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MAPPING THE IMPACT OF ISIS PROPAGANDA NARRATIVES: EVIDENCES FROM A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS IN ITALY AND FRANCE***

Abstract

The increasingly worsening threat posed by terrorism in Europe has led the media to focus their attention on the issue of violent radicalisation. Although this phenomenon includes different forms of violent extremism – from extreme right-wing movements to catholic movements, eco-terrorists, etc. – today the question of violent radicalisation is mainly related to Jihadism, and ISIS is the most recent and, from the perspective of its media use, intriguing expression. However, radicalisation is a debatable topic whose dramatic consequences invite a deeper analysis of both driving and enabling factors. Within theoretical debate, there is the well-known *querelle* between Oliver Roy (2016) and Gilles Kepel (2016), two French authors who underlined several factors. These include ISIS' ability to persuade its martyrs, thanks to a skilful use of aesthetic codes of modernity to spread the underlying principles of an obscurantist interpretation, or the role of Salafism in enlarging the gap between the second and third generation immigrants and western societies, those considered the manifestation of moral and spiritual decadence. Furthermore, social relations established on Internet, group dynamics and the inclination to crime have been interpreted by Anglo-Saxon scholars as enabling factors (Neumman, 2013, 2015, Berger & Stern 2015; Klausen 2015).

The essay presents the key findings of qualitative research carried out within the EU SAFFRON Project. The empirical research included seven focus groups in Italy and France which involved 47 individuals: 17 experts or qualified testimonials and 30 young people (age between 16 and 32) selected among second and third generation immigrants, political refugees, university students from Iraq, Pakistan, Senegal and Iran, secondary school students, and Italian youths converted to the Muslim faith. The theme of motivations or driving factors has been analysed using a participatory approach aimed at studying in depth the main rhetoric and narratives of online propaganda spread by the ISIS organisation for the purpose of recruitment. Research findings identified some specific factors as crucial: for example, the role of social media considered by young people as reliable sources of information versus mainstream media, which described as responsible for the dissemination of false stereotypes related to Islam; the theme of pseudo-heroism as promoted by skilful storytelling techniques; the patriotism which drives young immigrants and refugees to "take a position" in relation to conflicts in their countries of origin; and even existential and identity problems – almost always intertwined with the religious dimension – that apparently find an easy and immediate solution in the choice to *radicalise*.

Keywords

Jihadist narratives, online radicalization, social media narratives, radicalization, foreign fighters.

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1. INTRODUCTION: ISIS ONLINE PROPAGANDA

The relationship between the increase in religious and political radicalism and the role of Internet and social media was analysed by many scholars throughout the 1990s and after 9/11[1]. Even if it turned out to be difficult to analyse the specific relations among terrorist acts and the online propaganda contents[2], today many scholars agree that Internet acts as a "facilitator environment" in a process leading to violent radicalisation[3] and, in some cases, to terrorism[4]. In particular there's a growing corpus of literature on the topic of "on line jihadist narratives" considered as main vectors enabling - especially young subjects - to embrace extremist views and also actions as the ones of foreign fighters. Narratives are considered strategic assets for confronting public opinion and for 'conquering the hearts and minds' of the jihadist audiences. According to Halverson et al. (2011)[5], at the basis of narratives there is a set of themes, forms and archetypes; a narrative is defined as a coherent system of interrelated and sequentially organized stories. Moreover, narratives function as "rationale": they represent underlying motivations which may lead or even legitimize violent actions[6].

The spread of Internet and social media represents a significant turning point: it enables extremist propaganda narratives to reach groups and individuals located in geographical, socio-cultural contexts basically detached from the original milieu where those narratives were conceived. Propaganda appeal turns out to be relevant in fact for a number of foreign fighters or *wannabe* jihadists born and raised in western countries, who don't speak Arabic and show a very poor religious culture related to the Muslim faith. Through their active interaction with online extremist contents, they become part of what is considered a *digital caliphate*[7], a virtual environment considered as an important source of inspiration also oriented to violence.

Recently the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has proven itself to be a disrupting phenomenon in the online jihadist galaxy: Through the massive production and online dissemination of propaganda contents, ISIS has been overwhelming the me-

[1] G. Weimann, *Terror on the Internet: The New Arena, the New Challenges*, Washington, DC: Institute of Peace Press, 2006; T. Precht, *Home Grown Terrorism and Islamist Radicalisation in Europe. From Conversion to Terrorism*, København, DK: Danish Ministry of Justice, 2007; B. Braniff, A. Moghadam, "Towards Global Jihadism: Al-Qaeda' Strategic, Ideological and Structural Adaptations since 9/11", *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 5, 2 (2011).

[2] A. Meleagrou-Hitchens, N. Kaderbhai, "Research Perspectives on Online Radicalisation. A Literature Review, 2006-2016", 2017. Online available at: http://icsr.info/2017/05/icsr-vox-pol-paper-research-perspectives-online-radicalisation-literature-review-2006-2016/. Accessed September 1, 2017.

[3] For "violent radicalisation" we mean 'a process of socialisation leading to the use of violence'" cf. Alonso *et al.*, *Radicalisation Processes Leading to Acts of Terrorism*. A concise report prepared by the European Commission's expert group on violent radicalization, 2008.

[4] Meleagrou-Hitchens, Kaderbhai, "Research Perspectives on Online Radicalization; I. Von Behr *et al.*, "Radicalisation in the Digital Era: The Use of the Internet in 15 Cases of Terrorism and Extremism", 2013. Online available at: https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR400/RR453/RAND_R453.pdf, accessed 01/09/2017; P. Gill, *Lone-Actor Terrorists: A Behavioural Analysis*, London: Routledge, 2015.

[5] J. Halverson, S. Corman, H. Lloyd Goodall, *Master Narratives of Islamist Extremism*, Springer, 2011.

