

## An Empirical Analysis of Causes of Islamist Radicalisation: Italian Case Study

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### Abstract

*This Research Note is based on a doctoral dissertation to be shortly completed at King's College, London. It presents first results of one of the largest quantitative analyses of possible causes of Islamist radicalization in Italy, based on a sample of 440 respondents from 15 Italian cities. The study investigates Muslim respondents' support for violence framed in Islamist religious terms. After defining "Islamist radicalisation", a large number of models linking support for violence with various predictor parameters were tested. No statistically significant support was found for theories proposing discrimination, economic disparity, outrage at Western foreign policy, oppression of Muslims, traumatic experiences, or any standard sociological variable, including gender and being a convert to Islam, as predictors. Similarly, neither "networks" nor rational choice theory was supported by the data. By contrast, the most significant predictor variables relating to support for violence were taking offense against offenders of Islam and the endorsement of an Islamic, theocratic form of government (ideology). Social difficulties and uncertainty as for the wish to belong to Italian culture (identity crisis) were marginally significant.*

**Keywords:** Islamist radicalisation, causes, ideology, Italy

### Introduction

Ever since European and U.S. officials brought the concept into discussion in 2004, "radicalisation" has been used to explain causes of terrorism. With time, radicalisation firmly entered the political discourse and its supposed relation to terrorism has become a matter of conventional wisdom. At the same time, radicalisation has principally, if not entirely, been associated to "Muslims in Europe" and to converts to Islam.[1] Following the 2004 Madrid and the 2005 London attacks, it was claimed Europe clearly had a problem with radicalisation.[2] A decade later, even prior to ISIS's terror spree in France, Islamist radicalisation in Europe was pronounced an urgent issue.[3] Given ISIS's ability to radicalise and recruit European Muslims, it has been suggested that radicalisation "will be a more or less permanent feature of Western societies"[4] and that, accordingly, "the new wave of Jihadist terrorism has only just begun." [5]

Yet, the very notion of radicalisation as an explanatory factor of terrorism is a source of controversy. As a phenomenon, radicalisation is not fully understood. There is no accepted definition of radicalisation, as "about the only thing radicalisation experts agree on is that radicalisation is a process." [6] The uncertainty as to whom and what is to be considered "radical" is often responsible for contradictory government policies.[7] This ambivalence is rooted in the changing attitudes within societies towards "radical" notions throughout history, because the term "radical", and hence radicalisation, is utterly relative, for it depends on history and context.[8]

Furthermore, terrorists have not always been deemed "radical". For instance, in the past there was no mention of IRA members being radicalised. The terminology has emerged in the post-9/11 era to describe al-Qaeda and its affiliates.[9] Yet, the often-assumed connection between radicalisation and terrorism is problematic. A number of terrorists were never radical in first place, while most radicals never turn to terrorism.[10] Even though radicalisation represents certain individuals' starting point towards violence, others radicalise only after being recruited. Besides, in Europe, if one takes the Europol statistics, in recent decades separatist terrorism trumped religious terrorism, with most terrorism perpetrated by non-Muslims.[11]

### ***The Study's Conceptual Approach to Radicalisation in Historical Context***

Since 2004, multiple attempts have been made to define radicalisation. Various definitions include “the process (or processes) whereby individuals or groups come to approve of and (ultimately) participate in the use of violence for political aims”[12]; “a personal process in which individuals adopt extreme political, social, and/or religious ideals and aspirations, and in which the attainment of particular goals justifies the use of indiscriminate violence”[13]; “the process of progressively adopting more radical beliefs and ideas of Islam”[14]; and “the process of coming to adopt militant Islamist ideology.”[15]

