



# **Ebb and Flow: The Three Cycles of Jihadism in Europe**

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**Hugo Micheron • October 2022**

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**Program on Extremism**

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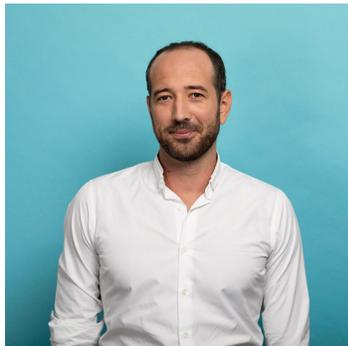
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## About the Author



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## About The Program on Extremism and *Nexus*

The Program on Extremism at George Washington University provides analysis on issues related to violent and non-violent extremism. The Program spearheads innovative and thoughtful academic inquiry, producing empirical work that strengthens extremism work that strengthens extremism research as a distinct field of study. The Program aims to develop pragmatic policy solutions that resonate with policymakers, civic leaders, and the general public.

This report is released as part of The Global-Local Jihadist Nexus project (*Nexus*). *Nexus* draws on a global network of subject matter experts and locally-based researchers to monitor Islamic State and al-Qaida affiliates across the Middle East, Africa, and Asia, as well as their support and enabling networks in the West. Our products analyze the interplay of several pairs of forces that have the potential to drive or constrain the global Islamic State and Al-Qaida nexus, including: global and local contexts, ideological and pragmatic drivers, individual and group appeals, leader-inspired and organizationally-enabled change, foreign influence versus local interest, and more.



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## Introduction

The trial of the November 2015 Attacks in Paris that ended in June 2022 in part symbolizes the end of an important phase of jihadism in Europe. But jihadism continues to pose an intellectual and political challenge to European societies. The need to understand it is urgent, but the task is made difficult for two reasons.

First, Islamist militancy has penetrated the Western European media space in the last few years, and now provides the backdrop for a muddled public debate on immigration, the place of religion, and terrorist violence. Since the 9/11 attacks on the United States, nearly 150 Islamist attacks have assailed Europe causing 800 deaths and nearly 5,000<sup>1</sup> injuries. Hundreds of other attempts have been thwarted from Brest to Vienna, from Glasgow to Milan, from Barcelona to Oslo, and even in Geneva. The sheer proliferation of these violent acts often gets in the way of making sense of the broader phenomenon.

Second, Islamism tends to produce anabolic effects within the societies it affects. These are fixed around two postures in the debates on terrorism and its causes: extreme relativization, or excessive hysterization. These two postures often trap public reflection in slogans and lead to paralysis.

However, jihadism is more than just the attacks, and it is certainly not confined to the macabre death tally to which it is too often reduced. Rather, it has lasting political effects that profoundly and negatively corrode the ties that bind European democracies. Jihadist attacks represent a delayed symptom of individuals in our midst who adhere to this ideology and resort to its violent methods. For these individuals, attacks are a means, not an end, and are but one path among others at the disposal of jihadist followers for terrorizing their enemies. Nonetheless, it is this violent path that represents the ultimate manifestation of the jihadist movement's existence in the heart of European societies. To focus only on the attacks and their mournful toll, to make them the yardstick by which to calibrate militancy, is comparable to watching the last few minutes of a film to gauge its quality. As a result, what goes under-analyzed and under-represented in the public discourse is a jihadism that prevails *between terrorist attacks*.

Second, jihadism is a *religious and political ideology* that is not confined to the organizations that claim to be jihadist, such as al-Qaeda, the Islamic State or their global network of affiliates. These organizations populate a religious-political field that includes other Islamist movements with which, depending on the circumstances and

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<sup>1</sup> Mostly in eight countries; see below. Dominique Reynié (dir.), "Les attentats islamistes dans le monde 1979-2001", Fondapol, September 2021, p. 9.

the issues at stake, they may fight or collude. The destruction of a jihadist group does not, therefore, automatically mean that the ideology from which it drew its strength is dead, nor does it put an end to the utopian project of building an “Islamic” state and imposing visions of Islamic law that may have galvanized followers around the world. The ideas that sparked the movement can continue to proliferate as long as the conditions for their dissemination are still in place and their supporters still have the capacity to act. The destruction of the so-called “Caliphate”—the territorial entity between Syria and Iraq controlled by ISIS—in 2019 and the death of the “caliph” Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in the same year did not *ipso facto* put to rest the issue of European jihadism, because in many respects the phenomenon is built from within and is structural.

Building on these preliminary remarks, this paper will explore why the French case is not unique before analyzing the mechanics of jihadism in Europe over the past thirty years during three major cycles of its development. Afterwards, it will examine the potential evolution of this phenomenon and ways in which it might collectively be dealt with.

## "Denmark Does Not Produce Terrorists": The (un)exceptionality of the French Case

By 2015, France had provided the largest single contingent of European jihadists in Syria— about 2,000 of the 6,000 West Europeans in the Levant were French.<sup>2</sup> France also suffered the greatest number of terrorist attacks of any Western country, accounting for one-third of all jihadist terrorist attacks in the West from June 2014 to September 2022 (39 of 118) .<sup>3</sup> These statistics have caused the French case to be viewed through the lens of its uniqueness, but this narrow lens ignores other factors that would allow resituating France within the heart of the European paradigm based on several shared characteristics.

The first of these shared characteristics is that jihadism is imposing itself as a reality in some Western European countries and not in others. Nearly 90% of the Europeans who joined jihadist organizations in Iraq and Syria in the 2010s hailed from just seven of the 28 EU countries: France (1910, 32.3% of the total), Germany (960, 16.2%), the United Kingdom (850, 14.4%), Belgium (498, 8.4%), Sweden (310, 5.2%), the Netherlands (300, 5.1%), and Denmark (145, 2.4%).<sup>4</sup> In proportion to their total populations, the last four countries were the most prolific producers of jihadist travelers per capita, compounded in the cases of Belgium and Denmark by their minuscule Muslim populations, much smaller than those of France and Britain. This data contradicts a common belief, recently expressed by the American diplomat James F. Jeffrey, formerly the U.S. Special Envoy for Syria, that "Denmark does not produce terrorists"<sup>5</sup>. On the contrary, these data show that jihadism disproportionately affects the Scandinavian countries despite their comparative lack of colonial pasts and reputations as some of the most egalitarian societies in the world. Jihadism has thus far developed in Europe in localized contexts, but in countries with very different histories, relationships to religion, and political systems. Analyzing it cannot be reduced, as is often the case, to the specificities of each country's social "*ism*" (French "*secularism*", British "*communalism*", German "*differentialism*", Scandinavian "*egalitarianism*", Dutch "*multiculturalism*", etc.).

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<sup>2</sup> Joana Cook and Gina Vale, "From Daesh to 'Diaspora', Tracing the Women and Minors of Islamic State", ICSR, 2018, p. 17.

<sup>3</sup> Vidino, Lorenzo, and Francesco Marone. (2022). *Jihadist Attacks in the West: 2014-2022*. The Program on Extremism at George Washington University. [https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/Jihadist-Attacks-in-the-West\\_Vidino-Marone\\_September-2022.pdf](https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/Jihadist-Attacks-in-the-West_Vidino-Marone_September-2022.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> For a detailed account see: Joana Cook and Gina Vale, "From Daesh to 'Diaspora', Tracing the Women and Minors of Islamic State", ICSR, 2018, p. 17.

<sup>5</sup> Piotr Smolar, interview of James F. Jeffrey: "L'armée américaine a fait un boulot catastrophique en Afghanistan", *Le Monde*, 27 August 2021, [https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2021/08/27/james-f-jeffrey-l-armee-americaine-a-fait-un-boulot-catastrophique\\_6092541\\_3210.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2021/08/27/james-f-jeffrey-l-armee-americaine-a-fait-un-boulot-catastrophique_6092541_3210.html).

Within this broader picture, Italy stands as a notable exception. 129 Italian residents reached the Levant, 2.5 times fewer than Sweden despite having a population six times the size. Only 11 of these 129 travelers (8.5%) were native-born Italians.<sup>6</sup> Unlike its European neighbors, Italy has not experienced the rise of homegrown jihadism, but this does not preclude it as a target of future attacks.

The seven aforementioned countries also all share a disproportionate concentration of jihadist activity within their borders. Within each, only a handful of cities provided the bulk of their country's travelers bound for the Levant: some 15 in France,<sup>7</sup> ten each in Germany<sup>8</sup> and Great Britain,<sup>9</sup> six in the Netherlands,<sup>10</sup> five in Denmark,<sup>11</sup> four in Belgium,<sup>12</sup> and the same number in Sweden.<sup>13</sup> Within each municipality, departures were organized from certain neighborhoods and not from other comparable areas, with each of these 'springboard' areas presenting a distinct social environment. Brussels provides an ideal example; most of the nationals who joined ISIS came from four districts (*communes*) in Brussels and many were acquainted with one another. A similar trend has been observed in North African and Middle Eastern countries affected by largescale departures for Iraq and Syria. This was amply illustrated by Nate Rosenblatt's thesis, successfully defended in 2021 at Oxford University,<sup>14</sup> which suggests as a topic for further research the potential existence of a universal mode of how jihadism spreads across a given territory.

The second shared characteristic is that jihadism cannot be reduced to economic and social marginalization, nor to simple suburban vs. urban dichotomies. In Belgium, the rust belts of Wallonia hit by economic and social difficulties have seen few departures, in contrast to the many who left Antwerp, the country's richest city. The overcrowded housing projects in the northern neighborhoods of Marseille, despite being enclaved and segregated, have seen almost no departures, while Lunel in France's Hérault, home to a mostly middle class population one-tenth the size of Marseille's, saw about 20 departures in 2014 alone. Germany's first jihadist network formed in the peaceful conurbation of Ulm and Neu-Ulm, which in some ways is a veritable anti-Molenbeek. Located in the heart of the southern German Tech Belt, Ulm and Neu-Ulm are far

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<sup>6</sup> Francesco Marone, Lorenzo Vidino, *Destinazione Jihad, i Foreign Fighters d'Italia* (Milan: Ledizioni, 2018), pp. 16-19, <https://www.ispionline.it/sites/default/files/pubblicazioni/foreignfighter.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> Primarily in the regions of Toulouse, Montpellier and Nimes, Nice and Cannes, Lyon and St. Etienne, Grenoble, Orleans, Strasbourg, Ile-de-France and Lille.

<sup>8</sup> Primarily, Dinslaken, Solingen, Bonn, Duesseldorf, Frankfurt, Ulm and Neu-Ulm, Hamburg, and Berlin.

