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Radicalization through religion

I-Sacred values and transnational radicalisation
In classical sociology, two sets of concepts seem of notable significance: instrumental values versus expressive values. The first type of values are mobilised in order to achieve goals. They are supposed to be interchangeable since what is aimed at is the goal and these values are simply “instruments” in order to achieve the goal. On the contrary, expressive values are supposed to be somehow “absolute”, “non negotiable”, related to the deep expression of one’s psychic or social life and therefore, not interchangeable. Expressive values cannot be “changed” at will since they embody the deep desires or the “sacred” values the individuals prevail upon.
Religious values are of course “expressive” at least up to the moment people who refer to them, believe sincerely in them.
Radical values in the name of religion have always been a problem for those who are “moderate” or “non fundamentalists”. In the catholic areas, the “intégristes” are those who identify too closely to the religious values which are supposed to shape their entire life. “Fundamentalists”, in the protestant areas are seen mutatis mutandis in the same fashion by the others whose life is not as strictly determined by religious values as the former.
In the history of Islam, “radical” sects and groups were legion: the Khavarej after the death of the Prophet believed that all those who did not strictly abide by the Islamic rules according to their interpretation were de facto Heretics and therefore, shedding their blood was religiously permitted. The number of Islamic sects up to the 19th century is probably higher than those within Christianity in spite of the diversity of the Protestant and Orthodox groups and cults.
With the advent of European colonialism, Jihad became one of the major ways through which Muslims could justify the fight against the intruders. The change within the Muslim world after the Second World War and the end of colonialism induced new forms of Jihad, although many features of the new wave are akin to those of the past, expressing forms of social or political protest.
The problem arising within the contemporary Islamic Jihadism is threefold:
  1-first of all, the relationship between “expressive” and “instrumental” values becomes much more complex than before;
  2-second, new forms of radicalisation occur that are not related to the concrete “situation” of the individual but to a complex framework, mostly “imaginary” within which he embeds himself without any firm community or deeply rooted traditions; in this respect, processes of individualisation are as important as those giving birth to new imaginary communities (the Neo-Umma – see below);
  3-third, there is a major difference between what might be called “national” Jihadism (related to national claims and demands like the Palestinian, Tchechnian, Kashmiri etc.) and “transnational” Jihadism where the claims are much more abstract and “imaginary”, much less “tangible” and “definable” in the classical sense. It is a phenomenon related to the global changes within the world at large (the constitution of sizeable Muslim minorities in the West and particularly in Europe since the 1960s) and in the Muslim countries in particular (beginning with the Shi’ite and then spreading to the Sunni: the nowadays’ Jihadis are exclusively Sunni). The ideology of transnational Jihadism as well as the nature of their recruitment and the ways individuals realise their Self within them present marked differences with the national patterns of Jihad.

If the above remarks are to be taken seriously, in the process of radicalisation, what is important is at least as much the “sacred values” (or the “expressive values”) as the
processes of sacralisation. My entire research on Iran and Europe (particularly France) has been dominated by this sweeping fact: the generation which sacralises “martyrdom” and Jihad does it in a way that is totally alien to its fathers and grand-fathers. What used to be a “sacred value” in a ritualistic and theatrical way (through doloristic Ashura rituals in Shi’ism, “orthopraxy” in Sunnism) has taken on an entirely new dynamics based on self-realisation through martyrdom and Jihad. The dimension of “perverse modernisation” in terms of the individualisation of the decision and on concrete accomplishment of it are processes of sacralisation which go much beyond the “sacred values” in the traditional sense. New social and generational categories enter the scene, which were forbidden to act in the public sphere before: the very young and women for example. Their implications might seem “un-islamic” or even “anti-islamic” from the perspective of traditional Muslims. Here too, “sacralisation” takes precedence over the “sacred”. The shaping and framing of new social groups or subgroups defining and revisiting Muslim notions and ideals is, in this respect, more important than the mere study of cultures or “alien” cultures from the views of the secular Western eyes. It is precisely because the embedded traditions are in deep crisis where Jihadists operate that we have nowadays phenomena of martyrdom and sacred death to an extent unheard of before. The extreme forms of Jihadism nowadays in Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Pakistan, Western Europe (to name the main places in the geo-politics of martyrdom) are related to new forms of “perverse modernisation” in which individualisation and new forms of communities (between political parties and grass root associations) are produced in non-traditional ways. That is why I’ll concentrate on these processes of sacralisation rather than on “expressive” or “sacred values”.

