

# Contemporary Jihadism: a generational phenomenon

by Giulia Mezzetti



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Contemporary jihadism can be described as a generational phenomenon, due to the young age of those involved in it, and to specific circumstances and characteristics concerning the generation they belong to. The present paper seeks to provide an account of these peculiarities, analyzing the complex and multi-faceted phenomenon of radicalization and jihadism against the backdrop of the profound transformations that concern Western societies, and of the identity struggles linked to the process of integration and acceptance of Islam in the Western world in particular.

## 1. The young age of contemporary jihadists<sup>1</sup>

Contemporary *homegrown jihadists* from Western countries, be they so-called “foreign fighters” who travel and combat jihad where there is the concrete opportunity to establish an Islamic State – as has been the case in Syria or in Libya since the uprisings in 2011<sup>2</sup> – or terrorists that decide to hit their home countries in the West (in some cases, they are returnees from the conflict currently taking place in Syria)<sup>3</sup> – all share a feature: their young

<sup>1</sup> The scope of the present contribution is limited to “Western” jihadists only, and will not deal with jihadists originating from other parts of the world (Eastern Europe, Asia, Africa, the Middle East), their motivations, radicalization paths and type of engagement being too diverse and peculiar to be explored in the present paper. By jihadism, we mean a form of violent mobilisation in the name of a radical version of the Islamist ideology, which advocates jihad against the “blasphemous” West and the Muslim countries which act as apostates, having regressed to idolatry - “Jahiliya” (Khosrokhavar, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> The phenomenon of “foreign fighters” is not only limited to jihadism. For instance, there currently are foreign fighters within the Kurd brigades or the Free Syrian Army, who have reached the territories of Syria and Iraq precisely to fight *against* the so-called Islamic State (The Soufan Group, 2014; Dawson, Amarasingam, Bain, 2016). Nor is this phenomenon recent or just associated with the Middle East: there are scholars who compare nowadays’ foreign fighters with the estimated 40,000 foreigners, coming from a number of different countries, who joined the International brigades during the Spanish civil war (1936-1939) to fight against Franco (Jung, 2016; for a thorough comparison of foreign fighters movements and insurgencies, see Malet, 2013). With specific reference to jihadist foreign fighters, their first appearance dates back to the war in Afghanistan led by jihadists against the Soviet Union (1979-1989); since then, jihadist insurgencies have always profited from the inflow of fighters originating from different countries. For instance, foreign fighters were present among jihadists in war-torn Bosnia and Serbia (1992-1995) and during the conflict in Iraq that started in 2003 (Roy, 2016). However, what represents a particularly striking novelty about today’s jihadist foreign fighters is their sheer number.

<sup>3</sup> “Homegrown terrorists” and “foreign fighters” are closely intertwined manifestations of contemporary jihadism. Actually, they can be depicted as two sides of the same coin: even those who have not travelled to Syria to “carry out” jihad, have either attempted to leave their home countries to join the jihadist cause, or have in any case been extremely active within what experts call the “jihadisphere”, i.e. the web of websites and social media which creates and spreads jihadist propaganda. This is all the more the case since 2016, when, due to the self-proclaimed Islamic State’s increasing territorial losses and defeats on the ground, its leaders’ called upon jihadists in the world not to join them in Syria any more, but to perpetrate attacks in their countries, with any possible means (see the proclaim issued in May 2016 by Al Adnani, IS’ chief propagandist, eventually hit by a drone strike later in 2016: <https://www.memri.org/tv/isis-spokesman-abu-muhammad-al-adnani-calls-supporters-carry-out-terror-attacks-europe-us> ). At the same time, it is true that not all those who joined the jihadist insurgency in Syria did so in order to kill, fight or commit violent actions: many have left with the “romantic desire” to save their “brothers” persecuted by the Syrian regime (Khosrokhavar, 2015). Indeed, some who have migrated to the self-proclaimed Caliphate do not think it is correct to carry out attacks in their home country

age. What is striking about the profiles of the adherents to the present new “wave” of jihadism is precisely their relative heterogeneity and the impossibility to identify a “profile” of would-be jihadists; however, while they may differ in manifold aspects, one of the few characteristics they all have in common is their youthfulness. Contemporary jihadists are overwhelmingly in their twenties (The Soufan Group, 2014; The Soufan Group, 2015; Bouzar, Caupenne, Valsan, 2014). Some are even younger: among those having joined (or having attempted to join) the self-proclaimed Islamic State in the territories between Syria and Iraq, there are many teenagers and adolescents (The Soufan Group, 2014; Thomson, 2014; Saltman & Smith, 2015). Only a residual percentage of the estimated 5,000 Westerners (The Soufan Group, 2015) that have reached the territories under the control of jihadist groups concerns persons aged more than 30 or 40, according to the most recent reliable information (The Soufan Group, 2015; Roy, 2016)<sup>4</sup>.

Of course, it is only an extremely small fraction of Western societies’ youths that is engaged in jihadism. However, such a fraction seems to keep growing, and Westerners involved in jihadism have never been as many as during this present phase of jihadism, which dates back to the aftermath of the so-called “Arab Springs” and culminates with the creation of the self-proclaimed “Caliphate” in Syria and Iraq and the perpetration of terrorist attacks in different areas of the world<sup>5</sup> (see below for a brief description of what is meant by “new jihadism”). This state of affairs compels us to reflect upon the possible reasons why the jihadist ideology appeals to Western societies’ youths. Indeed, contemporary jihadism appears to be taking the form of what Olivier Roy called a “generational revolt” (Roy, 2015; 2016). Therefore, in order to better understand why it is mostly youngsters who are driven to radicalize and embrace jihadism’s violent extremism, it appears pertinent and promising to consider the *age* and *generation* variables among the most prominent explaining factors of the complex dynamics at play in jihadist radicalization processes. The present contribution squarely aims at analyzing contemporary jihadism as a *generational* phenomenon.

## 2. A generational phenomenon

It is possible to qualify contemporary jihadism as a *generational* phenomenon under different points of view. A first level of analysis concerns the inherent characteristics per-

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(Thomson, 2014) and condemn the attacks committed in the West between 2015 and 2016 (Thomson, 2016). Many reached the Syrian territories controlled by jihadist militias just in order to be able to finally live under the strict rule of Sharia, in a “proper” Islamic State, without being exposed to the “unholy society” of “Western misbelievers” (Thomson, 2014; Saltman & Smith, 2015; Hoyle, Bradford, Frenett, 2015). However, while it is important to bear in mind these distinctions, it is equally fundamental to fully realize that both those who leave their country and join jihadist groups elsewhere and those who organize terrorist attacks in their home countries, are “homegrown” jihadists.

<sup>4</sup> It is obviously extremely difficult to gather precise data about this kind of population: even the most reliable sources cannot but provide more or less accurate *guesstimates*.

<sup>5</sup> Jihadist terrorist attacks were not only perpetrated in Europe (France was hit in 2015 and 2016; Belgium in 2016; Germany in 2016) and in the United States (hit in 2015 and 2016), but also in Australia (2014), in North and Sub-Saharan Africa (Tunisia, Egypt and Kenya were hit in 2015; Nigeria and Mali are engaged in an enduring fight against jihadist organizations in their territories), in the Middle East (Turkey was hit in 2016; Kuwait in 2015) and Asia (an attack was committed in Bangladesh in 2016; Pakistan is repeatedly the target of these type of attacks).

taining to “youth” and “the young age”, per se. A second level of analysis – strictly interwoven with the first one – refers to the specific and contextual features of the present age, during which the youths involved in jihadism have grown. A third level concerns the deep transformations undergone by Western societies – particularly European ones – due to the settlement of sizeable proportions of immigrants during the second half of the Twentieth century. Such transformations have specifically concerned the accommodation of new cultures and religions by receiving societies and have resulted in a fraught relationship with Islam and Muslim migrants, which has deeply affected the self-identification processes of youths with a migratory background (often referred to as “second generation” migrants), notably the Muslim ones (Phalet, Fleischmann, Stojčić, 2012). A fourth level regards the evolutions of jihadism itself, in its ideology, goals and *modus operandi*: although there are divergent interpretations of these evolutions (see below), it is arguably possible to speak of a “new generation” of jihadism.

However, none of these aspects should be analyzed isolated from the others: it is precisely their inextricable intertwining what makes contemporary jihadism a generational phenomenon. In the following paragraphs, we will take into consideration each of these different levels of analysis on its own, while attempting to show the many ways they influence and interplay with each other. A further section will be devoted to the unprecedented role assumed by women within contemporary jihadism: up to now, the presence of female jihadists among recruits has never been as numerous and troubling. The concluding paragraph will “connect the dots” between the different aspects examined in the course of the paper, highlighting how the *age* and *generation* variables help explain the spread of jihadism among youths in an *ecological* perspective. In so doing, we will take into account the present debate on contemporary jihadism, considering the seemingly contrasting theses on the present radicalization phenomena put forward by three among the most eminent scholars of this field of study.

## 2.1 Specific features of the young age

The very first datum that research on this topic should consider is the mere young age of jihadism’s adepts. A significant proportion among them consists of adolescents (Bouzar, Caupenne, Valsan, 2014<sup>6</sup>) or persons in their early twenties, as shown by most accounts and reports. This means that, in many cases, jihadism results appealing to persons who are still going through the process of constructing and defining their own identity – i.e. who they are, what they want to do or become in life, what inspires them, what they like

<sup>6</sup> Dounia Bouzar is a French researcher and the founder of CPDSI, a private consultancy firm and research centre on radicalization and de-radicalization (Centre de Prévention contre le Dérives Sectaires liées à l’Islam - <http://www.cpdsi.fr/>), which was contracted by the French government between 2014 and 2015 in order to provide assistance to the families of young girls and boys who had left for Syria or were about to leave. However, it was up to the families’ will to contact the Centre in order to ask for assistance in “de-radicalizing” their children. Therefore, the analysis it conducted on the cases it treated are based on a self-selected sample, mostly composed by middle or upper class families (Bouzar, Caupenne, Valsan, 2014). This introduces a bias in the gathered data, as, for instance, they do not include youths having become jihadists that do not have stable, orderly families or come from poorer and more deprived areas.

and dislike, what are their points of reference, etc. This is indisputably a period in life during which one's own preferences and interests are extremely malleable, flexible and fickle – and more exposed to risks of outer manipulation. For some, it is marked by fragilities; for others, by low levels of consciousness and information or little awareness of the separation between reality and imagination. The quest for adventure and for living “extreme” experiences is also more characteristic of young ages.

