

The Motivations Behind Jihad

by Théo Blanc

Why did 5,000 Europeans join the jihad in Syria? The volunteers who left between 2011 and 2014 displayed a form of religious solidarity and a desire for revolution, which were later exploited by Daesh.

Reviewed: Montassir Sakhi. *La révolution et le djihad. Syrie, France, Belgique*, preface by Olivier Roy, Paris, La Découverte, 2023, 328 pp., €24.

In *La révolution et le djihad* [The Revolution and Jihad. Syria, France, Belgium], Montassir Sakhi explores the reasons behind the departure of French-speaking Europeans (from France and Belgium) for jihad in Syria. The book's core assertion contrasts two types of jihadist logic. The first is "utopian and revolutionary," essentially rooted in solidarity with the Syrian people's revolt against the authoritarian regime of Bashar al-Assad. The second is "totalitarian and terrorist," and coincides with the emergence of Daesh (pp. 27-28). The author seeks to highlight that the predominance of the second logic in political, academic and media discourse has overshadowed the first, which was in fact the main driver of departures between 2011 and 2014.

These two logics are distinguished above all by chronology: the majority of departures took place well before Daesh's territorial claims (June 2014) and the attacks on European soil (mostly 2015-2017). In fact, volunteers did not join a global jihad led by Al-Qaeda-type organizations; rather, they signed up solely in the context of the Syrian revolution, whose primary objective was the overthrow of Bashar al-Assad's regime. However, the meaning of jihad changed radically with the emergence of

Daesh, which uses violence as “purification rather than resistance” (preface by Olivier Roy, p. 13).

Seen from the Western point of view, the international coalition's intervention against Daesh in Syria-Iraq (summer 2014) caused the original fighters to fall completely onto the “wrong side”: that of Daesh's global terrorist jihad. From then on, volunteers who left between 2011 and 2014 saw the meaning of their engagement retroactively changed. They found themselves and their families equated with terrorists and prosecuted as such on their return (the vast majority returned before the summer of 2014). The key question of solidarity was swept aside by the narrative of terrorist radicalization dominating the political, media, academic, and judicial treatment of jihad in the West in a traumatic post-attack context. There is a striking contrast between the trials of “returnees” and the period when French foreign minister Laurent Fabius declared that the jihadist group Jabhat al-Nusra was carrying out “effective and useful action in the service of the Syrians” (December 2012, quoted on p. 40). The author observes that “Syrian returnees and their families expressed shock at the way their departures were incriminating them by systematically referring to the period when European governments had expressed their support for the revolutionaries.” (p. 40).

By explaining the jihadist departures for Syria not as the result of religious radicalization in connection with a global jihad, but as a phenomenon of “transnational solidarity with the values that inspire Syrians in their rejection of the regime” (p. 38), M. Sakhi takes issue with the work of researchers such as Gilles Kepel (criticized directly on p. 180 and p. 205) and Hugo Micheron, who support the theory of ideological radicalization with a global aim.¹

Giving a voice to the actors

The author chooses an anthropological approach that focuses on the “point of view of the actors concerned and their own reflexivity about their own lives” (p. 25),

¹ Gilles Kepel & Antoine Jardin, *Terreur dans l'Hexagone. Genèse du jihad français*, Paris, Gallimard, 2015; Hugo Micheron, *Le jihadisme français. Quartiers, Syrie, prisons*, preface by Gilles Kepel, Paris, Gallimard, 2020; Hugo Micheron, *Jihadisme européen. Quels enjeux pour l'avenir ?*, Paris, Gallimard, « Tracts », 2022.

rather than the perspective adopted in studies on “radicalization,” which are based on a profiling of the actors (p. 25).

His approach, which could be described as constructivist, is based on a rich field survey and numerous interviews: five in 2017-18 with Moroccans and Tunisians who had returned from jihad; twelve in 2021-22 with Europeans who had returned from Syria after their release from prison; twenty in 2016-2017 with Syrian revolutionaries on the Turkish-Syrian border; ten interviews with relatives of “returnees”; and several interviews in Iraq in 2017 with refugees who had lived under the control of Daesh in Mosul.

