

Jihad-fighters carry guns and a Facebook account

How Social Media affect Jihad as a popular cult-phenomenon



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July 2014

“This research topic and focus have literally been 'on the news', which is an illustration of the creative approach Annemarie van de Weert has taken. Rather than summarizing literature and redrafting existing arguments, she has developed her own research agenda, interesting new concepts (banality of Jihad) and presented some interesting empirical findings which give food for thought for both academics and policy makers.”

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INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 2014 the General Intelligence and Security Service of the Netherlands made public that Jihadism in the Netherlands changed due to four developments (AIVD July 2014). Firstly the movement¹ has become more professional in their modus operandi, secondly Dutch Jihadists express their opinions in a new and provocative way, thirdly they have embraced the use of Social Media to spread their message and fourthly the new dynamics have a ‘swarm-like’² nature. In a reaction on the developments around the new crop of ‘fighters’, the National terrorism coordinator Dick Schoof declared in an interview that they are: “people radicalized almost exclusively through social media and exhibit cult-like behavior without a leading role of a preacher.”

As explored by Bhui & Ibrahim (2013) Jihadist rhetoric, image, and symbolism manifested in text, videos, and interactive formats function as a marketing tool. Reviewing communication-channels, tells us that armed groups currently active in the Syrian crisis passionately combine propaganda with new ways to reach audiences through both popular culture and religious ideologies. The overall message of a ‘holy war’ against alleged oppression and the idea that Muslims live in humiliation is confirmed everyday on the web (Van San 2013). In reaction the Jihadi is exposing that he is somebody to consider in the struggle; belonging to a group that fights the

¹ See for up to date facts: ‘Dreiging tegen Nederland nog altijd substantieel; zorgelijke ontwikkelingen zetten zich door’. Actieprogramma intensificeert brede aanpak jihadisme. NCTV Persbericht 12-11-2014.

² “Swarm dynamics is a term also used in sociology and military theory. Here, it is used to reflect the new characteristics of the contemporary jihadist movement: it is a strong decentralized network, moving fast and being very flexible” (AIVD 2014, p.2)

injustice laid upon them. Through slick images and video's they present themselves as cool, tough, and overall fearless guys, with a purpose in life. To understand the role of this form of communication through media in the phenomenon of political extremism, Archetti (2012) argued that we need to fit the exchange of information, its processing, and its effects into the broader picture of how social interactions occur, identities are constructed, and groups mobilize for political purpose (p. 12).

In the age of global media, I suggest taking a communication approach in understanding the expansion of Western Jihadism. Social Media therefore needs to be reviewed from a narrative point of view "enabling the examination of the cultural identity of social groups not as an immutable entity but as a transformation process based on the relationships with the world outside and the interaction process with other groups" (Belaala 2008, 19, p. 23).

Platforms like Facebook, which are all about 'profiling' could be playing an important role in shaping peoples perceptions of the outside world that can support the development of a distinct individual and collective identity. In the case of Jihadism this probably leads to interpretations of unity and brotherhood.

As already indicated by Stern in an article in the Boston Globe (august 2006) 'Jihad has become a global fad, rather like 'gangsta-rap' in which expressing dissatisfaction with a power elite, whether held by totalitarian monarchs or by liberal parliamentarians, may be comparable with the way exposure to violent lyrics against the establishment in rap music has a mass appeal. The provocative nature of the eighties and nineties rap-scene was hugely popular with young people. This also had a positive effect on the cognitions, believes and attitudes of youngster towards the hip-hop culture (Patton e.a. 2013).

In following Stern (2006) I therefore attribute significance in viewing Jihad as a 'millenarian movement [...] similar, in many ways, to earlier global movements' but then within the context of Social Media where the narrative is producing repeated social and psychological interactions with an ideology, the community of practice it

engenders and the meaning that is derived by the individual from sustained involvement and engagement with the group and activity (Horgan 2009, p. 8). One could therefore argue that Jihad fighting is becoming more of a lifestyle-idea instead of a religious ideology. However, unfortunately this Jihadi social status might look the most appealing to teenagers (15-20 years old) who are due to their age very susceptible to outside influences (Strauss 1996) and thus most likely to be ‘under the spell’ of ‘gangs’ (Clement 2010).

By the above, I suggest now is the time to study the effects of Social Media platforms, like Facebook on the Jihad-identity formation of the adolescent consumer. Since, the news about a growing number of underage youth going to Syria is currently causing municipalities all over the Netherlands to alert government actions into the spread of Jihad propaganda, empirical data is most welcome for implications on policy and theory about extremism, radicalization and current and future affairs. Because only by searching for possible triggers that can start a minor off into following fanatic ideas, can policymakers and counterterrorism teams operate in a preventative way and fulfill their duty to protect the nations children from becoming terrorists.³

³ Legally the Dutch State has an obligation to prevent that adolescents take part in the conflict in Syria. According to the NCTV (2014, p. 13), Treaties like The International Convention on the Rights of the Child, signed both by Syria and The Netherlands prohibit this action. Available at: http://wetten.overheid.nl/BWV0002508/geldigheidsdatum_20-06-2013#AuthentiekEN_VDRTKS845101_PARTI_Article38.

