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Jihadist Mobilization, Undemocratic Salafism, and Terrorist Threat in the European Union

Fernando Reinares

The most recent jihadist mobilization observed since 2012 across countries belonging to the European Union (EU) is related to the ongoing like-minded insurgencies in Syria and in Iraq. However, the levels of this jihadist mobilization, from all accounts in a receding sequence throughout last year, reached unprecedented peaks inside the EU. Since the formation of al-Qa’ida in 1988 and the subsequent development of global jihadism as a worldwide movement, no other jihadist mobilizations—in connection, for example, to conflicts such as those which took place in Bosnia, Chechnya, Afghanistan, Iraq between 2003 and 2007, Somalia, or northern Mali—raised to similar heights within the EU.

In order to explore and understand both the extent and scope of this most recent jihadist mobilization affecting EU nations, it seems reasonable to rely on data about foreign terrorist fighters as a good indicator. It has been empirically established, precisely with respect to previous jihadist mobilizations, that individuals who radicalize as jihadist in the West are more likely than not to leave or try to leave the West to fight somewhere else. This trend has been explained as resulting from factors such as opportunity to easily travel to fight abroad for a longer period, availability of training to increase operational capabilities, and norms according to which foreign fighting is perceived as more legitimate.

Muslims—including in this term not only mindful followers of Islam but persons having a Muslim cultural background—from EU nations account for around one-fifth of the 27,000 to 31,000 individuals who, from 2012 to the end of 2015, had traveled to join jihadist organizations in Syria and Iraq. They went to primarily join the so-called Islamic State—between April 2013 and June 2014 known as Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIL)—but also the al-Qa’ida branch based in the former of these two countries, and other smaller entities also active in the area. However, no more than 20 million Muslims were living in EU countries, which means these are approximately 16 times overrepresented among the foreign terrorist fighters present in Syria and Iraq when compared to figures for Muslims traveling from other regions of the world.

Against the background of all these developments, the purpose of these remarks is, first of all, to reflect on differences in the levels of the most recent jihadist mobilization that can be observed between EU nations. Secondly, it aims at dealing with a factor usually forgotten when discussing the why Western European governments have problems to accommodate many among the descendants of immigrant Muslims. Finally, the essay discusses how jihadist organizations based abroad can exploit both favorable conditions for recruitment within certain Muslim congregations and a religious cleavage inside EU countries.

Towards a Differential Analysis

The unprecedented jihadist mobilization in the EU hasn’t plagued all member nations uniformly, a rather overlooked reality. Contrary to what is often taken for granted, the EU countries more seriously affected by this most recent jihadist radicalization are neither necessarily defined by having the largest numbers of Muslim inhabitants nor by having the highest percentages of Muslims as part of their total national populations. Leaving aside the case of Cyprus, because of the exceptional circumstances concurring in this divided island, Bulgaria is next among EU countries with respect to the highest percentage of Muslims as part of the total population. However, very few Bulgarians are known to have traveled to Syria and Iraq as foreign terrorist fighters.

On the other hand, Italy and Spain rank in the top five among the EU states with larger Muslim populations living inside their territories. However, figures for the number of nationals or residents in these two countries that departed to become foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq, as well as for their proportion with respect to their corresponding national populations in general and the Muslim populations in particular, are rather low. Therefore, if countries affected in a particularly serious manner by the most recent jihadist mobilization taking place across the EU are not necessarily those where Muslims register highest proportions with respect to the national populations nor of necessity those which concentrate more Muslim people, which ones are they?

The EU countries more seriously affected by this wave of jihadist mobilization surely include large nations with indeed large Muslim populations, such as France, Germany, and the United Kingdom, but also smaller nations with relatively high proportions of Muslims as part of

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their populations, as in the cases of Austria, Belgium, Denmark, the Netherlands, or Sweden. As opposed to the centuries-old Muslim population of Bulgaria or the first-generation immigrants that predominate among Muslims in both Italy and Spain, the common unifier for those other eight mentioned countries is the fact that they all have Muslim populations composed mainly of second-generations, descendants of immigrants who left their Muslim-majority homelands in Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia decades ago.