The book offers the reader lengthy testimonies that are as invaluable for their rarity as they are enlightening, thanks to the reflexive hindsight the interviewees gain by expressing themselves several years after they became involved. A similar approach—though still rare—can be found in Farhad Khosrokhavar's long book on radicalization in prison.

However, the artificial antagonism author creates between his approach and that of studies on radicalization, which also sometimes take into account the point of view of the actors, is regrettable. This is true of Elyamine Settoul's recent work (2023), *Penser la radicalisation djihadiste*, in which the author also favors the notions of commitment and biographical trajectory over those of radicalization and profiling.²

Supply (the revolution) and demand (jihadist volunteers)

On the face of it, the author seems to be offering us two books in one. The first and longest part looks at the Syrian revolution, analyzing in turn the outbreak of peaceful uprisings, the regime's repressive turn and the move to armed struggle, the administration of the areas liberated by the revolutionaries, the uses of religion in the revolution, and the opposition between revolutionary jihad and the global, state-based jihad of Daesh. The second part of the book looks at people's motivations for leaving, the conditions of their return and attacks in Europe.

In fact, this narrative structure is consubstantial with the author's thesis, which combines analysis of supply and analysis of demand. The revolution represents

² Elyamine Settoul, *Penser la radicalisation djihadiste. Acteurs, théories, mutations*, Paris, Puf, 2023.

supply, opening the door to European volunteers (the first part of the book); while the volunteers' motivations represent demand (the second part of the book). The author seeks to interpret the union of these two components through the prism of “emancipation” from conventional “political framings” (state, nation, borders). The phenomenon of jihad volunteers reflects the encounter between, on the one hand, young people challenging the “failings of democratic representation” and the conditions under which post-colonial immigration is accepted in Europe (p. 118-9), and, on the other hand, the Syrian revolution, perceived not only as a revolt against authoritarianism, but also as a moment of experimentation with non-state political utopias (p. 132). The author thus situates people's reasons for going to Syria in an “arc” between “two poles”: “to leave in pursuit of a utopia with a chance of being part of the revolutionary space that Syria offered; or to enlist in response to the political and military emergency imposed by the brutalization of a society in revolt.” (p. 217).

These two poles are reconciled in Islam, which was both the central reference point for volunteers' mobilization and “the centralizing force behind the revolution's claims” (p. 163). Religion, and in its armed form, jihad, represented a kind of “revolutionary morality” legitimizing resistance, unifying dissident society against the state, and preparing fighters to “accept” death (p. 163, 161). This utopian function of jihad was not theorized, but was “practical thinking” (p. 164), unlike the ideological, organizational, and territorialized jihad that Daesh has succeeded in substituting for revolutionary jihad since 2014. At the outset, revolutionaries and volunteers were indeed inspired by a religious mindset, which the author describes as a “utopian projection that abstracts itself from territorialized government in an attempt to realize itself as a here-and-now embodiment of divine justice” (p. 193).

Consequently, it is difficult to make a clear distinction between humanitarian jihad and utopian jihad, since both facets were present, if not consubstantial, in the volunteers' motivations. The author could be criticized for emphasizing the first of these in the introduction, thereby giving the impression of a secular undertaking, before re-characterizing it later in the book as a utopian religious commitment. Nevertheless, it is clear that the volunteers profoundly disagreed with the murder of civilians and the fratricidal conflicts between revolutionary groups, whose sociology eluded them or did not interest them (see p. 210) but which prefigured the Daesh era.

Jihad “returnees” and prison

The “returnees” got a bad press. Yet Montassir Sakhi offers a different picture of individuals imprisoned for jihadism and/or terrorism than that painted by David Thomson³ and Hugo Micheron, both of whom express pessimism over the potential for prisoners to re-offend after their release. According to Micheron, prison is the “main space for ideological recomposition” of jihadism. In his latest book, he argues that Europe is in a state of “low tide,” a kind of strategic retreat for jihadism, while the next “high tide” is being prepared in prisons, ushering in the resurgence of large-scale terrorist attacks⁴. In actual fact, while 486 “Islamist” prisoners have been released since 2018, the rate of recidivism is very low, according to the former head of the French Directorate General for Internal Security, Nicolas Lerner.