[6] E. Kassels, "Countering Violent Extremist Narratives", 2010. Online available at: https://www.clingendael.nl/publication/countering-violent-extremist-narratives. Accessed June 1, 2017; D. Al Raffie, "Whose Hearts and Minds? Narratives and Counter-Narratives of Salafi Jihadism", *Journal of Terrorism Research*, 3, 2 (2012); A.P. Schmid, *Al-Qaeda's "Single Narrative" and Attempts to Develop Counter-Narratives: the State of Knowledge*, The Hague: ICCT, 26, 2014; N. Prucha, "Understanding the "Islamic State" Narratives", 2015, Lecture available online at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TAwtwaL6kfg. Accessed 01/06/2017.

[7] A.B. Atwan, *Islamic State. The Digital Caliphate*, Los Angeles, US: University of California Press, 2015.

dia scene in Europe since 2014, with a propaganda effort focused on appealing to young Muslims in "Western" countries in order to join his army[8]. The high quality ISIS-magazine *DABIQ*, released online in several languages such as Turkish, English, French and German, appeared in 2014 following the proclamation of the Caliphate of ISIS; it was replaced in 2016 by the magazine Rumiyah[9], which is the Arabic word for Rome, thus referring even more explicitly to "the West" as an alleged land of conquest. Along with the cited two titles, between 2014 and 2016 ISIS released other five propaganda magazines available online in English, Turkish, German and Russian: *Dar al Islam*, *Costantinopole*, *Istok*, *al-risalah*, and *Kibernetik*[10].

Islamic State is a Salafi-Jihadi movement: notwithstanding his media appearance based on extreme violence, ISIS, as stated by Wood in an influential essay, "is no mere collection of psychopaths. It is a religious group with carefully considered beliefs"[11]. Their beliefs refer to the jihadist wing of a branch of Sunnism called Salafism, after the Arabic *al salaf al salih*, the "pious forefathers." These forefathers are the Prophet himself and his earliest adherents, whom Salafis honor and emulate as the models for all behavior, including warfare, couture, family life, even dentistry. In the last two centuries Salafism evolved into a militant doctrine also adapting to the different conflicts in the Middle East involving Muslims in a struggle against the West: the Afghanistan war against Soviet Union in the '80, the war in Iraq after 9/11 and the recent Syrian conflict[12]. Jihadi Salafism also evolved around a number of influential scholars such as Bin Laden, Al-Maqdisi, Al-Suri, Al-Zawahiri, Al Zarqawi and in the latter part of the 2010s Al-Baghdadi, the ISIS Caliph. It's very complex to detail the Salafist ideology in the context of this essay and also to relate the online propaganda contents to the principles of such a vast doctrine. Nevertheless it's worthwhile to mention some significant dimensions: first of all, in his most militant form, Salafism is considered a practical guide to Jihad, a set of rules and prescriptions on how to engage war against the enemies of Muslims; secondly, Salafist contributed to empower the use of *takfir*, an excommunication which condemns whomever – within Islam and outside – would act discordantly from the purest version of the Salafist doctrine; thirdly the concept of Al-wala' wa-l-bara', meaning ''loyalty and disavowal'', loving and hating for the sake of Allah. In its political and militant version, especially related to Al-Maqdisi writings, it refers to the obligation for Salafist to hate and reject the rulers and also the forms of government – especially in the West – that may detach the Salafist community from the true path of Allah. Those arguments in particular, have been pointed out by many scholars to explain the isolation and the detachment of the Salafist communities living in the West[13]. Those concepts are also exemplified in ISIS propaganda magazines such as *DABIQ*, through different "narratives" considered as a system of interrelated and sequentially organized

[8] Prucha, "Understanding the "Islamic State" Narratives"; M. Maggioni, P. Magri, eds., *Twitter and Jihad: The Communication Strategy of ISIS*, 2015, Online available at: http://www.ispionline.it/sites/default/files/pubblicazioni/twitter_and_jihad_en.pdf. Accessed June 1, 2017; J. Stern, J.M. Berger, *ISIS: The State of Terror*, London, UK: Harper Collins, 2015; C. Whiteside, "Lighting the Path: the Evolution of the Islamic State Media Enterprise (2003-2016)", *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism*, The Hague 7, 11, 2016.

[9] https://clarionproject.org/latest-issue-isis-rumiyah-magazine-released/.

[10] L. Quadarella, *Perché ci attaccano. Al Qaeda, l'Islamic State e il terrorismo «fai da te»* (Why Do They Attack Us. Al Qaeda, the Islamic State and the "Self Made" Terrorism), Roma: Aracne, 2017.

[11] G. Wood, "What ISIS Really Wants", in *The Atlantic*, February 2015; https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/03/what-isis-really-wants/384980/. Accessed December 4, 2017.

[12] For un updated description of Jihadi-Salafist ideology and his influence on ISIS, see S. Maher, *Salafi-Jihadism: The History of an Idea*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.

[13] G. Kepel, *Terreur dans l'Hexagone. Genése du djihad français*, Paris: Gallimard, 2015.

stories meant to translate a complex doctrinal corpus into simple arguments. As stated before, it is not in the objective of this paper that of analysing the influence of Jihadist Salafism on ISIS narratives; we'd rather focus on propaganda narratives as they appear on line in the magazines mentioned before and in a corpus of selected social media.

Before presenting our research approach we also give an overview on the state of the art of the research related to ISIS online narratives.

