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Dina Al Raffie
None, dina.alraffie@gmail.com

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Social Identity Theory for Investigating Islamic Extremism in the Diaspora

Abstract

An overview of literature on radicalization in the Muslim diaspora in Europe finds identity crises to be a key precipitant to the process. Studies also typically focus on the manipulation of identity by violent Islamic extremist groups. This paper attempts to contribute to the discussion on the role of identity in radicalization by using social identity theory. In doing so, the article explores the formation and transformation process of social identities, and argues that the nature of community-level groups and networks may contribute to identity 'readiness' for radicalization. To this end, special focus is given to formally recognized Islamist non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and institutions and their potential impact on Muslim religious identity in the European Muslim diaspora. Findings suggest that the more pervasive the ideology of Islamist representatives is, the more likely the normative environment in the diaspora is to be conducive to both non-violent and violent Islamic extremism.

Introduction

There is little doubt that the surge in scholarly interest in Violent Islamic Extremism (VIE) and Islamic Extremism (IE) is a partial result of the securitization of political Islam as potentially one of the largest threats facing Europe in the 21st century. Given that prior to 9/11 little attention had been paid to the phenomena of religiously inspired terrorism in the field of terrorism studies, scholars and practitioners have come a long way in shedding light on the particularities of the processes underlying it.¹ Despite this, the studies on radicalization have been slow to unfold, bearing answers that have been useful in identifying checklist factors perceived to contribute to the process, but challenged by the lack of solid working theory.

Much credit has been given to terrorist organizations like al-Qaeda in their efforts to radicalize and recruit, despite the fact that these organizations lie on the fringe of a much wider spectrum of non-violent political Islam. Such intentional myopia can arguably be attributed to the sensitive nature of this particular *brand* of terrorism, given that its adherents draw from the one of the world's fastest growing religions. Accusations of "Islamophobia" in Europe have made European governments hesitant to confront sub-state actors that may indirectly support the global Jihadist movement. Although discrimination should not be discredited, the refusal of governments to accept that the phenomenon is more than tangentially tied to specific understandings of Islam has hindered states' abilities to adequately address the problem.

Scholarship has offered several explanations as to why individuals and groups have had the compulsion to act out what they believe to be a religious duty. To this end, the progression of Islamic theology and its breakdown into various competing understandings and sects has provided the groundwork for understanding the radicalization process from a religious perspective.² This has been followed by profiling and intensive research in social movement theory and the socialization process of would-be Jihadis, the assumed predisposition of specific "identities," a suggested clash between Western and Islamic values in general, and studies on integration which more or less constitute the cornerstone of most state-sponsored radicalization prevention efforts.³

Studies on radicalization find identity to stand at the fore of the radicalization process. Success partially lies in the radical's ability to provide the radical-to-be with a distinctive identity. Here,

¹ Only seven out of 102 articles between 2001 and 2002 were related to 'Muslim extremism or an associated Middle East terrorist topic'; Magnus Ranstorp, "Mapping Terrorism Studies after 9/11," in Richard Jackson, Marie Smyth, and Jeroen Gunning (eds.), *Critical Terrorism Studies: A New Research Agenda* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 22.

² Calvert, John, *Sayyid Qutb and the Origins of Radical Islam* (London: Hurst, 2010); Shmuel Bar, "The Religious Sources of Islamic Terrorism," *Policy Review* 125 (June/July 2004): 27-37.

³ Post, Jerrold M., *The Mind of the Terrorist: The Psychology of Terrorism from the IRA to al-Qaeda* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Sageman, Marc, *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-first Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008); Seth J. Schwartz, Curtis S. Dunkel, and Alan S. Waterman, "Terrorism: An Identity Theory Perspective," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 32:6 (2009): 541; Huntington, Samuel P. *The Clash of Civilizations?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, John M. Olin Institute for Strategic Studies, 1993); Wiktorowicz, Quintan. *Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Theory Approach* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2004); James Brandon and Lorenzo Vidino, "ICSR Report: Countering Radicalization in Europe," *ICSR RSS* (December 12, 2012), available at: <http://icsr.info/2012/12/icsr-report-countering-radicalization-in-europe/>.

the identity is based on a puritanical interpretation of the religion that imbues the radical with a sense of moral and spiritual superiority, setting him/her aside from the rest of society.⁴ In this sense, the *new* radical successfully joins an imaginary elite social group, and the second task in the recruiting radical's handbook is the slow and steady demonization of the society that exists outside the group.⁵ Geopolitics is presented through religious frames to further the notion of a conspiratorial attack of the West against Islam, and sets the stage for the adoption of violent means by some.

Implicit in a majority of literature on radicalization in the field of terrorism studies is that Jihadist organizations/networks and their recruiters are the sole agents promoting radicalization. Other factors are only agitants that support the overall process. This paper argues that Jihadists are also recipients of individuals whose identities have already been radicalized.⁶ It addresses the following questions: How and why could Muslim identity in the European diaspora be becoming more prone to extremism?; and, What other, non-violent actors could be contributing to the radicalization process? In doing so, the paper does not argue that European Muslims are necessarily becoming more extreme, yet attempts to gauge the non-violent sources of radicalization that may be contributing to extremism. The term "diaspora" is used in the paper to denote a minority that shares a religious social identity (in this case Islam), and applies to all Muslims in Europe regardless of the generation to which they belong.

The paper uses social identity theory to help in answering these questions and is structured as follows. After defining relevant terminology, the paper proceeds with an overview of literature on radicalization, with a focus on the role of identity. This is followed by an introduction to social identity theory principles and a summary of a taxonomy measuring expected behavioral, perceptual and effective outcomes on threats to groups. The latter is used to challenge some of the findings in terrorism studies literature that attribute radicalization in the European diaspora to threatened and/or stigmatized religious social identity issues. Drawing on both, the paper then attempts to expand on the various "schools of thought" on the role of identity in the radicalization process, as well as suggest how non-violent elements may contribute to this process.

The purpose of the paper is thus two-fold. First, it attempts to broaden the discussion on identity through viewing it from a socio-psychological lens. This preliminary examination underscores a number of flawed assumptions in the current radicalization studies discourse that could provide avenues for future research. Then, building on theory, it begins to suggest connections between non-violent, legal European Islamist activists, movements and organizations, and the identity dynamics of radicalization; the argument being that the former play a crucial role in setting into motion the latter. It recognizes that the task of understanding radicalization is "[...] not a task for

⁴ Sadek Hamid, "The Attraction of 'Authentic Islam': Salafism and British Muslim Youth," in Roel Meijer (ed.), *Global Salafism: Islam's New Religious Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 384-403.

⁵ Schwartz et al., "Terrorism," 541.

⁶ The paper thus argues from the perspective that radicalization is a 'bottom up' process. Support for this perspective has previously been argued by other scholars including Sageman, "Leaderless Jihad," 2008; Peter R. Neumann, Brooke Rogers, Rogelio Alonso, and Luis Martinez, *Recruitment and Mobilisation for the Islamist Militant Movement in Europe* (London: ICSR, 2007).

a single theory or discipline,” and is one that should be “[...] able to integrate mechanisms at the micro (individual) and macro (societal/cultural) levels.”⁷

Two important caveats should be made before proceeding. First, the argument made in this paper is not all encompassing as it does not and cannot account for all the pathways into and processes of radicalization. It realizes that: “Different pathways and mechanisms operate in different ways for different people at different points in time and perhaps in different contexts.”⁸

Second, many external influences play a role in the radicalization process as per findings in literature. The author acknowledges this, yet focuses primarily on the influence of non-violent European Islamism on Muslim religious identity dynamics in the diaspora, and the consequent implications this holds for the study of radicalization and VIE.