It is precisely this type of fragilities and variability in interests and tastes that the jihadist propaganda exploits, both via social network and through its video and content production. A study (Bouzar, Caupenne, Valsan, 2014) traces a first tentative categorization of young persons who got involved in jihadism via the internet, unveiling how jihadist propaganda identifies its potential “victims” and proposes “customized” contents based on their characters and personal traits. Let us briefly analyze it:

- 1) a first group is composed by adolescents who feel vulnerable, physically or psychologically, and have often lost a loved one (a relative or a friend) before the start of their process of radicalization. They are offered warm welcome and protection by recruiters, who subsequently convince them to join the jihadist cause. These young people often declare they want to “save” the loved one they have lost, adopting the apocalyptic language deployed by jihadist propaganda contents, which speak of the “imminent end of the world” and of the imperative to “die in the holy land of Sham” (i.e. the Levant) to secure a place in paradise;
- 2) a second group consists of adolescents who feel a predisposition to be helpful and altruistic; they are often interested in humanitarian causes and wish to become doctors or nurses in their future. Recruiters show them the tortures endured by the Syrian people due to the atrocities perpetrated by the Assad regime, and then convince them to leave for Syria in order to “help the Syrian people”. This humanitarian sentiment is akin to a form of “revolutionary romanticism”, and often turns into disillusionment, once the reality of the situation on the ground has been acknowledged, (Khosrokhavar, 2015);
- 3) a third group is made up of male youths who feel the need to demonstrate they are “tough men”, “real soldiers” and want to challenge themselves with the experience of war – many of them had previously failed the psychological tests foreseen by the army admission procedure, and thus could not join the army;
- 4) a fourth group is composed by young people who want to feel “almighty”, by “imposing sharia to the entire world” – often, before starting their jihadist “career”, these persons had perilous conducts, adopting behaviors able to make them feel immortal and invincible (dangerous drive, drug or alcohol abuse...).

The individuals belonging especially to the third and fourth group seemingly manifest a dire need to exercise violence. The linkage between adolescence and violence does not only concern jihadism and its most violent manifestations (i.e. the self-proclaimed Islamic State). Indeed, in their cultural consumption, today's teenagers are offered and have the opportunity to practice unprecedented levels of violence. In other words, violence – and more importantly, its aesthetization – entirely belongs to nowadays’ “youth culture”, and

is manifest also in contexts which have no relation with Islam. For instance, *banlieuesards* (young people from deprived neighbourhoods) are used to the everyday violence they see practiced – or which they practice themselves – within gangs and forms of organized crime. Most of those who committed attacks in Europe between 2015 and 2016 had criminal records and had served prison sentences for being involved in petty crimes (thefts, aggressions, drug dealing...) <sup>7</sup>. For these persons, the attraction exerted by Jihadism appears to be motivated precisely by the violence it preaches. In these youths, the jihadist ideology seems to legitimise, by “sacralising” it in retrospect, their pre-existent “need of violence” – something that, often, they have already practiced in other forms, through gang membership, for instance. Indeed, significant similarities have been found between the motivations that encourage young people to become part of extremist religious groups and of criminal groups. These similarities lead to the hypothesis that jihadist radicalisation is a *consequence* of the entry in violent groups, rather than the cause (Dandurand, 2014), meaning that many individuals are driven to adhere to violent ideologies (like the jihadist one) after joining a violent group, and not by their prior interest in that ideology. What seems to play a crucial role is the people’s personal inclination towards violence.

This is the reason why some scholars (Roy, 2016; Geisser, 2015) plea for a study of jihadism and of jihadist violence in crosscutting and comparatively terms, seeking the similitudes and the commonalities between different forms of youth violence. For instance, it is arguably possible to correlate the aesthetic of violence expressed in the recent jihadist terrorist attacks with that of the recurring mass shootings in the United States, of the attack committed by Anders Breivik in Oslo and Utoya in 2011 or the one carried out by Ali Sonboly in Munich in 2016, as they all seem to share the same matrix of “theatralized” violence. Such an aesthetization of violence represents the premise for becoming recognised as a “negative hero” as an extreme form of self-realization (Khosorkhavar, 2014).

For those who are driven towards jihadism by their preceding “need of violence”, the Islamic State offers exactly the opportunity to exercise such violence. It is no coincidence that the Islamic State’s propaganda videos contain images and references to popular videogames such as *Call of Duty* and *Grand Theft Auto* – known for their violent contents. Jihadist videos also employ a language similar to that of *banlieues* gangs, imbued with its “codes of honor” (Kepel, 2015). Part of the popularity and the appeal of the Islamic State certainly lies in its aesthetics of violence and in the unparalleled levels of violence it exercises. Roy (2016) claims that this is also the reason why the Islamic State can dispose of a much more numerous “reservoir” of potential recruits in the West compared to al Qaeda in the past: Al Qaeda did not “offer” the same possibility to practice violence *per se*, as the Islamic State does. According to this interpretation, those who are interested in violence

<sup>7</sup> Consider, for example, the cases of Mohammed Merah (Toulouse attacks, March 2012), Mehdi Nemmouche (Bruxelles attack, May 2014), Chérif and Said Kouachi and Amedji Coulibaly (Paris attacks, January 2015). The turbulent lives of these individuals all have in common various episodes of delinquency and violence, as well as periods of detention in jail.



in the first place could not find in Al Qaeda the “adequate” satisfaction of their “needs”, as the violence practiced by Al Qaeda did not reach the same levels as those practiced by the Islamic State.

The focus on youths’ need to express violence and on the type of communication conveyed by jihadist networks allows us to consider their agency. It is fundamental to bear in mind that these youths are not just “victims” of “manipulators”: we should not forget their individual agency, which made them interested in the jihadist propaganda in the first place. In considering so, we should properly take into account the dimensions of the “communicative universe” in which these persons are immersed, on one hand, and which they contribute to shape, on the other. Jihadism is more likely to attract very young people because the language its propaganda skilfully makes use of is the one of “digital natives”. Precisely digital natives are more familiar and more included in the specific communicative world of jihadism networks. The language used by jihadist propaganda taps into these youths’ imaginary and usual cultural consumption. However, radicalized youths do not just passively absorb propaganda contents: because of their familiarity with jihadists’ methods and styles of communication, they are also “better suited” to show interest in propaganda contents in the first place and to subsequently diffuse, modify and enrich them. In this sense, their agency does play a role in the shaping of the “jihadi world” and contributes to its “plausibility” (Introini & Mezzetti, 2017).

A further observation to be related to the young age of these persons concerns specifically those with very poor educational achievements or those who are school dropouts. Because of their low levels of education, these persons might lack the instruments to develop a critical thinking. The years spent in education are pivotal for developing critical thinking and for acquiring the capability to go more in-depth and look beneath appearances, i.e. the only resources against bigotry, categorizations and simplistic accounts of global and complex phenomena. Indeed, the latter are the type of accounts heralded by jihadists (just as by xenophobes and white supremacists): within their propaganda and their agenda, they propose a vision of the world as if it was divided in two, with “the good” on one side (jihadist Muslims) and “the bad” (the West and the rest of Muslims, who are not considered to be “zealot” enough) on the other side. Therefore, because of their poor education and relative inexperience, these youths might be more at risk of “falling into the trap” of believing to Manichean and over-simplified visions of the world, such as those put forward by jihadist groups.

By purporting this binary division of the world between “us” and “them”, considered as enemies, jihadists impose a strict code of conduct and a rigid set of rules. Such an affirmation of authority represents a further motive of the fascination that jihadism exerts, according to Farhad Khosrokhavar (2015). This scholar hypothesizes that today’s “authority crisis”, i.e. the dilution and the dispersion of parental presence, might be one of the factors paving the way for the desire to take part in the “jihadist endeavor”. In many cases, what these youths are looking for is clear and well-defined authority figures, instead of the

great freedom they are granted in nowadays' Western societies. In the eyes of these adolescents, the charisma, the force and the capacity to "rule" displayed by the self-proclaimed Islamic State leaders seem able to fulfil this need.

Lastly, a significant feature related to the young age – both in general terms and with specific reference to radicalization and jihadism – is the salience of the group of peers within the socialization of youths. The analysis of the stories of a number of jihadists sheds life on the paramount importance of the group of peers in their lives – and on the symmetric dysfunctionality of these persons' families. As in the cases for Mohamed Merah, the Kouachi brothers and Mehdi Nemmouche, the father is often an absent figure in young jihadists' families. Moreover, groups of siblings appear overrepresented within jihadist networks: such overrepresentation "appears too systematic to be anecdotic" (Roy, 2016 – our translation) and would deserve further investigation. The group of peers seems to become a substitute for the family or its surrogate. The dynamics of group's pressure to conformism may help explain the adhesion to jihadism – especially considering the very young age of the group members, an age when the "others'" judgment is crucial for one's self-esteem and may exert a strong influence on one's actions. In any case, the importance of the group of peers and the recurring presence of siblings represent supplementary evidence of the *generational* dimension of the jihadist phenomenon.

