
Research Notes

Who are the British Jihadists? Identifying Salient Biographical Factors in the Radicalisation Process

by Gavin Lyall

Abstract

Drawn from a wider-ranging piece of research into radicalisation processes, this research note presents findings about the backgrounds of British jihadists travelling to fight in Syria. The research identifies biographical factors that are salient to two theories of radicalisation—Social Movement Theory (SMT) and Olivier Roy's 'youth revolt' theory and presents a short discussion on the validity of these theories in regard to British jihadists.

Keywords: Radicalisation, Syria, British jihadists, foreign fighters, terrorism

Introduction

The phenomenon of foreign fighters is not a new one, nor is it confined to Salafist-jihadism. Many conflicts have attracted ideologically inspired fighters, the most famous example being the Spanish Civil War, which saw both Communist and Fascist sympathisers enlisting to fight for their cause. Over the past two decades, European Muslims have fought in a number of different wars—Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia and Bosnia—in the name of Salafism (a conservative version of Islam adhered to by a minority of Sunni Muslims). The civil war in Syria, however, has been marked by the involvement of an unprecedented number of European citizens, most of them with an immigration background.

What is it that draws people to extremist organisations like Islamic State (IS)? The most common response is 'radicalisation'. It is an idea that has achieved widespread currency in political and academic circles and there is much debate on the dynamics of the process. Experts are divided on which factors are most important: some focus on macro-level explanations that emphasis economic deprivation, political disenfranchisement or racial discrimination, while others point to the influence of Salafist religious doctrines or to Western foreign policy. For some sociologists, the answer lies in the dislocation felt by young European Muslims caught between their parents' culture and the one in which they grew up.[1]

Yet despite becoming the most popular conceptual framework for understanding why some European Muslims are drawn to violent Islamism, the study of radicalisation remains controversial. Some scholars not only question the various assumptions made but the validity of the entire concept. In their view the discourse is politically motivated and designed to deflect attention from wider political and social circumstances. Arun Kandani [2] for example, points out that 'homegrown' terrorism and radicalisation increased dramatically in the aftermath of the 2003 invasion of Iraq and therefore it makes little sense to isolate the process of radicalisation from the political context in which it occurs.

Studies on radicalisation usually fall into two categories: those that focus on analysis of demographic data and those that formulate theories of radicalisation (usually based on literature reviews or case studies). Less emphasis has been placed on testing these theories against empirical data. This Research Note demonstrates a way of doing this by identifying biographical factors that are salient to two radicalisation theories—Social Movement Theory (SMT) and Olivier Roy's 'youth revolt' [3] theory—in order to see what factors hold most water when applied specifically to British jihadists enlisting in IS or a similar group in Syria or Iraq.

There are areas of commonality between the theories but also clear differences. For example, in SMT radical political or religious groups are seen as ‘gateways’ to enlistment. Roy, on the other hand, does not believe they play a significant role. The primary difference is between individualistic motivations (in the view of Roy) and wider social ‘strains’ (in the case of SMT). The aim of this Research Note is not to prove one theory right and the other wrong but to identify insights that could help answer three research questions regarding British jihadists:

- (i) What are their backgrounds in demographic, educational and socio-economic terms?
- (ii) Can British jihadists be regarded as political or religious actors?
- (iii) Are they linked to certain organisations or religious groups?

First, we begin with a review of both radicalisation theories.

European Jihadism as a ‘Youth Revolt Against Society’

Olivier Roy presented what can be referred to as ‘youth revolt’ theory. At a conference organised by the German Bundeskriminalamt (Federal criminal police office) in November 2015 he presented a general portrait of the causes and circumstances that can lead to radicalisation. The talk was entitled ‘What is the driving force behind jihadist terrorism?’ Roy includes in his analysis those who travel to the Middle East to do jihad.

In Roy’s view the radicalisation of some young European Muslims is a:

Youth revolt against society, articulated in an Islamic religious narrative of jihad. It is not the uprising of a Muslim community’s victim of poverty and racism: only young people join, including converts who did not share the ‘sufferings’ of Muslims in Europe. These rebels without a cause find in jihad a ‘noble’ and global cause, and are consequently instrumentalised by a radical organisation that has a strategic agenda.[4]

For many, jihadism is an extension of a shared youth culture that includes membership of street gangs and delinquency. Radicalisation is, in this view, not the maturation of long-term involvement in political or Islamic movements, and few jihadists have a history of political or religious militancy. Nor can the phenomenon be linked to the frustrations of a wider Muslim community—the high proportion of converts in the ranks (highest in France but significant in all European countries) is seen as evidence of this.

