Militant Jihadism

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Concluding Considerations

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The chapters in this volume have attempted to give a picture of the various aspects of militant jihadism as of today and have discussed its probable future in and around Europe. We are still far from suggesting clear projections. There are some critical unknown factors that may have a huge impact on future developments. We do not know, for instance, whether IS and al-Qaeda will cooperate one day in the future, or even will become one organisation. Today this seems unlikely, given that there are strategic differences between the two movements and that there are also personal aversions between their respective leaders. Nevertheless, leaderships may change and may transform the organisations. Whatever happens, militant jihadism will not disappear in the foreseeable future and we still cannot confidently predict in which direction it will transform. Following the analyses provided by our contributors, let us put some elements together of what we know so far.

Instant Jihadism

Those who have analysed the jihadisation process since the official emergence of IS’s territorial Caliphate in July 2014 have very often used step by step models to explain the process. These models attempted to explain how young people between 14 and 25 years old have ended up with militant jihadism as a gradual process: how they adhered to a minority branch in Salafism, namely
the *al-salafiyya al-jihadiyya*, why its *takfiri* perspective was so attractive to them, how they have been moved by tailor-made, intense propaganda, how this has led to radicalisation and finally turned them into jihadist fighters. While studying the case of 20 youngsters from the first generation of Muslims who left Belgium for Syria between 2012 and 2015, Leman (2016), for instance, mostly referred to gradual conversion theories to explain how these young people decided to reconstruct the rest of their lives in such a dramatically different way from their peers. In the event of suicide attacks, one could similarly explain how these people have gradually decided to create a clean *umma* free from *jahiliyya* (moral savagery), and how this decision has step by step led them to further their expectation to survive with such a clean identity in the perception of co-Muslims in the physical world as well as in Paradise (Asad, 2018:77-79).

Such a gradual process is, however, no longer present among current “lone wolves” and other people who have recently become jihadists. The profiles of recent lone wolves tell that they no longer follow this step by step ideological path in adopting their new identity. It is “instant jihadisation” which seems to be on the horizon. The frustration and aversion against Western society is determinant and one or two simple jihadist references to the Quran or *hadith* are sometimes enough to give it an empowering content in a minimum of time.

**Global Yet Fragmented Jihadism**

Global militant jihadism started with the Afghan war in the 1980s and later with the Kashmir crisis. It subsequently advanced with the creation of al-Qaeda. In Europe, it started in 1995 with metro bombings in Paris organised by Algerian-French militant Khalid Kelkal and developed further since then. The Syria crisis and emergence of IS brought unprecedented global popularity. At the beginning of the Syrian crisis, the jihadist call stimulated many young Muslims to leave their country for humanitarian reasons to support suffering Muslims in their fight against Bashar al-Assad. At the same time, an iconic apocalyptic dimension came to the scene: some *hadith* already prophesied that Sham (the Levant) would trigger events that would finally bring about the end of time. This added a significant apocalyptic glamour to the global jihad.

The Sham-caliphate turned out to be a deceiving and cruelly inhumane experience, and many Muslims will surely not engage in such a new experiment in the next few years. However, what one may learn from the recent past is that if
a Muslim country feels itself to be under attack, there are surely young Muslims worldwide who are disposed to show their loyalty by fighting for it with the locals. If the situation has something iconic, such as the Sham’s supposedly apocalyptic role in the last case, the pull factor will become even stronger.

In the meantime, we will most likely witness a fragmented process where Islamist cells will be militantly active in various countries, spread over the Caucasus, Central Asia (possibly due to the Uyghurs’ persecution by the “atheist” China), South-East Asia, Central and North-West Africa, or again in the Near East (since in Iraq the situation is not very promising). Some pull factors for jihadist engagement outside Europe will continue to exist in the coming decades. Meanwhile, Libya, as analysed in this volume, will remain for some time a highly important country for the future of militant jihadism. As a “failing state” and a highly convenient door to Europe, Libya provides a lot of potential for future jihadist engagement.