<sup>9</sup> London, Birmingham, Leeds, Luton, Manchester, Portsmouth, Sheffield, Walsall, Brighton, Cardiff, and Coventry.

<sup>10</sup> La Haye, Rotterdam, Amsterdam, Delft, Zoetermeer and Arnhem.

<sup>11</sup> Aarhus, Copenhagen, Ishøj, Odense, and Aalborg.

<sup>12</sup> Brussels, Anvers and Vilvoorde and to a lesser extend Charleroi.

<sup>13</sup> Göteborg, Stockholm, Malmö, and Örebro.

<sup>14</sup> Nathanael Rosenblatt, *All Jihad is local*, PhD. Thesis, University of Oxford, 2021, <https://ethos.bl.uk/OrderDetails.do?uin=uk.bl.ethos.844026>.

removed from the economic pain that has roiled lifestyles in the former GDR (East Germany). Furthermore, the area is not undergoing sociological upheavals comparable to those in Berlin or other major German cities, has recorded virtually no incidents against the Muslim community, and criminality generally is low.

Of course, the marginalization within certain cities affected by the jihadist phenomenon is undeniable, such as the disadvantaged sectors of English cities, the deprived communes of Brussels (In particular, Molenbeek, Laeken and Schaarbeek), vulnerable French neighborhoods (Trappes, Roubaix, Strasbourg, etc.) or certain poor districts in Scandinavia or the Netherlands. Socioeconomic dimensions do matter in some cases, but to make them *the* explanatory factor is a tempting shortcut that can only lead the debate astray. They do not fully explain the phenomenon and must be supplemented by a socio-religious approach that is not in opposition, but rather complementary.

It is also necessary to take into account local history when re-contextualizing jihadist phenomena in various places. Local histories of course differ from place to place depending on prevailing cultures, from the North to the South of Europe, from rural to urban areas, from Muslim heritages mainly from the Indian subcontinent (for England) to North Africa (for France) to Turkey (for Germany). However, these differing histories are rooted in the same transformations that have taken place over the last thirty year, including deindustrialization stemming from globalization, digitalization in the wake of the digital revolution, diversification resulting from the influx of new populations, among others.<sup>15</sup>

Yet regardless of the locale, jihadist militants have established themselves from Roubaix to Berlin essentially in the same manner. This is the third and final shared characteristic: the areas that have produced the vast majority of European combatants in Iraq and Syria are the same areas originally settled in the 1990s by veterans of the Afghan, Algerian, or Bosnian jihads. Jihadism has been transplanted through them to certain European cities, which would become the “centers” of this militant constellation and provide the backstory to the geography of European jihadism.

France, despite its specificities, is part of a constellation of European countries that share these three common characteristics, but it has been over-scrutinized for being the most targeted country in the West. In this respect, France has succeeded Great Britain, which was at the center of concerns in the mid-2000s, and the United States, which had been the primary Western target ten years earlier. Today, the jihad in Europe comes from within— from the historical shifts in European societies, which includes the permanent settlement of Muslim immigrants, the economic distress of

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<sup>15</sup> Jérôme Fourquet, *L'Archipel français, Naissance d'une nation multiple et divisée*, Seuil, 2019, 384 pages.

certain neighborhoods, the unresolved backlash to colonialism— but also comes from outside, in part “reimported” to European countries by militants from the Muslim world. Fresh from conflicts that were *a priori* remote, they saw their advantage in rooting the movement in, and acclimatizing it to, local political, social, and religious environments in Europe. Thus, to ignore jihadi militancy, their discourse, and their actions is to deny key elements for understanding the movement’s inroads into Europe over the past thirty years.

## The Mechanics of Jihadism in Europe

It is a recurring misjudgment to approach jihadism only through the prism of Western categories of thought. While the movement has become an indigenous European phenomenon, it first reared its head thousands of miles from the French suburbs, the Belgian and British inner cities, or the German Sauerland plateaus. Today's global jihadist movement initially materialized in Afghanistan, in the midst of a conflict of unprecedented violence that tore the country apart between 1979 and 1989 following the Soviet invasion. The victory of the Afghan resistance was enabled by extraordinary support from the United States, Pakistan, and the Gulf States, but also by thousands of *mujahidin*—Islamist volunteers—from all corners of the Muslim world. Their defeat of the Red Army after ten years of occupation was the prelude to the collapse of the Berlin Wall a few months later, followed soon after by the demise of the Eastern Bloc. The *mujahidin* joined the fight not to uphold liberal values over totalitarianism, but to defend a land of Islam against communist forces seen as importing atheism to the region. In Afghanistan, these militants would lay claim to embodying a vanguard of Islam. They would define the doctrinal foundations of what was to become the template for contemporary jihadism and, on this basis, form dozens of organizations, al-Qaeda today being the most notorious.

From the Western point of view, Afghanistan represented the burial of the USSR and the final episode of the Cold War, the “end of history” as the American researcher Francis Fukuyama called it. However, for the jihadists it was the start of theirs. This original wishful misreading of events would take on a life of its own in the West, and ultimately lead to a painful underestimation of the full extent of the burgeoning movement that had been loosed upon the world. In January 1998, the architect of the American strategy in Afghanistan and former National Security Advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski, famously declared to the French magazine *Le Nouvel Observateur*: “What is most important to the history of the world? The Taliban or the collapse of the Soviet empire? Some stirred-up Muslims or the liberation of central Europe and the end of the Cold war?”<sup>16</sup> Not long after, on the morning of September 11, 2001, al-Qaeda, harbored by the Taliban, conducted the first large-scale attack on U.S. soil by a foreign terrorist organization. Fast forward to France today, and jihadism has become a domestic political issue in the presidential campaign. In retrospect, the ideology advocated by “a few stirred-up Islamists” proved powerful enough to spread within a generation from the Hindu Kush in the western Himalayas to Arab and European cities, where it resonated with a segment of the youth to the point where it has become a matter of public concern.

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<sup>16</sup> *Le Nouvel Observateur*, “La révélation d’un ancien conseiller de Carter”, January 15-21, 1998, p. 16.

### *Ebb and Flow: The Two Phases of Jihadist Activism*

In light of these observations, it is important to examine how the jihadist movement has evolved since its inception. For the past thirty years and around the world, jihadist militants have tended to act differently depending on how they judged the balance of power with their enemies and the opportunities presented to them. They have alternated between two distinct periods of militancy: phases of action and expansion when they perceived they had an edge, and phases of withdrawal and reconfiguration when they did not. Jihadism has not evolved in a linear fashion; it has followed a sinusoidal pattern, marked by both ebbs and flows.

In flow phases, the movement emerges from the shadows. Its followers prioritize warlike jihad—physical struggle. The organizations intent on armed struggle, such as al-Qaeda or more recently the Islamic State, mount attacks against their designated targets—the Western powers and Muslim regimes they brand as “apostates.” They spout diatribes through designated spokespersons and infect all types of media with their propaganda. The theological-political objective they have in their sights is clear. Their members cluster in foreign theaters of operation, which become the epicenters of their militancy, such as the Afghan-Pakistani tribal areas (1990s), Iraq (2000s) or Syria (2010s). These territories are to be subjugated by any means necessary to install the most rigorously interpreted version of Shari’a, which is presented as a body of perfect laws, a divinely inspired political model, and the only possible expression of Islam. Militants who forgo traveling (*hijrah*) to foreign combat zones serve the cause at home, either with financing (with assets, *bi-amoualhim*), mobilizing volunteers (by language, *bil-lissan*), or launching armed attacks to open a new front (with the sword, *bis-sayf*). Through non-stop media coverage of these operations, especially on social networks, they galvanize supporters, seduce recruits, and intimidate opponents. Publicity for the jihadists represents an essential component of terrorism particularly during these assertive periods.

# Four Channels of Jihadist Support in the West



Travel (*hijrah*) to foreign combat zones



Financing the cause (*bi-amoualihim*)



Mobilizing others (*bil-lissan*)



Attacks on Western homelands (*bis-sayf*)

In these sequences, the armed fighter, Kalashnikov in hand, cartridge belt slung over his shoulder, and girded with explosives, becomes the movement's central figure. Zeal and urgency propel the militant ranks to pursue projects on a global scale. They feel themselves to be part of an inexorable dynamic, in whose last stage they will conquer Jerusalem and Rome before subduing the whole of humanity.

In the ebb, or retreat, phase, the jihad appears to have been defeated. Groups that had been scenting victory only a few months earlier are on the run. Terrorist organizations have been devastated by the forces they awakened and united against them, or they are fighting each other in fratricidal battles. They no longer have the operational capacity to conduct large-scale attacks abroad. Their spokesmen now sing the virtues of going underground, like Abu Mohamed al-Adnani, who anticipated an inevitable military defeat in Syria and called on Islamic State supporters to return to the shadows in the summer of 2016.<sup>17</sup> Their leaders, when not targeted in raids like Osama bin Laden was on May 2, 2011, or Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi on October 27, 2019, go into hiding or are captured. To the outside observer, armed jihad appears to be over, and the threat it poses is once again fading. The emblematic fighter of the previous phase now evolves into the figure of an emaciated prisoner, like the ISIS supporters held in camps in northern Syria or the Arab-Afghans penned up in Pakistan in the squalid Peshawar camps of the early 1990s.<sup>18</sup>

Such then is the common and morbid image of jihadism. But for the militants, the ebb phase responds to a different logic: No longer is the priority on the direct destabilization of enemy societies, but on ideological and intellectual reconfiguration, on immediate adaptation to the new legal or security situation. Certainly, attacks may still occur, but the security threat level has dropped considerably. Physical struggle gives way to ideological subversion from outside or within "unbeliever" countries. The supporters strive to stay off the radar, to minimize their punishment when they are tried, even if it means formally dissociating themselves from their former terrorist affiliations or minimizing the extent of their involvement. Those who refer to themselves on the first day of their trials as "soldiers of the Islamic State" are rare, such as Salah Abdeslam, the sole survivor of the November 13, 2015 Paris attackers.<sup>19</sup> For the most part, they cease delivering grandiloquent public speeches and abandon digital platforms in favor of private chat rooms on encrypted message boards.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Dabiq [ISIS propaganda magazine], "Break the cross", issue n° 15, July 31, 2016, 82 pages.

<sup>18</sup> See Leah Farrall, "al-Qaida's Foundation and Early History", *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Dec. 2017, vol. 11, n° 6 pp. 17-37.

<sup>19</sup> Tangi Salaün and Yiming Woo, "Main suspect tells Paris attacks trial he's 'an Islamic State soldier'", Reuters, September 8, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/security-high-paris-2015-jihadist-attacks-trial-begins-2021-09-07/>.

