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INDEX

Buoncompagni G., *The Platformisation of Immigration. Migration Network and Digital Public Sphere* 349

Borella. P., *The 'Princeton Engineering Anomalies Research' and the 'Global Consciousness Project' as Possible Tools for Forecasting and Monitoring Catastrophic Events* 369

Biffani C., *Defending Yourself During A Terrorist Attack* 389

Cian A., *Gender, Second Generation Identities And Radicalization To Violent Extremism: Social Movements Studies In The Analysis Of Radicalization To Jihadism* 411

Borella P., *The Spacetime Configuration of the Catastrophic Event: Psychosociology and Psychopathology of the Victims* 449

Signorini M. F., *Praise Or Peril? Problematic Aspects of Criminalising Incitement to Terrorism in International Law.* 485

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GENDER, SECOND GENERATION IDENTITIES
AND RADICALIZATION TO VIOLENT EXTREMISM: SOCIAL MOVEMENTS
STUDIES IN THE ANALYSIS OF RADICALIZATION TO JIHADISM

GENERE, SECONDE GENERAZIONI
E RADICALIZZAZIONE ALL'ESTREMISMO VIOLENTO: APPLICAZIONE
DEGLI STUDI SUI MOVIMENTI SOCIALI NELL'ANALISI DI PROCESSI
DI RADICALIZZAZIONE ALLO JIHADISMO

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ABSTRACT

Among the 40.000 estimate foreign fighters who left their home countries to join ISIS, second generation Muslim women from the Western world compose an interesting yet under researched group. This dissertation aims at exploring the role of both social interactions, and gender, in processes of radicalization through the application of social movements theories. A comprehensive framework including top-down social movements tasks performance, and peer interactions and group-based dynamics is proposed, in the attempt to bridge the research gap between social movements studies and radicalization studies. The dissertation relies on third parties' interviews with Hoda Muthana, a former US student who joined ISIS in late 2014, as well as on a rich database of her own social media posts. The findings indicate that second generation Muslims' identity distress and socialization difficulties in the host countries lead to attempts to craft a new individual identity and socialization opportunities in the online realm. Online interactions provide individuals with strong collective identities, and at the same time offer several entry points for Jihadist recruiters and proselytizers. Gender has shown to be a significant component of such process, as it furthered grievances. The results illustrated align with previous research on social movements studies and radicalization, proving that this approach offers fertile ground to move beyond compartmentalization and lack of interdisciplinarity in the field, offering a novel approach that can inform policy making in a comprehensive way.

Tra i 40.000 combattenti stranieri che hanno lasciato i loro paesi per unirsi all'ISIS, un interessante ma sottostimato campione è composto da donne musulmane immigrate di seconda generazione residenti nell'emisfero occidentale. L'obiettivo della presente tesi è l'esplorazione del ruolo di interazioni sociali e genere nei processi di radicalizzazione allo Jihadismo attraverso l'applicazione di studi sui movimenti sociali. Viene proposto un quadro analitico comprendente top-down performance dei compiti chiave dei movimenti sociali, interazioni di gruppo e dinamiche collettive, nel tentativo di conciliare la ricerca sui movimenti sociali e quella sulla radicalizzazione. Il progetto di ricerca si basa su interviste con Hoda Muthana, una ex studentessa statunitense unitasi all'ISIS nel 2014, e su un ricco database di fonti primarie inclusive di post pubblicati dalla stessa su varie piattaforme online. I risultati indicano che i giovani musulmani di seconda generazione, a causa delle difficoltà nella creazione di un'identità sia individuale che collettiva, e di possibilità di socializzazione, tendono a spingere i giovani verso la dimensione online come alternativa per la creazione di un'identità personale e di una comunità di simili. L'interazione online fornisce una forte identità collettiva a tali individui, ma allo stesso tempo assicura svariati punti di contatto con proseliti e reclutatori Jihadisti. Una delle dimensioni fondamentali per tali processi di radicalizzazione è il genere, che ha dimostrato produrre rimostranze addizionali.

Cian A., Gender, *Second Generation identities and Radicalization to Violent Extremism: Social Movements Studies in the Analysis of Radicalization to Jihadism*, in 'Urgency', DOI: 10.57658/411-447; N. 1, 2023, 411-447.

risultati dello studio si conformano con la precedente ricerca sul tema, dimostrando quanto una convergenza tra studi sui movimenti sociali e sulla radicalizzazione possa provarsi fruttuosa e in grado di garantire interdisciplinarità all'ambito, offrendo un approccio innovativo che possa supportare il policy making in maniera estensiva.

INDEX

1. Introduction...... 415
2. Radicalization as a social process...... 416
3. Social movements theories and radicalization...... 419
4. Jihadism as a social movements...... 422
5. Women, youth and radicalization...... 427
6. New radicalization milieus: on line radicalization as a security threat...... 432
7. Gendering Jihad...... 434
8. A case study. Hoda Muthana...... 437
9. Main results of thew study...... 438
10. Conclusion...... 442
11. Bibliography...... 444
12. Notes...... 445

Cian A., Gender, *Second Generation identities and Radicalization to Violent Extremism: Social Movements Studies in the Analysis of Radicalization to Jihadism*, in 'Urgency', DOI: 10.57658/411-447; N. 1, 2023, 411-447.

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GENDER, SECOND GENERATION IDENTITIES AND RADICALIZATION TO VIOLENT EXTREMISM: SOCIAL MOVEMENTS STUDIES IN THE ANALYSIS OF RADICALIZATION TO JIHADISM

Alice Cian

1. Introduction,

By December 2015, estimates provided by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime indicate that around 40.000 foreign fighters from all over the world joined ISIS in its territories. Since the announcement of the formation of the Caliphate in 2014, the number of Westerners moving to its territories has been remarkably high and rising until its territorial fall. According to the Soufan Group's data (2015), foreign fighters from the Western hemisphere account for a relevant percentage of the total: up to 5000 foreign fighters originated from Europe and around 250 from the United States. Among those, a large number was composed of young women coming from a Muslim immigrant background but born in a Western host country. Estimates on foreign fighters in general, and on female foreign fighters specifically, are rather hard to obtain and vary across a wide range. Nevertheless, Dawson (2021) calculated an average estimate of female foreign fighters from the West that lies around 18% of the total number, reviewing different estimates and studies.

Female Jihadists from the Western world have been under the spotlight of Western mainstream media for a long time, as the power of the romanticized figure of 'jihadi brides' was largely leveraged on to gain audience, perpetrating the fascinating, yet wrong idea of naïve groomed adolescents who joined a terrorist group in the name of 'love'. The oversimplistic framing of women radicalization as luring or grooming, added to the infantilization of radicalized women in mainstream media, downplays their accountability as political agents of violence. At the same time, academic research on radicalization tends either to homogeneously treat political violence in an aggregated fashion regardless of gender, or to consider women violence as exceptional and deviant from prescribed models of femininity. In doing so, the field is prevented from fully expanding its explorative potential, remaining static and underdeveloped. To address this reductionist understanding, this dissertation will focus on second-generation Muslim women in the West who joined ISIS in its territories, and the social dimension of radicalization. The role of group dynamics and interaction on processes of radicalization to Jihadism, as well as the influence of gender, will be put under the spotlight. Radicalization will be considered as a non-linear, incremental, and context-dependent process, not solely as the product of a single decision but as the end result of social processes conducive to socialization into violent extremism.

Cian A., Gender, *Second Generation identities and Radicalization to Violent Extremism: Social Movements Studies in the Analysis of Radicalization to Jihadism*, in 'Urgency', DOI: 10.57658/411-447; N. 1, 2023, 411-447.

Therefore, the focus is going to be on 'how' such women are radicalized, rather than merely 'why', opening up to possible explanations for radicalization linked to relational components. The social dimension of radicalization has not yet gained prominence in the field; it is however a promising avenue for research on radicalization that would be comprehensive of individual level factors pushing individuals towards a cognitive opening, as well as of a deeper consideration of interpersonal relations, socialization and social networks, and macro-level conditions in general. In this light, social movements studies have been informative in providing a well-established framework of analysis capable of downgrading the transcendency of religious terrorist movements such as Jihadism. The contribution of social movements' studies has proved to be enlightening in this sense, and Borum (2011) and Wiktorowicz (2004) works on Islamic movements as social movements pioneering in the field.

Nevertheless, the number of studies applying such theories to address radicalization remains limited, leading to a compartmentalization of research on radicalization. Social movements studies, at the current state of art, have been rarely discussed in parallel with literature on radicalization, with few exceptions. Borrowing theory from social movements studies and merging it with theories on radicalization allows for the development of new models that could provide an integrated analytical framework able to connect structural factors, group processes, and individual motivations for joining terrorist groups in light of gender considerations. This study will therefore investigate the role of contextual and meso-level factors and interaction, as well as gender, in processes of radicalization, with the aim of providing a framework for the understanding of women radicalization to Jihadism that allows to go beyond reductionist assumptions and to take into consideration the wider context.

2. Radicalization as a social process.

Despite the inflation in the use of the terms radicalization and radicalism, the challenge in operationalizing it is still faced by both academia and policy makers as a universally accepted definition of the concept is still to be developed. Analysists of radicalization do not always agree on dynamics of radicalization, with the result of different conclusions drawn from different premises, ranging from psychological explanations to grievances theories; nevertheless, they all leverage on the concept of push and pull factors. However, taking into consideration only push and pull factors to explore causes of radicalization and terrorism would limit the understanding of the phenomenon, hindering the possibility to deal with it in a feasible manner. Almost all the theories proposed in the past 20 years focused on the causes that lead somebody to radicalize, analyzing push and pull factors conducive for radicalization in the attempt to answer the question 'why do individuals radicalize'.