The Unreturned from the Levant

The number of IS militants or sympathisers detained in Iraq or in Kurdish and Turkish prisons in Syria is estimated to be still quite high. The numbers vary according to different sources. But there are still a minimum of some 20,000 fighters, detained or not, believed to be in Syria and Iraq. What will happen to them? Will they seek revenge if they manage to be released? Will these people opt for normal life or will they opt to continue their crimes there? It is plausible to predict that many of them will keep their ideology. But how will this happen? Will they adhere to local jihadist cells or will they look for new jihadist opportunities once the jihadist leadership proposes some alternatives? How about those who will disengage? Will their disengagement mean total abandonment or will they just give up active militancy in the field but continue to inspire others as veteran jihadists? What about the children of the unreturned? Will they continue the job that their parents were unable to finish or will they be able to create a different and brighter future from that of their parents? These are questions to be answered to give a realist picture of future militant jihadism.
Cyber and Digital Opportunities

Digital technologies, the Internet and social media are developing at an unprecedented pace. They have already challenged the conventional borders, be they territorial, political, social or cultural. More importantly they have created a cyber space where an unbridled exchange of virtual content has been made possible. Jihadist terrorists are among the most interested beneficiaries of this huge virtual opportunity. Many observers agree that the worldwide appeal of IS brand jihadism among younger generation was closely related to its professional use of digital technologies and cyber space. Bin Ladin occasionally recorded VHS videos to disseminate his message and expected them to be broadcast by a TV channel. Al-Baghdadi, instead, favoured creating aggressive social media teams, issuing online magazines in several languages, creating highly professional audio-visual jihadist contents and investing in other cyber outreach opportunities. There has been a clear decline in IS online content since it lost Raqqa in Summer 2017. Many analysts, however, today talk of a possible “virtual caliphate” after the demise of IS’s territorial caliphate. Furthermore, dark web and encrypted online platforms may secure jihadist militant activity besides wider outreach. Alkhouri already gave us a picture of such cyber opportunities. Cyber jihadism will thus remain a critical concern in the future. We can identify at least two important fields where militant jihadism will be employing new digital and online technology the most: the incitement of lone actor attacks in the West, mainly in Europe, including Russia, and promoting attacks with drones or with simple, improvised yet damaging weapons.

The most recent “post-Caliphate” jihadist terrorist attacks were carried out by the “lone wolves.” Cyber space is a good source of these terrorists not only for inspiration but also in organising an attack and in preparing the weapons. This trend seems to be continuing into the foreseeable future. Moreover, it is possible that the terrorists may learn or buy more know-how from non-jihadist cyber criminals and take over their modus operandi. In considering the future harm of militant jihadism, security authorities should try better to understand the tactics, techniques and procedures that these online terror actors are more likely to employ.

At this point, we should think of the possible role that Emni, the IS’s former intelligence apparatus, may play for the jihadist use of cyber techniques; and for encouraging and backing lone wolf attacks. It is already known that some Emni people managed to escape from Raqqa before it was liberated. Intelligence
sources suspect that some of its units are reorganising themselves in Europe. Whether these units will be able to function effectively and if so to what extent they will prioritise use of cyber space and technology is currently unpredictable. This should urge European intelligence and security services to become better informed about the functioning of the possible Emni cells and their priorities in the continent.

Jihadist militants are adaptive, smart and creative people. New digital technology brings further imagination and flexibility. It would then be reasonable to predict that they would be thinking of attacking with unconventional weapons enabled by this new technology. Weaponised drones are such an option. They can cause a lot of damage and casualties to such targets as outdoor events or critical energy facilities. Explosive drones make these targets physically more vulnerable. Similarly, terrorists may continue to attack with different types of IED (improvised explosive devices). They had used mass shooting weapons in the suicide attacks in the Bataclan Theatre in Paris in November 2015. It was during the heydays of IS. The Manchester Arena suicide attacker, rather, detonated an improvised home-made bomb in May 2017, a few months before the fall of Raqqa. It is highly probable that the jihadist terrorists will prefer IEDs in future attacks instead of conventional shooting weapons, given the increasing surveillance of weapon use and trafficking after the attacks shocked Europe in recent years. The al-Qaeda mujahidin were trained to hijack planes or to skilfully attack a US military base. The post-Caliphate IS mujahidin will most probably be trained in designing, developing and using small-scale weaponised drones or simple yet destructive weapons with the support of new technology.

Women and Children in Future Jihad

The place of women in future developments of jihadism merits reflection. One may expect feminisation of jihadism not only in attacks or in inspiration for them but perhaps more importantly in the socialisation of future generations. As illustrated in Chapter 5, women may have both passive and active roles in Islamist jihadism. For ideological reasons, most investment will probably go to passive roles for women. However, it is clear that there is still more potential among women as “critical mass” to be engaged for jihadist actions. Recent trends verify this possibility. In 2016, women already represented 25% of the arrested jihadists

Education is often regarded as a passive role that jihadist women are expected to be (or already were) mostly involved in. Nevertheless, we would be misled if we continue to consider it as a mere passive role. Education is an efficient and sustainable way of indoctrination and it will become an important new priority for future militant jihadism. It is so even today when compared to the case in the past (e.g. Ingram, 2018).