<sup>20</sup> See Moustafa Ayad, Nadeem Khan, Aymenn al-Tamimi, "The Terror Times: The Depth and Breadth of the Islamic State Alternative News Outlet Ecosystem Online", *ISD*, September, 2022, <https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/The-Terror-Times-The-Depth-and-Breadth-of-the-Islamic-State-Alternative-News-Outlet-Ecosystem-Online.pdf>.

During these interludes, jihadists recognize reality, admit—publicly or privately—their present inability to disrupt the status quo by armed action, and concede their military failure, from which the most intelligent distill lessons learned.<sup>21</sup>

The militants then gauge the balance of power by the enemy society's imperviousness to jihadist propaganda and to the twisted arguments with which they try to justify resorting to attacks. Along with discretion, education becomes a central preoccupation. They urge volunteers to fall back on outreach work (*da'wah*) in the immediate environment or in prison where most militants evolve after their arrest.<sup>22</sup>

They work to expand the reach among the Muslim population of what they call the religious and moral "disavowal" (*al-bara'*) of democratic values. They enlist those loyal (*al-wala'*) to the canons of Salafist Islam they promote.<sup>23</sup> These efforts seek to counteract their fear of cultural integration of Muslims in Europe, which they perceive as the greatest threat to Islam. In doing so, they echo the anxieties of the nativist far right. The militants seek to form new alliances to help discredit the forces in the hostile environment, and delegitimize the democratic principles and political institutions of Western modernity. Regardless of their numbers, they feel they are an enlightened vanguard whose goal is to awaken as many of their fellow believers as possible. In this way, they intend to prepare for the next expansion (flow) phase and attract more followers.

The main protagonist now morphs from vanquished warrior into the resolute militant. Now, it is a man or woman driven by the cause, one who wields the pen, uses their smartphones, and exploits the Qur'an and the books that Salafists and jihadists churn out and distribute freely as their weapons.

These tidal fluctuations have been conceptualized by a number of ideologists, prominently among them the Muslim Brotherhood's Sayyed Qutb. One of the primary sources of inspiration for the Salafi-jihadist movement, he was radicalized in Nasser's prisons and hanged by the regime in 1966. In his framing, militancy is a succession of periods of strength (*marhalat al-tamakkoun*) in which open struggle is decreed, or of weakness (*marhalat al-istid'af*) in which preaching, political struggle, and religious

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<sup>21</sup> Ingram, Haroro, Craig Whiteside, and Charlie Winter, 'The Fallujah Memorandum', The ISIS Reader: Milestone Texts of the Islamic State Movement (2020; online edn, Oxford Academic, 17 Sept. 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197501436.003.0006>, accessed 3 Oct. 2022.

<sup>22</sup> See Hugo Micheron, *Le jihadisme français, Quartiers, Syrie, Prison*, Gallimard, 2022 (poche), p.320-344.

<sup>23</sup> See Joas Wagemakers, "Framing The 'Threat To Islam': Al-Wala' Wa Al-Bara' In Salafi Discourse." *Arab Studies Quarterly*, vol. 30, no. 4, 2008, pp. 1–22. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41858559>. Accessed 3 Oct. 2022.

teaching take priority.<sup>24</sup> These interpretations let militants act out Muhammad's apostolate. The Prophet had managed to skirt open confrontations when he began his preaching, and the early Muslims were exposed to the hostility of Mecca's pagan tribes. After fleeing to Medina (the Hegira, or *hijrah*, in 622, year 0 of the Islamic calendar), they succeeded in turning the tide, gathering support, campaigning against the Meccans, and retaking the city, ushering in Islam's long period of expansion by the sword (*foutouhat*).<sup>25</sup>

Almost all jihadist militants are familiar with these Qur'anic references, even if they do not necessarily refer to them on a daily basis to justify their actions. The ideologues among them who intellectually structure the movement, however, use them easily and adapt them to the context.

### *Shadow and Light*

These fluctuations, so easy to grasp when it comes to the Norman, Breton, or Basque tides, remain the most misunderstood element of the jihadist movement's dynamic in the West.

The conventional approach tends to ignore these pendulum swings, and instead sizes up the phenomenon statically in the light of the terrorist threat it represents, i.e. through a narrow focus solely on the rising tide and easily-observable and quantifiable metrics like terrorist attacks. The mutations that occur during the ebb sequences and which determine the form of the next terrorist high tide are of little interest. By failing to take into account the dual political and religious dimensions of this ideology and how it is disseminated, European societies risk marching to the rhythm imposed by jihadists, at the cost of failing to anticipate their long-term reconfigurations. In fact, when public acknowledgement of and reaction to the threat does come, it will be out of phase, as terrorist organizations will already have reached peak operational capacity and power to do harm. As history shows us, the awakening is often rude, shock sets in, and the reality of jihadism is rediscovered with each attack.

This asynchrony is compounded by a bias specific to the media. When the wave of attacks crests, the democratic debate is caught short, the subject gets sensationalized and receives exceptional attention. Terrorist groups' capabilities tend to be overstated, which is to their advantage as it lets them build a victorious narrative and intimidate their opponents. Publications proliferate, as was the case after 9/11, in the wake of the creation of the Islamic State of Iraq, or with the rise of ISIS and the departure of

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<sup>24</sup> See Sayyid Qutb, *Milestones*, Islamic Book Service, 2001, pp. 7-76 and Gilles Kepel, *The Roots of Radical Islam*, 2005, Saqi, pp. 23-67.

<sup>25</sup> David Cook, *Understanding Jihad*, University of California Press, 2015, pp. 5-31.

Europeans by the thousands to Syria. Once the emergency abates, when jihadism begins to ebb again, the illusion of a lasting, if not definitive, retreat sets in. Lack of interest or fatigue compromise vigilance and once again leads to a misjudgment of the militants' ability to adapt to new situations, ignoring that they are experienced in clandestine work.

Instead of accumulating knowledge as the jihadist phenomenon grows, with each decade the original blind spots are revived, *mutatis mutandis*, to impair continuity and unity of analysis. Thus, on the eve of 9/11, many academics agreed with the thesis that the end of "Islamism" was at hand<sup>26</sup>. Ten years later, the elimination of Osama Bin Laden married to the hope raised by the pro-democratic revolutions of the Arab Spring led others to infer the disappearance of the "global jihad", even while it was poised to peak again in Syria. Recently, the military defeat of the Islamic State in the Levant led to similar hasty responses, even from informed and respected pundits. For example, on April 29, 2021, Fareed Zakaria, the star CNN commentator and Washington Post columnist, predicted the collapse of jihadist militancy, an analysis that is widely accepted in the U.S. today.<sup>27</sup> Of course, the public debate is by no means limited to these positions of uneven value. Dozens of works during the same period have enriched the discussion in academia and the media. But the prevailing public sentiment remains one that is isolated to two extremes, between which it too blindly oscillates.

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<sup>26</sup> Asef Bayat, "The coming of a post-Islamist Society", *Critical Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 5, Issue 9, 1996, pp. 43-52.

<sup>27</sup> Fareed Zakaria, "Ten years later, Islamist terrorism isn't the threat it used to be", *The Washington Post*, April 29, 2021, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/ten-years-later-islamist-terrorism-isnt-the-threat-it-used-to-be/2021/04/29/deb88256-a91c-11eb-bca5-048b2759a489\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/ten-years-later-islamist-terrorism-isnt-the-threat-it-used-to-be/2021/04/29/deb88256-a91c-11eb-bca5-048b2759a489_story.html).

## European Jihadism: Three Decades of Ebb and Flow

Physical and ideological struggle, visibility and discretion, urgency and patience, attack and indoctrination— whether it wears the black suit of the fighter, the white tunic of the preacher, or the glasses of the Islamist intellectual— jihadism knows how to be flexible. It is adept at changing its face and strategy in coping with the adversities confronting it, an adaptable militant movement that ebbs and flows according to the context. However, it does not cease to exist between these different phases any more than the ocean evaporates between high and low tide.

The difficulty of conceiving it in this light, i.e. as an evolutionary politico-religious movement, explains why its inroads into the European environment were often flagged too late. This has been all the more damaging due to the slowness of the process. Over the past thirty years, jihadism in Europe has ebbed and flowed with astonishing regularity, at the rate of one complete tidal cycle per decade.

### *The 1990s: Cycle 1- Low Tide*

In the early 1990s, the collapse of the Afghan front marked the decline of the jihad that formed there, but not the extinction anticipated by military strategists. Thousands of "Arab-Afghan" volunteers did not lay down their arms after the fall of the USSR. Some returned home, but the others partook of the smorgasbord of conflicts spread out before them by global geopolitics. They transited to new hot spots in the Euro-Mediterranean zone: to Bosnia (1992-1996) following the implosion of Yugoslavia; then to Algeria during the "black decade" that ravaged the country (1993-1998); and to Chechnya (1998-2001). The "returnees" from Afghanistan to these crisis zones perceived their continued struggle as a natural extension of their previous undertakings where they could reanimate themselves by recycling similar logics. In their minds, the Algerian regime, the Serbian militias, and the Chechen dictator took the place of the communist powers they had fought ten years earlier. They substituted each as contemporary representations of what Salafi-jihadists equate with *taghut*, the image of iniquitous tyrants who trample on divine laws, persecute good Muslims, and against which they were compelled to rise up.

At the same time, in ways that would only be understood after 9/11, veterans of the Afghan jihad made their way to European shores. London serves as the paradigmatic case. At the time, Europe had yet to be identified as a target (with the exception of France, which Algerian jihadists attacked between 1994 and 1996).<sup>28</sup> Instead, the militants saw it as a place of retreat, a safe haven from the repression that awaited

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<sup>28</sup> Petter Nesser, *Islamist Terrorism in Europe: A History*, Oxford University Press, 2016, pp. 68-81.

them in their countries of origin, and where they could organize logistical support for fighters abroad. A clutch of preachers who had passed through or were linked to Afghanistan settled in the British capital, singing its praises. Among them was the famous al-Qaeda propagandist, Abu Mus'ab al-Suri, who described London as the place of "Islamic revival, especially for jihadists"<sup>29</sup>. These men would in retrospect be referred to as the "emirs of Londonistan" who repeatedly assured the police that they were promoting the cause abroad, but "preventing any terrorist attack on British soil."<sup>30</sup> In , a jihadist ecosystem whose diversity would never be equaled emerged around the positions they had taken over in the capital's places of worship (mosques in Finsbury Park, Regent's Park, Tottenham, Brixton). Mobilizing several hundred of the faithful, they proceeded to set up "cultural" centers, open ultraconservative Islamic bookstores, and organize conferences and assemblies. In some cases, such as during a meeting in Wembley on August 7, 1994, calls for jihad rang out publicly before an audience of several hundred people.<sup>31</sup> They launched newspapers and magazines backing the cause in Algeria and Bosnia, preached homophobia, anti-Semitism, misogyny and subverting Western democracies from within. An emblematic speaker at the time, the Syrian, Omar Bakri, founded a nonprofit called *al-Muhajiroun* (literally "the emigrants," a Qur'anic term referring to the first Muslims, companions of the prophet on his *hijra*) with the avowed goal of establishing a caliphate on British soil and one day flying the black banner on the steps of 10 Downing Street.<sup>32</sup> This ambitious project brought only ridicule from the British tabloids and wariness in Islamic circles. Yet, Bakri and his followers worked hard and spread *al-Muhajiroun's* activities throughout the United Kingdom beyond London and into Luton, Manchester, Birmingham, Leicester, and Leeds in particular within a few months. Each city would become a springboard for departures to Syria twenty years later. A few of Bakri's followers also went to Scandinavia, Belgium, and the Netherlands, where they established contacts mainly in student circles close to the Muslim Brotherhood. Several of these go-betweens later surfaced in terrorist cases<sup>33</sup>.