A generalized identity crisis among young, second-generation descendants of immigrant Muslims in Western Europe’s wealthiest countries appears then to lie behind the most recent unprecedented jihadist mobilization. Migrant descendants born or socialized in an EU country are often caught in an odd balance between cultures and are especially prone to identity crises connected with a diaspora situation. Too many of them have developed little, if any, affection for the EU nation in which they were born or raised, even though they show scant attachment to the nation from which their parents or grandparents originate. Jihadist propaganda offers an extreme, violent solution to these people’s identity conflicts, luring them with a different concept of nation: the nation of Islam as promoted by Islamic State but also al-Qa’ida.

Policy Failure, but Also Salafism

What the figures on foreign terrorist fighters suggest is that the EU countries in general and Western European governments in particular have a serious problem in accommodating a more than significant portion of second-generation Muslims amidst their heterogeneous and pluralistic societies. Their institutions and civil society entities are failing to persuade thousands of young second-generation Muslims—irrespective of their socioeconomic and educational background, which is no key to predict the appeal of jihadist attitudes and beliefs—that their religious identity is compatible with their identity—or multiple identities—as citizens of liberal democracies. Neither a multiculturalist approach, such as the one long pursued in United Kingdom, nor the pervasive assimilationist policies adopted by France, has succeeded.

But flawed institutional policies and inadequate performance of civil society entities are not alone to be eventually blamed for the lack of accommodation experienced by considerable segments of second-generation Muslims in EU countries. Inside the Muslim collectivities themselves, dynamics towards self-marginalization and self-exclusion from mainstream open societies exist. These dynamics advocating segregation result mainly, though not only, from the doctrinal and organizational efforts of Salafist religious leaders and congregations. Efforts often transmitted by means of places of worship and in households, attracting many among young
second-generation Muslims born or raised in Western European countries but suffering from identity conflicts and in quest of meaning or structure in their lives.

While, in its traditional version, Salafism presents itself as a quietist orthodox brand of Islam, respectful to the established authority, it is also a fundamentalist and politicized religiously-based ideology. Actually, Salafism as a rigorist understanding of the Quran and the Hadith leads its followers to believe that liberal democracy is *haram* or prohibited from an Islamic perspective, that there is an intrinsic incompatibility between Islam and democracy, and that Muslims living in majority non-Muslim countries should actually resist social integration and behave in such a way as to drastically restrict and regulate, particularly but not solely when it comes to women of their own closed communities, interaction with the rejected surrounding society—presented in typically antagonistic terms as a secularized and impure infidel environment—in order to avoid corruptive influences and thus affirm what they claim to be the true faith of the Prophet Muhammad and the pious predecessors.⁴

This all implies a very serious middle to long-term challenge to the basic social cohesion constitutive of Western European nations, added to other socio-political antagonisms. Not only because Salafist congregations and organizations established in EU nations purposefully reach out to Muslim immigrants or Muslim immigrant descendants whose original Northern African or Middle Eastern religious tradition derives from a distinct, far more adaptable, and tolerant understanding of Islam. Also because they are comparatively more efficient in incorporating individuals to their associations due to, among other advantages, financial support from transnational Salafist networks and ultimately from affluent public authorities and private donors located in countries of the Arabian Peninsula where, Saudi Arabia being the unavoidable reference, Salafism is the exclusive religious confession.

What the Terrorist Can Then Do

Salafism continues to grow influential among Muslims in the EU and, despite the many different interpretations of Islam existing among them, has taken a central role in conditioning how Muslims deal with their religious traditions in Western societies. This has sometimes been the unexpected or uncalculated consequence of poorly-informed decisions, eventually adopted on the spur of the moment and often in the context of broad religious policies or radicalization prevention programs, from the local level of government to the national one and including

intermediate provincial and regional authorities. Probably out of ignorance, EU politicians and policymakers, when confronted with the problem of jihadist mobilization, seem to be rather prone to think about peaceful Salafists—because they present themselves as peaceful, disregarding their fundamentalist credentials—as the best partners against violent Salafists.