1-Expressive versus instrumental values

Usually, these values are supposed in sociology to be given once and for all, at least during a determined period. In classical, national Jihadist movements, this supposition is somehow acceptable: the domination predicament makes actions and reactions somehow predictable and their patterns receive some kind of stability which can be “rationally” explained in terms of oppression or mutual antagonism. The “absolute” values among the Palestinians, Tchechnians, Kashmiris and alike are “the Islamic nation”, at least for those who engage in action implying martyrdom and self-sacrifice. Islam embodied in a nation becomes the absolute value for the defense of which the martyr is ready to die through a sacred death. The problem is not so much the “instrumental” versus “expressive” (or

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1 See my three books on Iran: L’utopie sacrifiée, sociologie de la revolution Islamique, 1993; L’islamisme et la mort, 1995; L’anthropologie de la revolution iranienne, 1997 and my book on French second and third generation Islam: L’islam des Jeunes, 1997. Of course many other scholars have done similar ideas on these topics, a list of them being provided in the bibliography of my latest book: Quand Al Qaeda parle, 2006.

2 In my extensive interviews in Iran during the Islamic revolution, many traditional Muslims told me that the young coming out in public demonstrations and women being there were against Islam. It was ayatollah Khomeyni who published “fatwas” declaring licit their participation, against the view of many other traditional religious marja’ that made this participation “legitimate”, mashru’. The same case holds for many other acts in the name of Jihad and martyrdom. Many religious authorities are reluctant to let women engage in them because at the end, this would mean some kind of equality between men and women and the challenge to their dissymmetrical legal situation. In the Iranian revolution women were not permitted to engage in acts of war, not because they were more precious but for fear of their later claims to some kind of equality. Nowadays, these are being put into question, not without resistance from traditional circles and ulama.

3 Since processes are focused upon, biographic methods are more appropriate than statistical data. The latter usually provide us with extensive yet static pictures of reality (this is true of the remarkable article of Atran’s, at least the part provided for this seminar). This default can be remedied but in this case, the financial means should be very significant in order to have a much more complete questionnaire (which has not been the case for my studies, always made with negligible financial assets).
sacred) values but their evolution and the fact that in many cases, those who were rather “indifferent” to these sacred values begin to sacralise them. In the case of “transnational martyrdom” this situation is even more unstable since the “patriotic” dimension (related to the land, the nation, people) is missing. What is aimed at is a holistic “Neo-umma” whose consistency is by far less granted than that of the “national martyrs” who can concretely refer to the “land” of their parents and ancestors and who would like to become a “people” in their own “country”. In the case of the “transnational” Jihadists, this is not the case and the relationship between “expressive” and “instrumental” values is much more diversified and complex than in the former. One example can clarify it: the case of “Born again Muslims” who turn radical and even more strikingly, the case of the “radicalised converts”. For the first case one can refer to Richard Reid (the so-called Shoe bomber) or Kantcharsky, this Polish person who became a German citizen and then converted to Islam, chose a radical version it and ended up becoming very close to Bin Laden. In these cases, what was an “instrumental” value or even neutral or “indifferent” (Islamic values) becomes “expressive”, “absolute”, “intractable” in a span of time that might stretch from few years to few months or even weeks. In that respect, the pattern of “national” and “transnational” Jihadism seem different in a fundamental way. In one case, the whole matter happens within a framework whose coherence is defined in “territorial”, “cultural” and “historical” terms (relation to the country, the language or the cultural frameworks within it and the past and the present related to a specific territory). In the other, there is no such coherence and the motives seem much more “imaginary” than in the first case. How an East European becomes German, embraces Islam and chooses an extremist interpretation of it? How a Born Again Muslim (the cases abound, Moussasou’s being a trivial one) changes his entire life and chooses to be a martyr without anything that might justify it in his past? The case of some Christian women (the Belgian one) is even more striking. In any case, the framework within which one can interpret this type of phenomenon cannot be the same as the one for “national” martyrs and Jihadists (this point has to be discussed and perhaps rejected if there are strong arguments).