The activism within these militant ecosystems gave rise to intellectual reconfigurations that are crucial to the evolution of jihadism in the West and representative of the functioning of a low tide. For example, the followers of the seminaries run by the Londonistan emirs began theorizing the construction of symbolic dividing lines

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<sup>29</sup> See Brynjar Lia, *Architect of global jihad : the life of al-Qaida strategist Abu Mus'ab al-Suri*, Hurst and Co, 2008, pp. 87-89.

<sup>30</sup> See Robert Leiken, *Europe's Angry Muslims*, Oxford University Press, 2015, pp. 163-164

<sup>31</sup> See The Investigative Project on Terrorism, "Select Quotes from Historic 1994 Hizb ut-Tahrir Rally in London's Wembley Arena", July 17, 2009, <https://www.investigativeproject.org/1096/select-quotes-from-historic-1994-hizb-ut-tahrir>.

<sup>32</sup> Mitchell Silber & Jesse Morton, "From Revolution Muslim to Islamic State, An Inside Look at the American Roots of ISIS' Virtual Caliphate", The New America Foundation, June 2018, p. 11.

<sup>33</sup> Robin Simcox, Hannah Stuart, Houriya Ahmed, Douglas Murray, "Islamism Terrorism, The British Connections", Second Edition, The Henry Jackson Society and The Centre for Social Cohesion, 2011, pp. IX-XI.

between British identity and religious identity. In 1993, one of Bakri's students translated for the first time into English a thesis on the Wahhabi principle of "loyalty and disavowal" (*al-wala'a wal-bara'a*).<sup>34</sup> This concept, originally developed in 19<sup>th</sup> century Saudi Arabia, would become the intellectual foundation of Salafi-jihadism in 21<sup>st</sup> century Europe.<sup>35</sup> As reinterpreted in England during the 1990s, it sought to have the Muslim choose between two systems deemed irreconcilable. It pitted Islamic ways against the "unbeliever" way, religious law against British laws, religion against the corrupt, worldly culture against the West. No bridge was to be constructed between the two universes, described as monolithic and antithetical. Friendship with Muslims was to be automatic, rejection was to be the default attitude towards unbelievers, with an exception made for those who might be of passing use to the cause.

Thus, Omar Bakri invited his students to renounce their British citizenship and denounce the legitimacy of democratic values and principles. He also counseled them to refuse political and cultural integration, to reject the morals of the miscreants, and to abstain from voting. Bakri regularly palavered with the authorities, which had grown concerned over his vehemence, reprimanded anyone who was "ready to sacrifice the *shahada* [the profession of one's Muslim faith] in exchange for an English passport."<sup>36</sup> These principles theorize a form of "Muslim supremacy" mirroring that of white supremacist groups in the United States and Europe. The activities of *al-Muhajiroun's* members, driven by religious beliefs, thus had social and political repercussions. The militants, often young British students in the throes of awakening to their faith-based identity, focused on Islamizing the lifestyles of British neighborhoods. They drew new invisible, moral, symbolic, and geographical boundaries within society between Muslims and non-Muslims, the latter being portrayed as hostile, dirty, and corrupt. Religious education and a spreading anti-democratic discourse served to justify a mandatory return to a supposed Islamic "purity", which would otherwise be "contaminated" and "altered" by Western values that were presented as Satanic in nature.

Identical but smaller microcosms took hold elsewhere in Europe and drew the contours of a militant geography in Brussels (Molenbeek) and to a lesser extent in Copenhagen, Bonn, Madrid or Lyon (the latter city was home to Khaled Kelkal, the man responsible for the 1995 attacks on the Paris metro). Thus, the seeds of Salafi-jihadist preaching were first sown in a peaceful manner in the 1990s. They were dispersed by a politico-religious militancy whose effects on the social fabric, mentalities, and worldviews are powerful, but rarely understood and even then often not taken seriously. In retrospect,

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<sup>34</sup> Muhammad Saeed al-Qahtani, *Al-Wala' Wa'l-Bara' According to the 'Aqeedah of the Salaf*, Part 2, Al-Firdous, 1999.

<sup>35</sup> See Joas Wagemakers, *op. cit.*

<sup>36</sup> Omar Bakri Muhammed, *The British Plan Upon Islam and Muslims: A Continuation of the Crusader Wars*, Ad-Dawah Books, 2004, p. 91.

these veterans appear to have been the first transmitters of jihadist ideas from Afghanistan to Europe. They were jihadists before they were considered terrorists by the West. Their initiatives prefigured the international rise of al-Qaeda, some of whose proxies were influential long before 9/11. The difficulty in connecting these dots at the time was reinforced by the effects of a concurrent geopolitical lull that had set in. In 1996, the Bosnian war was concluded with a cease-fire and a settlement under the aegis of the UN. In Algeria, Zitouni, the leader of the main jihadist group, the GIA, was killed. The massacres of two villages, Benthala and Raïs, literally put to the sword in 1997, discredited the group and confirmed the political victory of the Algerian regime, which consolidated with the adoption of a law of "civil concord" in 1999. Nevertheless, international jihad was undergoing profound changes. Far from disappearing with the Cold War, it was being structured globally.

### *Cycle 1- High Tide*

The first cycle's ascendant phase began in 1996 after the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan and the formation of their "Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan". This event breathed new life into international Islamist circles. It led to the new masters in Kabul taking Osama bin Laden and the leadership of his organization, al-Qaeda, under their wing. However, it also ushered in a change of strategy: the shift to global jihad, a mantra that reverberated in the European microcosms. In London, Brussels, and Berlin, the veterans told their European protégés to depart for the training camps in Afghanistan. Some of them, like the German Christian Ganczarski, who gained notoriety in 2019 for trying to assassinate prison guards while imprisoned in France, went on to lead large-scale operations.<sup>37</sup> Bin Laden, himself a veteran of the fight against the Soviets and a financier of the "Arab-Afghans," roused Muslims around the world to fight "Zionist" and American interests in a global battle against godlessness. He formulated a declaration of war against the United States in two fatwas issued in 1996 and 1998.<sup>38</sup> This led to a first series of attacks against US embassies in East Africa and Yemen, and culminated in the attacks on 9/11. These were orchestrated in part from European rear bases (a Hamburg cell, Madrid financiers, and Londonistan ideologues in particular). Nineteen hijackers took over four airliners and flew three of them into financial and military symbols of the American superpower: two into the World Trade Center in New York, and the third into the Pentagon in Washington. The fourth plane, ostensibly aimed at either the Capitol or the White House, crashed into a field in Pennsylvania as the passengers fought the hijackers for control of the aircraft.

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<sup>37</sup> F.W Horst, *Salafist Jihadism in Germany*, International Institute for Counter-Terrorism, January 12, 2011, pp. 9-12.

<sup>38</sup> Bruce Lawrence (ed.), *Messages to the World, The Statements of Osama Bin Laden*, Verso, 2005, pp. 24-62.

*The 2000s: Cycle 2- Low Tide*

9/11 was a momentous event, and its long-term implications are probably still not fully fathomed. It marked the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and the emergence of jihadism as a full-fledged force in world geopolitics. It also had serious implications for this movement, whose fortunes once again started to ebb. In late 2001, the defeat of the Taliban regime, which had refused to give up Osama Bin Laden, weakened jihadist networks. So, too, did the killing of several of its high-ranking cadres in the War on Terror declared by Washington.

This retreat phase would last about three years. Between 2001 and 2004, most Western European countries responded to the threat by strengthening their anti-terrorist legal arsenal. In London, as elsewhere, the top jihadist leaders were arrested or went on the run, and most of the networks there were dismantled.<sup>39</sup> For the authorities and public opinion, counterterrorism became the policy of choice. Jihadism, according to this logic, was an aggregation of terrorist cells, a form that it could effectively take in the ascendant phase. However, the militant aspect that it defaults to in periods of retreat like this was not addressed. Meanwhile, the militants were visibly agitating in certain neighborhoods the image of the Salafism that was gaining ground in Western Europe.

Therefore, the early 2000s were a period of calmness in security terms, with many plots foiled.<sup>40</sup> However, ideologically, this period saw the start of the Europeanization of jihadism, which went largely unrecognized. While the active networks could be broken up by arresting or causing them to flee, the militant ecosystems they had established during the previous decade remained intact. These would be taken over by the European nationals who had learned at their feet, with yesterday's disciples now emerging as the precursors of today's Western jihadism.

This pattern was repeated everywhere the veterans had clustered. In Toulouse, former Algerian jihadists decamped from the Mirail neighborhoods, but not without having first passed on their knowledge to the Clain brothers. The pair became pillars of the French jihad movement, claiming responsibility for the November 13, 2015 attacks on behalf of ISIS before they were killed in Syria in 2019.<sup>41</sup> In Ulm, Germany's first jihadist group was formed in 2004 after an Egyptian veteran of the Bosnian jihad exited the stage.<sup>42</sup> At the same time, a number of Britons were charged in Leicester with terrorist plots,

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<sup>39</sup> Robert Leiken, *op. cit.*

<sup>40</sup> Dominique Reynié (dir.), *op. cit.*

<sup>41</sup> Elian Peltier, "Fabien Clain, Prominent French Voice of ISIS, Is Reported Killed in Syria", *The New York Times*, February 28, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/28/world/europe/fabien-clain-death-isis-france.html>.

