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Radical Islam

In European countries, radical Islam has different origins, mainly related to the colonial background (France, England) or to the immigration of Muslims in the last few decades (Holland, Germany, Spain).

In France, radical Islam has two different roots. The external one is mainly grounded in the Algerian extremist networks, the GIA (Groupe Islamique Armée) directed by the military branch of the FIS (Front Islamique de Salut) after it was denied the power by the military in 1992 in spite of its gaining the majority in the vote for the parliament. There was (and still is) an animosity between the GIA and the French government due to the support the latter gave to the Algerian army against the FIS. But the GIA would not have been able to operate in France without the Algerian diaspora and more generally, the Maghrebini disaffected youth in the French poor suburbs. Some 1,5 million people of Algerian descent, around 700 thousand from Morocco and some 350 thousand from Tunisia live in France and among them, a tiny minority has been active for the GIA. Some terrorist networks were set up in France in the 1990s and enrolled young peoples from the poor suburbs. Among them, some people like Khaled Kelkal¹ who were exposed to racism and few Muslim converts were involved. Some cells from GIA were in touch with Al Qaeda and found in this way connections within France. Otherwise, autonomous Al Qaeda networks have been exceptional in France.²

Radicalism has been enhanced through links with England much more than other European countries. Religious radicalism has had a tinge of post-colonialism marked by the rancour against the former colonizers by the children of those colonized, residing in France. The people who take part in radical Islam are mostly recruited among those young people who feel themselves as belonging neither to the country of their parents (North African ones) nor to France in which they are rejected as “Arabs”. They have a deep ambivalent attitude towards themselves: they believe they are hated and despised by the French and for this reason,

¹ See Dietmar Loch "Moi, Khaled Kelkal" (the interview was made on October the 3rd, 1992), *Le Monde*, October the 7th, 1995. In this interview, the social roots of Kelkal's Islamic radicalism are spelled out by himself. In our own interviews, many young boys of the poor Paris suburb (Argenteuil in 1997) pretend to be treated like « insects » by the French people.

consider themselves as free to oppose to this indignity their own violence³. Islam gives them the opportunity to legitimize their feeling of rejection by canalizing it into a sacred cause. In this way, they take their revenge on the society and at the same time, accede to the salvation of their soul. They attain a twofold goal by engaging under the banner of radical Islam: they fight against a society which has never accepted them as such and they fight for Islam against the entire West. This fight raises them in their own view and provides them with a dignity that was denied them in their daily life before adhering to radical Islam. Through their engagement they gain the salvation (they become martyrs if they die), they accede to a new honour and dignity and they find meaning and sense for their life which was, previously, meaningless and without any end.

There is an “Islamist affect” in many French “banlieues”⁴ that predisposes part of the disaffected male youth towards the violent commitment for a sacred cause embodied in an anti-Western Islamic ideology.

Another factor that encourages the advent of this affect is the way this population feels despised by the society at large. Racism is strongly felt, particularly through the advent of the Extreme Right⁵ (Lepen group and dissident ones). This is reinforced by the restrictions imposed through the Laïcité which bans the Islamic signs in the public sphere and holds the communities as the moral negation of true and genuine citizenship. There is a “hatred” (haine) in part of the second and third generation of the people of North African origin which finds expression in two distinct attitudes that can be combined in radical ones: one is the rejection of “Frenchness”. This finds its expression in Islamic moods that define themselves not so much in an autonomous way but as “un-French” and sometimes even “anti-French”. This can be done also by espousing attitudes related to another version of modernity, namely the so-called “Anglo-Saxon” ones. Many of the young people who travel (and sometimes stay) in Great Britain do it in order to accede to a “non-French” ways of life perceived as an alternative to the French one they feel oppressive because based on the denial of their identity. “Americanized” or “Anglicized” attitudes are sometimes displayed in a provocative way in order to show a “non-French” identity, touching the tender spot of some French people and denying them the symbolic supremacy as a counter-measure against the contempt they feel subjected to. When cultural reaction against the French society becomes radicalized through

³ For a more detailed information see Farhad Khosrokhavar, *Suicide Bombers : New Martyrs of Allah*, Pluto Press (distributed in the US by Michigan Press University), 2005.

⁴ See Farhad Khosrokhavar, *Islam des Jeunes*, Flammarion, Paris, 1997, Gilles Kepel, *Jihad*, Gallimard, Paris 2002.

⁵ See Michel Wieviorka (sous la direction de), *Violences en France*, Seuil, Paris, 1999.

