



# STRATEGIC FILE

No. 1 (82), February 2016 © PISM

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## Universal Utopia: Weighing the Reasons for the Appeal of the Islamic State<sup>1</sup>

Patrycja Sasnal

*Jihadism may be exclusively associated with the Muslim culture as a term and concept, but failing to see its universal, cross-cultural dimension impairs domestic and international policy considerations. This radical utopia serves as a global magnet for anti-systemism rather than just attracting religious locals in the Middle East. European countries need to structure their policy toward ISIS carefully, so that they do not become the frontline soldiers in the fight against this utopia and, in doing so, tie the rope around their necks at home. This is especially true as, globally and in the long term, the number of potential supporters for ISIS is likely to grow.*

The plethora of reasons for the Islamic State's (ISIS, IS, ISIL) global appeal, the lack of any one single set of political, cultural or economic causes, the diversity of backgrounds of its supporters, and the different languages and skin colours of foreign fighters within its ranks corroborate the thesis that it is becoming a global, radical anti-system movement, in which ideology per se is secondary to the rejection of the outside world. ISIS fills a vacuum left by other radical revolutionary movements, which gradually lost their appeal after the end of the Cold War. There have always been individuals alienated in the systems they lived in. Their radicalisation has always been a result of an amalgam of personal, sociological, political and economic reasons. Looking at ISIS today as a cultural concept limited to one religion or background misses its gradual but advancing transformation into a global, anti-systemic movement that can attract anyone.<sup>2</sup> The 30,000 or so foreign extremists in Syria and Iraq come from 86 countries, and by December 2015 an estimated 5,000 nationals from Western Europe had joined their ranks, which marks a 100% increase from 2,500 in June 2014.<sup>3</sup>

There is a rich literature about radicalisation and its causes,<sup>4</sup> which in the case of the popularity of ISIS in Europe and the Middle East can be grouped in four categories. These are ideological and political,

<sup>1</sup> This article is part of the EuroMeSCo ENI Project, co-financed by the European Union and the European Institute of the Mediterranean. The contents of this publication are the sole responsibility of the author and can in no way be taken to reflect the views of the European Union or the European Institute of the Mediterranean.

<sup>2</sup> "This case [of an IS supporter], like others in communities across the United States and around the world, is an example of how a young person from any place and any background might make the terrible decision to try and become part of a terrorist organisation," U.S. attorney, [www.fbi.gov/sacramento/press-releases/2015/san-joaquin-county-man-pleads-guilty-to-attempting-to-provide-material-support-to-isil](http://www.fbi.gov/sacramento/press-releases/2015/san-joaquin-county-man-pleads-guilty-to-attempting-to-provide-material-support-to-isil).

<sup>3</sup> "Foreign Fighters: An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters to Syria and Iraq," *The Group*, December 2015, [http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/TSG\\_ForeignFightersUpdate\\_FINAL.pdf](http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/TSG_ForeignFightersUpdate_FINAL.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> See i.e.: T. Olesen, F. Khosrokhavar, *Islamism as Social Movement*, Centre for Studies in Islamism and Radicalisation (CIR), Aarhus University, Denmark May 2009, [www.ps.au.dk/fileadmin/site\\_files/filer\\_statskundskab/subsites/cir/pdf-filer/Hæfte2final.pdf](http://www.ps.au.dk/fileadmin/site_files/filer_statskundskab/subsites/cir/pdf-filer/Hæfte2final.pdf); "ISIS—

sociological and psychological, economic, and technical and practical. In each of the categories a distinction between Arab and European citizenry needs to be made, as these two groups are more often than not drawn to ISIS by different factors. Overall, the reasons, even though categorised and ordered, are not disconnected from one another but rather merge into one push and pull factor. By weighing the four categories of reasons for the appeal of ISIS today, the conclusion can be drawn that some of these reasons may be growing in importance despite the political efforts of many governments.