## 2.2 Today's Western society

Some aspects of contemporary Western culture provide a crucial background against which radicalization and violent extremism take place. Indeed, the spread of radical behaviors and beliefs is facilitated and may actually be even catalyzed by the new social conditions that characterize the present era in the West (Introini & Mezzetti, 2017; Dawson, Amarasingam, Bain, 2016) – which has been variously defined as "late modernity" (Giddens, 1991), "risk society" (Beck, 1992), or "liquid modernity" (Bauman, 2000). We refer specifically to the "crisis of sense" that followed globalization processes. The latter would have opened the until-then closed political, social and cultural systems of Nation States, depriving individuals of the usual social and institutional reference points and frameworks. In other words, due to the transformations induced by globalization, people would have lost their "ontological security" and especially the possibility to "orderly" plan their lives within the usual coordinates of meaning provided by societal norms and institutions. The latter suffer from a loss in legitimacy, which translates into relativism, individualization and the privatization of one's quest of sense. These trends are reinforced by the unprecedented possibility to encounter different – even faraway – cultures and to be exposed to a multiplicity of codes of behaviour, which globalization and migrations bring along. Every single individual must then "decide for himself", and must be ready to run all the risks entailed by this decisional autonomy – while this task was previously fulfilled by "society". This paves the way for the opportunity to continually experiment with one's own Self: against this backdrop, even something that might have once appeared "exotic"



(like jihadism) ends up becoming a “possibility among others” to experiment (Introini & Mezzetti, 2017).

This context jeopardizes or significantly weakens the roles of traditional agencies of socialization (such as the family and the school) in transmitting rules, values and social norms and in helping younger individuals plan their lives. The *impasse* faced by parental authority might paradoxically push the most vulnerable youths – especially those who are still going through their process of self-construction – to frantically seek a substitute source of authority and orientation, as discussed earlier (Khosrokhavar, 2015). In addition, the freedom to decide and experiment that has now become possible in contemporary Western societies might scare, as it leaves the individual with no reference points whatsoever. The “easy recipe” offered by jihadism, with its set of severe rules about what is licit (*halal*) and illicit (*haram*) and its rigid codes of honour, might fill the “void of authority” perceived in contemporary Western societies, thus proving capable of providing guidance and reference points.

The current “crisis of sense” coincided with what has been broadly defined as the “end of grand narratives” (Lyotard, 1979), i.e. the waning of the great ideologies that had shaped the West, that no longer seem suitable for providing any guidance or orientation, having lost their capability to account for today’s social reality. In the view of many, ideologies’ “unfulfilled promises” to build a better and fairer future opened the door to a widespread disillusionment in politics, which might even culminate in forms of nihilism.

It is precisely a *nihilistic* attitude that seems to characterize Westerners’ involvement in jihadism<sup>8</sup>. In stark contrast with previous forms of revolt and rebellion (such as those in the ‘60s and in the ‘70s), Western jihadist do not seem to live their “endeavour” as a utopic one: they do not aim at constructing a new world, nor are they interested in the future, as they only show attraction for destruction, annihilation, slaughter. While Middle Eastern jihadists do have a political objective (building a concrete, territorially-anchored Islamic State), Westerners joining jihadism and carrying out violent attacks seem to lack one. Actually, there is a distinctive linkage with death in the mindset and *modus operandi* of today’s jihadists. For instance, as argued by Olivier Roy (2004; 2016), choosing kamikaze operations for carrying out terrorist actions means having no political objective, except for disseminating terror. Those involved deliberately seek death, either by killing themselves or by attempting to be killed by law enforcement officials: they have no “plan B” for escaping and continuing their activities after the attack they are about to carry out. Death is not an accident, but the ultimate aim of their actions, just as violence is not a means in order to reach a political objective: violence is intended *per se*, the very end of the whole endeavour (Roy, 2016). This makes any kind of negotiation or political solution impossible. In this sense, there is no *political* dimension in Westerners’ interest in jihadism (even

<sup>8</sup> As already mentioned (note n.1), the drivers and motivations of jihadist from other parts of the world – which might on the contrary be of a genuine *political* nature (contrary to Western jihadists’ intentions – see the debate between Olivier Roy, François Burgat and Stéphane Lacroix – [savoirs.ENS.fr](http://savoirs.ens.fr), 13 May 2016) – will not be discussed in the present paper.

if their actions do certainly have political consequences). Their violence and their lack of a political objective to build a new utopia represent an extreme manifestation of nihilism.

The traits of today's youth "culture of violence" – which we have discussed earlier – are axiomatically interwoven with the nihilism and the individualism that characterize present Western societies, just as the "quest of authority" might represent a paradoxical consequence of nowadays' absence of rigid societal rules and of the disappearance of great political ideologies – as mentioned above. The features of "the youth" are inevitably contextual to each time period and depend on the latter's traits. Indeed, "it is fair to say that no previous generation of young people, especially immigrant youth, have borne the combined impact [of this combination of factors and features] to the same degree" (Dawson, Amarasingam, Bain, 2016: 8).

With regard to nowadays' globalizing dynamics examined at the beginning of the present section, there is one last relevant remark to consider. Globalization favours the diffusion of radicalization phenomena through one of its most salient features: interconnectedness. Indeed, "the local and the global are increasingly merged, where global conflicts and grievances receive attention every day in the media and penetrate into every home. We now worry about what is happening to people continents away" (Dawson, Amarasingam, Bain, 2016). This is made possible first and foremost by the Internet – often quoted as the epitome and the emblem of the dramatic change prompted by globalization, as it enables the dematerialization of geographical and temporal distances as well as the opportunity to immediately connect and communicate with peers – whose important influence has been mentioned above.

### **2.3 Identitarian cleavages: the "deculturation" of Islam and the birth of and "oppositional identities"**

The scientific literature on the topic of violent radicalization agrees that it is impossible to identify the "typical profile" of would-be jihadists. It has equally proved extremely difficult to define univocal "pathways" or "models" of radicalization<sup>9</sup> referred to members of jihadist organizations such as Al Qaeda. Indeed, scholars who have embarked on such an endeavour show wariness in listing a fixed set of deterministic "indicators" or in depicting clear-cut trajectories of radicalization (Christmann, 2012).

However, there are two critical recurring traits within the jihadist "population". The first recurring trait is to be found in the composition of such population, which is made up of two main groups: "second-generation" migrants of Muslim affiliation, whose parents migrated from Muslim countries to Western ones, and, in a smaller proportion, young converts – who are often "second-generation" migrants themselves, but descending from migrants with different ethnic origins and religions, other than the Muslim one (Thomson,

<sup>9</sup> Within the vast literature on the topic, see for instance McCauley & Moskaleiko, 2008.

2014; 2016). There are very few jihadists belonging to the first or the third generation of migrants.

The second recurring trait has to do with the specific migratory background of these people: among “second generation” migrants of Muslim affiliation, there is an over-representation of those with Maghrebian origin – and an under-representation of persons with Turkish migratory background. This is true for France, Belgium, the Netherlands and Germany (McCants & Meserole, 2016; Kepel, 2015; Kepel & Rougier, 2016; Roy, 2016)<sup>10</sup>.

Therefore, the study of contemporary radicalization phenomena cannot do without a thorough examination of the dynamics of migrant integration processes, with specific consideration of how such processes affected migrants’ descendants. Arguably, a scrutiny of the conditions of the so-called “second-generation” migrants – especially those with a Muslim cultural and religious background – is key to the comprehension of the spread of jihadism, just as much as the consideration of the above-mentioned characteristics of today’s generation of youths. Furthermore, because radicalization processes and jihadism mostly concern young people belonging to Muslim “second-generation” migrants (or young converts, often with other migratory backgrounds), they should be considered *generational* phenomena within the realm of migrant integration processes, for reasons pertaining specifically to the dynamics of migrants’ inclusion and acceptance into society.

The present section of the paper describes how the context of emigration affected the practice of religion and the self-identification processes of young people having a migratory and a Muslim background, with a view to shed light on the mechanisms lying behind the spread of Islamic fundamentalism and ultra-orthodox communities (i.e. Salafism) within European and Western societies. This will allow us to better understand the relationship between the diffusion of Islamic fundamentalism and the development of jihadist radicalisation processes.

### *The “deculturation” of religion*

Let us then try to understand why second-generation Muslims and young converts may be more exposed to the appeal of jihadism – and why specific ethnic groups in particular appear more “permeable”. As Olivier Roy argues (2004, 2008, 2016), these two categories have lost the “culturally-rooted religion of their parents”. Second-generation Muslims’ practice of religion may profoundly differ from that of their parents – first-generation Muslims. The latter experienced the practice of their religion primarily in their home country, where Islam is part and parcel of the country’s culture (just as Christianity is part and parcel of European countries’ culture and history) and where, in turn, Islam is

<sup>10</sup> The case of the UK is very different, as it received only very few migrants from North-African countries. Muslim migration to the UK mostly originated from former British colonies in the Indian sub-continent and, in smaller proportions, from some sub-Saharan countries (e.g. Nigeria or Somalia). Therefore, the overwhelming majority of British jihadists with a migratory background are of south-Asian or sub-Saharan origin. However, some mechanisms that are observable for second-generation Muslims with a Maghrebian origin hold true also in the case of second-generation Muslims with Pakistani origin, for instance. See the sub-section “The deculturation of religion”.

imbued with that country's local traditions and cultural connotations. Each "universal" religion is practiced differently in different local and linguistic contexts: over centuries, religions gained local cultural anchoring, acquiring some of the locally specific cultural habits, and, in turn, becoming a part of the local cultural landscape. The kind of Islam practiced by first-generation Muslims is that of their country of origin: for them, Islam belongs to the cultural and social landscape of the place where they were born. This is not the case of second-generation Muslims: Islam does not belong to the "ambience" of any of the Western countries in which they have been growing up. Indeed, the diffusion of Islam in the West marked a significant novelty: "its complete disconnection from a concrete and contextual culture" (Roy, 2004: 20 – our translation). Thus, to second-generation Muslims, Islam is not socially or culturally "obvious" or "self-evident", as it does not belong to the cultural and social landscape of Western countries.

This makes the intergenerational transmission of traditional values – be they religious and/or cultural – between first-generation migrants and their children more difficult in the context of emigration. In the West, first-generation migrants' culture and religion lack social evidence and social support, a circumstance which represents a significant obstacle in transmitting norms and habits. While in the countries of origin their children would be "passively" exposed to those cultural-religious norms and habits, this is not the case in the country of emigration, where second-generation migrants are exposed to different and multiple cultural codes and practices. Furthermore, migrants' children reportedly often feel as if they have been caught in a trap, or in a limbo: on one hand, they cannot belong to their parents' country, which they do not know or like; on the other hand, they do not feel accepted in the country emigration, and they perceive their cultural roots as something they are constantly reminded of, as an inescapable burden (Arslan, 2010).

