

INTERVIEW

NEW GENERATIONS WILL BE ABLE TO FIND A SENSE OF BELONGING

A conversation with Olivier Roy about terrorism, extremism and identity

by Adil Radoini

THE GLOBAL TERRORISM INDEX (GTI) SHOWS HUGE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN COUNTRIES IN TERMS OF EXPOSURE TO TERRORIST ACTIVITIES. AS AN INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATION ADDRESSING TERRORISM AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM, WHICH GROUPS SHOULD WE FOCUS ON? IN OTHER WORDS, WHAT IS THE STATE OF VIOLENT EXTREMIST GROUPS?

That's a complex question! It depends on the areas of the world that you are considering, but a global trend can be distinguished. Major organized, radical groups like Da'esh and Al-Qaida are currently going through a crisis; they are in fact far less effective than they used to be due, for example, to internal turmoil, military defeats and efficiency of the law enforcement and intelligence services. Above all, Da'esh and Al-Qaida pri-

oritized suicide actions that resulted in their best people losing their lives. The Bataclan terrorist attack in France was certainly well organized – the organizers had logistical support and had planned the coup for over one year – but they are now dead or in jail. As a result, that was the last organized terrorist action on French soil.

In recent years, we are facing an increase in individual actions where the connection between the terrorists and the centre of the attacks is becoming looser. We can in fact observe individuals who pledge allegiances – at least formally – to Al-Qaida and Da'esh, yet without being supported by those networks. This trend can be described as an 'individualization' of the actions which is both good and bad news. It is good news because these types of ter-

rorist actions are less lethal (overall) but – on the negative side – they are more difficult for the police to spot and track. Additionally, local jihadist groups – active in, for example, Chad, Mali, Nigeria, and Yemen – do not indulge in global terrorism i.e., there is no global spill over from these local movements. This is very paradoxical as France has been fighting jihadist groups in Mali since 2013 but there has been no terrorist attack in France that can be traced back to them, rather all terrorist attacks were related to Syria and Iraq where France had a lower profile. If we look at the USA, lots of mass murders – which are sometimes considered terrorism – are driven by different motivations, but the patterns of the actions are the same: an individual goes somewhere to kill as many people as s/he can. Therefore, there is something

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that transcends political affiliations; there is a pattern of terrorist action that is transversal.

AFTER READING YOUR BOOK ON DA'ESH, I BECAME CURIOUS ABOUT HOW THE IDEOLOGY BEHIND EXTREMIST GROUPS THAT ASSOCIATE THEMSELVES TO ISLAM HAS CHANGED OVER THE YEARS. IF WE GO BACK 10 YEARS, WE SAW DA'ESH ESTABLISH ITS CALIPHATE IN IRAQ AND THEN EXPAND TO SYRIA WHERE MANY MILITANTS WERE ATTRACTED FROM ALL OVER EUROPE WITH A "NO FUTURE" MENTALITY, AS YOU DEFINE THEIR PERSPECTIVE IN THE BOOK. I BELIEVE THIS IS AN APT WAY TO DESCRIBE THAT GENERATION'S MENTALITY, WHERE THERE IS NO LONGER AN APPEAL IN BUILDING A SOCIETY NOR A DRIVE OR ATTRACTION FOR THESE KINDS OF RADICAL IDEOLOGY. HENCE,

IS IT POSSIBLE TO ALTER THE WAY THESE TERRORISTS THINK, AT SOME POINT? DO YOU THINK THE IDEOLOGY OF DA'ESH CHANGED AFTER ITS DEFEAT IN IRAQ AND SYRIA, AND IF SO, HOW IS THIS CHANGE NOW REFLECTED IN THE NARRATIVE OF THE IDEOLOGY?