Research questions

The objective of this thesis is to gain insight into the interpretation of Dutch youngsters, on occasionally received but unrequested Facebook-posts about Jihad.

What do teenagers know about Jihad? What were their first sentiments, feelings and emotions viewing violent images and clips? How does it affect their attitudes towards Jihad? And how does it affect their beliefs towards Islam in general? How do they feel about religious fighting? What do they think of peers going to Syria to join the war? And how do they feel about Jihad-profiling on Facebook and the men who carry guns in Youtube-videoclips? Is it an appealing lifestyle to them? Can they imagine themselves fighting in Syria? And if so, why (not)?

More specifically, this study addresses the following research questions:

- How can Social Media posts about rebel fighting in Syria shape the perspective of Dutch youth on Jihad?
- To what extent could Dutch youngsters be affected by Jihad as a popular cult-phenomenon?
- Does this make them receptive for expedited radicalization?

Answering the above explorative questions asks for a qualitative approach. However, a study of such a social phenomenon cannot rest solely on the exploration of values and norms, but must be established by thoroughly interrogating how youngsters formulate world-views, ideologies and belief-systems regarding their life circumstances (Young 2006). This implies contextualizing the observed experiences of respondents during a one-on-one interview. I have therefore extracted individual

ideas and thoughts of four teenagers from Huizen, an established ‘risk-municipality’ (NCTV 2014) for potential Jihadis.

Summary of the empirical findings

In relation to the ‘influence of Social Media’ I can only conclude that in the ‘upbringing’ field, the information stream about the war in Syria and related Jihad battle has lapsed into a messy puddle for the respondents in this study. All four respondents declared that at home, at school and not even in the Mosque, their parents, teachers nor the Imam, speak about the war in Syria, let alone Jihad-fighting. There is no guideline, no framework within the social environment of respondents, on which they can hold on to. The lack of education given by the Imam and the absence of paternal conversation, could very well be the cause that the Muslim-respondents don’t really know about the ‘Salafist’ purpose of contemporary Jihad, leaving them to think that Dutch Syria-fighters simply go to Syria to help their Muslim brothers as some form of personal endeavor. A, B and C do not doubt whether this ‘interpretation’ is the right one. Jihadi’s are simply ‘top-Muslims’ because being prepared to die for your faith shows a lot of devotion, which eventually will be rewarded by Allah with a life in *Jannah*. Jihad fighting appears something you do ‘out of faith’ not ‘in the name of faith’.

The non-Muslim respondent has an opposite view but mainly seems to reproduce what he is told in populist media coverage, coming to think that Jihad is a way of spreading faith and Jihad-fighters are ‘thrill-seekers’. Nevertheless, his cognitions are mixed-up with the views from his Muslim-peers, making him conclude that the worldwide Islamic community ought to help each other. However because the current violent Jihad-developments don’t match his cognitions about ‘helping other Muslims’, he turned this concept around and deliberately went on a search for an example of humanitarian aid. For this adolescent was mainly scared of by the fanatic way in that the Jihad-ideology was spread, his perceptions remain the opposite from how the non-Muslim respondent perceives Jihad. Moreover the people who are active in the violent struggle seem very dangerous and unreliable to him. He could only

think of Jihad as an aggressive way to spread faith. It appeared that the non-Muslim respondent was put off by Social Media posts about rebel-fighting in Syria.

Because of the perceived 'social tie' between the worldwide Muslim communities, there appears to be a significant difference in the identification with teenager Jihadi's between the Muslim respondents and the non-Muslim respondent. The first seem to understand why peers would go and 'fight for their belief'. Nevertheless they showed a high level of gullibility that the intention could not be physically fighting in an armed battle, but they take 'helping' Muslim brothers literally as any form of care for victims. Therefore they believe most adolescent Jihadis are not involved in combat. Nevertheless these respondents see adolescent Jihadi's as part of a special 'brotherhood' now, therefore they believe their presence in the conflict in Syria will probably be 'ok' anyway.

The non-Muslim respondent is far more leery and therefore finds it particularly very 'stupid' to go and join the Syrian war. Moreover he thinks it is pointless because the conflict is a civil war between Muslims, which makes it no suitable situation for a religious fight.