A first implicit risk in this kind of partnership is that of empowering those who preach the incompatibility between Islam and democracy at the obvious expense of moderate Muslims who, also part of our own societies but loyal to our institutions as a result of conviction and not of convenience, think the opposite in this respect. This would amount to facilitating the growth of Salafism among Muslims living in Western European nations, moving people away from ordinary social life to deliberately segregated collectivities with patterns of behavior contradictory to those common in open societies. As a consequence, Muslims as a whole might be perceived with increasing distrust by non-Muslims, potentially widening an already emerging religious cleavage, as unfavorable views of Muslims appear to be on the rise in main EU countries.\(^5\)

The more Salafism as a fundamentalist version of Islam, as well as the inward-looking Salafist congregations, become attractive to identity-seeking and disenfranchised second-generations Muslims in EU countries, the more jihadist organizations based abroad will find it easier to recruit young individuals, willing to transit from orthodox quietism to jihadist terrorism, by focusing on potential recruits already familiar with Salafist tenets and using Salafist entities as gateways. Also, terrorists acting under the attitudes and beliefs promoted by the bellicose strand of Salafism, that is to say by Salafist-jihadism or plainly stated jihadism, can exploit and widen the social fracture between Muslims and non-Muslim in EU countries alluded to in the previous paragraph.

Indeed, they now do so every single time a jihadist attack is successfully perpetrated on Western European soil and it could even be said that as long as jihadist terrorism remains a credible threat for Europeans, even if perceived differently depending on the country.\(^6\) This threat can currently manifest itself, as is well known, throughout a variety of possible expressions, ranging from terrorist attacks carried out by lone actors or solely inspired cells to acts of terrorism

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prepared and executed by small groups of individuals having some kind of connection with jihadist organizations based abroad or acting on a more complex and centralized mission planned by Islamic State or al-Qaeda senior leadership. Each time a terrorist attack is conducted, jihadism is to be thought of not just as a national security problem, but also as a challenge to the fabric of open societies.

Addressing the US Administration

Though an EU strategy for combating radicalization and recruitment to terrorism exists and several EU member states have effectively implemented national programs, the unprecedented most recent jihadist mobilization evidences the insufficiency or outright failure of these efforts. Well over a decade after the bombings of 2004 in Madrid and those in London in 2005, in the wake of the attacks of 2015 in Paris and 2016 in Brussels, EU citizens are still demanding urgent measures to deal with terrorist radicalization and recruitment. Measures of their preferential requests have to do with the fight against social exclusion and poverty, the fight against radical websites, the removal of illegal contents from the Internet and online social media, communication campaigns to raise awareness among the youngest and the most vulnerable about the risks of radicalization, and the promotion of dialogue between different cultures and religion.

Interestingly for the US administration, the absolute numbers and proportions of Muslim youth who left the United States since 2012, with the aim to become foreign terrorist fighters in Syria and Iraq, resemble much more those found for Italy and Spain than those corresponding to France, Germany, United Kingdom, Austria, Belgium, Denmark, the Netherlands, or Sweden. They are more similar, in other words, to those of EU countries where the most recent jihadist mobilization as such proved to be less severe that to those far more seriously affected by the same extremism phenomenon. But this should come as no surprise, as first-generation immigrants

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and, to a lesser extent, converts—but not second-generation descendants of Muslim immigrants—still predominate among Muslims in America.\(^9\)

Despite foreign terrorist fighter figures of individuals who departed from the United States, despite the number of arrestees in the United States for activities related to the Islamic State or al-Qa’ida as the most recent jihadist mobilization initiated worldwide unfolded, and despite the terrorist incidents which occurred on the US mainland throughout the past five years—in particular, lethal attacks such as those in Boston in 2012, Chattanooga and San Bernardino in 2015, and Orlando in 2016—the US administration remains in a relatively advantageous position to face the jihadist mobilization and threat. It can work ahead, extracting lessons from its own experience but also assessing the experience of EU member states, on addressing factors that make second-generation Muslims especially vulnerable to jihadist radicalization and open societies less resilient to violent extremism.

About the Author

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