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THE RATIONAL IRRATIONAL: A SOCIO-PSYCHOLOGICAL APPROACH TO THE CAUSALITY OF ISLAMIC RADICALIZATION IN THE WEST

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JCSP 44

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Maj Amir ElMasry

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ABSTRACT

The understanding of the causes of Islamic radicalization in the West has been limited by a worldly-minded approach where terrorist acts are labeled irrational, rebellious, or anomic. Taking into consideration the spiritually imbued Islamist ideology, this paper will offer that Western Muslims' participation in radical activities is rational and conformist. This paper will thus answer three core questions to arrive to this conclusion: What are the triggers driving Muslims to accept such radical movements? How are Islamists able to persuade their followers that their interpretation of Islam is the most valid one? And how are Western Muslims persuaded to participate in high risk activities leading to their suicide? Through Robert Merton's Strain Theory and Robert Agnew's General Strain Theory, this paper will present how strain can act as a catalyst to adopting a radical ideology once offered religion as a coping strategy. Serge Moscovici's Social Representations Theory will then address the rhetoric used by Islamists to sway their potential followers that their ideology is the purest form of Islam. Finally, with the help of Emile Durkheim's views on religion and suicide, this paper will offer that to cope with a communal collective strain, the religious follower will adopt a sacred lens that encourages martyrdom and suppresses normative behaviour while rationalizing theirs.

INTRODUCTION

In early November 2009, the USA suffered yet another terrorist attack at the hand of Islamic extremism when Major Nidal Hasan, a United States Army Medical Corps psychiatrist, pulled out his pistol and fired at unarmed soldiers being processed for deployment overseas in Fort Hood. Twelve soldiers and one civilian were killed, and thirty-two others were injured in that attack. Hasan's assault came to an end as a civilian police sergeant fired back, hitting him in his spine and paralyzing him from the waist down. Four years later, and after a series of dramatic ordeals in and out of his court-martial, Hasan, representing himself, admitted guilty to his thirteen counts of premeditated murder and thirty-two counts of attempted murder, and was sentenced by a jury with the death penalty. Today, Hasan awaits his execution incarcerated at Fort Leavenworth in Kansas.

Americans mourned the loss of their brave and wept over the lives lost. They could not believe that the war on terror could come knocking at their front door in their own homeland. Dismayed, they did not expect that the terrorist would be one of them. After all, Hasan was born and raised in Arlington, Virginia.¹ He had a typical American upbringing and as a third generation American to Palestinian grand parents, his Arabic was very weak. Growing up, he was not religious. In fact, in a video interview with his cousin, Nidal was described as a loving and caring person that was never violent and

¹ ABC News, "Army Doctor Nidal Malik Hasan Allegedly Kills 13 at Fort Hood," last modified Nov 6, 2009, <http://abcnews.go.com/WN/fort-hood-shooting-army-doctor-nidal-malik-hasan/story?id=9012970> .

would never kill a bug in the house.² Highly educated, he obtained a MD and became a psychiatrist. Yet his upbringing, his education, his status nor his economic class prevented him from becoming radicalised and picking arms against none-else other than his brethren.

Similarly, in Jan 2013, a Canadian by the name of John Maguire left his Ottawa home and headed to join combatants of the Islamic State In Syria (ISIS). Four months earlier, Maguire had converted to Islam after being influenced by one of his coworkers working the graveyard shift. Canadians were introduced to Maguire as he starred in an ISIS propaganda video warning them that “it should not surprise you when operations by the Muslims are executed where it hurts you the most in retaliation to your very own acts of aggression towards our people.”³ Maguire was referring to two separate terrorist attacks that were acted out months prior. First, in October 2014, Martin Couture-Rouleau, a twenty-five year old Quebecer, used his vehicle as a weapon as he deliberately rammed into two Canadian Forces soldiers in St-Jean-Sur-Richelieu killing one and injuring the other. Similar to Maguire, Couture-Rouleau had converted to Islam the year prior to the incident.⁴ He came to his death as local police intercepted his vehicle and shot him down as he charged at them with a knife. Days later, a second incident where Michael Zehaf-Bibeau went on a shooting rampage in Ottawa, killing Corporal Nathan Cirillo and while attempting to enter parliament he was shot and killed by parliament security personnel.

² “Interview with Nader Hasan,” Youtube video, 1:30, posted by “ABC News,” 4 Sep 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TJOptN8aDe0&index=11&t=0s&list=PLpZaTciQeMBCrhHMWk5KgRcuTcZfUf94E> .

³ “Canadian John Maguire appears in new ISIS video,” Youtube video, 0:10, posted by “The National,” 8 Dec 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1t0YesVmizM> .

⁴ CBC News, “Who is Martin Couture-Rouleau?,” last modified 22 October 2014, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/who-is-martin-couture-rouleau-1.2807285> .

Where does one begin to comprehend the behaviour of these perpetrators? Are they criminals? Are they perhaps psychotic or delusional? What kind of ideology is capable of transforming young, loving, and peaceful individuals to self destructing political violent individuals all within mere years of their newly adopted views? This paper will assess the socio-psychological reasons that may drive western Muslims to become radicalized pushing them to political violence. Ultimately, this paper will offer that these perpetrators are completely rational and sane individuals who have been inspired by goals and means of a skewed spiritual world.

Scope and Limitation

It is important to note that this paper will focus particularly on radicalization of Muslims in Western civilizations. This is an important distinction due to the significant deviation in the political, economical and social structure of other civilizations that influence religious radicalization in different ways. For example, a Palestinian suicide bomber in Israel may have been driven by political and social conditions that are much more relevant than someone born and raised in the West. Equally, living in a predominantly Muslim country, the religious influences are much more accessible leaving for a different social dynamic for the fundamental reasons to which a potential Islamic extremist may join or not join a particular group. As such, the most common catalyst for Muslims in the East to become radicalized includes “blocked social mobility, political repression, and relative socioeconomic deprivation.”⁵ In contrast, Western civilizations provide a relatively more comfortable style of living under mainly

⁵ United States. Congress. Senate. Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, *The Roots of Violent Islamist Extremism and Efforts to Counter it : Hearing before the Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, United States Senate, One Hundred Tenth Congress, Second Session, July 10, 2008, 2009*), 97.

democratic societies, freedom of speech and freedom of religion. To that end, this paper will evaluate the conditions that may drive Western Muslims to abandon the social construct for a *divine calling*. Some political critics describe terrorism in the west for what it is – the basics of war – the west invades the east, and the east retaliates. These critics are the same who label so called terrorist as, simply put, nothing more than soldiers recruited by leaders with political agendas in disguise under the *religion umbrella*. It is in that same forum as well, that one finds the common cliché statement *One man's terrorist, is another man's freedom fighter*. Needless to state, there is benefit in studying the psychological and sociological factors that are still able to reach in and defect the populace of an otherwise undisturbed society. Despite the above focus, this paper will still be capturing properties and ways of recruitment of terrorist organizations in other parts of the world but will focus on how it relates to the western radicalized Muslim.

Research on the topic of the mind of a terrorist has evolved over the past century. What was once seen a topic far too dangerous to even discuss due to the dangers of propagating corruptible ideas is now an *industry* through which academics and scholars speed to publish books, papers, articles, reports, interviews and Twitter posts every time a dramatic terrorist incident occurs. The result is that there is enough research material for a student in this domain to spend researching for the rest of their life. John Horgan, professor of Security Studies and Director of the Center for Terrorism and Security Studies at the University of Massachusetts Lowell, believes that in spite of the overabundance of data on the topic, “it is ironic then that even now a true science of

terrorist behaviour continues to elude us.”⁶ Horgan uses the example of contemporary criminal menace researcher Xavier Raufer as he warned in 2003 the risk of “drowning in a rising tide of misunderstood facts”⁷ and confirmed how unimaginative, and depressingly wrong scholars were on how al-Qaeda operated at the top once the *Abottabad documents* were released.⁸ Consequently, the science behind the mind of a terrorist is not a definitive one, rather built on a framework of known knowns, known unknowns, and unknown unknowns. Despite all that, this research paper will attempt to highlight key conclusions relevant to influencing radicalization of Muslims in the West and offer alternative theories that will aid in rationalising what may seem irrational.

To understand why individuals pledge for a more radicalized Islamic Ideology, Quintan Wiktorowicz, professor, researcher, and well-known expert on Islamic movements in the Middle East and Europe, argues that three important related questions need to be answered.⁹ First, what initial triggers cause for an interest in such movements? Wiktorowicz argues that individuals are inspired by a *cognitive opening* that challenges their previously accepted ideologies. It begins with the individual dealing with a life changing experience such as discrimination, political repression, socioeconomic crisis etc. For some, a cognitive opening provokes a process of religious seeking through which the individual is seeking answers for their concerns through religious meaning. Certainly not all those who experience a cognitive opening will seek answers through religion. This is where the role of the radical recruiter comes in as they recognize the opportunity and

⁶ John Horgan, *The Psychology of Terrorism*, Rev. and updated 2nd ed. ed.Routledge, 2014), 2.

⁷ Xavier Raufer, "Al Qaeda: A Different Diagnosis," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 26, no. 6 (Nov 1, 2003): 391.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁹ Quintan Wiktorowicz, *Radical Islam Rising: Muslim Extremism in the West* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 5.

introduce the individual, through outreach and social networking (both physical and virtual), to consider religion as an answer to their cognitive opening.

Once individuals are exposed to a movement and express initial interest, Wiktorowicz then asks how individuals are persuaded that the radical group is a credible source of Islamic interpretation?¹⁰ This is an important step in the process of becoming radicalized since if the group is not seen as legitimate, the individual's interest will deplete and eventually look at other radical groups or stop seeking religious answers all together. What makes this step in particular interesting is the lack of a decentralized *sacred authority* in Islam, thereby challenging the various Islamic schools of thought to convince their seekers that "its scholarly interpretation is not only legitimate but also more authentic than alternatives."¹¹ Once an individual confirm the group's legitimacy and credibility, they are open to absorb all the religious education delivered almost blindly.

Third, Wiktorowicz asks how are individuals convinced to engage in *risky activism* leading to their suicide? He argues that the process includes the socialization and culturing of their religious followers with goal to indoctrinate them to accept participation in high risk activism. They are therefore taught that the primary and sole self-interest is eternal salvation. The movement then offers its ideology that the highest level of salvation and guaranteed acceptance to the highest level of paradise can only be achieved through fulfillment of divine commands including high-risk activism and violence.

Wiktorowicz's three questions form the core of this research paper as it attempts to answer them with socio-psychological theories. To that end, chapter one will introduce

¹⁰ Wiktorowicz, *Radical Islam Rising . . .*, 6.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

essential roots of Islamism by covering some key historical moments that gave birth to Islamism and helped in forming the core elements of the Islamist ideology. Chapter one will also offer an introduction to the nature of Islam in the West by presenting how with the help of skewed interpretations of euphemism in the Qur'an along with taking Qur'anic verses out of historical context, the Islamist is able to persuade their followers effectively.

Chapter two will answer Wiktorowicz's question to the initial triggers causing interest in the Islamist movement. With the help of Merton's strain theory, Agnew's General Strain Theory, and Durkheim's views on religion, chapter two will submit that prior to radicalization most individuals have faced a moment of strain which led the individual to enter a state of cognitive opening. To cope with the strain, individuals who choose religion as a coping strategy and cross paths with what Islamists have to offer, are more likely to accept the radical ideology. This chapter will also offer an alternative explanation of Merton's categorization of criminals by presenting alternative cultural goals and institutional means seen through the sacred lens as oppose to the profane one.

Chapter three will address the legitimization process through which the individual is persuaded that the Islamist ideology is indeed the pure and accurate interpretation of true Islam. To do so, this chapter will analyse Moscovici's social representations theory by linking the anchoring and objectification processes, propaganda, propagation and diffusion techniques, stereotyping and opinion forming, and social group segmentation to the language and rhetoric used by Islamists.

Finally, chapter four will provide insight to the reason that drive individuals to participate in high risk activities leading to their suicide. Returning to Agnew's General

Strain Theory, this chapter will demonstrate how Islamists will impose on their religious followers a collective strain that revives their sense of communal identity leaving them with the impression that the only coping mechanism is suicidal terror. Matza and Sykes' neutralization techniques will be presented to explain how Islamists are able to persuade their followers to harm themselves and other innocent civilians. This chapter will conclude by offering a rationality only found in the sacred dimension where martyrdom promises an eternal blissful and guaranteed entry to paradise.

CHAPTER 1 – DEFINING THE ROOTS OF ISLAMISM

Introduction

Prior to understanding the social-psychological factors that drive Western Muslims to radicalization, it is important to first highlight some of the defining core elements common to Islamists. This is particularly important since these elements play a critical role in the radicalization process as they form the foundational construct on which radical religious authorities influence their potential followers. This chapter will therefore provide an overview of certain definitions including that of terrorism, Islamism, jihadism and radicalization. Furthermore, this chapter will present four common elements found with Islamists: Islam as a political ideology, the unity of the Muslim community, Shari'a law and the revival of the Caliphate. Finally, this chapter will provide an overview of the nature of Islam in the West, highlighting the reasons why Western Muslims are more susceptible to radicalization.

Terrorism, Islamism, Jihadism and Radicalization

To submit a broad and brief introduction on the evolution of Islamist political ideology, one must distinguish certain terms commonly used today in media and political spheres. A common word vastly used to brush a holistic picture of any political violence is the word *terrorism*. The definition itself has evolved throughout the past century and, despite remaining a secular one, it is commonly used in the media today exclusively in labeling Islamic political violence. The most inclusive definition, along with over 250 academic, Governmental and Intergovernmental definitions of terrorism, can be found in Alex Schmid's Routledge Handbook of Terrorism Research:

Terrorism refers on the one hand to a *doctrine* about the presumed effectiveness of a special form or tactic of fear-generating, coercive political violence and, on the other hand, to a conspiratorial *practice* of calculated, demonstrative, direct violent action without legal or moral restraints, targeting mainly civilians and non-combatants, performed for its propagandistic and psychological effects on various audiences and conflict parties.¹²

Other commonly used terms, which will also be employed in this research paper, are *Islamism*, *Islamic extremism*, *political Islam* and *fundamentalism*, all of which are terms used to refer to “contemporary movements that attempt to return to the scriptural foundations of the Muslim community, excavating and re-interpreting them for application to the present-day social and political world.”¹³

Islamism and *terrorism* intersect when the attempts to return to scriptural foundations resort to the usage of violent means. This is more commonly known as *ihadism* which is a 21st century *neologism* derived from the Arabic word *ihad* (to struggle, to strive)¹⁴ and has been more frequently used in the press to describe violent political Islamism. The process through which an individual becomes a *ihadist* is through radicalization. Radicalization is therefore the “process of ideological socialization of (usually) young people towards effectuating fundamental political changes, usually through the use of violent tactics of conflict waging against the political

¹² Alex Peter Schmid, *The Routledge Handbook of Terrorism Research* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 86.

¹³ Roxanne Euben and Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *Princeton Readings in Islamist Thought : Texts and Contexts from Al-Banna to Bin Laden* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 4.