Terminology

As in the case of defining “terrorism,” most studies on Islamic extremism (IE) settle for a working definition due to lack of consensus on a fixed definition. The term “fundamentalism” is oftentimes used interchangeably with the term “extremism,” perhaps due to its historical religious connotations that automatically link it to forms of movements based on religious pretexts. This paper similarly draws from definitions of fundamentalism to define and explain IE, violent Islamic extremism (VIE), and the radicalization process. Although not used interchangeably, the paper adopts the position of R. Korteweg that understands IE as a variant of Islamic fundamentalism (IF).⁹

IF is not a unique religious phenomena and shares many features of the earlier American Protestant movement that coined the term, like the rejection of modernity and secularism, and the castigation of fellow coreligionists as being “corrupters of the tradition” and “pawns of unbelievers.”¹⁰ IF is similarly understood as the rejection of democratic and secular forms of governance as adopted by the West. This rejection by the ideological forefathers of the movement is based on the notion of “the unity of God” (*tawhid*), which argues against the sovereignty of states and for the sole sovereignty of God’s laws (*hakimiyyah*) as the only legitimate form of governance; in this case the Islamic *Shari’a*. However, whereas Christian fundamentalism has remained a mostly non-violent fringe movement, active in only a handful of countries and lacking the transnational nature of its Islamic counterpart, IF has witnessed a marked surge since the 1970s and has spawned various global, violent offshoots, of which al-Qaeda and its so-called “affiliated movements” are the most prominent.¹¹

⁷ Tinka M. Veldhuis, and Jørgen Staun. "Islamist Radicalisation: A Root Cause Model," *Netherlands Institute of International Relations Clingendael* (2009), available at: <http://www.clingendael.nl/publications/?id=7740>.

⁸ Randy Borum, "Radicalization into Violent Extremism I: A Review of Social Science Theories," *Journal of Strategic Security* 4:4 (2011): 8, available at: <http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/jss/vol4/iss4/2/>.

⁹ Rem Korteweg, Sajjan Gohel, Francois Heisbourg, Magnus Ranstorp, and Rob De Wijk, "Background Contributing Factors - Radicalization and Recruitment," in Magnus Ranstorp (ed.), *Understanding Violent Radicalisation: Terrorist and Jihadist Movements in Europe* (London: Routledge, 2010), 26.

¹⁰ Michael Barkun, "Religious Violence and the Myth of Fundamentalism," in Leonard Weinberg and Ami Pedahzur (eds.), *Religious Fundamentalism and Political Extremism* (London: Frank Cass, 2005), 60.

¹¹ Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Reference for more on Christian fundamentalism.

The ineffectiveness of Christian fundamentalism in attracting a larger following may be one of the consequences of the repositioning of the role of religion in secular states. The separation of church and state in most Western societies has effectively reduced religion to the private realm and distanced society from the influence, power and dominance that institutionalized religion once had over collectivities. Religion is no longer a tie that binds and, as Beit-Hallahmi states, is "...pluralist, individualistic, privatized, achieved, and often freely chosen."¹² Thus, if a defining characteristic of social movements is their role in socially constructing new meanings based on "frameworks of understanding that resonate with potential participants and broader publics," attempting to draw support from a collectivity that no longer prioritizes religious frames for the creation of meaning may prove difficult.¹³

The same argument is harder to apply to the Islamic context. Islam not only remains to be a defining, collectively expressed, cultural characteristic but also "contains a corpus of legal and moral regulations and thereby constitutes the idea of a social order."¹⁴ Parallels in "frameworks of understanding" between targeted Muslim communities and Islamic fundamentalists provide a supplier basis for mobilization.¹⁵

IF generally speaks to many of the definitions related to religious fundamentalism that include: the "...return to a holy text considered infallible and which cannot be interpreted critically..." "...the return to an idealized religious-political reality," and (most importantly) "a belief system...[in which] its adherents regard its tenets as uncompromising and direct transcendental imperatives to political action oriented towards the rapid and comprehensive reconstruction of society."¹⁶ The lattermost definition specifically refers to groups and individuals that actively advocate for the reconstruction of society and is defined as *political* IF (henceforth referred to as 'Islamism' in this paper). This is because not all Islamic fundamentalists promote political activism to reconstruct society. Indeed, various strands within the Wahabbist-inspired school of

¹² Benjami Beit-Hallahmi, "The Return of Martyrdom: Honour, Death and Immortality," *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 4:3 (2003): 12.

¹³ Quintan Wiktorowicz, "Islamic Activism and Social Movement Theory: A New Direction for Research," *Mediterranean Politics* 7:3 (September 26, 2007): 202.

¹⁴ Matenia Sirseloudi, "The Meaning of Religion and Identity for the Violent Radicalisation of the Turkish Diaspora in Germany," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 24:5 (November 15, 2012): 808.

¹⁵ Max Taylor, and John Horgan. "The Psychological and Behavioural Bases of Islamic Fundamentalism," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 13:4 (2001): 42; Reference to find four qualities of Islam that 'sustain fundamentalist positions': '[...] claims to universal validity', '[...] theocratic demands extending to all aspects of life', '[...] sanctification of Islamic law and its rulings', and '[...] general equation of the state with the implementation of Islam.'

¹⁶ Luisa Giuriato and Maria Cristina Molinari, "Rationally Violent Tactics: Evidence from Modern Islamic Fundamentalism," in Albert Breton, Gianluigi Galeotti, Pierre Salmon, and Ronald Wintrobe (eds.), *Political Extremism and Rationality* (Cambridge: University Press, 2002); PISOIU, Daniela, *Islamist Radicalisation in Europe: An Occupational Change Process* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2012), 15; Menachem Friedman, "Jewish Zealots: Conservative versus Innovative," in Emmanuel Sivan and Menachem Friedman (eds.), *Religious Radicalism and Politics in the Middle East* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1990); PISOIU, "Islamist Radicalization in Europe," 15; Lustick, Ian, *For the Land and the Lord: Jewish Fundamentalism in Israel* (New York, NY: Council on Foreign Relations, 1988), 5-6.

Salafism favor isolation as a means of religious purification and reject the intermingling of religion and politics.¹⁷

Islamists not only wish to reconstruct societies where Muslims are the majority but, in following the example of the Prophet Mohammed and the successive Islamic Caliphs, to pursue a “Islamic” reconstruction of all world societies based on *Shari’a*. The spectrum of Islamism is large and spans many movements and “sub-ideologies” that together agitate for similar goals but reserve disagreements on the means and methods of implementing them.¹⁸

A simple example would be to compare and contrast the methodology of Jihadist groups like al-Qaeda, and the global Muslim Brotherhood. The former lies on the violent end of the spectrum of political Islam and openly propagates the violent overthrow of governments it deems un-Islamic. Such a group holds loose conceptions of Islamic infidelity or apostasy that are generally non-negotiable, and is an extreme manifestation of IF.¹⁹ The latter has, given a few exceptions, focused on a “bottom up” approach to the *Islamizing* of society through a socialization process that indoctrinates Muslim communities and populations into adopting values, beliefs, and norms that support its agenda.²⁰ Give or take a few peculiarities, several similarities exist between the overall narrative and goals of both.²¹ This is one of the main reasons why a few European governments halted cooperation with Islamist organizations in counter-radicalization processes. Experience showed that many of the organizations involved, whilst condemning violence as a legitimate means, nevertheless upheld many of the narratives of their violent counterparts.²²

To summarize, institutionalized IF is understood as a wide spectrum that encompasses all forms of political Islam, and is equated in this paper to the term “Islamism.” Unlike Roy’s suggestion that fundamentalists and Islamists are differentiated along the lines of “political action, shari’a and the issue of women,” this paper argues that the primary distinction between fundamentalism at the individual and institutionalized level rests with political action.²³ That is, Islamists work towards the (re)construction of an Islamic society through the use of some organized form of political action, as well as possessing all other attributes commonly associated with Islamic

¹⁷ The Jamis and Madkhalis are a good example. For an in-depth discussion see Bernard Hakel, "On the Nature of Salafi Thought and Action," in Roel Meijer, *Global Salafism: Islam's New Religious Movement* (New York: Hurst & Company, 2009), 33-57.

¹⁸ Maajid Nawaz, "Combating Violent Extremism: The Counterradicalization Debate in 2011," Address, Policy Forum Luncheon at The Washington Institute, Washington D.C., available at: <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/combating-violent-extremism-the-counterradicalization-debate-in-2011>.