Given the emphasis on “individual” and “personal” in some of the above-definitions, much academic research has been devoted to attempts to link personal circumstances to causes of terrorism. The attempts have been mostly unsuccessful. Though individual biographies certainly matter, the extensive focus on personal variables has produced “false positives”.[16] That is, what enticed certain individuals to radicalise and turn to violence did not apply to others with similar characteristics. The inability to develop profiles or predictive models based on personal circumstances brought the study of radicalisation into doubt.[17] Radicalisation has even been branded a myth created by the media to advance new agendas and certain policies [18], socially constructed to defend Western culture, securitise the Muslim community, and avoid coping with society's inability to provide universal equality.[19]

Against this background, this study's contribution is as follows. The research is based on a questionnaire that includes a number of key statements, answers to which are deemed indicative of Islamist attitudes of the respondents. The author modelled the probability of such responses using a wide range of predictive variables that included, as a subset, those studied in the literature (see the next section). A quantitative analysis of each of the potential predictors of radical Islamist attitudes was performed in order to identify the most statistically significant ones that fit the Italian sample the best.

Particularly significant is the distinction between radicalisation in general and “violent radicalisation” based on notions of extremism. As defined by Anja Dalgaard-Nielsen [20], radicalisation is “a growing readiness to support and pursue far-reaching changes in society that conflict with or pose a direct threat to the existing order”, while “violent radicalisation [is] a process in which radical ideas are accompanied by the development of a willingness to directly support or engage in violent acts.” Defined in this way, violent radicalisation is linked to extremism, or the acquisition of extreme views that either justify or trigger acts of violence in response to a state of close-mindedness that leaves no room for tolerance.[21]

Note that the definition above is deliberately more general than the notion of radicalisation as applied to Islamism, al-Qaeda, ISIS, and their affiliates. This study, however, specifically concerns itself with “Islamist radicalisation”, with “Islamism” defined as those visions of Islam (typically, but not exclusively, from the Salafi school) whose “goal [is] the establishment of an Islamic political order in the sense of a state whose governmental principles, institutions, and legal system derive directly from the shari'ah.”[22] It is also recognised that not all Islamists actively seek social change, as they belong neither to the politically militant nor violent jihadist but to the quietist version of Salafism. Within the Western, specifically European, context, we define Islamist radicalisation as:

*The process by which a Muslim individual or a group of Muslim individuals residing in Europe or other parts of the West adopts purist visions and interpretations of Islam or Islamic tenets, mainly, but not exclusively, from the Salafi school of thought, conflicting with mainstream society's core liberal, democratic values, which may or may not turn into the justification of violence and/or active engagement in actual acts of violence to subvert the democratic system or achieve particular profound political and societal goals.*

This definition covers three intersecting groups of Islamist “radicals”: “religious purists”, “non-violent extremists”, and “violent extremists”.[23] Here, “religious purists” are those individuals who support purist visions of Islam that might or might not be considered radical as these might or might not conflict with

the existing order, but never endorse violence. “Non-violent extremists”, who may or may not be “religious purists”, justify but do not engage in religiously framed violence. “Violent extremists”, who also may or may not be “religious purists”, justify and actually engage in violence.

That specified, this Research Note concentrates on theoretical models of assumed causes of Islamist radicalisation and tests their application to the Italian scenario. The dissertation from which this Research Note is drawn explores the academic debate on radicalisation in depth and delves into the Italian case in regard to Islamist radicalisation, which is the main focus of the study. By doing so, the dissertation features a vast literature on assumed causes of radicalisation, clearly differentiating instances of Islamist radicalisation by both “non-violent extremists” and “violent extremists”. Further, the dissertation includes a detailed statistical methods section, which is constructed on both quantitative and qualitative levels of analysis (440 surveys and 200 interviews/focus groups). After comparing the results from a nearly identical questionnaire aimed at Italian non-Muslims (440 individuals), the dissertation offers a discussion and policy implementation section. A brief summary of these parts of the dissertation is provided here.