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Despite remaining a fundamental unresolved question, its resolution is virtually impossible: ruling how single causes to answer to the why question would put research on the field in a vacuum, leading to an oversimplification of the phenomenon. Radicalization does not happen in a void: it is inherently context-dependent, and as such, the question that should be addressed in this dissertation is the one that regards the 'how'. As Pisoiu points out while reviewing developmental approaches to radicalization, 'group mechanisms intervene in individual radicalization as well; further, some of the mechanisms presented as individual pathways might and usually do combine in actual biographies, where the role of social networks in joining is one of the few generally acknowledged constant ingredients of the radicalization process' (2014: 781).

Considering radicalization as a non-linear, incremental and context-dependent process that accounts for both contextual and individual factors, allows to open up the definition for relational components that can complete explanations for radicalization based on different assumptions. According to Taylor and Horgan (2006), engagement and involvement in terrorism are not static but rather a gradual incremental process which involves transition through different stages up to the radicalization and the effective commission of terrorist actions. As Alonso (2008) emphasizes indeed, radicalization takes place at the intersection between a personal trajectory and an enabling environment. Wilner and Dubouloz consider radicalization as a transformative learning process, 'in which individuals adopt extreme political, social, and/or religious ideals and aspirations, and where the attainment of particular goals justifies the use of indiscriminate violence.

It is both a mental and emotional process that prepares and motivates an individual to pursue violent behaviour'(2010: 38). Following the lead of Borum, and Taylor and Horgan, Beelmann (2020) developed a social developmental model of radicalization that integrates the above-mentioned frameworks, conceiving ontogenetic development as the outcome of negative risk factors, understood as societal, social, and individual features that are linked causally to radical attitudes and actions. The highly sensitive phase between early childhood and early adulthood, the statistical period during which most of the prospective extremists radicalized, is characterized by developmental processes that lead to an increased risk of radicalization, setting the stage for becoming extremists. Following biographical related development, the second stage of the model is characterized by proximal radicalization processes, linked to radicalization in a narrow sense and representing central preconditions for political and religious extremism to emerge, during a phase of development extending from adolescence to adulthood. In this phase, problematic identity processes are characterized by unfulfilled needs that express in a constellation of negative emotions. The stronger these proximal radicalization processes, the greater the risk that extremist attitudes and actions, represented in stage 3 of Beelmann's model, will emerge.

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In this sense, political mobilization is to be considered as 'not a single great leap, but rather a flow of action in which specific emotions represent turning points and accelerating factors' (Gamson, 1992, from Costalli and Ruggeri, 2015). Critics to the understanding of radicalization as a social process (see Hafez and Mullins, 2015) indeed leverage on the assumed linearity of the whole concept of 'process' itself, thus leading to an inadequate framework of analysis for such a multifaceted phenomenon as radicalization. Nevertheless, using the term process to describe radicalization only implies its association with actions and reactions, expressed in reciprocal relationships in a dynamic and non-linear trajectory (Taylor and Horgan, 2006).

Following Borum (2011), therefore, radicalization would be tackled through a developmental or pathway approach: 'within the *developmental* or *pathway' approach*, radicalization is viewed not as the product of a single decision but the end result of a dialectical process that gradually pushes an individual toward a commitment to violence over time'. According to several authors [see Borum (2011) and Dalgaard-Nielsen (2008)] viewing contemporary militant Islamism as a social movement and considering the relationality of processes of radicalization opens up for the development of new analytical models of radicalization, providing an integrated analytical framework that connects structural factors, group processes and individual motivations.

In order to properly understand meso level and collective dynamics leading to radicalization is indeed necessary to attempt an understanding of the individual trajectories that lead to cognitive opening and allow predisposition for radicalization through social relations. Neglecting the understanding of individual processes to focus only on meso-level dynamics would lead to a flawed comprehension of the phenomenon per se, that needs to be tackled in a holistic and comprehensive way.

The pioneering work of Wilner and Dubouloz (2011) applying transformative learning theories to radicalization opens new dimensions for the understanding of what happens on the micro-level prior to interrelational dynamics. According to the authors, sustained behavioral change can occur when critical reflection and the development of novel personal belief systems are provoked by specific triggering factors: following a personal crisis of any sort, individuals reconstruct personal meaning schemes and perspectives in order to cope with the situation.

Through the application of transformative learning theories, it highlights how meaning changes as identity does, leading to an opening to radical environment and cognitive radicalization, where social relations and networks ease the process into behavioral radicalization. According to the authors, the process of radicalization is triggered by strong social, political, and environmental forces; individual radicalization takes place during the change phase, in which a combination of personal reflection, knowledge acquisition and identity reassessment occurs.

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What changes leading to radicalization are meaning schemes and perspectives: beliefs and judgements that act as frames of reference for behavior, and structures of assumptions that shape comprehension of one's reality suffer a meaning distortion, where previous meaning perspectives are no longer an adequate framework for understanding. As a consequence, individuals undergo a critical reflection on such distortions, triggered by personal crisis and initiate a process of transformation that produces individual personal change. According to Mezirow (1991), transformative processes consist of ten different phases, beginning with a disorienting dilemma that leads to the exploration of new dimensions of understanding, ultimately reintegrating into one's life on the basis of the conditions dictated by the new perspective[1]. Social environment in transformative learning processes has a role to play along the whole process of learning, not only towards its end: entry points for interpersonal relations and the strengthening of new personal and social identities through interactions are to be found in each of the ten phases identified in the theory.

3. Social movements theories and radicalization.

Social movement studies have a lot to offer in terms of understanding of radicalization processes. As stressed above, radicalization is a context dependent process in which an individual, following a cognitive opening triggered by events on the individual level, comes to adopt extremist views on the world through his/her socialization in a fertile environment. Social movement theories offer an alternative framework that might be able to overcome the limitations of models of radicalization focusing on compartmentalized perspectives on violent extremism. As Taylor and Horgan stress (2006), any useful framework for the understanding of the progress from cognitive to behavioral radicalization must be able to integrate mechanisms at the micro and macro level, but at the same time accounting for differences in paths and keeping the focus on the context in which interactions between individuals play out, ultimately leading to violent extremism.

The deficiencies of socio-psychological frameworks emphasizing the primacy of grievances and discontent with the underlying assumption that 'grievances are generated by socio-structural, economic, and political strains and crises which produce psychological distress and prompt individuals to participate in collective action' (Wiktorowicz, 2004: 3), led to the diversion of scholarly attention to social movement theory as a more valid alternative for the explanation of radicalization processes. According to Dalgaard-Nielsen, Social Movement Theory (SMT) offers a 'way of conceiving violent radicalization with an explicit focus on the broader dynamics and processes of political mobilization' (2008: 3) by looking at larger groups and the relationship between the individual, the group, and the broader society. SMT conceives social movements and their violent subgroups as rational actors, driven by a political agenda and a set of political goals.

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The ambition in applying social movement studies to the field of radicalization is to 'link structural factors, group processes, and individual motivation in an integrated analytical framework' (Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2008: 3). Therefore, SMT is a promising avenue of research for the development of a comprehensive framework capable to go beyond distinction between socio-psychological theories and rational choice ones, merging the two levels through a different framing lens. Different approaches exist within SMT, where each of those focuses more or less on different collective dimensions of social interactions: framing theory ought to be consider the most promising avenue for the understanding of social production and dissemination of meaning, key factors for mobilization, and ultimately radicalization to violent extremism. Framing theory, according to Dalgaard-Nielsen, would seek to explain violent radicalization through the distinct constructed reality shared by members of violent groups which frames problems as injustices, attributing responsibility and blame and constructing moral arguments for the provision of solutions of such injustice.

Framing theory focuses on socio-psychological dimensions but in terms of the relational positioning of the individual inside a society rather than innate characteristics or emotions (Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2008): the focus is put on the intersubjective and communicative process of framing a problem as a key to understand radicalization. Framing consists in meaning construction, which denotes an active, processual phenomenon implying agency and contention at the level of reality construction (Benford and Snow, 2000). Frames offer a language and cognitive tools for making sense of experiences and events and are fundamental for production and dissemination of meaning and participation mobilization: ideas and ideologies are 'arranged and socially processed through interpretive lenses that create intersubjective meaning and facilitate movement goals' (Wiktorowicz, 2002: 202). Through frames, personal life experiences are collectivized and made sense of, leading to their functioning as interpretive tools in a mobilizing way.

Collective action frames are constructed as movement adherents negotiate a shared understanding of a given problematic condition and define shared attributed blame and alternative sets of arrangements to exit the grievance situation. Snow and Benford (1988) delineated three core framing tasks for social movements. Diagnostic frames are a first step in a process that leads to mobilization of constituencies: through the construction of frames, social movements diagnose a condition as a problem which needs to be addressed and resolved. Therefore, the first fundamental task of a social movement in terms of framing is the diagnosis and attribution of blame, followed by prognostic framing processes. The purpose of prognosis is the identification of strategies and tactics to address the identified problem. Nonetheless, despite the identification of a problem and the possible solutions to tackle it, the success of framing and ultimately of mobilization, is the ability to motivate individuals to action.