However, the age-factor in the social identification process seems to turn out an deterrent factor for all four respondents, to judge actions. They simply believe that adolescent Jihad-fighters are too young to be able to capture what might happen to them ones in a conflict area. Therefore the respondents believe, that peers who travelled to Syria must have been persuaded by somebody to actually pack their bags and go. It appears that they find it much more 'logical' for older men to travel to Syria because they are already 'grown up' and therefore capable of making important decisions by themselves. The respondents do however believe that also underage Jihadi's have gained enough knowledge about the war via 'real-life' footage on Facebook. They also think that this content has persuaded their peers to join the fight, because it was just too terrible to see what is happening to Muslim brothers and sisters. Overall the above suggests that thoughts on physically going on Jihad as a 'good' or 'bad' thing to do, is age-related. Therefore this variable could be playing a major role

in relation to teenagers' actions about Jihad-fighting. However, only time will tell, if these perceptions remain passive or are in fact a ticking time bomb.

CONCLUSION

Now that the end of this empirical study is in sight, it is necessary to go back to the beginning. As seen in the introduction the most recent AIVD-insights came to the conclusion that Jihadism in the Netherlands is more vibrant than generally assumed. The institution assigns this development to several changes within the movement, namely: Jihadist networks have become more visible and open, opinions are expressed in a provocative way by the use of social media and the effectiveness and speed of their communication enables both real-time communication and a constant affirmation of the shared ideology. Anno 2014 this has resulted in a decentralized network, moving fast en being very flexible. From a sociological and military point a view: a swarm-like movement. However, as already established by Archetti (2012): reach is not impact.

This study therefore answers the questions on 'how' Social Media could shape the perspective of Dutch youth on Jihad in the context of the current transformation of Jihadism in the Netherlands. To what extent are teenagers affected by Jihad as a popular cult-phenomenon? And lastly, does this make these adolescent consumers receptive for expedited radicalization?

Before coming to the conclusion I have to emphasize that every individual is unique and their perspectives built on different factors: conditions, personal traits and social influences.⁴ Nevertheless, in line with the early study of Arnett e.a. (1995), it is important to emphasize the role of teenagers as active Social Media consumers and 'the relation of media to the rest of their social and cultural environment' (p. 513). However, in the meantime, this very complex micro-proces

⁴ This view is based on the uses and gratifications approach (Rubin 1993), which recognizes that (1) people differ in numerous ways that lead them to make different choices about which media to consume, how they use it and how they interpret the content, and (2) even people consuming the same media product will respond to it in a variety of ways, depending on their individual characteristics.

is the proof that a potential Jihadi-profile does not exist, let alone be generalizable.

The banality of Jihad

The insights into the cognitions, beliefs and attitudes of a selected group of friends from the municipality of Huizen is regarded a first step to show that the consumption of Social Media-content solely, is making Western adolescents identify with certain insurgencies then would be the case if they obtain information through multiple channels. Due to the mutual influence of media selectivity and reciprocal effects, this assumes an impact on individual behavior and social identity. Thus the respondents showed they have become more susceptible to Jihad messages. Furthermore in this study it is explained in detail how radical movements construct a Jihad-lifestyle on Social Media by providing homemade persuasive propaganda material like promoting symbols, religious one-liners and militant chants (Jihad *nasheed*), and the self-presentation of being part of a 'brotherhood'. The scholarly background shows that we have to bear in mind a kind of competition between the historic faiths and their claims on the one hand and the realm of the media and popular culture and their claims on the other. My analysis demonstrates how we are to understand this convergence and its relationship to the individual quest for meaning by means of social identification.

To arrive at answering the first research question: *How can Social Media posts about rebel fighting in Syria shape the perspective of Dutch youth on Jihad?*

This study indicates that Social Media has a major influence on the adolescent mindset of the respondents. The shaping of ideas, thoughts, views and sentiments towards Jihad ideology seem to be the result of a complex convergence between factual knowledge, religious know-how and story telling through social networking. The lack of thorough historical knowledge about the meaning of Jihad as an internal struggle appears to be swamped by Social Media messages on

contemporary violent Jihad against enemies of Islam. This ‘war of words’ has left the respondents in a grey area of interpretation.

In order to come to the answer of the second research question: *To what extent could Dutch youngsters be affected by Jihad as a popular cult-phenomenon?*

It is first of all important to emphasize that the outcome of the one-on-one interviews showed a division between the Muslim-respondents and the non-Muslim respondent. The first perceived Jihad fighting as generally positive. The second perceived Jihad as something bad. This contraposition appeared to be the result of a social identification process based on ethnicity, what the Muslim respondents even referred to as ‘nationality’. The Muslim teenagers attribute meaning to their relationship with the global Islamic community, which is constantly replenished by the receptions of narratives through Social Media. The social-tie concerns them so deeply that they declared to see every Muslim as their brother or sister. Furthermore, they believe the purpose of Jihad is in fact to help the brotherhood, which they say is no less than an intrinsic social duty of every Muslim.

