

## Islam and Islamism: Interpretation of a Cultural Paradox

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**Abstract:** The paper aims to highlight, using historical data and sociological reflection, how much contemporary Islamism is a product of the conflicts of the second modernity and globalization rather than a legacy of Sunni religious fundamentalism.

Starting from a cultural reading of fundamentalisms, the research aims to pause the reflection on the cultural similarities between the West and the otherness that threatens it, more attentive to the effectiveness of its action than to the construction of a new order of values. This anthropological framework is defined by exploiting the sociology of experience according to which the continuous effort of each individual is aimed at achieving the balance of three basic logics of social action: belonging; integration; subjectivation. In this framework, therefore, Islamist propaganda will refer to the dominant values, symbols and conceptualizations rather than trying to assert its own independent identity.

**Key words:** terrorism; Islamism; fundamentalism; culture; identity

**JEL codes:** Z1

The American historian Daniel Pipes<sup>1</sup>, a Middle Eastern scholar, in a paper (Pipes, 1995) of the mid-1990s recounted the passion for Western art and culture of Fat'hi ash-Shiqaqi, a passionate reader of Shakespeare, Dostoyevsky, Chekhov, Sartre and T.S. Eliot. What I just said would not matter if we were talking about a common Arab student in the West. Talking about Shiqaqi, instead, meant talking, until its killing by Israeli Special Forces, the head of Palestinian Islamic Jihad, responsible for the killing of dozens of Israelis.

The passion manifested by Shiqaqi for Western things was not a rare case for the Islamist landscape of the 90s. In fact, his successor at the head of Islamic Jihad, Ramadan Abdullallah Shallah, had lived for nine years in Britain and the United States where he was, teaching at the Faculty of Political Science at the University of South Florida in Tampa, just when Shiqaqi was being eliminated. Eyad Ismail, one of the bombers who hit the World Trade Center in 1993 was also fascinated by the United States and the lifestyle of which the Twin Towers were the symbol and emblem. As well as Mohamed Atta and the members of his deadly commando, were lovers of alcohol, cocaine and strip clubs, just dissimulation, was explained by analysts, rigorously accompanied with rap music sounds (Conti, 2017).

It is clear that with the trauma of September 11, 2001 and the launch of the “global War on terror”, the aforementioned influences of Western culture on many of the Islamist terrorists that animated the criminal chronicles until then have given way to the sociological concept of “clash of civilizations” (Huntington 1993–1996) burying the common Abrahamic origin among Jews, Christians and Muslims in place of a much more

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<sup>1</sup> US historian of Jewish origin is the author of numerous books, essays and articles on the subject of political Islam.

philosophical concept of “Jewish-Christian origins of the West” (Ruthven 2002 – Mustafa 2002). This trend did not surprise historians or political scientists who had always been accustomed to the rise of Islamic fundamentalists who had been formed in the West (White, 2010), from Hasan al Banna to Sayyid Qutb, from Sayyid Abdul A'la Mawdudi to Ayatollah Khomeini, from Hasan to Turabi to Mohamed Farah Aydidi ((Pelletreau, 1994; Musallam, 2005; Euben, Zaman, 2009).

With the passing of the years from the tragic events of 2001 and a continuous evolution of the threat, the theater of confrontation and the objectives in play (Gallagher, 2016; Bogain, 2019). Even the dominant sociological reflection has begun to distance itself from politics to summarize that role of exploration of society that must be proper to this science (Berger, 2002). In this perspective, the sociological perspective of experience is perhaps the one that better than any other reaches the motives that push individuals towards jihad. From this perspective, as Alain Touraine affirms, one of the greatest exponents of that Freudian-Nietzsche vein that reads the subject not as social but above all it frames it as desire, the social actor and therefore also the terrorist, appears constantly in search of the affirmation of his own self where the subject becomes an ethical, cultural force. We are in the midst of the evolutionary metaphor, where modernity, or as we would have said a few years ago postmodernity, after leading to the Holocaust, is leading us towards the hybrid war of which terrorism represents the sum and most threatening of the expressions.

A war also carried out in a culturally similar to our strategic but above all tactical standards. We are far from the customizations of the war of yesteryear. Today Islamist fighters use the same operational procedures as western infantry, from the CQB to the FIBUA, up to the techniques of handling and wielding of weapons as the rapid mode of change of loader. Operational aspects of detail, but not only, strongly influenced by a global collective imagination, which also affects the exteriority of warriors, combat shirts and baseball caps like Oakley glasses are some of the inevitable warlord leaders whether it's a French Legionnaire, a British SAS or a Chechen fighter. A fashion trend produced by globalization itself that leads to the disintegration to which the sociology of experience provides answers decidedly comprehensive.