This brings us to what jihadism may try to do with children. As well illustrated in Perešin’s analysis, jihadists will not disregard the future potential that children and teenagers could bring to future jihadism. We can expect that they will try to lower the age for candidate jihadists and to achieve that, they will invest in education, in the internet and if possible also in some places outside the schools where they hope to create new “sanctuaries” in the future to reach out, indoctrinate and recruit. Policy makers should thus clearly understand that working with children and youngsters in urban neighbourhoods merits much more care than is currently the case. In reflecting upon the future, we should not, on the other hand, miss the opportunity that women could significantly contribute to the fight against and to the prevention of radicalisation.

Returnees

There is a widespread assumption that returned foreign fighters will seek to carry out terrorist attacks at any condition and in a more determined way. Many experts, however, think that there are different options available for them. There will certainly be those who wish to stay as hardliners. Nonetheless, there will also be those who will choose to disengage or simply stay passive because of advancing age or disillusionment or because they will change their minds. Some will, instead, be wishing to turn back and keep fighting again against the concrete “oppressors.” Some may also think of a career move. Therefore, we will be seeing different scenarios with regard to the future decisions of “returnees.” Considering this fact, Teun van Dongen predicts a low probability / high impact scenario about future terrorist attacks by the returnees. We will see whether his prediction comes true. If his projection is realised and the attacks are quite rare, when they do occur, as he foresees, they may cause many casualties. This may again paralyse politicians to develop proactive policies. In such a scenario, not
only the focus of the debate will shift but also the determination to take effective yet long-term measures will be risked. The recent rise of anti-immigrant populist policies and right-wing extremism in Europe already confirms this possibility. Such a scenario will not, however, hinder but most probably will be conducive to the existence of the breeding ground.

**Western Prisons**

Closer observation reveals that criminal behaviours among young people already comprise an implicit form of radicalisation. What happens in prison is that, if prison life is not immediately oriented to reintegration into society, this implicit form of radicalisation may become confirmed and supported by jihadisation. The seemingly “noble” content of jihadism can activate an instant or gradual jihadism and this may feed and justify aggressive feelings vis-à-vis the society. A high risk in prisons is also that the prisoners may find opportunities to socialise into a normalisation process of criminal behaviour and criminal networking. How to cope with it will be an important challenge for an effective prevention policy in the future.

**Terrorist Blind Spots**

Safe havens have always played an important role in the organisation of criminal groups such as mafias. That they may also exist in democratic and liberal countries is proven. The role of the small but very dangerous “Molenbeek network” in the Paris and Brussels attacks is perhaps the most impressive example of this possibility. Molenbeek is just ten minutes away by metro from the headquarters of the European Union. May it happen again? If jihadists in the future again have a chance to do it, why should they not try to organise it again?

The Molenbeek case hopefully teaches us two critical lessons. First jihadism in an urban setting functions more like a mafia rather than a conventional terrorist organisation. Hence, past achievements against mafia can inform counter strategies against future urban jihadist threats. Secondly, jihadist recruiters start to collect their poisonous fruits after an incubation period of approximately seven or even more years before their “terrorist urban sanctuary” comes to the surface. A retrospective analysis of the Molenbeek case, for instance, tells us
today that Ayaachi Bassam, an important jihadi preacher, installed himself in the
district in 1992 and created its jihadist mosque only five years later, in 1997. His
activities became visible only in 1999. He guided the marriage of Dahmane ‘Abd
al-Sattar who on 9 September 2001 killed Ahmad Shah Mas’ud, the leader of the
Northern Alliance and the only remaining opposition commander against the
Taliban in Afghanistan. Similarly, Khaled Zerkani, the most efficient recruiter
in Molenbeek, arrived in 2002, remained invisible for about 9 years, and began
recruiting youngsters for Somalia and Syria only from 2011 onwards. Henceforth,
the authorities in democratic societies should obviously invest in positive social
networking and positive social control among their citizens and in efficient
intelligence infiltration where there are signs of the possible creation of “blind
spots” or where they know that there are dysfunctional institutions.

**Financing Jihadist Terrorism**

Money is important for any terrorist activity and jihadist terrorists will be seeking
new financial sources in the future. They will most probably approach to financial
reserves in the bank sector deposited so far, to some charity organisations, to
trade of stolen pieces of art, and some other criminal activities. Some Belgian
judicial files, as discussed in Chapter 9, demonstrate that human trafficking and
migrant smuggling already permit creation of financial capital, networking,
communication and transfer of jihadists in the past. This clearly suggests that in
the future jihadists will try to localise such criminal money, earned by smuggling,
in local cells in a country of destination or in transit countries as well as in the
centre, wherever it may be in future. Financing terrorism is certainly not the
main objective of migrant smuggling; but unfortunately this criminal business
may create new opportunities for some jihadist financing. Along with other
difficulties and challenges brought by migrant smuggling, the authorities should
consider this aspect when tackling militant jihadism.