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Motivational framing is a critical phase that needs to push corrective action to tackle the problem. Mobilization does not automatically follow from consensus to the necessity of mobilization, therefore the development of motivational frames functions as a tool to convince individuals that the possible downsides of mobilization are outweighed by both the necessity to take action and the positive outcomes of such action. Diagnosis and prognosis do not call for action: they simply attribute blame and propose solutions and agreement, but do not bear mobilizing potential, or as Snow and Benford put it, 'consensus for needed mobilization does not necessarily yield to mobilization' (1988: 202). The mobilizing task of motivational framing is the 'elaboration of a call to arms or rationale for action that goes beyond the diagnosis and prognosis' (1988: 2002).

Furthermore, motivational frames 'appeal to a broader spectrum of emotions including rage, enthusiasm, and joy as well as emphasize the importance of immediate actions' (Andersen and Sandberg, 2020: 1514). Frame alignment, as collective frame development could be alternatively understood, allows for the easy creation of an in-group and an out-group, fostering group identity leveraging on self-identification and othering. In other words, it helps the transition first of all from individual identities to a single collective identity with the peer group, and secondly smooths the transition from collective identities to collective action and mobilization (Aslan, 2009).

Doosje et al. (2016) propose a model for radicalization that stresses the relational component and the prominence of group membership and intergroup relations in the radicalization process. According to their work, radicalization follows three phases that develop through three different levels: micro, meso, and macro. At the individual level, factors within the person influence the process. Personal feelings such as humiliation, poor life prospects, personal loss or grief, sense of non-belonging or discrimination lead to what Wiktorovicz calls 'cognitive opening'. An individual must be willing to expose him or herself to the movement message: prior socialization influences the likelihood of conscious exposure, but a crisis can produce a cognitive opening that renders an individual more receptive to alternative views. According to Horgan, 'an openness to socialization into terrorism' is determined by certain predisposing risk factors' (2008: 84).

Specific crises vary across individuals but are generally related to economic (mainly job related or in terms of blocked mobility), socio-cultural (cultural humiliation or racism), political (repression, political discrimination), or personal crisis (grief, family difficulties, personal victimization) (Wiktorowicz, 2004: 8). Radical groups are receptive of personal grievances and are active in identifying difficulties and provide solutions to restore feelings of significance (Doosje et al., 2016):

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personal uncertainty leads to the necessity to identify with a group that the individual considers to be capable of reduce such uncertainty thanks to a restored sense of community and personal identity and value. Radical groups, as they have a clear profile, are able to offer a solid moral and value-based structure that compensated for individual uncertainty (Doosje et al., 2016). At the meso level, the radicalization process according to Doosje et al. depends on the social environment. The feeling of injustice that promotes cognitive opening turns to a collective dimension when the individual recognizes the shared dimension of their personal grievances: the recognition of fraternal relative deprivation leads to group identification and the collectivization of grievances. Furthermore, interpersonal relations and strong feelings of group belonging, a basic human need, foster in-group and out-group delineation that in turn guarantees an enhanced intra-group solidarity.

At the macro level, the process of radicalization is influenced by societal factors for example globalization and the perception of dominance by a prominent group on the global scale. Once a cognitively open individual joins a radical group, his/her commitment to group membership and the found-again sense of belonging after discrimination leads to the necessity to prove his/her value inside the group through attempts to show loyalty and adhere in a strict manner to its values. The ties between the individual and the group are strengthened through group membership. On the macro level, the formal recognition of the radical group and its institutionalization increases the levels of perceived group efficacy. Finally, the last phase of radicalization delineated by this model consists in the full action and violence use - or acceptance.

4. Jihadism as a social movement

If social movements are defined as 'a set of opinions and beliefs in a population, which represents preferences for changing some elements of the social structure and/or reward distribution of a society' (Zald and McCarthy, 1987: 2), it is non-debatable that any organization that leverages on the collective level to pursue a societal change can be ascribed in the definition of social movement. According to Borum (2011), viewing contemporary militant Islamism as a global social movement permits a different conceptualization of the problem with a relevant potential for the understanding of radicalization. Treating religion as a social movement might be useful to understand radicalization in terms of converging grievances, identity formation, framing and potential mobilization. This rationalization of a religion-based organization would downplay its transcendent instances and the divine-based values to a concrete set of beliefs, providing a more grounded and politicized understanding of the dynamics of religious terrorism.

Cian A., Gender, *Second Generation identities and Radicalization to Violent Extremism: Social Movements Studies in the Analysis of Radicalization to Jihadism*, in 'Urgency', DOI: 10.57658/411-447; N. 1, 2023, 411-447.

Ideology in relation to movement's emergence and dynamics is a main theme when it comes to the study of Islamic terrorism and social movements: in this field, ideology is invoked as a 'cover term for values, beliefs, and goals associated with a movement or a broader, encompassing social entity, and is assumed to provide the rationale for individual and collective action' (Snow and Byrd, 2007: 120). According to Snow and Byrd, ideology in social movements, regardless of if religious or not, should be treated as a social production that evolves during the course of interactive or dialogic processes among individuals and social groups, being highly context dependent and dynamic. Ideologies, according to Costalli and Ruggeri (2015), are normative and structured transformative systems of beliefs that act in combination with emotion: ideologies have the potential to crystallize emotions leading from the recognition of horizontal inequalities and shared grievances to political mobilization, constituting the backbone of the flow of action and influencing preferences in the process of mobilization.

According to Aslan (2009), global Jihadism has taken many characteristics of a transnational social movement. First of all, it appeals to a set of familiar symbols to construct a collective identity that transcends cultural, ethnic, and gender boundaries in order to promote and affect social change through the employment of frame alignment techniques that foster the creation and identification of an in-group and an out-group. Through the creation of collective frames for action, global jihadism is capable of framing legitimate grievances named and connected to other grievances within a larger frame of meaning, aligning personal feelings of discrimination to the discrimination of Muslims on the global scale. Furthermore, by employing consensus mobilization techniques to identify and address problems, assign blame, and suggest solutions, global Jihadism develops tactics and strategies for mobilization in an attempt to direct heterogeneous and diverse interests and objectives into a collective action for the attainment of a common goal, namely the establishment of an Islamic state. For its essential features, religion is prone to lending itself as an efficient vehicle for grievances.

Its intrinsic qualities make it a useful tool to promote social movement activism. The capacity of religion to tap into a deeper sense of identity - the existential self - and to provide members with a profound personal and emotional stake in the success of the movement, makes it a very efficient mobilizer and catalyst of support (Aslan, 2009). Furthermore, the hierarchical structure of religion facilitates an almost effortless degree of authority and legitimacy that otherwise would require years to develop. In terms of mobilizing symbols and framing, religion provides social movements with a ready list of symbols that can be employed to mobilize constituencies and create solidarity across any kind of barrier and border. In Aslan's words, 'it offers a trove of words and images that can be interpreted and reinterpreted as often and as innovatively as one likes to invest a movement's message with meaning' (2009: 37).

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Religion is able to frame violence as an acceptable way to attain specific goals through its framing as a necessary mean in the global fight between good and evil. When religion is involved, selective incentives become easier to provide since people of faith are willing to sacrifice earthly rewards for the promise of a heavenly one. The presence of religiosity as a fundamental component of one's identity causes processes of cognitive opening to lead to religious seeking. The greater the role of Islam in an individual's identity, the greater the likelihood he or she will respond to cognitive opening through religious seeking (Wiktorowicz, 2004: 8). In most of the cases individuals turning to religion after a personal crisis and cognitive opening are novice in the religion, as they practice out of custom and tradition but do not master the religious knowledge needed to autonomously make use of religious meaning systems and scheme to satisfactory provide themselves with alternatives.

The result is that they accept something 'good enough' to fit their needs: as individuals tend to lack expertise, they do not select religious truth but are rather convinced by persuasion abilities of religious movements' proselytizers (Wiktorowicz, 2004). Jihadist movements indeed tend to focus on local, immediate concerns or emotional issues to achieve frame alignment and align the personal grievances of the prospect constituents with their own, in order to provide them with sufficient incentives to dive into religion as a solution to personal crises. In the Western world, individuals from an immigration background and of Muslim origins are trapped between two socialization environments: the secular Western society and institutions that propose themselves as pioneers of equality but in reality, offer discrimination, and the traditional home with passive religious values and narrow focus on the Muslim community, leading to a feeling of non-belonging to either world (Wiktorowicz, 2004). ISIS main propaganda instrument for the West, the English-language periodical *Dabiq*, and social media campaigns on different platforms, effectively framed the oppositionary binarism that proved effective to draw young people to its territories.

ISIS had extremely powerful tools to frame their cause: a successful framing must indeed overshadow alternative proposals for reality interpretation and be powerful enough to trick individuals into believing that that one version of the story is the 'good' one, versus an antithetic version that is 'bad'. The portrayal of the world in binary oppositionary terms polarizes the narrative into a 'us versus them' dynamic, where the master narrative appeals to the Westerners as being *kuffar* (infidels) since the time of the Crusaders (Andersen and Sandberg, 2020). According to Ingram (2017), the central purpose of ISIS messaging is to shape perceptions and polarize the support of contested population as for example Muslims living in the West: to do so, it produces messages that appeal to both pragmatic factors, such as security, stability, and livelihood, compelling the audience to engage in rational

-choice decision-making, and perceptual factors, leveraging on emotional items such as identity, crises, and solution constructs and aim at promoting ISIS credibility in order to convince the prospect constituencies that its efforts to create a state for all Muslims are true. This prompts cognitive opening as the individuals reassess beliefs and identity: the identity crisis is critical for Jihadist recruitment as it creates new openness to socialization while pushing towards a reevaluation in terms of Islam and no other ideologies. The Islamic State has a multifaceted narrative appealing to its various target audiences in several ways (Gartenstein-Ross, 2015): religious obligation, political grievance, and a sense of adventure are the three areas upon which ISIS messages are mainly framed. Social movements entrepreneurs leverage on the context of discrimination by offering alternative identities and opportunities to prove one's value through renewed empowerment and feelings of belonging in a context of alienation and discontent.