Several biographical factors are significant to this theory; a history of criminal activity could be regarded as a manifestation of resentment against society and also as a sign that jihadism is often an extension of gang culture; furthermore a large number of converts in the database would lend support to the theory and few of the British jihadists would be expected to have a history of political or religious activism.

Social Movement (SMT)

The central proposition of SMT, when applied to violent radicalisation, is that it cannot be isolated from the political or social context in which it occurs. Radicalisation happens through pre-existing networks and organisations, which are active agents in the radicalisation process.[5] If this is the case, then jihadists are the violent subgroup of a larger social movement and those that travelled to Syria could be expected to have links with radical political or religious groups.

SMT argues that because of the costs and risks involved, participants will likely be defined by a lack of personal constraints like full-time employment and family commitments (known as ‘biographical availability’ in the literature).[6] Therefore British jihadists would not be expected to have much in the way of family ties. A high number of immigrants and low numbers of people with university education (or a large number of

people with degrees who have been unable to capitalise on their qualifications) would lend weight to the idea that 'strains' on a certain community are a cause of radicalisation.

SMT argues the importance of informal ties and networks based on friendship and kinship. This idea was put forward by Donatella della Porta [7] in her work on left-wing groups, when she observed the decision to join an underground movement almost always involved cliques of friends. Therefore, the mobilisation patterns of the jihadists are relevant—although this is a factor common to both theories and would not therefore give more credence to one over the other.

Methodology

The study on which this Research Note is based used secondary sources to create a database of jihadists. The first source of information was an existing BBC News database. This source was chosen over others because it was the most comprehensive. The BBC database provided the names and basic biographical details of 203 British jihadists. 59 of these had been convicted of offences related to the war and were removed from this analysis because the study focuses on those who reached Syria. People were kept in the database regardless of what their likely role would be after they arrived in Syria (for example, women or elderly people who left in family groups). Among the remaining 144 individuals, 32 were removed because their names were unconfirmed or because very little or no information could be gathered on them. This left 112 profiles of British jihadists who became foreign fighters. 40 of them had died and the remaining 72 are believed to still be in Syria or Iraq.

Information for the following categories was gathered: name; age (at the time of departure); immigration background; educational background; family ties (biographical availability); history of membership in radical religious or political groups; criminal history and whether they travelled individually or as part of a group. The sources were primarily media organisations—the *BBC*, the *Guardian*, the *Independent* and the *Daily Mail* were the most diligent reporters of jihadist activity. Information was only used if it could be confirmed by two independent sources. In addition, local newspapers contained valuable information that was often not included in the national media. The personal blogs of experts and researchers were also used, along with an activist group that campaigns for Muslims imprisoned as part of the war on terror.