“The social meaning of an action should not be confused with the meaning the actor gives. If we want to establish this meaning at the most superficial level, we are doomed to resort to mechanical explanations, whenever there is a certain diversity of opinions and behaviour. On the contrary, it is necessary to reach a collective social consciousness, which does not coincide with individual consciences and is therefore presented as an unconscious” (Touraine, 1965, p. 35).

We are not faced with a cultural approach, based on the deep knowledge of the culture of the other with the aim of coming into contact. What we see is nothing more than the fruit of the heterogeneity of social action (Farro, 2012), if society no longer has a unique horizon, then what holds it together? The work of the French sociologist Françoise Dubet helps us to respond, that is, the continuous effort of each individual to achieve the balance of three basic logic of social action: belonging; integration; subjectivity.

This represents the constant effort of the individual in society, a fatigue for the actor who thus constructs his own subjectivity. The need to manage different logics becomes an ethical process that characterizes a critical social experience because it always tries to account for its practices, as is evident in the propaganda videos disclosed by Al Qaeda, before, and by ISIS, then, where there is always a basic justification for barbarism.

For Dubet these logics, as said, are three and never present in pure but combined form, with sometimes the predominance of one over the other, realizing an imbalance that can become dangerous. Wherefore:

- 1) the community, which is the warm dimension of experience, affirms belonging and acceptance. When

this logic becomes preponderant it becomes dangerous, just think of the Shahid. They seek in belonging to the Umma (the great Islamic nation) or more simply to a terrorist organization, a ransom for the exclusion felt in the societies of which they are cultural expression, because there are often born and raised (an example of all the district of Molenbeek Saint Jean in Brussels);

- 2) the strategy, it promotes competitiveness and expresses affirmation as an individual. A predominantly strategic logic produces an individual who is completely adherent to society: he is on the ground with no background;
- 3) subjectivity, where the actor does not want to act strategically nor integrate with society, he wants to be himself, assert his own self.

An adage that decoded in this article thanks to the French school of sociology of experience that led us to Al Qaeda first and Daesh then. Like all the main terrorist groups of recent years, those who represent the real big players in the landscape, have preferred structured forms of organization, hierarchical pyramid with a careful distribution of tasks according to the skills of each, almost entirely speculating on modern Western military organizations. Equipped, therefore, as Fabrizio Battistelli describes in the *Manual of Military Sociology*, with biform organizational forms and models, depending on whether they are in a condition of “peace” or “war” (Battistelli, Amendola, & Greco, 2011, p. 19).

To keep the Shahid in battle come into play the same mechanisms that influence the life of the welded in the fulfillment of their duty also pushed to the extreme sacrifice, or the group of peers who, in the absence of the traditional affective-identity references of the individual (the family of origin, the companion/wife or the wife/husband, the friends), replaces these, providing psychological and therefore physical support to the fighter (Stouffer, 1949).

To this should be added the use of the most advanced technologies in the field of communication, aimed towards a real marketing of those brands of terror and an ostentatious familiarity with Western customs so as to make it really difficult a distinction of the enemy in cultural terms. Many Islamists in the West were even born there, raised in the shadow of popular neighborhoods of our great metropolises, in Paris as well as in Orlando, Berlin, London. The same familiarity they have, However, even those who have never moved away from their homelands and that we see on television on the news with a jersey of Milan and over a sand-colored plate carrier brandishing a machine gun FN Minimi engaged to fight in Tripoli as in Mosul. Almost all appear to be foreign to their mother culture, disregarding the history and traditions of their nations or their parents (Burke, 2004). An example is the Jordanian Abu Mussab Al Zaraqawi<sup>2</sup>, whose debut in the world of crime as a minor was in the context of petty crime and whose radicalization occurred in prison where he had been imprisoned for minor crimes. In prison, a chicken thief became the murderous murderer that Osama Ben Laden nominated as Emir of Al Qaeda in Mesopotamia (Napoleoni, 2006).

The radicalisation process that turned bully Ahmed Fadel into terrorist Al Zaraqawi, that transition from hardship to prison and from prison to Islamist radicalism is common to thousands of European foreign fighters, men who like Ahmedy Coulibaly<sup>3</sup>, Salah Abdesslam<sup>4</sup>, Ibrahim Al Bahkraoui<sup>5</sup>, Just to name a few, they went to

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<sup>2</sup> Born Ahmed Fadel al-Nazal al-Khalayl (20 October 1966 - 7 June 2006), he represented the main threat to Allied forces in the Iraqi theater. Wanted as an international terrorist and leader of the Al Qaeda group in Iraq was killed in a surgical operation of the intelligence and military forces Jordanes, US and Italian. Originally from Zarqa, a poor industrial town northeast of Amman and home to the oldest Palestinian refugee camp, from which he inherited the tribal pseudonym Al Zaraqawi.