## Plastic Islam

As a religion Islam is simple and ideologically flexible, more so than other monotheistic religions. One of the most acclaimed sociologists and political scientists in this field, Ernest Gellner, claims that Islam is “the most protestant of the great monotheisms, it is ever Reformation-prone (Islam could indeed be described as Permanent Reformation).”<sup>5</sup> It has undergone many successive self-reformations, which Gellner calls Islamic Protestantism,<sup>6</sup> and the urge to reform has always been present in Islam.<sup>7</sup> Jihadism and ISIS, are therefore not unexpected, for historically they were preceded by other revolutionary intra-religious movements. The possibility for revolution from within comes, among other reasons, from the dogmatic absence of clergy, meaning the lack of any intermediary between man and god, and from the multitude of possible interpretations of the scripture. Egalitarian, direct relations with god are attractive as a concept but also allow self-proclaimed, uncontrollable imams or those from outside mainstream official Islam to be seen by their followers as just as righteous as anyone else. It weakens religious oversight and facilitates revolt and recruitment. So does the ease of being a good Muslim, for one may simply follow the five pillars of Islam in order to reach heaven, without the need to confess to anyone in between. The universal features of Islam, its simplicity, combined with the freedom to judge for oneself and the “ambiguity of concrete moral and political precepts,”<sup>8</sup> makes for a religion that can be shaped to anything that fits one’s needs. Jihad, too, even if the word itself is Arabic, has a universal meaning of revolution, of fighting against an oppressor or of an internal, personal struggle to be good.

Jihad per se is no longer restricted to Muslims. Becoming Muslim is of secondary importance as the formal and final step to being included in the community, and a symbolic ceremony present in many other “brotherhood” systems, like taking a scout oath, or swearing allegiance to a leader or law in the army. In France, jihadi recruits have for 20 years hailed either from second generation migrants or have been “organic” (*de souche*) French converts.<sup>9</sup> American recruits, many of them converts, are Caucasian, Somali-American, Vietnamese-American, Bosnian-American, Arab-American, among other ethnicities and nationalities.”<sup>10</sup>

The anti-system nature of ISIS is corroborated in its opposition to the international system and to the traditional Westphalian state system in the Middle East, an order that is thought un-Muslim, created and oriented by the West. Middle Eastern states have also been oppressive toward Islamists and impotent in providing services to the people in general. Today, ISIS is strongest in those provinces in Syria and Iraq where central government had been the weakest.

The vast majority of resistance movements in the Middle East since the 1970s have been religious in nature. Jihadists can be against state institutions, but in their ideology Islam plays a similar role to that of nation state nationalism in the West, with the caliphate as an alternative, moral, responsible state. As in the Middle East, personal grievances in the West can easily be directed against the state or system. The more secular that state or system is, the more sense it makes to become religious in opposition to it. In France, young

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many faces, different battles, Wilson Centre,” Middle East Programme, Winter 2015; J.M. “Matt” Venhaus, *Why Youth Join al-Qaeda*, Special Report 236, USIP, 2010, [www.usip.org/sites/default/files/SR236Venhaus.pdf](http://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/SR236Venhaus.pdf); F. Khosrokhavar, *op. cit.*

<sup>5</sup> E. Gellner, *Nations and Nationalisms*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca–New York, 2006, p. 77.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 40.

<sup>7</sup> E. Gellner, *Postmodernism, Reason and Religion*, Routledge, London–New York, 1992, p. 19.

<sup>8</sup> E. Gellner, *op. cit.*, p. 69.

<sup>9</sup> O. Roy, “Le djihadisme est une révolte générationnelle et nihiliste,” *Le Monde*, 8 January 2016, [www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2015/11/24/le-djihadisme-une-revolte-generationnelle-et-nihiliste\\_4815992\\_3232.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2015/11/24/le-djihadisme-une-revolte-generationnelle-et-nihiliste_4815992_3232.html).

<sup>10</sup> P. Bergen, C. Schuster, D. Sterman, *ISIS in the West: The New Faces of Extremism*, New America, November 2015, <https://static.newamerica.org/attachments/11813-isis-in-the-west-2/ISP-Isis-In-The-West-v2.b4f2e9e3a7c94b9e9bd2a293bae2e759.pdf>.

Muslims, disconnected from the culture of the Middle East, often without knowledge of Arabic,<sup>11</sup> can shape their beliefs practically at will thanks to Islam's malleability.<sup>12</sup>

For Muslims, the ideological strength of ISIS also comes from the fact that jihadists play on the analogies between today and the time of early Islam, in the Middle Ages. This religion emerged in the seventh century, being created among Christianity, Judaism and others. It also found its way (the "right way") by converting those around to the "righteous," final religion (Muhammad was the "seal" on prophecies). And so today, like Mohammad in the seventh century, Muslims need to perform a hijra (emigration) from the land of the disbelievers to the land of Islam.<sup>13</sup> Historical narrative is also important because it epitomises the longing for a golden age, when the civilisational achievements of the Middle East exceeded those of Europe.

