafi-Jihadi organizations, in particular, have earned prominence as significant Internet exploiters due to their proven expertise in leveraging IT for offensive operations and their ability to effectively imitate more traditional propaganda, fund-raising, and recruiting goals. The Internet, or electronic Jihad, as they call it because they need to justify their use of the Internet for their purposes, was one of the most important issues that dramatically changed the nature of the global Jihad's operations and leveraged this organization's ability to recruit people. The more sophisticated the technology, the more it was used to reach individuals and audiences all over the globe. Furthermore, since Jihad spread globally and organizations transitioned from a hierarchical to a decentralized structure, the Internet was the only tool that enabled them to interact with one another.

The variegated and complex use of the Internet by Islamic terrorist organizations led Benjamin Ducol to coin the neologism *Jihadisphere* to describe the online community of militants and sympathizers who share the adherence to a global Salafi jihadi ideology. Within this group, it is possible to distinguish three categories: passive participants, who consume propaganda content; the creators of materials, affiliated with various organizations; and the Jihobbyists, those who are part of the structural milieu and play a crucial role in the strategy to follow online.

Nowadays, the main platforms serving Jihadisphere are:

1. **Static Websites:** Terrorist groups' official websites are top-down and hierarchical, with admins sharing content with users. On these platforms, *producers* and *consumers* cannot communicate; the main aim is to spread propaganda and store radical materials.
2. **Forums and Chatrooms:** The Internet's growth allowed extremists to engage and dispute with followers in relative safety and freedom. Because of their engagement potential, these platforms quickly supplanted static jihadist websites as powerful platforms for spreading propaganda and creating online linkages.

3. **Social Networks:** The Web 2.0 revolution gave birth to social media, transforming the Jihadi organization's tactics. As argued by Eva Kohlmann, these platforms host 90% of online terrorist activities. Social Networks let users engage in discussions, share ideas, and shape their communities, providing several benefits. First, they are the most popular platforms among their target demographic, providing terrorist groups with a foothold in popular culture. Second, social networks are free, trustworthy, and accessible. Then, these platforms enable recruiters to seek out their targets, unlike prior websites. Finally, social networks are advantageous due to their simplicity of creation and IP address tracking security.
4. **Encrypted Tools:** This term refers to social networking-based instant messaging apps like Telegram and WhatsApp. Most of these solutions provide free end-to-end data encryption and multi-user conversations.
5. **Dark Web Platforms:** Some terrorist organizations use the dark web since counter-terrorism authorities monitor and hack their websites and social media accounts on the clear net. The Dark Web is a collection of unindexed, anonymous websites and services that cannot be accessed with a conventional web browser.

The first chapter goes on to describe how these platforms are used to spread propaganda for radicalization. Online propaganda generally takes the form of publications, treatises, video files, audio files, video games, images, and other forms of multimedia communication. Undoubtedly, one of the most relevant dynamics is narrowcasting, or disseminating information targeted at a specific audience section. Depending on the message and the target audience, this content acquires various characteristics. They can be designed to inform, educate, gain support, or generate feelings of frustration. To fully understand the threat, the section continues analyzing the electronic magazines Inspire (AQAP) and Dabiq (ISIS) and their contents.

The first chapter concludes with an overview of the difficulties faced by Western democracies in confronting the use of the Internet by terrorist organizations. Following an ICSR report, the thesis identifies three categories of approaches to combat this phenomenon: "hard approaches" (invasive and designed to restrict Internet material), "soft approaches" (minimal intrusion, based on counter-narratives), and "intelligence-led approaches" (blend both hard and soft strategies, based on the intelligence gathering and monitoring).

The second chapter is dedicated to analyzing the dynamics that characterize the online radicalization paths. Starting from the premise that radicalization is always a process involving complex social and psychological dynamics, the chapter opens with a presentation of the major academic studies on radicalization. In particular, using as a starting point the article *What Everybody*

*Should Know About Radicalization and the DRIA Model* by Alessandro Orsini, this section presents what can be called the *milestones* in this field of study. In order, the contributions of Fathali M. Moghaddam, Fathali M. Moghaddam, Silber and Bhatt, Marc Sageman, John Horgan, Quintan Wiktorowicz, Lawrence Kuznar, McCauley and Moskalenko, Donatella della Porta, Alessandro Orsini, and Arie W. Kruglanski, Jocelyn J. Bélanger, and Rohan Gunaratna are presented.

Among these radicalization models, two, in particular, will be used to analyze three case studies in the third chapter. These are the DRIA model by Alessandro Orsini and the Silber and Bhatt model, which will now be presented concisely.