¹⁹ Quintan Wiktorowicz, "A Genealogy of Radical Islam," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 28:2 (2005): 76.

²⁰ Israel Altman, "Strategies of the Muslim Brotherhood Movement 1928-2007," *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology* (February 24, 2009), available at: <http://www.currenttrends.org/research/detail/strategies-of-the-muslim-brotherhood-movement-1928-2007>.

²¹ Dina Al Raffie, "Whose Hearts and Minds? Narratives and Counter-Narratives of Salafi Jihadism," *Journal of Terrorism Research* (August 2012), available at: <http://ojs.st-andrews.ac.uk/index.php/jtr/index>.

²² This was especially the case in the UK. The case study on the UK counter-radicalization strategy in discusses this in more detail; Brandon et al., "ICSR Report: Countering Radicalization in Europe."

²³ Roy, Olivier, *The Failure of Political Islam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994); Pisiou, "Islamist Radicalisation in Europe," 17.

fundamentalism. And thus, all Islamists are Islamic fundamentalists by nature yet not all fundamentalists are necessarily Islamists.

How is extremism then derived as a variant of IF? Several parallels exist between definitions of extremism and those of fundamentalism. One of the most obvious is the existence of an uncompromising cognitive dissonance that markedly sets the extremist apart from mainstream systems of thought, belief or action. The extremist's mindset revolves around an absolutist claim to an authentic truth, coupled with the steady rejection of opposing opinions and beliefs. As with IF, there is a need to reorder elements in the extremist's surroundings to bring it into harmony with his/her views and visions. However, definitions of extremism not only stress a departure of views, norms and beliefs relative to the mainstream, but in some cases also imply the adoption of extraordinary actions to impose the world view of the individual/organization.²⁴

Parallels similarly exist between definitions of Islamism and extremism. The following definition of extremism by Neumann highlights this: "Extremism can be used to refer to political ideologies that oppose a society's core values and principles [...] opposes the core principles of democracy and universal human rights. The term can also be used to describe the methods through which political actors attempt to realize their aims, that is, by using means that 'show disregard for the life, liberty, and human rights of others.'"²⁵ In this context, Islamist ideology is necessarily extremist, and if violence is advocated or employed, violently extremist.

Finally, for the purpose of this paper, radicalization is understood as a process. The definition of which is first based on two observations made by Pisoiu: 1) That 'radicalizing at the individual level might be a strategic activity or set of activities, with a more or less clear set of objectives and undertaken by a rational actor;' and 2) "...[Radicalization] has the features of gradualism, a succession of two or more different phases..."²⁶ In this context, radicalization is understood as both *gradual* and *intentional*.

A broader definition of political radicalization as forwarded by McCauley further understands "political radicalization" as having both functional and descriptive elements. From a functional perspective, the process is seen as the "increased preparation for and commitment to intergroup conflict." From a descriptive perspective, the process is defined as a "change in beliefs, feelings, and behaviors in directions that increasingly justify intergroup violence and demand sacrifice in defense of the ingroup."²⁷ Radicalization in this paper is thus defined as the gradual and intentional process that consists of a set of activities that aim at changing the beliefs, feelings and behaviors of individuals with the intent of 1) Aligning them against the core values of societies in which individuals are based; and 2) Readyng them for intergroup conflict, whereby society constitutes an out-group that must be fought.

²⁴ See discussion on extremism in Pisoiu, "Islamist Radicalisation in Europe," 17-18.

²⁵ Peter Neumann, "Prisons and Terrorism Radicalisation and De-radicalisation in 15 Countries," ICSR 2012, available at: <http://icsr.info/projects/de-radicalisation-and-disengagement-in-prisons-lessons-from-15-countries/>.

²⁶ Pisoiu, "Islamist Radicalisation in Europe," 24.

²⁷ Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko, "Mechanisms of Political Radicalization: Pathways Toward Terrorism," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 20:3 (2008): 416.

The Radicalization Process: An Overview of Literature

Two out of Dalgaard-Nielsen's three "schools of thought" in her overview of radicalization studies in terrorism literature are used to structure this section: the "French Sociology" and "Social Movement Theory and Network Theory" schools.²⁸ For each, a special focus is given to identity. The different schools are not intended to be mutually exclusive but intersect on varying levels.

Radicalization and Identity

The first school of thought, "French sociology," centers primarily on identity formation and the effect of modernity and globalization on identity formation/reformation and the radicalization process. "Modernity" here implies secularism and the values and norms inherent to secular states. Thus, when studies talk about the inability of Muslims to handle modernity, they mainly refer to a potential clash between worldviews predicated on differing value systems. Globalization, through the spread of global media, social networking tools and technology, ensures an almost uninterrupted flow of information that raises cultural and religious awareness of a diaspora by connecting them to events back home.

The first view in this school suggests that radicalization partially results from the inability of Muslims to handle modernity and globalization, particularly within the religious realm, in Western environments. Given the strict separation of church and state in Western democracies, Muslims are conscious of the fact that public displays of religiosity go against mainstream views that perceive religion to be a primarily private affair.²⁹ The subsequent *feeling* of exclusion from mainstream society, that is at times strengthened by actual discrimination, leads certain individuals to fall back even further on religion as a means of reaffirming what they perceive to be a 'threatened self-identity.'³⁰

The second view builds on the first and suggests that second and third generation Muslims face difficulties in balancing their religious and national identities.³¹ On the one hand, unlike their first generation predecessors who follow a traditional *folk* Islam, second and third generation immigrants are found to have a more "intellectual approach towards Islam."³² This approach is premised on an individual preference to adopt certain cultural and religious elements, and is undoubtedly the influence of secular attitudes towards religious identity and expression as experienced in Western societies.

On the one hand, the individualization of religious identity creation is stressful as Muslim youth are nevertheless subjected to their parents' views at home, which brings into conflict their own,

²⁸ Anja Dalgaard-Nielsen, "Violent Radicalization in Europe: What We Know and What We Do Not Know," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 33:9 (2010): 797-814.

²⁹ Roy, Olivier, *Globalised Islam: The Search for a New Ummah* (London: Hurst &, 2004); Alex Wilner and Claire-Jehanne Dubouloz, "Homegrown Terrorism and Transformative Learning: An Interdisciplinary Approach To Understanding Radicalization," *Global Change, Peace and Security* 22:1 (2010), 41.

³⁰ Catarina Kinnvall, "Globalization and Religious Nationalism: Self, Identity, and the Search for Ontological Security" *Political Psychology* 25:5 (2004): 742.

³¹ Mirella L. Stroink, "Processes and Preconditions Underlying Terrorism in Second-Generation Immigrants," *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology* 13:3 (2007): 293-312.

³² Sirseloudi, "The Meaning of Religion and Identity," 813-14.

“secularized” religious identities and those of their families; all the while stressing a disconnect between the two and further alienating individuals from their families. On the other, society exerts its own pressures on the identity formation process. Here, a combination of socioeconomic, structural factors such as unemployment, and a low social standing relative to the societal average, may ferment feelings of disaffection towards the host country, making it difficult for the individual to fully identify as a national. The result is a ‘double sense of non-belonging’ that triggers a search for identity.³³

There are two recurrent themes on the topic of identity search. The first understands the search for identity as a response to a personal crisis, of which a double sense of non-belonging could be one.³⁴ The second is a result of feelings of guilt, compassion or empathy triggered by media portrayals of the suffering of co-religionists and/or fellow country-of-descent compatriots (i.e. the effects of globalization). Various actors often further portray this suffering as the intended outcome of foreign policies of the immigrant’s host countries as a means to suppress Muslims and defeat Islam. A search for meaning ensues whereby the individual attempts to reconcile national and religious identity attributes in answering the question, “Who am I?” in an individual test of loyalty. This view is often used to suggest why seemingly well-integrated, non-religious individuals may become radicalized.