Well, we have no alternative ideology: there is no text nor writing explaining how the situation has changed. This confirms what I wrote: it is not a matter of ideology but more of narrative. Militants joining Da'esh were not attracted by its strong ideology, but rather by the narrative of the "lonely hero" inflicting losses on the dominant society. This is the narrative of the heroic soldier who ultimately dies. This narrative is still working, but not so much with Muslims: among them there is clearly an idea that jihad is lost. Many people

believed that because democracy is becoming less rooted in Tunisia and Egypt, more people would join Da'esh, but this is not true. Young Tunisians merely try to go to Europe and that's all. We are witnessing a 'depoliticization' phase, which is clear among Muslim youth, and for me this is closely associated with the fact that the jihad moment was a generational phenomenon. I would compare it with the revolution of the leftists in the 1960s and 1970s: indeed, during the 1970s 'revolution' was as big of a word as jihad in 2010. However, when the generation of the revolutionaries became adult, the movement ended. Since the 1980s we still have some revolutionaries in the radical left, but the momentum disappeared. The same goes for jihad, however the paradigm of the "lonely hero" continues

to exist. The idea now is that you don't need to be very well organized, one guy – see the Christchurch Mosque shootings for example – can still have a tremendous impact. At this point, we can say that the narrative is more important than the ideology as we don't have very well-organized groups, but feeble networks and internet communities which are not yet very structured but potentially still very dangerous.

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I BELIEVE IT IS ALSO INTERESTING TO COMMENT ON THE SHIFT IN PREVALENCE, FROM ISLAMIST EXTREMIST NETWORKS TO THE IDEOLOGY OF EXTREME-RIGHT GROUPS. I WAS HAVING A LOOK ON TELEGRAM WITH COLLEAGUES, AND WE NOTICED THAT MANY GROUPS WERE FULL OF WHITE SUPREMACISTS AND PEOPLE SUPPORTING FASCIST OR NAZI IDEOLOGY; WE WERE WONDERING HOW THIS 'NEW' FORM OF FANATICISM SHOULD BE PREVENTED AND TACKLED? WITH THE ADVENT OF NEW TECHNOLOGIES AND SOCIAL MEDIA YOU CAN IN FACT HAVE AN ECHO CHAMBER OF IDENTICAL IDEAS WITH THE RESULT THAT THE USER MAY EASILY BE CONVINCED THAT EVERYBODY THINKS AS S/ HE DOES. IT IS EXTREMELY DIFFICULT TO MANAGE THESE PRIVATE SOCIAL NETWORKS AND TO PREVENT SUCH ENVIRONMENTS FROM

GROWING INTO SOMETHING DANGEROUS FOR SOCIETY. HENCE, WHAT DO YOU THINK SHOULD BE THE ROLE OF THE STATE IN TACKLING THESE TYPES OF DYNAMICS?

That's very difficult because these people play on fears; they see themselves as victims, as a threatened minority, and similarly to jihadists they have this recurring idea of some sort of apocalypse approaching i.e., a very pessimistic vision of the future. The white supremacists are not trying to build a political coalition; they can easily be spotted by the security services, because they often speak 'too much' and in unprofessional ways. The discrepancy between their radicalism and their approach to a coup d'état is fascinating; Hitler did the same when he tried to organize his first coup in Mu-



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nich, but somehow it worked. Hence, the only way to prevent these movements from spreading out is to look at the possible connection between these people and the more organized groups. This sort of shift to the right is now typical of politics in Europe: however, this is dangerous because politicians speaking about a *grand remplacement*¹ are playing in their favour. Therefore, it would be beneficial to push these extremist people to the margins; however, with the lines between normal politics and extreme politics becoming more blurred this approach works less and less. Ultimately, I would say that in terms of communication it is essential to isolate these groups, without sticking to a purely moral narrative, until they appear as losers as opposed to heroes.