¹⁴ The word *Jihad* is a term in Arabic that denotes *to strive* or *to struggle* in a particularly commendable way. In fact, many baby boys are named *Jihad* as an aspiration that their boy will struggle to achieve great goals in his life. This term has since been hijacked by Islamists and publicised by the press to denote the most violent acts of Islamism. In most recent news, a Muslim family living in France were denied permission from registering their son’s name as *Jihad*.

enemies and their followers.”¹⁵ Through radicalization, an individual is susceptible to the psycho-political influences of particular radical social groups that strive on “the ways in which external influences transform otherwise normal individuals into potentially violent political activists.”¹⁶

Historical evidence shows that terrorism in religious movements is not new. In fact, all Abrahamic religions have experienced “the rise of radical offshoots that promote extreme interpretations of religion”¹⁷ in order to achieve a specific worldly political objective. The promotion of peaceful versus violent political agendas were achieved with the help of religious leaders using their authority to interpret the particular verses from holy scriptures that champion peace or war. As such, when taking an analytical approach to Islamists and their radicalization process, one must also consider the “conditions that may encourage them to turn to violence, and the dynamics of contention that facilitate their growth or decline.”¹⁸ Consequently, there is very little evidence that shows that religion *in itself* is the root cause of political violence, instead, it is the religious authoritative figures who harness the power of religious influences to advance their political agenda.

Core Elements of the Islamist Ideology

Most of the founding figures of contemporary Islamism were born in the Middle East, Northern Africa, and Asia at the turn of the 19th century in an era where the political climate was dominated by colonialism and world wars. The influences of the West on the East gave birth to some of the most influential thinkers in Islamism which, to this day,

¹⁵ Schmid, *The Routledge Handbook of Terrorism Research* . . . , 217.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 24.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

have left their footprint on the proletariat and bourgeoisie of the Arab-Asian Muslim world. Islamists distinguish themselves from mainstream Islam in that they rely solely on the scriptural foundations of Islam: The Holy Qur'an and the Hadith (the teachings and practices of Prophet Muhammad). As Euben and Zaman state:

In general, Islamists aim at restoring primacy of the norms derived from these foundational texts in collective life, regarding them not only as an expression of God's will but as an antidote to the moral bankruptcy inaugurated by Western cultural dominance from abroad, aided and abetted by corrupt Muslim rulers from within the *umma* (Islamic community).¹⁹

In general, there are four common core elements that Islamists all share:²⁰ (1) Islamism is a political Ideology more than a religion; (2) The enforcement of Shari'a law as state law; (3) The unity of Muslims under one umma; (4) The establishing of a Caliphate that will rule them all.

Islamism as a Political Ideology

Islamists effort to re-establish an authentic and pure Islam is the primary catalyst that leads to their involvement in all aspects of life, including politics. Islamists thus believe that Islam is not a religion, "but a divine political ideology surpassing Communism and Capitalism."²¹ What distinguishes Islamism from other political ideologies is that Islamists believe in the notion that Islamic scriptural foundations offer

¹⁹ Euben and Zaman, *Princeton Readings in Islamist Thought : Texts and Contexts from Al-Banna to Bin Laden* (Oxfordshire : Princeton, 2009), 4.

²⁰ Majid Nawaz, *The Roots of Violent Extremism and Efforts to Counter it*, Testimony quoted in United States. Congress. Senate. Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, *The Roots of Violent Islamist Extremism and Efforts to Counter it : Hearing before the Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, United States Senate, One Hundred Tenth Congress, Second Session, July 10, 2008*, 52.

²¹ *Ibid.*

“a detailed and divinely pre-ordained stance on matters such as political structure or the economy.”²²

As mentioned earlier, Islamism was influenced by the political climate of their environment, which gave rise to Islamist thinkers who were not trained in theology, but driven by an ideology. One of those prominent thinkers for example was Egypt’s Hasan al-Bannah (d. 1949) who is commonly characterized as the father of contemporary Islamism and the founder of *al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun* in 1928 (Egyptian Society of Muslim Brothers or more commonly Muslim Brotherhood). Al-Banna was a teacher by profession, and despite not having proper theologian schooling, he was an activist who had developed “an Islamist theoretical framework to thinkers who came after him.”²³ The Muslim Brotherhood since has become one of the most powerful Islamist organizations, not only in Egypt, but also throughout the Middle East, North Africa, Europe and the Americas. Although never officially stating it, the organization has influences and direct links with Al-Qaeda, Hamas in Palestine, and Ennahda in Tunisia.²⁴ The Muslim Brotherhood was formed on a simple motto: “Islam as a way of life.”²⁵ For al-Bannah, Islam was not simply a religion, instead an ideology that covers all aspects of a Muslim’s life including the politics that govern the people.

Islamism and Shari’a Law

²² Nawaz, *The Roots of Violent Extremism* . . . , 50.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ “The Brotherhood: Investigating The Muslim Brotherhood,” Youtube video, 24:02, posted by “Best Documentary,” 29 Sep 2016.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5C1NyDnGfW8&t=1441s&index=29&list=PLpZaTciQeMBCrhHMWk5KgRcuTcZfUf94E>.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

Another core element of Islamism is the notion that Islamic states must abide by Shari'a law (Islamic religious law). Shari'a represents the divine law as it was revealed in the scriptural foundations of Islam. There are several schools of thoughts on Islamic law that slightly vary from one another all of which were established in the eighth and ninth centuries.²⁶ One of the popular Islamist figures that revived the notion of the importance of Shari'a law in contemporary Islamic states was Abul A'la Mawdudi (d. 1979). Mawdudi believed in the importance of oneness of God and that in order to implement the *sovereignty of God* to its full legal and political implications Muslims must follow the concept that "God alone is the source of the law, all people must submit to this law, and the sole mandate of the Islamic state is to implement this law."²⁷

Despite Mawdudi's efforts, mainstream Muslims viewed Shari'a law as medieval and barbaric and they took every effort to oppose its implementation. Mawdudi blamed the westernized educational system and institutions for the influences that spread ignorance of true Islam among Muslims. To this day, Islamists in most Muslim countries struggle with their governments as they try to employ and enforce certain aspects of Shari'a law.

Islamism and the Unification Under One Umma

The notion of unifying *all* Muslims as one Muslim community is also linked to the politicization of Islam. Islamists thus draw parallels with Communist ideology of an international proletariat where loyalty and allegiance to this global community is part of the foundation of being Muslim. Consequently, Islamists believe that nationalism and

²⁶ For Sunni Muslims, four schools of law (*madhabs*) are attributed to scholars who lived in the eighth and ninth centuries. The four schools of law are the Hanafi school (after Abu Hanifa d. 767), the Maliki school (after Malik Anas d. 795), the Shafi'i school (After Muhammad Idris al-Shafi'i d.820).

²⁷ Euben et al, *Princeton Readings in Islamist Thought* . . ., 81.

national identity do not exist in the vision of a unified Muslim umma. In contrast, mainstream Muslims believe that the umma is united strictly through religion. As such, according to mainstream Muslims, one can have a national identity and a religious identity. This can also include non-Muslims if they live under the ruling Muslim government. For instance, prophet Muhammad declared that “Jewish, Christian and Muslim residents of his city-state were all *one umma*.”²⁸ Islamist on the other hand, do not see this umma including any but the Muslims, and see no other political ruling other than an Islamist one which abides by the Shari’a law.

Al-Banna was one to profess the importance of the umma and that to achieve that in the early 20th century required a reform of the Muslim mentality. Starting with the Muslim from within, reform must re-establish those pure views of the fundamental essence of being a Muslim. Having reformed the individual, al-Banna offered that one must thus focus on reforming their family. Moving outwards, the individual must then reform their state, the Muslim *umma*, and then the world. Like his predecessors, al-Banna came to a realization of the challenge where “allegiance to an Islamic umma defined not by territory but by faith required increasing justification in the face of crosscutting national and ethnic loyalties.”²⁹ With his deep influential thoughts, al-Banna planted a seed in the hearts of Islamism questioning the survivability of the Islamic traditions as it flourishes in “a modern landscape increasingly defined by the authority of scientific rationality, the sovereignty of the nation-state, and the dominance of the West.”³⁰

²⁸ Majid Nawaz, *The Roots of Violent Extremism* . . . , 53.

²⁹ Euben et al, *Princeton Readings in Islamist Thought* . . . , 54.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 55.

As time went on, Arab countries became further influenced by the West. Consequently, movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, became more popular and stronger. It was evident that a gap was wedging between the upper class modernist elites and the lower classes. Islamist movements gained popularity amongst the proletariat as they offered an anti-nationalist ideology that championed unity of the Muslim world and retaliation against the Western apologetic Arab leaders. To this day, clashes between Islamist movements and their governments became the example of political religious struggle in an attempt to unite Muslims under one umma.

Islamism and the Revival of the Caliphate

The final core element in the Islamist ideology is the re-instating of the *Caliphate*, under one ruling body. The *Caliphate* is a term in Islam which origin is linked to the question of who would lead the Muslim *umma* (community) after the death of Prophet Muhammad. From 632 A.D. to 1924, the concept of the Caliphate evolved as “an institution and a theory of political power over the centuries [reflecting] various historical, political, economic, cultural, and regional transformations”³¹ forming the different Muslim societies we know today. By the eighteenth century, the Ottoman Empire had risen to power claiming control of the Caliphate. This control was the last time the Muslim world was ruled under one entity since by the end of World War I, the Ottoman Empire was dismembered and the Caliphate abolished in 1924.

Since then, Islamists have attempted to re-instate a powerful authority that will regain control of the umma and lead Muslims to their victory. Its ideology will be Islamism, its law, Shari’a law, and its rulers, a Caliphate powerful to stand against

³¹ Euben et al, Princeton Readings in Islamist Thought . . . , 54.

Imperialist expansions. Nawaz draws parallels between the rise of Fascist, Communists and Nazis post World War I. He offers that in the same way the war gave rise to the Communist parties attempting to *liberate* workers from the tyranny of Capitalism, “likewise the Caliphate must proactively intervene in the affairs of other states so as to *liberate* Muslims residents from the yoke of *kufr* (disbelief).”³²

Methodology to Employ the Core Islamist Elements

In general, there are three overarching strands of methodology through which Islamists will enforce their four core elements: Political methods, revolutionary methods and militant methods.

Not all Islamists use violence to achieve their goals. Political methods used by Islamist have one goal in mind, to influence governmental authorities to recognize the legitimacy of the movement in order to enable them to influence the policies.

Other Islamists are revolutionaries in that they are anti-establishment and governmental institutions. These types of Islamist will use their influential power to instigate military coups against regimes.

Finally the most violent of Islamists are the militant ones. The militarization of Islamism came around under one of the most influential architects of contemporary Islamist thinkers, Sayyid Qutb (d. 1966). As one journalist once dubbed him “The Philosopher of Islamic Terror,”³³ his 1964 publication *Signposts Along the Road* detailed the importance of jihad as a mode of political action stating that “the path for freedom must occasionally be hewn by way of the sword because tyrants are not reasoned out of

³² Majid Nawaz, *The Roots of Violent Extremism* . . . , 53.

³³ Paul Berman, *The Philosopher of Islamic Terror* (New York: New York Times, 2003), quoted in Euben and Zaman, *Princeton Readings in Islamist Thought* . . . , 129.

power, and *jahiliyya* (ignorance) is not *abstract theory* . . . [it] strives to preserve its own existence.”³⁴ Islamists contend that only when Islamic law reigns are humans free from enslavement to one another’s rule. To that end, the realization of justice, liberty, equality, and choice itself “necessitates the forcible removal of the constraints imposed by *jahiliyya*, along with those who aid and abet it, *no matter the cost*.”³⁵

In summary, the rise of the core elements of Islamism was driven by an unsatisfactory political climate as imperialism took control of the East after the fall of the Ottoman Empire. The struggle continued as ruling Muslim governments continued to adopt the values and ideologies of the West forcing a gap between social political-religious movements and the institutions. The core elements of Islamism were fuelled by Islamist thinkers who sought a unity under a Caliphate that respects Shari’a law. To achieve their agenda, Islamists use politics, revolutionary tactics and/or violence in order to overcome the *jahiliyya*, which they believe, has infected the blood of Muslims worldwide. Notably however, the mass immigration of Muslims from Asia, Middle East, and Africa to the West carried with it some of these ideologies. One can argue that the propagation of Islamists ideology to the West faced less of a resistance than in the East since Islamists found success in harbouring their notions under the democratic auspices of freedom of speech. The following section will highlight how Islamists recognised a set of conditions particular to Western Muslims that enabled the advancement of their agenda.

³⁴ Euben and Zaman, *Princeton Readings in Islamist Thought* . . . , 44.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 45.

The Nature of Islam in the West

Certain conditions and characteristics particular to Muslims living in the West facilitate the acceptance and adoption of Islamists ideology. As mentioned in previous paragraphs, Islamists center their ideology on their fundamental interpretation of the scriptural foundations. Western Muslims suffer from a particular disadvantage in comparison to other Muslims living in the East – they possess weaker or nonexistent Arabic linguistic abilities and rarely receive Islamic schooling. Islamists recognize these limitations and in turn offer loose English translations and interpretations of the euphemistic language found in the Qur'an, and take scriptural foundations out of context. As such, the Western Muslim will accept these interpretations if they live in a milieu that is void of offering alternative interpretations.

Interpretation of Euphemism in the Qur'an

The Arabic language is just as euphemistic as English. It uses euphemism in literary and non-literary texts in both classical and modern Arabic. Euphemism is equally found in Islamic scriptural foundations and particularly in the Qur'an. Euphemism in the Qur'an “gain further significance as they are normally used on contexts bearing a strong relevance to Muslim social life.”³⁶ The Holy Qur'an has been translated into many European languages. Regardless of the language translation, whether translated by English or non-English scholars, the translations “harbour many culturally and linguistically induced errors.”³⁷ Common errors fail to capture the Arabic syntax,

³⁶ Salah Salim Ali, "Euphemism in Translation, A Comparative Study of Euphemistic Expressions in Two Translations of the Holy Qu'ran," *Islamic Quarterly* 43, no. 2 (1999), 104.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 104.

morphology, and semantics as it overlooks the pragmatic and figurative styles that are commonly found in Qur'anic language.

It is therefore common in the Arab world for debates to occur over the meaning and interpretation of some of the euphemistic choice of divine language let alone in English translation. Needless to state, for second generation Arabs or Muslim Asian descendants who have no formal Arabic schooling, they are more susceptible to accepting translations of the scriptures without questioning its original meaning. This thus becomes a dangerous ground, one that Islamists have certainly explored and taken advantage of.

Scriptural Foundations out of Context

On top of offering a skewed English interpretation of Qur'anic verses, another common technique that Islamists do is select particular *hate* verses out of context and apply them at face value. Most Qur'anic verses descended to prophet Muhammad were verses describing historical events and offering guidance and morals from those events to mankind. As such, taking a specific verse from the middle of a *sura* (chapter) without providing any context is seen as manipulative. For instance, a common verse used by Islamists and Islamaphobics alike, is taken from verse 191 of the second surah which states "And kill them wherever you find them"³⁸ in reference to Christians. However, upon examination of the verses prior and after that verse, one finds a passage that offers a self defence explanation giving Muslims permission to resort to force when they are being persecuted. Equally, verse 192 mentions that Allah is forgiving and merciful. Thus, taking advantage of Western Muslims lack of Qur'anic education, Qur'anic verses

³⁸ The Holy Qur'an, 2:191.

interpreted out of context has been and continue to be one of the strongest means through which Islamists are able to socialize their radical interpretations in order to achieve their violent political agenda.