Findings

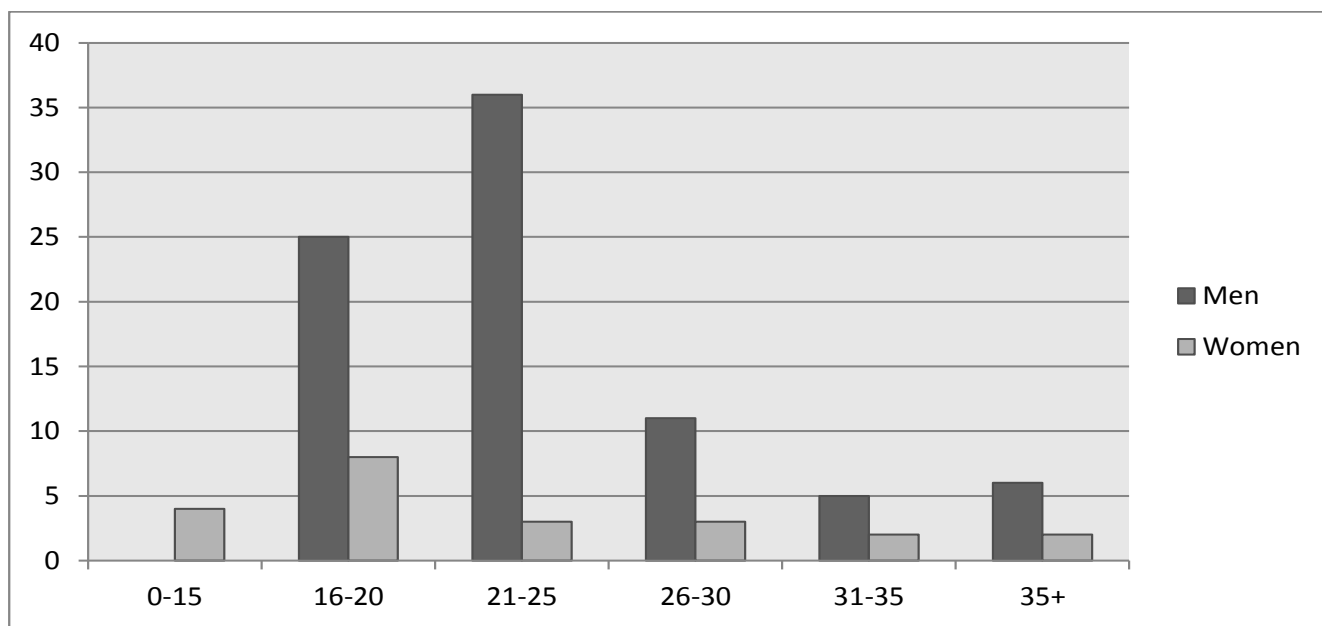
Gender

Of the aforementioned 112 profiles, 88 were men and 24 women. The decision to include family groups meant there were more women than usual in studies like this. For example, there were four women in the extended family from Luton—Minera Khatun (53), Sheida Khanam (27), Rajia Khanom (21) and Roshanara Begum (24)—who left for IS controlled territory in April 2015. There were also four women among a group of medical students who were studying at the University of Medical Sciences and Technology (UMST) in Khartoum before they left for Syria.

Age

The person's age at the time of their departure was used. It was possible to determine ages in all but seven cases. The average age for men was 24. There were no men aged under 17 and only six were older than 35. The oldest was Muhammed Abdul Mannan (a member of the same extended family from Luton), who was 75 when he left. The average age of the women was 23; however, it was notable that 12 were under the age of 20, and four of them were just 15. Figure 1 provides an overview of the age ranges.

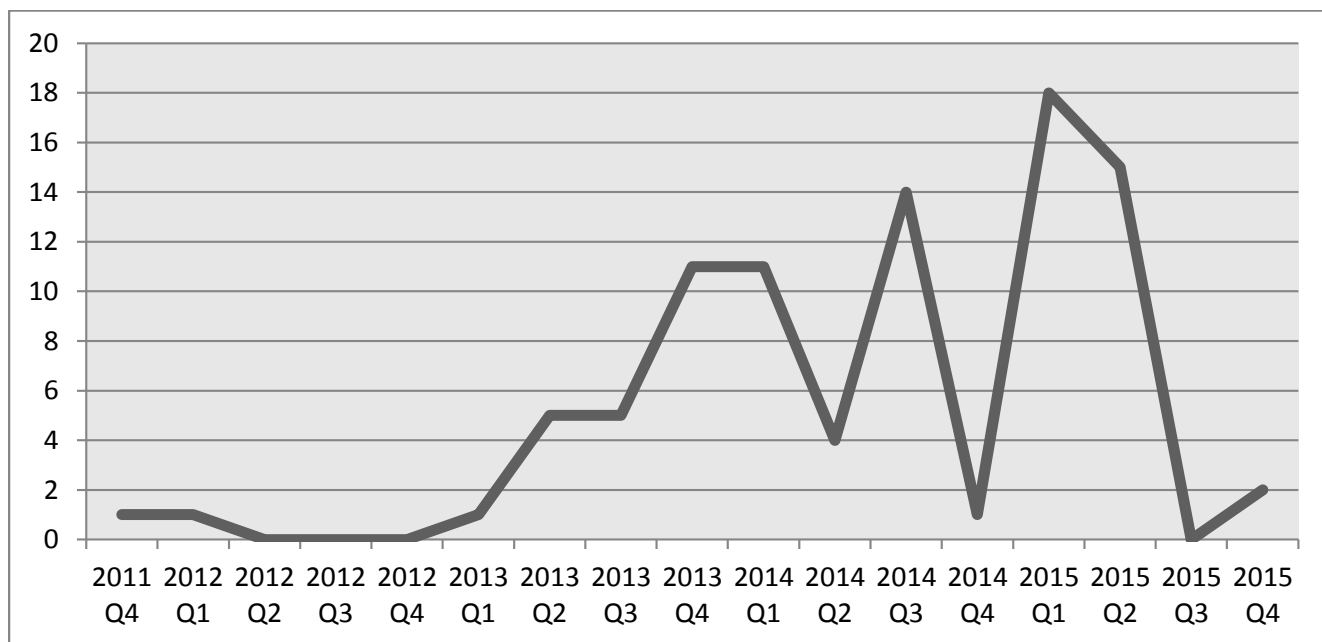
Figure 1: Age at Time of Departure



Time of Departure

The time of departure could be determined in 78 cases. Media reports often only specified a season or time of year. Therefore, each year was divided into quarters and the data classified accordingly. The first person to definitely leave for Syria was Kamran Hoque (29) who left the UK at the end of 2011; originally he signed up to be an ambulance driver but it seems that he later became a fighter for the al-Nusra Front.