2. ANALYSING THE IMPACT OF ONLINE PROPAGANDA NARRATIVES: DIFFERENT APPROACHES

The most detailed and structured sources of ISIS propaganda are the organization's online magazines: *DABIQ*, *Rumiyah*, *Dar Al Islam* etc. Different scholars analysed their contents, identifying distinct, though not mutually excluding narrative layers[14]: a political narrative that employs themes such as the crimes of "the West" and its supported proxies, the global suppression of certain religious minorities and the unfair distribution of income, welfare or land; a moral narrative framing concepts such as liberal democracy, freedom of speech and gender equality as unachievable and hypocritical "Western" ideals; a religious discourse that is employed to further delegitimize "the West" and promote the perception that fighting against the "infidels" is a right cause. In relation to European youngsters, different scholars point out the specific impact[15] of a social and heroic narrative aimed at exploiting feelings of social exclusion and marginalisation. Those narratives present jihadism and the struggle against "the West" as the perfect fulfilment of their yearning for adventure, heroism, glamour and admiration, by enhancing romantic notions of brotherhood of arms and exciting life in camps. As mentioned before, narratives are here used as "rationale" – as objective motivation – which may entitle the audience to take action against the "West" and the "enemies of Islam". Besides the propaganda magazines' analysis described above; a number of recent studies presents in-depth online video content analysis – mainly based on YouTube contents – aimed at describing either the self-representations of terrorist groups or the ones of the individual foreign fighters[16]. Different studies focus more on the rhetoric used by ISIS[17] through the analysis of their textual production; others offer a detailed analysis of the cross-media communication processes deployed by ISIS to engage their audience[18].

Notwithstanding the important contribution given by online content analysis, a very few studies empirically investigate the impact of narratives on the alleged audience. Neumann[19], for example, thanks to a set of in-depth interviews with 58 ISIS' defectors, pointed out that the recruitment narratives used by the terrorist organization were evolving around three main motivations/rationale: the cruelty of Assad's regime and the need to defend the Syrian Sunni Muslims against his atrocities, the ISIS legitimacy to be

[14] Kassels, "Countering Violent Extremist Narratives", 3; Prucha, "Understanding the "Islamic State" Narratives".

[15] O. Roy, *Le Djihad et la mort*, Paris, Seuil, 2016, 881-980 kindle position; P.J. Salazar, *Paroles armées: comprendre et combattre la propagande terroriste*, Lemieux éditeur, 2015, 1705-1838 kindle position.

[16] M. Vergani, D. Zuev, "Analysis of YouTube Videos Used by Activists in the Uyghur Nationalist Movement: Combining Quantitative and Qualitative Methods", *Journal of Contemporary China*, 20, 69 (2011), 205-229; M. Vergani, "Neo-Jihadist Prosumers and Al Qaeda Single Narrative: The Case Study of Giuliano Delnevo", *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 37, 7 (2014), 604-617.

[17] Salazar, *Paroles armées.*

[18] Maggioni, Magri, eds., *Twitter and Jihad.*

[19] P.R. Neumann, *Victims, Perpetrators, Assets: The Narratives of Islamic State Defectors*, ICSR, 2015, 9.

the "purest" realization of an Islamic State where Muslims could live according to the *sharia*; a pragmatic narrative based on the promise of material goods and benefits to the foreign fighters who would join the ISIS army.

The article will present the research deployed by the SAFFRON[20] project (Semantic Analysis Against Foreign Fighters Recruitment Online Networks) in order to analyze perceptions and opinions in relation to ISIS' propaganda narratives with a particular regard to an audience of at-risk young Europeans and the foreign fighters phenomenon.

With respect to the studies mentioned above, the SAFFRON research focuses on online ISIS propaganda developing a mixed-method approach based on a computer-automated lexical and semantic analysis of online propaganda contents (Facebook posts, tweets, textual content from the *DABIQ* magazine) as detailed in sec. 3.2, and a qualitative inquiry carried out through a set of workshops with at-risk young subjects in Italy and France.

This methodology enabled us to empirically analyse the impact of online narratives on a targeted sample with the aim of overcoming the limits of the previous studies based either solely on online contents – such as ISIS magazines or YouTube videos – or on individual interviews. Moreover, the participatory methods deployed provided the opportunity of grasping even the tacit knowledge and unexpected opinions fostered by the debate on such sensible topics. In consideration of the limited number of individuals involved (n. 47), it's difficult to generalize our outcomes to the entire population of young Europeans sensible to ISIS' propaganda; nevertheless our inquiry highlighted some interesting issues. Thanks to the mentioned approach, our analysis, on one hand reinforced some evidences discussed in the literature: for example the prominent role of political narratives concerning the oppressive regimes in Syria, Chechnya etc. On the other hand it questioned significantly the emphasis on Internet and social media propaganda as the main hotbed for radicalisation: the youth sample interviewed highlighted also the role of mainstream media for their framing young Muslims as violent or even terrorists. In the following paragraphs (see sec. 4.2) we analyse how mainstream media representation of Muslims in Europe turned out to be a problematic dimension closely interwoven with ISIS on line propaganda.

2.1. *The alleged target of the propaganda narratives: who are the foreign fighters?*

Our analysis was focused on the foreign fighters' phenomenon related to the current Syrian conflict, whose extent has grown significantly bigger than it was the case in the previous wars in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iraq. However, with the recent (as of December 2017) ISIS' territorial defeat in Iraq and Syria, a large number of foreign fighters are currently abandoning Islamic State and either returning to their national countries or joining other active conflicts[21]. Even if the ISIS online propaganda turned out to be a

[20] SAFFRON is a European Union funded project (2016-2018) involving different institutions (private ICT companies, a military academia and one university) in France, Italy and Romania; its main objectives are:

– deliver and test a tool to be used by all relevant players (which are also part of the consortium) to identify in a timely fashion both all internet activities of direct and indirect recruitment of foreign fighters and all signals (weak or strong) pointing at radicalization of single individuals;

– analyse the recent trends about recruitment of young European people by terrorist groups;

– analyse the online communication strategy of terrorist groups and develop a social media campaign to contrast their propaganda. www.saffron-project.eu.