Lack of Diversification of Alternative Views

Finally, the lack of resources for Western Muslims to get alternative Islamic views is another catalyst that facilitates the propagation of the Islamist ideology in the West. Aside from the local Mosque, and online resources, a Western Muslim who has received a loose translation of Qur'anic verses that were taken out of their historical and sequential context has no other way to corroborate this information. In comparison to Muslims living in predominantly Muslim countries, popular resources available to the youth are their teachers in schools, colleagues, family members and friends, all of which can provide a different interpretation and offer an alternative and more moderate view.

Conclusion

This chapter has summarised some of the root causes that led to the creation of Islamists. Influenced by a political climate that threatened a pure Islam free from the ignorance of the West, Islamists thinkers' ideology was formed as it fostered an Islam that intertwined every aspect of a Muslim's life including politics. With that came a fundamental interpretation of Islamic scriptures as it gave rise to Shari'a law and the drive to re-establish a Caliphate. In a world that continued its Westernization, a widening gap was emerging between the Muslim elitists and lower classes. Any Muslims denying the core elements of Islam (Shari'a law, anti-nationalistic umma, political ideology and Caliphate ruling), Islamists are quick to label them as heretics or apostates. To enforce

their vision, Islamists interpreted Islamic scripture to authorise politics, revolutionary tactics, and violence in order to win over their government.

One can argue that Islamists found more success in the West, than the continuous struggles faced in Eastern predominantly Muslim countries. Despite having a stronger Western education, second and third generation Muslims lacked the linguistic and Islamic schooling to properly challenge the skewed interpretations of Islamic scriptures that Islamists presented as evidence. This paper offers that despite this argument being a simplification of a much larger problem, evidence shows that Islamic education can be an important factor. For instance, in a study of 171 terrorists convicted with an al-Qaeda related offence in the United States, 54 percent were US citizens, 36 percent were born in the United States, and 24 percent were committed by Christians who had converted to Islam.³⁹

This chapter has thus summarised the reasons, motivations and political climate that set the conditions for the birth of Islamism by focusing mainly on the Islamists themselves. The following chapters will now shift the focus to the potential religious seekers as they cross paths with an Islamist's ideology.

³⁹ Horgan, *The Psychology of Terrorism*, 67.

CHAPTER 2 – STRAIN THEORIES AND COGNITIVE OPENINGS

Introduction

In a post-September 11 era, the decision for a practicing Muslim living in the West to adopt radical Islamic views seems irrational and belligerent. To do so openly, entails high risk and exposure to being labeled *fanatic* and *radical*. An important question must therefore be addressed: why are Western Muslims drawn towards a more fundamental ideology of their beliefs?

This chapter will demonstrate through Merton's strain theory and Agnew's General Strain Theory that "strains or *grievances* are a major cause of terrorism."⁴⁰ In particular, what leads a Western Muslim to arrive at a *cognitive opening* state is when the individual chooses religion as a coping strategy to overcome a strain imposed by the social group to which they identify. Furthermore, this chapter will offer the same approach that Merton and Agnew submit, by translating their theories through the *sacred lens* through which an Islamist might view the world. Finally, this chapter will highlight common strains found in the Western world and focus on the *identity crisis* as a common strain faced by Western Muslims.

The process itself is much more elaborate and complicated than one might think. Rarely will an individual awaken and suddenly accept the Islamists' interpretation of Islam. As Wiktorowiz argues, a prerequisite is that the individual must be willing to listen

⁴⁰ Robert Agnew, "A General Strain Theory of Terrorism," *Theoretical Criminology* 14, no. 2 (2010), 132. Agnew lists an exhaustive list of terrorism researchers to support the argument of strain as a major cause to terrorism. These researchers include Gurr and Moore, 1997; Blazak, 2001; National Research Council, 2002; de Coming, 2004; Bjorgo, 2005; Pape, 2005; Victoroff, 2005; Callaway and Harrelson-Stephens; 2006; Goodwin, 2006; Hoffman, 2006; Robinson et al., 2006; Piazza, 2007; Post, 2007; Smelser, 2007; Stevens, 2002; Freeman, 2008; LaFree and Dugan, 2008; Forst, 2009

and open to persuasion.⁴¹ In the most part, Muslims completely tune out when an Islamist launches into heated and polemical rants. However, some “experience a cognitive opening in which they become more receptive to the possibility of new ideas and worldviews.”⁴²

The term *cognitive opening* was coined by the radical organization Hizb al-Tahrir (HT). In their detailed theory of radicalization, HT labels *cognitive opening* as that which allows for receptivity of their ideology. It is categorized when an individual experiences a crisis that is of economic (financial struggle, or loss of a job), personal (loss of a loved one, a relationship break up, or drug addiction), cultural (discrimination, humiliation, or racial insults), or directly political (governmental discrimination, or repression) in nature.⁴³ Many who experience a cognitive opening find answers to their underlying crisis through their traditional and already accepted beliefs. Others may take an indifferent approach and do nothing. But a selected few will indeed find answers through religious dialects in order to seek answers to address their concerns.

Merton’s Strain Theory and the Alternative Modes of Adaptation

Strikingly, linked with what HT would label as a cause leading to a state of cognitive opening, American sociologist Robert King Merton developed the *strain theory* on the basis of explaining delinquency by specifying the type of social relationships and the motivations that lead to it. Merton therefore argues that the amount of deviance in a society depends on whether that society has provided sufficient means to achieve

⁴¹ Wiktorowicz, *Radical Islam Rising: Muslim Extremism in the West . . .*, 85.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Robert S. Leiken, *Europe's Angry Muslims* (Oxford [u.a.]: Oxford Univ. Press, 2012), 157.

culturally defined goals.⁴⁴ Merton then argues that there are two elements of social and cultural structure that influence deviate behaviours. The first is composed of culturally defined goals, purposes, and interests. The second consists of the acceptable institutional modes of achieving these cultural goals. For example, individualist cultures such as ones found in the West, tend to “pursue goals that are directed at achieving personal success, seeking social independence, and influencing and persuading others.”⁴⁵ The accepted institutional means used to achieve these goals include getting a job, investing, and saving. Merton then uses the equilibrium between these two phases of social structure to define the alternative modes of adaptation. He defines five logically possible *culture patterning* alternative modes of adjustment within the culture-bearing society or group. These are presented in Table 2.1, where (+) signifies “acceptance,” (-) signifies “elimination” and (+/-) signifies “rejection and substitution of new goals and standards.”⁴⁶

Table 2.1 - Merton's alternative modes of adaptation

	Culture Goals	Institutionalized Means
I. Conformity	+	+
II. Innovation	+	-
III. Ritualism	-	+
IV. Retreatism	-	-
V. Rebellion	+/-	+/-

Source: Merton, “Social Structure and Anomie”, 676.

As shown in Table 2.1, the first adaptation is conformity to both cultural goals and means. Conformity is evidently the most popular and widely diffused in every

⁴⁴ Robert K. Merton, "Social Structure and Anomie," *American Sociological Review* 3, no. 5 (1938), 674.

⁴⁵ Gabriele Oettingen, A. Timur Sevincer and Peter M. Gollwitzer, "Goal Pursuit in the Context of Culture-Chapter 9," in *Handbook of Motivation and Cognition Across Cultures* Elsevier Inc, 2008), 192.

⁴⁶ Merton, "Social Structure and Anomie," . . . , 676

society. It is there that one finds law abiding citizens working hard to achieve the ultimate cultural goals. Alternatively, under adaptation IV, retreatism describes individuals who have given up on achieving cultural goals and the institutionalized means all together. In 1938 when Merton developed the strain theory, the *retreatism* adaptation was used to label “psychotics, psychoneurotic, chronic autists, pariahs, outcasts, vagrants, vagabonds, tramps, chronic drunkards and drug addicts”⁴⁷ because individuals who fit that description were seen as rejecting the common frame of orientation.

Other alternative modes of adaptation include innovation, where an individual maintains the desire to achieve the highest cultural goals, yet chooses unaccepted institutionalized means. This category would thus host criminals, gang members and professional con artists. Conversely, adaptation III, describes individuals with a ritualistic culture pattern that abandons the societies’ cultural goals and are very much satisfied with whatever goals they are able to achieve given their current means. It will be in this category that one finds individuals who do not seek promotions and accept that possessing personal wealth and prestigious life are improbable as a life goal. As such, a ritualist is satisfied going through the motions of daily life.

Finally comes the fifth category – Rebellion. This adaptation contains the most dangerous mechanism of alleviating the strain since individuals in this adaptation replace the social and cultural structures with new proposed goals and means for success. This includes contemporary Marxists and socialists who prefer group success and distribution of wealth as oppose to individual success. With that they replace the conventional definition of successful cultural goals and propose new means to achieve them.

⁴⁷ Merton, "Social Structure and Anomie," . . . , 676.

By applying Merton's alternative modes of adaptation to the culture patterns of an Islamist, the closest mode of adaptation that fits would be *rebellion*. In other words, Merton would argue that because a radical Muslim living in the West has rejected the cultural goals and institutionalised means to achieve them and replaced them with his own, they are categorized as rebels. Indeed, many authors and researchers place radicalists living in the West as *rebels*.⁴⁸ Taking a critical approach to Merton's theory however, one recognizes several gaps. First, Merton's analysis is focusing on the lower class, yet as in the case of Nidal Hasan, Muslims who choose to follow radical ideologies come from all socioeconomic classes. Usama Bin Laden for instance comes from a wealthy Saudi family. Second, is that Merton's theory is limited by cultural goals that are financially driven. These were all flaws that American sociologist Robert Agnew (b. 1953) had recognized and consequently developed a General Strain Theory (GST) that would take a similar yet more inclusive approach.

Agnew's General Strain Theory and Coping Strategies

Robert Agnew further built on Merton's strain theory by reviving it after it was heavily criticized in the 1970s for being too centered on monetary and materialistic success as a cultural goal. After conducting extensive research in areas outside traditional criminology research (including stress research in medical psychology and sociology, justice research in social psychology, and aggression research in psychology), Agnew was able to add essential modifications to the strain theory. Under the GST, Agnew proposed that various forms of strain caused individuals to experience negative emotional states, such as anger, depression, and fear, which in turn forced individuals to

⁴⁸ Ozgur Nikbay, "An Application of Anomie and Strain Theories to Terrorism: Suicide Attacks in Turkey" ProQuest Dissertations Publishing), 131.

seek coping strategies to help overcome the source of strain. As such, he introduced three main types of strain: (1) the prevention of an individual from achieving positively valued goals, (2) the removal, or threatening to remove, positively valued stimuli that one possesses, or (3) the presenting, or threatening to present, one with noxious or negatively valued stimuli.⁴⁹

Agnew's Three Types of Strain

Under the first type of strain, Agnew defines three sub-categories. The first sub-category is what comprises most of the major strain theories in criminology, including that of Merton's; that is, strain as the failure to achieve positively valued goals. The other sub-category is strain due to the disjunction between aspiration and expectations/actual achievements. In this sub-category, an individual's aspirations do not level with their achievements leaving them in distress. For instance, an individual that is a visible minority may aspire to move up the ranks in their company, yet due to discrimination is not given the opportunity to advance. The third sub-category is strain as the disjunction between just/fair outcomes and actual outcomes. This sub-category sees the individual weighing the outcome to input ratios. For example, an employee who works hard for a promotion only to get undervalued by a supervisory who negatively assesses the outcome.

The second type of strain, Agnew demonstrates how the removal of positively valued stimuli can lead to delinquency as the individual "tries to prevent the loss of the positive stimuli, retrieves the lost stimuli, obtains substitute stimuli or seeks revenge

⁴⁹ Robert Agnew, "Foundation for a General Strain Theory of Crime and Delinquency," *Criminology* 30, no. 1 (1992), 50.

against those responsible for the loss.”⁵⁰ Examples of removal of positive stimuli include the loss of a next of kin or a close friend, getting laid off from a job, or a relationship break up.

Finally, the third type of strain can be caused by presenting one with negative or noxious stimuli. Agnew highlights how a wide range of noxious stimuli, such as child neglect, physical and sexual abuse and domestic violence, contribute to delinquency.

Thus far, this chapter has captured the various factors that cause an individual to experience strain through two similar strain theories. Both sociologists confirm that not everyone who experiences strain is prone to becoming *delinquent*. In the same manner, not everyone who experiences strain becomes radicalised. Why then do some find answers in radical variations of Islam? Agnew answers this by describing three *coping strategies* with which an individual seeks to alleviate the strain: Cognitive, behavioural and emotional.⁵¹

Coping Strategies – Cognitive, Behavioural, and Emotional

Cognitive coping strategies see the individual dealing with the strain in one of three ways. First, the individual could ignore or minimize the importance of the adversity justifying to oneself that the goal was not important in the first place. Alternatively, another coping strategy is when the individual would maximize positive outcomes and minimize negative ones. Finally, the individual could accept responsibility blaming themselves and convincing themselves that they deserve such adverse outcome.

Similarly, with *behavioural coping strategies* the individual bears specific actions to maximize the positive outcome or minimize the negative ones. A common behavioural

⁵⁰ Agnew, *Foundation for a General Strain Theory ...*, 57.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 66.

coping strategy is the presentation of vengeful behaviour where the strained individual attempts to behave in such a particular way with intention to change the causes of strain.

Finally, *emotional coping strategies* see the individual “acting directly on the negative emotions that result from adversity.”⁵² Some of the strategies that falls in this coping mechanism includes drugs, physical exercise, meditation, and most importantly for the purpose of this research, religion. It is important to note that amongst the three coping strategies, emotional coping is the only that focuses on alleviating negative emotions as oppose to cognitively reinterpreting the strain or behaviourally altering the conditions in order to alleviate the strain. Taking a closer look at emotional coping strategies, the following sections will examine how a Western Muslim is highly susceptible to reach a state of *cognitive opening* when using religion as a coping strategy.

Religion as a Coping Strategy

The majority of Islamists were not born with a radical ideology. Aside from being born into an Islamist family, radicalized Muslims were either moderate, non-practicing or non-believing altogether. The statistics presented in chapter 1 and the cases presented in the introduction speak to this fact and show how prior to becoming radicalized, potential Islamists held either moderate religious or secular views. Consequently, one can easily argue that prior to radicalization, and particularly if they struggled with a strain, Islamists chose religion as a coping strategy to relieve their social strain. Despite that however, not all who choose religion as a coping strategy become violent. To explore potential sociological factors that lead to the wide spectrum of radicalization after choosing

⁵² Agnew, *Foundation for a General Strain Theory ...*, 70.

religion as a coping mechanism, this section will explore French sociologist Emile Durkheim's (d. 1917) research in this domain.

The Profane versus Sacred Worlds

Durkheim took interest in the analysis of religion by determining the elementary forms of religious life and breaking down the origin of the fundamental notions and categories of thought. Durkheim's intent was to create a generalised theory that can be used to understand all societies by using the elementary ideas at the basis of religion. One of the more popular observations in his analysis is his dichotomy between the sacred and profane world. Durkheim theorises that all known religions, whether simple or complex, display a common classification and distinct division of the world into two domains: the profane and the sacred.⁵³ As such, he explains that the sacred world contains the beliefs that capture the myths, dogma and legends that express the nature of what is sacred, and the rites that capture rituals and practices that separate the sacred from the profane. Durkheim therefore believes that the two worlds are "not only separate but also hostile and jealous rivals."⁵⁴

Applying this dichotomy of two worlds, the sacred and the profane, to the theories developed by Merton and Agnew and to the understanding of sociological causes of Islamic radicalisation, one can argue that these theories are limited by the parameters established by the profane and take little consideration of the sacred world. More specifically, the *cultural goals* established by a society that may cause strain on an individual are all worldly, materialistic goals established in the profane world. Similarly,

⁵³ Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, ed. and trans. by Karen E. Fields. (New York: The Free Press, 1995), p. 34

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 37.