These processes – which have been described as the "deculturation" of religion (Roy, 2004; 2008; 2016) – favour the disruption of first-generation migrants' traditional system of values in the context of emigration: countries of origin's traditional social structures and cultural codes cannot simply be "imported" in the country of emigration. Indeed, migrants' settlement and incorporation into Western societies does not correspond to the mere importation of a population that would easily preserve the habits of the country of origin's society. This is all the more the case when migrants and their children find themselves segregated in particularly deprived neighbourhoods, where other dynamics, connected to poverty, unemployment, and a fragmentation of the social fabric and of solidarity ties, play a role. For instance, the spread of heroine is reported to have represented a plague in French *banlieues* in the '80s (Kepel, 2012). Drug dealing, gang violence and criminality are still recurrent features of marginalized, post-industrial areas, where migrants tend to settle and concentrate, across Europe. These phenomena pave the way for the disintegration of traditional social structures and strongly contribute to alter or hamper the maintenance of traditional norms and habits.

Moreover, preserving and transmitting cultural and religious values might be further discouraged or compromised – and identity-disruptive processes are made worse – in some social settings more than in others. Secularization is one of the main forces driving these complex processes of disruption (and reconstruction, as we shall see below) of religious practices and identities, as Western secularized societies do not accept “religion” *qua talis* in the public sphere, or fiercely reject it altogether. In other words, there is not any more room for a “cultural anchoring” of religion in Western societies. This is particularly the case of Western French-speaking societies, which are characterized by a long-established rigid interpretation of *laïcité*, which has led to conceive religion as something to be completely expelled or banned from the public space and the public sphere (materially and metaphorically). Indeed, France represents a case in point, due to the very way it perceives itself as a secular country: “*laïcité* is nothing but the most ideological and explicit form of secularization” (Roy, 2016: 115 – our translation), as, from being just a simple juridical principle of neutrality of the State, “it has become a principle of exclusion of religion from the public sphere” (ibid.). Thus, French-speaking societies are those where religion undergoes a process of “deculturation” more than anywhere else in the West, as these societies refuse religion more explicitly and perceive it as an irreducible Alterity (ibid.). Moreover, France’s political tradition has historically been wary of the development of communitarian allegiances and identities, as there should be no intermediaries between the *République* and the citizen, who is depicted in universalistic terms, deprived of any cultural or religious affiliation or belonging. In French political culture the citizen’s religion has no room or legitimation within the political arena: it is to be strictly confined to his or her private sphere and should not form the basis for communitarian claims, which are perceived as particularistic, contrary to the universality and equality of rights. All this significantly discourages the intergenerational transmission of cultural values, habits and affiliations<sup>11</sup>. This helps explain why French-speaking societies in Europe (France and Belgium) have suffered more numerous jihadist attacks (during the present phase of jihadism, from 2014 onwards) and have witnessed the highest numbers (both in absolute and relative terms) of young people joining the Islamic State<sup>12</sup>.

Some ethnic groups are subject to this process of deculturation of religion more than others, i.e. those for which the transmission of a common national language and of strongly rooted traditional cultural and religious practices cannot be guaranteed. This is the case of Maghrebians, who do not have a common language, due to the different and competitive

<sup>11</sup> According to an account by Roy (see the debate between Olivier Roy, François Burgat and Stéphane Lacroix – *sa-voirs.ENS.fr*, 13 May 2016), between the ‘70s and the ‘80s, first-generation migrants in France were not willing to transmit their cultural and religious habitus to their children, as they either feared that their children would not understand their religious practices or that teaching these practices would prevent their children’s insertion into (secular) Western societies. In other words, they deemed that stimulating their children to actively cultivate their parents’ cultural and religious habits was possibly not functional to their integration in the (strongly secularised) context of the country of emigration.

<sup>12</sup> According to Kepel & Rougier (2016:36): “North African jihadism is also permeated with a specific anti-French dimension. In this context, the French language is seen as the conveyor of the religious skepticism of Voltaire and the secularism embodied by the principle of *laïcité*, whereas English is perceived as a ‘neutral’ universal language and used indifferently by Islamists from the Arab world and the Indian subcontinent”.



dialects spoken in the Maghreb region (such as Berber), or Pakistanis, whose mother tongue – Urdu – is spoken only by a part of the population in their home country and is subject to the possibility of disappearing among those who emigrate elsewhere. On the contrary, Turks are poorly represented within the jihadist universe – largely due to strong ethnic belonging they maintain within their communities and to the robust links they keep with their native country, which enables the cultivation of a “culturally rooted” practice of religion (Roy, 2016). This is the reason why second-generation youths with a Maghrebian migratory background from across Europe – and youths with a Pakistani migratory background from the UK – appear over-represented among jihadist recruits.

In the case of converts, too, there is a complete refusal of the family’s religion (or the lack thereof). For them, embracing Islam occurs after “erasing” their previous cultural and religious affiliations: in this sense, they experience a process of deculturation, in that they discover Islam “from square one”, in a context – the Western one – that provides no social evidence and support for this religion.

### ***“Reislamisation” via individualization***

However, the fact that Islam undergoes a process of “deculturation” in contexts of emigration does not mean or imply that the practice of the Islamic religion disappears. Just because they do not merely adopt the cultural and religious models of the parents in a passive manner does not mean that new generations will simply end up following the dominant models of secularized Western societies. On the contrary, second-generation youths reformulate and create new identities, which often include the re-elaboration of the traits of the cultural and religious heritage of their parents – i.e. the first-generation.

Indeed, scholars speak about a “return” of the Muslim religion among migrants’ descendants – a phenomenon which often goes under the name of “reislamisation” (Kepel, 2012; Khosrokhavar, 1997). Indeed, such “return” derives from a different approach to religion adopted by second-generation Muslims. Due to their experience of “uprooting” and of “in-betweenness” briefly described above, many children of Muslim migrants continuously feel compelled to reflect upon their identity, their self-identification, their cultural origins and the meaning of religion and of religious practices and beliefs in their lives (Khosrokhavar, 1997). This is all the more the case considering receiving society’s general sentiments of distrust and hostility towards Muslims (Alba & Foner, 2015): these negative attitudes constantly reminds them of their “difference”, and cannot but make them feel as alien “others”. It is precisely this “othering” process that pushes young second-generation Muslims to interrogate themselves about their belonging, their religion and their religiosity. For many, such a questioning results in a “re-evaluation” of their religious affiliation or in a “discovery” of religion, followed by a firm adhesion to its tenets, in a process that represents a purely *individual* choice. As argued above, in the context of emigration, religion cannot be passively inherited from parents, nor is it “imposed” by a social control exerted by a social “evidence” of Islam. The disconnection of Islam as a religion from a concrete culture (its deculturation) obliges single actors to reformulate by themselves a religion



that is not supported by any social evidence. Second-generation Muslims' interest in religion does not derive from conformism or traditional habits, as in Western receiving society there is no cultural or social pressure "telling them" to be Muslims, as there is no Islamic social "obviousness". Therefore, any interest in religion derives from the single individual and from his/her will to "know more" about the religion and the identity he or she is constantly assigned to by the receiving society, which perceives Muslims as the "irreducible Other".

In other words, such an endeavour is *individual* because collective instances (parents, social pressure or control, imams, the State's laws) do not work in the context of emigration: they cannot say what is Islam, nor can they impose how it is to be practiced. Lacking any cultural and social evidence in the surrounding social setting, second-generation youths' religious involvement cannot but descend from an individual interest, which often derives from a preceding quest for identity. The practice of religion is thus explicitly *chosen*, re-appropriated and entrusted with a personal meaning: it is not the result of a "tradition"; on the contrary, it is interiorized on a voluntaristic and individual basis.

### *The quest for a "pure Islam" and the lure of fundamentalism*

However, the individual effort of resorting to one's cultural origins results in a religious practice that significantly differs from that of the parents, precisely because it lacks the traditional or cultural connotations of their parents' manner of practicing religion. More in particular, the hostile environment and mistrustful public opinion towards Islam make second-generation Muslims feel obliged to ask themselves "what is Islam". This questioning often takes the form of an individual endeavour in an effort to discover what is "pure Islam", over and beyond any cultural trait that religion might have taken on in its history. Indeed, the cultural traits of the religion of their parents would be deprived of their sense in the context of emigration, in a non-Muslim society; therefore, they are explicitly refused, in an attempt to isolate only what is deemed to be "essential" and "fundamental" about Islam in any historical period or region of the world. Second-generation Muslims – and converts all the more so – seek and reformulate a "universal" Islam, deprived of any social or cultural anchoring, in the quest of the "perfect", "pure" religion.

This quest induces many to despise and expunge all those elements belonging to the cultural legacy of their parents, which they consider as exogenous to the "correct" or "quintessential" practice of religion. Indeed, they reject what is specific to the parents' practice of Islam, often looking at it as "superstition" or "not religious" (Arslan, 2010). This is facilitated by the fact that the rediscovery of Islam cannot be but an individual, personal, autonomous endeavour: as such, there is no possibility and no will to passively confirm to the habits of a "community".

In sum, religion in emigration loses its cultural roots and expressly undergoes a process of "deculturation". However, this, in turn, may lead to very different outcomes. In fact, deepening one's own knowledge about "what Islam is" may mean adopting a practice aimed at

reaching dignity, plenitude and self-realization within on one's own relation with God and in a spiritual quest for meaning and salvation (Roy, 2004). As empirically demonstrated, this type of recourse to religion often follows difficult moments in life, which second-generation youths experience in many occasions, due to their living conditions and the racism and discrimination they endure (Kapko, 2007; Arslan, 2010). For these persons, true religiosity and genuine spirituality build upon the need to construct a positive identity.