The DRIA model was first theorized by Alessandro Orsini in his book *Anatomy of the Red Brigades* and later developed into various articles and monographs over time. The acronym DRIA summarizes four phases of a process of radicalization in which ideology takes a key role: Disintegration of Social Identity; Reconstruction of Social Identity; Integration in a Revolutionary Sect; Alienation from the Surrounding World. It is important to stress that this model is related to a peculiar anthropological type, called *terrorist by vocation*, namely a category in which terrorists have an existential purpose in the sense that they pursue the objective of feeling part of an imagined community.

The first phase starts from a series of traumas experienced by an individual that leads to a condition of *social marginality*, which must be understood as a mental state independent of social status, which occurs when the individual considers his role in society inferior to the merits and abilities attributed to him. Starting from this crisis of identity, the individual goes in search of an *exit strategy* thanks to his innate creative ability to create an alternative vision. This inner quest leads to the second phase, *Reconstruction of Social Identity*. Reconstruction is a complex process in which the individual undergoes a psychological undertaking that requires the “will to want”, or the ability to transform the inner need for change into actions. It is a *cognitive opening* that indicates the willingness to adopt a new set of beliefs and concepts. Thanks to the encounter with radical ideology, which is only one of the possible paths that the individual can take, the future terrorist acquires a new mental universe composed of various features, of which the most important is the *binary code mentality*. The radical mental universe alters the social perception of reality, and the world appears divided into two antagonistic groups: the good, composed of allies, and the evil, composed of opponents who are not people but symbols to be killed. The third phase, *Integration in a Revolutionary Sect*, marks the transition from cognitive radicalization to political violence. The individual enters into a terrorist group or begins to feel part of an *imagined community* that strengthens his beliefs towards accepting violence. Finally, the individual embarks on the final phase, *Alienation from the Surrounding World*, in which he is imbued with ideology and part of an *imagined community*, utterly detached from

reality. Social alienation promotes an anthropological transformation, as it closes all relations with the external world and, as a result, excludes visions that can contradict the radical mental universe. Murder is accepted as a solution, and the terrorist is ready to act.

On the other hand, the Silber and Bhatt model is a sequential paradigm consisting of four phases: Pre-radicalization; Self-identification; Indoctrination; and Jihadization. As in the DRIA model, the process starts from an existential crisis that leads the individual to seek a new identity, and radical ideology has a crucial role in this path. The first phase, pre-radicalization, describes the situation before ideological exposure, in which an individual is usually an average person with a completely ordinary life. Following a trauma that can have political, social or economic connotations, a cognitive opening takes shape, and the future terrorist approaches the radical ideology that begins to question his vision of the world (*self-identification*). The third phase, *indoctrination*, describes the strengthening of new individual beliefs and the adoption of ideology as a filter to interpret the world, promoted by entry into a terrorist group or into an online terrorist network. The last phase, jihadization, is characterized by the belief of jihad as a personal duty and self-identification in a mujaheddin, with the consequent predisposition to attack.

After analyzing the aforementioned milestones, the second chapter describes the phenomenon of online radicalization. The advent of the Internet has opened up new perspectives on radicalization studies. Nevertheless, while the ability of the virtual world to inspire or encourage radical pathways is amply demonstrated by a series of court documents and empirical analyses, there is no academically recognized agreement on the phenomenon and its effects on the road to political violence. The thesis, therefore, aims to present the most important contributions in this field of studies, emphasizing relevant dynamics and mechanisms.

In his renowned book *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century*, Marc Sageman made one of the first significant contributions. The scholar argues that radicalization processes are mainly explained by a bottom-up dynamic in which face-to-face relationships act crucially. In this sense, the Internet has added new life to the process, allowing virtual relationships to replace physical ones. This dynamic has not been imposed hierarchically by the leaders of the global jihad but is the result of a progressive growth of virtual relationships in everyday life. The Internet has provided minimal ideological and strategic coherence and a new space where social networks can occur that are, in part, even more effective than physical ones. In fact, the anonymity provided by the Internet enables a greater level of intimacy as individuals are concealed behind an alter ego, allowing them to experiment and then share extremist ideas and experiences in a secure environment, compared to traditional radicalization sites. Moreover, the Internet has opened the

world of radical Islamism to women, traditionally relegated to a secondary role, but who, thanks to the anonymity and global reach of the Internet, can experience a new world.