[21] A. Reed, J. Pohl, M. Jegerings, *The Four Dimensions of the Foreign Fighters Phenomenon: Making*

facilitator driver to turn quite young European into foreign fighters, it is very difficult to identify a unique target group profile. Data on the demographic and socio-economic features of radicalised "Westerners" are diversified. They may have different professional and educational backgrounds, belong to a wide range of socio-economic conditions and come from various countries of origin. The mean age of foreign fighters from European countries ranges from 18 to 29, with some differences among the EU Member States[22]. The average percentage of females is 17%[23]. Moreover, some authors of terrorist attacks occurred in Europe during last few years are refugees or asylum seekers, such as for instance Ahmad al-Mohammed - one of the bombers of 13 November 2015 Paris attacks- or Anis Amri – who drove a truck into a crowd at the Berlin Christmas market on December 19, 2016 – or Mohammed Daleel – a suicide bomber who performed a terrorist attack in Ansbach in Germany on July 24, 2016[24]. Finally, a relevant number of European foreign fighters is composed of converts to Islam, ranging between 6% and 23%, depending on the individual EU Member States. Many of them are second or third generation of immigrants. The majority of European foreign fighters (both converts and with Muslim origins) have very few previous connections with Syria or previous experiences of religious militancy. They convert (or re-convert) themselves to Islam after a process of political radicalisation (not *vice versa*). Following an individual path, they increasingly endorse a new idea of the world: they accept an extreme and simplified version of Islam as if it was the real one. Such version of Islam allows them to embrace the new strict "ethos" they were looking for[25].

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY: IDENTIFYING THE "SAMPLE TARGET"

Data collected by various scholars and research institutes, as presented in the previous paragraph, show that Western young people radicalised and foreign fighters come from different countries, belong to diverse age groups and genders, differ for education path and professional qualifications. In view of these so diversified demographic and socio-economic features, SAFFRON research team identified a heterogeneous sample of young subjects who might have been involved into this study. Although our sample is numerically limited and not representative of all European youth with some connections to violent radicalization plights, it gave us several interesting and significant elements

Sense of an Evolving Phenomenon, ICCT Policy Brief, 2017. https://icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/ICCT-Reed-Pohl-The-Four-Dimensions-of-the-Foreign-Fighters-Threat-June-2017.pdf, 5; M. Chulov, J. Grierson, J. Swaine, "ISIS Faces Exodus of Foreign Fighters as Its 'Caliphate' Crumbles", in *The Guardian*, 26 April 2017. Online available at: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/apr/26/isis-exodus-foreign-fighters-caliphate-crumbles: Accessed July 22, 2017.

[22] R. Briggs, T. Silverman, *Western Foreign Fighters. Innovations in Responding to the Threat. Institute for Strategic Dialogues*, 2017. http://www.strategicdialogue.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/ISDJ2784_Western_foreign_fighters_V7_WEB.pdf. Accessed June 1, 2017, 12; R. Guolo, *L'ultima utopia. Gli jihadisti europei*, Milan: Guerini e Associati, 2015, 29; B. Boutin, Berenice, G. Chauzal, J. Dorsey, M. Jegerings, C. Paulussen, J. Pohl, A. Reed, S. Zavagli, *The Foreign Fighters Phenomenon in the EU – Profiles, Threat & Policies*, 2016. Online available at: https://www.icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/ICCT-Report_Foreign-Fighters-Phenomenon-in-the-EU_1-April-2016_including-AnnexesLinks.pdf. Accessed June 1, 2017, 51.

[23] Boutin, Berenice, Chauzal, Dorsey, Jegerings, Paulussen, Pohl, Reed, Zavagli, *The Foreign Fighters Phenomenon*, 2016, 4 and 51.

[24] M. Seloom, *ISIS and the Refugee Crisis in Europe*, Migration Research Institute, 2015. https://www.migraciokutato.hu/en/2015/11/21/isis-and-the-refugee-crisis-in-europe/. Accessed November 27, 2017; Reed, Pohl, Jegerings, *The Four Dimensions*, 2017.

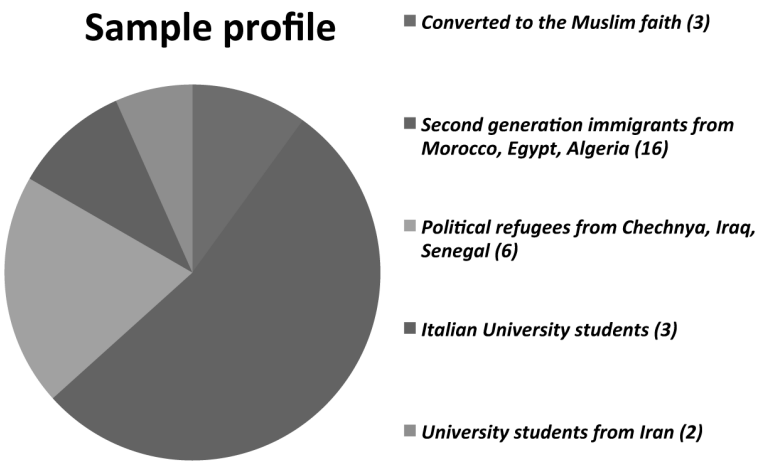
[25] Guolo, *L'ultima utopia*, 2015, 31-33.

for thought about the attractive' power and appeal of ISIS' propaganda[26]. In fact, the choice of our sample allowed us to explore the narratives exploited by ISIS for motivating young Europeans towards a violent radicalisation process, using a participatory approach. These motivations have been investigated through an empirical research carried out by organising 7 workshops in Italy (Turin) and France (Grenoble)[27]. Between July and October 2016, a total of 47 people were involved: 17 experts and 30 young people.

Alongside young subjects, in fact, experts on terrorism, communication and media, Islam and youth, were involved for analysing in-depth several issues related to the foreign fighters' phenomenon and considering the opinions and ideas expressed by young participants.

Young subjects – 10 females and 20 males, aged between 16 and 32 – were involved in 5 workshops. The Italian sample mainly involved second generation immigrants originally from Maghreb, Italians converted to Muslim faith, University students and political-refugees from Iraq and Senegal. On the other hand, the French sample was mostly made up of second generation immigrants with Algerian origin and of political-refugees from Chechnya. Especially young French people (11) were involved as they were considered by the educators of the associations collaborating in the project and by the research team as "at risk" youth.