### ***Assumed Causes of Radicalisation***

Social and political grievances are among the most mentioned precursors to radicalisation, e.g., according to the relative deprivation theory.[24] It has been suggested that Muslims may fall prey to radicalisation as they suffer from economic inequality, social disparity, discrimination, and acts of Islamophobia.[25] Proponents of the cultural identity theory and the humiliation-revenge theory [26] contend that outrage at Western foreign policy and the oppression of Muslims worldwide trigger radicalisation [27], particularly in light of feelings of collective belonging that are a defining trait of Arab and Muslim cultures.[28]

Studies in Britain illustrate that personal negative experiences such as imprisonment or death of close relatives can foster cognitive openings and extreme visions.[29] Analogously, works in France show how young, alienated Muslims, while trapped between two cultures, find in radical Islam the remedy to their identity crises.[30] Alternatively, one can view an individual as a rational actor making cost and benefit analyses to maximise profits. By this logic, the availability of any kind of incentive (material and spiritual) can push an individual towards radicalisation. Within this framework, Islamist radicalisation would be nothing but the product of a rational choice.[31]

To other analysts, based on notions from the social bond theory—disruption or weakening of social bonds within society can cause criminal behaviour [32]—radicalisation depends on radical networks and their success in recruiting and indoctrinating new members.[33] While occurring in “echo chambers”, personal bonds and pre-existing ties to radical subjects are also instrumental tools for radicalisation to happen.

Without assuming the Islam-radicalisation nexus, various scholars have accentuated the role of Islamist ideology disseminated from the teachings Sayyid Qutb, Abdullah Azzam, and others.[34] According to absolutist/totalist theory notions [35], adherents of their ideology picture the world in a perpetual state of war, where true Muslims are antagonised by infidels who must be confronted militarily unless they convert.

Besides facilitating factors (diasporas, public places, prisons, the Internet), Islamist radicalisation can be approached through gender and conversion theories.[36] Based on masculinity theory, Muslim men might endorse and join ISIS to demonstrate their manhood. Likewise, ISIS offers Muslim women a chance to reclaim their position in stern patriarchal communities. Finally, European converts to Islam might be vulnerable to radicalisation as they often fall prey to discrimination, political grievances, and radical preachers.

### *An Italian Case Study*

Given the fact that Italy has yet to experience a major terrorist attack from Islamists, Italy might seem to be different from other major Western countries. But the country is not exceptional in the context of Islamist radicalisation as defined above. Recently, masses of new migrants have arrived on the Italian shores, triggering anti-Muslim sentiments within certain segments of society. This, coupled with harsh economic instability, heated political debate on immigration, and threats from ISIS, has widened the gap between Italy and its Muslim citizens. Further, the country has harboured al-Qaeda/ISIS members and affiliates, has exported fighters to theatres of Jihad, has witnessed 23 known cases of terrorist activity, including thwarted plots and unsuccessful attacks, has imprisoned and expelled dozen of individuals deemed threats to national security, and has been the home to radical preachers.[37]

### *Methodology Utilised*

The investigation is based on a survey featuring 68 questions, administered in 15 Italian cities selected according to Muslim demographics and Jihadist history. Overall, 440 people took part in the survey, while 200 subjects were examined through one-on-one interviews and focus groups. This makes it by far the largest quantitative study of causes of Islamist radicalisation in Italy to date. Individuals were approached at Islamic centres, mosques, or public places such as markets, stores, stations, etc.

The target population was not preselected in any way. The sample includes 303 males and 133 females. 263 respondents were 16 to 30 years old, 155 between 30 and 60, 17 over 60. 117 were Italian citizens, 209 came from Africa, 64 from Asia, 34 from Europe. 108 resided in the northeast of Italy, 195 in the northwest, 81 in the centre, 54 in the south. 212 earned less than 1,000 Euros a month, 133 between 1,000 and 2,000, 16 more than 2,000. 232 had a high school diploma, 113 a university degree, and 88 had neither. 286 always went to the mosque, 133 only took part in religious ceremonies on holidays or were not very observant. 365 were Sunni, 21 Shia, 39 Sunni converts. Thus, the sample is fairly representative of Italy's Muslim population.