It appears that the Muslim respondents could identify with violent Jihadis because Jihad is for that matter not seen as political agenda setting with long-term goals. They see their acts as ‘standing up for your brothers’. This points out that they attribute a social ideology to Jihad rather than it has theological meanings for them. In this, the empirical data confirms that the adulation of Jihad can exist without factual knowledge about the proclaimed goals, let alone traditions, history and symbols, because Western Muslims are de-culturalized and de-territorialized (Roy 2004, de Koning 2008). The Muslim respondents explain that according to them Jihad is based on the premise that the individual’s loyalty and devotion to the nation-state (in this case all Muslims) surpasses other individual or group interest.

Furthermore, superficial and volatile Facebook-posts constantly affirm their perceived shared social ideology. The interviews proofed that deep thoughts are hardly read by the respondents, let alone seen. Leaving the core ‘ideological’

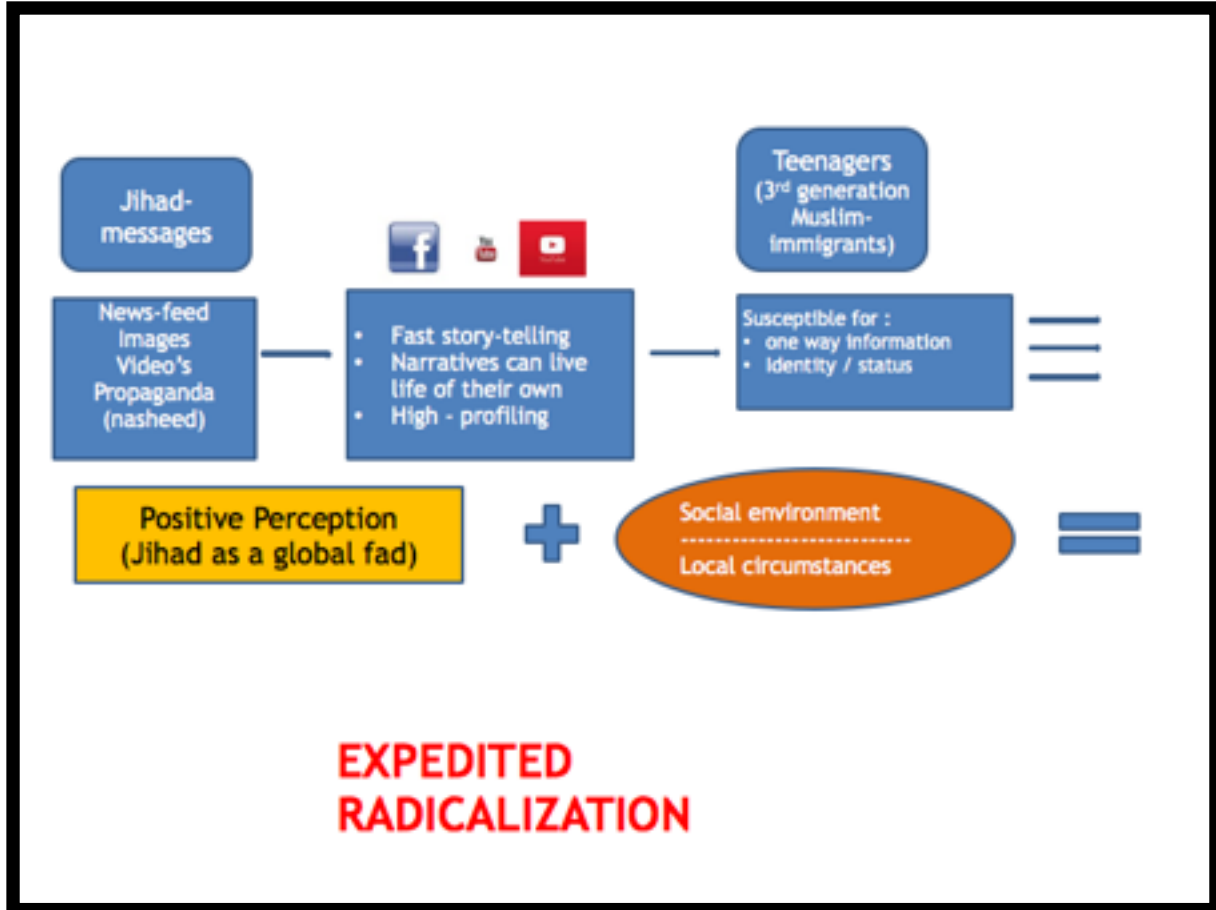
component of 'Salafist' Jihad to be far off. The only thing that remains is the view of solitaire brave men who risk their lives to free others from tyranny. It seems the Muslim respondents simply do not see the 'extremist' side of the Jihad's attitude. It appears this is why these respondents say they understand why peers and others willingly want to do their instrumental part in the name of faith, out of neither the achievement of higher goals like the resurrection of the caliphate nor pure malice, but out of a social-ideological form of 'obedience' to Islam.