Figure 1 - *Profile of young participants*



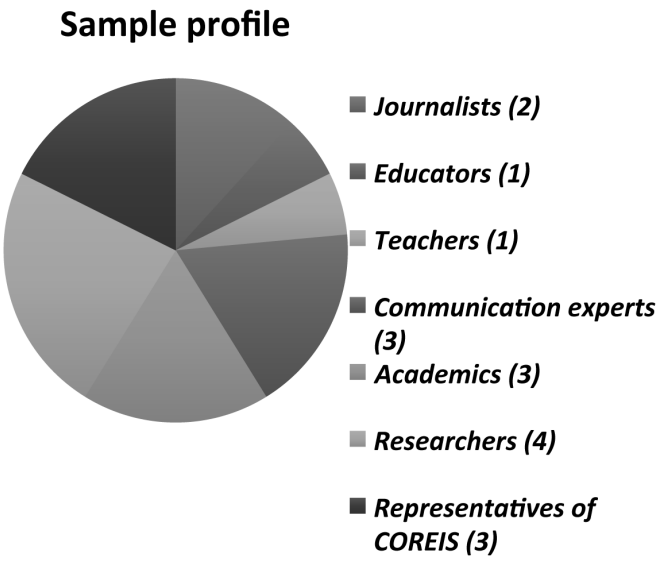
[26] The research team didn't involve a huge number of young people and also prisoners which would have been more representative of European context because it was out of the SAFFRON Project' aims and we didn't have a dedicated budget for that kind of research activity.

[27] The choice of these two countries was determined by some specific characteristics of the foreign fighters' phenomenon: France was chosen in consideration of the fact that it is the European country that is most affected by the foreign fighters phenomenon (1700 – see R. Barret, J. Berger, L. Ghosh, D. Schoenfeld, M. el-Shawesh, P.M. Skinner, S. Sim, A. Soufan, *FOREIGN FIGHTERS. An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters Into Syria and Iraq*, 2015. Online available at: http://soufangroup.com/wp-, 8) as well as by the jihadist terrorism. The French sample was chosen as an "at risk target" while the Italian one reflected the heterogeneous European foreign fighter profile as surfaced in the literature and described in sec. 1.1. The Italian sample involved also a number of Italian citizens who converted to the Muslim faith. It is interesting to note that said sub-sample in particular contributed to the representation of the potential propaganda target as described above. A comparative study of these two national contexts allowed us to analyze the differences between these two groups in relations to the enabling and driving factors which bring them toward a radicalization process.

Both young Italian and French participants were contacted trough the associations and NGOs collaborating in the project[28]. These NGOs, which work in the area for supporting youth in integration and socialisation processes, made a relevant contribution to identify young subjects as the potential target group of ISIS' propaganda and to involve them into the workshops. The research team repeatedly met the educators of such associations to characterise and define the typologies of young people who should have been involved in the workshops. Then, the educators selected young subjects based on the information provided by the researchers of the project. Some of them were evaluated as a youth "at risk" of radicalisation due to the extremist ideas and beliefs that they expressed during discussions with the educators of the associations and NGOs involved in the project (which they restated during the workshops as well, see sec. 3.1).

The experts – 9 females and 8 males, mean age 45 – who participated in two workshops in Turin, were professionals with different backgrounds: journalists, educators, teachers, communication experts, academics, researchers and representatives of the Islamic religious community COREIS.

Figure 2 - *Profile of experts*



The experts were involved as qualified testimonials who, as a result of their specific professional backgrounds and expertise, could provide their advices, opinions and impressions about the different features of radicalisation phenomenon. Therefore, the experts gave an important contribution to the analysis of the opinions expressed by young participants and to the contextualization of the workshops' main findings.

[28] The associations involved are: COREIS (Religious Community of Converts to Islam); ASAI (Association of Intercultural Entertainment); GMI (Italian Young Muslims); Balon Mundial (Sports association for multicultural integration); AMAL (Cultural association for French-Maghreb integration); Le Plateau Mistral (Centre for cultural encounter).

3.1. *Participatory methods for mapping ISIS propaganda narratives*

Participatory design is an approach and a set of methodologies in which the final target groups' products are already included into a meta-reflexive analysis process about the present and future. In fact, people are asked not only to express their opinions and beliefs about what actually is the present, but also to think about how the future could be, by designing products, services or experiences. It can be considered a qualitative ethnographic analysis with a predictive aim[29]. The favourable participatory workshop outcomes are usually attributed to the exploitations of targets' tacit knowledge and the activation of their collective intelligence[30]. Qualitative ethnography[31] enables us to foster practical activity and to look at what usually remains unspoken and relates to experiences and feelings. In particular, it includes photography, voice recordings, participatory videos, digital storytelling and visual archive research[32] usable to elicit tacit knowledge and emotion from the participants. In addition, other techniques as brainstorming, card sorting, low-tech prototyping are used to stimulate the co-creation of new artefacts: It is a form of engaging researchers and participants in a creative or playful method of collective enquiry[33]. Thus, participatory workshops allow us to gain inspiration on how to interpret the context, to provide nuances and insights that would be unlikely to materialise through a conventional process. Therefore, in contrast to focus groups, participatory workshops are structured around practical activities (writing or drawing) and allow for the exploration of emotional dimensions.

3.2. *The participatory workshops*

In line with the methodological approach described above, each workshop was structured into three separate phases:

– *First part. Presentation of the problem*: facts and figures related to various case studies of foreign fighters[34] at international level through their online images and short biographies.

– *Second part. Reflection* based on the facts and biographies presented before: what are the driving motivations of radicalisation? Round table discussion on the possible causes and narratives. The idea was not to propose solutions without having first completed an immersive and empathic investigation into the causes. Brainstorming and

[29] G. Taddeo, "Pre-visione/co-visione. Limiti e potenzialità del "participatory design" come metodologia proiettiva per le scienze sociali", in *Ieri oggi e domani. Studi sulla previsione nelle scienze sociali*, edited by G. De Maria, Rome: Aracne, 2011.

[30] H. Sanoff, ''Special Issue on Participatory Design'', *Design Studies*, 28, 3 (2007): 213-215.