However, it might also mean adopting a very different stance, which culminates in resorting to a "purified" Islam, more orientated towards the respect of norms, interpreted not as ethical values, but as a rigid code. Indeed, feeling compelled to reflect upon "what the real Islam is", the following step is very often that of "going back to the sources", adopting a completely *literal* reading of the scriptures, in order to be faithful to their presumed "exact" meaning. "True", "pure" Islam is equated with "literal": any successive interpretation is perceived as a betrayal of the authentic meaning of the scriptures and of what God prescribed to do. This is why neo-fundamentalist and ultra-orthodox preaching yields great success among "born-again Muslims", who wish to rediscover what they consider a "pure" Islam. By "neo-fundamentalism", Roy (2004) refers to any movement advocating the "return to the sources" and a strict literal reading of the texts, such as the Salafi one – which we will refer to below. In sum, it is precisely such a deculturation of religion that opens the door to its reconstruction in fundamentalist terms. In the context of emigration, there are also fewer chances to get to learn the Islamic knowledge produced by Islamic scholars in centuries, with its immense legacy and tradition of interpretation of the Quran. The impossibility to access this knowledge and the unawareness of the different streams of thought and of the rich Islamic theological literature also contribute to the "success" of literalist stances.

Particularly this fundamentalist drift should be considered as a revolt against the generation "of the fathers" and against their practice of religion: second-generation Muslims accuse their parents of following a too traditional or "folkloristic" Islam – meaning that their parents' Islam is imbued with the cultural and traditional references of their countries of origin, and is not "pure" or "intransigent" enough (Arslan, 2010). This constitutes, indeed, a further trait of a *generational* revolt (Roy, 2016).

### ***The spread of Salafism***

A major, critical driver of such a fundamentalist drift is the need to react to a hostile environment. As briefly described, the experience of discrimination, racism and "othering" processes play a significant role in motivating young second-generation Muslim youths to (re)discover, re-formulate and affirm their religious belonging. Secularized Western societies' impossibility to comprehend any manifestation of religious instances – which derives from the expulsion of religion from the public space – significantly contribute to the processes of "deculturation" of religion. However, this produces other serious consequences, as it often results in negative and distrustful depiction of Muslims.

European societies, in particular, developed a terribly fraught relationship with Muslims and the practice of Islam (Foner & Alba, 2008). Cultural and political élites often portray Islam solely in terms of social and cultural “Otherness” and assign an *a priori* negative identity to Muslims, who have come to be considered as intrinsically “problematic” (Fredette, 2014). The crystallization of the Western public debate on the compatibility of Islam with claimed Western “values” and *laïcité* has induced to depict the integration of Muslim immigrants as “failed” (Fredette, 2014) and to attribute to Muslims and their religion the responsibility of their supposed refusal to integrate and of their presumed desire to live “parallel lives”, separate from and in opposition to the rest of the society. This has strongly hampered the process of “symbolic integration” of Islam and Muslims into mainstream society (Césari, 2015).

Indeed, the widely-held perception of Islam as a “public enemy” across Western societies eventually facilitates the reconstruction of religion in fundamentalist terms and the formation of closed-off ultra-conservative religious communities. Such a re-affirmation of religion often assumes the traits of what has been defined an “oppositional identity”, which refuses mainstream society’s values and codes of behaviour (Foner & Alba, 2008). In other terms, these dynamics may lay the foundations for the development of identity cleavages within society. The spread of Salafism is an illustrative example in this regard.

As documented by several scholars (Kepel, 2012, 2015; Adraoui, 2013), Salafism has been slowly on the rise during the past ten-fifteen years in Europe and especially in France. Although this “puritan”, ultra-orthodox and intransigent form of Islam is practiced by a very tiny portion of French Muslims, it spread across the country and gained more and more visibility, in particular in its most impoverished and deprived areas (Kepel, 2012; 2015). However, as argued by Adraoui (2013), the success of Salafism can be only partly explained by socio-economic marginalization and deprivation. A strong reason behind the spread of Salafism as an “oppositional identity” derives from the stigmatization and discrimination its followers feel in the face of how negatively they are portrayed as children of immigrants.

Salafism represents a strong form of cultural and identity rupture in contemporary Western societies, as the adhesion to its tenets implies a refusal of modern Western society as “unholy”, “impure” and “depraved” – terms borrowed from the religious language that Salafists’ employ to describe their conflictual relationship with society. Salafism can be characterized as a “counterculture”, founded on uncompromising, ultra-Orthodox and ultra-conservative religious norms, which disavow mainstream Western societies’ values and codes of behaviour (Adraoui, 2013). As such, it constitutes an extreme and “radical” choice: even if it concerns only a very small proportion of French Muslims, it represents a powerful source of identitarian cleavages.

Given that the Salafist practice of Islam claims to be grounded in an absolutely literal reading of the Quran and of the hadiths, Salafists can easily depict themselves as the “custodians” of the correct religious norm. This way, in the eyes of many Muslims, Salafists have

come to be perceived as a sort of “model” for those who want to appear as true believers. In addition, the more behaviours linked to Salafism, such as the obligation to wear the niqab for women, have been proscribed by law and are stigmatized in the public debate, the more Salafists have gained the implicit solidarity by the majority of Muslims, even non-Salafist ones, who see, in the continuous acts of discrimination being endured by the Muslim community, a form of humiliation (Kepel, 2012). Claiming to adhere to the pure “Islam of the origins” practiced by the “companions of the Prophet” (according to the etymology of the name of the movement), Salafists seek legitimation in the attempt to impose their hegemony over organised Islam amid the competition of various groups and actors characterized by different ways of practicing the Islamic religion (Kepel & Rougier, 2016).

By professing the separation of every single aspect of everyday life between what is “pure” and “impure”, seeking to avoid any kind of contact with all non-Muslims, the “Salafist thinking” promotes a binary vision of the world, as if it was divided between “the good” and “the bad”. This is how Salafism has come to structure itself as an antagonist counter-culture, precisely by opposing itself to the rest of society and especially by rejecting mainstream Western way of life. In this sense, for many Islam has become the only source of identity, in exclusive terms: Salafists have come to define themselves solely base on the religious belonging, rebuffing any other definition or affiliation.

Therefore, to the perceived discrimination, a fraction of Muslims have slowly started paradoxically responding by adopting the Salafist oppositional *habitus*, purporting a vision of society according to which “the West” is “bad” and incompatible with Muslim (Salafist) values and behaviours – indeed, such a Manichean vision ends up being just as paranoiac as the one that considers Muslims as “unintegrable”.

Nonetheless, however reactive in nature, the diffusion of the Salafist counter-culture is not marked by a concrete political agenda. The disadvantage perceived by young second-generation Muslims is not viewed as a social class problem; it is rather framed in *identitarian* terms – in fact, majority society stigmatizes their religious identity. Contrary to what happened for previous generations, there is no longer a demand for an ideology to create a fairer society, but an attempt to give a global sense to individual life through religion (Khosrokhavar, 1997). Disadvantage and marginalization are not fought against from a political standpoint. Despite a troubled and unresolved colonial legacy and the hardships, frustration and humiliation endured by their parents in the emigration country, second-generation Muslims who choose to adhere to Salafism do not choose the political language and arena to engage with a mistrustful majority society. They rather express their anger at society by explicitly rejecting its cultural norms, seeking refuge in a diametrically opposed counter-culture. In this de-politicization, one might recognize a diffused trait of today’s younger generations, to which we referred above.

### *What relationship with jihadism?*

Now, how does all this relate to jihadism? The trends motivating the diffusion of Salafism – “deculturation” of religion and its successive “fundamentalist” reconstruction, refusal of Western society and birth of oppositional identities – create a basis for the spread of jihadism too. However, an important caveat is to be highlighted in order to properly understand this claim. As we will argue below, there is *no* continuity, or direct linkage between Salafism and jihadism: in other words, Salafism is *not* a mechanic or deterministic precursor or “conveyor belt” for jihadism. However, at the basis of the success of the two phenomena we find the same social and generational mechanisms – indeed, Salafism’s adepts are the same as jihadism’s: young converts and second-generation Muslims<sup>13</sup>. This shows that, while there is not any relationship of causality between the two, they share a common matrix (Roy, 2016).

In this sense, the spread of Salafism contributes to forge the “plausibility” of the appeal of jihadism (Introini, Mezzetti, 2017), in that it represents an identitarian rupture that shapes a favourable “environment” for jihadism. The isolation in which the Salafist community relegates itself, the reject of the “Western way of life” it preaches and the authority it claims based on its literal reading of the scriptures endow jihadism with “sense”. In *ecological* terms, as we shall see in the concluding paragraph of the present paper, the presence of Salafism shapes a context in which the jihadist “option” appears less and less “exotic” or “absurd”. Contemporary jihadism has taken shape in a context marked by deep identitarian cleavages, with the growth of Salafist closed-off enclaves (even though it is only a small fraction of Western Muslims that adhere to Salafism) and, on the opposite front, with the surge in neo-nationalistic and xenophobic movements and parties across the Western world. These two specular and symmetric movements put forward a similar rhetoric, erecting barriers between “us” and “them”.

We will analyse this mechanism more closely below; for the purpose of this section, it suffices to underline the reasons why Salafism and jihadism gain success among a distinct generation and are specific to precise groups within it.

### **2.4 A new jihadism**

Today’s jihadism presents significant evolutions in comparison to the movement’s characteristics in the past, to the extent that it is possible to speak about a “new jihadism”.