It is in this time of doubt, when the individual is searching for deeper meaning and a distinctive identity that a window of opportunity opens up for extremists. Utilizing complex framing processes that draw on geopolitics and religion, extremists cease on this confusion and offer up their ideologies as alternative value systems on which individuals can build a more definitive identity. This identity is eventually incorporated into a larger, imagined community of resistance, whose main antagonist is Western countries depicted as waging a war against Islam.

Radicalization and Socialization

There is a significant grey area that exists between drivers for radicalization at the individual level, and those at the organizational level, where the individual has already joined a violent extremist organization. The second category in Dielgaard-Nielsen, “Social Movement Theory and Network Theory,” summarizes scholarly attempts in bridging this gap by suggesting transactions at the group and community level that foster an environment conducive to adopting violent extremist ideas and behaviors.³⁵

Of particular importance are the works of Sageman, Wiktorowicz’s, Neumann and Rogers, and McCauley on the social processes that drive radicalization. Sageman uses network theory to demonstrate the importance of kinship, personal relations, and social circles in reinforcing extremist ideology.³⁶ The latter draw more on social movement theories and group dynamics to

³³ Khosrokhavar, Farhad, *Suicide Bombers: Allah's New Martyrs* (London: Pluto Press, 2005), 185; Dalgaard-Nielsen, “Violent Radicalization in Europe,” 800.

³⁴ Wiktorowicz, Quintan, *Radical Islam Rising: Muslim Extremism in the West* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005).

³⁵ Dalgaard-Nielsen, “Violent Radicalization in Europe,” 801-06.

³⁶ Sageman, Marc, *Understanding Terror Networks* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Sageman, “Leaderless Jihad”; Wiktorowicz, “Islamic Activism”; Neumann et al., “Recruitment and Mobilisation”; McCauley et al., “Mechanisms of Political Radicalization.”

examine how individuals and communities are mobilized by altering meaning construction through the application of select framing techniques.

These constructivist approaches to understanding radicalization are useful as they help build on our understanding of how identities can be manipulated to mobilize individuals in serving the purpose of ideologies. If the “French Sociology” school sets identity as one of the core driving factors of radicalization, this school follows on by suggesting the next step in the process. Namely, it looks at *how* both extremist and non-extremist elements work to reformulate identities of Muslim youth through the creation of social circles that help cement select identities.

In his study of *al-Muhajiroun*, Wiktorowicz finds that an individual particularly vulnerable to radicalization efforts is one that has recently experienced a crisis of sorts and is open to considering varying ideologies.³⁷ Similarly, Sageman finds that a sense of “moral outrage” is derived from radicals witnessing global events against co-religionists.³⁸ Ironically critical thinking, a value heavily praised in Western societies, becomes a useful tool for extremists when it provides the sort of existential, confused cognitive opening on which ideologues can play.

The success of radicals in capitalizing on this opening depends not only on the presence (or lack thereof) of competing influences, but also on how high the individual already “ranks” on the supposed contributing factors of radicalization. Thus, if the individual is experiencing high anxiety with matters pertaining to religious identity, is disenfranchised due to a perception of unfair treatment, discrimination and the like, the likelihood of being open to accounts offering explanations for or else confirming these views is higher.³⁹ This presupposes some level of radicalization “readiness,” and the success of the extremist narrative in mobilization relies on its resonance with already “espoused beliefs, ideas and values” of the target group.⁴⁰

Upon engaging with extremist elements, individuals are then subjected to a lengthy process whereby ideologues set about reconstructing realities by introducing alternative frames through which the individual is made to interpret their grievances. These frames are variations of existing religious, cultural ones that rework schemata of interpretation to affect the meaning attached to events. For example, the ills and disenfranchisement of the individual are attributed to a larger, conspiratorial campaign launched against Islam and Muslims. The reason the West has apparently been able to proceed undeterred with this campaign is due to the demise of Islam and the infiltration of Western values, which have corrupted Muslim morals and weakened the unity of the Islamic *Ummah*. The subsequent reinforcement of a Manichean “us versus them” mentality fostered by increased socialization with like-minded individuals finally brings the individual fully into the extremists’ fold.

³⁷ Wiktorowicz, “Islamic Activism,” 2004; Dalgaard-Nielsen, “Violent Radicalization in Europe,” 802.

³⁸ One of steps in the radicalization process as described by Sageman in “Leaderless Jihad,” 2008.

³⁹ There is a general consensus in studies on radicalization that one of the main functions of extremist organizations and militant movements is to provide confused youth a more definitive sense of self as espoused by the group’s ideology. This identity compensates for the confused youth’s lack of strong identity by providing alternative communities or realities in which individuals can vent their frustration and compensate for their general lack of belonging in other identities.

⁴⁰ Robert D. Benford, and David A. Snow, “Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 26:1 (2000): 621.

Geopolitics is a useful tool that Islamists and their violent Jihadi extensions utilize in tailoring the rhetoric of their ideologies. Argumentation varies depending on the extremity of the organization or group, yet the basic master narrative is that the “war on terror” is a guise under which the West is actually fighting a war against Islam. The details of the political narratives have been studied in detail elsewhere, but their significance in the radicalization process context lies in their implications.⁴¹ These political narratives work to both create and perpetuate a perception of intentional religious discrimination against Muslims in the European diaspora. When combined with identity confusion, or else the battle for reconciliation of European national and Islamic identities, it becomes clear that their purpose is to shift that balance in favor of the latter.

Social Identity Theory

This paper borrows elements from social identity theory (SIT) and Turner’s theory of self-categorization (SC) to analyze and forward a more in-depth explanation of identity formation and transformation in the radicalization process.⁴² These two theories are used because they examine the socio-cognitive impact of groups and social categories on the development of personal identities and hence bridge the gap between the individual and the environment. Radicalization does not occur in a vacuum and so SIT, like social movement theory (SMT), is more useful as a lens through which to view the process.

SIT is primarily interested in the socio-cognitive processes underlying group dynamics and how they shape identity. In this respect, it shares a lot with the framing theories in SMT, as SMT also focuses on the way that groups of people construct reality - and individual self-conceptions - through particular cognitive frameworks. Social identities are reflections of the social categories, groups, and networks into which individuals belong. Social categories are broad, “large-scale” sources of social identity that often provide the pretext for the formation of community level social networks and groups.⁴³ Examples of large-scale categories are religion, gender, and ethnicity.

Social categories define imaginary boundaries, which separate members (in-group) from non-members (out-group). In other words, they are inherently discriminatory—though not necessarily negatively so—as they constitute norms and values that describe membership criteria and consequently set themselves apart from other social categories.⁴⁴ Membership criteria not only demarcate the group, but also define the systems of meaning and frameworks through which

⁴¹ Al Raffie, “Whose Hearts and Minds?”

⁴² Tajfel, Henri, *Human Groups and Social Categories: Studies in Social Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); John C. Turner, “Some Current Issues in Research on Social Identity and Self-Categorization Theories,” in Naomi Ellemers, Russell Spears, and Bertjan Doosje (eds.), *Social Identity: Context, Commitment, Content* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), 6-34; Turner, John C, *Rediscovering the Social Group: A Self-categorization Theory* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987).

⁴³ Sheldon Stryker, Richard T. Serpe, and Matthew O. Hunt, “Social Structure and Commitment: A Study of Blacks, Latinos and Whites” (2000), Unpublished Manuscript; Kay Deaux and Daniela Martin, “Interpersonal Networks and Social Categories: Specifying Levels of Context in Identity Processes,” *Social Psychology Quarterly* 66:2 (June 2003): 104.

⁴⁴ Michael A. Hogg, Deborah J. Terry, and Katherine M. White, “A Tale of Two Theories: A Critical Comparison of Identity Theory with Social Identity Theory,” *Social Psychology Quarterly* 58:4 (December 1995): 259.

members make sense of their surrounding social environments. They are “thought communities,” where both behavior and perception are restrained by “normative constraints such as rules that specify what ways of thinking are appropriate in a particular social community or situation.”⁴⁵

Because the core function of the group to its members is found by SIT theorists to be its utility in boosting self-esteem and ego, internalized stereotypes and norms are developed in such a way that they favor the in-group.⁴⁶ This is known as “self-enhancement” and is also an outcome of efforts to elevate the perceived status of the in-group relative to that of the out-group/out-groups.⁴⁷ The process of distinguishing the group through stereotype assignment and the allocation of cognitive frameworks is known as the “categorization” process.