<sup>3</sup> French national born to Ivorian parents (27 February 1982 - 9 January 2015). Defined by Islamist propaganda as a “soldier of the Caliphate”, that is, a staff of Daesh in Europe, that goes into action on January 8, 2015 while a commando of Al Qaeda is sowing

death in the name of Jihad but as a Western soldier would do, inspired by those same feelings that are the subject of centuries of our narrative, literary and then cinematic: courage, sacrifice, justice, determination, bravery, mourning, gratitude, sincerity, firmness, combat, revenge, heroism, martyrdom, certainty, faith, promised paradise, dogma, brotherhood, union, honor, obedience, success. They are the same concepts that Daesh promotes in his propaganda video released by Al Furat<sup>6</sup> 26 November 2016 in HD quality and with which it traces all the main stages of the attack, to the heart of Europe, brought by those who in the video, in French language, are called Muslim agents and soldiers of the Caliphate. Therefore, a perfect westernization not only thanks to the exploitation of common technologies in the West, but also on the conceptual and semantic plane. The video, which has a fast pace, is characterized by agile and dynamic editing typical of our documentaries and presents a series of “logos” now become the emblem of efficiency and quality for young Westerners. The militant of Daesh therefore makes use of the maximum offered by the marked, according to the logic of the winning typical of our narrative (Wright, 1977). He closes his Apple laptop and stows his automatic weapons in a North Sail duffel bag. Nothing is left to chance, in an attempt to communicate an iconographic efficiency in tandem with the actions of armed propaganda.

Apparently the hero myth<sup>7</sup>, on which the film industry has worked so much, is expertly used by Islamist propaganda to communicate with the Westerners. A communication that on the one hand tends to threaten the enemy and on the other aims to recruit sympathizers, militants and aspiring martyrs, being precisely the Western suburbs the main basin for the recruitment of the fighting base (Neumann, 2012; Lakomy, 2019); all through their own language and their own symbols. In this situation, it is not surprising the ignorance by the mass of Islamist maneuver of traditional Islam. They are often individuals born and raised in the West or in highly westernized pan-Islamic countries (Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, the Philippines), who have known the Islamic tradition only those aspects that have contributed to their own marginalization: a mother with a veil or a father with a jalaba. They are therefore citizens of a globalized humanity dominated by the dominant culture (Allodi, 2003), the Anglo-American one, which penetrates the rest of the world both on the level of the elites and on the popular one, with respect to which the response given by different cultures oscillates between acceptance and rejection, with intermediate positions of coexistence and synthesis (Berger, 2002).

Therefore fundamentalists, “radicalists”, Islamists and terrorists, know better Western customs than pan-Islamic ones, are inspired by the Sunna approaching through the ideological filter of the second modernity, unwittingly replacing Western customs with Islam for whose triumph they claim to spend. If collectively their objective is not a genuinely Islamic order, rather it is an attempt to Islamize the West, through a kind of transcendental globalization that invests the four main sectors of society: religion, daily life, politics and legal

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panic for the Parisian municipality after having carried out the massacre in the editorial office of the satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo. After the murder of a policewoman on January 8, 2015, the man barricades the next day in a Parisian supermarket, kills 4 patrons and waits for the clash with the French security forces dying, throwing his weapon in the fist, against the policemen of the RAID.

<sup>4</sup> Belgian national born on 15 September 1989 to Moroccan parents. Also organic of Daesh and active in the attacks in Paris of 13 November 2015, Stadium of France, Cafe of the 18," city district and theater Bataclan. The only one of the commando who manages to escape and return to Belgium, where he will be arrested on 18 March 2016, four days before the attacks on the airport and the metro in Brussels.

<sup>5</sup> Belgian citizen born to Moroccan parents. 09 October 1986 - 22 March 2016. Daesh's staff in Europe was one of the bombers of 22 March 2016 in Brussels, exploding on a subway train.

<sup>6</sup> Al Furat Media Foundation - Islamic State's organic video production company.

<sup>7</sup> The “hero's journey” is one of the twelve most important archetypes. Archetypes can be found in the tradition of every people in the world, regardless of the religions practiced (Jung, 1978).

sphere; on the individual level, again quoting Dubet, they do nothing but try their own desperate “socialization” through exasperated forms of “criticism” and “conflict”.

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