Echoing critical reviews, the author provides an unflattering overview of the conditions under which Micheron and Thomson carried out their research in prisons, based on the words of the “returnees” they interviewed (see pp. 244-6). He also shows that the vast majority of those involved were “self-critical, based on their experiences and actions” (p. 247), with a particular focus on the turning point of 2014. However, such self-criticism is generally not accompanied by a decline in religiousness or a questioning of textual and ideological references (p. 237). Herein lies the author's central criticism of deradicalization policies, which in his view “are nonsense,” since “they disregard the fact that it is precisely because of their religious commitment that ‘returnees’ [...] have already acknowledged the failure of their quest and the disparity between their initially imagined goal and their lived experience” (p. 273).

This admission of failure, in particular deeming it “irresponsible to wage war against international armies” after they began to intervene in the summer of 2014 (p. 273), is a far more robust criterion of “deradicalization” than that of religiosity⁵. As Olivier Roy has shown, the claim that deradicalization should aim at de-ideologization

³ David Thomson, *Les Revenants. Ils étaient partis faire le jihad, ils sont de retour en France*, Seuil, Paris, 2016.

⁴ Hugo Micheron, *La colère et l'oubli. Les démocraties face au jihadisme européen*, Paris, Gallimard, 2023.

⁵ This point echoes the controversy surrounding the book by Olivier Galland and Anne Muxel, *La tentation radicale*, which, according to Olivier Roy, establishes a false link of continuity between intensity of religiosity and violence, prompting a response from the authors and a counter-response, as well as several critical reviews, in particular by Patrick Simon and Jean Baubérot.

or “de-religionization” is a non-starter.⁶ For example, a study of female jihadists in prison sought to assess their “de-radicalization” in terms of “the intensity of their religious commitment,” and naturally concluded that no de-radicalization had taken place.⁷ This approach is in line with the concept of radicalization as a continuum between Salafism and jihadism, which is highly questionable in practice (see also the preface by Olivier Roy).

Terror attacks in Europe

In the final part of the book, the author distinguishes three types of terrorism: anti-Semitic attacks (those of Mohamed Merah, Mehdi Nemmouche, for example); attacks committed by first-time migrants alienated by the border experience; and those committed in response to the international coalition's war (p. 32 and chapter 10).

The “returnees” implicated in terror attacks represent a tiny minority of all jihad volunteers; indeed, involvement in jihad is not an over-determined factor in the terrorist phenomenon. However, the author considers that attacks of the third type are a direct response to the intervention of the international coalition (see table p. 279) and, more generally, to “colonial domination in the Middle East” (p. 273). This analysis, which echoes that of François Burgat in the way it calls for a questioning of the “responsibility” of Western countries in the cycle of violence (p. 277), is in line with two quantitative scientific studies that establish a causal link between Western interventionism against Daesh and the occurrence of terrorist attacks in Europe (2015-17), while also confirming the finding of a dissociation between jihadist involvement (2011-2014) and terrorism (2015-2017) advanced by Montassir Sakhi.⁸ Any interpretation of these studies in terms of Western responsibility must, however, be

⁶ Olivier Roy, « Mais pourquoi veut-on déradicaliser ? », in Juliette Galonnier, Stéphane Lacroix, and Nadia Marzouki (ed.), *Politiques de lutte contre la Radicalisation*, Paris, Presses de Sciences Po, 2022, pp. 173-182.

⁷ François Castel de Bergerac « Rupture jihadiste. Les jeunes femmes de la prison de Fleury-Mérogis », in Bernard Rougier, *Les territoires conquis de l'islamisme* Paris, Puf, 2020, pp. 285-332.