[31] The term design ethnography is used to describe all the ethnographic practices aimed to obtain concrete results in order to make design productivity, of a process or a product, more effective. Respect to the pure ethnography it has, therefore, a more applied in nature aim. Design ethnography is used in many design contexts: from ICT prototyping to urban planning up to the artifacts' design.

[32] F. Bayre, K. Harper, A.I. Afonso, "Participatory Approaches to Visual Ethnography from the Digital to the Handmade. An Introduction", *Visual Ethnography*, 5, 1 (2016): 5-13.

[33] J. Halse, L. Boffi, "Design Interventions as a Form of Inquiry", paper for seminar (Vol. 1), 2016, 92-93.

[34] The case studies presented were 1) in Italy: Giuliano (Ibrahim) Delnevo; Maria Giulia Sergio (alias Fatima); Mohamed Jarmoune; 2) in France: Junaid Hussain, Sally Jones, Denis Cupert, Boubaker Al-Hakim, Salim Benghalem. They have been chosen in consideration of the availability of sufficient biographical information, and also because they were able to represent, according to our research, a sufficient nuanced and variegate picture of the typical radicalization process. The foreign fighters profiles were selected thanks to the open database available at: https://www.counterextremism.com/extremists

collection of opinions from participants on the main reasons that lead individuals to radicalisation. This phase was carried out as an open discussion: we, as researchers leading the workshop, tried to avoid as much as possible to interfere with our suggestions or beliefs. We attempted to stimulate a spontaneous talking, in order to let emerge "genuine" opinions and not influenced by "socially" or "academic" acceptable frameworks.

– Third part: why does this happen?

Presentation of a large paperboard (Figure 3) of possible motivations, visually organised around five themed areas and articulated in different narratives. Our research goal was that of analysing the impact of a set of narratives identified in the literature as the enabling arguments leading youngsters to a violent radicalisation path: nevertheless we assumed that the concept of narrative itself was misleading for our young sample and we preferred to present them as *motivations*. That helped us to translate in a more comprehensible way the concept of narrative as a "rational argument" driving young people toward radicalisation.

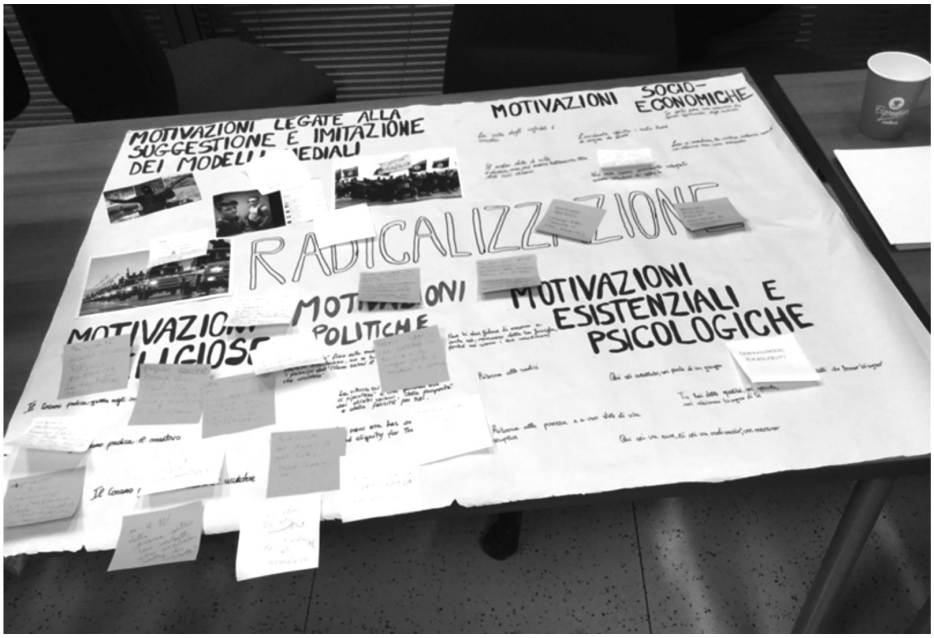
The motivations proposed in this third stage, are related to various aspects and problems of the individuals' lives: for example, socio-economic conditions refer to social marginality, to problems of obtaining citizenship and lack of work opportunities; instead, existential problems are linked to solitude, isolation, lack of alternatives, the need to give a meaning to one's life and find a place in the world, political-ideological reasons refer to the political project of the Caliphate, to the need to have a state where it is possible to practice the religion in the most orthodox manner; religious reasons refer to the precepts of the Qur'an. Lastly, media-related narratives or motivations refer to the role of media and social media in enhancing the heroic and social appeal of ISIS. The motivations areas presented as starting framework, were: Psychological and existential; Socio-economical; Political and ideological; Religious; and Media – related,

Since our research goal was that of analysing the impact of ISIS narratives in order to engage and recruit the youngsters target, each motivation was depicted through propaganda messages published online: the motivations were exemplified by sentences, posts and real tweets, identified through the computer automated semantic and lexical analysis of a substantial body of online data that included 14 issues of the *DABIQ* magazine and messages posted on Facebook and Twitter accounts which are considered to be extremist[35]. The following were among the most significant phrases: for example, in relation to the political motivation, we presented such phrases as: ''the Caliphate is better than democracy''; for the religious one: ''The Koran preaches war against infidels''; for the psychological and existential: ''Muslim brother I will defend you to the death but if you betray the principles of Islam you will be the first to be killed''; for the media-related motivations we presented a set of tweets focused on the critique of Western mainstream media: e.g. "American networks always lie on Muslims" or "French TV is part of the security state". Thanks to those messages we wanted to get an impression on the role of media (mainstream and social) in the social representation of the radicalisation issue. Along with the textual narratives mentioned above, we also presented a set of meaningful images selected in the same corpus of online data referring to an idealised and heroic representation of the ISIS fighters. The images referred to alleged foreign fighters depicted through evocative and appealing attitudes in the magazine *DABIQ* and also in social media networks; they were presented to our sample as a media-related narrative (Figure 3).