<sup>42</sup> Horst, *op. cit.*, pp. 20-22.

all of whom had been trained in the same way by the Londonistan Islamists.<sup>43</sup> The same happened to Salafi-jihadist followers who appeared in The Hague in the Netherlands.<sup>44</sup>

These young followers, whose examples could be multiplied in the eight European countries most affected by jihadism— France, Great Britain, Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands, Denmark, Spain, and Sweden— were the "pioneers". They would become the vectors of the shift from a jihad conceived and waged in the Middle East to one imported into a Europe that gradually ended up in its crosshairs. Like their predecessors, these individuals tried to act primarily locally. They organized religious seminars, founded schools and sometimes "cultural" associations; in short, they engaged in grassroots preaching, which took the form of neighborhood militancy. They were very much the minority in the neighborhoods where they operated: At the beginning, the Clain brothers and their entourage constituted a few dozen individuals in an area with forty-five thousand inhabitants. The same dynamic existed in Ulm, The Hague, Malmö, etc. Even in neighborhoods where these dynamics were most highly developed, such as in Molenbeek, the militant environments remained of modest size. This observation discredits *a priori* generalizations about the movement that some polemicists try to exacerbate, as well as the wholesale stigmatization of these neighborhoods. However, it has also served as an excuse for political inaction or even complacency, leaving the militants in question room to maneuver to their advantage.

Simultaneously, the "jihadi clusters" phenomenon was coupled with another, even less understood one: the beginning of jihadist preaching behind prison bars. Indeed, with the incarceration of some jihadi veterans in European lockups, part of the process of ideological transmission shifted from the neighborhoods where they had settled to a prison audience receptive to their thesis. In England's Belmarsh prison, the Algerian Abou Doha, who participated in several attempted attacks, including the one against the Christmas market and the cathedral in Strasbourg in 2000, turned into an exceptional recruiter.<sup>45</sup> When he was released in 2004, he even trained to become a "listener"— someone who is allowed into prison visitation rooms to lend an attentive ear to prisoners and to coach them through their solitude. In France, at Fleury-Mérogis prison, Djamel Beghal, who led an aborted attack on the American Embassy in 2001, took charge of the religious education of Cherif Kouachi and Amedy Coulibaly.<sup>46</sup> Kouachi and Coulibaly later executed the editorial staff of the *Charlie Hebdo* magazine

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<sup>43</sup> Petter Nesser, op. cit., p. 108.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 150.

<sup>45</sup> James Brandon, *Unlocking Al-Qaida, Islamist Extremism in British Prisons*, Quilliam Foundation, 2008, p. 32.

<sup>46</sup> Read Scott Sayare, *The Ultimate Terrorist Factory, Are French prisons incubating extremism?*, Harpers, report, January 2016, <https://harpers.org/archive/2016/01/the-ultimate-terrorist-factory/>.

and customers and staff in the HyperCacher supermarket on January 7 and 9, 2015.<sup>47</sup> In Denmark, Saïd Mansour, an Egyptian jihadist who had lived in the country since the 1990s and had been imprisoned multiple times, was reportedly responsible for radicalizing a man who tried to massacre participants at a conference on freedom of expression on February 14, 2015, in Copenhagen.<sup>48</sup> As a recent interview with a senior French prison official attests, it took the authorities a decade to catch on to these radicalization methods, not until the early 2010s.<sup>49</sup>

There is a clear generational dimension to the evolution of European jihadism; trained by veterans, the pioneers took over and became preachers and recruiters for the battle abroad. In the era of high-speed internet connections (2005) and social networks (from 2006 onwards), their activities are still rooted primarily in real territories.

### *Cycle 2- High Tide*

Beginning in 2004, the deteriorating security situation in Iraq, set in motion by the American invasion a year earlier, spurred on the first European jihad networks. A branch of al-Qaeda appeared in eastern Iraq and proclaimed the founding of an "Islamic State of Iraq". It proved to be a short-lived experiment, but not before generating an unprecedented stir in the jihadist galaxy, one that would serve as a prototype for ISIS ten years later.

Unlike most parts of the world, there has never been a "European" branch of al-Qaeda, due to the fact that Europe does not qualify as a Muslim land that needs rescuing by the standards of al-Qaeda's global struggle. Therefore, the United States remained al-Qaeda's chief enemy. However, this logic was beginning to erode with the Iraqi crisis and the concurrent emancipation of the pioneers. As nationals of the European Union, they considered themselves duty-bound to "defend" Islam locally against their leaders and fellow citizens, who they lumped together as enemies of Allah according to the logic of loyalty and disavowal now taught in Salafist circles.

Amid this ferment, on November 2, 2004, a young Salafist from The Hague with ties to jihad veterans murdered the Dutch filmmaker, Theo Van Gogh, in the street.<sup>50</sup> Van Gogh had made a short film that Muslim conservatives railed against as an insult to

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<sup>47</sup> Reuters, "Five years on, France to try suspects in Charlie Hebdo killings", August 28, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-france-charliehebdo/five-years-on-france-to-try-suspects-in-charlie-hebdo-killings-idUSKBN25O21W>.

<sup>48</sup> Griff Witte and Karla Adam, "Danish attacks echo France", The Washington Post, February 16, 2015, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/danish-police-kill-copenhagen-shooting-suspect/2015/02/15/8bed7a70-b50a-11e4-9423-f3d0a1ec335c\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/danish-police-kill-copenhagen-shooting-suspect/2015/02/15/8bed7a70-b50a-11e4-9423-f3d0a1ec335c_story.html).

<sup>49</sup> Author's interview with the Director of the French Prisons Administration, November 2022, Paris.

<sup>50</sup> DW, "Van Gogh Murderer Sentenced to Life", July 26, 2005, <https://www.dw.com/en/van-gogh-murderer-sentenced-to-life/a-1659337>.

Islam. In the young killer's mind, the director's death was a just punishment. His act horrified a country that had made tolerance a cardinal virtue of public life. It ushered in a chain of dramatic events that extends to the present day. Indeed, it was the prelude to the affair of the cartoons in Denmark (October 2005), where the cartoonists and the newspaper that published them were the object of multiple threats and attacks.<sup>51</sup> This affair ricocheted to France following the republication of the cartoons in *Charlie Hebdo* (2006). Now it was the editorial staff's turn to be threatened and attacked several times, before being massacred in January 2015. This episode led to a long trial, which was marred by an assassination attempt and, above all, by the beheading of Professor Samuel Paty as he left his school on October 16, 2020, for having discussed these events in his high school civics class.<sup>52</sup>

The mid-2000s were also scarred by the deadliest attacks in Europe to this day: the Madrid Atocha railway station bombings on March 11, 2004.<sup>53</sup> They were conducted by Salafi Spaniards in the entourage of a preacher who had been linked for several years with veterans in London and Hamburg. The bombers portrayed their carnage as a logical sanction, ordered by divine law, in response to the Spanish army's participation in the war in Iraq.<sup>54</sup> This attempt to legitimize the attacks on both religious and political grounds has served as a model for their counterparts in other terrorism cases since then, such as the November 13, 2015 attacks in France.

In a similar pattern, on July 7, 2005, four British men, whose leader had been a member of *al-Muhajiroun* circles and had trained in Afghanistan, blew themselves up on London public transport.<sup>55</sup> At the same time, dozens of European volunteers left for Iraq, intensifying the two-way traffic with the war zones.<sup>56</sup> They included several who would soon come to personify contemporary jihadism. A member of the Buttes-Chaumont group in Paris traveled to Iraq and fought in the grueling 2004 battle of Fallujah against the American army.<sup>57</sup> He is now in prison for his involvement in several planned attacks in France. In Brussels, Osama Attar, a young man from the

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<sup>51</sup> BBC, "Kurt Westergaard, Danish cartoonist behind Muhammad cartoon, dies at 86", July 19, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-57883392>.

<sup>52</sup> The Economist, "Samuel Paty was killed on October 16<sup>th</sup>", October 22, 2020, <https://www.economist.com/obituary/2020/10/22/samuel-paty-was-killed-on-october-16th>.

<sup>53</sup> Fernando Reinares, *Al-Qaeda's Revenge: The 2004 Madrid Train Bombings*. Columbia University Press, 2016. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7312/rein70454>. Accessed 3 Oct. 2022.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> CNN, "July 7 2005 London Bombings Fast Facts", June 23, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2013/11/06/world/europe/july-7-2005-london-bombings-fast-facts>.

<sup>56</sup> Petter Nesser, "Jihadism in Western Europe After the Invasion of Iraq: Tracing Motivational Influences from the Iraq War on Jihadist Terrorism in Western Europe", *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, Volume 29, 2006, Issue 4, pp. 323-342, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10576100600641899?journalCode=uter20>.

<sup>57</sup> United Nations, "Peter Cherif", September 29, 2015, [https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/sanctions/1267/aq\\_sanctions\\_list/summaries/individual/peter-cherif](https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/sanctions/1267/aq_sanctions_list/summaries/individual/peter-cherif).

Laeken district, followed the same route after crossing paths with a Syrian preacher from Molenbeek.<sup>58</sup> Taken prisoner in Fallujah, the Americans held him in a cell with Abu Mohamed al-Adnani, who would become the spokesman for ISIS ten years later. Attar was repatriated for medical reasons, with the support of several human rights organizations, but the state of his health did not keep him from intense proselytizing upon his return to Brussels. He would join ISIS shortly after the group emerged in Syria, and was entrusted with organizing the attacks of November 13, 2015 in Paris, and, indirectly, those of March 22, 2016 in Brussels, carried out by childhood friends and cousins living in Laeken and Molenbeek.<sup>59</sup>

Thus, at the end of the 2000s, a certain number of mechanisms could already be observed that would become key to the later successes of ISIS in the 2010s: Europeans departing for war zones abroad, returning to commit attacks, instrumentalizing public opinion, and mobilizing on the Internet, in prisons, and among the entourages of the pioneers.