MY QUESTION WAS ALSO TRYING TO LOOK AT THE PROBLEM FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS. SINCE NETWORKS LIKE FACEBOOK, TWITTER AND TELEGRAM ARE OWNED AND MANAGED BY PRIVATE INDIVIDUALS, HOW SHOULD THE STATE REGULATE CONTENT THAT IS TOO DANGEROUS OR THAT QUALIFIES AS A HATE CRIME? ON ONE EXTREME, ONE CAN LOOK AT CONSERVATIVE COUNTRIES WHERE UNAPPROVED CONTENT IS EASILY CENSORED, ON THE OTHER HAND YOU HAVE STATES RESPECTING FREEDOM OF SPEECH, BUT LEAVING IT UP TO SOCIAL MEDIA COMPANIES TO SCREEN ONLINE CONTENT IS BECOMING MORE AND MORE DIFFICULT, BECAUSE THE SIZE OF PLATFORMS IS



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¹ According to *The Guardian*, the *grand remplacement* or 'great replacement' conspiracy theory is a "racist premise that white Americans and Europeans are being actively "replaced" by non-white immigrants." (Steve Rose, "A deadly ideology: how the 'great replacement theory' went mainstream", *The Guardian*, 8 June 2022.)

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There is much disagreement on what qualifies as 'hate speech', racism and incitement to violence

I WOULD NOW LIKE TO GO BACK TO SOME QUESTIONS REGARDING THE VIOLENT ISLAMIST GROUPS IN AFRICA. AFTER THE DEFEAT OF DA'ESH IN THE MIDDLE EAST, WE SAW A DECREASE IN ATTACKS IN THAT AREA OF THE WORLD AND THEN A MOVEMENT TOWARDS AFRICA, IN PARTICULAR, THE SAHEL REGION. WHAT CAN EXPLAIN THIS DEVELOPMENT? IS IT LIKE AN ALGEBRAIC EQUATION WHERE YOU HAVE MINUS IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND PLUS IN AFRICA? IS IT A PHYSICAL MOVEMENT OF PEOPLE OR A CHANGE THAT IS TAKING PLACE BECAUSE OF OTHER DYNAMICS AND PHENOMENA?

It is not a physical movement of people, you may have some individuals who move, but we have no example of hundreds of fighters from Syria going to Somalia or Nigeria. It's home-grown radicalism: it comes from the country where they are operating. Hence, in Mali the militants are from there and the same goes for Somalia, Mauritania, etc. If compared to Da'esh and Al-Qaida, the jihadist groups in the Sahel have an anthropological

GROWING EXPONENTIALLY . SO MAYBE STATES SHOULD GIVE GUIDING PRINCIPLES TO THE PRIVATE SOCIETIES THAT ARE IN CHARGE OF REGULATING THESE PLATFORMS. AND IF THE PRIVATE MANAGERS CANNOT DO SO, THE STATE SHOULD INTERVENE TO REGULATE IT. WOULD THIS BE A GOOD WAY TO DEAL WITH THE EMERGING PROBLEMS AND CHALLENGES? ARE THERE OTHER STRATEGIES THAT, IN YOUR OPINION, COULD BE USED?

In theory, it is a good way, the problem is that there is much disagreement on what qualifies as 'hate speech', racism and incitement to violence. So, we may all agree that any reference to Hitler is bad but then you will have some coun-

tries labelling rebel and pacifist groups as terrorists. This is the case of non-violent Salafists who are accused of fueling terrorism, leading to a call to censor speeches that are not necessarily terrorist, but which are fundamentalist, meaning that the problem lies in where to put the cursor. There is a lot of disagreement between governments on these topics, but we must strive to isolate political extremists, even though the balance between freedom of speech and hate speech is very fragile. I believe we should work in this direction, but I am not very optimistic when you see some people in power, who are regulating social media, and what they can do.

basis that is relatively well studied. This is largely also because of climate change: when you have less water, more demographic pressure, and a change in the balance between agricultural labourers and nomads, people are more likely to be recruited into jihadist organizations. So, each country's case might be explained by its local conditions as opposed to ideology. The Tuaregs were nationalists 30 years ago, now they are largely jihadists. This shift has a local, anthropological basis, which is 'good' news because it means that those groups are not interested in exporting their jihad abroad, they may be interested in cooperating with other countries, but they don't need to have foreign fighters, while for Da'esh

and Al-Qaida foreign fighters were central. In the military operations of Da'esh foreign fighters were on the frontline, but this is not the case in the Sahel or in Somalia. Additionally, the fact that France left Mali is good because that was an internationalization of a local conflict. Ultimately, the few people from the Sahel who joined global jihad did so because of Syria and not Mali. So, we should tackle this phenomenon from a political perspective and look at success stories, Mauritania – for example – did well by using repression and support from the traditional tribal system of relations. There is ultimately a political dimension to the story where there is a need to fight corruption, as usual.