Figure 2: Date of Departure



Mobilisation Patterns

The profiles were examined to determine whether people were more likely to travel alone or in groups. This has significance in terms of radicalisation patterns. The profiles were divided into three mobilisation groups depending on whether the individual travelled alone, with one other person, or as part of a group of three or

more (family groups were included in this category). Information was found for 89 of the profiles: of them, 22 people travelled alone, 20 travelled in a pair and 47 travelled with a family or in a group of three or more.

Criminal Histories

Criminal histories were discoverable for 19 individuals, all of them male (in other words, 22 percent of male jihadists in this database had convictions prior to departure). This number is likely to be higher when taking into account the incompleteness of the data. In several cases, individuals had no reported convictions themselves but were close associates of those who did. Only those with convictions were designated as such in the data however.

Six people had served time in prison and six were on bail for serious offences when they left for Syria. It is therefore likely that serious legal trouble was the impetus for travelling. Examples include Choukri Ellekhli (22), who was convicted (in absentia) for a series of violent robberies; Abu Aziz (32), who skipped bail when facing charges of public fighting; and Ibrahim Kabir Sadik (24) and Daha Essa (25), who fled the country when facing fraud charges. In six cases, it was unclear what crime the individual had been convicted of, but in four of these cases the convictions were linked to gang culture. Two people had been convicted of sexual offences, one for drug dealing and one for computer hacking. Two people had convictions for activism (or what could loosely be termed political offences): Kabir Ahmed, was convicted of inciting hatred against homosexuals after distributing leaflets, and Mohammed el-Araj (23), was convicted for violence at an anti-Israel rally. Abu Rumaysah (31) was on bail for membership of a banned organisation (*al-Muhajiroun*) when he took his family to Syria. It is thought that three people were radicalised in prison, all of whom also had gang connections—Fasil Towalde (21), Ondogo Ahmed (23) and Aine Davis (30).

Education

The educational status of 35 people was found (this includes a group of 15 who abandoned their medical studies in Khartoum). Seven people had undergraduate degrees and 27 had abandoned their studies to travel to Syria. One person—Mohammed Azzam Javeed (18)—left for Syria shortly before he was due to study for an undergraduate degree.

Links with Political or Religious Groups

The research looked for connections with established groups, radical preachers or mosques that had a reputation for preaching an extremist message. 17 people had links with extremist groups prior to departing for Syria. It was found that those with links to social movement groups tended to be older (their average age was 27). The group that came up most often was *al-Muhajiroun*, a Salafist group banned under the UK Terrorism Act in 2010. Seven individuals were members of this group or had links with its founder Omar Bakri Muhammed or its leader, Anjem Choudary. Members of *al-Muhajiroun* who went on to fight or support the cause in Syria include Kabir Ahmed (32), who came to national media attention when he was jailed for inciting hatred on the grounds of sexual orientation in 2012, and Abu Aziz (32), who was jailed for an assault following an anti-Israel protest. Those with links to *al-Muhajiroun* were all male except for Rajia Khanom (21), who left for Syria with 12 family members.