Turner elaborated on the categorization process in groups through his development of “self-categorization” theory.⁴⁸ Self-categorization is the cognitive process whereby individuals strengthen their social identity by emphasizing intra-group similarities and intergroup differences. Such distinctions sharpen group boundaries as well as the meaning systems inherent to the group, and set down group standards for behavior. Group standards ultimately become the blueprint for the individual’s identity and subsequent behavior; the individual is “depersonalized.”⁴⁹ Self-categorization theory suggests that the adoption of a collective identity by a group member will trump his/her personal, individual identity, as he/she becomes an extension of the collective whole.

Individuals typically belong to several social categories. These social categories will often drive the formation of community level groups and networks as individuals are subconsciously and/or consciously attracted to similar “others”—particularly if they are part of the minority or else belong to a lower status group in society.⁵⁰ An important element of social identities is that they do not necessarily hinge on the continued interaction of group members in closed settings. Individuals act on behalf of the group according to the norms he/she internalize as a result of *belonging* to that group.⁵¹ Findings on what causes one social identity to dominate or else exert considerable influence on behavior are not well developed. Oakes suggests that salience is not in response to social stimuli as much as it is the “psychological significance of group membership.”⁵² An important definition of commitment as found in identity theory—a neighboring theory that shares similarities with SIT—finds identity salience to be high depending on the density and significance of the social network in which individuals are embedded.⁵³ The suitability of the social identity, in terms of how appropriate its cognitive

⁴⁵ Eviatar Zerubavel and Eliot R. Smith, “Transcending Cognitive Individualism,” *Social Psychology Quarterly* 73:315 (November 11, 2010): 322.

⁴⁶ Hogg et al., “A Tale of Two Theories,” 260.

⁴⁷ Hogg, Michael A., and Dominic Abrams, “Towards a Single-Process Uncertainty-Reduction Model of Social Motivation in Groups,” in Michael A. Hogg and Dominic Abrams (eds.), *Group Motivation: Social Psychological Perspectives* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), 173-90.

⁴⁸ Turner, “Rediscovering the Social Group.”

⁴⁹ Hogg et al., “A Tale of Two Theories,” 261.

⁵⁰ Jan E. Stets and Peter J. Burke, “Identity Theory and Social Identity Theory,” *Social Psychology Quarterly* 63:3 (September 2000): 225.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 227.

⁵² Penelope Oakes, “The Salience of Social Categories,” in Turner, “Rediscovering the Social Group,” 117-41; *Ibid*, 230.

⁵³ Hogg et al., “A Tale of Two Theories,” 258.

frameworks are in fulfilling the goals and tasks that a situation presents, is another factor predicting salience.⁵⁴ Other determinants of social identity salience may include:

Intergroup Status Relations

The *status* of a group is mostly a perceptual construct, but is also built on cues and stimuli from the surrounding social context that positions a group on a hierarchy of social identities.⁵⁵ Because groups are defined in contradistinction to out-groups, status is measured as a function of perceived relations between the group and the out-groups to which it compares itself. Groups may perceive themselves to possess a lower status relative to others or vice versa.

Behavior based on perceived status relies on “stability and legitimacy” of these groups as well as the evaluative consequences of group membership.⁵⁶ Intergroup conflict will arise if group members are dissatisfied with their lower status (i.e. perceive it to be illegitimate), are unable to adopt different social identities or “pass into them,” and believe that this can only be changed by changing social order. On the other hand, individuals belonging to lower status groups that are perceived by their members to be legitimate and more stable are less likely to compete or conflict with higher status groups. These individuals will nevertheless seek membership into higher status groups if the option to do so is perceived to be available.⁵⁷

Positive Evaluative Self-Conception

Social identities are evoked insofar as they provide useful references with which the individual can make meaning of his/her surroundings. More importantly, social identities set the stage for self-evaluation by furnishing standards against which self-image and self-conceptions are measured.⁵⁸ Essentially, group members must be able to make sense of the world around them within the cognitive framework of the social identity, and emerge from the process feeling positive and satisfied.⁵⁹ If a particular identity is unable to provide the level of meaning and accompanying positive evaluative consequences, individuals can alternatively call on other social identities or categories they belong to, or else seek membership in other groups.⁶⁰

Level of Network Support for Social Identities

The addition of the interpersonal context by Deaux is important as it discusses the influence of intra-group dynamics on social identities.⁶¹ People may typically prefer to join groups whose members share the same social categories. However, reality is more complex and networks in which individuals interact may not always provide the preferred basis for categorization as

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Hogg et al., “A Tale of Two Theories,” 260.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Kay Deaux, “Social Identification,” in E. Tory Higgins and Arie W. Kruglanski (eds.), *Social Psychology: Handbook of Basic Principles* (New York: Guilford Press, 1996), 777-98; Tajfel, Henri, *Differentiation between Social Groups: Studies in the Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations* (London: Published in Cooperation with European Association of Experimental Social Psychology by Academic Press, 1978).

⁵⁹ Hogg et al., “A Tale of Two Theories,” 260.

⁶⁰ Hazel Markus and Paula Nurius, “Possible Selves,” *American Psychologist* 41 (1986): 954-69; Hogg et al., “A Tale of Two Theories,” 260.

⁶¹ Deaux et al., “Interpersonal Networks,” *Social Psychology Quarterly* 66:2 (June 2003): 101-17.

dictated by chosen social identity claims or categories. Belonging to certain group categories is often subject to judgment by members of the individual's wider network, and it is the feedback from the network (positive or negative) that will make a given social identity more or less salient.⁶² Because one of the core functions of networks is to provide support for chosen identity claims, the failure to do so may lead to either abandoning the network or the social group category.⁶³ Alternatively, some theorists argue that networks provide "sites in which group identities may be subject to negotiation."⁶⁴ This implies individuals may also respond to contextual, network pressures through the "expansion and modification of identity definitions over time."⁶⁵

Despite the existence of social categories into which people are born, these social constructs are not the primary determinants of identity and behavior. If anything, the literature seems to imply that human ego and self-esteem are two of the strongest drivers of identity in society, and that social categories are vehicles for recognizing and bolstering the latter. Further, because peoples' identities are multilayered (i.e. they possess several), behavior can be more accurately predicted based on the salience of a given identity as opposed to its mere existence. Levels of commitment to given social identities as well as their usefulness in furnishing individuals with a positive sense of self are more important in determining which social identity is dominant, and thus which is more likely to drive behavior.

Finally, *perception* is a key term in both theories, and is shaped by systems of meaning that constitute the groups, networks and broader social categories in which individuals belong. The content of these systems is important in assessing to what extent they allow for the adoption and/or tolerance of other systems of meaning. All social identities are defined by their differences relative to others. This discriminatory element, however, is not *ipso facto* negative but is more a yardstick for measuring distinction. Distinction includes all the internal cognitive processes and evaluative mechanisms that nurture self-esteem and positive self-image of *belonging* to a group. It is primarily the nature of the stereotypes associated with the out-group that will determine the relationship between the two in terms of tolerance of other or demonization of other.

Social Identities and Threat

An underlying assumption in terrorism studies is that a perception of threat to Islam is one of the main triggers of identity crises in Muslim youth. Because this assertion is so central to the discussion on radicalization, this paper integrates basic findings from social psychology on the anticipated perceptual, affective, and behavioral outcomes of group-directed threat. A taxonomy developed by Ellemers studies the effects of differing levels of threat on self and group membership based on levels of commitment.⁶⁶ Although six different cells make up the matrix, this paper only includes that which measures group-directed threats vs. commitment.

⁶² Ibid, 107.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Naomi Ellemers, Russell Spears, and Bertjan Doosje, "Self and Social Identity," *Annual Review of Psychology* 53 (2002): 161-86.