First, it is necessary to consider the significant changes underwent by the very meaning of the notion of jihad in its ideological elaboration. According to a long-established juridical literature, “jihad” means acting in defence of Muslim populations when they are menaced

<sup>13</sup> In light of the “deculturation” hypothesis here described, it should not surprise that, among French jihadists, we find very high proportions of persons with Algerian migratory background. For second-generation Algerians, the process of “deculturation” reached its peak due to the lack of homogenous national culture in the country of origin, the wounds inflicted by colonial rule and the tormented colonial past that binds France and Algeria caused serious identitarian conflicts on Algerian migrants and their descendants (Kepel, 2012).



on a specific territory by non-Muslim forces. This literature fixes the limits and the conditions by which it is possible to conduct a *defensive* war. The necessity to take action against threatening enemies must be declared only by religious authorities and is never referred to other Muslims: “jihad” means combating non-Muslims (Roy, 2016). Therefore, in its classical interpretation, “jihad” has always been associated with the community, and, until the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was considered a duty of the state, not of the individual. However, the roots of the new interpretation of jihad date back already to the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when, after the historical defeat suffered by Arab countries in 1948 against Israel, states started being considered no longer capable of taking charge of jihad (Roy, 2016). The new doctrine of jihad was elaborated by some Arab thinkers during the ‘50s, and was destined to yield great success. In their view, jihad becomes an *individual religious obligation* – not anymore a political collective duty performed by the State. It is not optional: it is as mandatory as the “five pillars” of Islam. As a religious duty, it is to be considered permanent and global: jihad must be fought not only wherever Muslims are in peril, but also in order to expand Islam (Kepel & Rougier, 2016). This forges a new type of Muslim, increasingly detached from any territorial and cultural belonging as well as from the concrete political and social life of Muslim societies. This is the ideology at the basis of movements such as Al Qaeda, which precisely call upon Muslims in the world to fight jihad as their individual duty and to join the cause of jihad wherever it is needed. This different conceptualisation of jihad allows for the adoption of terrorism – and specifically of suicide attacks – as a systematic *modus operandi*. Neither terrorist strategies nor suicide attacks represent any novelty *per se* – as the first had been employed by other political armed groups throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the second was introduced as an “innovation” by the Tamil tigers. Nonetheless, jihadism attaches an unprecedented *nihilistic* and *apocalyptic* dimension to the “quest for death” encapsulated in suicide attacks, epitomized by the notorious jihadist slogan “we love death as much as you love life”<sup>14</sup> (Roy, 2016). The appeal of today’s jihadism lies precisely in this nihilistic vein, as explained above.

Against the briefly-outlined wider backdrop of the ideological and factual transformations of jihadism, it is now possible to consider the evolutions of jihadism in terms of *generations*, in two senses. The first sense refers to the *familial genealogy* and the *geographical origin* of those involved in jihadism. The first generation of jihadism was “born” in Afghanistan while combating jihad against the Soviet Union invasion and has been subsequently represented by Al Qaeda. Volunteers originating from Arab and Middle-Eastern countries –constituted it. As Kepel & Rougier explain, this is when the term “jihadist” was coined, to designate foreign fighters who had come from abroad and distinguish them from autochthon Afghan *mujahideen* (Kepel & Rougier, 2016). Diversely, the second generation of ji-

<sup>14</sup> According to Roy (2016), this nihilistic attitude has its roots in the “profound religious pessimism” that permeates the works of Sayyid Qutb one of the most influential ideologues of political Islam. According to him, Muslim societies live in a condition of “ignorance” of religion, just as they did before the advent of the Prophet and of his Revelation. However, there will be no other Prophet who will come to save them (as there is only one Prophet, Muhammad), and this means that the end of time is close. Everybody must then think of his own personal salvation, as there is no point in striving for establishing a better society – and the fastest and safest way to reach salvation is death: in this climax resides the apocalyptic and nihilistic dimension of the whole reasoning.



hadism increasingly comprises sizeable proportions of young people originating from Western countries, in most cases young “second-generation” immigrants descending from Muslim immigrants. Thus, though jihadist insurgencies still see a substantial participation of individuals coming from Muslim-majority countries<sup>15</sup>, what characterizes as an intrinsic peculiarity the present “wave” or “generation” of jihadism is the fact that it concerns – tellingly, and continuously – children of immigrants. This is why it is possible to refer to a new generation of jihadism in terms of familial genealogy and geographical origin, and this definition of applies at least since the mid-90s onwards. In 1995, France was hit by jihadist attacks (for instance, the attack on the RER B at the station of Saint Michel, Paris) which took place in the framework of the tensions surrounding the bloody Algerian civil war and were organized by Khaled Kelkal, a second-generation immigrant of Algerian descent. Since then, an entire generation of so-called “homegrown” jihadist terrorists has developed in Western, Christian-majority countries; while, until the end of the 2000s decade, this was limited to a rather exiguous number of persons, the beginning of the 2010s are marked by a sharp increase in jihadism’s adherents having been born and/or having grown up in the West.

The second sense attributed to the term “generations” refers to the *qualitative changes* in the objectives and in the implementation of jihadism (Kepel, 2015; Kepel & Rougier, 2016; Roy, 2016). With reference to the changes occurred in the choice of the *objectives* of jihadism, Kepel (2015; Kepel & Rougier, 2016) argues that the jihadist doctrine has experienced three different phases. The first phase dates back to the Soviet Union’s invasion of Afghanistan (1979), when the necessity to conduct jihad was motivated by the defense of Islamic territories threatened by “misbelievers”, and lasted until the mid-‘90s, when jihad became “the duty” to combat against what jihadist ideologists called the “near enemy” – that is, secular regimes in the Middle East and in the Muslim world. The fight against “near enemies” took place in Egypt, Algeria (during the Algerian civil war at the beginning of the ‘90s that spilled over into France through the above-mentioned attacks) and in Muslim-majority Bosnia (during the war that ravaged the former territories of Yugoslavia at the beginning of the ‘90s). The second phase of jihadism dates back to the end of the ‘90s and is embodied by Al Qaeda and its charismatic leaders Osama Bin Laden and Ayman al Zawahiri – the main ideologue of the organization. Al Qaeda elaborated a new doctrine, on the grounds that a new objective was necessary, since the first attempts to fight jihad did not yield the hoped for results, as none of the wars against “near enemies” had gathered support from Muslim populations at large. Al Qaeda shifted the focus from “near enemies” to “far enemies”, arguing for the need to target the USA and the West in general through large-scale attacks: from those carried out against the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania (1998) and the American ship USS Cole (in the Gulf of Aden, 2000), to the “spectacular” 9/11 attacks on the American soil. According to Al Qaeda ideologues, such attacks

<sup>15</sup> The largest contingents of foreign fighters combating in Syria and Iraq come from Maghrebian, Middle Eastern and South-Asian countries; Tunisia is the number one nationality among foreign fighters (The Soufan Group, 2015). It is also important to mention localized jihadist insurgencies such as the ones led by the Boko Haram or the al Shebaab organizations in Nigeria and Somalia respectively.

could finally prove that the US was just a “paper tiger” and could be easily defeated, thus paving the way for a “Muslim insurgency” around the world, which would eventually lead to overthrow “near enemies” regimes. Notwithstanding the shock wave provoked by the Twin Towers attack, however, this strategy did not prove successful either, in that it did not spark a mobilization of Muslim masses across the globe. In the following phase – the third one – the jihadist doctrine concentrated on Europe as its privileged target. According to Kepel (2015), the reasons behind this choice were provided by Abu Mussab al Suri, a Syrian Al Qaeda ideologue, who published a book online titled “The Call to Global Islamic Resistance” in 2005. While analyzing the failures of the two previous phases of jihadism, al Suri claims that, from a top-down *organization*, it should transform into a bottom-up *movement*, allowing for the creation of flexible networks and for an easier recruitment. Moreover, it should focus on Europe, considered as the “soft underbelly” of global Islam, home of discriminated “angry” Muslims and easy to hit. Lastly, al Suri recommends perpetrating attacks against Jews, “apostates” (such as soldiers of immigrant-Muslim origin wearing the uniform of a Western country) and “Islamophobic” intellectuals, so as to ignite powerful emotional reactions in the defense of “Western values” (such as freedom of speech), able to stir identity-based conflicts in European societies (Kepel, 2015; Kepel & Rougier, 2016).

Though the effective influence of al Suri’s work on today’s young jihadists is questioned (see Roy, 2016), the strategy of the global jihadist movement has undoubtedly changed, moving in the direction of the above-outlined path. Indeed, since the early 2000s Europe has become jihadist networks’ preferred target (think of the Madrid and London attacks in 2004 and 2005 respectively), and in many cases attacks were conducted precisely against Jews (see the murders committed by Mohamed Merah in 2012 and the assault carried out by Mehdi Nemmouche in 2014), “apostates” (Merah also killed three policemen of immigrant-Muslim origin) and “Islamophobic” intellectuals (the film director Theo van Gogh was shot dead in 2004, the Charlie Hebdo editorial staff was massacred in January 2015).

Perhaps more importantly, the very *implementation* of jihad has evolved, considerably resembling what al Suri had suggested. In its first phases and specifically during the Al Qaeda’ leadership, jihadism was practiced by a highly hierarchical and clandestine organization, formally structured in a pyramidal system of covert cells, including a limited number of especially in Western countries. In a quintessentially top-down manner, this organization would plan with extreme care each detail of the attacks to conduct, and the realization of these costly attacks would be paid for by Bin Laden’s money: “with al-Qaeda, Bin Laden had created a pyramidal organization where he paid for business class plane tickets and sent subordinates strictly adhering to the scenario devised by the head of the organization, with no link to the reality of the target and its sociology” (Kepel & Rougier, 2016: 34). On the contrary, since the mid-2000s, jihadism started becoming a purely bottom-up movement, with a much looser structure which would facilitate the recruitment of followers. This was made possible by the acceleration caused by the unprecedented opportunities opened up by the recent and fast developments in the domain of information technol-

ogy, communication and media: jihadist propaganda can now travel along “open air” channels that are able to reach an extremely wide and differentiated audience – while before, indoctrinating potential new recruits and spreading the jihadist message could only be done clandestinely.