[35] The analysed online data refers to messages and posts in English and French identified from a corpus of approximately 1500 Twitter accounts and about 1200 Facebook profiles monitored between February to July 2016. The processing and analysis of such online data was carried out by the French companies VISEO and Eloquant, partners of the SAFFRON project, of which the research presented here forms part.

Figure 3 - *Foreign fighters images*

Figure 4 - *The motivations map used as first visual framework to gain opinions by the participants. The paper board contained a first map or motivations, created by the researchers according to methodology explained above. Participants could add or erase motivations with respect to the five ones indicated.*



4. MAIN FINDINGS FROM THE PARTICIPATORY WORKSHOPS

Discussions held during the workshops highlighted a set of core narratives that are considered by both French and Italian participants as the more convincing: the political, the religious narrative and the media-related narratives turn out to be the most prominent ones.

The map was analysed both with the young subjects and with experts who were questioned in relation to the rhetoric and persuasion strategies employed by ISIS. Thanks to physical interaction around the paperboard, the participants were asked to choose the most important motivation/narrative. Then, through additional post-its, they could add phrases they considered meaningful for such motivations: slogan as well as simple thoughts they consider representative of one or more aspects of such motivation.

4.1. *The impact of political and religious narratives*

Young workshop participants relate a number of political issues to the topics of patriotism and the associated need to take a position on political issues and objective topics, desirable political regime and the ideological narrative of state building, all three exploited by ISIS' propaganda. The young Muslims among the French participants feel a moral and ethical duty to take a stand, to defend the Muslim community to which they belong and all the people suffering in their own countries of origin. They are interested to the political questions of their own countries of origin, rather than to those of their host-countries, and feel the need to take a position and to affirm their values and identity.

> The most important motivation that drives young people is political. It is not the politics of the country in which young people are in [...] the basis is patriotism for their country of origin. In fact, young people today cannot change anything in the country they are in. So they look for ease, the possibility of changing something [...] they joined terrorist groups because they want to change something and do something important and useful in their country of origin (C., m., 22, refugee).

Furthermore, a number of French Muslims believe that "the caliphate is better than democracy". These few young French participants had been considered as "at risk" of radicalisation. In fact, during the workshops, they showed to be particularly interested in the contents of jihadist propaganda, and claimed to have had discussions with an online recruiter as well as to be attracted by the stories of their peers who had departed for Syria. The basic hypocrisy of democratic system, which deceives young subjects to be free and have a social high value, but then leaves them without real opportunities, pushes the youth to embrace a stricter kind of political regime where every life' aspect is controlled by alleged precise and clear rules. Many young people who leave for Syria are convinced of the positivity of living in a territory where all behaviour is regulated by *sharia* in its most obscurantist version. The same ISIS rhetoric articulates the message that the caliphate is justified by and rooted in Islam and that this form of government works and allows everyone to live as a true Muslim. This message is confirmed by the testimony of some young people who have experienced both the caliphate and democracy, as reported by some young participants:

> The most important reason is the requirement of Islam to have a caliphate. A Muslim has no doubt about his own duties and obligations. [...] For Islam, the state must be the caliphate

> which is justified by the Koran and the Sunna that say that democracy is prohibited because it is created by the laws of men [...] These young people grew up in a democratic system, they therefore discover what is positive and negative for them in a democracy [...] they say that they have lived this life there (in Syria). After this experience, they can say that an Islamic religious system is better than a democratic system (J., m., 17, refugee).

Moreover, the rhetoric of state building seems to have a significant impact. Some of the experts who took part in the workshops showed to be well impressed by the picture of ISIS as a composite, multitasking and full-package organisation where Muslims can live under *sharia* law and freely perform their religion:

> ISIS is successful because it presents itself as a multitasking complex: there is the state, the territory, the fact that you can find yourself in a fully Islamised context in which you can live this aspect of global Islam, in a context that protects the individual from birth till death and seeks to create something (Prof. of Political Sciences, f.).

Finally, religion plays a significant role in persuading young people of the truth claimed by propaganda. It gives an ideological basis to each of the listed topics. For instance, the participants linked the topic of taking a position on the wars in the Middle East to the issue of "holy war" in the name of the Koran. However, all participants showed to be aware that religion is exploited by ISIS for justifying its narratives and its violent actions.

> The problem is religious because religion, which is a profound thing in human nature, has been exploited [...] it is the manipulation of religion that is no longer religion and becomes something we can't even describe (Imam COREIS, m.).

4.2. *Media-related narratives*

The impressions gathered from the young subjects emphasize the role of the media-related narrative as one of the most insightful. As introduced in par. 3.2 we presented the media narratives through a set of images, mostly collected from social networks profiles, representing young combatants and alleged foreign fighters showing heroic attitudes.

The young people interviewed, both in Italy and France, stated that they, both passively and actively, extensively use social media – Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. When solicited to comment the social media images of young fighters though, our interviewed pointed their fingers on main traditional media. They criticize mainstream media such as TV networks and newspapers with regard to their representation of terrorism, the Islamic world, and politics in the Middle East: they consider them as biased and responsible for spreading superficial and misleading representations of Muslims in Europe:

> Yes, well there is a political will to show [...] the BBC but also *Al-Jazeera* [...] the political will to show and get the message across of what ISIS is and on the other side there are those who send, always as a political message, who show the ill-treatment in the refugee camps which exists but which is also amplified [...] that is the other part of the information. Always through Facebook I see many friends who perhaps are on an immigration path to Europe and are filming these videos that testify the degree of racism that exists in many cases against them in Europe. So there is the BBC that does show ISIS, but there is also a kind of commu-

> nication on the other side, there is a representation of reality that amplifies what [...] just look at how they treat us in Europe (A, f., 22, second generation).

In particular, the French subjects insisted on the concept of Jihad which mainstream media tend to manipulate in order to shed a negative light on young Muslims:

> And then there is the use of the media jihad for war. [...] In fact, it is their mistake, the media as well, if people think that jihad is the jihad of war. But they do not know that if your mother does not give you her consent for war, you cannot go to war (R. m., 20, second generation).