For the first combination—group-directed threat vs. low individual commitment—the main coping strategy of individuals on all levels appears to be distancing oneself from the group. Perceptually, individuals explain away negative feedback from the surrounding environment by attributing it to the group and group values and not themselves personally.⁶⁷ Low levels of group commitment lead to a weak collective sense of self, and so the group member is not entirely “depersonalized” and likewise not part of a cohesive whole threatened by relevant out-groups. Individuals also distance themselves by emphasizing the heterogeneity of group members as a means of showing that the negative attributes attached to the group do not apply to them.⁶⁸

On the affective level, the authors find that when group commitment is low, individuals will develop and maintain negative self-esteem vis-à-vis the group so long as feedback remains negative.⁶⁹ The combination of affective and perceptual outcomes similarly translates into physically distancing oneself from the group. In this case, the most obvious alternative is shifting to another group. As opposed to trying to improve the group standing in society, group members instead display behaviors that indicate their desire to “pass” into other groups.⁷⁰ Circumstances that may prevent members from doing so (either perceptual or real) may lead to other ‘creative’ coping mechanisms that are employed primarily at the level of perception, or else the “internalization of inferiority.”⁷¹ The latter undoubtedly leads to lower levels of self-esteem and negative self-image.

The only case mentioned in the authors’ study where the individual may identify with the threatened social category is when the moral values or ‘integrity’ of the group are questioned.⁷² In this case, the group’s moral integrity is scrutinized due to its mistreatment or harming of another group, and the members with the lowest commitment are often found to suffer the most from affective emotions like guilt.⁷³ In this context, there is a higher possibility that an individual may identify with the group and act on its behalf in attempts to restore its moral integrity as a result of the collective guilt that he/she feels. However, the authors assert that this will translate into “prosocial” (and not defensive/conflictual) behavior towards the mistreated group.⁷⁴

The second combination—group-directed threat vs. high individual commitment—supports the hypothesis that highly committed members of a group fall back further on the group when the

⁶⁷ Jennifer Crocker, Brenda Major, and Claude Steele, "Social Stigma," in Daniel Todd. Gilbert, Susan T. Fiske, and Gardner Lindzey (eds.), *The Handbook of Social Psychology* (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 1998), 504-53; Ibid, 174.

⁶⁸ Bertjan Doosje, Russell Spears, Naomi Ellemers, and Willem Koomen, "Perceived Group Variability in Intergroup Relations: The Distinctive Role of Social Identity," *European Review of Social Psychology* 10:1 (1999): 41-74; Ellemers et al., "Self and Social Identity," 176.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 175.

⁷⁰ Henri Tajfel, *Differentiation between Social Groups: Studies in the Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations* (New York: Academic Press, 1978).

⁷¹ John T. Jost and Mahzarin R. Banaji, "The Role of Stereotyping in System-justification and the Production of False Consciousness," *British Journal of Social Psychology* 33:1 (March 1994): 1-27; Ellemers et al., "Self and Social Identity," 175.

⁷² Ellemers et al., "Self and Social Identity," 175.

⁷³ Bertjan Doosje, S. Alexander Haslam, Russell Spears, Penelope J. Oakes, and Willem Koomen, "The Effect of Comparative Context on Central Tendency and Variability Judgements and the Evaluation of Group Characteristics," *European Journal of Social Psychology* 28:2 (March/April 1998).

⁷⁴ Ellemers et al., "Self and Social Identity," 175.

group faces a threat. This suggests that individuals with a more salient religious identity are likely to become even more religious in a crisis. Across the different levels (perceptual, affective, and behavior), group members strive to further distinguish their group from relevant out-groups. Efforts to do so include strengthening in-group stereotypes to promote further homogeneity among members—and thus strengthening the in-group.⁷⁵ Feeling challenged or threatened, group members' self-esteem is negatively affected as strong ties to the group prevent them from passing into another, more attractive, group that provides better chances for positive self-evaluation. Findings here support that these perceptual and affective conditions are “conducive to collective group behavior” or collective action.⁷⁶

In SIT, the determinant of behavior in a condition of strong group identification is primarily the perception of the legitimacy and stability of the group status. As reported in the study cited here, the behavioral outcomes resulting from strong group distinction and tense relationships between in- and out-groups usually manifest themselves in competitive tendencies. For low status groups (as is the case of religious minorities in Europe for example), this is likely to take the form of collective action in an attempt to amend the group's situation. With regards to threat to group moral values, similar patterns are displayed along all three levels. Members with high levels of commitment are more likely to react defensively, and less likely to consider the actual harm they may have inflicted upon other out-groups.

The challenge of redressing the situation of a group as seen fit by more committed group members often takes place as a competition between the in- and out-group. The manner in which the competition will play out is ultimately the result of the normative environment of the group upon which behavior is dictated. Strategies that committed members adopt in attempting to redress the situation may exacerbate real *and* perceived tensions between the in- and out-group, sometimes further stigmatizing the group and confirming the beliefs and conditions that lead to threat perceptions in the first place. These very same strategies may also make it difficult for less committed members to “pass” into other out-groups that increasingly perceive homogeneity amongst group members as a result.

Putting Theory into Practice

The dynamics of social identities as discussed in the previous section hold several implications for mainstream assumptions and views that underpin identity discourse in terrorism studies and studies on radicalization. In the “French sociology” school, identity crises result from a handful of factors that challenge the individual's ability to reconcile two main social identities: religious and national social identities.

In the first view (View 1), identity crises result from Muslims feeling unaccepted in society due to their religious affiliation. Tensions arise from the lack of fit between differing religious roles

⁷⁵ Bertjan Doosje, Naomi Ellemers, and Russell Spears, “Perceived Intragroup Variability as a Function of Group Status and Identification,” *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 31:5 (1995): 410-36; Russel Spears, Bertjan Doosje, and Naomi Ellemers, “Self-Stereotyping in the Face of Threats to Group Status and Distinctiveness: The Role of Group Identification,” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 23:5 (May 1997): 538-53, *Ibid*, 176.

⁷⁶ Caroline Kelly and Sara Breinlinger, *The Social Psychology of Collective Action: Identity, Injustice, and Gender* (London: Taylor & Francis, 1996); Ellemers et al., “Self and Social Identity,” 177.

in society. For Muslims, religion is more visible in the public realm than that of the mainstream. Coupled with real and/or perceived discrimination, Muslims respond to the threat by strengthening their ties to the “Muslim” social category, and further segregating themselves from the mainstream.

In the second view (View 2), there exists a tension between traditional Islam as practiced by the first generation (the parents), and individually formed religious identities of later generations. Coupled with discrimination that they experience—or perceive—in mainstream society due to belonging to a *suspect* social identity, Muslims find it difficult to fully identify as Europeans. One of the solutions is joining an extremist group if “the individual shows receptiveness to extremist ideas.”⁷⁷

In View 1, the underlying assumption is that high levels of commitment to the “Muslim” social category *automatically* exist, and will therefore override commitment to other social categories and groups. Assuming individuals are highly committed to religious social identities to begin with, when their religious social category is threatened, SIT posits that they are more likely to fall back even further on religion. Because commitment is measured by the density and significance of social ties attached to a social category membership, it is also logical to assume that the larger the number of Muslims in an individual’s network, the stronger the religious social identity will be. This may be the case in diaspora neighborhoods in Europe where the majority of residents are Muslim immigrants who immigrated to Europe from the same country and live in tight-knit communities that less frequently interact with mainstream society. In this context, children are raised in an environment that is composed of primarily similar “others”—in this case Muslims from their countries of descent—and build networks based on these relationships.