By the above, I suggest the perceptions of contemporary Jihad move into the sphere of banality (Arendt 1963). Especially since it seems the Muslim respondents have constructed their ideas more out of a shallow conviction. Because of this naivety and ignorance they could probably be more receptive for Jihad as a popular cult-phenomenon. However, through the high use rate and velocity of the content consumption, the respondent teenagers could furthermore become even more susceptible for the attractive cultural forces of a perceived comradeship with 'their kind of people'.

To finally answer the last research question: *Does this make them receptive for radicalization?*

As described by Staub (2010) the shift to collective identity can result in opposing nationalisms or opposing ideologies: 'the differentiation between us and them, differences in values and beliefs, negative views of the other, conflict and differences in interests, and violent acts by other toward one's group as well as by one's group toward the other can all contribute to the evolution of this ideology' (p. 37).

The degree of receptivity for expedited radicalization nevertheless depends highly on socio-psychological variables such as devaluation, a sense of humiliation, hostility, education and socialization as well. For that matter, I would like to recall on the conclusion that Facebook provided the respondents with one-sided information; see it as some form of virtual upbringing with no contradiction or opposite opinion. Therefore the construction of perceptions through social networking turned out to be everything but a 'social' process. Thus, leaving this



platform an open and uncontrollable private environment for adolescents to be persuaded into more far-reaching cognitions, beliefs and attitudes. In order to make this process clear, I have taken the liberty to create a first-attempt scheme of how such developments occur. See figure 1.

Figure 1

Discussion

Until so far this study has reviewed the identity-formation and perceptions of four teenager-respondents towards Jihad. The previous conclusion has proposed explanations for the extent of Social Media-influence on their views about this matter. As such this section has summarized the answers to the research questions. That leads to the question: what are the implications of this study? The following section therefore addresses the following subjects, as hinted at in the introduction:

- Radicalization: When certain adolescents identify with a community through Facebook profiling (in this case the victims of perceived oppression), how to address Islamic extremism?
- Policy: Which course would policymakers be able to take?
- Current affairs: Does receptivity of expedited radicalization also apply to other instances of Jihad than Syria?
- Counterterrorism: what are the consequences of the awareness that the fight against terrorism is being played out in the realms of perceptions and communications?
- Theory: What are the implications of the empirical data for science theory?

Radicalization

The bottom-up approach of this empirical study is in line with Köhlers' (2013) 'socio-psychological' view⁵, which points to the fact that no 'terrorist' profile has been found and most studies do not look into dynamics between 'push and pull factors' (Horgan 2008). Whereas in an area in which Jihad has become a popular culture with a high level of identity profiling on Facebook by means of communication (Becker 2012), this variable should be considered.

The fact that new media technologies allow for both message reception and message generation has important consequences for this process because it gives the medium influence that is self-directional. Furthermore we have to focus on the notion that outcomes of media can also cause media use. This reciprocal relationship between media use and identity is called a transactional effect⁶ and this perspective 'highlights the need for longitudinal modeling of mutually

⁵ This author states that 'emotional vulnerability, dissatisfaction with current political activity, identification with victims, belief that the use of violence is not immoral, a sense of reward and social ties into the radical group, among others, are very important' (p 6-7).

⁶ According to Valkenburg & Peter (2013) it has become opportune to recognise transactional media-effects, given recent insights into behavioural genetics and development research (Plomin e.a. 2008, Saudino 2005). 'In both disciplines it has been shown that many trait variables show less heritability than was previously assumed. [...] Temperament dimensions have been shown to change overtime (Slater 2003) and in response to environmental influences (including media use; Stoolmiller e.a. 2010)' (Valkenburg & Peter (2013), p. 205).

influencing media selection and effects processes; study of the impact of such processes in youth and adolescent identity development; analysis of social and psychological factors that control, dampen, or eventually extinguish the influence of such spirals' (Slater 2007, p. 281).

In order to furthermore assess how the social construction of an ideology like Jihad via Social Media may eventually initiate a radicalization process, we should however acknowledge that popular online practice is in fact an erratic process. Because this view is opposite to the assumption that the radicalization-process is a linear development, it seems more logic to let go of any conceived 'stages' of radicalization a person goes through. This starting point is in line with De Koning (2009) who stated that studies of social movements and radicalization often reveal a static conception of participation. Because of this I also suggest viewing the recruitment process via social networking as a 'quick-and-dirty' phenomenon; one that can occur within only a few months, perhaps weeks, rather than a constructive process with several noticeable time stages.