Political entrepreneurs profess an ideology: through framing, they provide an interpretation of facts that politicizes the status quo and leverages on grievances, amplifying and aggregating them on the collective level; followers of a movement join the ideological network after an emotional shock (Costalli and Ruggeri, 2015). Following the process of religious seeking, social movement entrepreneurs devote themselves to the creation of collective frames of understanding. Ideology in this case acts as a push factor, giving political entrepreneurs the opportunity to provide a specific frame of the status quo in order to translate private and individual grievances into public and collective ones (Costalli and Ruggeri, 2015). Ideology is thus fundamental in terms of framing and formation of collective grievances, providing guidance for movements' followers and producing mobilization.

ISIS and Jihadist movements therefore master mainstream social movements tasks, which is especially evident when it comes to framing of reality. Diagnostic framing identifies the causes of Muslim suffering in the Western governments, accused of oppressing Muslims in a systematic way. US-led coalition interventions in the Middle East, among which the Gulf War (1990) and the US invasion of Iraq (2003) take a prominent role, are blamed for the sufferings of the Muslim people. The propagated idea leverages on how Muslims as an international community have been violently persecuted without any sort of justification throughout history, while the invading force is framed in terms of infidels responsible for the situation in Syria and Iraq portraying jihad as a legitimate answer. In addition, Western values and way of living are deemed as deviant and immoral, diverging from the message of Allah and therefore resulting in a wide range of social problems: with the imperialist dominance of Western powers over third world regions, the West imposed its deviant lifestyle on Muslim lands and gave rise to such issues as poverty, unemployment, lack of social capital, and most of all war.

Coming to prognostic framing, ISIS had very powerful tools to frame itself as promoter of powerful solutions to the diagnosed malaise suffered by the Muslim community all over the world. First and foremost, the creation of a caliphate capable of welcoming Muslims regardless their origin, ethnicity, language, or gender: the idea of a caliphate is framed in terms of a safe haven for oppressed Muslim, where a favorable lifestyle was to be found. Functioning infrastructures, job availability, schools and hospital: all according to the religious precepts of Islam and Islamic values (Andersen and Sandberg, 2020).

In order to fight the immorality left by the West, the Islamic law is framed as the only response to deviance: the Islamic values are proposed as moral alternative to the ill individualism of Western values and lifestyles. As stressed in the previous section however, diagnostic and prognostic frames are not sufficient to mobilize support and overcome mobilization costs. In order to leverage on the emotional component of individuals, motivational frames proposed by ISIS perpetuate the binarism of 'us versus them' through the vilification of the enemy and the positivization of the group.

The celebration of its military success in an exaggerated fashion in order to accelerate mobilization through scenic video clips representing glorious warriors, decapitation, thriving marches of armies following a victory is contrasted with the crimes of the West: pictures of dying children, bombed cities, overarching desperation among people in the attacked cities. Tapping into the individuals' deep emotions in terms of apocalyptic clashes between the West and the Muslim world, fated to win and establish a just global Muslim society, proved to be an efficient mobilitator of constituencies and allowed the overcoming of rational uncertainties that might have prevented people from performing *hijra* and supporting ISIS.

Furthermore, the apocalyptic idea of a forthcoming judgement day urged Muslims to adhere to Jihadist claims in order to avoid afterlife damnation: such apocalyptic framework tapped into the fear of the believers, resolving inner struggles preventing them from joining in (Ryan, 2015). Once frame alignment is achieved, the fundamental factor that ensures a possibility for radicalization is deeper socialization. The process of socialization inside the movement is intended to 'alter the values of the individual so that self-interest is defined in accordance with the goals and beliefs of the movement ideology in order to foster identity construction, encouraging social bonds that convince the individuals to stay the course' (Wiktorowicz, 2004: 10). Formal joining happens when the individual internalizes much of the ideology and adopts a new identity – that of a member of the movement: when this happens, the individual is trained to participate in movement activities intended to reproduce the movement message and attract new followers in a network structure, creating a feedback mechanism through with trained members reach out for new participants and in turn get closely tied with their identity of member of a movement.

5. Women, youth, and radicalization.

The analysis of the drivers behind radicalization in the specific case considered in this dissertation must depart from the acknowledgement of the highly intersectional character that radicalization takes. It is indeed fundamental to examine the intersected identities of the subjects under scrutiny as they locate at the very delicate convergence between gender, religion, migrant status, and age to gain the clearest knowledge as possible when it comes to the understanding of causes and dynamics of radicalization. While all four axes (gender, religion, migrant status, and age) individually account for a certain degree of influence on radicalization processes in ways that are going to be depicted below, their intersection in a single individual acts as a powerful amplifier of the possibility of turning to violent extremism and radicalize. Perceived or real inequalities inside a society lead to the formation of grievances that have a relevant role in the process of radicalization.

Such inequalities however need to be tackled with an intersectional theoretical and methodological approach (Choo and Ferree, 2010): as Crenshaw (1990) elaborated in her foundational work in intersectional feminist studies, there is the fundamental need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is structured and how inequalities inside a society come to be constructed. What McCall (2005) calls 'complex inequality system' needs to be the foundational framework of any inquiry in the realm of gender and radicalization: the idea of 'multiple jeopardy' stresses how discriminations are cumulative and jointly act as inequality creators, challenging the idea that 'each discrimination has a single, direct and independent effect on status' (King, 1988: 47).

In these terms, lived experiences of discrimination and oppression ought not to be clearly separated in gender-based, religion-based, or race-based discrimination: the discriminatory factors rather cumulatively account for a harsher degree of discrimination. Within the feminist theory, the claim that women's lives are constructed by multiple, intersecting systems of oppression has become commonplace (Carastathis, 2014): oppression in this sense is not a 'singular process or a binary political relation, but is better understood as constituted by multiple, converging, or interwoven systems' (Carastathis, 2014: 304). Assuming homogeneity of gender through its analysis as a relevant component for radicalization would imply that all women experience disadvantages in a same way, providing an inadequate frame for understanding women radicalization: according to Crenshaw indeed 'ignoring the difference within groups contributes to tensions among groups' (1990: 1242).

As Carastathis (2014) argues, intersectionality accounts for or captures experiential and structural complexity: 'rather than reducing the phenomena of oppression to one foundational explanatory category (as class, race, or gender) (…) intersectionality theorists argue that oppression is produced through the interaction of multiple, decentered, and co-constitutive axes' (Carastathis, 2014: 308). Furthermore, in addition to gender and migration status, age is a factor that clearly accounts for radicalization: the mind of a youngster is malleable, and the formation years going from pre-adolescence to early adulthood are significant in terms of shaping world views, morality, and personality formation[1]. This leads to a relevant openness to radical ideas, that would probably not be present in a latter life period when such cognitive structures are already formed, and radicalization processes would have to go a harder way to effectively convert an adult into a violent extremist. Periods of neural plasticity in terms of brain formation such as adolescence and puberty tend to create vulnerabilities that in turn contribute to a high rate of problems and disorders emerging, among which proneness to radicalization as a response to such disorders can be listed (Dahl, 2004).

The total estimate of female foreign fighters to ISIS according to the ICSR Report (considering the time period 2014 – 2018) suggests a number in between 4162 and 4761 women affiliates in ISIS territories that moved from other countries to Syria. Perešin (2015) indicates an estimate of around 10 – 15% of women among the Westerners who migrated to ISIS territories. Other estimates go as far as 18% (Dawson, 2021). In the case of Western Europe, women accounted for a 17% of the total Western European foreign fighters, in a number that ranged between 940 and 1023. Consistent with TSG's findings, the majority of women foreign fighters come from the same cluster of four countries (France: 300 - 382; UK: 145; Germany: 165; Belgium: 47).

Statistics from Meleagrou-Hitchens et al., 2018 indicate how the number of women Jihadists from the US accounted for a 11% over the total of foreign fighters from the US; however, such figures are subject to potential methodological biases as women tend to more easily avoid detection and are possibly underrepresented (Meleagrou-Hitchens et al., 2018). According to Loken and Zelenz (2017), many Western young Muslim women recruits are middle class, pursuing higher education, engaged in civil society, and voluntarily leaving behind comparatively comfortable lives in liberal states. Girls and young women according to Darden (2019: 6) 'face additional pressures stemming from gendered social roles that make them susceptible to terrorist recruitment (…); typical drivers of participation in violent extremism may operate differently when applied to females'.

Cian A., Gender, *Second Generation identities and Radicalization to Violent Extremism: Social Movements Studies in the Analysis of Radicalization to Jihadism*, in 'Urgency', DOI: 10.57658/411-447; N. 1, 2023, 411-447.

Saltman and Smith (2015) provide an overview of the overarching push factors that prime women to be vulnerable to propaganda and therefore to easily radicalize, and of the pull factors that indoctrinate those women to the point that they are willing to give up the life they know for a promised but uncertain future. In terms of push factors, several drivers are identified by the authors. First of all, feelings of social or cultural isolation profoundly shape young women's lives in the West. Young individuals in any context and from any context must come to terms with adulthood in a highly sensitive period of everybody's life: they must define their personal identity and understand where they want to belong, which is a strikingly hard process in normal circumstances as well.