Agnew's GST takes into consideration positive and negative valued stimuli that are, once again, all but sacred. When factoring Durkheim's dichotomy of the sacred and profane, in the application of religion as a coping strategy, a new parallel dimension is added to this research; a dimension that includes the sacred equivalent of Merton's alternative modes of adaptation.

Sacred Alternative Modes of Adaptation

This chapter has thus far explored strain theories that were limited by the profane world. Merton offered that strain is caused when a society denies cultural goals and the institutional means to achieve them. Agnew, submitted a larger causality of strain, but also defined coping strategies that help the individual in relieving the strain. This paper thus offers that when an individual experiences a strain and uses religion as a coping strategy, they are more likely to replace the cultural goals and institutional means of the profane world with *self-perceived sacred goals* and *religious means* of the sacred world. Revisiting Merton's strain theory strictly with a sacred lens on provides a new set of alternative modes of adaptation. To illustrate this parallel sacred dimension, Table 2.2 demonstrates how Merton's alternative modes of adaptation evolve.

Table 2.2 - Alternative Modes of Adaptation in the Sacred World

	<i>Self-Perceived Sacred Goals</i>	Religious Means
I. Conformity	+	+
II. Innovation	+	-
III. Ritualism	-	+
IV. Retreatism	-	-
V. Rebellion	+/-	+/-

Examples of sacred goals include having ones sins forgiven, spiritual connection with Allah, escaping hell fire and securing guaranteed entry to the highest levels of paradise. The means through which one can achieve these goals are through religious sacred means. Islamically, the five pillars of Islam form the religious means: To bear witness that there is no creator other than Allah, and that Mohammed is his messenger; performing supplication and prayer to Allah; contributing to charity; fasting during Ramadan; and pilgrimage to Mecca. Religious means can also go above and beyond the five pillars of Islam. As will be demonstrated in the following chapters, radicalized Muslim recruiters persuade their followers that activities such as jihad would secure them a spot in the highest level of paradise.

In the same sense as Merton's alternative modes of adaptation in the *profane world*, the *sacred world* adaptations also contain the same five variations. For the purpose of this research paper, these adaptations have been adjusted to fit to the sacred Muslim word. Conformity in this case is where every Muslim achieves the highest level of spiritual or sacred goals. Most pious and practicing Muslims would fit in that adaptation. Equally, Islamists would also fit in this subjective adaptation since by accepting fundamental views (including the jihadi ideology), they believe that they are the true purists of Muslims. Alternatively, the Rebellion adaptation is where a Muslim replaces sacred goals and the religious means by other sacred ones. This adaptation includes those Muslims who explore other religions and/or those who become agnostic (i.e.: redefining the common Islamic understanding of a supreme being, redefining the definition of life after death, and adopting new means to achieve other sacred goals). A Muslim who rejects Islam and becomes a Buddhist for instance is a perfect example of a rebellion in

the Islamic sacred world. The individual still believes in the sacred world, yet has redefined it to their own perceived goals and means.

The other forms of adaption in the sacred Muslim world include Innovation, where an individual still believes in achieving the ultimate afterlife, but replaces their common understanding of the pillars to achieve them with their own. For example, a Muslim redefining what prayer is and justifying to oneself new methods of prayer other than what has been prescribed would fit in the Innovative adaptation.

The ritualist adaptation sees a category of Muslims who take every necessary measure to achieve religious means, yet continuously feel that they have never done enough to achieve the ultimate sacred goals. As such, they are always living in constant desire to build on their religious means by continuously seeking religious education. Finally, the Retreatism adaptation is where a Muslim believes that they have sinned enough in this world and that there is no salvation for them in the sacred world, as such they have given up on all religious practice. When a Muslim is therefore in retreat, they live in a vicious cycle where although they believe in the sacred world, continue to sin and have given up hope on the idea that religious means can provide salvation in the hereafter.

It is important to note then that in the sacred dimension, it is every Muslim's objective to arrive to a positive afterlife outcome and as such strive to move up to the *conformity* adaptation. For the purpose of this research, Muslims most susceptible to being receptive to radical views are those who have a self-perception that they have no redemption (i.e.: the ritualist and the retreatist). In such a manner, Muslims who have faced strain in the profane world, and who choose religion as a coping strategy, are more

receptive to radical Islamic views if they have a self-perception that, at that specific point in their life, they have no chance at redemption in the sacred world. When a radical Muslim leader, recruiter, or even Islamic web source, offers a *lost soul* that salvation is indeed possible, the individual will be amenable and in turn has more possibility for radicalization. This in particular explains the many examples of sudden changes of non-religious people as they migrate their priorities from the profane world, to the sacred one. Examples like that of Martin Couture-Rouleau, who only two years prior to converting to Islam and committing his last act of self-sacrifice in St-Jean-Sur-Richelieu, was an average Quebecor who was a “partying bon-vivant who liked to play poker and smoke weed.”⁵⁵

The sacred world therefore offers depth and an irreplaceable eternal promise through which the strained individual can ensure a self-perceived success. With the strain lens on, the individual compares the economic, personal and cultural goals with that of eternal salvation and comes to the conclusion that the latter is the true goal to be attained.

Common Strains Found in Western Muslim Communities

In 2010, Agnew applied his research on GST to terrorism. Through his research, he was able to identify a series of strain that link to global terrorism:

- Absolute and relative material deprivation;
- The problems associated with globalization/modernization, such as threats to religious dominance and challenges to traditional family roles;
- Resentment over the cultural, economic, and military domination of the West, particularly the United States;
- Territorial, ethnic, and religious disputes resulting from postcolonial efforts at nation building and the breakup of the Soviet bloc;

⁵⁵ National Post, “From typical teen to jihadist: How Martin Couture-Rouleau became radicalized after converting to Islam,” last modified 24 January 2015, <http://nationalpost.com/news/canada/from-typical-teen-to-jihadist-how-martin-couture-rouleau-became-radicalized-after-converting-to-islam> .

- Economic, political, and other discrimination based on race/ethnicity or religion;
- The problems encountered by certain immigrant groups, including unemployment, discrimination, and the clash between western and Islamic values;
- The denial of *basic human rights*, including political rights, personal security rights, and the right to the satisfaction of basic human needs;
- Harsh state repression, including widespread violence directed at certain groups;
- Severe challenges to group identity or *identicide*;
- Military occupation of certain types; and
- Threats to the status of working-class, white, male heterosexuals, including the loss of manufacturing jobs and the movements for civil, women's, and gay rights.⁵⁶

Although many aspects of Agnew's list are applicable to the West, one in particular is common and is a returning theme in radicalization of Muslims in the West; the challenges to group identity. The following section will further explore this strain.

Identity Crisis

A common strain that Muslims living in the west are bound to face is seen as they struggle to balance between their religious Identity (sacred identity) and that of their Western identity. Political scientist and international relations expert, Janice Gross Stein defines identity as "the way in which a person is or wishes to be known by others; it is a concept of self in relation to others."⁵⁷ Stein highlights that an individual in most cases will have multiple identities. For instance, a professor has a teaching identity relation with their students, a scholarly identity with their university colleagues, a parenting identity to their children and a spousal identity with their significant other. An individual is therefore able to move freely among all identities depending on the circumstances they are placed in. Another important component of identity is social identity. Stein defines

⁵⁶ Agnew, "A General Strain Theory of Terrorism," . . . , 132.

⁵⁷ Chester A. Crocker, Fen Osler Hampson and Pamela R. Aall, *Turbulent Peace: The Challenges of Managing International Conflict* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2001), 190.

social identity as “the part of an individual’s self-concept that derives from knowledge of his or her membership in a social group or groups, together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership.”⁵⁸ Social psychologists have therefore discovered that there is tendency for individuals to satisfy their need for positive self-identity by identifying with a group.⁵⁹ As such, when an individual is a member of a social group, they are in constant “systematic comparison, differentiation and derogation of other groups through processes of categorization and social comparison.”⁶⁰

With that perspective, Muslims living in the West are faced with a social identity challenge. In one hand, they have their religious identity based on the sacred world and limited by the Islamic pillars mentioned earlier. At the same time, they harness the value and emotional significance of the Western social identity of the profane world where they participate in the common values, goals and cultural objectives insofar as it does not oppose their sacred social identity. For instance, they pay taxes, play hockey, seek knowledge through education, but will abstain from drinking alcohol and eating pork. Where most Muslims will face a strain in their Western social identity is when they experience discrimination based on their race, ethnicity, or religious views, leading them to perceive that although they have subscribed to the Western social group, they have been rejected and denied participation.

Concrete examples of Muslims struggling with an identity crisis in the Western society are affluent. A notable example is that of Majid Nawaz, the British-Pakistani who

⁵⁸ Crocker et al, *Turbulent Peace . . .*, 191.

⁵⁹ Michael Hogg and Dominic Abrams, “Toward a Single-Process Uncertainty-Reduction Model of Social Motivation in Groups,” in *Group Motivation: Social Psychological Perspectives* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), 173-190 at 173, in Crocker et al, *Turbulent Peace . . .*, 191.

⁶⁰ Crocker et al, *Turbulent Peace . . .*, 191.

became radicalized through the HT movement, then disengaged and became the founder of the Quilliam foundation, the counter-extremism think tank. Nawaz recounts the myriad of discriminations he faced growing up in Essex, UK, which led to his eventual acceptance of radical views. From as early as a grade-schooler, he once got ridiculed by the canteen lady for refusing to eat pork sausages and was forced to eat it in order to avoid embarrassment.⁶¹ In a similar incident, he was rejected from playing soccer and shouted at by other players, “This game’s not for Pakis!”⁶² He observed from the sidelines as the remainder of his friends played on. Later in his life, Nawaz was constantly avoiding neo-Nazi skinheads who lived in his neighbourhood. On a separate incident, he almost lost his life to neo-Nazi skinheads who hunted him down for some *Paki-bashing*. If it was not for a bystander who intervened, Nawaz claims that he could have very much died then and there.⁶³ Even when police arrived at the scene, they immediately focused on Nawaz as the potential perpetrator, while allowing for the skinheads to escape the scene. It was not long before Nawaz developed an identity crisis strain as he struggled to find value in belonging to the British social group. Nawaz’s strain was therefore induced with the presentation of a noxious stimuli in his teenager and adult years. Like many second-generation Muslims living in the West, he faced an identity crisis as he found a struggle to be accepted while balancing his native culture and the Western culture in which he was born. As the next chapter will capture, Nawaz entered a cognitive opening stage and after offered to attend a religious study circle, he found refuge and gave up on the cultural goals and institutional means of the profane

⁶¹ Maajid Nawaz, *Radical: My Journey Out of Islamist Extremism* (Guilford, Conn: Lyons Press, 2013), 14.

⁶² *Ibid*, 16.

⁶³ *Ibid*, 28.

world. He suddenly became religious, but under the wrong hands, who moulded his views convincing him that in order to become *conformist* in the sacred world, he must pick arms against his enemies.

Conclusion

The process of radicalization is a complex one that, to this day, continue to be analysed by different theorists. One thing is certain, radicalisation does not happen suddenly and for no reason. This chapter has summarised one of the initial causes that may lead a moderate Muslim living in the west to consider a more radical ideology of Islam. The initial onset shows that prior to radicalisation, individuals will experience a strenuous moment in their life. Agnew's generalised strain theory suggests that three types of strains push individuals to consider making life choices: the prevention from achieving positively valued goals, the removal of positively valued stimuli, and the presenting of noxious or negatively valued stimuli. What makes a Muslim individual to become radicalised however is reliant on which coping strategies they choose (cognitive, behavioural or emotional). The selection of religion (emotional coping strategy), sets the condition for the individual to enter a state of *cognitive opening* through which they are more likely to be open to radicalised views of Islam. Guided by a proper radical leadership, they are prone to falling down the path of political Islamism.

An important aspect that this chapter offers, is the transitory process through which the affected individual accepts to shift their life goals and means from the profane to the sacred world. Once they are convinced that the sacred world is of bigger importance, they work their ways through the alternative methods of adaptation in order

to achieve the ultimate goal: eternal salvation. Once influenced by the appropriate radical leader, the individual may pick means above and beyond the five pillars of Islam including jihad.

Concrete cases that support this argument are easy to find. The examples presented in the introduction are a prime example. Nidal Hasan for instance, although a believing Muslim, was never a practicing one. It was only after the death of his mother that he turned back to Islam. While on her death bed, Hasan's mother wished that he would know God and be more religious.⁶⁴ As Agnew's GST would state, Nidal's strain was the removal of a positively valued stimuli. To deal with his strain and to respect his mother's wishes, he chose religion as a coping mechanism by studying Islam, being more pious and attending his local mosque more regularly. It was indeed in a mosque where his cognitive opening moment occurred as he attended the *Dar al-Hijrah* mosque in Falls Church, Virginia. The Imam at the mosque at that time was none other than the high profile American-Yemeni Islamist Anwar Al-Awlaki. Al-Awlaki was a powerful figure in the Islamist sphere as he was highly educated and had a talent to relate to the young Muslim youth of America. His ability to inspire Muslims to take initiative in their faith by rationalising jihadi and political violence ideology was without a doubt what later got him on the US drone target list. Needless to state, Hasan's encounter with Al-Awlaki left an impression on him since he reached out to him inquiring more on dying as a martyr. He thus shifted his goals from the profane world to the sacred one. One can argue that when Hasan put on his sacred lens, he came to a realization that he fits under the *retreatist* sacred adaptation (after years of not being a devout Muslim, he had no chance

⁶⁴ "Interview with Nader Hasan," Youtube video . . . , 1:30.

of going to Paradise, and as such had not sought any religious means to advance). With the proper influencing and guidance of al-Awlaki, Hasan used his newly acquired radicalized ideology to move up the alternative modes of adaptation in order to reach *conformity* and achieve the ultimate sacred goal by employing jihad as a speed track to the ultimate salvation.

In the case of Martin Couture-Rouleau, his moment of strain was of the economic nature. Two years prior to his conversion to Islam and radicalisation, he had invested in a pressure-washing cleaning business. “His slide began after his failed bid to start . . . the business, in which he lost thousands and felt he had been cheated by his business partner.”⁶⁵ In Agnew’s terms, the source of strain came from his prevention to achieve positively valued goals. To cope with his strain, he was introduced to religion by a moderate Muslim. His radicalization however was through online religious websites, which took advantage of his cognitive opening and persuaded Couture-Rouleau that in order to be forgiven for his years of sinful parties and smoking weed, he must move up the sacred alternative modes of adaptation. Convinced that in order to be *conformist* he must accept self-sacrifice, he committed his act of terror convinced that he will be granted to the gates of heaven.

Having gone through a cognitive opening, the next chapter will research the process through which the individual determines the validity of the radical ideology as it competes with the more moderate and liberal ideologies of mainstream Islam.

⁶⁵ National Post, “From typical teen to jihadist,” . . .

Whenever a community participates and develops a way of knowing about itself and others, it is, by the same token, instituting itself as such, inviting a future for what it does and indeed, actualising the power it holds to participate in shaping a way of life.

- Campbell and Jovchelovitch, Towards a social psychology of participation.