At the same time, al-Qaeda networks were retreating on various fronts while once again plunging into staggering patterns of violence. Attempts by al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) to unify armed groups in North Africa led nowhere, but still resulted in the deaths of a considerable number of innocent people.<sup>60</sup> The jihad in Iraq was defeated militarily, thanks in particular to the mobilization of local Sunni forces, but at the cost of an average two thousand civilian deaths per month in 2009.<sup>61</sup> The Islamic State in Iraq was driven underground a year later. The American Islamologist Will McCants recorded a household scene that reveals the poisonous atmosphere reigning during its last days. In this vignette, one of the organization's emirs is scolded by his wife, exhausted by the discomfort of living in a yurt and incensed at her husband's blinkered attitude: "But where is the Islamic State you're talking about? We are living in the middle of the desert!"<sup>62</sup>

### *The 2010s: Cycle 3- Low Tide*

In the early 2010s, the movement went through a new period of crisis marked by the defeat of the jihadist project in Iraq and the death of Osama Bin Laden on May 2, 2011.<sup>63</sup> Most of the leaders who embodied the revival of the organization had been

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<sup>58</sup> Georges Dallemagne, Christophe Lamfalussy, *Le Clandestin de Daech*, Kennes, 2021, pp. 47-59.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 161-181

<sup>60</sup> William McCants, *ISIS Apocalypse*, The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State, Picador, 2016, p. 41.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42

<sup>63</sup> Barak Obama Presidential Library, "Death of Osama bin Laden", May 2, 2011, <https://www.obamalibrary.gov/timeline/item/death-osama-bin-laden>.

neutralized, including the American ideologue, Anwar al-Awlaqi. An online drummer for terrorism, he was killed on September 30, 2011, in Yemen by an American drone strike.<sup>64</sup> In Europe, most of the pioneers ended up in prison, where they often began recruiting their fellow inmates, employing the methods described earlier. The rise of social networks (Facebook and Twitter) offered new platforms for recruiting and mobilizing members, but the immediate security threat level decreased.

However, the cumulative effects of both the global economic crisis, which hit the industrialized countries hard, and the empowerment of Salafist preaching networks now made themselves felt. In Germany, the trial of the Sauerland cell in the summer of 2009 became fodder for radical websites for the first time. The Salafi-jihadist discussion platform "*ahlu-sunna*" castigated putting the terrorists on trial as an "unjust" act, and many other forums called on their followers to throng the public hearings, which they did by the dozens.<sup>65</sup> Thus was highlighted the increasingly public and political mobilization of German Salafi networks and the issue of prisons, where many European jihadists were serving time in the late 2000s.

At the same time, a string of Salafist initiatives emerged in the early 2010s from the wreckage of *al-Muhajiroun*, which the United Kingdom had broken up in 2005. Among them were Sharia4UK in Great Britain, Sharia4Holland in the Netherlands, Sharia4Belgium in the Low Countries, Militu Ibrahim in Germany, Kaldet til Islam in Denmark, Profetens Ummah in Norway, and Forsane al-Izza in France.<sup>66</sup> The latter received public attention in June 2010 during a demonstration in front of a McDonald's restaurant in Limoges that denounced the links between the fast-food chain and the worldwide "Jewish foundation".<sup>67</sup> With their faces hidden by *keffiyehs*, the handful of militants vilified "satanic secularism" before pelting the building. During another demonstration in September, they stomped on the penal code and burned the civil code, staging the religious "disavowal" of "impious" laws,<sup>68</sup> tactics reminiscent of those later used by the young people who would burn their European passports in Syria after joining the Islamic State's "Caliphate".

All of these groups, however small, yearned for the establishment of Islamic law in their countries of origin. They used the same methods pioneered by the preacher Omar Bakri in the 1990s: deliberately provoke public opinion in order to gain wide exposure and monopolize the discourse on religion. Their objective was twofold: on

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<sup>64</sup> Scott Shane, "The Lessons of Anwar al-Awlaki", *The New York Times*, August 27, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/30/magazine/the-lessons-of-anwar-al-awlaki.html>.

<sup>65</sup> Horst, *op. cit.*

<sup>66</sup> Lorenzo Vidino, "Sharia4: From Confrontational Activism to Militancy", *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 9, issue 2, 2015, pp. 2-16.

<sup>67</sup> *Le Parisien*, "Guéant dissout une association de fondamentalistes musulmans", January 24th, 2012, <https://www.leparisien.fr/archives/gueant-dissout-une-association-de-fondamentalistes-musulmans-24-01-2012-1826336.php>.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

the one hand, there was the need to intimidate Muslims who did not buy into their radical vision and rejected their pretensions to embodying the "authentic" Islam. On the other hand, they tried to provoke negative media attention in order to intensify the face-off with the extreme right. This confrontation let them seize the mantle of defenders of a religion under siege, threatened by the rise of racism. These polarization dynamics allowed them to justify the radical nature of their positions, and even to trivialize the use of violence in the name of a right to "self-defense". Thus, in Molenbeek, Jean-Louis Denis, known as "the Submissive" (translation of the term "Muslim"), a young Salafist close to these different movements, made a name for himself with his hate speech.<sup>69</sup> He situated his activities in the filiation of the center opened by the Syrian Basam Ayachi in a commune in 1996, which Belgian law enforcement had shuttered in 2012 because of its ties to jihadist circles.<sup>70</sup> The Submissive distributed leaflets in the streets with titles such as: "O you who adhere to democracy, the vile fruit of secularism, O you who steal, here is what you are accomplices of."<sup>71</sup> Then, he enumerated what these movements wanted all "Muslims" worthy of the name to reject: "democracy, homosexuality, homoparentality, secularists, Freemasons, Christians, Jews, atheists, Darwinians." In addition to the highly publicized public harangues, his activity in Brussels took the form of social outreach to the needy with the aim of making them aware of the benefits of jihad. He founded an unofficial association called "Aidons les pauvres" (Let's help the poor), through which he distributed food rations to homeless people living in the Brussels train stations while indoctrinating them on the jihad taking shape in Syria.<sup>72</sup> Following internal disputes, he set up a second entity, called the "Restos du Tawhid", a kind of Salafi-jihadist food bank.<sup>73</sup> He posted videos on YouTube of himself formulating religious reminders (*tadhkir*) and vehement rants. In them, he also inclined toward incriminating Belgian Muslim leaders and leveling threats against them:

"The main *dawa'a* preaching is that palace scholars who are paid by secular governments preach lies about Allah .... I no longer invite people to head to the front, but instead to first to sweep away our corrupt imams and scholars ... remove them and replace them with authentic Muslims, who preach authentic Islam, pure monotheism. This is my new battlefield."<sup>74</sup>

The Submissive did little to conceal his aims: "This is not just a war against America and capitalism, it is first and foremost an ideological war between the authentic

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<sup>69</sup> Pieter Van Ostaeyen, "Belgian Radical Networks and the Road to the Brussels Attacks", CTC Sentinel, Vol. 9, Issue 6, June 2016, pp. 7-13.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> The following quotes of Jean-Louis Denis are part of the 122 pages act of condemnation read during his sentencing at Brussels Court on January 29, 2016, to which the author was granted access.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

Muslims and the others who call themselves secularists."<sup>75</sup> He laid down the punishment reserved for the believers who would not come over to his side: "I tell you that the law of Allah requires the slaughter of the apostate Muslims who have been excommunicated by these Salafists who fight against the Muslims."<sup>76</sup>

Thus, by the end of the 2000s, Salafism was visible, vocal, and organized to a degree in Europe. Its followers were attacking both the values of European countries and of Muslims who did not identify with their extremist and maximalist vision of religion and identity. These groups based their media arguments on a siege myth, alleging that they, the "true" believers, were persecuted by "Islamophobic" democracies and threatened by Muslims who would accommodate their faith to their citizenship. In 2010, four years before the rise of ISIS, these Islamist microcosms were campaigning openly in European societies for the application of Shari'a and the rejection of the disbelieving "system" in which they lived. They conducted their campaigns at a time when al-Qaeda was losing traction. In fact, it was not so much the inherent logic of the jihadist organization that accounted for the emergence of these Salafi-revolutionary groups, but rather the conjunction of other factors described above, which had been at work since the early 1990s. Foremost among these was the Europeanization of jihadism under the influence of first the veterans, and then the pioneers. The ideological revolution brought about by Salafism within European Islam and embraced by tens of thousands of people in Europe also played a role. The militancy of a minority among them was the decisive factor. Modeled on the *al-Muhajiroun* movement, it now took the form of an increasingly aggressive Salafist populism. In fact, from the early 2010s on, during a period of "low tide", the determining factors that would explain the gravitational pull of the Islamic State's "Caliphate" initiative were lining up in the Salafi-jihadist galaxy.

### *Cycle 3- High Tide*

In early 2012, a new foreign front was opened as the Syrian political crisis in the wake of the "Arab Spring" escalated into civil war. The atrocious repression of the protests by the regime and the disintegrating democratic opposition allowed jihadists to establish themselves in Syria's north and east.<sup>77</sup> Diehards from the former Iraqi jihad network that refused to abandon the "Islamic State" project moved into Syria.<sup>78</sup> The erstwhile European pioneers who had forged links with them were the first to join them, starting in 2012-2013.<sup>79</sup> Because of their previous ties, they were integrated into

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> à Nikolaos Van Dam, *Destroying a Nation, The Civil War in Syria*, I.B. Tauris, 2017, p. X-XI.

<sup>78</sup> Michael Weiss, Hassan Hassan, *ISIS, inside the Army of Terror*, Regan Arts, , 2016, chapter 2 and 3.

<sup>79</sup> Micheron, op. cit., pp. 178-182.

jihadist organizations with a particular level of responsibility. This aids in explaining their involvement in subsequent attack campaigns in the West, as they set up channels between Europe and the Levant to facilitate bringing in other volunteers from among their followers. Groups backing Shari'a implementation in Europe acted as relays for their initiatives, and they repackaged their local preaching activities to sending fighters to Syria, which Jean-Louis Denis, referred to as the extension of the "Belgian front".<sup>80</sup> Ultimately, these organizations were dissolved and their leaders arrested in most countries; however, some found a way to escape justice. Shiraz Tariq, the Danish leader of Kaldet til Islam, died in Syria, weapon in hand, in 2013.<sup>81</sup> The German rapper, Deso Dogg, who founded Milet Ibrahim, joined ISIS only to meet his end as well.<sup>82</sup> In France, in the wake of the Merah affair, Forsane al-Izza was disbanded in the spring of 2012 as its members were in full planning mode to murder a magistrate of the Jewish faith.<sup>83</sup> Several managed to escape to the Syrian fronts before they could be tried.

Between 2012 and 2014, Syria became the epicenter of a terrible international crisis that would give birth to the most outsized jihadist project yet. By the summer of 2014, the country was on the verge of disintegrating. Internationally, a Russian veto in the UN Security Council paralyzed prospects for a settlement. Western policy predicated on a rapid collapse of the Damascus regime no longer fielded any coherent strategy. As the crisis was about to reach its climax, ISIS reared its head in the midst of the chaos to make a claim that would have seemed preposterous had it not been for its global consequences. The "Islamic State", the world's most radical organization, announced nothing less than the reestablishment of the universal Islamic Caliphate. Its spokesman urged believers to move under the protection of the new "commander of the faithful", to perform the hegira (*hijrah*, migration) to Syria. He called for unleashing jihad against the "unbelievers" and "apostates" all over the world.<sup>84</sup>

The proclamation by ISIS suddenly tore the veil off the reach of European jihadism. The first demonstration of support was staged in The Hague, Netherlands, the seat of the International Criminal Court and a city that symbolizes peace. However, it had also spawned some of the organizers of the Madrid attacks, the murderer of Theo Van Gogh, and the first members of Sharia4Holland. Less than a week after the Islamic State was proclaimed, a local Salafist led a group of about 50 ISIS followers marching

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<sup>80</sup> Act of condemnation of Jean-Louis Denis, op. cit.