However, when it comes to second generation ethnic minorities in the West, 'an additional layer inherent within this questioning of identity adds' (Saltman and Smith, 2015: 9): most individuals belonging to an ethnic minority group are likely to experience identity distress due to discrimination based on their ethnic identity. According to Lyons-Padilla et al. (2015), Muslim American youngsters who do not identify neither with their heritage culture, nor the culture of the host countries, tend to feel more marginalized and may be at a much greater risk for feeling a loss significance which might in turn relate to increased support for fundamentalist ideologies.

This is particularly true in the case of women, as their belonging to a different ethnic group is enhanced by the visibility of their religious identity markers such as modest coverings makes Muslim women more vulnerable to discrimination, fueling feelings of isolation within the larger host community. These claims are validated by Loken and Zelenz's (2017) empirical analysis, which proves that *muhajirat* reported feeling isolated and discriminated against in their home countries because of their public displays of Islamic piety. Comeau (2016: 26) stresses how the 'turn to Islamism to formulate a cohesive cultural identity in the case of members of diasporic Muslim communities is made even more extreme for diasporic women as they are torn between the traditionally conservative roles associates with female gender in their homelands and the often-liberal freedoms that they are offered in the West'.

The drive for these women to live within a primordial society enforcing premodern Islamic rules is tied to the necessity to have certainties in terms of identity: they are unable to properly exhibit their religious identity in the West without feelings of discrimination, therefore they turn to a safe haven where they are certain that their religious will not be a token for discrimination and there they can be finally free to live accordingly to their religious values. Havlicek (2015) stresses how additional layers of identity-based questioning are added to non-gendered identity grievances.

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Western feminism, and the Western 'emancipation' project is 'seen as a ruse, a means to sexualize women (…). The so-called Islamic State presents the opportunity to live free of such tyranny; to gain solidarity, sisterhood, belonging and (self)respect. Joining ISIS is presented to and among the women as an emancipatory and empowering project' (Havlicek, 2015: 7). Lyons-Padilla et al. survey of 198 Muslims in the USA provides interesting insights on the nexus between experiences of non-belonging and support for radicalism. Immigrants' identity processes – or how people manage their identities with their culture of origin and their identities with their new home country's culture - are a fundamental dimension to consider in terms of youth radicalization. The authors focus on what they call *significance loss* - namely the process that leads from a perceived social maltreatment to a feel of loss of self-worth (Lyons-Padilla et al., 2015: 2).

In their model, supported by their findings, marginalization relates to feelings of significance loss and those feelings are associated with increased support for the behavior and ideologies of fundamentalist groups. This significance loss leading to favorable perception of radical groups provides the necessary cognitive opening for radical groups' recruiters to intervene and further radicalize first, and recruit after, young second-generation Muslims. Young adults and children are indeed particularly vulnerable to grooming: they are naturally inquisitive and keen to explore new avenues and ideas (Reeves et al., 2018), especially when they are not satisfied with their current way of living and are looking for possible exit solutions from a situation that they deem uncomfortable.

As Doosje et al. (2013) highlight, young Muslims in the West tend to highly suffer of personal uncertainty, defined as a 'subjective sense of doubt or instability in self-views, worldviews, or the interrelation between the two'; as the authors conceive it, it also involves the implicit and explicit feelings and other subjective reactions people experience as a result of being uncertain about themselves. When uncertainty arises, people cling to their cultural worldview (Doosje et al., 2013). Extreme ideas and groups, in this sense, are able to provide clear and straightforward answers and solutions to questions and worries: when the solutions are rooted in a millennial religious system, furthermore, they gain enhanced legitimacy and authority that is exerted in a non-contested way over young people's minds. Religion in this sense happens to be a strategic tool for uncertainty reduction and self-enhancement (Murshed and Pavan, 2009).

In terms of pull factors, the gendered dimension of radicalization takes a more specific shape. Jihadist narrative and propaganda, constituting the main pull factors leading towards radicalization, indeed differ greatly due to the differences in roles between men and women inside ISIS territories.

According to Steflja and Darden indeed 'ISIS created an ideological space and a physical place for women to express their commitment to the group' (2020: 103): the declaration of the Caliphate acted as a crucial factor to drive women to ISIS territories, both on a moral and on a concrete level. Leveraging on the role of women inside the Caliphate, al Baghdadi explicitly called for women to perform *hijra* as a religious duty. Female migrants find themselves in the position of having a purpose, being valued for their own identity as both Muslims and women: they are agents of state-building thanks to their contribution to ISIS's expansion through the bearing of cubs of the Caliphate (Saltman and Smith, 2015). Female migrants are convinced, as much as men, that migration to the Caliphate is a religious duty that every good Muslim must perform. Furthermore, the quest of belonging takes the shape of Muslim sisterhood. Young Muslim women in the West go through additional criticalities during their adolescence, where a permeant feeling of non-belonging in the majority community of their host countries leads to the proliferation of feelings of exclusion and quest for an in-group in which they might identify and finally shape their personal identity through it.

The sense of 'otherness' is naturally embedded in being part of a minority ethnicity and it is only natural that youngsters tend to look for a group of peers with shared characteristics with which to identify. In this case, young Muslim women are of course attracted to other individuals that resemble them and are capable of reproducing a community in which they can feel safe and accepted. The search for meaning, sisterhood and identity is therefore a primary a driving pull factor for women radicalization. The perspective of finding a community of women – 'sisters' – who can actually understand their deep sorrows in the Western communities and with whom they can share their religiosity and make it visible without being discriminated but rather praised transforms ISIS territories in a promised land, where their true self can finally find an expression in a safe environment.

Drawing conclusions on the matter of gendered and age-sensitive radicalization can be a tough task. However, Loken and Zelenz's study on Western women in Daesh does an excellent job in contending that the *muhajirat* are 'primarily responding to a religious and political call to righteousness and view themselves as political agents for a group they believe represents their interests as Muslims and as women' (2017: 47). To this extent, their analysis of an original dataset of the social media accounts of 17 Western *muhajirat* validates the claim that female Daesh recruits should be considered seriously as insurgents. They contend that women make largely autonomous decisions to join Daesh, and their motivations resemble the ones of their male counterpart. Of course, as it holds true in the case of male radicalized individual, not each second-generation Muslim woman in the Western world radicalizes and performs *hijra*, turning to extremism to validate their claims and resolve their personal and political struggles.

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Mobilization processes delineated in the first theoretical chapter of this dissertation hold true for gendered processes of radicalization, with a predominant role of collective dynamics leading to violent extremism.

6. New radicalizing milieus: online radicalization as a security threat

A Pew Research Centre survey (2018)[1] showed how 45% of youth are almost constantly online, and how numbers as high of 97% of the sample use at least one social media platform. While the research is focused on American youth, the results of the survey are consistent with European numbers: Eurostat provides similar results for the year 2018, where the 87% of individuals aged 16 to 24 is regularly active on social networks in terms of regularly posting and interacting online[1]. When cognitively open young adults resort to online connections in order to find alternative meanings and systems of coping with the feelings they experience in such a sensitive period of their life, the possibility that they come into contact with likeminded persons is very high. The internet and social media were identified as one of the most significant resources in terms of radicalization milieus: as Weimann and Von Knop (2008) stress, they are decentralized, impossible to control, censor or restrict, and are accessible to untold millions globally, 'transcending geographical barriers and providing opportunities for the emergency of homogeneous, like-minded virtual communities readily available to sympathizers, potential recruits, and existing members' (Siegel et al., 2019: 407).

Reeves et al. (2005) identify five hypotheses in the literature concerning the link between the internet and increased opportunities of being radicalized: the internet acts as an echo chamber to find like-minded individuals, accelerates the process of radicalization, increases opportunities for self-radicalization, and allows radicalization to occur without physical contact. Social media, according to Perešin and Cervone, allow ISIS to promote its goals quicker and more easily to 'a younger generation who spend a great deal of time on the internet and is adept at utilizing all its advantages' (2015: 27).

Social media usage takes a gendered form as well, having at least two significant effects in relation to women and terrorism (Huey and Witmer, 2016). First of all, they are spaces within which women are afforded new opportunities to become exposed to Jihadist groups and create significant links with other sympathizers; furthermore, these sites allow women a greater freedom of engagement in a wider array of activities than those permitted offline and in real life settings. The internet cooperates towards an enhanced inclusion of female participation in Jihadist groups: as Havliceck (2015) stresses, while they would have been excluded from the offline recruitment networks of the Jihadists of the past, the online dimension provided women with an arena where to obtain and express real agency.

The internet indeed provides alternative spaces to 'perform less restricted gender identity, more easily engaging firstly with Islam, then Islamism, and progressing to a more extreme and ultimately violent position' (Pearson, 2016: 17). In this sense, it allows women to move out from invisibility but at the same time respecting the limits imposed by their ideology (Alava et al., 2017). To attract Western women to ISIS territories, recruiters introduced a new type of social media campaign primarily led by female supporters that already joined the group (Perešin, 2015: 25). Klausen (2015) identifies this factor as the *Umm factor*: ISIS leverages on women inside the Islamic State, or already radicalized, to re-iterate radicalization processes through the dissemination of information in order to recruit and radicalize other women, in an ever-lasting spiral. The collective dimension of social media and the entrenched networking performed online turns internet into a social milieu. The internet, according to Pearson (2016), performs in the same way as a real-world social milieu: the creation of an active sisterhood creates a visibly gendered community where messages are transmitted, frames are produced and aligned, and radicalization can be attained.