Another major academic in online radicalization is Peter Neumann, who, in his article *Options and Strategies for Countering Online Radicalization in the United States*, summarized the six most essential dynamics theorized by various academics about this phenomenon. These are the following:

- 1. Mortality Salience:** This dynamic, theorized by Pyszczynski, argues that prolonged exposure to radical online materials representing martyrdom and death increases support for brutal terrorist tactics.
- 2. Moral Outrage:** This dynamic, theorized by Marc Sageman, argues that videos, images and other extremist content can trigger mobilization to violence.
- 3. Extremist forums as “a criminogenic environment”:** This dynamic resumes Sutherland’s studies on the “criminogenic environment”, arguing that deviant positions and activities become accepted and buoyant thanks sharing positions and ideas in a common location.
- 4. Online Disinhibition:** This dynamic, theorized by Suler, claims that anonymity and physical distance guaranteed by the internet promote group hostility and polarization.
- 5. Mobilization through role-playing:** Brachman and Levine argue that using a virtual alter ego that personifies unmanaged extremist characteristics not embodied in real life leads to frustration and suffering, resulting in wanting to implement their virtual selves in the physical world.
- 6. Links to terrorist structures:** The Internet helps individuals find a virtual network of like-minded people and, at the same time, offers a pool of potential members to recruiters. Various studies, including an AIVD one, underlined this mechanism.

McKenna and Bargh made another significant contribution. The two academics argue that cyberspace enables individuals to show stigmatized social identities and connect with others with the same stigma. In a similar view, Benjamin Ducol adds that unions in stigmatized anonymous virtual communities can lead to a deindividuation process in which individuals conform actions to that of the group by decreasing the level of responsibility on themselves. These dynamics can lead to a cognitive bias in which exposure to radical materials and communities leads individuals to show their true identity. In addition, the Internet enables to search for homophily that in anonymous online subcultures can flourish. Indeed, a fundamental dynamic is the echo chamber phenomenon. Algorithms governing today’s Web 2.0 platforms foster online communities where users only engage with others who hold similar views, leading to increased ideological homogeneity and the consequent consolidation of beliefs among a relatively small group of people. Some people lose touch with reality

and the potential to evaluate other viewpoints after repeated exposure to the same information. In certain circumstances, this leads to even more extreme positions being taken. In the real world, users don't have the luxury of passively absorbing the radical content offered by algorithms and simultaneously making operational choices to look for virtual groups or other material of the same ideological mould.

Silber and Bhatt also stress the crucial role of the Internet in the processes of radicalization. The two academics argue that the virtual world can act as a support in each of the phases of their model. As a result of trauma, in the stage of self-identification, the Internet is where individuals can find initial exposure to radical material. Later, it allows them to join a terrorist group without problems of security and anonymity, but benefiting from the feelings of acceptance, approval, unity and consent. Finally, in the last phase, the Internet provides all the strategic indications to carry out an attack.

Some researchers have also described possible processes of online radicalization. In particular, Bastug, Douai and Akca highlighted several important aspects: First, people may find propaganda materials and connect with others who share their views thanks to the "accessibility and proliferation" of information. It may therefore depend on a person's "susceptibility and predisposition" regarding whether or not they experience an ideological impact from these sources. This may set off a "terrorist mobilization", where social networks assume a pivotal role since they encourages people to "share" their own experiences online, which feeds back into the initial spark by providing even more context.

In conclusion, it is crucial to introduce Benjamin Ducol's taxonomy of online radicals. The researcher postulates three categories associated with radicalization on the Internet. The first kind is the "pure online radical", in whom the Internet plays a significant role in the first exposure to radical beliefs and the eventual acceptance of belief systems that justify violent acts. The Internet is pivotal in this trajectory, from initial radicalization to eventual violent action. The second is when online activities reinforce radicalization that has already taken place away from the computer. The Internet may also serve as an "initial trigger" of radicalization, as in the case of those initially exposed to radical speech online before meeting others with similar views in person.

The second chapter continues by analyzing the phenomenon of lone wolves concerning online radicalization. After defining the phenomenon using the approach of Hamm and Spaaij used in the monograph *The Age of the Lone Wolf Terrorism*, this section uses the studies of Gabriel Weimann on the online radicalization of individual attackers. The Israeli scholar argues that lone wolves are not entirely cut off from society, but an online community provides radicalization and training. Weimann has developed a four-step model that describes this process:

- 1. Netting:** Terrorist organizations use the Internet as an undifferentiated arena where only a few individuals react favorably to radical inputs.
- 2. Funnel:** When recruiters believe that a person is ready to be recruited but still needs ideological work, they foster overexposure in order to create cognitive and social responses. The result often depends on the level of frustration and alienation of the subject.
- 3. Infection:** Alienation is complete, and the individual is driven towards self-radicalization.
- 4. Activation:** The Internet provides all the strategic guides needed to carry out an attack.