WORLDWIDE USE ISLAMISM AS A PLATFORM TO ENGAGE IN POLITICAL CONFLICTS?

First because we had a wave of 'Islamization' of society in the 1990s; Islam became the way for young generations to contest traditional hierarchies. In a tribal system, people from dominated clans often use Salafism to contest the dominant higher clans. The same logic was used by the Taliban with Karzai in Afghanistan. But because everybody now claims to be an Islamist, Islam is no longer seen as the solution; when you have Da'esh fighting Al-Qaida you cannot say that Islam is the solution, so many religious figures like Mahmoud Dicko in Mali are also trying to play a role. Islam is thus no longer the monopoly of the radicals.

I HAVE A MOROCCAN BACKGROUND AND I AM WONDERING WHETHER YOU WOULD CONSIDER MOROCCO TO BE A POSITIVE EXAMPLE HERE. I REMEMBER SEEING STRONG TELEVISION CAMPAIGNS DEDICATED TO CLARIFYING WHAT ISLAM IS, IN OPPOSITION TO THE EXTREMISTS' NARRATIVE, WHICH I WOULD SAY WORKED QUITE WELL BECAUSE EVEN MOROCCO STARTED TO ACT AS A TUTOR TO OTHER COUNTRIES IN AFRICA IN TERMS OF ISLAMIC TEACHING AGAINST

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ISLAMISM IS EXPLOITED BY MANY AS A PHILOSOPHICAL PARADIGM TO TACKLE POLITICAL AND LOCAL ISSUES. WHY DO YOU THINK SO MANY DIFFERENT GROUPS

We should push to have Muslim communities, and not Muslim cultural minorities. But I am quite optimistic that the new generations will be able to find a sense of belonging

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THE PROLIFERATION OF THE EXTREMIST NARRATIVE. DO YOU THINK IT WAS SUCCESSFUL?

I would say it worked relatively well because it was done in a subtle way: in Morocco they were able to find a narrative of legitimization based on traditions. These networks were thus used as a tool of soft power. It worked; it didn't solve the issue globally but inside Morocco it worked.

DUE TO MY WORK IN THE CHEMICAL, BIOLOGICAL, RADIOLOGICAL AND NUCLEAR (CBRN) RISK MITIGATION UNIT, I KNOW THAT THESE MATERIALS CAN BE MISUSED AS WEAPONS OF MASS DESTRUCTION. SINCE 9/11, WE HAVE BEEN CONCERNED ABOUT THE POTENTIAL USE OF WEAPONS OF MASS DESTRUCTION BY TERRORIST ORGANIZATIONS, BUT EXCEPT FOR DA'ESH – WHO PROBABLY USED THESE TOOLS IN IRAQ AND SYRIA – THERE IS NO OTHER EVIDENCE. WHY DO YOU THINK THE JIHADIST ORGANIZATIONS NEVER USE THESE WEAPONS?

Well, Al-Qaida dreamed of having nuclear weapons of mass destruction, but it never worked. It is not because they have an ideology or religious duty, it simply didn't work.

THAT'S TRUE, I CAN TELL YOU FROM MY PERSPECTIVE THAT IT IS VERY DIFFICULT TO

WEAPONIZE SUCH MATERIALS, YOU NEED CERTAIN TECHNICAL AND PHYSICAL CONDITIONS AS WELL AS EXPERT KNOWLEDGE. WHAT COULD THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY, INCLUDING THE UNITED NATIONS, DO TO PREVENT AND RESPOND TO THE CHALLENGES POSED BY VIOLENT EXTREMIST GROUPS?