<sup>81</sup> Assaf Moghadam, The Jihadist Entrepreneur: What The Anjem Choudary Case Can Teach Us, War on the Rocks, September 15, 2016, <https://warontherocks.com/2016/09/the-jihadist-entrepreneur-what-the-anjem-choudary-case-can-teach-us/>.

<sup>82</sup> Jason Burke, "Gangsta jihadi' Denis Cuspert killed fighting in Syria", The Guardian, January 19, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jan/19/gangsta-jihadi-denis-cuspert-killed-fighting-in-syria>.

<sup>83</sup> Le Parisien, Guéant..., op. cit.

<sup>84</sup> *Dabiq*, ISIS propaganda magazine, « Khilafah Declared », n°1, Ramadan 1435 (June-July 2014), pp. 7–11.

under the black banner of the Islamic State to a rally in the Schilderswijk working-class neighborhood,<sup>85</sup> which they billed as a demonstration against Israeli operations in Gaza. No arrests were made, but the journalists at the protest had to take cover behind police lines to escape being attacked by the marchers. Some posted a video on YouTube in which they posed surrounded by ISIS flags in front of a block of high rises as the leader pronounced The Hague as a "city of jihad".<sup>86</sup> On the sidelines of this event, several local Salafist imams issued ambivalent statements about the Islamic State caliphate. One of them, a spokesman for the Bewust chat platform, said: "All Muslims are by default in favor of restoring an Islamic state, but it is still too early to say whether the Islamic State is the one we expect. We don't know enough about this organization and religious scholars are divided on this issue."<sup>87</sup> The Hague would eventually see nearly 30 departures for the Islamic State, mainly from the Schilderswijk neighborhood.<sup>88</sup>

On Saturday, August 9, 2014, at Oxford Circus, London's busiest commercial thoroughfare, former students of Omar Bakri passed out leaflets calling for the expansion of the Caliphate to the entire world.<sup>89</sup> Written in English, they proclaimed that the "Caliphate has been founded," and that a "new era has begun... Muslims with the help of Allah have announced the restoration of the Caliphate and have appointed an Imam as Caliph."<sup>90</sup> Their newly appointed imam demanded pledges of allegiance to him personally, obedience to his commands, and emigration to the heart of war-torn Syria.<sup>91</sup> These young men from Luton insulted a passing-by doctor of Iraqi origin when she asked them why they supported the Islamic State. She was ridiculed as an "unbeliever", while a red-bearded convert told her "she ought to be killed like those Christians in Iraq" as called for by divine law.<sup>92</sup>

These protests came as ISIS launched a blitzkrieg in Syria and Iraq that was matched only by the fanaticism and violence associated with its headlong expansion. The jihadists seized the Sinjar Mountains, populated mostly by Yezidis.<sup>93</sup> These followers

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<sup>85</sup> Theresa Lageman, "Islamic State fears take hold in Netherlands", Al-Jazeera English, 5 Sep 2014 <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2014/9/5/islamic-state-fears-take-hold-in-netherlands>.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> David Churchill, "Radical students hand out Isis leaflets on Oxford Street in attempt to get British Muslims to join jihad", The Standard, August, 13, 2014, <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/london/radical-students-seen-handing-out-leaflets-on-oxford-street-encouraging-british-muslims-to-join-isis-9665280.html>.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Sam Jones, "Pro-Isis leaflets distributed in London's Oxford Street", The Financial Times, August 12, 2014, <https://www.ft.com/content/d933b2ae-223e-11e4-a828-00144feabdc0>.

<sup>92</sup> Siraj Dato, "Pro-ISIS Leaflets Have Been Handed Out In Oxford Street", Buzz Feed, August, 13, 2014, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/sirajdato/pro-isis-leaflets-handed-out-in-oxford-street>.

<sup>93</sup> ViceNews, "L'horreur du « jour de marché » des esclaves sexuelles de l'EI", November 3, 2014, [https://www.vice.com/fr/article/gyn93j/video-shows-islamic-state-fighters-39buying-and-selling-yazidi-slaves39-fr-translation\\_](https://www.vice.com/fr/article/gyn93j/video-shows-islamic-state-fighters-39buying-and-selling-yazidi-slaves39-fr-translation_).

of an ancient syncretic belief stood accused of "polytheism" and thousands were massacred. Seven thousand Yezidi women were reduced to sexual slavery, with girls and their mothers sold for a few hundred dollars (more for young virgins) on human markets the organization had just opened in Mosul.<sup>94</sup> Several international investigations documented this outrage and labelled it as genocide.<sup>95</sup> Among the individuals at the forefront of these atrocities was Abdelhamid Abaaoud from Molenbeek, future leader of the November 2015 attack cell in Paris.<sup>96</sup>

Between 2012 and 2018, nearly six thousand Europeans, mostly from the eight countries mentioned above, left for Syria.<sup>97</sup> The collective wake-up call was strong, but it came late; ISIS had already reached its operational peak and jihadism crested at its new high water mark. The campaign of attacks against Europe began in 2014 and led the European authorities to strengthen legislative countermeasures and strengthen the judicial response. The Western members of ISIS were targeting countries of which they were citizens in order to open up this new "front". Their operative idea was to create the conditions for a communal civil war from which ISIS hoped to benefit. France, which contributed the largest contingent of jihadis in Syria,<sup>98</sup> was the priority target, absorbing about twenty attacks between 2015 and 2017.<sup>99</sup> Denmark suffered an attack on February 14, 2015,<sup>100</sup> Belgium was hit in Brussels on March 22, 2016.<sup>101</sup> Germany was also targeted, with a car ramming into the Berlin Christmas market on December 19, 2016,<sup>102</sup> and with several knifings in the summer of 2017.<sup>103</sup> Starting that year, Great Britain endured spectacular attacks including those in Westminster (March 22),<sup>104</sup> in Manchester during an Ariana Grande concert

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Amnesty International, "Germany/Iraq" World's first judgment on crime of genocide against the Yazidis", November 30, 2021, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/11/germany-iraq-worlds-first-judgment-on-crime-of-genocide-against-the-yazidis/>.

<sup>96</sup> C.J. Chivers, "Syrian's Path From Leader of Rebels to Enforcer for Jihadists", The New York Times, December 21, 2015

<sup>97</sup> Joana Cook and Gina Vale, op. cit.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Vidino and Marone, op. cit.

<sup>100</sup> Griff Witte and Karla Adam, "Danish...", op. cit.

<sup>101</sup> New York Times, "Brussels terror attacks", 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/news-event/brussels-attacks>.

<sup>102</sup> Simon, Darran, Ralph Ellis, and Frederik Pleitgen, "Berlin Christmas market: 12 dead, 48 hospitalized in truck crash," *CNN*, December 19, 2016.

<https://www.cnn.com/2016/12/19/europe/berlin-christmas-market-truck>.

<sup>103</sup> Reuters, "Factbox – Deadly attacks in Western Europe since 2014", April 8, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-europe-attacks-timeline-factbox/factbox-deadly-attacks-in-western-europe-since-2014-idUKKBN17A0HN>.

<sup>104</sup> BBC, "Westminster attack: What happened", April 7, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-39355108>.

(May 22),<sup>105</sup> and at London Bridge (June 9).<sup>106</sup> Sweden also saw an assault by a hit-and-run driver claiming to be a member of ISIS on April 7, 2017.<sup>107</sup> Barcelona and its surrounding area were hit twice on August 17 and 18, 2017,<sup>108</sup> with comparable tactics.

The rising tide of threats followed by atrocities prompted European countries to ramp up their efforts in the Levant as part of the international coalition. From 2016 on, the Islamic State lost ground, and by 2019, the "caliphate" it controlled in the Levant was crushed. Hundreds of Europeans who made their way back home are now imprisoned in their home countries. Hundreds more, including women and children, remain in Syrian camps guarded by Kurdish forces.<sup>109</sup> The physical entity known as the ISIS "caliphate" may have disappeared, but its ideological territory survives in part, foreshadowing a new turn of the tide. Just as Afghanistan catalyzed a global jihad, the war in Syria proved to be a defining event for the European movement.

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<sup>105</sup> Macguire, Eoghan, Alexander Smith, Jason Cumming, and Alex Johnson, "Manchester Arena suicide bombing: 22 die at Ariana Grande concert", NBC News, May 22, 2017, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/deaths-injuries-confirmed-after-explosions-heard-u-k-concert-featuring-n763286>.

<sup>106</sup> BBC, "London, Bridge: What we know about the attack", December 3, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-50594810>.

<sup>107</sup> BBC, "Stockholm truck attack: Who is Rakhmat Akilov", June 7, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-39552691>.

<sup>108</sup> ABC News, "Barcelona terror attack in pictures", 2017, <https://abcnews.go.com/International/photos/barcelona-terror-attack-49276071/image-49276410>.

<sup>109</sup> Joana Cook and Gina Vale, op. cit.