2- In the transnational Jihadism, the individual’s situation does not directly (or in some cases it can be argued, not even indirectly) account for the choice of Jihad. In national cases Jihad is an option (exceptional in almost every context) but its “rationale” can be somehow expounded in terms that are referring to a concrete situation: the Tchechnians suffering from the Russian yoke, the Muslim Kashmiris feeling despondent within a Brahman dominated secular India, the Palestinian being vexed in his daily life by the checkpoints entailing humiliation in what they perceive as their own homeland…: in all these cases, there is a “direct” connection to the predicament of a “denied nation”. In the transnational Jihadism, we are facing a “Neo-umma” which is imaginary in many ways, in a way different from the “imaginary communities” within Nations: in the history of Islam, this type of Umma has never existed, having been but an ideal, never realised concretely, neither as a purely “civil society” nor as a “state”. Neither the Ottoman Empire, nor the Abbasid Caliphate, nor the Omeyyad Empire did accomplish the dream of a universal umma and it remained a utopia in reference to the “Medina period” of the Prophet in the Golden Age of Islam. The world witnessed many competing empires after the first glorious period (the Omeyyad never became the muster due to their more or less aristocratic nature, after the first 4 Caliphs, the Rashidun, well-guided who embodied this Umma, although many groups rejected them, particularly the last one, Ali and the penultimate, Osman). The utopia of the universal umma gave birth to religious and

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4 The idea has to be discussed, challenged and contextualised. See also Olivier Roy’s Islam mondialisé (Seuil, 2002, translated into English).
political movements which intended to dislodge the rulers by substituting new dynasties to them, according to Ibn Khalidun’s famous theory of *asabiya* (13-14th century).

The idea of a universal umma (the “Neo-umma”) in its transnational shape could not occur but as a “culture-free” notion at the age of Internet and universal media. This idea as the major reference to transnational Jihadism is interwoven with a new imaginary world that is new in its shape and symbolic content.

The individual’s economic situation (whether he is middle class or lower class) is not important, neither his relationship to the politics, nor his cultural background. What is more important is his “instant” relations with “effervescent” groups, voluntary associations, new “sects” which act as an enlarged family rather than any pre-existing framework that might shape his feelings in the long run. Even gender becomes less and less important (although we are at the beginning of this process). The electronic connections, the sectarian affiliations, the new forms of socialisation are more important than political parties, deep roots or traditional connections.

3-Transnational Jihadism versus national
If the idea of a major difference between the two types of Jihadism is defensible, one has to justify it in manifold ways.

To begin with, the paths from national to transnational Jihadism are not numerous. In few cases (Lashgar Tayyeba or exceptional cases in the Palestinian or Tchetchenian) we have the transition from one to the other. Those who accomplish the leap change their ideological framework and their strategic priorities. The tactical or even strategic relations between the two are not obvious.

The passage from one to the other means a deep change in the pattern of radicalisation.

II-Concrete Forms of radicalisation
The first major feature from what the radicalized people say themselves is the conjunction of two different types of “facts”: to begin with, an existential experience, based on racism or on repression of Islamist movements by the government. The second feature is the global situation of Islam or Muslims in the world and the consciousness of being part of a large, transnational “umma”, transcending national boundaries and extending to the entire world.

The first feature distinguishes this type of radicalisation from the radicalized Europeans of the 1970s who constituted the core of the leftist movements: Action Directe in France, Roter Armee Fraktion in Germany, Red Brigade in Italy, to mention but few. (The cases of “nationalist” extremism like those of Northern Ireland, Basque or Corsican are different).

The middle class people who constituted the extreme left movements in the 1970s did not have any direct experience of racism or government oppression in the same sense as those leaving in Muslim countries (strong repression) or in Europe (racism).

