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Young people going off to fight in Syria: an attempt to position this phenomenon within the history of terrorism linked to radical Islamism in our country

(main lines of intervention)

Islam, the beneficiary of Muhammed's prophecy of perfecting the so-called "book" religions, is considered a perfect religion. Muslims believe that God finally sent Muhammed as the last law-bearing prophet (Seal of the Prophets) to convey the divine message to the whole world (to sum up and finalize the word of God).

- In the prophetic gesture, Muhammed constructed politics (governance of the new universal community, the *Ummah islamiyya*) at the same time as religion (absolute monotheism, the culmination of all prophecy since Abraham), thereby creating total confusion between the spiritual and the temporal in the minds of Muslims. God guided the prophet on both levels at once (the religious Koran of Mecca and the political Koran of Medina). The notion of secularism may thus appear unnatural in the collective subconscious of Muslims.

- Constituting the political instrumentalisation of Islam, radical Islam is rooted in prophetic teaching. Radicalisation can take place in the ideological/religious field (from "reformism" = adapting Islam to modern circumstances, to "Salafism" = a return to the strict observance of Islam as lived by the prophet and his disciples (*salafs*)).

This radicalisation of thought may go hand in hand with a radicalisation of the means used to achieve one's goals. While "religious radicalism" does not always automatically involve violence and armed conflict, Salafists are - in our sense - naturally attracted to it. Indeed, the further away the ideal society is from the real world, the less it is attainable without the use of violence and armed conflict.

The conjunction of these forms of radicalisation (vision and means) leads to the movements we are currently faced with (violent Salafism: al-Qaida, the Islamic State (IS), etc.).

- We have spent the past three decades in Belgium dismantling "radical Islamic" networks. In the initial period, these armed groups were (in their words) 'freedom-fighters' battling against the deviant governments of their countries of origin (the '*Groupe islamique armé*' (GIA) in Algeria, the '*groupe islamique combattant marocain*' (GICM) in Morocco, the '*groupe islamique combattant tunisien*' (GICT) in Tunisia, etc.).

- These groups merged in Afghanistan in the late 90's (via London) in the melting pot of globalised Islam embodied by al-Qaida (Osama bin Laden's declarations of war on the West in 1996 and 1998).

- After spectacular actions culminating in the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Centre, we have seen Al-Qaida being pushed back by the US military and Western security forces, as

well as a change of strategy theorised by Abu Musab al-Soury (a globalised Islam, a call to local militants to perpetrate actions inside enemy territories).

- The current phenomenon of large numbers of young people going off to fight in the Middle East is new, and constitutes a mix of a) these groups embodying resistance to the USA under the al-Qaida banner (which has since become the IS) and a generation of young people in search of something to hold on to and of redemption. The origin of this phenomenon is to be found in the Syrian popular uprising, hijacked by the Islamists in the face of general do-nothingness.

- As often stated, we are now dealing with “Islamised radicals” rather than “radical Islamists”, with these young people without the same knowledge as their older “brothers in arms”, whether on a religious or political level. They often have no idea of what Islam is all about, despite it being a powerful identity provider (sacred and, of course, irrational). These “Islamised radicals” are however bound at some stage to come up against “radical Islamists”, who may act as catalysts in their transition to the “new man” status (ironic analogy with the biblical “Road to Damascus” where Saul of Tarsus, a torturer in the pay of the Romans, was transformed into “Saint Paul”, only to become a martyr!).

- In the case of these young people, we posit that we are seeing the convergence between a “person” (a young person who has broken with a society to which he/she feels not/no longer to belong) and a “particular product” (“Salafist” Islam, a form of Islam not requiring any reflection and based on the servile imitation of conduct) in the “context” of the disastrous geopolitical situation of the Muslim countries (the externally imposed artificial construction of Syria and Iraq).

* However, we need to note that the process of constructing these various entities (“person”, “product” and “context”) have been observable (and observed) for many years and have often been theorised. For instance, the study of the rise of ghettos (e.g. the banlieues in Paris and Brussels), the home of the majority of these young people, began way back in the 1930’s in the Chicago School (of Sociology). The “Salafisation” of Islam is also a process we have been seeing for the last 20 odd years in French-speaking Europe (rivalry within Muslim communities between adherents of the “Muslim Brothers” and disciples of the various Salafist fundamentalist currents, which the latter are winning!).

As for the feeling of frustration and the desire for revenge within the Islamic world, it seems to be omnipresent, especially in the area we are focused on and where the states were defined on the drawing board at the beginning of the 20th century by the colonial powers (the Sykes-Picot agreements) and the oil companies (the Acknakary and Ostend agreements in particular) without worrying about either religious (Shiites / Sunnis) or ethnic (Kurds ...) boundaries.

- Taking part in this struggle to defend the Islamic world renders the violence used legitimate but also redemptive since this new stance gives meaning to an earlier life seen as a failure.

- These young people detest our society so much that they are driven to depart for distant battlefields. Moreover, it induces them to bring this violence back to our countries and to use it to punish us ... and to take revenge!

- this stance is all the more natural as it is now seen as a response to the coalition attacks against attempts to create an "Islamic State". Now with a defensive role, this jihad has syphoned off warriors from al-Qaida, the movement that originally attracted these young people. Following the logic of urban gangs, the IS is seen as a "super gang", the mere mention of which sends a shiver down the spine of its adversaries (a subculture in which respect goes hand in hand with the fear one inspires!).

- We thus see three theories fuelling the debate, especially in France (the socio-economic causes upheld by Olivier ROY, the responsibility of religion/Salafism posited by Gilles KEPEL, and the geopolitical frustrations put forward by François BURGAT).

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