Policy

Although, the process in which Jihad is cultivated thru Social Media as a 'lifestyle' is established to be a serious phenomenon by the National Coordinator of Security and Counterterrorism (NCTV 2014), the communication-approach to this threat to society remains under-studied, at least publicly. The focus on 'radical religious ideology' as a kind of virus infecting those with whom it comes into contact, either by itself or in combination with psychological processes, fails to demonstrate how belief systems and ideologies come to be adopted. It could be argued an in depth-knowledge gap has emerged; one that could be critical for the radicalization-prevention industry to become successful. While the current policy

is a very repressive one based on the ‘deterrent’ effect of criminal justice⁷, making it in fact illegal to fight in the Syrian war as a rebel-fighter because participating in armed Jihad is considered to be a terrorist offense, no intensive attention is paid to the perception of Jihad as a social duty, let alone a cultural phenomenon. As filtered out of the respondents-interviews, this incomprehension stimulates the perspective of a culture divide with in-, and out-group members. The question remains: To what extent is social engagement in the public sphere necessary to advance the political transformation that justice measures hope to promote?

Considering that legally the Dutch State has an obligation to protect the Rights of the Child⁸, the Netherlands also have a positive obligation to prevent that youngsters will participate in the armed conflict.⁹ It however seems from current repressive policies that youth who embrace ‘otherness’ are faced with few options. This nevertheless seems to generate an identity-gap that has fueled a deeper hold on by the adolescent respondents, yes indeed in the prime of their life of shaping identity, to the Muslim-self and everything that comes along with it. While in the meantime in Social Media the Jihad-identity has found the optimal playground to perpetuate and replicate itself, this ‘pigeonholing’ can only result in a deeper

⁷ The legislature has placed the ‘forbidden nature of jihad’ with participating in a terrorist organization under article 134a of the Dutch Criminal Code: ‘to furnish oneself or another intentionally the opportunity, resources or intelligence, or try to do such, in order to commit a terrorist crime or a crime in preparation or facilitation of a terrorist crime, or to acquire knowledge or skills to this end or impart these to another’. The provision is based on the 2005 Council of Europe Convention on the Prevention of Terrorism [available at: <http://conventions.coe.int/Treaty/en/Treaties/Html/196.htm>] and was also used by the prosecutors in two recent cases, which led to the conviction of two young men ‘preparing to commit murder’ in Syria (District court Rotterdam 23-10-2013 [Available at: <http://www.rechtspraak.nl/Organisatie/Rechtbanken/Rotterdam/Nieuws/Pages/Verdachten%20schuldig%20aan%20voorbereidingshandelingen.aspx>]) The case sets a legal precedent in the Netherlands for people who plan to fight in Syria. Making it in fact illegal to fight in the Syrian war as a rebel-fighter because participating in armed jihad is a terrorist offense.

⁸ According to the NCTV (2014, p. 13), Treaties like The International Convention on the Rights of the Child signed both by Syria and The Netherlands prohibit that minors take part in conflict. [Available at: http://wetten.overheid.nl/BWBV0002508/geldigheidsdatum_20-06-2013#AuthentiekEN_VDRTKS845101_PARTI_Article38]

Additionally, it is important to take knowledge of the following Articles of the Optional Protocol on The International Convention on the Rights of the Child (New York, 25 mei 2000) which has also been ratified by The Netherlands (24-09-2009) and Syria (17-10-2003). [Available at: <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/126486.pdf>]

⁹ In conclusion the NCTV (2014) states: ‘recruitment / participation in the struggle in Syria by a 16-year old youngster is contrary to treaties ratified by the Netherlands and under these treaties, the Netherlands has a positive obligation to prevent these youngsters will participate in the armed conflict. A positive obligation means that active measures should be taken’ (p. 16).

feeling of being an outcast of a Dutch community, making the compartmentalization between ‘Islam’ and the ‘West’ only bigger.

Nevertheless as shown by the respondents in this study the lack of thorough information-input about the meaning of the Quran and Islamic culture in general, is evident. Even though all three Muslim respondents considered themselves to be ‘seriously’ religious by going to the most important prayer meeting at the Mosque on Friday (which in fact makes them moderate in practicing), the deep historical insight into the meanings, morals and values of Islam is not yet imbued in their ‘being’. It is therefore arguable that more focus should be put on the ways in which communicative practices can raise social awareness of and reflection upon the legacies of Jihad (Social science research Council 2014).

Unfortunately, not much emphasize is put on the importance of a more bottom-up approach to reconciliation.¹⁰ Especially outreach topics on media, culture and education, are neglected by the international community decision-makers (ICTJ 2014). It is therefore arguable that the current situation requires examining the roles that culture and society play in justice contexts to forestall perceived social meaning assigned to Jihad militancy in the Syria-case and furthermore, the ‘nationalistic’ perspectives on Islamic Jihad in Gaza and Iraq.