CHAPTER 3 – LEGITIMIZATION OF RELIGIOUS INTERPRETATIONS

Introduction

Unlike other Abrahamic religions, Islam does not have a “central political or theological authority capable of adjudicating competing perspectives and rendering definitive decisions regarding *true* Islam.”⁶⁶ As a result, radical Islamic groups are in continuous competition with ideas of alternative religious interpretations including liberal and conservative ones. Having gone through a moment of strain, leading to the use of religion as a coping strategy, and being in a state of cognitive opening, the individual is faced with an evaluative period through which they assess the legitimacy of the radical ideology in comparison to more moderate and liberal views. After all, not all Muslims who choose religion as a coping strategy end up radicalized. How then does a radical religious authority persuade their potential followers that their interpretation of Islam is the most valid and worth following?

Wiktorowicz argues that the role of the religious authority itself is the contributing factor in the legitimization process.⁶⁷ He categorizes religious authority as “community leaders, mosque Imams, self-taught charismatic leaders, or trained Islamic scholars – anyone perceived as knowledgeable about Islam.”⁶⁸ These religious authorities act as *cultural brokers* as they provide to religious seekers an explanation of the sacred texts, religious rituals and practices. While maintaining an image of *the perfect Muslim*,

⁶⁶ Wiktorowicz, *Radical Islam Rising* . . . , 25.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

they are portrayed as the epitome and the example for all Muslims to emulate. With the help of their Islamic knowledge (whether through official theology school or self taught), their intellect allows them to guide Muslims to understand the message of God and guide them to the path of heaven. Given that mentoring role, religious authorities take great care in their reputation as it is their notoriety that will help persuade potential followers. And because the average Muslim is not trained on the complexities of *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence), they seek the proper *sacred authority* that will help them in their religious coping strategy. Wiktorowicz, for example, demonstrates that in the case of Omar Bakri, as the world wide Amir of al-Muhajiroun movement, it was his deep Islamic knowledge, charismatic character, and his sincere and trustworthy personality which played an important role in gaining British Muslim followers.⁶⁹ Wiktorowicz's argument is inline with Majid Nawaz's experience prior to joining the HT radical organization in Essex. It was after his encounter with Nasim Ghani, a British Bangladeshi member of HT, that he was attracted to join the movement. To Nawaz, Ghani's intellect and charisma had a crucial factor in persuading him to join. As Nawaz states:

His authority and confidence with which he spoke on any number of subjects made a huge impression on me at an age when I was easily influenced. And the subjects he talked about related directly to my life, something my father or the imam had been unable to do. He knew about politics, philosophy, and theology – all the issues that bands like *Public Enemy* had raised – and took them further. The way he ties these different issues together was intellectually intoxicating. It felt revolutionary and that's exactly what it was: advocating a revolution.⁷⁰

Going beyond Wiktorowicz's character and knowledge based contributing approach, this research paper will offer a more socio-psychological approach that would help further understand the religious seeker's choice to follow the more radicalised views

⁶⁹ Wiktorowicz, *Radical Islam Rising* . . . , 160.

⁷⁰ Nawaz, *Radical: My Journey Out of Islamist Extremism* . . . , 62.

offered by the religious authority. With the help of French psychologist Moscovici, this chapter will explain through the Social Representations Theory, how Islamists use language to legitimize their ideology over mainstream Islamic authorities. With the help of the anchoring and objectification processes, Islamists will create an image of the West as crusaders while promising a Utopian image of a Caliphate that offers governance. Equally, with propaganda, propagation and diffusion via an aggressive social media presence, the religious seeker is introduced to the benefits of martyrdom. This chapter will also revisit the identity crisis theme by presenting how Islamists will capitalise on an existing strain to create social group segmentation and amplify the dichotomy between *them and us*.

Social Representations

To better understand the socio-psychological factors that influence religious seekers to legitimize the more radical ideology, this research paper takes into consideration the social representations theory (SRT). Coined by French social psychologist Serge Moscovici (d. 2014) in 1961, SRT provides a lens through which ideas circulate from an individual to a collective society as it gives rise to change. It is driven by how minority ideologies can influence the majority in a society. In a foreword to a study on social representations, Moscovici writes:

. . . social representations are cognitive systems with a logic and language of their own and a pattern of implication, relevant to both values and concepts, and with a characteristic kind of discourse. They do not represent simply “opinions about”, “images of” or “attitudes towards”, but “theories” or “branches of knowledge” in their own right, for the discovery and organization of reality. [. . .] a social representation is a system of values, notions and practices with a two-fold vocation. Firstly to establish an order which will enable individuals to orientate themselves in their social, material world and to master it. Secondly, to enable communication to take

place among members of a community by providing them with a code for their exchanges and a code for naming and classifying unambiguously the various aspects of their world, of their individual or collective history.⁷¹

Moscovici therefore offers that with social representations an individual can provide a constructivist approach to what would otherwise be foreign concepts to the average individual. This certainly highlights the importance of both knowledge and communication. Bauer and Gaskell offer a more comprehensive approach to SRT as they highlight key concepts from Moscovici's study on the representations of psychoanalytic ideas in three segments of the French society in the 1950s.⁷² They concluded that social representations use characteristics of communication systems that are broken down to *the contents of communication* (encompassing anchors and objectifications), *the typified process of communication* (encompassing propaganda, propagation, and diffusion), *the consequences of communication* (encompassing stereotype, attitude, and opinion), and *the segmentation of social groups* (encompasses the milieus). A closer understanding of these characteristics will be useful to link to the common themes used by radical religious figures.

First, the contents of communication include the processes of anchoring and objectifying. When referring to anchoring, Moscovici attributes it to “the classification and naming of unfamiliar objects or social stimuli by comparing them with existing stock of familiar and culturally accessible categories.”⁷³ Moscovici also refers to the process of *Objectification* which refers to the “process by which unfamiliar and abstract notions,

⁷¹ Lemaine Gérard, "Claudine Herzlich, Santé Et Maladie, Analyse D'une Représentation Sociale," *Annales.Économies, Sociétés, Civilisations* 24, no. 24 (1969), 1519.

⁷² Martin W. Bauer and George Gaskell, "Towards a Paradigm for Research on Social Representations," *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 29, no. 2 (1999), 165.

⁷³ Martha Augoustinos, Ngaire Donaghue and Iain Walker, *Social Cognition*, 3. ed. ed. (Los Angeles [u.a.]: Sage, 2014), 38.

ideas and images are transformed into concrete and objective common-sense realities.”⁷⁴ As such, the objectification process enables an individual to transform analytical and conceptual categories in the abstract construct to a more construed objective in the concrete construct.

Second, the typified processes of communication encompass propaganda, propagation and diffusion. Propaganda, a popular process used in the communist milieu, is used consistently within the dichotomy of *friend or foe*. The goal of propaganda is ultimately to emphasize the incompatibility of one social group with the other. Propagation on the other hand, is used in well defined social groups with intention of anchoring on traditional concepts in order to shape their social group. Finally, diffusion occurs in social groups with weak identity and structure with intent to inform their group of new opportunities with the help of casual irony and humour.

Third, when evaluating the consequences of using the above mentioned typified processes of communication, Moscovici’s study showed that propaganda will usually lead to the generation of negative stereotypes, whereas propagation will shape attitudes, and diffusion will contribute to the formation of opinions. Finally, segmentation of the social group allows for targeting the appropriate communication system for the proper social milieu.

Taking Moscovici’s psychoanalytic approach and applying it to the characteristics of communication of radical religious authorities in Islam, one certainly finds a recurring pattern that distinguishes the radicalist ideologies from that of mainstream Islam. Evidence presented in the popular and controversial online recruiting magazine by al-

⁷⁴ Augustinos et al, *Social Cognition* . . . , 39.

Qaeda, *Inspire*, shows how social representation is instrumental in successful recruitment of Muslim jihadis. *Inspire* was created by Anwar al-Awlaki, the Yemeni-American Islamic lecturer and al-Qaeda leader who was central in inspiring young American Muslims to pickup arms and make *jihad* against Americans.⁷⁵ With the help of Samir Khan, a Pakistani-American, they were able to publish more than eight online issues of the magazine. Each issue contained a high concentration of Salafi jihadi themes and rhetoric. From emphasising that jihad is a duty, to authorising the use of violence even against innocent civilians, to reminding their readers of the rewards of martyrdom, the language used is a precise example of communication systems used in social representation. For instance, the attractive, well designed and contemporary composition of the magazine is a way of anchoring the readers with a modern magazine one would find laying on a coffee table. A study conducted on the whole series of the magazine highlights how the visual association, in particular when using ambiguous photographs, invites for a “varied and imaginative interpretation.”⁷⁶ Furthermore, the magazine uses a recurring theme used by radical recruiters to anchor their readers. At every occasion the United States or the United Kingdom was mentioned, the word *crusaders* followed. The representation of American and British forces as crusaders is a way to anchor their readers with a familiar dark period in Islamic history. As Hewer and Taylor offer, this classification by comparison to existing and familiar event “provides a basis for understanding the world and, in this case, invokes a sense of certainty – a belief in the

⁷⁵ Al-Awlaki is believed to be the inspiration behind several terrorist attacks in the USA including Nidal Hassan, the Fort Hood shooter, Umar Farouk Abdulmuttallab, coined the *Christmas Underwear Bomber*. Al-Awlaki allegedly was involved in a dozen terror plots in the UK and Canada including the 2005 London bombings and the 2006 Toronto 18 terror plot.

⁷⁶ Peter Garrard Beck, "Identity, Allegiance and Death: Inspire and the Case of Anwar Al Awlaki" (ProQuest Dissertations Publishing), 36.

unchanging nature of the enemy and their longstanding political and religious motivations.”⁷⁷ Usama Bin Laden, for instance was known to return to that religious heretics at every statement video release.⁷⁸

While the *anchoring process* captures its potential followers with the help of historical references, the *objectification process* will introduce abstract notions and transform them into concrete realities. A common example of that is the radical Islamist relentless effort to “restore the Islamic caliphate which extends from China in the East to Andalusia (Spain) in the West; indeed beyond that according to capability until the land of the *kuffar* (non-believers) is conquered.”⁷⁹

The notion of a West and East united under one rule and respecting a jurisprudence that is in accordance with *shariaa* law is an unrealistic and unattainable goal to which all radical Islamist subscribe to, even willing to sacrifice their life for. The most recent attempt for such unification saw a slight rise to global prominence in early 2014 at the hands of the self proclaimed Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). The complexities of a single world governance, has already been proven fruitless as the powers of the world struggle to dominate with their own political agenda. Needless to state, any political scientist can confirm that despite the knowledge, money and power governments have, the concept of a single global governance is an unfathomable concept and unachievable today. Yet radical Islamist are able to somehow objectify this ultimate

⁷⁷ Christopher J. Hewer, Wendy Taylor, "Deconstructing terrorism: Politics, language and social representation," in *Just War: Psychology and Terrorism*, ed. Ron Roberts (London: PCCS Books, 2007), 10.

⁷⁸ Aljazeera, "Bin Laden: West Waging a Crusade," last modified 24 April 2006, <https://www.aljazeera.com/archive/2006/04/200841014569421355.html>

⁷⁹ Al-Qaeda, "Inspire Magazine," issue #6, September 2011, 10. Available online at <http://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2011/09/inspire-magazine-6.pdf>

goal to their potential followers providing them with a false hope that one day they can claim their contribution to the world caliphate unification.

Research conducted by the Quilliam foundation, world's first counter-extremism think tank, on documenting the virtual Caliphate certainly supports this objectification process. Their study captured 1146 separate online *propaganda events* conducted by ISIS in the Iraq-Syria region during a one month period. By classifying the themes used by ISIS, the study demonstrates how over half the propaganda events were centred on the promising of Utopia (see Figure 3.1).⁸⁰ As the foundation reports and as demonstrated under *governance* in the second chart of Figure 3.1, *statehood* makes up 28% of all Utopian themes as ISIS' chief appeal to its potential followers. They do so with the help of image streams that show their members providing health services, street cleaning, blood donations, and education.⁸¹

⁸⁰ Charlie Winter and Quilliam Foundation, *Documenting the Virtual 'Caliphate'*, (United Kingdom: Quilliam, 2015), 30.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 35.

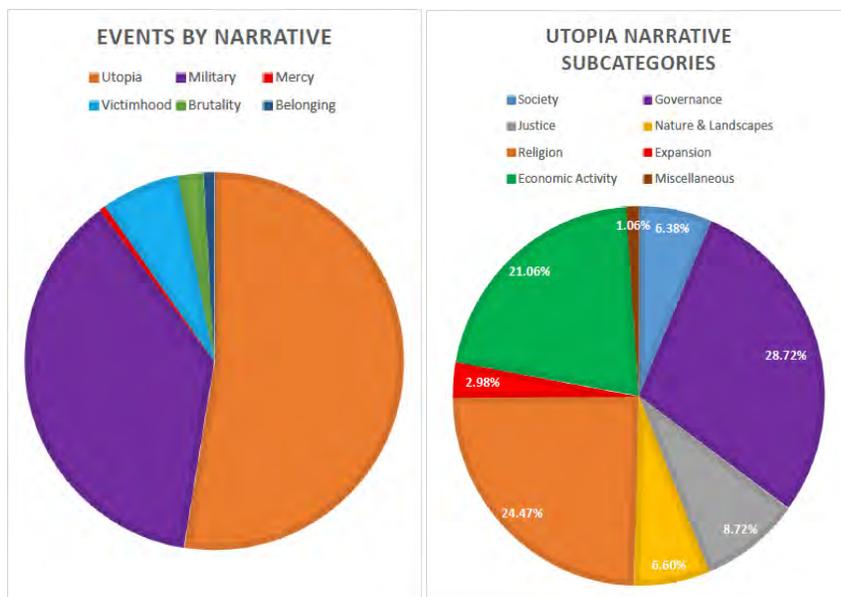


Figure 3.1 – ISIS virtual propaganda events over a one month period. Analysis of events by narrative (left) and subcategories of the Utopia narrative (right).

Source: Winter, *Documenting the Virtual Caliphate*, 30.

Shifting now to the typified process of communication through which radical Islamist will influence their social representation, one notices the usage of a combination of propaganda and diffusion. With the help of propaganda, they are able to provide a clear and precise dichotomy between friends and foes of Islam. This in particular is a vital notion in the West as it places an identity crisis strain on the follower. This identity crisis and dichotomy of friend and foe will be further developed in later sections of this chapter.

Equally important however, is the use of diffusion as a typified process of communication where the religious seeker is assured that the reward of martyrdom is paradise. In a single page article in the second issue of *Inspire*, Awlaki published a single page article titled *The Prize Awaiting the Shahid (Muslim Martyr)*. In it, he describes the blessings of being a martyr in Paradise as he states “the people of Paradise are free to do

what they like, whenever they like and for as long as they like” offering a concept of never ending pleasures that “never stops, it keeps on going. The Energizer bunny would die and you’re still alive in *jannah* (paradise).”⁸² This theme will also be revisited in chapter 4 demonstrating how martyrdom is used for rationalization of suicidal terrorist activities.

The Inspire magazine series are the optimal demonstration of propaganda and diffusion. Today, with the help of other social media platforms, it has evolved to be *the* means through which primary contact is achieved. In fact, the Quilliam foundation study states that the Islamic State in 2015 published on various social media platforms “on average 38 individual batches of propaganda each day – videos, photo essays, articles and audio programmes.”⁸³ Although no full study was conducted on the usage of social media for moderate religious authorities, one can argue that they are dwarfed in size by radical groups’ social media behemoth level of activity.