This perception of an online collectivity accelerates the process from individual identities and grievances to collective ones: online platforms somehow reduce the risks, removing barriers for participation and guaranteeing the possibility to reach for followers at any time of the day, in any given geographical location. Extremist groups target collective identities, through relational and emotional bonds, in order to achieve endorsement of their values (Alava et al., 2017: 17). Online identities are constructed and often they clash with offline identities, leading to what is called 'identity dissonance' (tension arising from a lack of cohesion between identities) (Pearson, 2016: 22). In the case of young Muslim women, already negotiating their identity between their culture of origin and the culture of the host country, this happens to be severely distressing: online recruiters ease the process of identity re-unification, providing solid frames for the understanding of a new individual identity under the light of Jihadism.

Online radicalization, according to Pearson, can effectively bound together the multiple identities an individual fails to unite in the real world (2016: 23). The Social Identity and Deindividuation Effect (SIDE) model emphasizes how the coexistence of several identities in the virtual world facilitates processes of separation from one's individual identity and the adoption of new group identities, facilitated by the sense of virtual community and sense of presence (Alava et al., 2017). This in turns leads to the acceptance of the new radicalized identity, fostered by in-group acceptance and peer support. The goal of campaigns of online recruitment is indeed to identify women in distress with their personal and collective identity who are experiencing high degrees of dissatisfaction and personal uncertainty and are undergoing a moment of personal crisis; once identified, women recruiters offer them a possible solution to all their problems: making *hijra* to ISIS territories.

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ISIS proved to be active on all the main social network platforms, with a particular prominence of Twitter in terms of usage due to the possibility to better conceal identity and easily re-establish accounts after governmental or platform account shut down (Perešin, 2015). Communication of women recruiters on social media tends to mix both ideological messages regarding religion, the victories of ISIS over the infields and pro-ISIS slogan and ideology, but at the same times scenes of common life such as 'making Nutella pancakes and playing with children' (Perešin, 2015: 26). Tales of ordinary scenes of living, romantic sunsets over Syrian cities, and narratives of the Caliphate grandiosity support a romanticized image of Jihad, providing that last decisive token to convince young Western Muslim women to leave their reality behind. This is a powerful tool to pull young girls by re-assuring them that whatever they have in their current life in the West, they can have in ISIS territories as well, but with the added certainty that their lives are going to be guided by religion in each step. Several Jihadi media outlets focused on helping perspective recruits to 'identify themselves with the chatty young jihadist females who express their happiness at living in the Caliphate', in a very distorted image of what life under ISIS looks like (Khaleeli, 2014, quoted in Perešin, 2015). Through online propaganda, ISIS is depicted as an ideal place for a new start for all Westerners looking for a *halal*[1] way of living.

7. Gendering Jihad.

As every social fact, Jihad can and has to be gendered. Neglecting the gender-based differentiation of experiences inside Jihadist radicalization processes would imply an ill-understanding of women drivers for joining ISIS and in the last stance result in an incapability to prevent other women from joining extremist organizations in the future. Quoting Martini (2018, 26), 'a narrow, gender biased interpretation may limit the understanding of these women's actions to their personal problems and thus restrict a vision that should take into account more elements'.

Not including gender when talking about radicalization would prevent the analytical ability to entirely grasp all the dimension of a very intricated phenomenon and therefore hinder the ability to provide effective early responses to prevent dynamics of radicalization to violent extremism. The discourse surrounding gender and political violence is a wide and deep one, and its effects on knowledge creation must not be underestimated. When women choose violent roles and embrace political violence, 'they do not only commit a crime, but they also undermine our perception of how a woman should be: soft, and law-abiding' (MacDonald, 1991; from Fraihi, 2018: 27). If one had to go with the mainstream though that characterized the imaginary of women and war for centuries, then women violence would only be the result of the rage of a moment, of a mental illness well-rooted inside a deviant female individual.

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The times where violence exerted by women could only be deemed exceptional and out of order are (almost) long gone, to leave the stage open for a rational understanding of gendered political violence. Nevertheless, what Linton (2016: 182; from Steflja and Darden, 2020) argues is that the topic of female perpetrators of extreme crimes 'cannot but challenge the dominant contemporary dogmas in the international arena' and as such, as Steflja and Darden (2020) highlights, has largely been avoided in scholarship.

In the case of Western women joining Jihad, it is even more relevant to set the stage for a gendered and feminist analysis capable of a deeper sociological understanding of the drivers for radicalization, as post-colonialist views on Muslim women highly intersect with gendered assumption further complicating the debate on women and political violence. The mere fact that a woman enjoying a Western life, including fundamental rights, freedom, and economic welfare, would leave the West for a worse social, political, and economic setting, sets into motion a crisis of values that requires a feminist and non-orientalist lens of analysis. According to Martini (2018), those women from the West that willingly join Jihadist terrorist organizations and are prepared to give up a Western living challenge the Western neo-orientalist perspective on Muslim women in the West.

As a matter of fact, gender highly intersects with neo-orientalism as Muslim women in the West are portrayed as victims of the barbaric nature of Muslim men and Muslim culture: they are oppressed and passive victims in need to be saved from the black man by the white man and should cherish and be grateful for the opportunities provided by the West - as Spivak famously contended: 'white men are saving brown women from brown men' (1988: 93). A signifying debate enshrining the idea of Muslim women as oppressed is the conversation surrounding hijab as a sign of female oppression: white man, and white feminists, cannot avoid making a point for Muslim women subjugation and need for liberation from their own culture by accusing the hijab of being an instrument of modern slavery against Muslim women.

However, *muhajirat* proved the opposite: women 'saved' by the West, socialized, and instructed there, willingly challenge Western values to join the enemy. Jihadi women challenge the gendered and neo-orientalist discourses through processes that perform agency: in the words of Ali, 'female jihadi shatters the edifice of passivity through her acts of violence and turns against her would be liberators' (2012: 145). As Loken and Zelenz (2017: 47) put it, 'Western women's voluntary involvement in Daesh complicates the institutional depiction of Middle Eastern woman as perpetually in need of emancipation'. This collective disbelief that women would willingly forgo social and political equity to seek out restrictive gender roles stems for the irreconcilability of the West's security narrative with female recruits (Loken and Zelenz, 2017: 48 - 49).

Cian A., Gender, *Second Generation identities and Radicalization to Violent Extremism: Social Movements Studies in the Analysis of Radicalization to Jihadism*, in 'Urgency', DOI: 10.57658/411-447; N. 1, 2023, 411-447.

This narrative, according to the authors, makes it difficult to reconcile the West's role in Syria and Iraq as an emancipatory one when women are willingly joining those same organizations that the West deems oppressive. This leads to the downgrading of those women and their motivations for joining as coerced, tricked, and driven to irrationality by sexual and romantic desire. Furthermore, following Martini (2018) Jihadism ought to be considered as a problematic violence as Islamic precepts and differences in terms of conception of the social sphere, which is perceived in strictly religious terms clashing with Western laicity. This clash between two different conceptualizations of social and political dynamics, joint to the Western presumptions of saviorism, further complicates the position of Jihadi women.

Western security narratives, according to Loken and Zelenz (2017), emphasize saviorship as justification for military interventions: US administrations legitimized military interventions in the Middle East, among other factors, through the necessity to save women from their oppressors in the name of Western freedoms and liberalism. Women engagement in Jihadist violence, their consensual use of 'instruments of oppression' – namely, the veil – and their denial of Western freedoms in the name of Jihad jeopardizes not only the moral position of the West as above any other civilization, but also the legitimacy of many military interventions of the last decades. As Martini puts it, Western militants blur the constructed boundaries between the West and Islam, taking the West into the Islamic terrorist world (2018).

8. A case study: Hoda Muthana.

Hoda Muthana was born in 1994 in New Jersey, and raised in the US for her whole life, but experienced all the identarian distress second generation Muslims experience: her family was traditionally religious, despite not being deeply aware of religious knowledge but rather practicing out of custom and tradition. She described her religious upbringing as a traditional and social custom rather than as a firm and deeply rooted religious belief (Speckhard and Shajkovci, 2019). She was not obliged to wear modest clothing as far she complied to head coverings, and Friday prayers and fasting were seen as a social moment rather than a religious one, as 'we didn't have any knowledge of our religion' (Speckhard and Shajkovci, 2019).

Her relationship with her mother was, in her words, extremely troubled and complex due to her extreme conservatorism and strictness. She expected the daughter to leave home only after marriage, possibly with a husband chosen for her from their Yemenis acquaintances, either in the US or back to their home country. Muthana disagreed with her mother's expectations over her marriage and her future in general. She stressed her desire for an autonomous and independent life, and her striving to make individual choices over her future: 'I had no interest in marrying someone from my country.

Cian A., Gender, *Second Generation identities and Radicalization to Violent Extremism: Social Movements Studies in the Analysis of Radicalization to Jihadism*, in 'Urgency', DOI: 10.57658/411-447; N. 1, 2023, 411-447.

I wanted to do my own things, I wanted to go to school by myself, hang out with my friends (…), get a job and get married to whom I want' (Speckhard and Shajkovci, 2019). During her upbringing, she was only allowed to have restricted contacts with people outside home: she described how she could not really do anything growing up, as 'because of religious culture, it was only school and home or wherever my parents went' (Drury and Ashmore, 2022). Her socialization opportunities were limited to school and the mosque, that led to her being 'socially underdeveloped', as she labelled herself in an interview with Drury and Ashmore for the Daily Mail. As she already had a laptop, she could access online websites, and despite not having a mobile phone yet, she started browsing religious websites around 2012.

In an interview with Hall, Muthana states how she 'started getting interested in my *deen*[1] around 2012', and how her religious awakening got kick-started back then, watching scholars' lectures about Islam on YouTube (Hall, 2015). After graduating from high school, she enrolled in a business program at the University of Alabama-Birmingham and she was finally gifted her first mobile phone, for which she longed for years (Steflja and Darden, 2020). In 2013 she went on and opened a secret Twitter account which allowed her to come into contact with a well-established network of ISIS members and members-to-be, the so-called Muslim Twittersphere.