Islamist extremist networks, it gives birth to a terrorist attitude. The radical Islamic groups benefit from this predisposition of the young people (overwhelmingly male) of North African origin who consider themselves as stigmatized by the society and banned by it. In this way, they are open to radicalization and if any network succeeds in getting in touch with them, some overstep their fears of repression and accept to act against those whom they hate and who, they think, are against Islam because they have reduced them to misery and on the international scene, defend Israel and all the anti-Islamic forces. The conjunction of identity problems, racism and economic exclusion creates a fertile ground for radicalization and violence among a tiny minority of this disaffected youth. Islamisation brings a sense of existence to them and radicalization gives them a new dignity as warriors of a just cause against a corrupt and ruthless society. This generation of inhabitants of poor suburbs, mostly of North African origin, totally destructured (monoparental families, high rate of joblessness and illiteracy, absence of strong ties with the family and the community) can be easily manipulated. Paradoxically the Media are the major source of their inspiration. The tragic spectacle of Palestinians dying under the attacks of the Israeli army and the indifference of the public opinion to the fate of Chechnians and other Muslims in the world easily convince them that the West in general is against Islam. The antagonistic attitude of some French political groups (the Extreme right) towards them is easily generalized, through the images of the TV, to the entire Western world. The deduction is peremptory: the West is against Islam and the genuine Moslems should fight against it in order to recover their dignity and their honour.

The police repression and infiltration among terrorist group since the 1990s has brought a halt to their acts within French borders. Some of these groups went to Great Britain and the presence of a Maghrebin diaspora there (around some 40 thousand Algerians among them) helped for a while to build up the new groups. But since the September the 11th 2001, the situation has changed and these groups are under police scrutiny.

The radical Islam in France began in the 1990s and from that point of view the French authorities had to address it a decade before the other Western countries. The probable number of the people arrested on that occasion during 1995 and afterwards is the highest in the Western countries (more than 200 were put in prison). After the September the 11th, although precise data are not available, the same statement can be cautiously made: the number of the French people of North African origin presumably involved in the Islamic terrorist activities and arrested for that reason is much higher than in England, Germany, Spain or Italy. This is partially due to the efficiency of the French police, but also to the fact that radical Islamic terrorism in France is much more deeply rooted into the poor suburbs, and

it is not only due to a group of Muslim foreigners coming to France in order to implement their terrorist activities (this is the case in Germany with few probable exceptions: the Islamists who took part in the September the 11th terrorist acts and prepared them in Hamburg did not belong to the Turkish Islamic community of Germany⁶). In the French case, Islamic radicalism is partially rooted in the disaffected Youth of North African origins or the converts mostly belonging to the same “Banlieues”, although the networks are of Algerian (and through a branch of GIA related to Al Qaeda) and more generally North African origin. This makes the French case a unique one. The English one is much more marginal. It involves members of radical Muslim groups belonging to the association Al Mohajirun or affiliated to other networks suspected of having ties with Al Qaeda. But these people form a tiny minority and up to now, only a dozen of them have been put under arrest. The French case, with the high number of people imprisoned, preserves its peculiarity concerning radical Islam so far. In Holland, one might think of some kind of “hyper-fundamentalist” Islam in the case of the Moroccan who killed Theo van Gogh and who was affiliated to a group of Muslims with no proven ties with Al Qaeda or any transnational Muslim organisation. This type of group who allegedly belongs to Al Qaeda has nothing to do with the real organisation which has been destroyed in its real capacity to act in its former structure. This new type of Al Qaeda may be called a “metaphoric Al Qaeda”: the mere fact that radical Muslims refer to it shows the prestige it enjoys within the radicalized youth in the Western European countries.

⁶ See Nikola Tietze, *Islamische Identitäten, Formen Muslimischer Religiosität jünger Männer in Deutschland und Frankreich*, Hamburg Edition, Germany, 2001 ; Farhad Khosrokhavar, *Nilola Tietze* “Violence en France, le cas de Neuhof” in Michel Wieviorka (editor), *Violences en France*, Seuil, Paris, 1999. The “Mouvement pour l'égalité” of the 1980s aimed at defending the rights of the French citizens of North African origin in a secular and non-religious manner. The slogan “touche pas à mon pote” defended by a national association like SOS Racisme didn't possess any religious content and was in accordance with the French “laïcité”. The failure of this movement to achieve its goals was one of the causes of the “islamization” of part of the young generation of the French of the young people from the so-called “banlieues” (poor suburbs) who don't believe anymore in equal treatment and opportunity in a society where they feel victimized.