The consequences of propagation and diffusion influence the potential follower to develop negative stereotypes and form opinions that are fuelled with hate. Those who subscribe to believe in the radical Islamist view will have tendency to develop negative stereotypes on Western forces, seeing them as crusaders with one objective, the elimination of Muslim population. Similarly, opinions are formed on the guaranteed path to paradise - martyrdom.

Finally, the fourth characteristic of communication systems is the segmentation of social groups. This characteristic is fundamental and most notably the most

⁸² Al-Qaeda, “Inspire Magazine,” issue #2, September 2010, 64. Available online at <https://publicintelligence.net/complete-inspire-al-qaeda-in-the-arabian-peninsula-magazine-issue-2-fall-2010/>

⁸³ Winter, *Documenting the Virtual Caliphate* . . . , 3.

distinguishing characteristic which provides a compelling advantage for the religious seeker to choose the radicalist ideology. Since it covers the political and social milieu, the segmentation of social groups allows for the religious authority to converge political consciousness and religious identity to a “point that the private and political [consciousness] are indistinguishable.”⁸⁴

Note that radicalist ideology will categorise moderate mainstream Muslims as foes as well. In Wiktorowicz’s study of al-Muhajiroun operations in the U.K., he highlights how the radical group took an active role in undermining the reputation and credibility of mainstream Muslim authorities, by issuing a *fatwa* (Islamic religious decree) accusing them of distorting and libelling the image of al-Muhajiroun.⁸⁵ In doing so, radical Islamist groups are offering that their views and interpretations of Islam are the most reliable alternative. For the religious seeker who has chosen religion as a coping mechanism and is open to consider the radical ideology, this dichotomy is an important one. As the Centre for the Prevention of Radicalization Leading to Violence (CPRLV) analytical report on the radicalization leading to violence in Quebec schools summarises, an advantage that radical Islamists provide over mainstream Islam is that it presents a *purified* vision of Islam that echoes with the experiences of some of the religious seekers.

The report further states:

This *radical option* offers a new *pure* identity that strikes a chord in these vulnerable young Quebecers who, because they do not see themselves as full-fledged members of Quebec society, are all the more receptive to discourses that offers them alternative forms of identification – including a pure and absolute Muslim identity.⁸⁶

⁸⁴ Hewer and Taylor, "Deconstructing terrorism," . . . , 13.

⁸⁵ Wiktorowicz, *Radical Islam Rising: Muslim Extremism in the West* . . . , 158.

⁸⁶ Centre for the Prevention of Radicalization Leading to Violence, "Radicalization Leading to Violence in Quebec Schools: Issues and Perspectives", 23.

The topic of Muslim identity in the West is of important significance when studying the psychological and sociological factors that drive radicalism. It would therefore be beneficial to explore the relationship between social representations, discourse and identity since “identity is created from the substance of available cultural discourses and can be construed as the assimilation and internalisation of a social representation.”⁸⁷

Formation of the *Us versus Them* ideology

Chapter two introduced the identity crisis that Western Muslims may face as they attempt to balance their Western identity and their religious identity. This identity crisis can be a contributing factor for a strain that may lead the individual to seek religion as a coping strategy. Radical religious authorities will recognize this crisis and introduce a parochial mentality that Westerners sole goal is to hate Muslims.

Not all who experience negative stimuli arising from the Western social identity will experience strain. The majority will fight for their right to exist in that social group and will succeed to find a healthy balance between both religious and social identities. Nevertheless, some will fail and will lose hope in gaining value from the Western social group. With objective to gain their allegiance, radical religious authorities will instil a differentiation between the two identities forever branding Westerners as haters of Muslims. Stein raises a valid observation on that matter: “The most striking finding of social psychologist is that social differentiation occurs even in the absence of material

⁸⁷ Christopher et al, Deconstructing terrorism, . . . , 19.

bases for conflict.”⁸⁸ In other words, despite the fact that societies possess incompatible social identities it is not necessarily an underlying factor for conflict and violence. For instance, the Rwanda conflict between Hutus and Tutsis spans decades of conflict, whereas Quebecors and Anglophones have not seen conflict in over two hundred years regardless of their deep differences. Stein therefore argues that in spite of the presence of differentiated and incompatible identities violence is only triggered by the exclusionary acts of leaders by pressing claims, evoking threats to the opposing identity which in turn provokes stereotyping and eventually leads to violence.⁸⁹

In comparison to the radical Islamist strategy of injecting enemy images in order to induce social differentiation between Muslims and Westerners, one finds similarities with Stein’s views. Compounded with the identity crisis religious seekers may have, radical religious authorities bombard their audience with negative images of the out-group, thereby developing stereotypes and further differentiating the gap between the Muslim and the Western identity. This leads individuals to see their social perspective as *us* versus *them*, allowing for the labeling of the Western identity as *outsiders*. Examples of these acts were witnessed by Majid Nawaz while living in Essex. After facing an identity crisis due to discrimination from neo-Nazi skinheads, he was invited to use religion as a coping strategy. Gradually and meticulously, he was lured into attending *halaqas* (study circles) at a mosque sponsored by Hizb al-Tahrir. The study circles, he states, were supplemented by videos of the Yugoslavia conflict between Bosnian Muslims and Serb forces. The images in the footage were purposely disturbing and

⁸⁸ Crocker, Hampson and Aall, *Turbulent Peace: The Challenges of Managing International Conflict*, 191

⁸⁹ Crocker et al., *Turbulent Peace . . .*, 194.

designed to move the audience to take action. They featured scenes of Bosnian men with their genitals cut off, dead pregnant women on the ground with their bellies cut open and their babies ripped out alive, and combat footage of Muslim fighters defending against the Serbs.⁹⁰ Nawaz's reaction to the brutal video was as shocking and traumatic as one might expect. His immediate response was "a desire to go fight in Bosnia."⁹¹ Nawaz was fuelled with anger as he states that these videos confirmed two things for him:

First of all, it reinforced the narrative [. . .] that these were individuals whose death had nothing to do with the color of their skin. The fact that they were Muslims was the salient issue, as shown by the fact that all the individuals were white. Second, Britain and other Western governments were doing nothing about it, which reinforced their *blind eye* approach to world politics. When it was Muslims who were under attack, and there was no oil to defend, the West wasn't interested in getting involved. And why should they? These were our people, not theirs. This is why we needed *the Khilafah* (caliphate).⁹²

His recruiters had therefore succeeded in accomplishing two things: Provide a clear dichotomy between his Muslim identity and *the others* by highlighting that the West supports the killing of Muslims; and harness enough hate energy to motivate him to take a political violent religious approach. A strikingly interesting observation in Nawaz's case is his sudden sense of communal identity with Bosnian Muslims. As a British Pakistani, born and raised in Essex, who has never visited Bosnia, he was ready to take serious action and participate in high risk activities in order to avenge them. This observation is witness to the sacredness of a Muslim identity. So sacred that once evoked by religious authorities that it is threatened, the ramifications can be highly reactive.

⁹⁰ Nawaz, *Radical: My Journey Out of Islamist Extremism*, 58.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² Nawaz, *Radical: My Journey Out of Islamist Extremism . . .*, 59.

Conclusion

Thus far, this chapter has presented the tactfulness and resourcefulness of radical religious authorities in exploiting religious seekers who have experienced a significant strain leading to their cognitive opening and considering religion as a coping mechanism. A psychoanalytical approach using Moscovici's theory on Social Representation presents overwhelming understanding of how radical Islamist exploit religious seekers. With the use of the anchoring process, their potential followers are bombarded with images of the crusaders and concepts of *us* versus *them*. Through the objectification process, they introduce abstract notions such as the establishment of the caliphate, and they offer a guaranteed everlasting utopian future and promise eternal bliss in paradise. Furthermore, radical religious figures will exploit the possible identity crisis that the Western religious seeker may very well have experienced by emphasising a stereotype that permanently causes differentiation between their Muslim and Western identity. To achieve all of the above, they persistently make use of propaganda and diffusion, be it in social media, online magazine, or pamphlets distributed at mosques and community centres. Needless to state, they are exceptionally active and offer precise solutions to serious problems that mainstream religious authorities rarely address.

When observing the typified process of communication of radical Islamist and that of mainstream religious authorities, no fair comparison can be made. To the religious seeker, mainstream Islamic leaders appear dormant and passive in comparison to the active and omnipresence of radical religious authorities. Their presence on social media alone is dwarfed by the behemoth media command of Islamist organizations. The Quilliam report for instance has broken down the Islamic State central media command

demonstrating its *forty-five* media offices and foundations that span Northern Africa from coast to coast.⁹³ Despite the lack of data on mainstream religious authorities presence on social media, their involvement in the political and social sphere is considered supererogatory. As such, while religious seekers are in search for a legitimate religious ideology that will ease their coping with a particular strain, they are most favourable to find answers offered by the most poignant social group– the radical Islamist.

Central to the argument of legitimization is radical Islamists' ability to persuade their potential followers of social groups segmentation. By anchoring an inflated and dramatized image of Westerners as *outsiders* whose exclusive goal is the eradication of Muslims, radical Islamist introduce a collective strain that can only be resolved with violence. One thing is certain however; once religious seekers have chosen the radical Islamist views, they will blindly subscribe to become an active member, even if it requires participating in high risk activities. The next chapter will capture how radical Islamist will exploit the newly introduced collective strain and, with the help of socialization and neutralization, persuade the now hate fuelled religious seeker to participate in what they have objectified as every Muslim's duty in *pure Islam* – jihad.

⁹³ Winter and Quilliam Foundation, *Documenting the Virtual 'Caliphate'*. . . , 16.

Let there rise from among you group(s) calling society to Islam, commanding society to do what Allah orders and to refrain from what He forbids and these (group(s)) [sic] are the ones who are successful.

- Al-muhajiroun's translation of Qur'an 3:104

CHAPTER 4 –RATIONALIZATION OF HIGH RISK ACTIVITIES

Introduction

The legitimization process gained the radical religious authority a follower that has confirmed, accredited and concluded that other interpretations of Islam are flawed. At this stage, the process of injecting new notions to the religious seeker is much easier. This chapter will assess how by introducing a collective strain, the radical religious authority is able to further influence the religious seeker by offering a coping mechanism that is subjective and can only be understood by someone blinded by the *sacred lens*. This chapter will therefore revisit Robert Agnew's General Strain Theory as he applies it to the study of terrorism. Once convinced of the existence of the collective strain, the individual is awoken and is fuelled with a communal association that drives to avenge their in-group in order to cope with their newly acquired strain.

This chapter will thus offer a comparative understanding of the Western profane-limited understanding of suicidal terror versus the radicalised individual's sacred lens understanding. By using Durkheim's theories on suicide, this chapter will therefore present that most Western understanding of terrorism is established in the profane construct labeling such behaviour as anomic. Furthermore, this chapter will point out flaws in rational choice theory as it attempts to understand suicidal terror. Alternatively, from the sacred understanding of suicidal terror, this chapter will highlight the value of martyrdom and the neutralization techniques used by the radical individual to suppress

their old profane world normative behaviour and rationalize their sacred world radical acts.

The Effects of Collective Strain

As highlighted in chapter two, Agnew identified three types of events or conditions that are detested by individuals and contribute to strain: prevention of achieving positively valued goals, removal of positively valued stimuli, or the introduction of negatively valued stimuli. In 2010, Agnew refocused his research on general strain theory by applying it to terrorism.⁹⁴ He thus furthered his theory by proposing that terrorist activities are more likely to occur when people experience *collective strain* that are: “(a) high in magnitude, with civilians affected; (b) unjust; and (c) inflicted by significantly more powerful *others*, including *complicit* civilians, with whom members of the strained collectivity have weak ties.”⁹⁵ This section will submit how radical religious authorities will impose a collective strain on their newly recruited religious followers in order to harness enough hate and energy leading to their participation in suicidal terrorist activities.

Nature of the Collective Strain: Victimization of Muslims

The nature of the collective strain introduced by radical religious authorities center on the theme of the victimization of Muslims worldwide. Agnew characterises the nature of the collective strain as acts that cause “a high degree of harm, such as death, serious physical and sexual assault, dispossession, loss of livelihood, and major threats to core identities, values, and goals.”⁹⁶ Videos witnessed by Majid Nawaz, during study

⁹⁴ Agnew, "A General Strain Theory of Terrorism," . . . , 131.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 132.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 136.

circles in a HT sponsored mosque in Essex, displaying horrific scenes of innocent Bosnian civilians, women, and children slaughtered and left on the ground to bleed was the typical example of the radical Islamist imposing a collective strain on its potential follower. This technique is used to this day by organizations like ISIS. As demonstrated by the Quilliam foundation in their report on documenting the virtual *Caliphate*, up to 6.4% of ISIS' digital media focused on victimhood by displaying graphic images of dead and injured civilians, youths and women (see Figure 3.1).⁹⁷ The report continues to state that "the victimhood narrative plays a crucial role as a justifier, a means of legitimating Islamic State's acts"⁹⁸ and that in doing so, it also serves as "indicators of the *sacrifices* it suffers on behalf of Sunni Muslims the world over."⁹⁹

Reason for the Collective Strain: Unjust Acts

Another aspect of collective strain is observed by Agnew when an unjust act occurs with intention to violate relevant justice norms. This can be experienced when the strain is seen as undeserved, is not in the service of some greater good, or the strain violates strongly held social norms or values.¹⁰⁰ Once more, radical religious authorities paint a picture to their followers convincing them that they have been treated unjustly. Taking a look at the 2015 Charlie Hebdo shooting in France for instance, one must recognize that the attackers were driven by the humiliating act of the caricaturist drawing of prophet Mohammed. The Al-Qaeda branch in Yemen who claimed responsibility for the attack had without a doubt inspired the Kouachi brothers to avenge Muslims from this collective unjust strain that violated a fundamental value in Islam.

⁹⁷ Winter and Quilliam Foundation, *Documenting the Virtual 'Caliphate'* . . . , 23

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 24.

¹⁰⁰ Agnew, "A General Strain Theory of Terrorism," . . . , 138.

Relationship with the Source of the Strain: More Powerful Others

Agnew finally offers that individuals who experience collective strain are more likely to partake in terrorist activities when the strain is caused by a more powerful *others*. This includes *complicit* civilians with whom members of the collective strain group have weak ties. As alluded to in the previous chapter, radical religious authorities are very precise in actualizing the dichotomy between the Western identity and their religious one. By introducing this dichotomy between *in-groups* and *out-groups*, radical religious authorities are able to legitimize innocent civilians as permitted targets. As Agnew argues, since Civilians play a role in the creation of the government (either through voting, or payment of taxes), they “may benefit from the infliction of the strain, and they may fail to take action against those who inflict strain when such action is seen as possible.”¹⁰¹ Horgan also shares these views by offering that the rationalization and normalization of targeting civilians is achieved via reference to *legitimacy by comparison* to what Westerners do to their civilians.¹⁰² Evidence authorising the targeting of non-Muslim civilians is easily noticeable throughout and can be found in the radicalist magazine *Inspire*. One article in particular by Shaikh Adil al Abbab uses alternate interpretations of verses from the Holy Qur’an to authorise the killing of innocent civilians. Abbab explains:

When we look at the state of the Americans and Europeans, we see that they are in a state of war with us because of their participation in elections that choose governments that wage war against Muslims . . . it is legitimate to target the people of the West and we have no doubts about its legitimacy.¹⁰³

¹⁰¹ Agnew, "A General Strain Theory of Terrorism," . . . , 139.

¹⁰² Horgan, *The Psychology of Terrorism* . . . , 125.

¹⁰³ Beck, "Identity, Allegiance and Death: Inspire and the Case of Anwar Al Awlaki" . . . , 51.

