



Beyond borders: the transnational identity of the jihadi subculture in Europe

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In the aftermath of terrorist attacks in western Europe perpetrated by so-called jihadi “homegrown” terrorists, the recurrent question arises regarding why these individuals reject European values and seek a different path, namely jihad. Traditional and mainstream discourse on the topic often relies on the assumption that lack of integration, economic and political marginalization, and status frustration are to blame, and that terrorists primarily emerge from “ghettos” or “no-go” areas in large inner-city areas. In this chapter, Daniela Pisoiu and Reem Ahmed argue that violent jihadis are not confined to one social group and the structural forces at play do not necessarily affect their actions. Rather, these persons reject mainstream norms and values because they are driven by a strong desire to be different. The global nature of the jihadi subculture has particularly attracted second- and third- generation Muslim immigrants who feel neither European, nor attached to their parents’ home countries. Regardless of whether an individual originates from a disadvantaged social standing, or a privileged middle-class background, this transnational subculture attracts individuals who desperately seek a virtual community that is worlds apart from the one they have been brought up in.

In recent years, radicalization research has witnessed a dramatic increase in both the sheer numbers of works dedicated to the field and the types of approaches applied to it. Immediately after 9/11, quick and practical solutions were sought; thus the initial texts dealing with the topic usually tried to model a process of radicalization in several phases or steps, or looked for simple explanatory variables at the macro-level. As the discipline matured – and given the difficulty to match theory with empirics – other theories, concepts and models were developed at the meso- and micro-levels, most prominently those drawing on social movement research, psychology and criminology. In the context of social movement research, the contemporary discourse on terror has largely evolved from organizations and networks to include “movements”, “communities”, “milieus”, or indeed “subcultures”. Applying social movement theories to radicalization not only necessarily involved a broader conceptualization of the unit of analysis as “movement”; it also opened the way towards more sophisticated inquiries into the relationship between the “hard core” radicalized groups and the broader social movement. The concept of “subculture” has its roots in criminology and refers to the way certain minority groups distinguish themselves through an autonomous normative system and specific social values; a way of life which somewhat draws on, but is fundamentally different from, the “mainstream”.

In the general subcultural literature, subcultures have for a long time been considered marginal – economically marginal and politically marginal, emerging out of frustration with the impossibility to adapt to mainstream standards and to more generally “make it”. However, more recent conceptualizations have moved away from this idea and have

acknowledged the autonomous, rather than deterministic nature of subcultures and, more importantly, their increasingly strong political involvement. Currently, in the context of political violence, resistance is conceptualized in a different fashion, as strong, driven by agency, and not necessarily on the background of need or cultural hegemony, but due to the wish to have and especially be something different.

A particularity of the jihadi subculture is its transnational identity. Individuals living in various European countries relate less to their national or ethnic identity, and see themselves more as part of a global community of believers. Transnational jihad refers to the manner in which jihadi ideology transcends borders promoting norms through global communication networks. There are a number of arguments concerning why individuals are drawn to this movement; for example, theological reasoning, a search for meaning and shared identity, the feeling of superiority as Salafism offers access to the “Truth”, or the supposed altruistic motive, which implies that fighting jihad is necessary to protect and defend the “oppressed Umma” from the Western “crusaders”. In the context of subcultural theory, the transnational jihadi identity is primarily one of “resistance”. That is resistance to Western values and norms as well as the perceived notion of the West attempting to manage the conduct of Muslims. Regardless of individual motivations, globalization and the advent of the Internet has facilitated communication between this transnational movement easing international outreach of ideas and propaganda through numerous channels and successfully establishing a virtual community where individuals can feel more in touch with the Umma and actively resist European norms and values.



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