**Efficiency of Counter Theologies**

The debate among Muslims about the religious credentials of Islamist jihadism
will continue and this will have consequences. It is, however, not the debate itself
alone that will have an impact on future jihadist transformation. Who frame the
counter-theologies and how they frame will perhaps be more decisive. Today, the counter-religious arguments and strategy are strongly nationally tailored. They reflect the political and institutional concerns of the religious authority in question. No doubt there is much more care and cooperation than before among religious and political leaders in Muslim countries to prevent violent jihadism and religious extremism. In practice, this usually manifests itself as a particular collaboration between political and religious authorities. However, this collaboration in reality takes place as a negotiation, competition or sometimes a clash over the meaning of Islamic (Sunni) authority and the governance of the religious field. Furthermore, it has the potential to bring a credibility challenge to the religious institutions. If not managed properly, this challenge may in future cause (more) disillusionment about their moral authority, which will undermine, in turn, the effectiveness of their counter-theologies no matter how superbly they are designed. The success of the (Sunni) religious strategy against militant jihadism, on the other hand, will depend less on its ability for argumentative and conservative engagement with the jihadist discourse on authenticity and purity. It will, rather, depend more on its ability for a critical and creative engagement with modern, progressive and/or reformist discourse on such issues as democracy, social and gender justice, pluralism and citizenship.

A Systemic Analysis

When we put together the dynamics discussed above in a systemic approach, we can identify two fundamental axes that will support the survival of violent jihadism. First, the existence of a “pull country” in the Islamic world that can attract some Muslims from outside who feel ready to go there in order to defend Islamic interests (for humanitarian or other reasons) and to ease the suffering of this part of the “Islamic body.” Secondly, the persistence of simplistic, exclusivist and pragmatic Salafist interpretations that legitimise such violent jihadist militancy, expressed in one liner form or in more complex arguments, online or offline, in prisons or in urban blind spots, by veteran jihadist recruiters or by jihadist women indoctrinating their children with anti-Westernism. In the meantime, we will be seeing the lone wolf attacks from time to time. They may exist for a long period but they are more likely to be only functional in the sense that they feed Islamophobia, inter-ethnic, inter-religious and inter-sectarian
tensions in a society. Possible actions of Emni cells, which probably still exist, are an unknown factor.

On 29 April 2019, al-Furqan, one of IS’s media outlets, released a video in which al-Baghdadi is viewed alive and speaking to his aides. The video came shortly after the fall of Baghouz, the IS’s last significant territory in Syria. This was also the first visual appearance of al-Baghdadi since he first publicly appeared at Mosul’s Grand Mosque al-Nuri where he declared his “Caliphate” in 2014. In the video, he encourages his followers to keep fighting, to “harm the enemy” through a long “battle of attrition” and to seek revenge for the group’s losses. Previously, on 22 August 2018, al-Furqan had released an audio message where al-Baghdadi reportedly gave a long speech on the occasion of the Muslim celebration of ‘id al-adha. In this record, he addresses the “allies of the caliphate” anywhere and invites them to continue the fight against “seculars, liberals, godless people and unfaithful ones.” He advises them to use explosives and cars in attacks. His call found an immediate echo. The day after its release, a jihadist sympathiser killed two people and injured a third one with a knife in Paris. Amaq, the IS’s news agency, claimed the attack. With such appearances, the jihadist leader, on the one hand, gives the message that he wants to keep taking the stage. The sporadic attacks by lone wolves carried out with less complex instruments that may kill only a few people will provide this visibility. On the other hand, he gives a second and more important message: until IS finds a suitable place for the new “caliphate” in future – probably in the Caucasus, in Northern, Western or Central Africa or in East Asia – IS will continue a fragmented and glocalised jihadism.

To what extent Europe and the West will be affected by these messages will depend on the extent of the Western military engagement in these non-Western regions, on the extent of their ability to get young Muslims to feel that they are included and accepted in the West and on the extent of how the jihadist ideas, messages and images keep flowing at both cyber and real social space. It will be geopolitics, the presence or absence of successful social inclusion and intra-Islamic debate that will determine if violent jihadism has a future or not in the West.

Notes
1 For a recent analysis of this question see Renard and Coolsaet, 2018.
References