With the introduction of the above collective strain, the religious follower now comes to a realization that they indeed belong to a dominated class ruled by the dominating. Agnew explains that after experiencing the above collective strains, the religious follower is fuelled with “strong negative emotional states and traits, including anger, humiliation, and hopelessness.”¹⁰⁴ Such negative emotions leave the individual with the desire to take corrective action, otherwise, they would feel like they have abandoned their brothers and sisters. Due to the intensity of anger, individuals are therefore less capable to accurately and effectively communicate their concerns with others leaving them with strong desire for revenge and the use of violence to *right* the wrong that has overcome their social group. Agnew provides ample “anecdotal data suggesting that negative emotions play a key role in the explanation of terrorism”¹⁰⁵

When looking at the coping mechanisms for those individuals who have adopted this collective strain, Agnew argues that terrorist activity is truly their only option.¹⁰⁶ For Western Muslims, the source of the collective strain is usually the great powerful states that control the forums where negotiation and lobbying occur through external agents such as the United Nations. With that in mind, the individual experiencing the collective strain feels that coping with this matter through legal and military channels is inexistent. As such, the individual is left with the perception that in order to alleviate the collective strain, participation in terrorist activity is the only way out.

¹⁰⁴ Agnew, "A General Strain Theory of Terrorism," . . . , 140.

¹⁰⁵ In particular, Stern, 2003; Victoroff, 2005; Moghdam, 2006; Newman 2006; Frost, 2009 all relate to revenge as a catalyst for individuals to participate in terrorist activities. In Agnew, "A General Strain Theory of Terrorism," . . . , 140.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

Communal Identity

An important aspect that is relevant in particular to radicalization in the West, is why Western Muslims are easily persuaded by radical authorities once shown unjust themes of other Muslims in other continents of the world. To explain that, one must first understand the distinction between objective and subjective strains. Agnew offers that while objective strains refer to certain conditions disliked by most people in a social group, subjective strain is disliked by a selected few who interpret this strain in their own subjective evaluation. For instance, data suggests that not everyone sees marital divorce in the same manner. While some may consider it a strain, others may celebrate it. Furthermore, other authors have drawn attention to personally experienced strain, anticipated strain, and vicariously experienced strain (i.e. strains experienced through a relative or a close friend).¹⁰⁷ Research has therefore shown that subjective strains along with its anticipated and vicarious strains are the most contributing strain to crime.¹⁰⁸ As such, when Western Muslims adopt this new collective strain they foster a “heightened sense of collective identity”¹⁰⁹ and experience a vicarious strain leaving them with a sense of obligation to protect the others in the collective social group.

Thus far, this chapter presented how radical religious authorities can influence their religious followers in resorting to terrorist activities in order to cope with their collective strain. The religious follower is now driven with passion and desire to avenge their religious social group by pledging allegiance to the radical group in order to

¹⁰⁷ David J. Eitle and R. Jay Turner “Exposure to Community Violence and Young Adult Crime: The Effects of Witnessing Violence, Traumatic Victimization, and Other Stressful Life Events”, *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency* in Agnew, “A General Strain Theory of Terrorism,” 135.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid*, 135.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid*, 142.

advance their agenda. Nevertheless, participation in a radical movement and supporting terrorist activities, is not the same as committing the terrorist act itself. How will participating in a high risk activity, leading to the religious follower's suicide, relieve the collective strain? In taking a socio-psychological approach to answer that question, this chapter will now discuss the rational behind suicide as a coping mechanism as seen through the profane and sacred lens.

Rationalisation through the Profane Lens

The terrorist acts presented in the introduction were executed with two main objectives in the mind of the perpetrator: to inflict as many casualties as possible, and to die as martyrs while executing the act. For many in the West, these acts are seen as irrational and can only be carried out by someone with a mental illness. This interpretation is a limited one due to being constructed within the limitations of the profane world. To better understand this construct, this section will submit how sociologist influenced that interpretation.

When addressing suicide, one must consider Durkheim's most popular work on that subject which was published in 1897 and titled *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*. Durkheim initiated and inspired other sociologist to discuss and explain individual behaviour as a function of broader social influence. He thus highlights four main types of suicide and how society has an influence on its prevalence: egoistic suicide, altruistic suicide, fatalistic suicide, and anomic suicide.¹¹⁰ Durkheim identified two processes through which society can influence these four suicide categories - social integration and moral regulation.

¹¹⁰ Billy Henson, "Durkheim, Émile: Anomie and Suicide," in Cullen, Francis T. and Pamela K. Wilcox, *Encyclopaedia of Criminological Theory*.

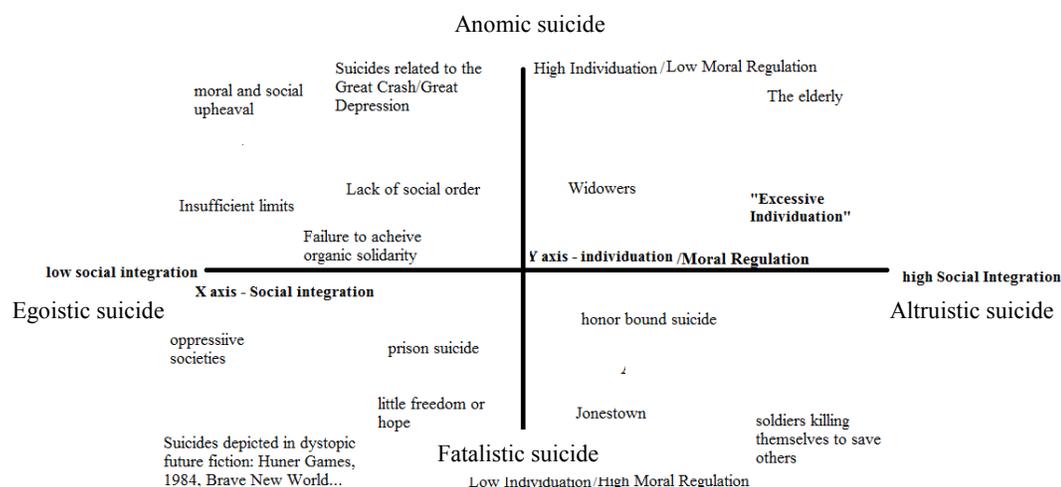


Figure 4.1 - Durkheim types and causes of suicide

Source: Rogers, "Theory: Durkheim and Functionalism", Sociology 1 Class (blog), 8 October 2014, <http://thelearningsociologist.blogspot.ca/2014/10/theory-durkheim-and-functionalism.html>

As shown in Figure 4.1, the social integration axis is influenced by “the development of bonds with other individuals, groups, and/or institutions within society.”¹¹¹ This integration allows for an individual to adopt social norms and values in a society. Alternatively, under the moral regulation axis, Durkheim underlines the role of “traditional social institutions and processes (i.e., marriage, religion, employment) in the regulation of individual behaviour.”¹¹² As such, Durkheim elaborates his theory by placing egoistic suicide and altruistic suicide on the two extremes of the social integration spectrum. Equally, fatalistic and anomic suicide are influenced by the level of moral regulation sitting at opposite sides of the moral regulation spectrum.

In such a manner, Durkheim observed that egoistic suicide occurs when an individual fails to form bonds with individuals and institutions by experiencing very low social integration and failing to espouse social norms, values or goals. Alternatively,

¹¹¹ Henson, *Anomie and Suicide ...*, 2.

¹¹² *Ibid.*

altruistic suicide occurs when an individual becomes highly socially integrated that they lose all sense of their individuality. Durkheim, highlights how by losing their individuality, “these altruistic individuals may easily become a tool of the larger group or institution. Often, they are willing to sacrifice their health, livelihood, and even life for betterment of the group as a whole.”¹¹³

Comparably, on the moral regulation spectrum, Durkheim theorised that fatalistic suicides are bound to occur if an individual experiences a higher level of moral regulation leading to the feeling of oppression or the stripping of their basic freedoms (e.g.: slavery, imprisonment). Finally, on the opposite spectrum falls Durkheim most reviewed category offered by him: Anomic suicide. Durkheim described this category as being highly influenced by a term he refers to as *anomie* which he defines as “the inability of groups and/or institutions to effectively regulate normative behaviour.”¹¹⁴ Durkheim elaborates on anomie by linking the inability to effectively regulate norms and behaviours with a disconnect between desire and reality. In other words, an individual’s *desires* to achieve a specific objective can very much outpace the *means* leaving them with frustration and anxiety if unable to achieve those desires.

Anomic Suicide versus Altruistic Suicide

Wiktorowicz draws attention to authors from the 1950s through 1960s¹¹⁵ who use Durkheim’s functionalist social psychology approach on mass behaviour by categorizing

¹¹³ Henson, *Anomie and Suicide* ..., 3.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁵ See, for example, Ralph H. Turner and Lewis Killian, *Collective Behavior* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1957); William Kornhauser, *The Politics of Mass Society* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1959); Neil J. Smelser, *Theory of Collective Behavior* (New York: Free Press, 1962) quoted in Wiktorowicz, *Radical Islam Rising*, . . . 11.

suicide acts of terror under anomic suicide.¹¹⁶ To that end, older studies of the causes of Islamic radicalization offer that an individual commits anomic suicide because they have low moral regulation due to either acute or chronic economic and/or domestic anomie. Leading into the twenty first century however, there was a significant increase in the study of radicalization along with a larger data set, allowing researches to shift away from the functionalist approach to Islamic radicalization. Authors such as Robert Agnew, John Horgan and Alex Schmid have all considered symbolic interactionism and conflict theory as sociological perspectives that contribute to the overall causes for an individual to be driven to committing suicidal acts of terror in the name of their religious beliefs. This new approach certainly allowed researches to consider both micro and macro levels of social patterns which, without a doubt, provides a more accurate understanding of the issue at hand. Needless to state, although there are certain elements of anomic suicide in the acts of radicalized Islamists, the majority are nowhere near what one would label as individuals who have *low moral regulation* or *high individuation*. Indeed, this research paper supports the view that strains (which include economic and domestic types) are an underlying factor pushing the individual to use religion as a coping mechanism which in turn may result in the adoption of a more radical ideology of Islam. However, participation in the terrorist act including sacrificing oneself is seen as a way of high social integration within the social group to which the religious seeker now subscribes. With that logic, their acts of terror are in line with *altruistic suicide* since, from their perspective, their actions are contributing to the betterment of their social group from the unjust acts of the West.

¹¹⁶ Wiktowicz, *Radical Islam Rising* . . . , 11.

Rational Choice Theory

Another profane-limited method used by researchers in an attempt to understand the logic behind suicide in Islamism is the modern rational theory. Political scientist Roxanne Euben submits a crucial point when it comes to properly rationalising Islamic radicalization. Basing her statements on her extensive studies of Sayyid Qutb, she emphasised the importance of engaging in the content of Islamic fundamentalist ideas “on their own terms or . . . for an interpreter whose position is exterior to the worldview”¹¹⁷ to help us to intelligibly translate the world of the *other*. For Euben, the meaning and function of the Islamist ideas are mutually determinative, and as such, the functionalist approach of understanding those ideas must include interpretive ones. This new understanding will therefore help us to grasp another way of looking at the world. A world that, as alluded to in chapter two and as Durkheim would state, is split between *the profane* and *the sacred*. In so far as we apply our functionalist profane world understanding to terrorist activities in the West, those acts will remain irrational to us.

Euben’s arguments are also in line with Schmid’s views on using rational choice theories. He equally proposes that the major drawback of applying rational choice theory has serious drawbacks since “it assumes a fixed definition of rationality, when in fact there is none that is uncontroversial.”¹¹⁸ By thus using the rational choice theory based on a construct of pre-established definitions, social science researchers are bound to “subsume a large number of behaviours under the rational choice label.”¹¹⁹

¹¹⁷ Roxanne Leslie Euben, *Enemy in the Mirror: Islamic Fundamentalism and the Limits of Modern Rationalism : A Work of Comparative Political Theory* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1999), 156.

¹¹⁸ Schmid, *The Routledge Handbook of Terrorism Research . . .*, 222.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 222.

In summary, this section submits observations that challenge the mainstream and often out-dated views that suicidal terrorist acts are committed by individuals who have lost moral regulation within the society. Instead, this section offers that with the adoption of the sacred lens through which the *other* may view the world, a new reality comes forth that redefines the very essence of the parameters defining rationality and consequently occasion altruism and rationalization to what might seem anomic and irrational.

Rationalisation through the Sacred Lens

Thus far, this chapter has submitted that through the introduction of collective strain, the religious follower is now overtaken with a new burden of avenging their fellow Muslims who are suffering at the hand of so called *crusaders*. Furthermore, this chapter offers that the understanding of suicide shifts from an anomic type to an altruistic type once a better understanding of rationality includes parameters presented in the sacred world which the radicalised Muslim may view the world with. What then is the rational in the sacred world that drives an individual to commit suicidal terrorist acts? To answer this question, this section will revisit the importance of martyrdom which, in most cases, is the most crucial pillar in understanding religious suicide. This section will also submit that with the help of *neutralization techniques*, radical religious authorities will ensure that their religious followers will not hesitate to kill when the time comes.

Religious Suicide and Martyrdom

All Islamic scholars and Imams agree that suicide in Islam is forbidden in accordance with Allah's decree in the Qur'an. Verses such as "And spend in the way of Allah and do not throw [yourselves] with your [own] hands into destruction. And do

good; indeed, Allah loves the doers of good”¹²⁰ and “O you who have believed, do not consume one another’s wealth unjustly but only [in lawful] business by mutual consent. And do not kill yourselves. Indeed, Allah is to you ever Merciful.”¹²¹ Where Islamists differ, is when killing oneself becomes the only viable weapon available to overcome your enemy. This interpretation is certainly supported by Yusuf al-Qaradawi, the Egyptian Islamic scholar and theologian who takes his inspiration from the likes of Hassan al Banna. Al-Qaradawi supports Palestinian suicide bombings and labels them as *martyrdom operations*. He thus believes that “laying down one’s life would be abhorrent only if no benefit whatsoever is to come out of it” and that “if some harm can be inflicted on the enemy forces, . . . the certain loss of one’s life in the face of impossible odds is not a waste.”¹²²

The reward of martyrdom is a fundamental and essential incentive used by radical Muslim authorities to lure in their religious followers. At a stage where the individual is blindly convinced of the legitimacy of the religious authority, they will believe and accept everything their religious authority says. As submitted in the previous chapter, the effects of social representation by anchoring and objectifying concepts to the individual can have an everlasting influence on the individual. To that end, when radical religious authorities transpose interpretations from the Qur’an and supplement that with hadiths that support religious suicide, reminding the religious follower of the reward of dying a martyr, the follower is convinced and will apply no critical thinking to the matter.

¹²⁰ The Holy Qur’an, 2:195.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 4:29.

¹²² Euben and Zaman, *Princeton Readings in Islamist Thought* . . . , 228.