Social media, instant messaging apps and the possibility to share graphic and video contents in countless ways allow for extraordinary opportunities of interaction and exchange among users, who, from passive recipients of propaganda messages, have become active agents that spread and contribute to forge the very contents of those messages. This is how jihadist propaganda grew more and more imbued with a “young” type of language and with references to today’s “youth culture”. It suffices to think, for instance, of the video diffused by Amedy Coulibaly after the Charlie Hebdo attack, in which he makes massive use of “young” slangs and motives, typical of banlieues’ gangs (Kepel, 2015). Another example is the pervasive presence of video games graphics and contents in jihadist videos. Gradually, jihadist “political grammar” has been hybridized with “pop culture” languages, incorporating and exploiting the communicative behaviors of the internet era, thanks to the active involvement of today’s youth – in this sense too, contemporary jihadism is a generational phenomenon. This communicative universe has become so “real” (Introini & Mezzetti, 2017) that it goes under the name of “jihadisphere”.

This way, jihadism could turn into a purely bottom-up movement, resembling to other forms of “self-entrepreneurship” and “self-organization”: “interestingly, these ways of acting and doing are extremely modern. They have an uncanny resemblance to Californian start-ups whose employees define the company’s R&D strategy themselves within an overall framework designed by the managers and they fully use the latest means of communication. Between 2005 and 2015, the ‘third jihadist generation’ therefore grew through video sharing websites (YouTube, DailyMotion etc.) and inside social networks (notably Facebook and Twitter)” (Kepel & Rougier, 2016:34).

By the way, this bottom-up functioning makes the jihadist movement fuzzier and fuzzier: it has become hard for experts to establish whether some of the attacks conducted in the West between 2015 and 2016 were planned by the heads of jihadist organizations such as ISIS, or were autonomously improvised by single actors<sup>16</sup> or groups that declare allegiance to jihadist movements.

In sum, the transformations of jihadist *modus operandi* are necessarily and inevitably connected to the evolutions concerning the present age, both in the *instruments* used (the advent of 2.0 web with its content sharing platforms and its type of language and communication) and in the *mindset*, whereby we mean the sort of “do-it-yourself” approach inherent to today’s instances of self-entrepreneurship and experimentation. Such a mentality is supported by the widespread assumption – emblematic of contemporary Western culture (see section 2.2) – that “everything is in one’s own hands”. Therefore, even if the protago-

<sup>16</sup> The fact that they act alone does not mean that they are “lone wolves”: the very interconnectedness of these individuals to the wider jihadisphere implies they are not “alone” at all (Introini, Mezzetti, 2017).

nists of jihad have not changed over roughly the past twenty years (when children of immigrants originating from Western countries gained centre-stage within the jihadi scene – see above), jihadism has surely taken a new shape, starting in particular since the early 2010s.

## 2.5 Jihadist women

The sharp increase in women among jihadist recruits is a distinctive feature of contemporary jihadism (Kepel & Rougier, 2016). Again, it represents an unprecedented phenomenon (Peresin & Cervone, 2015): during the previous above-described phases of jihadism, women constituted an absolute exception. This poses the need to explore the motivations that currently drive women to join the cause of jihad and to examine their roles and actions. In the framework of the present description of contemporary jihadism, we deem it necessary to at least briefly review research findings on this noteworthy development of the present “generation” of jihadism.

First, just as for men, it is not possible to identify and provide a “typical profile” of women advocating or joining jihad: the samples that have been investigated so far reveal a great variety of education levels and class and familial origins, spanning a wide spectrum of “profiles”. Women involved in jihadism do not constitute a homogenous group: in this sense, what has been found about jihadist men, holds true for jihadist women as well (Alexander, 2016; Saltman & Smith, 2015).

A study (Alexander, 2016) identifies three forms of women’s engagement:

- as *plotters*, referring to women taking part in the organization of a terrorist attack, as was the case of Tashfeen Malik, who carried out the San Bernardino attack with her husband in California on December, 2<sup>nd</sup> 2015;
- as *supporters*, referring to women disseminating jihadist propaganda, showing support for jihadist attacks and identification with jihadist organizations;
- as *travelers*, referring to women who decide to leave their Western country of origin to reach the territories currently controlled by jihadist groups in Syria and Iraq.

These three forms of engagement are not mutually exclusive and often overlap. In any case, such a categorization, based on the empirical data gathered through the analysis of the social media accounts of these women, clearly demonstrates that jihadist women are not at all passive actors, just wishing to be “a good wife” and “a good mother” of jihadist fighters. On the contrary, they are extremely active and within the jihadisphere: they not only vigorously spread propaganda messages and contribute to increase the “gradient of reality” of the jihadi world, but also embark on the demanding task to emigrate to Syria and sometimes take part in attacks. Women have thus become active protagonists of the jihadi scene in their own right. This entails that their roles should be duly taken into consideration, as they are not at all marginal or residual within the jihadi movement – even if jihadist religious preachings imposes gender subalternity and a strict separation of gen-

der roles: “it is essential to first recognize how the historical distortion of women has led contemporary research to overlook or diminish activities perpetrated by women. Moreover, it is somewhat difficult to accept women as perpetrators or supporters of violence within organizations that subordinate women and employ gender-based violence” (Alexander, 2016:2).

In the light of their different forms of activism, it is possible to understand that “women have no fewer motives than men for joining jihad” (Peresin & Cervone, 2015:497). Their engagement is ascribable to a mutliplicity of different reasons, grouped by Saltman & Smith (2015) in “push” and “pull” factors. The authors have examined the content posted online by jihadist women on their personal social media accounts, analysing their stated reasons for migrating to ISIS – or, in the words of Alexander (2016), for becoming “travelers”.

The identified “push” factors leading women to join ISIS do not differ much from those exhibited by men: they consist in a feeling of social and cultural isolation, in the rejection of Western culture, in the perception that the international Muslim community is persecuted and in a frustration over the lack of action in response to this perceived persecution (Saltman & Smith, 2015). These motives echo jihadist propaganda typical refrains and motives, which divide the world in a Manichean manner between “good” persecuted Muslims on one side, and “the evil” rest of the world on the other. This is no surprise: the analysis of social media accounts postings cannot but reveal motivations that are by now articulated in the “global jihad” language; in other words, these empirical data are retrieved after the process of radicalization of these individuals has taken place, when they ascribe or trace their entire experience and personal choices back to the jihadi “creed”.

Among “pull” factors, Saltman & Smith (2015) identify an idealistic goal of fulfilling a “religious duty”, the will to build the utopian “Caliphate state”, as well as reasons that appear more typically feminine and more specific to the female universe: the need to recover a sense of belonging through sisterhood with other women travelling to Syria, as well as a certain “romanticisation” of the migration experience. Concerning the feeling of a moral obligation to join the utopia of ISIS, what is been recurrently put forward by these women – but by some men too, who often leave for Syria together with their wife and children – is the dire need to live in a place where Muslims are respected and where one can live his/her own religion “in peace”, contrary to what allegedly happens in the misbelievers’ land – i.e. the Western world (Thomson, 2014). Closely intertwined is the exigency to feel a kinship with other “sisters”, which would compensate for the afore-mentioned sense of alienation ad isolation perceived within Western societies. Surely, the will to be a “good wife” for the “brave” jihadist soldier is a persistent motive that abides by the Caliphate’s strict and patriarchal interpretation of Sharia norms regulating gender roles. Hence the romanticisation of the journey to Syria, based on a fantasized vision of adventure and in the desire to find romance in the form of a jihadist husband. It is important to bear in mind that “a large number of Western women joining ISIS are very young ... [Many] are in their late teens to early twenties, with the youngest known female migrant being only 13



years old” (Saltman & Smith, 2015:16). Their extremely young age helps explain such a romantic projection of their life in Syria: marriage, as a crucial transition from childhood into adulthood, is deemed to be a powerful factor of attraction.

However, the possibility to exercise violence, *per se*, is also a major push and pull factor in the migration to ISIS for many girls, who leave for Syria with this precise intention. These women exhibit a manifest will to fight, celebrating the extremely violent deeds of their fellow men and wishing to be able to perpetrate violence themselves (Hoyle, Bradford, Frennett, 2015; Thomson, 2014). Up to now, ISIS has envisaged strictly non-combat roles for women, but violence is an essential part of their embraced ideology, suggesting they might claim a more militant role (Peresin & Cervone, 2015), perhaps not so much within the territories controlled by the movements, but across the West. In fact, ISIS increasingly relies on self-starters and small, disconnected groups for carrying out attacks in Western countries (Alexander, 2016). Also, many Western women who might be anxious to join ISIS but find themselves unable to travel, could decide to engage in violent acts in their home countries (Peresin & Cervone, 2015): the contemporary “diffused, non-localized interpretation of violent jihad means that anyone, including women, can heed the call to action if they so desire” (Alexander, 2016: 8).

In any case, the unprecedented visibility and levels of activity of women on the jihadist scene, compared to previous foreign fighter migration patterns during conflicts in Afghanistan or the Balkans, is due to a series of concomitant circumstances and to a peculiar state of affairs. On one hand, women have been “granted” a more proactive role because ISIS needs them; for instance, it “requires a certain number of female roles to cater to female medical and educational needs, given strict laws on gender segregation” (Saltman & Smith, 2015: 14). This is why “propaganda and recruiters have also called for women to take on roles as nurses or teachers” (Saltman & Smith, 2015: 14). Although most women currently maintain and most likely will keep maintaining limited official roles, ISIS is *de facto* the first jihadist organization to explicitly reach out to and recruit women, willingly accepting and encouraging women to become in turn propagandists and recruiters. On the other hand, women could succeed in claiming certain space for their agency for the simple reason that contemporary jihadism is made up of many Western individuals, who are used to societies where women are granted equal rights and have become emancipated and protagonists on the social stage. As Roy (2016:50-51) puts it, “the contemporary jihadist lives in a contemporary society. He does not share its values, but he shares its sociology [...]. He comes from a society where women are emancipated, even if ‘the sisters’ wear the veil and condemn the illusion of the equality between men and women, they are all, as a matter of fact, modern” (our translation). Indeed, the prominence assumed by women represents a further feature qualifying contemporary jihadism as a new, distinct movement with its peculiar characteristics.

Lastly, we deem that the present remarkable involvement of women in jihadism is also easier to understand in an *ecological* perspective – as we shall argue in the following sec-



tion – which should help us better grasp why they have “no fewer motives than men for joining jihad”.