Bolt find that “strong religious attachments among Muslim immigrants lead to an increased desire to self-segregate that is not found among other immigrants of the same socio-economic level.”⁷⁸ Similarly, a case study on the Muslim diaspora in the UK finds support for the argument that residential segregation contributes to the radicalization process.⁷⁹ Other factors, such as perceived societal rejection and actual discriminatory practices of landlords and real estate agents, are also found to play a role in encouraging residential segregation.⁸⁰

The emergence of these “ethnic enclaves” may thus result in higher levels of commitment to immigrants’ religious and/or ethnic social identities and increase the likelihood of strongly identifying with religion at the expense of nationality.⁸¹ It also creates further challenges of reconciling or balancing the two identities as, the higher the perceived level of threat to the

⁷⁷ Ellemers et al., “Self and Social Identity,” 816.

⁷⁸ Gideon Bolt, Maarten van Ham and Ronald van Kempen, *Immigrants on the housing market: spatial segregation and relocation dynamics*, paper presented at the European Network of Housing Research, Ljubljana, Slovenia (July 2-5, 2006); David Varady, “Muslim Residential Clustering and Political Radicalism,” *Housing Studies* 23:1 (January 2008): 47.

⁷⁹ Marie Macey, “Islamic Political Radicalism in Britain: Muslim Men in Bradford,” in Tahrir Abbas (ed.), *Islamic Political Radicalism: A European Perspective* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 160-172.

⁸⁰ Nielsen, Jørgen S, *Muslims in Western Europe* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), 48.

⁸¹ Term taken from Hans Skifter Andersen, *Moving to and from Enclaves. Housing Choices of Ethnic Minorities in Denmark*, technical paper (2006), available at: http://yks.tkk.fi/fi/opinnot/arkisto/36-2320/ysss_2007/materiaali/enclaves.pdf.

religious identity from society, the less individuals will be willing to participate in society and the more defensive they may become towards society as a whole. In this case, religion is the predominant framework through which individuals interpret experience, and is therefore the most salient. The ensuing behaviors are thus very much dependent on the content of the religious frameworks and the norms they prescribe.

Whereas the above explanation may hold true in cases where an Islamic social identity category is presumably extremely pervasive, it is problematic for number of reasons. First, it assumes that the practice of Islam among members of the diaspora, and across Muslim diaspora originating from different countries, is uniform. Polls do show that Muslims in Europe will generally identify themselves first as Muslims and then as nationals of the countries in which they are born and raised.⁸² But such identification fails to account for variation in how the same Muslims define their religious categories, and the meanings and practices they attach to their religious identity claims (a shortcoming that View 2 addresses). More importantly, it also fails to account for Muslims that are better integrated—measured here by the plurality and meaningfulness of other group memberships in mainstream society.

One of the main contentions in social identity theory (SIT) is that social identities may be driven by overarching systems of meaning—like religion—but are also subject to being renegotiated according to the social contexts in which they are employed. Membership in differing groups in society will typically lessen the level of commitment to one ascribed identity (such as religion) and instead rely more on other factors related to chosen identity claims; for example the utility of alternative groups and social identities in boosting individual self-esteem. Further, because identity formation is subjected to feedback from the network in which an individual interacts, the secular nature of societies that later generations of European Muslims are brought up in suggest that less emphasis will be placed on utilizing religious frames in the public realm. Thus, the more memberships immigrants and/or minorities hold in groups that extend beyond their religion and ethnicity, the less tempered religious and ethnic frameworks become in daily interactions.⁸³ In this case, it is unlikely that the religious identity will be the most salient, or else salient in a manner that distinguishes the individual from the majority to a point of discomfort that triggers an identity crisis.

View 2 more accurately addresses the issue of context-specific religious identity formation. In this view, the immediate frustration is not the result of a religious identity incompatible with societal values, but one that is incompatible with traditional religious values practiced in the home. This frustration is compounded and leads to an identity crisis when coupled with real and/or perceived discrimination outside the home. In View 2, two assumptions form the corollary argument. The first is that second and third-generation Muslims are unable to reconcile

⁸² *Muslims in Europe: Economic Worries Top Concerns About Religious and Cultural Identity*, Pew Research Global Attitudes Project (July 6, 2006), available at: <http://www.pewglobal.org/2006/07/06/muslims-in-europe-economic-worries-top-concerns-about-religious-and-cultural-identity/>.

⁸³ Marco Goli and Shahamak Rezaei, "Radical Islamism and Migrant Integration in Denmark: An Empirical Inquiry," *Journal of Strategic Security* 4:4 (Winter 2011): 90-91, available at: <http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/jss/vol4/iss4/5/>; A study on Muslim immigrants in Denmark finds a 'downward slope corresponding to degree of radicalism' between friendships with native Danes or other immigrants along a spectrum of four groups: from 'non-radical' to 'radical'. This may imply that the more integrated immigrants are in terms of meaningful relationships with 'others', the less radical they are.

contrasting religious identities—their families’ and their own. The second is that the societies in which these individuals live discriminate against them for belonging to a *suspect* social category; a situation which creates feelings of alienation from both home and society.

If one accepts the view that most second- and third-generation immigrants, born and raised in European countries, reject traditional Islamic practices as a starting point, it is reasonable to assume that the religious identities they craft for themselves will be more a reflection of the social settings in which they find themselves immersed. According to SIT, the formation of social identities is the outcome of exposure to a variety of networks and groups—of which there are also religious ones—that constitute different identity claims from which individuals choose.

Sirseldoudi’s study on second and third generation German Muslims of Turkish decent lends support to some of these findings. It shows how religious identity grows more out of individual choice, and how younger generations more consciously select elements from varying identity claims to shape their identities.⁸⁴ The second generation is no longer engaged in a “defensive practice of religion” and appears more confident in building its own religious identity.⁸⁵ The difference between the later generations and the first generation is that the former are entirely disconnected from the cultures of their home countries, and have not had traditional *folk* Islam imposed on them as their parents have. Thus, later generations learn and craft their religious identities in cultures that are mostly secular and adapt them accordingly.

From this perspective, it can be argued that the better integrated an immigrant is—measured here by the plurality and meaningfulness of other group memberships in mainstream society—the less conservative and pervasive the religious identity will be as it will be balanced by various *counter*-social identities. Further, possessing this repertoire of identities suggests that individuals can switch between social identities depending on their relevance to a given context. When one social identity is unable to foster a positive sense of self or else provide meaning in a given context, individuals can resort to alternative social identities that are more suitable. This is supported by a study on Muslims in Switzerland, where the author finds that Muslim immigrants brought up in Switzerland typically have two large-scale dual identities that straddle the secular and religious spheres.⁸⁶ The author similarly finds that youth are normally more likely to emphasize their religious social identity at home, and deemphasize it at school where the environment is less suitable to interact on a religious basis.⁸⁷

Although the study does not directly address the issue of tension that may arise among first and later generations with regards to religion, it supports the notion that Muslims are normally able to balance different social identities—particularly when actively participating in mainstream society. Such findings thus call into question the health of perspectives on religious identities and their role in radicalization processes.

⁸⁴ Sirseldoudi, “The Meaning of Religion and Identity.”

⁸⁵ Werner Schiffauer, “Migration and Religion: A Special Relationship,” *Fikrun wa Fann/ Art and Thought* 83 (2006): 29-34; *Ibid*, 815.

⁸⁶ Stephane Lathion, “Muslims in Switzerland: Is Citizenship Really Incompatible with Muslim Identity?” *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 28:1 (May 13, 2008): 56.

⁸⁷ *Ibid*, 56-57.

Discrimination—real or perceived—can become a source of frustration for Muslim youth who are rejected for belonging to a social category that they may not fully identify with. It is a common factor in both views, and may trigger identity crises when combined with other factors such as personal crises or religious identity dynamics.

In the case where commitment to religious identities is weak, European Muslims lack the opportunity to join groups in the mainstream, yet have few or no *strong* alternative social identities to resort to. The commitment-threat level taxonomy suggests that the inability to “pass” into other groups and the lack of alternatives may lead to the development of perceptual alternatives to cope or else the “internalization of inferiority.”⁸⁸ In the case where commitment to religious identities is strong, immigrants will fall back further onto religion and become further alienated from mainstream society—as has been discussed elsewhere here. In both cases, discrimination may trigger an identity search that leaves the individual cognitively vulnerable and receptive to extremist ideologies as a source of identity. Essentially, it is alternatives existing outside the mainstream and the familial realms that seem to be the most attractive to the individual that is unable to identify with either. The outcome ultimately depends on which alternative will reach the individual first.