Here I am not focusing on the last phase of radicalisation (affiliation to a group, a network or other types of organisations. For this see Marc Sageman’s major book and my book on suicide bombers where I describe 4 types of groups: the “group of friends” (Marc has extensively developed it), the charismatic leader who assembles the group in a non egalitarian way, the family as the center of a specific type of group and internet related

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5 If we read “between the lines” the fascinating article by Scott Atran presented in this seminar, we’ll see “inter alia” this new phenomenon which needs to be defined within new frameworks of individualisation and shaping of this Neo-Umma.

6 Can this idea be defended in these radical terms? I think they can, but it should be discussed and possibly confined to some categories.
abstract small groups). Here I focus on the way radicalisation occurs before the passage to any act or the adherence to any group.

a- The existential dimension
This existential experience is described in many interviews as important. In one case, the fact that the sister of a fully integrated French of “Arab” origin was treated as “dirty Arab” seems to have had a strong influence on him. He became an important member of Al Qaeda within France and was condemned for that reason.
In another case, the Algerian repression of “Islamists” induced a deep resentment and this was the “existential side” to the engagement of the person in question in Jihadist activities. One can see the many interviews conducted in prison or in the poor French suburbs and in almost all those cases, the “existential” factor, quite autonomously from the “intellectual” or “political” aspects seem to be of paramount importance7.

b- The “archetypal event” and its extension to the Neo-umma
This is the other aspect of the narrative of those who mentioned it as being of the highest significance for their new Islamic consciousness about the plight of the Muslim community (umma) worldwide. This aspect is quite independent from the “existential” one, although one can reinforce the other one. It seems, from the interviews and my own fieldwork experience that without this dimension, the mere “existential” side does not lead to radicalisation. It merely becomes a wound and that induces aggressiveness or internalisation of plight rather than concerted action against the “enemy of Islam”.
The archetypal event can be diverse: it can be the “Bosnian” experience, the Iraqi plights (before the American invasion, during Saddam’s post 1991 reign where many children are said to have died following the Western blockade. It can be the Afghan case or Chechnya or many other world events related to Islam. The major problem is that this type of event is interpreted as being the symptom of the wounds of the “Umma”. Without this unifying and globalizing interpretation the problem becomes merely “national” (Bosnia becomes the problem related to the disintegration of Yugoslavia and the anti-democratic nature of the Serbian regime and leaders – the other cases being interpreted in the same fashion). The holistic interpretation of the “archetypal event” has become possible only through the globalised access to the media and a sense that the “West” (on top of which America) is threatening Islam and its Umma in a unified and global fashion. This interpretation is related to a complex web of meanings that cannot be understood in isolation from the new world setting and the fact that this abstract Umma can be felt to exist through its “wounds” rather than through its real existence as such. The Umma is as a matter of fact a “wounded Umma”, it is made of all those humiliations and repressions that make it what I called a “Neo-umma”8. It exists because it is denied its old supremacy (but this never existed before in this way and it is much more an imaginary construction than a historical fact), it is suffering from the attempts to destroy it through the new Western pernicious culture (notably women’s emancipation, homosexuality, male and female, alcohol and drugs – among others) and politics, not to mention the economics.

7 This dimension is extensively developed in: Quand Al Qaeda parle.
8 I use the expression Neo-umma because it refers to an imaginary new construction of the umma which did not exist before in this shape. Historically, no empire (with the probable exception of the Rashidun and the early Omeyyad) encompassed all the Muslims and the idea to achieve this goal remained a wishful thinking, sometimes a sectarian or revolutionary utopia. The Neo-umma does not refer to any “government”, it is a hybrid form of a civil society and a self-ruling entity who will generate, by a kind of miracle, as a deus ex machina, a neo-califate. The subjective content of this Neo-umma is different from the traditional Islamic tenet on this matter. This was developed in my book “L’islamisme et la mort” (Islamic radicalism and death: 1995 (sic!), L’Harmattan.
This new-Umma has all the dimensions of an imaginary construction which give it a type of immunity against any “rational” reasoning. It is sacred not only because Muslims have “sacred” values against those, instrumental and “Zweckrational” in the West, but much more through the fact that it is being “sacralised” in new ways that are not, in most cases, the replica of the tradition. In my interviews, most of the speakers who were condemned for their association with Al Qaeda by the French judiciary system spoke between three and six languages. They were not traditional Muslims and they did not have the traditional background which give the “sacred” Islamic values their salience. They are radicalising those values in new ways and these combine the old and the new.