I would say that it is important to go back to politics when possible. When states or movements have a clearly identified political goal as in Tajikistan for example during the early 1990's, it is not a matter of ideology but rather of civil war between different factions which want to have the power. When this happens, you can negotiate. The problem is when you have no possible political management i.e., there is nothing to negotiate with Da'esh or Al-Qaida. For individual terrorism, it is important to avoid adding fuel to the fire by too repressive means. For instance, a takedown on religion in France is counterproductive and won't help. But the most important thing is to dismantle the biased narrative of the radicals. Sometimes we tend to exaggerate the danger of the radicalized, which makes radicalism even more attractive for some people. Hence, it is important to create a counternarrative which makes these guys appear as losers.

DO YOU BELIEVE THERE IS LESS ATTRACTION TOWARD RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS, ISLAM IN PARTICULAR, AMONG MARGINALIZED MIGRANT COMMUNITIES?

That was very typical of the 1990s and early 2000s where there was a shift from migrant identity to religious Muslim identity. Now there is no mass movement of Muslims in the European Union (EU), no political party, no unions. Now the interest in religion is more and more individualized, it is about personal salvation. If we look at the propaganda on TikTok, people are less radical, it is more about identity and less about jihad and the caliphate.

IT IS COMMONLY BELIEVED THAT THE SENSE OF BELONGING OF THE AMERICAN MUSLIMS TO THE UNITED STATES IS STRONGER THAN WHAT THE EUROPEAN MUSLIMS FEEL VIS-À-VIS THEIR EUROPEAN COUNTRIES OF ADOPTION, EVEN AFTER TWO OR THREE GENERATIONS. DO YOU THINK THE EUROPEAN COUNTRIES CAN DO MORE TO INTEGRATE MIGRANTS? IS THERE SOMETHING THAT GOVERNMENTS CAN DO TO MAKE THESE COMMUNITIES FEEL MORE AT HOME?

I think there is clearly a big difference when we compare Europe to the USA in this do-

main. Muslims there are middle class, while in the EU they are the children of immigrant workers. There is a cultural gap as traditions don't get transmitted from parents to the younger generation. This is not the case for Turkish people, for example: you don't have Turkish people among Da'esh

and Al-Qaida in Germany, for instance. This is the general story of migration. There is a confusion between religion as faith and religion as culture, but the more the youth are integrated the more they build a religious identity anchored in Western culture. We should push to have Muslim religious

communities, and not Muslim cultural minorities. But I am quite optimistic that the new generations will be able to find a sense of belonging.

Thank you, Professor, for this conversation!

Thank you!



INTERVIEW

ABOUT THE INTERVIEWED AND THE AUTHOR

Mr. Olivier Roy is presently Professor at the European University Institute (Florence): he is the scientific adviser of the Middle East Directions programme

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He headed the OSCE's Mission for Tajikistan (1993-94) and was a consultant for the United Nations Office of the Coordinator for Afghanistan (1988). He also worked as a part-time consultant for the Policy Planning Staff of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs (1984-2009).

His field works include Afghanistan, Political Islam, Middle East, Islam in the West and comparative religions. Mr. Roy received an "Agrégation de Philosophie" and a Ph.D. in Political Sciences.

He is the author of, among other books, "The failure of political Islam", "Globalized Islam", "Holy Ignorance", "Jihad and Death", "In search of the Lost Orient", and "Is Europe Christian?".

Mr. Adil Radoini works for UNICRI, the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute, as Regional Coordinator for the Middle East within the Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear (CBRN) Risk Mitigation and Security Governance Programme. He supports the implementation of the European Union CBRN Centres of Excellence Initiative. He previously worked as a journalist for the Italian press and television. In 2009, together with other international experts, he published "Un Hussein alla Casa Bianca", a perspective of the Arab world on the 2008 U.S. presidential elections. He graduated from the University of Bologna with a Master's degree in International Relations focusing on Middle Eastern politics, carrying out a research thesis led in Cairo and at the Institut d'Etudes Politiques, "Sciences Po" in Paris.