Most questions were intended to assess the respondents' views on different issues and were phrased as precise statements from which each respondent could chose one of the following answers: 1) strongly agree, 2) slightly agree, 3) slightly disagree, 4) strongly disagree, 5) do not know, 6) decline to answer. In the quantitative part of the study only the definite responses (the first 4) were taken into account.

We analysed "Islamist outlook", by which we refer to the respondents' views on violence framed in Islamist terms. These visions have been scrutinised through the respondents' agreement or disagreement with four statements: 1) justification of violence in defence of Islam; 2) duty to punish whoever offends Islam and its sacred tenets; 3) support for al-Qaeda; 4) support for ISIS.

Besides these "response variables", other questions corresponded to dozens of potential "predictor variables", many of which stem from previous studies described in the literature. They can be classified (with a degree of vagueness) as "grievances", "psychological factors" "rational factors", and "structural factors", as shown in Table 1. The survey also included standard sociological variables such as age, gender, nationality, occupation, etc.

**Table 1:** *List of Independent Variables Used in the Study.*

INDEPENDENT (PREDICTIVE)	VARIABLES
Variables from the literature on radicalisation	Grievances <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Economic disparity</li> <li>• Social difficulties</li> <li>• Discrimination/racism</li> <li>• Outrage regarding Western foreign policy</li> <li>• Perceived oppression of Muslims</li> </ul>
	Psychological factors <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Traumatic personal experience</li> <li>• Identity crisis</li> </ul>
	Rational factors <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rational spiritual and material benefits</li> </ul>
	Structural factors <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social groups/personal bonds ("networks")</li> <li>• Ideology</li> </ul>
Standard sociological variables	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Age</li> <li>• Gender</li> <li>• Nationality</li> <li>• Birthplace</li> <li>• Years of permanent residency in Italy</li> <li>• City of residence</li> <li>• Social status</li> <li>• Number of children</li> <li>• Economic status</li> <li>• Educational attainment</li> <li>• Occupation</li> <li>• Political orientation</li> <li>• Religious participation</li> <li>• Religion</li> </ul>

**Main Findings**

While a significant minority of respondents support violence framed in religious terms, the vast majority of Muslim respondents do not. Counting only the definite answers, 26% of respondents (105/408) strongly or slightly agreed with the justification of violence in defence of Islam, while 74% opposed it. Similarly, 33% of respondents (131/392), agreed with the statement that whoever offends Islam or its sacred tenets should be punished, while 67% disagreed with such belief. Lastly, 12% of respondents (44/380) strongly or slightly supported al-Qaeda, while 88% of the sample opposed it; likewise, 15% of respondents (57/392) supported ISIS and 85% objected to it.

We tested each model linking support for violence with predictors from the literature. Note that this was not to determine causal relations between variables, for statistics, as a matter of principle, is unable to establish causality. We could, however, determine quantitatively the degree of independence between the various variables. Secondly, we ran logistic regression models linking the responses indicative of “Islamist outlook” with the most statistically significant predictors.

No statistically significant support was found for theories proposing discrimination, economic disparity, outrage at Western foreign policy, oppression of Muslims, traumatic experiences, or any standard sociological variable, including gender and being a convert to Islam as predictors. Similarly, neither “networks” nor rational choice theory was supported by the data. In other words, these results challenge theories frequently found in the literature on radicalisation.

By far, the most significant predictor variable in the regression models was the duty to punish whoever insults Islam in relation to violence in defence of faith. Though violence was not directly implied, those who agreed to punish whoever insults Islam also supported the use of violence in general. Table 2 shows that out of 102 subjects who agreed with the right to punish offenders of Islam, 82 (80%) also supported violence in defence of faith while 20 objected it.