To give but one example. In many cases, in my research I was confronted with the fact that Israeli/Palestinian problem was raised as being deeply humiliating for the Muslims in general. This is something undeniable for many observers of the Muslim world, from Pakistan to Afghanistan, the Arab world and even the remote Indonesia. The Palestinian/Israeli conflict is having a unifying impact on the “Neo-umma” whose sufferings find a concrete outlet through the vivid pictures of the media and many other electronic means throughout the Islamic world. Here humiliation is something that seems to legitimize, in the eyes of many Muslims, moderate or not, some kind of retaliation (Bin Laden, in many poor suburbs in France and many poor Muslim districts in England as well as in many Arab countries was glorified at the same time that many would have rejected his political leadership in their country because he was able to inflict humiliation to the very same “humiliator” that sustains, in the eyes of the overwhelming proportion of Muslims, Israel in an absolute way). But what induces radicalisation is the combination of the existential experience of humiliation (in the Arab world like Algeria –as mentioned in my interviews – the humiliation of the Islamists after the coup d’etat sponsored by the military against the victorious FIS; in other parts of the world this can be constructed by induction) and the idea that this humiliation is not a personal phenomenon, not even a national one, but a global fact related to the repression of the Umma. In the French case, many youngsters in the poor suburbs told me that they believed France was treating them in the same fashion as the Israelis treated the Palestinians. This is mutatis mutandis the same in England with the “disaffected youth” who feels “mistreated” by the English in the same way as the Palestinians are manhandled by the Israeli army. This identification is, of course, wrong if we refer to the political and social reality. But it is the more astonishing as it works as being true by those who experience it and victimise themselves in an absolute manner, legitimizing as a consequence their aggressive attitude towards the global society. This can go up to Jihad and the killing of many innocent people for whom no sentiment of guilt is felt. The guilt feeling goes to the imaginary Umma rather than the concrete society that has been mistreated by the explosions or bombings.

The radicalisation is, in summary, related to this Neo-umma, mainly characterised by its being “wounded”, “manhandled”, “repressed”, “humiliated” and acted upon contemptuously. But another dimension comes into being and this is an important one. Since September the 11th, the Neo-umma is also a locus of revenge. In many Islamist writings (in my interviews, there are hints at that but many interviewees believed that I was an agent of Mossad or of the French Secret Services and didn’t want to add up to their already heavy charges –but still, they say a lot on these topics, because of the mere dynamics of discussion that implicated their ego at some moment of the interview) the references are not very strong, but one can find them in the Arab writings on these topics.

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9 Iran is an exception, not because people would be against the Palestinians, but due to the fact that here plays somehow the old dichotomy Persian (ajam) versus Arab and the fact that the Iranian government is pro-Palestinian and therefore, many people in the civil society who reject the theocracy become “non-pro-Palestinian” in this respect.
in which it is explicitly mentioned that the attacks against the two cities of New York and Washington were the beginning of a new era of dignity for Muslims. The Neo-umma is not any more simply a “community in affliction” but a jubilant community due to the two attacks (the Arab word is: *gazwatin*, meaning two attacks and conquests at the same time\(^{10}\)). The Iraq case also is added to the September the 11\(^{th}\) to make an afflicted community “jubilant” through its new achievements. The face of the Neo-community changes notably. It is at the same time a “dolorous” community and it is infused with some jubilation in contrast to its former pains through the September the 11\(^{th}\) events and partially, Iraq\(^{11}\).