She came into contact with ISIS supporter and propagandist Aqsa Mahmood, a Scottish teenager who fled to ISIS territories in late 2013, communicating extensively with her and modeling her departure on Mahmood's experience and tips (Vidino and Hughes, 2015). In November 2014 she withdrew from the University and used the reimbursement of the tuition her parents paid for to buy a ticket to Istanbul, Turkey, from where she went to Gaziantep and relied on some smugglers whose contacts she acquired online, being trafficked across the border to Syria and ISIS territories. After a period spent in a *madhafa*[1] she ultimately decided for marriage as her only way out the filthy conditions of the shared guesthouse, despite stressing how she did not want that and was not ready for it (Speckhard and Shajkovci, 2019).

She got married after around two months spent in the *madhafa*, in late December 2014. Her first marriage was to an Australian foreign fighter of Bengali origin who went by the *kunya*[1] of Abu Jihad al-Australi, who died in the battle of Kobane (March 2015) after only a couple of months in their marriage (Steflja and Darden, 2020). After his death, she was allowed to stay with the clique of Australian Jihadists her former husband came from, who provided for her as her widow stipend was cut as she was not going back to the *madhafa*. After a few months, in 2016, she married for a second time with a Tunisian 19-year-old Sharia student serving at a Sharia academy, the father of her now 5-year-old son Adam (Speckhard and Shajkovci, 2019).

Cian A., Gender, *Second Generation identities and Radicalization to Violent Extremism: Social Movements Studies in the Analysis of Radicalization to Jihadism*, in 'Urgency', DOI: 10.57658/411-447; N. 1, 2023, 411-447.

However, the man hid his desire for martyrdom to Muthana and left her to engage in a suicide mission, leaving her heavily pregnant and unprepared. She gave birth in sieged Raqqa, right before leaving the city and starting contemplating escaping ISIS. At that point however she was retreating with the organization following the last shadows of its territorial control towards the Eastern Syrian desert (Steflja and Darden, 2019). Around the time she got pregnant and realized she was about to become a mother (around late 2016), she states how she started to repent her decision of joining ISIS. Nevertheless, she did not attempt to leave ISIS territories sooner than 2019. When asked for justifications, she states that she was trying to leave for long, but it was not possible. She ultimately managed to escape through the desert with a group of other people, reaching a PKK's checkpoint and being captured and transferred first to al-Roj camp, where she received threats by still dedicated ISIS members for the interviews she granted to Western broadcasting media, and after to al-Hawl camp due to security reasons related to her now disavowal of ISIS and its actions, and repentance for her joining of the group (Speckhard and Shajkovci, 2019).

9. Main results of the study.

A vast database of qualitative first and secondary sources composed of retrieved Muthana's tweets and online interactions, as well as documentaries with her testifies and interviews with journalists, was investigated in order to explore the role of contextual and meso-level factors, as well as gender, in processes of radicalization. Using a developed qualitative codebook (based on Crossett and Spitaletta (2010), and on Wiktorowicz (2004), focusing on risk factors for radicalization and cognitive opening, and collective processes fostering socialization to radicalization) the collected material was analysed with the following results.

The key findings mainly relate to two domains. The first one concerns second generation identities and emotional vulnerability as a predisposing risk factor for cognitive opening to violent extremism. The perceived loss of significance due to non-identification neither with the culture of origin, nor with the one of the host country, added to the perception of discrimination of Muslims as a social group, resulted in feelings of 'belonging nowhere'. Hoda Muthana was trapped in an ultra-conservative household, that seemed to hold a strong attachment to the home country and an even stronger devotion to their religious culture, but she was growing up in a Western setting. As she stressed throughout the several interviews she granted, she was not allowed what was allowed to all her peers: 'no partying, no boyfriends, and no cellphone' (Porter and Callimachi, 2019). In her own words 'I couldn't do American things. And I am born and raised in America. I'm just as any blonde-haired, blue-eyed girl, you know? And I wanted to do things like them, and I could never do it' (Callimachi, 2022).

Cian A., Gender, *Second Generation identities and Radicalization to Violent Extremism: Social Movements Studies in the Analysis of Radicalization to Jihadism*, in 'Urgency', DOI: 10.57658/411-447; N. 1, 2023, 411-447.

Her grievances were connected with her individual experience as an adolescent who was prohibited to live the life of 'any blonde-haired, blue-eyed girl'. As Lyons-Padilla et al. (2015) empirically proved in their study of Muslim American youth, feelings of 'belonging nowhere' and loss of significance due to the non-identification neither with their home country culture, nor with their host country one, paired with a perception of discrimination against Muslims as a social group, lead to higher likelihood of radicalization. Furthermore, this emotional vulnerability took a specific gendered connotation as the positioning of women freedom inside the Muslim culture clashed with the one of Western countries, provoking distress due to lack of autonomous agency and dissatisfaction.

When confronting her home culture, Muthana expressed some sort of hate towards it: she was not hating the Islamic religion, to which her family belonged, she was rather hating her culture 'not in the sense of food and clothing and stuff, but in a sense of sexism, basically. They let men do everything and they don't let the women do anything at all (...) they could do whatever they want. I would dread looking at my future' (Speckhard and Shajkovci, 2019). She grew up in America, she was born and raised as an American, but all she had waiting for her in the future was an arranged married to which she would not want to consent.

The theme of how her brothers had it easier in their teenage years, as per the Arab tradition they 'get a pass for everything' (Speckhard and Shajkovci, 2019), is recurrent in the recalling of her teenage years, highlighting how this came to constitute an added line of personal grievance on a gendered basis for Muthana. She was expected to marry right after graduating, most certainly to a husband picked by her mother among their relatives in Yemen, but she disagreed with what her mother expected from her life. She felt a sense of powerlessness, as she knew marriage was coming for her whether she wanted it or not (Speckhard and Shajkovci, 2019). And the consequence for such powerlessness and deprivation of autonomy over her life choices brought her to see hope and escape from her problems in making *hijra* to the Islamic State, which she started considering as soon as she heard the Caliphate was being established.

Muthana felt she could not hold a grip onto her life, as all she could foresee in her future was a marriage she did not want to comply with. Agency was brought back to her through the active framing of women migration as a deliberatively autonomous act that would have brought with it not only compliance with Allah's rules, but also the true potential of self-determination as a woman. As Speckhard and Shajkovci (2019) stress, she started seeing hope and escape from her personal problems in the promise of change through migration to the Caliphate, as 'it seemed that it would convey personal agency over the big decisions looming in her life: when and who to marry, where to live, and how' (Speckhard and Shajkovci, 2019: 6 - 50).

Cian A., Gender, *Second Generation identities and Radicalization to Violent Extremism: Social Movements Studies in the Analysis of Radicalization to Jihadism*, in 'Urgency', DOI: 10.57658/411-447; N. 1, 2023, 411-447.

In this sense, Muthana stresses how 'when I saw this opportunity, I jumped for it because I felt like I could do whatever I want with my future' (Speckhard and Shajkovci, 2019). The second finding regards the collective dimension as a resolution of the aforementioned grievances. As collective identities minimize personal uncertainties, the online reproduction of the real-world social milieu as the only socialization opportunity allowed to Muthana granted her a newly found feeling of belonging. An unsatisfied young girl, navigating her life in the crossfire of a liberal American society of 'blonde-haired' girls and her ultra-conservative family, turned to the internet as a source of freedom and socialization. Muthana therefore turned to her religion in a much deeper way than before.

The creation of a secondary identity characterized by a zealous religiosity allowed her social identification in a group that validated her new identity and provided a sense of belonging thanks to the digital brotherhood. In turn, group relations and interactions acted as a catalyzer: they collectivized, legitimized, and amplified grievances and cemented Muthana's belonging to the new group of peers. As a reproduction of an offline social interaction environment, social networks create the same opportunities real life does: messages are transmitted, frames are produced and aligned, and radicalization can be attained. The close contact on online platforms is not restrained by geographical locations or time zones, as online activities are not bound to time and place: this allows a wider audience to be reached in no time in the global Muslim Twittersphere, where the extremely wide number of members composing the collectivity accelerates the process from individual identities and grievances to collective ones (Carvalho, 2014).

The high number of individuals engaging in a constant networking and communication on a daily basis allowed the formation of a strong in-group identity that was reinforced by the reiteration and propagation of one-sided messages. In terms of content of the online interaction, Klausen used four main categories to understand what Jihadists tweeted about, that turn out to be useful for understanding the performance of social movements' tasks by Western Jihadist network. The four categories are the following: religious instructions and advice, including references to fatwas and prominent religious figures; reporting from battle, including pictures of dead martyrs, battles, current locations, or activities related to specific battles; interpersonal communication, including regular conversation, discussion, or prior communication; tourism, encompassing everyday life topics; threats against the West.

These tweeting topics allow for the creation of a positive in-group identity, and a negative out-group one. Muthana's posts on social media (Twitter, Ask.fm, Instagram) are completely aligned with the topics delineated by Klausen: as a consequence, she can be deemed as an efficient social network user and proselytizer.

Cian A., Gender, *Second Generation identities and Radicalization to Violent Extremism: Social Movements Studies in the Analysis of Radicalization to Jihadism*, in 'Urgency', DOI: 10.57658/411-447; N. 1, 2023, 411-447.