**Table 2:** Contingency Table for Right to Punish Whoever Insults Islam and Violence in Defence of Islam

	Whoever insults Islam and its tenets deserves to be punished			
Violence in defence of Islam can be justified		Agree	Disagree	Total
	Agree	82	46	128
	Disagree	20	237	257
	Total	102	283	385

Out of 283 people who rejected the duty to punish offenders of Islam, 46 supported violence and 237 (92%) did not. Among those who supported the duty to punish offenders of the faith, supporters of violence outnumber non-supporters by a factor of more than 4 (82/20), while for those who opposed the duty to punish offenders the ratio was about 1/5 (46/237). The difference between the two groups was highly significant. This is consistent with the intuitive expectation that Islamist purists would be considerably more likely to take offense and accept violence if Islam is insulted than those who do not share their same beliefs.

The second most significant predictor in the regression models was support for an Islamic government (ideology). Table 3 shows that, out of 109 subjects who preferred theocratic rule, 54 also supported violence and 55 opposed it, i.e., the sub-sample was split evenly with respect to justification of violence.

**Table 3:** Contingency Table for Ideology (Theocratic Government) and Violence in Defence of Islam

	In the Middle East, an Islamic government is better than a democratic one			
Violence in defence of Islam can be justified		Agree	Disagree	Total
	Agree	54	37	91
	Disagree	55	211	266
	Total	109	248	357

In contrast, out of 248 subjects who opposed Islamic government, 37 justified violence, while 211 rejected it. That is, this subsample was split roughly 6 to 1 (211/37) against violence. Again, the contrast was highly significant. Similarly, in comparison to respondents who did not support an Islamic government, those who did were also considerably more likely to endorse punishment of offenders of Islam (67/44 vs. 50/190 ratio), al-Qaeda (35/67 vs. 5/234), and ISIS (44/64 vs. 8/236). The differences between the subgroups for all these questions were also highly significant. This is consistent with the intuitive expectation that Islamist purists would have, as a group, a higher rate of support for religiously framed violence than those who do not share the same religious views.

We also tested the predictive properties of social difficulties at school or at work and uncertainty as for the wish to belong to Italian culture (identity crisis). Those who suffered from social difficulties were slightly more likely to endorse violence in defence of Islam and punishment for those who offend its tenets than those who did not (53/86 vs. 49/209; 68/59 vs. 57/197). Those who suffered from an identity crisis were slightly more likely to endorse ISIS than people who did not (32/153 vs. 17/162). The difference between the subgroups were only marginally significant and provide weak support of the intuitive expectation that those who suffer from social difficulties and identity crises are more likely to accept violence.

It should be noted that this is not to claim all Islamist purists who support an Islamic government or the punishment of Islam offenders ultimately endorse violence. Nor it is argued that ideology, social difficulties, and identity crisis cause support for religiously framed violence. We contend that for those who supported violence in defence of Islam, being a person who agreed with the right to punish those who insult Islam mattered immensely. For those who supported religious violence, punishment for Islam’s offenders, al-Qaeda, and ISIS, being an Islamist purist considerably counted. For those accepting religiously motivated violence and the punishment of offenders, being a person experiencing social difficulties somewhat mattered. For those backing ISIS, being a person suffering from identity crisis also mattered slightly.

**Conclusion**

Based on an Italian case study, this analysis attempts to shed light upon the causes of Islamist radicalisation as offered in the literature. We have found no significant evidence in support of discrimination, economic

disparity, outrage at Western foreign policy, oppression of Muslims, “networks”, rational choice theory, and traumatic experiences as predictors of justifying religious violence. None of the standard sociological variables, including gender and being a convert to Islam, was statistically significant either. By contrast, duty to punish offenders of Islam was, by far, the most significant variable in the whole study. Ideology (support for Islamist government) was also of considerable significance, while social inequality and identity crisis were at best marginally significant.

These results might suggest that Italy is witnessing an inner confrontation within its Muslim community, with ideological factors playing a very considerable role in rejection or justification of an “Islamist outlook”. Yet, avoiding any absolutist generalisation, this study does not aim to universally reject existing causal models of Islamist radicalisation, since the results are solely the product of the Italian scenario. However, the results of this Italian case study suggest the desirability to conduct similar investigations based on the same variables in other European countries in order to gain a more holistic understanding of radicalisation.

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## Notes

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