On top of that, recent policy failures have also contributed to the appeal of ISIS today. The past four decades have seen a series of foreign policy mistakes by the United States, and recently by Europe as well. In the 1980s, the U.S. helped jihadists in Afghanistan and pitted the regime of Saddam Hussein against the Iranians. In the 1990s they intervened twice in Kuwait and Iraq (though wisely stopped short of deposing Hussein). In the 2000s they invaded Afghanistan and Iraq again, destroying the social and political fabric of both. And, in 2011, together with the UK and France, they helped to decompose Libya. Those mistakes empowered both radicals and authoritarian governments, and they also remain a potential radicalisation factor for the future. The political consciousness of those aged 15 to 30 in the Middle East and, to large extent, in Europe, is shaped by these events and therefore by anti-Americanism and anti-Westernism in general.<sup>14</sup>

The caliphate and ISIS are supposed to have the moral high ground that counters the "immorality" of the West.<sup>15</sup> The new moral system is combined with a state-like structure (caliphate ministries, passports, and currency), culture and art (newspapers, movies, and an Orwellian-like newspeak) to form a complete utopia. In such a system it is irrelevant or secondary who is from the political right wing and who is from the left. Muslim fundamentalists should be in European political terms considered ultra-right, with their cultivation of tradition, submission to one religion, social rigourism and disdain of minorities. But, with their anti-imperialist rhetoric, they attract right-wingers<sup>16</sup> and left-wingers alike.<sup>17</sup>

## Cross-Cultural Anti-Systemism

There are striking ideological and background similarities between ISIS today and radical leftist utopias that emerged among the generation after the Second World War in Western Europe. Both movements aimed at revolution for their goal, with the leftist radicals seeking an end to the alienation of the workers, and the Islamic radicals aiming to end Muslim alienation. Both hated their own governments and the United States. Like ISIS today, the Baader-Meinhoff group was also a symptom of a crisis of ideologies and clashing values. Back then it was socialism/communism and capitalism that divided Europe, with Germany in the middle. Today, more in Western Europe than in the Middle East, ISIS thrives on the crisis of European culture and

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<sup>11</sup> For an account of a young Muslim civic leader's remarks about the older generation's Muslim leaders see American diplomatic cable 06PARIS6995: [https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06PARIS6995\\_a.html](https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06PARIS6995_a.html).

<sup>12</sup> For an example of how British Muslim radicals have a very basic or distorted understanding of Islam. See D. Temple-Raston, "New Terrorism Adviser Takes A 'Broad Tent' Approach," NPR, 24 January 2011, [www.npr.org/2011/01/24/133125267/new-terrorism-adviser-takes-a-broad-tent-approach](http://www.npr.org/2011/01/24/133125267/new-terrorism-adviser-takes-a-broad-tent-approach).

<sup>13</sup> "Lift your heads up high. You now have a state and a caliphate that restores your honour, your might, your rights and your sovereignty. The state forms a tie of brotherhood between Arab and non-Arab, white and black, Easterner and Westerner. The caliphate brings together the Caucasian, Indian, Chinese, Shami, Iraqi, Yemeni, Egyptian, North African, American, French, German and Australian... They are all in the same trench, defending each other, protecting each other and sacrificing for one another. Their blood mingles together under one flag [with] one goal and in one camp... perform hijra from darul-kufr to darul-Islam. There are homes here for you and your families," [www.memri.org/report/en/print8147.htm#\\_ednref14](http://www.memri.org/report/en/print8147.htm#_ednref14).

<sup>14</sup> Anti-Americanism also characterised the leftist radicals of the 1970s in Germany and Italy, and can usually be found in the writings of mainstream leftist intellectuals. See T. Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945*, Vintage Books, London, 2010, p. 471.

<sup>15</sup> *Dabiq*, issue 7, p. 42.

<sup>16</sup> Such as Nicolas Michael Teasant, who is from a Christian family with military traditions. See [www.facebook.com/nicholas.teasant](http://www.facebook.com/nicholas.teasant) and [www.abc10.com/story/news/local/stockton/2014/03/17/video-nicholas-teasant-california-al-qaida-terrorism-suspect/6542359](http://www.abc10.com/story/news/local/stockton/2014/03/17/video-nicholas-teasant-california-al-qaida-terrorism-suspect/6542359).

<sup>17</sup> J.E. Arasli, "Violent Converts to Islam: Growing Cluster and Rising Trend," *Combating Terrorism Exchange*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2011, <https://globalecco.org/cvx-v1n1/violent-converts-to-islam>.

on the paradoxes of ultra-liberal social order that allows almost any form of individuality but fails to understand religiosity.