Biographical Availability

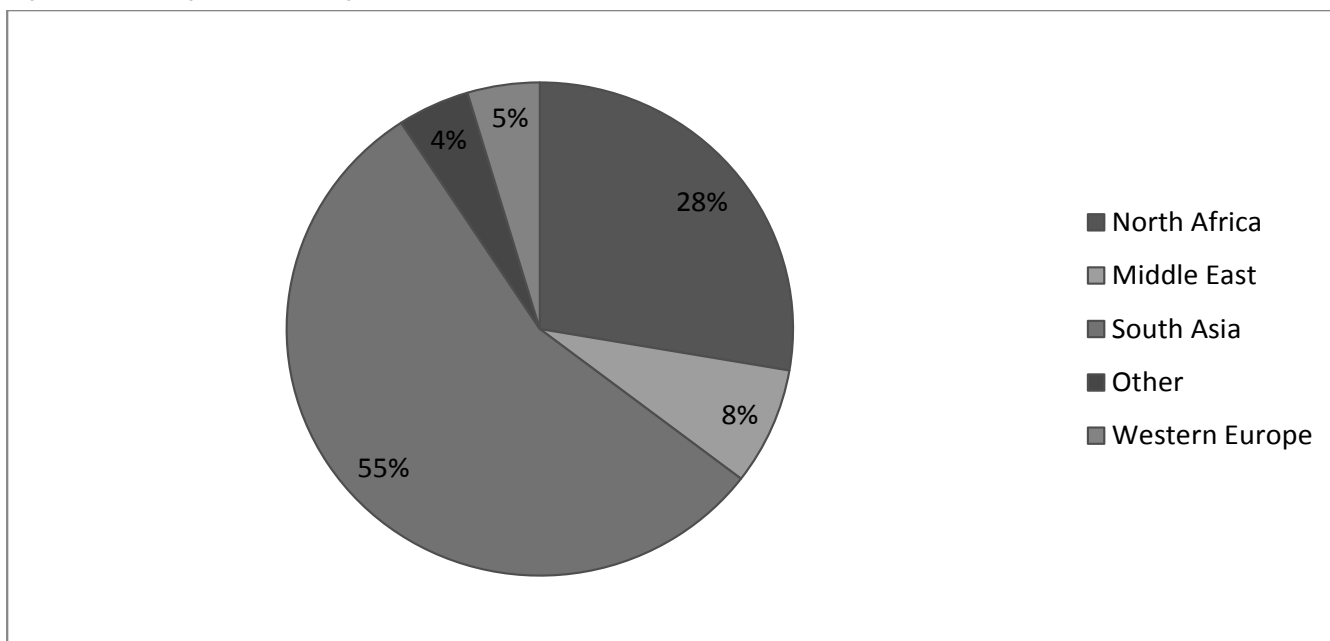
The profiles were also investigated for 'biographical availability'—factors such as whether or not the individuals were married, had children, or had embarked on a career. SMT holds that people with such ties are less likely to involve themselves with radical causes. The family status of 77 people could be determined. In cases where information could not be found, the age of the person often pointed to the assumption they would not be married or have children. However, this was not confirmed. 24 people were married prior to departure. Of these 20 had children, and two were divorced but also had children. 12 of those with children

left their family to travel to Syria or Iraq, and 10 took their children with them. Of the four married without children, two jihadists left with their wife and two left alone.

Immigration Backgrounds

The immigration backgrounds of 80 people could be ascertained. Only three had no recent immigration history; all of the others had at least one parent with non-British ancestry. The majority were second or third-generation immigrants, but nine were identified as being first-generation immigrants. Press and court reports did not reveal the backgrounds of the remaining 32 profiles, but their names suggested that they too had non-British ancestry. Figure 3 presents the findings.

Figure 3: Immigration Backgrounds



Converts

12 people were converts to Islam (11 percent). This is a smaller percentage than is the case with other European countries.^[1] Of these, 12 three were native Britons: Jake Petty (24), Jack Letts (19) and Lucas Kinney (26). Most other converts had immigration backgrounds in Africa (three from Eritrea, one from Ghana, one from Nigeria, and one from Gambia). Abu Rumaysah (born Siddhartha Dhar) had Indian-born parents and Jamal al-Harith was of Jamaican lineage. One other convert’s background could not be discovered. Two converts, both with Eritrean backgrounds, found Islam in prison.

Career

Information on employment history or career status could be determined for only 15 people. Many were too young to have worked full-time. 12 people were in full-time education when they left. For the 15, the range of occupations showed enough variety that no generalisations could be made. Included in the database were a care worker, a road engineer, a math tutor, an employee of British Gas and an estate agent. There were very few people with established careers or professions. There was one doctor (Issam Abuanza) and one owner of a successful software company (Siful Haque Sujan), but the overall tendency was towards underemployment—individuals with degrees working in jobs below their skill level.

¹Roy estimates that 25 percent of French jihadists are converts

Discussion

The biographical circumstance that lends most weight to Roy's theory is evidence of criminal behaviour prior to departure. This can be read as an indication both of resentment against society and that jihadism is often an offshoot of gang culture. In the database, 19 people had criminal convictions (although two of these convictions could be linked to activism). This constitutes 17 percent overall or 22 percent of men—a significant minority. However, the number of people with convictions that could be firmly linked to gang culture was smaller – only eight or nine people. Although the link with gang culture is real and many researchers have pointed to it [8], the numbers are not large enough to explain the phenomenon in isolation. In fact, this research points to criminal history actually being more rare than assumed, at least for the British contingent.