Current affairs

The respondents in this study showed that the perception of the purpose for a violent Jihad in the Syrian-case ‘to support other Muslims’ is strongly associated with ‘liberation from tyranny’. However, the fact that this civil war is in reality between Muslims of different backgrounds also made one of the Muslim respondents doubt the legitimacy of Jihad-fighting in Syria. According to this

¹⁰ Although, the ICTJ has published the book ‘Transitional Justice, Culture, and Society: Beyond Outreach (march 2014) on the relationship between transitional justice measures and different modes of expression and communication—developed mainly in the public sphere—that may engage populations in the justice process, a scientific model to alter attitudes towards war crimes, has not yet been developed (as stated in personal communication between author and Clara Ramírez-Barat, ICTJ Senior Associate, Research and Children and Youth Program).

respondent Muslims are ‘one people’ and thus you don’t fight each other. His answers suggest that the facts of the situation didn’t seem to match his cognition. According to his reasoning it would be more logical to fight in other areas, for example the current Islamic Jihad¹¹ in Gaza where the Muslim community is in conflict with the ‘Jews’.

The sectarian component of the Syrian crisis also appeared to confuse the non-Muslim respondent. He said he believed Jihad is about spreading faith and thus a war with Catholics or other ethnic groups would make more sense. The above views of two of the respondents point towards the importance of a better understanding of the cultural ideology behind Jihad, besides being ‘just’ a social duty. Apparently, for these individuals there is a deeper layer of perception towards foreign-fighting.

However, the current developments around Jihad-fighting in Iraq could have far-reaching implications for the social identification with rebel-groups in both ways; for good or for worse. Further research should obviously be more explicit about the representativeness of the statements of the young people who have been interviewed in this research and show how the cult-like character of the current Jihadi movement (AIVD 2014) can provide at least Muslim teenagers with a personal feeling of devotion and subjection in the long run because it fulfills their need to shape their social identity.

Nevertheless, although highly speculative, it is worth noticing that the more teenagers, like the respondents in this study, will experience the Western culture as territory with difficult life conditions, the more they will tend to follow the Jihad-attitude to fulfill their basic needs in destructive ways (Staub 2010, p. 38). As the Muslim-respondents have already shown a high matter of ‘empathy’ towards Jihadi’s who are fighting for their beliefs (Staub 2011), it is very likely they could associate even more with insurgents who raise their guns against perceived

¹¹ “Smaller and less known internationally than the militant Islamic Hamas faction that has ruled since 2007, Islamic Jihad and its Al-Quds Brigades are having something of a renaissance”, see: New York Time, may 3, 2014. Available at: http://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/04/world/middleeast/islamic-jihad-gains-new-traction-in-gaza.html?_r=0

oppression by out-group members with a totally different social-identity (Casiro 2006).

Since Social Media content generators have a free passage and are providing adolescents with unqualified 'answers' to their questions about Jihad (see for an example the Facebook-profile of Abu Bakr¹²), it could be that the admissibility for radical messages stands firm for cases of Jihad-fighting other than Syria.

Moreover, because there appears to be no cognition-check by the respondent's superiors about how they perceive news and certain phenomena around current affairs of foreign-fighting. In the end platforms like Facebook, remain the only open source teenagers have unconditional access to.

Counterterrorism

At a first glance the outbreak of the civil war in Syria may seem to have been the trigger for a sudden and rapid rise of Jihadism in the Netherlands¹³, "but however relevant the struggle for Syria to be, it is only part of the story" (AIVD 2014, p1.). Recent intelligence reports show that the new crop of foreign-fighters are: "people radicalized almost exclusively through social media and exhibit cult-like behavior without a leading role of a preacher", as declared by the National terrorism coordinator Dick Schoof.¹⁴

As written by Archetti (2012) 'there is an increasing awareness that the fight against terrorism is being played out in the realms of perceptions and communications as much as, of not more than, through financial, legal, and military measures' (p. 160). This observation combined with other insights that

¹² See for example: <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=578650792255520&set=a.101131570007447.1177.100003318122384&type=1&theater>

¹³ "Syria is easy to reach, and ideologically attractive to prospected Jihadists. The conflict in Syria has become a focal point for the Dutch Jihadist movement" (AIVD 2014, p. 1).

¹⁴ NRC Handelsblad, 'Jihadisten gaan de grens over, de inlichtingendiensten niet', 2 juni 2014

show that Jihad-fighters have different backgrounds (Barbieri & Klausen 2012¹⁵) and different motives (Bhui & Ibrahim 2013, Hegghammer 2013, Dantschke 2013), calls for a deeper understanding of who will possibly be impressed by the new-wave of Jihad-fighters and develop a positive perception towards Jihadism. However, combining the different variables in explaining this perception-process also requires not only examining psychological changes at the level of the individual, but also the broader constellation of relationships in which an individual is located in the context and the relevance of the transmission of ideas and beliefs (Sageman 2004, 2008 and Horgan 2009). According to Archetti (2012) the time- and context-specific combination of circumstances that may lead to the development of violent extremism makes community-based and local approaches the most effective in dealing with radicalization. However reality never sits still. Therefore Dr Robert Lambert, lecturer in terrorism studies at the University of St Andrews (and former head of the Muslim Contact Unit in the Metropolitan Police, pointed out: “the most useful intelligence is gathered in the UK through collaboration with community members who volunteer information as part of what they see as their civic duty (Lambert 2011 in Archetti 2012). Furthermore Archetti’s (2012) branding approach also leads to a contribution to preventive counterterrorism in that it ‘would not only raise the profile of communications in the current fight against terrorism; it would also support a more systematic effort in planning, development, and study of effects as a key tool of counterterrorism’ (p. 161).