### 3. Youth and jihadism: an ecological perspective

As highlighted thus far, the categories of *age* and *generation* appear critical for the understanding of contemporary jihadism features.

Age and generation intersect each other as explaining factors in that the features of the present era, characterized by a generalized nihilism and by the absence of social and institutional points of references and coordinates of meaning (section 2.2), which make the individual process of identity-building in adolescents and young people much more difficult. The present generation of young people is faced with a number of significant obstacles in planning their lives and realizing their aspirations, making them more fragile (section 2.1). Such fragilities and frustrations help explain the fascination exerted on them by the jihadist appeal.

Jihadism has evolved over time and today presents distinct features (section 2.4) which are the result of its contamination with specific traits of today's youth culture in general (think of the use of the Internet, social media, video-making etc). and of today's youth culture of violence in particular (section 2.1). The evolutions in jihadist *modus operandi* derive from the very sociology of the people involved in it, and this also explains why women have assumed such a more visible and operational role in jihadist networks and plots (section 2.5). Because it concerns today's younger generation, contemporary jihadism could evolve and is currently living a new phase – arguably, a “new generation” jihadism.

Moreover, contemporary jihadism involves a specific sub-set of today's Western youth: that of the children of immigrants. The transition from first-generation Muslim migrants to second-generation Muslim citizens entailed the transplantation of Islam in the West, but this process significantly has altered the practice and the meaning of religion in the context of emigration, intervening in the definition of individual self-identifications. Second-generation youths with a migrant and Muslim background are over-represented among jihadist recruits, due to the peculiar cultural limbo in which they grow up and to the experiences of humiliation and stigmatization they are particularly exposed to (section 2.3). Arguably, their process of identity-building is even more difficult than for other youths.

With specific reference to this last point, in the final section of the present paper we would like to explore more in-depth of the crucial question concerning the relationship between jihadism and the ultra-Orthodox practice of the Islamic religion (such as the Salafi one), which represents one of the most heatedly debated issues among experts and public opinion (we will not address the issue from the theological point of view, as it is out of the scope of this paper). For so doing, we would like to propose to make use of an *ecological*

*perspective* in order to grasp how the Salafi-style practice of religion and jihadism are related (Introini & Mezzetti, 2017).

As we have seen, Salafism rejects the rest of the society living apart from it: Salafists do live in their closed-off Salafi communities. However, this does not mean aiming at destabilizing or attacking society. Distancing from society does not entail clashing with it violently. Actually, the Salafi world is multi-faceted and composed of different streams. Within the Salafi community, “quietists” and “jihadists” confront each other in a harsh dispute around the right reading of Gods’ words. While “quietists” claim that no political or violent action should be taken against “misbelievers”<sup>17</sup>, “jihadists” assert that “good Muslims” should engage into actions to “punish” misbelievers and finally establish a world held by Islamic rules. According to most observers, the overwhelming majority of French Salafists are quietist and are not at all interested in politics (Adraoui, 2013). However, even if French Salafists do not preach violence, some observers – Gilles Kepel in particular (2015; Kepel & Rougier, 2016) – argue that the analysis of jihadism should be centred on the drivers of the success of Salafism, studying how Salafism is engaging in a strife to impose its hegemony over the Muslim community, suggesting a continuity between Salafism and Jihadism (Kepel, 2015; Kepel & Rougier, 2016).

At the same time, research evidence challenges this view. Indeed, to add a piece to the complex mosaic of the dynamics of radicalization, it is necessary to analyze the lives of those implicated in the “new wave” of jihadism. Taking a closer look to their knowledge of religion and their degree of religiosity, it appears that most of them were not religious at all, prior to their “radicalization” (Introini & Mezzetti, 2017; Roy, 2016). In other words, before joining the “jihadist cause”, these persons did not show any interest for Islam or actual knowledge of the scriptures. Indeed, they were not “pious”: their religiosity was recent and very fragile, and it actually seems to be the *effect*, or the result, of their adhesion to jihadism, and not the cause. As some point out, a stable and consolidated religious identity shields from violent radicalization (Khosrokhavar, 2014). In jihadists’ first-person accounts, it appears that those who join a Salafi community – a quietist one – immediately leave it, motivating this choice with the fact that “they are too quiet, they do not speak about jihad” (Thomson, 2014). In other accounts, the pre-eminent violence of these persons emerge in their clarity. In other words, the sincere and genuine practice of religion – even when it takes the form of Salafism – does not drive to political violence or violent extremism. The explanation of jihadism should not be a culturalist one, as if it was intrinsic to Islam (Geisser, 2015; Roy, 2015; 2016).

We are thus confronted with the spread of Salafism, on the one hand, and the spread of jihadism, on the other. As we have just seen, one should not look at Salafists’ sincere religiosity as the driver of violent radicalization. How could jihadism be explained, then? In an *ecological* perspective, we suggest that the forms of identity rupture caused both by

<sup>17</sup> In their view, this means that men are taking God’s place, while the final judgement over misbelievers’ acts pertains only to God, and not to men.

the spread of Salafism on the one hand and the treatment of the Muslim minority on the other constitute “fertile ground” for the diffusion of jihadism, which could grow precisely grafting onto the fragmentation along identitarian cleavages that is underway within European societies.

In order to explain this claim, let us now connect the dots between all of the different aspects we have analyzed thus far. Jihadism draws from a “reservoir” of would-be adepts. Their common characteristic is their young age; their profiles, social and ethnic origin may vary, but there are two categories that are more represented than others: “second-generation” Muslims and young converts. This is the case of Salafism as well (see section 2.3). The reasons why these categories are more represented is precisely their belonging to the present generation of youths, who are more exposed to the risks of “deculturing” their religion, and, in the case of second-generation Muslims, to a feeling of humiliation and resentment towards majority society on the other. The two phenomena – Salafism and jihadism – lie upon the same social and cultural mechanisms.

However, there is a fundamental difference between Salafists and jihadists: the first escape from a society, which they perceive as hostile and distrustful, seeking refuge in an exacerbated practice of religion; the second express their refusal of society through the practice of violence, which they then label as “jihadist”. As we have seen (section 2.1), jihadists have often experienced or exercised violence in other forms before their “jihadist turn” – or felt a need to “fight” under other forms (think of those who failed the army entry test). The jihadist cause is seemingly able to channel their pre-existing “need for violence”. In other words, radicalism does not descend by any religiosity (which is mostly inexistent in jihadists’ lives); rather, we are confronted with an opposite dynamic, that of an “islamization of radicalism” through jihadism (Roy, 2015).

The reason why these individuals resort to jihadism, and not to other forms of violent extremism – is two-fold: firstly, jihadism is the only available “ideology on the market” that explicitly calls to violence; secondly, it is the only “ideology”, or “movement”, that *makes sense* and appears *plausible* within today’s “ideological offer”, because of the enabling environment it is surrounded by. In *ecological* perspective, jihadism could grow and gain success thanks to the aggravation of identitarian cleavages represented on the one hand by Salafism, on the other hand by the growing hostility towards Muslims shown by majority societies.

Thus, as Roy emphasizes (2016), the quest for the practice of violence seems to be the main “detonator” for the adhesion to jihadism – and specifically that of the so-called Islamic State, that is, the jihadist organization that exercise, theatricalizes and displays violence as no other jihadist organization before. However, an ecological perspective helps us grasp that such quest for violence could not take this “jihadist form” without the presence and the diffusion of Salafism in the first place, highlighted by Kepel (2015). Indeed, Salafism “bears its responsibility”: jihadists choose a fanatic, violent and extremist form of Islam as it currently represents the only available and plausible form of

antagonism. This form of Islam embodies the most radical, efficacious and “frightening” expression of Alterity that “the market” can currently offer – but the “market” is shaped also by the presence, in ecological terms, of antagonist actors, i.e. Salafist communities. In other words, the mere presence of Salafist habits and practices in the surrounding “environment” also increases the gradient of reality of the jihadist worldview. Without suggesting that there is a direct continuity between quietist Salafism and jihadism, it may be said that, for a young person who already has a “need to be radical” and seeks a channel for venting this need, joining jihadism can seem more plausible and “natural” than joining other expressions of political violence, precisely because the choice of embracing jihadism occurs in a context characterised by the spread of identity fractures similar to jihadism, such as those embodied by Salafism. With its rejection of and isolation from mainstream society and the Manichean worldview it offers, Salafism contributed to convey the *plausibility* of the jihadist option – even if jihadists are not interested in Salafists’ rigorous and strict religious practice.

At the same time, those who embrace jihadism do not do so just because they merely feel the need to practice forms of violence. The reasons motivating the need to exert violence against mainstream society, in many second-generation youths, reside in their frustration of constantly feeling “othered” and “inferiorized”. This explains why, among jihadism’s recruits, we find not only the “banlieusards”, i.e. those originating from the margins of society, but also persons with a migratory background that “made it to the middle class”, that is, people who were able to climb the social ladder. Even if they could achieve a good position, having a good job and often a loving family, they still felt the “humiliation” of discrimination and of being perceived “always as different” because of their religion and their immigrant origin (Introini & Mezzetti 2017). In these accounts (Thomson, 2014), identity plays a prominent role: being constantly subject to processes of “othering” has fueled in many a resentment that jihadism successfully managed to channel. To feel such identity rupture it is not necessary to be religious. Meanwhile, as we mentioned earlier, jihadism has become the only powerful “ideology on the market” for expressing one’s rebellion and frustration at society (Roy, 2015): radical anger can then be “islamicised” (ibid.). By now, jihadism has become somewhat autonomous and presents a “plausibility” on its own (Introini & Mezzetti, 2017), which is able to reach and persuade even people with no migratory background and that are not in the position to “feel the humiliation” of discrimination and stigmatization.

To conclude, both perspectives – Kepel’s and Roy’s – are necessary to understand current radicalization phenomena: they are indeed complimentary. And in both perspectives the *age* and *generation* variables are crucial: as we have attempted to demonstrate in the previous sections, both *violence*, on one hand, and the *spread of Salafism*, on the other, are specific to today’s *generation of youths*.

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