Analogies between European utopian radicals of the post-war era and jihadism today extend to social conditions and psychological disposition. Violent extremism raised its head in the 1970s when economic crisis struck Europe after the golden age of the 50s and 60s. “The urge to bring the architecture of security and stability crashing down on the heads of their parents’ generation was the extreme expression of a more widespread scepticism, in the light of the recent past, about the local credibility of pluralist democracy.”<sup>18</sup> Today again, after the golden age of the 1990s, an economic and perhaps a social crisis is biting Europe. It consists of a cultural crisis that has dissolved the values of Europe and a social backlash against the liberalism of the “parents’ generation.” That crisis today also debilitates non-religious peoples’ understanding of religion and the function of its “ultimate concern,”<sup>19</sup> how a set of beliefs becomes an internal imperative above worldly life.

The ultra-libertarian society may have cut the branch they had been built on, that of religion, spirituality, and so on, ridding individuals of a foundation that uncertain souls need.<sup>20</sup> This drive of many Europeans toward ISIS resembles what renowned psychologist and sociologist Erich Fromm called “escape from freedom.” According to Fromm, freedom is so alienating and demanding that people would rather escape into authoritarian, totalitarian systems just to feel safe again. Undoubtedly, the crisis of personality and frustration (including the sexual frustration of young males in MENA)<sup>21</sup> are primary psychological reasons that push Europeans and Middle Easterners alike into the arms of ISIS.<sup>22</sup> It has been proven that second generation immigrants may have identity issues,<sup>23</sup> feel rejected by the societies they live in, and be attracted to brutality and power.<sup>24</sup> The caliphate satisfies the need to belong, have meaning and feel safe again, albeit pathologically. Another social and psychological reason that most probably binds the two sides of the Mediterranean in making ISIS attractive is that it revolts against the older generation.

## Young, Angry and Modern

The generational gap always makes youth rebel, but in recent decades the gap may have become deeper and broader, primarily owing to the change in means of communication. Most IS foreign fighters from Europe are in their 20s,<sup>25</sup> while in general 70% of the Arab world is under 30 years of age. In its global aspect it is a revolution of the young. The generational gap came to the fore in the revolts of 2011. With the crackdown both on religious and civil activism in many Arab countries, and a deep generational gap, there are today simply more young people (both in absolute numbers and proportionally) who are prone to the Islamic State’s propaganda than there were in the past. This is less obvious in Europe, but seems equally possible.

The caliphate does attract people who are economically deprived, but this category of reasons refers directly to the conquered population in Syria and Iraq and to recruits from the Middle East and the Caucasus. In Europe this reason may play a comparatively lesser role, although undoubtedly European recruits come from lower social strata, and often have criminal records. Arab states are petrified along lines of social class, with a long history of Westernised elite rule and poor social mobility. Many in such states live below the national poverty levels (in Syria in 2010 it was 30%). The region is particularly prone to climate change, leading to droughts, water shortages, desertification and urban pressure as masses move from rural to urban areas. Raqqa, the capital of ISIS, was one of the Syria provinces worst hit by drought

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<sup>18</sup> T. Judt, *op. cit.*, p. 470.

<sup>19</sup> P. Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, HarperCollins, 2001.

<sup>20</sup> For elaboration on religious aspects of Europe in crisis see J. Grey “What scares the new atheists,” *The Guardian*, 3 March 2015, [www.theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/03/what-scares-the-new-atheists](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/03/what-scares-the-new-atheists).

<sup>21</sup> For more on the topic see K. Kneissl, “TestosteronmachtPolitik,” *Braumüller*, 2012.

<sup>22</sup> Personality crisis and frustration are possibly the most frequent global common denominators between IS supporters: see examples of Sally-Anne Jones, a 46-year old former punk musician from Chatham (UK) who married a computer hacker and went to Syria with him, and second generation children of immigrants from lower social strata, often involved in petty crime.

<sup>23</sup> “Strikingly frequent stories about the corpses of British jihadists bearing tattoos of English football clubs suggest unsuccessful attempts to resolve these [identity] issues.” Owen Bennett-Jones, “‘We’ and ‘You,’” *London Review of Books*, 27 August 2015, p. 10.

<sup>24</sup> The usual psychological reasons for the appeal of ISIS have already been analysed elsewhere: see footnotes 3, 9 and 16.

<sup>25</sup> “Foreign Fighters: An Updated Assessment...,” *op. cit.*

between 2007 and 2011. Such reasons are most likely to lead to more migration from the Middle East to Europe, greater competition for jobs, and increased hostility towards migrants.