The most prevalent recount to highlight this, can be found in Usama Bin Laden's fatwa (authoritative legal opinion) titled *Declaration of War Against The Americans Occupying The Land of The Two Holy Places* that was published in a London based Arabic paper and faxed to his supporters in 1996. In it, Bin Laden first reminds his supporters of death by stating that "if death is a predetermined must, then it is a shame to die cowardly. . . . Who do not die by the sword will die by other reasons; many causes are there, but one death."¹²³ He then quotes a series of Quranic verses, once again taken out of context, that remind his followers of the promise Allah has reserved for *mujahidin* and martyrs. Bin Laden chooses verses such as, "He will not let the deeds of those who are killed for His cause come to nothing; He will guide them into the Garden He has already made known to them."¹²⁴ And "Do not say that those who are killed in God's cause are dead; they are alive, though you do not realize it."¹²⁵ Finally, Bin Laden will include the infamous *hadith* which captures the reward of dying a martyr:

A martyr's privileges are guaranteed by Allah; forgiveness with the first gush of his blood, he will be shown his seat in paradise, he will be decorated with the jewels of iman (belief), married off to the beautiful ones, protected from the test in the grave, assured security in the day of judgment, crowned with the crown of dignity, a ruby of which is better than this whole world (dunya – profane world) and its entire content, wedded to seventy-two of the pure Houries (beautiful ones of Paradise) and his intercession on behalf of seventy of his relatives will be accepted.¹²⁶

When an individual who has given up on their social identity and held solely onto the religious one is offered a promising eternal future, from a legitimate source, they will be more than willing to accept it. Gradually, the act of martyrdom seems like a solution to

¹²³ Usama Bin Laden, *Declaration of War Against the Americans Occupying The Land of The Two Holy Places*, quoted in R.L. Euben and M.Q. Zaman, *Princeton Readings in Islamist Thought*, . . . , 452.

¹²⁴ The Holy Qur'an, 47: 4-6.

¹²⁵ *Ibid*, 2:154.

¹²⁶ Euben et al., *Princeton Readings in Islamist Thought* . . . , 453.

their personal and collective strain and what was once foreign to their thinking is now “imbued with a sense of prestige.”¹²⁷

Neutralization Techniques

A common technique used not only in terrorists but also in offenders in general is the neutralization technique. Developed in 1957 by sociologists David Matza and Gresham Sykes, this technique shows how a delinquent justifies their deviant behaviour by representing “not a radical opposition to law-abiding society but something more like an apologetic failure, often more sinned against than sinning in his own eyes.”¹²⁸ Subjects therefore “learn a variety of excuses and justifications that can be used to suppress normative values, while rationalizing their own behaviours, either prior to or following [engagement].”¹²⁹ Matza and Sykes proposed five specific techniques in neutralization: “(1) denial of responsibility, (2) denial of injury, (3) denial of the victim, (4) condemnation of the condemners, and (5) the appeal to higher loyalties.”¹³⁰

When applied to the domain of Islamic radicalization, three of these techniques are particularly found in suicidal terrorism: Denial of the victim, condemnation of the condemners and the appeal to higher loyalties. The technique used to deny the victim centers on the notion that the injury inflicted is “not really an injury; rather, it is a form of rightful retaliation or punishment. . . . By a subtle alchemy the delinquent moves himself into the position of an avenger and the victim is transformed into a wrong-doer.”¹³¹ This technique conforms to the effects of collective strain introduced earlier in the chapter

¹²⁷ Horgan, *The Psychology of Terrorism* . . . , 118.

¹²⁸ Gresham M. Sykes and David Matza, “Techniques of Neutralization: A Theory of Delinquency,” *American Sociological Review* 22, no. 6 (1957), 667.

¹²⁹ Horgan, *The Psychology of Terrorism* . . . , 127.

¹³⁰ Sykes and Matza, *Techniques of Neutralization* . . . , 667.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 668.

where the individual experiencing the strain becomes fuelled with avenging their Muslim brethren who are unjustly suffering at the hands of *crusaders*.

The condemnation of the condemners, Sykes and Matza offer, is a technique where the delinquent “shifts the focus of attention from his own deviant acts to the motives and behaviours of those who disapprove of his violations.”¹³² As highlighted in chapter 3, the labeling of social groups by providing a clear black and white dichotomy between Western social groups and the sacred social group is in essence radical religious authorities way of condemning the condemners. Furthermore, by using their validation as a legitimate religious authority, they are able to include mainstream Muslims, who dare to criticize their fundamental ideology, as contributors to the West labeling them as hypocrites.

Equally important is the individual’s neutralization of their acts by appealing to higher loyalties. In doing so, they are convinced that by “sacrificing the demands of the larger society for the demands of the smaller social groups to which the delinquent belongs,”¹³³ the individual is able to justify their terrorist actions. The demands of the radical group is dictated by their interpretation of the creator of the sacred world. They are not negotiable, and must be obeyed in order to attain the ultimate salvation. Consequently, the individual’s appeal to higher loyalty can include three levels: loyalty to the radical group or movement, loyalty to the radical religious authority, and/or loyalty to Allah. As such, when the religious follower acknowledges the Qur’anic verses, hadiths and duty offered by the radical ideology, they are more inclined to neutralize the gravity

¹³² Sykes and Matza, *Techniques of Neutralization* . . . , 668.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 669.

of their terrorising acts, especially if guaranteed an eternal and blissful reward as an incentive to escape the profane world.

Major Nidal Hasan distinctly showed traces of behaviour uniform with techniques of neutralization. A year prior to his attack in Fort Hood in November 2009, the FBI retrieved 18 e-mails from Hasan's computer where he reached out to Anwar al-Awlaki seeking his guidance.¹³⁴ Of the 18 e-mails, 8 e-mails were requesting confirmation from al-Awlaki, as the religious authority, that collateral damage is permissible in Islam if it occurs while conducting an operation against *the enemy*. In one e-mail for instance he states:

[In] the Qur'an it states to fight your enemies as they fight you but don't transgress. So, I would assume that suicide bomber whose aim is to kill enemy soldiers or their helpers but also kill innocents in the process is acceptable. Furthermore, if enemy soldiers are using other tactics that are unethical/unconscionable [then] those same tactics may be used.¹³⁵

This quote shows how Hasan's interpretations of the Qur'anic verses permits him to seek revenge, inflict harm on innocent civilians, all while denying that there was a victim. He thus sacrifices the safety and security of innocent civilians, so long as he kills American soldiers. Similarly, in another e-mail, Hasan states:

My goal is Jannat Firdaus [Eden - the highest level in Heaven] and I praise and thank Allah (SWT) for giving [me] the ability to strive, to see the truth, to beg for his forgiveness, and ask for his guidance. If people truly understood the peace they could have by really believing that Allah (SWT) is in control and that he is just testing to see who is the best amongst us, it would be a lot easier to see through Shaitans (Satan) promises of poverty and destruction? I want to be with those who are the best. Imam, if you

¹³⁴ J.M. Berger, "Anwar Awlaki E-Mail Exchange with Fort Hood Shooter Nidal Hasan", *IntelWire* (blog), 19 July 2012, <http://news.intelwire.com/2012/07/the-following-e-mails-between-maj.html>

¹³⁵ Nidal Hasan, e-mail 17 to Anwar al-Awlaki on 31 May 2009, quoted in J.M. Berger . . . , *IntelWire* (blog), 19 July 2012, <http://news.intelwire.com/2012/07/the-following-e-mails-between-maj.html>

have any specific projects that you feel are important to get on their feet let me know. I will read up on them and Inshallah I will please Allah (SWT).¹³⁶

In this quote, Hasan is using his loyalty to the highest level (Allah), convincing himself that he was chosen by Him to *see the truth*. A truth he had acquired in a mosque, and from online research on the plethora of websites that present a fundamentalist approach to Islam. For instance, in his last correspondence to al-Awlaki, he asks his opinion on a Muslim lecturer's view where he draws parallels between Iblis (Satan) and the *People of the book*.¹³⁷ He states that the lecturer said "Allah (SWT) warns us not to take the people of the book as protecting friends and the lecturer stated that if we ignore Allah (SWT) like Adam we will have no excuse if we end up in hell fire."¹³⁸ Once again, a clear example of how Hasan condemned the condemners, making them in the out-group, and using sacred interpretations to neutralize the assassination of the innocent.

This section thus summarises that with the help of the sacred realm, the religious follower in the West is driven to consider suicide as a coping mechanism to manage a collective strain. The suicide has two objectives in mind; to avenge the Muslims around the world who have suffered at the hand of the out-group by inflicting mass destruction and casualties even at the cost of innocent civilians lives, and to die as a martyr in order to enter the highest levels of eternal Paradise. Through neutralization techniques, the

¹³⁶ Nidal Hasan, e-mail 11 to Anwar al-Awlaki on 22 February 2009, quoted in J.M. Berger . . . , *IntelWire* (blog), 19 July 2012, <http://news.intelwire.com/2012/07/the-following-e-mails-between-maj.html>

¹³⁷ In Islamic theology, this refers to Jews, Christians and Sabians.

¹³⁸ Nidal Hasan, e-mail 18 to Anwar al-Awlaki on 16 June 2009, quoted in J.M. Berger . . . , *IntelWire* (blog), 19 July 2012, <http://news.intelwire.com/2012/07/the-following-e-mails-between-maj.html>

individual justifies their act and does so with confidence and assertiveness, confident that they will be received by his creator in tranquility and eternal bliss.

Conclusion

Once the Muslim follower has legitimized a radical religious authority as someone who can indeed provide relief to their strain, this chapter analysed how the individual's motives evolve from supporting a radicalized group or ideology to participating in the act of terror. The religious follower now acknowledges the existence of a collective strain introduced by the religious authority. This strain is centered on propositions that innocent Muslims are unjustly and indiscriminately killed by a powerful, yet vulnerable, Western force. This in turn revives the religious follower's sense of communal identity leaving them with eagerness to get engaged in whatever activity that will take advantage of the out-group's vulnerabilities. As such, the individual arrives at the conclusion that terrorism is the best means through which they can relieve the collective strain and avenge member of their in-group. Violence thus becomes a rational response to strategic dilemmas fuelled by fear. Once merged with the benefits of martyrdom, suicidal terror becomes an even more viable option.

When the West attempts to understand terror activities, they tend to apply the limits of their profane world. Adopting theories developed in the 19th century by Durkheim with goal to help understand the effects of social integration and moral regulation on an individual, the West will categorise the suicidal terror act as a function of anomic suicide. Equally, applying the rational choice theory to put sense in their actions was proven to be built on false parameters. Instead, applying a sacred understanding, it becomes evident that suicidal terror acts are far from a mental anomic

behaviour. Once viewed through the sacred lens, these acts are seen altruistic and rational. For the individual to resort to suicidal terror, they go through an internal process of neutralization where they deny the existence of a victim, condemn the condemner and appeal to a higher loyalty. Under the disguise of skewed Qur'anic interpretations, the individual arrives to the conclusion that religious suicide will achieve both, relieving of the collective and individual strain, and instilling fear in the hearts and minds of the out-group.

Durkheim summarises eloquently the internal struggle between the profane and sacred world. He argues that to fully belong to one requires to have fully left the other. As such, the individual eventually arrives to a state of monasticism which “artificially organizes a milieu that is apart from, outside of, and closed to the natural milieu where ordinary men live a secular life.”¹³⁹ Subsequently, the individual arrives to a mystic asceticism with goal to eradicate any remaining attachment to their profane world. Durkheim therefore argues that all forms of religious suicide come from mystic asceticism, “since the only means of escaping profane life fully and finally is escaping life altogether.”¹⁴⁰ Combined with the desire to cope with their collective and individual strain, the killing of the source of the strain in the process will further the collective goal of their group while promising the highest payoff in the hereafter.

¹³⁹ Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* . . . , 37.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

CONCLUSIONS

By first introducing the underlying causes for the birth of the radical ideology, this paper has presented the core elements that makeup the essence of every Islamist's rhetoric: Islamism is a political ideology, with a goal to establish an *Umma* under a *Caliphate* ruling that respects *Shari'a* law. Strikingly, mainstream Muslim scholars will attest that none of these core elements respect the guidance found in Islamic scriptures and that they are not divine. As such, contrary to mainstream media, this paper submitted that Islamists today use religion as a cover to their political agenda in order to propagate their radicalized ideology.

This paper has thus answered Wicktorowicz's three core questions on Islamic radicalization in the West with the help of sociological and psychological theories in order to further comprehend the influences that drive Western Muslims' participation in violent and radical ideologies of Islam. To answer the first question, this paper took Merton and Agnew's approach on strain theories to explain the initial triggers that cause for an interest in radical movements. Then, with the help of Moscovici's social representations theory, this paper analysed the rhetoric and language used by radical religious authorities to persuade religious seekers that their interpretation of Islam is the most credible one. Finally, with the help of Matza and Sykes' neutralization techniques, along with a sacred rationalization of martyrdom, this paper offered that the religious follower is easily persuaded to engage in high risk activism leading to their suicide.

With that in mind, this paper concludes with three main themes that play a crucial role in influencing Western Muslim adoption of radicalization. First, the effects of strain and collective strain should not be undervalued. Evidence presented showed that prior to

joining a movement, most have experienced a moment of strain that, as Agnew's general strain theory categorised, was influenced by the prevention or removal of positively valued goals or stimuli, or the presentation of negatively valued stimuli. This in turn led the individual to use religion as a coping strategy while being in a cognitive state.

Recognizing this vulnerability, radical religious authorities will showcase their ideology with intent to offer relief from the strain. Gradually, the introduction of a collective strain that is high in magnitude, unjust, and caused by a more powerful entity will corner the religious follower to believe that terrorist activity is the only coping mechanism.

Second, a central argument to this research paper was the dichotomy between the profane and sacred dimensions. Using Durkheim's observations on religion, attempting to understand the world of the Islamist through the profane lens leads to wrongly labeled diagnosis of the issue. As a result, with a profane limited interpretation, one arrives to the erroneous conclusion that the Islamist's terrorist act was a sign of what Merton would categorize as a *rebellion* alternative mode of adaptation. This paper has proven the contrary by offering that with the help of the sacred lens, the individual is reminded of their sacred goals and religious means to achieve them. Fuelled with a new desire to become a *conformist*, the individual desperately accepts the ideology which offers a shortcut to the most honourable and prestigious salvation. Furthermore, the understanding of rationality through the profane lens is skewed in comparison to the sacred lens. This paper discredited common mistakes made by researchers and mainstream media by using rational choice theory and Durkheim's functionalist approach to suicide. This paper therefore argues that, once seen through the sacred dimension, the radicalised individual is blinded by a rationality that is guided by the parameters of the spiritual world.

Finally, a subsidiary argument to this paper centered on the struggle of balancing the social and religious identities of the Western Muslim. This paper has demonstrated how Muslims in the West face an identity crisis as they attempt to find value in holding on to their Western social identity. Once they see no value in that identity, the religious seeker faces strain and in turn finds more value in their religious identity. Furthermore, this paper has valued the importance a Western Muslim places on their communal identity which allows them to feel the need to take action to avenge their struggling brethren which they may have never met.

Areas for Further Research

Research on the psychology of terrorism has two goals in mind; an academic and scientific approach to understanding the mind of a terrorist, and using the data to contribute to the prevention of terrorism in the West. As presented in this research, there is no shortage of the former goal since there is seemingly endless amount of research that contribute to the understanding of the mind of a terrorist. Where there is room for further research is on the latter goal. Taking into consideration the efforts of law enforcement and intelligence agencies to counter-terrorism, very little contribution is made from the academic departments to help in the prevention of terrorism. Further research on the causes of this gap and how to bridge it will without a doubt be a step forward in the right direction towards terrorism prevention. Short of that, law enforcement agencies will continue to be reactive to terrorism and take a violent combating role to its eradication, which in essence further enforces radical religious authorities dichotomy between in and out-groups. Equally, with the help of academic experts on the psychology of terrorism,

intelligence agencies would be able to more accurately process intelligence data by differentiating between alarming signs and ordinary catalyst.

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