Muthana was not only an extremely active poster, but she also interacted a lot under other user's posts, entrenching a deep network of friendships and acquaintances and re-creating the micro-cosmos typical of the daily life of a teenager. The only difference was that instead of doing it offline, she did it on social media, and she did it with radical Jihadist networks that were ready to exploit their resources to convince social media users to move to territories controlled by ISIS with the global community of Muslim brothers and sisters. This brotherhood under a single flag served the in-group identification regardless individual origin, and collectivized grievances tapping into one's personally experienced injustices, as 'those generation that were drowning in oceans of disgrace, being nursed on the milk of humiliation and being ruled by the vilest of all people, after their long slumber in the darkness of neglect - the time has come for them to rise (…) as the dawn of honor has emerged anew' (al Hayat, July 2014: 9).

Removing barriers for participation and scaling up the number of members in one's close clique, allows for the rapid cementation of the collective identity and the connected grievances and the feeling, although fictitious, to have found a group of peers that can validate one's experiences and through which a sense of belonging and acceptance can finally be found. In terms of top-down tools for meaning dissemination, *Dabiq* proved to be an effective vehicle for narrative construction in terms of diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational framing that effectively re-united Muslim individuals prone to radical interpretations through the provision of fascinating versions of reality. It can be assumed that Muthana came across the journal while still in the US: the first issue calling for migration to ISIS territories, '*The return of Khilafah*' was released in July 2014. By then Muthana had an already well-established social network of keens, among which such periodicals were surely circulating.

She was certainly exposed to material of such kind, which was providing ISIS narratives to interpret world dynamics: it was her online community who encouraged her to listen to the sermons of al Awlaki, a Yemeni American preacher who was venerated by ISIS. By the time Muthana started to fall deep into radicalism, they were still publicly available on internet without restrictions. All of this, with little or no competing arguments on the internet at least as compelling as those ISIS provided Western youth with to prevent their rapid closeness to the violent extremist group. On top of that, the Muslim Twittersphere allowed for the cementation of positive in-group identities and negative out-group ones and alignment of frames with the goals of the group, initiating processes of socialization that ultimately led to Muthana's decision to join ISIS. Negative framing of the Western *kuffar*[1], to whom the blame for the suffering of the Muslim community globally was attributed, was corroborated by very visual and impacting images of the sins of the infidels both on social media and through *Dabiq*.

Cian A., Gender, *Second Generation identities and Radicalization to Violent Extremism: Social Movements Studies in the Analysis of Radicalization to Jihadism*, in 'Urgency', DOI: 10.57658/411-447; N. 1, 2023, 411-447.

With uncensored images of death and desolation, ISIS was leveraging on the blames of the West: 'nothing was as emotionally compelling as images that depicted the conflicts in Syria and invoked sympathy by many to travel to Syria and help beleaguered Muslim brothers and sisters suffering under Assad's cruelties' (Speckhard and Shajkovci, 2019). Positive framing was fundamental for the construction of a powerful image of legitimacy of the group in its territories: a list of benefits and services provided by the Islamic State was defined in several issues of *Dabiq*, including returning properties to the rightful owners, granting services and state security and stability, ensuring the availability of all food products and commodities, reducing the crime rate. For example, on issue 4 of *Dabiq*, a whole section was devoted to how life in ISIS territories did not stop and citizens were not abandoned: it showed pictures of operators restoring electricity, children getting cancer treatment, streets being cleaned, old people enjoying a warm meal in a care home.

Through the construction of an alternative interpretation of reality through framing processes, Jihadist broadcasters through social networks performed mainstream social movements tasks and led individuals to fall deeply in their network, legitimizing their operate and discrediting external interpretation through the provision of their own perspectives on matters. The support and legitimacy provided by religion, furthermore, enhanced the probabilities that individuals exposed to radical networks avoided questioning the provided version of reality, as religion and its transcendency and dogmatism require individuals to just believe, and not question.

10. Conclusions.

Taylor and Quayle (1994: 35) describe 'embarking on a life of terrorism like any other life choice' (in Horgan, 2006). Hence, the impossibility to rule out single and causal factors leading to terrorism. Nevertheless, the present study provided a valid framework for the understanding of the relationality of radicalization, and of social dynamics that further it and lead to joining radical groups. This research attempted to challenge mainstream interpretations of women and political violence through a deep understanding of dynamics of radicalization under a different approach, namely that of social movements theories. It aimed at contributing with an interdisciplinary approach to the understanding of factors that enable and further processes of radicalization, considering both the role of gender in interaction, and the shape such interactions take.

Based on the analysis of Hoda Muthana's radicalization process, the research has shown the relevant impact of the collective dimension of social interactions on processes of radicalization. The results of this work indicate that both interaction and group factors, and gender play a relevant role.

Cian A., Gender, *Second Generation identities and Radicalization to Violent Extremism: Social Movements Studies in the Analysis of Radicalization to Jihadism*, in 'Urgency', DOI: 10.57658/411-447; N. 1, 2023, 411-447.

First of all, the application of theory to Muthana's case enlightened how identity dissonance that second-generation Muslim can experience is a factor that gives rise to perception of inequalities and both personal and social grievances. Feelings of non-belonging due to struggles linked to one's identity lead to the impossibilitation of healthy socialization processes inside the host country community, furthering such feelings. As a consequence, individuals like Muthana turn to online socialization environments as an alternative to reconstruct their community in a way that fits their needs. Interaction with a new community provides several entry points for recruiters and proselytizers that exploit networks to expand their influence on distressed youth. Group dynamics with peers in the fertile online environment further radicalization in both a top-down and relational fashion.

Throughout the analysis, the major strategies performed by social movements in terms of framing and mobilization proved to be performed by ISIS as well. Once such top-down dynamics were put into place, a relational component allowed for the cementation of ideas, socialization and ultimately joining of the organization. This exploration addressed the main research question, providing answers regarding the role of interaction in processes of radicalization.

Secondly, the study analyzed the role of gender in such processes, finding out that it is a factor that cannot be ruled out when analyzing radicalization. Muslim women socialization opportunities outside the private sphere are limited: this both produces an additional line of grievance and makes online socialization environments a viable solution for participation. A specifically gendered analysis of such processes focusing on the differentiated experiences of young men and young women accordingly to their gendered socialization allows a better understanding of causes of radicalization, contributing to new perspectives on women and political violence.

The study displayed several limitations related to data availability and collection caused by the difficulty of investigating Jihadism and radicalization, relying mainly on third parties accounts and studies aimed at different goals than the present research. The pending criminal trials on Muthana, furthermore, might have led her testifies to be flawed in terms of presenting a more favorable narrative of her radicalization to reduce her accountability in light of future judicial processes. The generalizability of the results in addition might be limited as different contexts and the combination of different factors lead to differentiated individual responses to distressful situations, that can or cannot lead to radicalization. Nevertheless, the findings align with Wiktorowicz's (2002; 2004) contributions on social movements theory and radicalization to Jihadism and prove that such approach is fertile in providing explanations for radicalization, leaving an open window for future research.

Cian A., Gender, *Second Generation identities and Radicalization to Violent Extremism: Social Movements Studies in the Analysis of Radicalization to Jihadism*, in 'Urgency', DOI: 10.57658/411-447; N. 1, 2023, 411-447.

Furthermore, the results agree with Dalgaard-Nielsen (2008) and Borum's (2011) exploration of social movements theory as a possible explanatory framework for radicalization, supporting the idea that an interdisciplinary and holistic approach to radicalization is needed if more viable solutions are to be provided. The way governments make sense of radicalization and produce policies accordingly is often informed and influenced by academic research. Future research might therefore focus on the role of governments in terms of projects of social inclusion of second-generation migrants as a viable preventive strategy to address radicalization. Enforcing close control and shutting off social media pages deemed either propagandist for radicalization or belonging to individuals at risk of radicalization did not prove to be useful, as the digital world is a thriving environment for illegality. Furthermore, as the internet allows for the quick diffusion of radical narratives, it can grant the rapid diffusion of counter radical messages as well. Despite governmental efforts in producing counternarratives until now generally failed, future research could focus on possibilities of countering radicalization following the same strategies that are conducive of radicalization itself, exploiting networks and interactions in the same way that radical terrorist groups do.

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12. Notes.

[1]More specifically, the ten phases are: 1. Disorienting dilemma; 2. Self-examination; 3. Critically assessing assumptions; 4. Recognition of the shared dimension of discontent; 5. Exploring new perspectives; 6. Establishing a course of action; 7. Acquiring knowledge and skills; 8. Provisionally trying on new roles; 9. Building self-confidence; 10. Reintegrating into one's life according to the new perspectives.

[1] For a concise but comprehensive overview on adolescent brain development, see Dahl, 2004.

[3]https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2018/03/01/social-media-use-in-2018/.

[4]https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/submiViewTableAction.do.

[5]Religiously permissible.

[6] Religious life.

[7] House where unmarried women (either first-timers or widows) are kept until they decide for wedding.

[8] *Nom de guerre.*

[9] Infidels.

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that no competing interest exist; to be the only author of this research paper; that he has not received specific grants from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit-sectors; that the views and opinions expressed in this article do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Agency Owner and Publisher; that this article followed all ethical standars for carrying out research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

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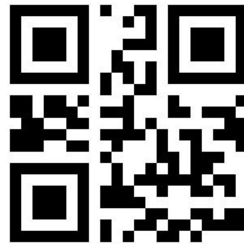

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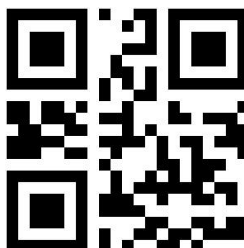

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