The chapter concludes by presenting some quantitative studies to understand the threat of online radicalization in practical terms. Although the danger levels are generally lower than the traditional radicalization processes, it is an extremely current threat to be combated, as witnessed by the latest European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report of EUROPOL.

The third and last chapter applies the theoretical concepts discussed in previous sections to the study of three Islamic extremists who have been radicalized over the Internet. These include Roshonara Choudhry, who tried to kill Labour MP Stephen Timms in London on May 14, 2010; Zachary Chesser, an American jihadist propagandist who tried to join as a foreign fighter Al Shabaab in 2010; and Sayfullo Saipov, who used a truck to attack pedestrians on a New York bike path on October 31, 2017. All three examples fit what Benjamin Ducol calls the “pure online radicals” category. In other words, the Internet was essential in all three incidents, both in the initial exposure to radical beliefs and in the progressive acceptance of belief systems that legitimate violent acts.

Some of the most influential academic research on the topic of internet radicalization are merged with the work of Alessandro Orsini and Silber and Bhatt to offer an appropriate and comprehensive overview. Remarkably, the works of Elizabeth Pearsons, Peter Neumann, Benjamin Ducol, Brachman and Levine, Mealeagrou Hitchens, and Gabriel Weimann get extensive coverage.

Through combining these two fields of study, it is possible to grasp the radicalization processes of Roshonara Choudhry, Zachary Chesser, and Sayfullo Saipov completely, highlighting not just the importance of the internet but also the psychological and social variables at play. Each extremist is analyzed using the same methodology. First, the dynamics, planning, and legal repercussions of terrorist acts or online extremist activities are dissected. After that, an examination of each case study’s life background and online radicalization process is presented.

In summary, in all three cases, starting from a situation of social marginality resulting from different traumas but at the same time extremely similar in their psychological value, the three extremists meet the world of radical Islam through the Internet and from that moment on, they are dragged in a radical virtual galaxy. While Choudhry and Chesser fell under the ideological influence

of Al Qaeda, particularly the cleric Anwar al-Awlaki, Saipov, given its temporal connotation, fell under the influence of ISIS propaganda. Although, as Neumann argued, no piece of propaganda itself can turn an individual into a terrorist, exposure to radical material has resulted in the three case studies of feelings of moral outrage and mortality salience. At first, the Internet acted as a primary place to access radical material and started a cognitive opening. The key values of their previous lives were questioned. The online encounter with radical Islam opened an identity crisis that, as in the DRIA model, led the three individuals to rebuild a new identity thanks to the jihadist exit strategy. As pointed out by Gabriel Weimann, the interactivity, frequency, immediacy and permanence provided by the online world imitate the processes that previously occurred in places of worship. Unlike mosques, these materials can be consulted anywhere, anytime and anonymously. As Pearsons pointed out, Roshonara Choudhry, thanks to these qualities, has managed to overcome the gender barrier in Islam. In a similar way, Saipov and Chesser have found a safe and anonymous way to experience terrorist ambitions that would have been difficult to find in their social contexts.

Moreover, as in the *Integration phase in a Revolutionary Sect* of the DRIA model and the *indoctrination* phase of the Silber and Bhatt model, the three extremists joined a terrorist group, only instead of being physical, were virtual and imagined. Participation in online jihadist networks has allowed them to feel part of an imagined community of global jihadists. Their beliefs were reinforced by previously illustrated dynamics, such as criminogenic environment theory, echo chambers, feelings of affinity and homophily in contrast to the outside world, and Mobilization through role play. Choudry, Chesser and Saipov, as in the DRIA model, are completely alienated from reality and live in a virtual imagined community where social interactions with other forums members continually strengthen their beliefs. The lack of a link with external reality makes it impossible to disprove their new vision. Physically and psychologically confined to their ideology and the virtual world, the three terrorists are ready to carry out their attack or join Al-Shabaab in the case of Chesser. Later, as in the last phase of the Silber and Bhatt model, jihadization, the Internet provided the three extremists with all the strategic and tactical information to carry out their activities.

In conclusion, Choudhry, Chesser and Saipov are emblematic examples of a new generation of jihadists. They do not need to frequent radical mosques or dusty training camps in the middle of a desert in the Middle East. They just need an Internet connection to be one click away from a radical universe to discover.