Theory

The outcome of the respondent-interviews shows that peers who joined the Syrian-Jihad, are believed to have already gone more in-depth about the meaning of Islam. These youngsters are nonetheless perceived as ‘ordinary’ guys by the respondents; ‘just like us’. When contextualizing these statements I suggest

¹⁵ “Over the past years we have seen a high number of converts with no immigrant background, no Muslim background, who were middle-class, suburban kids growing up”, Klausen said in a recent interview. Available at: <http://www.brandeis.edu/now/2012/december/klausengrant.html> [retrieved 5-6-2014]

emphasizing that all four respondents in this study appeared to be very social, sporty- and school-attending teens, who felt very safe and secure within their families and circle of friends. As for the Muslim-respondents, at this point in their life, it seems Islam is providing a 'safe heaven' for their personal Muslim-identity, and they add no deep religious values (yet) to being a Muslim.

Furthermore, as said by the three Muslim-respondents the only difference between them and the youngsters who went off to join the struggle in Syria, is that they have put action to the word. These respondents declare that it is not a way of life to look-up to in these early years of their lives (as said by one of the respondents: 'because it is not chill'), nor do they think it is 'cool'. It is however a status the Muslim respondents admit to admire (as said by one of the respondents: 'they are top-Muslims'). Following Stern (2006) we can compare the perceptions of the Muslim-respondents towards Jihad-fighters with the admiration of gangster-rappers.

Similarly like the personal presentation of gangster-rappers, the Jihadi is exposing that he 'is somebody'. A social status, that might look very appealing to 'insecure', 'naïve' adolescents, in search of status and respect. Moreover because 'fighting' Jihad is simply seen by the teenager-respondents as 'us against anybody who is mistreating the brotherhood', it is arguable that the presentation of the Jihad-lifestyle is promoting gang affiliation and/or communicates interest in gang activity. I suggest the development is comparable to a relatively new phenomenon of Internet behavior called 'internet banging', in which individuals that are associated with gangs or neighborhood factions, use Social Media sites such as Twitter, Facebook and Youtube to incite dares, trade insults or make threats of violence (Patton e.a. 2013).

Furthermore, research analysis has already shown that so-called 'Pop-Jihad' is also very adaptive through youth culture media like Youtube video's and Facebook profiles and groups (for an in depth analysis see: Dantschke 2013; Dantschke e.a. 2011; Wiedl 2012). Thus it is only one step further to conclude that perhaps

recruitment might evolve from increased access to and participation with Social Media. Understanding this new trend in Social Media however requires a communication approach that will contextualize the online experiences of young men and their social reality.

The theory of this social phenomenon must therefore be rethought to conclude ‘a proper cultural analysis of Muslim youth by thoroughly interrogate how these youngsters formulate world-views, ideologies and belief systems regarding their social environment’ (Young 2004, p. 18). It seems that in comparison with the so-called hip-hop generation as described by Kitwana (2002)¹⁶, the experiences of these people born within this generation are much different from other groups and need a separate characterization because they are part of a distinct group with a unique experience. In that, as Roy (2008) argues it makes more sense to separate theology from violence because ‘the process of violent radicalization has little to do with religious practice, while radical theology, as Salfisme, does not necessarily lead to violence’ (p. 2). As suggested by Stern (2006): “the only way to understand how this phenomena works is to hang out with [...] youths and talk to them (in Boston Globe, august 2006).

¹⁶ In his text, *The Hip-Hop Generation*, Bakari Kitwana suggests that urban Americans born between the years of 1965 and 1985 do not belong to Generation X, but rather are part of a distinct group with a unique experience in America.

Notes

- ♣ Because long-term changes need longitude research, I can instantly say that in the conclusion of this study I can only make statements about short-term personal cognitions, emotions, attitudes that result from Social Media use by certain individuals. Statements about behaviour can subsequently only be of a predicting nature, because this variable in fact needs retrospective analysis which requires a totally different sample.

- ♣ Due to the scholarly background, I conclude that it is not possible to squeeze the empirical data retrieved into a set-up media-effects model. This study therefore attempts to re-contextualize traditional communication-, sociological-and socio-psychological theories on the basis of its findings. As such the empirical findings can contribute to the development of theory that could have validity in other cases (Maesschalk, 2010 p. 130-131) and thus perhaps become generalizable.

- ♣ Lastly, because I am analyzing the effect of unrequested Jihad-posts one might in the first instance expect the media effects also to be non-deliberative, however because the subject has any semblance of an ideological characteristic, I assume the effect to be deliberative.

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