⁸ Mathias Delori, Clara Egger, Raul Magni-Berton, and Simon Varaine, « Les interventions militaires sont-elles une cause du « terrorisme » ? De l'utilité des analyses quantitatives pour les études critiques de la sécurité », *Cultures & Conflits*, vol. 123-4, 2021, pp. 37-65; Clara Egger, Raul Magni-Berton and Simon Varaine, “Jihadism without borders: The rise of foreign fighters, affiliated terrorists and lone wolves outside civil wars,” 2020; Clara Egger, Raul Magni-Berton and Simon Varaine, « Politiques antiterroristes : quel rôle pour la recherche ? », *The Conversation*, January 3, 2021.

qualified by the fact that the terrorists include converts and individuals with no migratory background and/or no experience of jihad.

It should also be pointed out that jihad volunteers' relationship with death is fundamentally different from that of European terrorists, as described by Olivier Roy in *Le djihad et la mort* [Jihad and Death]⁹: while for the former, death is an accepted risk and a gift of self in the service of the jihad against the Syrian tyrant, for the latter, death is a value in itself (see preface p. 14-15)—what Olivier Roy calls nihilism—with Daesh going so far as to encourage new recruits to check the “kamikaze” box on its administrative forms (p. 270).

Finally, the argument concerning the alienating effect of border violence, while not applicable to nationals who made up the majority of terrorists in the 2015-17 period, seems particularly relevant in the more recent period (2017-2023) marked by several attacks perpetrated by new arrivals, often undocumented. These include the knife attack outside the former Charlie Hebdo offices on September 29, 2020 (Zaheer Hassan Mahmoud), the attack on Notre-Dame de l'Assomption Basilica in Nice on October 29 (Brahim Issaoui), and the gun attack in Brussels on October 16, 2023 (Abdesalem Lassoued).

However, several assailants fail to fit the author's typology. Abdullakh Anzorov and Mohammed Mogouchkov, for example, who murdered teachers Samuel Paty (October 16, 2020) and Dominique Bernard (October 13, 2023) respectively, appear to have acted neither out of anti-Semitism nor in response to Western interventions in the Middle East, but in revenge for an “affront” to the prophet of Islam. Anzorov had refugee status, while Mogouchkov was a French national of Caucasian rather than North African migratory origin, with no traumatic border experience. Other profiles include nationals with no experience of jihad who are more likely to have been convicted of ordinary crimes, such as Zyed Ben Belgacem (attack on Orly airport on March 18, 2017) and/or have a psychiatric background (Mickaël Harpon, attack on the Paris police headquarters on October 3, 2019; Nathan Chiasson, attack in Ivry on January 3, 2020; Armand Rajabpour-Miyandoab, attack on December 2, 2023).

In this regard, the profile of late-stage terrorists seems to indicate a dual process involving individualization, radicalization and a commitment to action, as well as autonomization from family, friends, prison (in most cases) and jihadist organizations. This type of terrorism corresponds neither to a logic of strategic retaliation (Sakhi's

⁹ Olivier Roy, *Le djihad et la mort*, Paris, Seuil, 2016.

interpretation) nor to community or organizational terrorism (Micheron's interpretation), but rather to an uberization of terrorism in which “entrepreneurs of terror” present themselves as avengers of the “honor” of Islam through spectacular acts based on bloodthirsty delight rather than political revolt. It would seem that it is this kind of individualized terrorism, rather than a resurgence of organizational jihadism, that threatens Europe today. The example of Armand Rajabpour-Miyandoab, the perpetrator of a knife attack on December 2, 2023, seems to indicate that repeat offenders (he had been convicted of terrorism in 2018), even if they pledge allegiance to Daesh, act alone with no logistic support.

In conclusion, Montassir Sakhi's book calls for a much-needed rethink of the reasons behind the departure of jihad volunteers —both humanitarian and utopian— in a European context obsessed with terrorism. The most convincing arguments can be found in the way the analysis intertwines the Syrian revolution and the departure of Europeans for jihad, and in the critique of the political and judicial treatment of “returnees.” Greater caution should be exercised when interpreting terrorist attacks in terms of strategic response or traumatic border experience, particularly in view of the profile of assailants in the 2017-2023 period.

First published in laviedesidees.fr, December 18, 2023.

Translated by Susannah Dale with the support of Cairn.info and published in booksandideas.net, February 14, 2025