The study of the huge Arab literature produced on this topic is rich in its content: radicalisation is encouraged through the *hiyal*, the ruse through which America as the symbol of the West is “lured” into the traps and quagmires: the Muslim youth who seeks junction with Jihadi groups is not only going to die a secret death by inflicting the Heretics large casualties, it learns to experience many kinds of pleasures that are “affectively” oriented: they “build up” their new identity by fighting against a mighty enemy who becomes a “lame duck” through the faith of the believers in an unequal war in which the Infidels are supposed to win according to their technical and military might but which ends up in their defeat because the Islamic youth is not only valiant, but also “more intelligent” in terms of the new affective life conquered by “cheating” the enemy, enticing him gradually into the traps in which he falls without any previous knowledge or foreboding (*estadraja*, gradually luring).

**Tentative conclusions**

There is a new sacralising trend in the Jihadi st groups which uses the Islamic register but deeply transforms its values and shapes them in new ways. One has to understand these new patterns in order to understand the new tendencies within Jihadism. In some ways, of course, these are “classical” phenomena. Radicalisation is never neutral. But my contention is that in the case of the Jihadi groups one has to get into their mindset and try to understand their “imaginary”, mental constructions in order to gain an insight into the procedures of their radicalisation. The times where experience was embedded in solid communities with their rites and their entrenched traditions were blessed for their relative “lack of imagination”. The communities (Muslim in our case) imposed patterns of behaviour which left sparse room for a “bewildered imaginary”. Jihad was related to a restrictive code of religious conduct, rarely applied, most of the times exalted and glorified precisely because it was’nt put into practice. In our time, communities are more and more broken and fragmented and this leaves huge expanses for a new bewildered imaginary which takes up notions from an uprooted (or deeply in crisis) tradition and restructures them in ways unheard of in the past. The martyrdom in the Iranian revolution, the new ways of Jihad in Al Qaeda, the new mental constructions in the Islamic world related to life and death, all these use Islamic code and jurisprudence (one can cite *fardh al ayn/fardh al kifayah, dar ol habr/dar ol Islam, chahadah, taqut, jahiliyah* etc.) and even sometimes mystics (without mentioning them), couple them with the vulgar Marxism (see the way the dichotomy *Mostakbir/Mostadh’if* is used) or Western extrem right ideologies (the critic of homosexuality is influenced by the latter) in order to shape new patterns of radicalisation. The register of “existential” experience coupled with the Neo-umma has to do with the modernisation of this youth in different ways: in Europe, amid social and

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\(^{10}\) There are numerous references, one being: tabibuna Ayman al Zawahiri… yanhi ostura al Qaeda!! (analysis of recent speech by Al Zawahiri, Face of Death, August 2005), in Prism (many other examples in Al Tawhid).

\(^{11}\) See the illuminating text Al-Araq wal filistine, saha jahad wahida (Iraq and Palestine, theaters of a unifie dJihad) in the site Al Tawhid, aylul 2005.
economic hardship (sometimes exclusion, sometimes integration into the lower middle classes), uprootedness and the feeling of rejection by the society and above all, injustice and unfairness; in many Muslim countries through the breakdown of tradition and the advent of new generations where individualisation operates in a “perverse” way, due to social and political repression and helplessness and above all, the lack of mutual assistance structures (which warrants the success of Hizballah in Lebanon, Hamas in the Palestinian territories, Muslim Brotherhood and other, more radical groups in Egypt). In all these cases, the new individual takes hold of death in a way unheard of in the traditional Islamic world (fascination with death could be encountered in the mystical cases like Hallaj, whereas today there are subgroups of Jiaidists subjugated by the subculture of sacred death). What we are mostly lacking is the insight into the new ways “sacralisation” occurs not only “there” (Islamic world), but also “here” (Europe and perhaps America in the future). Another problem is the fallacy of the “unique model”. There are many ways (I described four in my latest book) through which Jihadist mental construction operate. The advent of new social and gender-related categories and new generations modernised in many ways (among which the “perverse modernisation” through the “unquenching thirst for martyrdom”) and the development of “subcultures of death” among some Jihadi groups are to be more closely analysed in conjunction with radical sects and cults in order to throw fresh light on radicalisation processes.