The strongest criticism of mainstream media is that they reinforce a negative image of young Muslims who are often described as terrorists, criminals etc. thereby creating a fertile ground for discrimination and pushing young people to embrace a path of violent radicalisation:

> Some people get influenced by what's written in the newspapers and so they say well for us the Islamists are all bad people, the Moroccans, the Arabs are all bad, they are ISIS [...] And so the ideology infiltrates [...] but that is where the problem is, instead one needs to try to get to know [...] and understand the mentality [...] In my opinion the information is the problem. In the sense that there are people who go there because the media push us to view Islam as bad (C., m., 26, second generation).

On the contrary, social media often make it possible to maintain ties with relatives and friends living in the Middle East. In this case, they are considered reliable sources and certainly preferable to mainstream media:

> I have many friends who are political activists. I read up on the Middle East and the various issues related to it by reading the writings of my friends. They use Twitter a lot and they are very critical. They write in English. Instead, I find that Western media exaggerates the activities and the declarations as well as the presence of ISIS and other terrorist groups (M., m., 25, University Student, Iran).

Young people, both in Italy and in France, stated that they have been contacted by or to have found a point of contact with ''propagandists'' or individuals interested in having a more in-depth relationship with them:

> When I wanted to know why people leave, I spoke with a man on the internet [...]. He showed me videos [...]. He asked me to what extent I am involved in my religion. He told me that I must know the religion. Once we know we decide to leave. What surprised me is that he told me not to leave, but first to learn the religion [...]. But he told me to learn the religion [...]. I believe that we must also dive into these ideological and spiritual aspects (J., m., 17, refugee).

The role of Internet as a favourable milieu for radicalisation was also reinforced by the experts. According to them, Internet is one of the factors that may have a hold over some types of individuals, e.g. ''lone wolves'' or women:

> It's true that something is changing, for example we now see on Telegram that they are really changing also the type of argument because the goal has become different. [...]. I am always cautious about using the word lonely wolf because then when we look at the cases in the news we are still missing many pieces, we are still missing pieces regarding Orlando and let's not talk about Nice, and we're missing them regarding Brussels. Therefore, it's very

> dangerous to say that they went on the Internet, they were recruited, they left [...] The case of women is interesting because they, being unable to do a number of activities even if they want to do them (fighting first of all), all technological tools are important to them because they allow for a more convinced affiliation. So much so that the women themselves are being turned into recruiters because they are more educated compared to boys and therefore have better language skills (Media educator, m.).

5. CONCLUSIONS

The dramatic events linked to terrorism question individuals, families and institutions about the meaning and reasons driving young Europeans to sacrifice their lives in suicide actions or to join the ISIS army. Propaganda has a role – as analysed by many scholars thanks to different research approaches – even if it turns out very difficult to understand what are the most effective narratives exploited by terrorist organizations in order to disseminate an appealing "call to action" toward young Europeans. Our research tried to investigate such a complex topic through a mixed-method approach including both an automated semantic and lexical analysis of online contents and a qualitative inquiry involving the alleged target of propaganda – a sample of young Europeans – and a number of experts in order to avoid the risk of one-sided interpretations. Among our interviewed emerged a wide consensus on the role of political narratives. Those were mostly related to the atrocities suffered by Muslims under oppressive regimes such as Assad's, as also highlighted by Neumann (see sec. 1). Moreover the political narrative manifests his appeal also as a call to action grounded on their sense of belonging to their countries of origins. This call is particularly emphasized by the young refugees and the second-generation immigrants who, even if they were born and raised in Europe, express this sense of political belonging as a powerful driver for radicalisation. The young subjects' original ties emerge also in relation to the religious narratives: narratives related to ISIS as a "political subject", as a "legitimate state" where Muslims could live according to an ultra-traditionalist version of Islam emerge as a very impactful narrative. Besides, the disenchantment toward democracy and its institution – especially the media – is another debated topic among the young subjects interviewed.

An important evidence, which challenges previous debate is the role of the media narratives: in contrast to what emerge in the literature mentioned in sec. 1[36] our young target didn't express any interest toward the "heroic and social images" spread online to appeal the sense of heroism and brotherhood of the potential foreign fighters. The interviewed seemed to be largely aware of the sugar-coated images of the young combatants portrayed by ISIS propaganda. Rather than commenting on that, they focused on the negative influence of mainstream media such as television and newspapers on the phenomenon of radicalisation. In their words "media-related narratives" turn out to be those of mainstream media rather than those of on line propaganda. According to them, Western mainstream media tend to frame young Muslims as violent or even as terrorists and to give a superficial and biased representation of important concept such as Jihad. They contribute to amplify social divide and a profound separation between ''us'' and ''them'', making grounds for the possibility of dialogue more difficult. This evidence questions significantly the idea of on line propaganda narratives as the prominent ones

[36] Roy, *Le Djihad et la mort*; Salazar, *Paroles armées.*

as suggested by other authors[37]. The youngsters interviewed didn't deny the role of social media as "facilitators" for recruitment or for accessing ISIS propaganda; nevertheless they didn't give much attention to Internet narratives as the emphasis they devoted to those of mainstream media. Those outcomes suggest to consider both as part of a more complex media ecology[38] where different media environments – Internet as well as mainstream media – and their specific narratives appear to be more deeply interwoven. The results related to media narratives also align with the emphasis given by our young sample to the political dimension: the mainstream media narratives mentioned before are indeed political in their fostering a social divide and the perception of "otherness".

Therefore, further researches should focus more on this subject trying to articulate better the different dimensions of the political narratives examined, and also how they're exploited by different media outlets (mainstream, social media). The empirical approach deployed in our research would also greatly benefit from a broader cross-national sample also at international level.

[37] Meleagrou-Hitchens, Kaderbhai, *Research Perspectives on Online Radicalisation. A Literature Review*, 2016.

[38] A. Hoskins, A. Awan, B. O'Loughlin, *Radicalisation and the Media: Connectivity and Terrorism in the New Media Ecology*, London: Routledge, 2011.