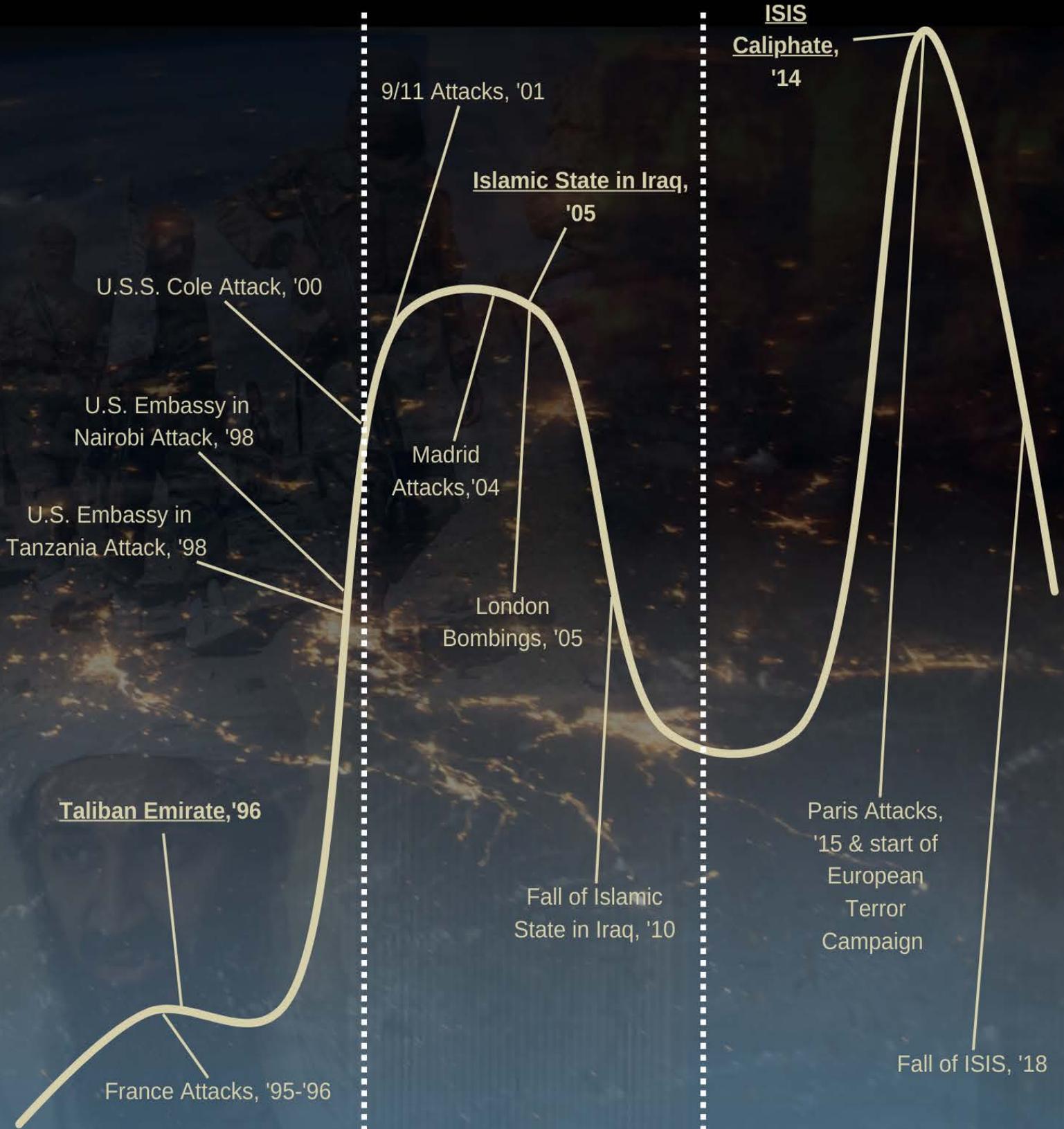
# Three Cycles of Jihadism in the West (1990-Present)



1990s

2000s

2010s



## A Homegrown Development

The jihadist phenomenon is neither external to Europe nor transplanted into it by migrants, despite what several presidential candidates asserted in the 2022 French elections. Since the 2000s, its development has been essentially organic, embedded in the major social, economic, political, religious and digital transformations that are roiling the nations of Europe and the Mediterranean region. It is a social issue linked to all the others, but it also needs to be approached on its own terms.

Over the course of the past three decades, the ambition of jihadist groups has grown. Despite repeated setbacks, with each new cycle the leading organizations have tried to wrap their project in an ever more outsized religious envelope: the Islamic Emirate in Afghanistan in the 1990s, the Islamic State in Iraq in the 2000s, and the global "Caliphate" ten years later. At a time when ISIS has been defeated militarily in the Levant, the debate over the future of the movement is (once again) at issue.

During the same timeframe, these oscillations have gained in amplitude. 100 times as many Europeans went to Syria than made their way to Bosnia or Algeria in the 1990s (6000 versus a few dozen then). Similarly, total numbers of terrorist attacks have increased. This surge has been accompanied by a qualitative evolution that the latest attacks in Europe should not be allowed to mask. Since 2019, jihadist attacks have mainly been the handiwork of badly organized, often unstable, or psychologically fragile individuals with little to no connection to the major terrorist organizations. They make up the poorly integrated margins of the movement and their actions should not distract from what is happening elsewhere within it. Indeed, since the advent of the Syrian crisis, the European jihadist movement has both grown younger and, ironically, older.

It has also become more feminized. Up to one-quarter of the departures in the 2010s to Syria were women.<sup>110</sup> Barred from taking part in the fighting (in principle), women joining the movement underscores the fact that the jihadist cause is not limited to fighting or attacks. Their first duty, according to the canons of the Salafi-jihadist doctrine, is to conceive and raise children, to indoctrinate them, and to transmit jihadism to them as a legacy. The involvement of women may portend a deepening of the phenomenon. Where jihadism used to be structured in terrorist or affinity cells, it could now be shaped in family cells in ways that are inherently more complex. No evidence indicates the process will succeed, but the metamorphosis observed under the rise of ISIS cannot be underestimated, even at a time when the movement is cycling through another ebb phase. In this context, responses aimed at reinforcing the security arsenal without addressing the societal and political dimension of the

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<sup>110</sup> Joana Cook and Gina Vale, op. cit.

movement are shortsighted and likely to do little to address its root causes. Abandoning the rule of law will not solve anything either, and to do so would only weaken the entire democratic edifice which, on the contrary, should be buttressed. By the same token, it is irresponsible to suggest that the jihadist dynamic in the West is a temporary evil that will dissipate as soon as it is forgotten about in the public discourse.

Europe's jihadists only constitute a few thousand of a population of nearly 450 million, so they have very little capacity to act on their own. Owing to their small numbers, they need to expand their circle of potential recruits to keep from going extinct. This is why the tendency to withdraw into the community has to be analyzed politically. However, the potential connections between jihadists and other more numerous Islamist groups—the Tabligh, the Muslim Brotherhood, the Salafists, etc.—from which the former have historically sourced many militants must be analyzed through the lens of religion.

Mirroring the situation of the 2000s, jihadi sympathizers are attempting to compensate for the failure of the Islamic State by taking the fight to European democratic values and prioritizing the Salafization of Islam<sup>111</sup>. They seek to deflect the hostility they foment by framing their actions as a prescribed response to the rise of the far right, which they otherwise incite and instrumentalize. Additionally, they try to justify past attacks as a response to political mistakes committed in the Middle East, using the pretext of strikes against ISIS to legitimize attacks in France, as has been alleged during the trial of the November 2015 attackers.<sup>112</sup>

Their goal is not to strike at the heart of European societies, but to mainstream their positions in the prevailing climate. Jihadists strive to persuade more Muslims to break away from anything that is not prescribed by the strictest visions of Islamic law through the logic of loyalty and disavowal. From this point of view, and on the scale of the last two decades, the rise of Salafism has been a key factor because it has popularized exclusionary worldviews (which exclude as much as they seek to be excluded) that render these discourses palatable to a segment of the faithful.

The quality of the public debate on these issues must improve. Too often, it becomes stuck between denial and hysteria, two positions that tend to shift in line with the polarization of opinion. The extreme right, under the guise of firmness, tends not to differentiate between a Muslim and a jihadist. In effect, this perception concedes the latter's claim that he embodies Islam. Such a reduction is tantamount to falling into the jihadist's trap, giving the jihadist considerable leverage and nourishing a logic of

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<sup>111</sup> Micheron, op. cit., pp. 373-378.

<sup>112</sup> NPR, "Lessons from the 2015 Paris attacks trial that ended in June", July 13, 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/07/13/1111388372/lessons-from-the-2015-paris-attacks-trial-that-ended-in-june>.

confrontation that is flipped against an adversary to gain ground. For its part, the extreme left fails to see Islamist militancy for what it is, on the laudable grounds of openness to the other and the fight against discrimination. The radicals are not distinguished from ordinary Muslims, who actually must withstand the worst of their pressure. Both are consigned to the status of oppressed people whose possible radicalism is only matched by the injustices they suffer. While the far left makes the fight against injustice a core principle, it glosses over the supremacist, anti-progressive, and anti-feminist nature of the Salafist project. The reality is compelling enough not to bury it under partisan assumptions.

Over the past 30 years, jihadists have profited from such misunderstandings within European societies, as well as from a cumulative delay in producing knowledge about them. For their part, Western societies have tended to rely on the tactical errors of jihadist organizations rather than on crafting legal responses and injecting intellectual, political, and religious antidotes into them.

Europe cannot forever bet on the lapses of these declared enemies in the hope of solving such a complex issue. This would risk, at a minimum, allowing jihadists to continue feeding the dynamics of Identitarian fervor and political fragmentation, and in the worst case, exposing the continent to a perilous new terrorist tide.

In this pivotal post-ISIS period, the jihadists see the French case as the major obstacle because it throws these transformations into sharp relief. The universalist claim of the French republican model is the antithesis of the norm that jihadists are driven to promote. France is estimated to be home to the largest populations of Muslim and Jewish descent in Europe, while also being heir to the longest-lived Catholic monarchy on the continent and the inventor of secularism. French society is thus rich and complex, which renders it the paradigmatic Western target for all Islamist movements in the world, perhaps even ahead of the United States. But through the French proxy, the model of the rule of law and the democratic values held in common by all European Union countries are directly threatened.

The EU will have to find a common ground on this issue and deal, ironically, with the unresolved legacy of American wars, some of which, like Iraq, were vetoed by France and Germany. Twenty years after 9/11, American decision-makers show a lack of interest and even a growing incomprehension of jihadist issues, at a time when the phenomenon has become endogenous to Europe and the Taliban have taken power again in Kabul.

The judicial response that is taking shape in France with the organization of major trials—like the one held for the perpetrators of the January 7-9, 2015, attacks, organized at the end of 2020, as well as the one for the November 13, 2015 terrorist

attacks— is likely only the beginning of a democratic response. These trials, in terms of form and treatment, define a French exceptionalism, unlike the American response to the 9/11 attacks, which led to the inextricable fiasco of Guantanamo, or that of the British, who were incapable of conducting an equivalent investigation after the attacks of July 2005. Instead, the French trials symbolically allow for throttling back the momentum generated by the jihadists during the attacks. They open a solemn space in which both political polemics and manipulation are curbed. In addition to rendering justice, they allow, via the judicial process, scrutinizing the words, attitudes and justifications of the accused, while listening to the stories of the victims. Thus, they ultimately distill meaning and knowledge from these calamities.

This type of response will not be enough, but it is a start at possibly forging a broader sense of community and compatriotism around these issues. Europe is really only in “year seven” of awakening to its jihadist reality, which represents a major challenge but is not insurmountable in the light of the common history of these 27 countries, and particularly the shared characteristics of the eight countries worst hit by the jihadist phenomenon. This challenge must still be analyzed thoroughly, as on it the intellectual defeat or resurgence of jihadism will likely be decided. In this respect, the future remains to be shaped.

Program on Extremism

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