The IS benefits immensely from the use by young people of new technological tools to communicate and entertain themselves. This “revolting youth” represent the most skilful group to be online, whether in terms of traditional operating systems, social media, smartphone apps or the dark web. Hailing from more than 80 countries they have multi-linguistic and wide reaching dissemination resources at their disposal. Many statements are translated into more than five languages and spread via the most popular internet platforms, multiplying the Islamic State’s impact. But this outreach would be much less effective if it were not for the personal bond that a recruiter develops with a potential recruit. Experts at the counter-radicalisation department (UCLAT) at the French Interior Ministry of have concluded that the true primary tool in recruitment is the personal relationship formed online. Such bonds in turn naturally develop between younger people who spend more time online, and are susceptible to accepting online relations as more genuine or valuable than real life bonds.

## **Europe in Crisis: More Caution Needed**

The search of universal reasons for the appeal of ISIS demonstrates that there is no single reason or type of reason that explains the popularity of ISIS completely. Many of the reasons, such as economic problems and authoritarianism, will remain for years, and some, particularly in the West (such as the crisis of values) may grow. Perhaps the key to seeing an upward trend in the attractiveness of jihad as a global utopia is understanding that Western culture is in crisis and the proportion of new foreign recruits from the Middle East to those from Europe may tilt in favour of the latter. This greater potential for radicalisation is present on both the right and the left political extremes, as well as among the second generation of immigrants in Europe.

The diversity of the reasons behind the appeal of ISIS makes it resilient, and ensure a constant inflow of fresh blood. Affinity needs not be physical in Syria or Iraq—its imaginary version is just as valid and strong. This kind of radical affiliation is just as dangerous for European countries. Also, even if in the coming months the territory under control of ISIS shrinks physically, the ideal of anti-systemic movement will remain attractive to a growing number of people.

However, in policy terms, understanding the global strength of ISIS, particularly its universal attractiveness, allows for a better-tailored policy in fighting this organisation. In formulating its joint response in the Middle East, Europe needs to avoid several mistakes, which it may be close to making today. When ISIS is viewed as a new universal utopia it becomes clear that any campaign against it in Syria or Iraq is linked to internal European issues. In other words, the foreign policy of European governments in the Middle East is also directed at the European citizenry.

Firstly, therefore, neither the European Union as a whole, not any of the Member States alone, can be seen as the vanguard in the fight against ISIS in Syria or Iraq as this will only speed up radicalisation in Europe and push more Europeans (and others) to ISIS. It does not mean that ISIS should not be challenged, but that European military involvement needs to be confined to air support and special operations while Iraqis and Syrians combat the jihadists themselves directly.

Secondly, the worst-case scenario is a European military campaign combined with anti-Muslim rhetoric on the social level at home. In multicultural societies this would radicalise both parts of the immigrant populations and, in turn, the far right, while in more homogenous European societies it would at least energise the far right. The country that seems to be using the global appeal of ISIS in Europe in this way is Russia. In Russian media, Muslims in Western Europe are vilified, and documentaries are produced that suggest the inability of France or Germany to integrate the Muslim population.<sup>26</sup> Fomenting religious and race-based xenophobia in Europe serves three major policy purposes, increasing social tensions in countries that may hurt the Russian economy the most, weakening European solidarity and the clout of any one current political leader, and rallying Russian minorities in Europe (of which there are more than a million in Germany alone), all while pushing Europe into a problematic focus on ISIS in Syria.

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<sup>26</sup> Even though Russian Muslims are the largest Islamic population in Europe, numbering 14 million (10% of the whole population). In France it is 4.7 million (7.5%), in Germany 4.8 million (5.8%), [www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/11/17/5-facts-about-the-muslim-population-in-europe](http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/11/17/5-facts-about-the-muslim-population-in-europe).

The best scenario for Europe is that Sunni Muslim countries are made responsible for the defeat of ISIS and play the biggest role in this effort. Two of them, Saudi Arabia and Egypt, should lead the regional military and ideological coalition against ISIS. Both countries are natural religious leaders for many Muslims, with Mecca and Medina in Saudi Arabia and the main religious university, Al-Azhar, in Egypt. The creation of the caliphate also poses a much greater direct danger to Sunni regimes in the Arab world than it does to Europe. The unwillingness of these two countries to become more involved in combating ISIS both ideologically and militarily should be seen as being against the vital interests of Europe.