A large number of converts in the database would support Roy's theory; 11 percent of the jihadists were indeed converts. Kevin Brice [9] estimates that up to 100,000 of the UK's Muslims are converts, amounting to at the very most 4 percent. Therefore converts are disproportionately represented in this database of British foreign fighters. In Roy's view, this is a sign that individual radicalisation does not reflect the radicalisation of a frustrated Muslim community. However, all but three of the converts in the database were from other immigrant communities, so they could have suffered similar frustrations in terms of cultural assimilation, socio-economic disadvantage and discrimination.

Roy [10] argues that jihadism involves 'a relatively sudden individual jump into violence' and is not the result of long-term involvement with radical groups. He also argues that jihadists do not have a religious background or links to mosques. However, the present research found that 15 percent of people in the database had a history of involvement with radical Islamic groups. Whilst this is not a large minority, it is still a sign that political or religious activism might not be as insignificant as Roy's theory contends. It is certainly true that in the case of the British jihadists, involvement with radical organisations is *one* route into fighting jihad.

The fact that 15 percent of the people in the database had links with radical groups demonstrates that there is a radical Islamist movement within the UK that operates as a gateway to jihadism. At the centre are *al-Muhajiroun* and its spinoffs like *Sharia4*. [11] Reports issued by Europol in 2014 and 2015 describe *al-Muhajiroun* as a driver for people going to Syria. Its leader, Anjem Choudary, was charged with inviting support for IS in August 2015. [12] However, the role of *al-Muhajiroun* should not be overstated; the majority of jihadists had no links to it or any other group. This is significant because SMT posits that movements act rationally to advance their aims—violence is just one tactic, but more conventional methods will also be used. Therefore, it does not seem to be accurate to describe the jihadists travelling to Syria as part of a social movement in the traditional sense. There is no collective rational mobilisation of resources to achieve some kind of reform or change in society. However, the idea that jihadism is a subculture allows for it to be understood through the theoretical insights of SMT—in this way it can be seen as a response to social strains.

More jihadists were married than expected (24 out of the 77 about whom marital information was available). Many also had children and were split roughly 50/50 on whether they took their children with them. This contradicts the theory of biographical availability that argues people with family attachments are less likely to embark on risky courses of action. In this database, being married and having children is no barrier to becoming a jihadist.

Conclusion

All theories identify general conditions and circumstances—there will always be exceptions and specific cases. Furthermore, although there are certain patterns across Europe, their distribution will change, depending on the country. Allowing for these caveats, what insights from the theories fit the profiles? A great many,

but the research also found that the range of backgrounds and motivations leading to radicalisation is over-generalised. For example, although Olivier Roy's theory offers a relatively accurate portrait, there are enough anomalies to suggest slightly different dynamics at work in the British case.

In emphasising 'generational nihilism' and the role of self-realisation through violence, Roy ignores the idealistic appeal IS holds.[13] He also fails to recognise that the disillusionment with society is often more existential in nature than a simple 'discrepancy between expectations and social outcomes'.[14] The jihadists seem just as disillusioned by what 'success' might bring in Western society. This could be a difference between the French and UK cases. Research shows that the British contingent is often better educated than their European counterparts. A survey by researchers from the Queen Mary College pointed out that in the British case, 'youth, wealth and being in education were risk factors'.[15] Many see a community that offers personal redemption rather than a foreign fighting career being an escalation of delinquent or criminal behaviour. It is not clear that nihilism is the best way to characterise the jihadists. As Scott Atran [16] testified to the UN Security Council:

Few if any of those who join militant jihad, or xenophobic nationalisms for that matter, are nihilists. That is an accusation levelled by those who wishfully refuse to consider the moral appeal, and hence real danger of such movements.

Relative deprivation plays a role in a wide variety of radicalisation models and is a central part of SMT. Although there is no straightforward relationship between strain and radicalisation, the idea places radicalisation in a vital wider context that is missed by the characterisation of jihadists as only alienated youth. If one accepts that young British Muslims are subject to these social and economic strains, it becomes clear that jihadism offers one way out that might appeal to some people. SMT offers interesting insights regarding wider structural strains on the Muslim immigrant community. The possibility that these wider dynamics are creating the circumstances where radicalisation can take root is still not given enough credence.

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Notes

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