The second assumption in View 2 may be valid when explaining attitudes and behaviors amongst individuals whose commitment to religion is high. Indeed, there is a general consensus on the finding that the more devout Muslim immigrants are, the less likely they are to join other groups or identify with other social categories.⁸⁹ However, it does not account for Muslims who already hold group memberships in society and are better integrated.

It is unrealistic to expect that European Muslims, who have forged meaningful relationships in groups and networks in mainstream society, are then targeted by the same groups and networks.⁹⁰ Even if the individual does come under scrutiny by some group members due to his/her affiliation to a stigmatized or ‘suspect’ social category—Islam for example—the effects of threat on members who hold lower levels of commitment to groups (as suggested in the taxonomy) indicate that the perceptual, affective, and behavioral response of the individual will be to distance him/herself from the threatened category.⁹¹ Behavioral outcomes are expected to place more emphasis on alternative social identities—“passing” into other groups—or else shifting the blame on other group members of the social category to demonstrate heterogeneity among group members.⁹² Further, because identity formation is subjected to feedback from the network in which an individual interacts, the secular nature of societies European Muslims are brought up in implies that less emphasis is placed on utilizing religious frames in the public realm.⁹³

⁸⁸ Jost et al., “The Role of Stereotyping,” 1994; Ellemers et al., “Self and Social Identity,” 175.

⁸⁹ Lori Peek, “Becoming Muslim: The Development of a Religious Identity,” *Sociology of Religion* 66:3 (2005): 229-30.

⁹⁰ In the same study on Muslim immigrants in Denmark, only 5.8 percent of the respondents claimed to have experienced some form of discrimination in their daily lives; Goli et al., “Radical Islamism and Migrant Integration in Denmark,” 93.

⁹¹ Ellemers et al., “Self and Social Identity,” 174-76.

⁹² *Ibid*, 175.

⁹³ Deaux et al., “Interpersonal Networks,” 107.

Applying SIT to the “French Sociology” school highlights a number of flaws in the logic and assumptions supporting the primary views within it. Despite this, the views themselves can nevertheless be substantiated when complemented by further levels of analysis. In other words, there are explanations that could account for why and how, contrary to SIT dictates on social identity dynamics and consequent behavior, the challenged assumptions on individual radicalization in both views may nevertheless be true. In this context, the “Social Movement and Network Theory” school, together with this paper’s findings from SIT, may be helpful in providing some of the answers. Of special interest in this paper is the influence of Islamic “meso-level” organizations, such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and social movement organizations (SMOs) on religious identity formation of diaspora members.⁹⁴

The formation and transformation of religious identities of later generations in the diaspora may be more individualized than that of the first generation, yet the process is nevertheless subject to external influences. Later generations refusing to fully conform to the traditional practice of religion are nevertheless bound to come into contact with religious groups and individuals that try and influence their religious identity formation processes.

In Europe, these voices range from NGOs like Millî Görüş in Germany or the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) in the UK, that claim to represent Muslims in the diaspora yet are more often than not Islamist in nature, to more extreme organizations like al-Muhajiroun or Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT). Religiously inspired groups need not be organized and can also operate through informal channels like mosques and student unions on university campuses.⁹⁵

Another band of organizations and programs that have formed as a response to the challenge of radicalization are ones premised on the promotion of pluralistic and democratic religious definitions. Establishments like the Quillham foundation in the UK that has recently begun working with the government to implement counter-radicalization programs is but one example. Unfortunately, these organizations continue to receive less attention than the more common Islamist NGOs as credible Islamic voices.⁹⁶

The availability of Islamist NGOs in the Muslim diaspora environment has important implications for the identity formation and transformation processes. This is because they are not only there to serve the social needs of Muslims, but also work to institute themselves as the official representatives of religion in the country. In many cases, these organizations will act as official conduits between Muslims in the diaspora and European governments, and this implies that it is primarily their frameworks of meaning through which each sees and understands the other. The extent of influence of these organizations can be measured by their success in establishing and maintaining social services (such as mosques, schools and ‘cultural’ events) that focus primarily on Muslim youth.⁹⁷ An in-depth background study of the major NGOs is beyond

⁹⁴ This term is borrowed from Wiktorowicz, “Islamic Activism,” and includes Islamic non-governmental organizations as well as Islamic activism in the form of social movement organizations (SMOs).

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ One of the reasons for this is that most Islamist and other religious NGOs established in Europe receive external funding for their activities – mostly from the immigrants’ host countries as well as from other Islamic governments

⁹⁷ Wiktorowicz, “Islamic Activism,” Nawaz, “Combating Violent Extremism”; Millî Görüş in Sirseldoudi, “The Meaning of Religion and Identity.”

the scope of this paper, but several studies have been carried out that cover their expansion into Europe and the West.⁹⁸

The most important effect of the growth of Islamist NGOs as representatives of religion is that, through their activism and social services, it is primarily *their* interpretation of religion that permeates the conscience of Muslim second- and third- generation immigrants. Because rejection of modernity as dictated by secular values lies at the heart of all Islamist ideologies, the adoption of Islam as preached by these organizations is the first step in the imposition of a cognitive barrier to social integration among Muslim youth. Islamist NGOs provide the material support to members of the diaspora whilst actively seeking to impose stricter Islamic norms through social channels. Their presence outside the diaspora and as official spokespersons for diaspora members means that elements of their ideology will infiltrate the religious identity formation process of Muslim youth as well as possibly transform identities of better-integrated Muslims.

It is surprising that few studies have been carried out on the effect of Islamist organizations and religious identity formation. This paper contends that the more power an Islamist NGO/SMO has in the diaspora - through its control of social services and its sway on local governments - the more challenging Muslim youth will find it to integrate. As these organizations grow in size, and begin to extend beyond the diaspora, their ideologies are bound to have an effect on even better integrated individuals.

From a social identity perspective the argument can be structured as follows: The one thing in common amongst all Islamist ideologies is their view that *Western*, secular values are antithetical to those of Islam and that they corrupt Muslims. The decline in the morals and thus the lower “status” of Muslims on the world stage is the result of Muslims straying from the true Islamic path. The solution is to be found, in varying degrees, in a purification of religious practice through stricter adherence to the basic tenets of religion through the full application of God’s law or *Shari’a*. The problem these organizations pose to the religious social identity of Muslim youth at once becomes obvious.

The frameworks of meaning set down by Islamist organizations are ones that not only demarcate themselves according to religious criteria, but also actively attribute negative characteristics to all other out-groups. All groups are marked in contradistinction to others, yet Islamist groups uphold norms and values that go one step further and demonize others. Schwartz contends that “terrorism requires having divided people into two categories,” where the “dichotomization [...] extends beyond mere descriptive differentiation to include an intense evaluative component.”⁹⁹ This dichotomization is not only a characteristic of the religiously inspired terrorist group but is similarly one that exists within the frameworks of meaning that Islamist organizations employ. The more accentuated the in-group positive/out-group negative stereotypes are, the more demonized the out-group becomes and the less tolerant members become of other views.

⁹⁸ Naser Khader, "Something's Rotten in Denmark," *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology* 6 (2008): 66-70; Vidino, Lorenzo, *The New Muslim Brotherhood in the West* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010); Michael Weiss, "Persons of Interest: Britain Learns from Ex-Islamists," *World Affairs* (July/August 2011), 65-74; Steven Merley, "The Muslim Brotherhood in the United States," *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology* (April 6, 2009), available at: <http://www.currenttrends.org/research/detail/the-muslim-brotherhood-in-the-united-states>.

⁹⁹ Schwartz et al., "Terrorism," 541.

Erikson terms this dichotomization “pseudospeciation,” and this process takes place at both the community level where Islamists are heavily entrenched, as well as in terrorist organizations.¹⁰⁰ As they also claim to be bearers of religious *truths*, they pose massive challenges to Muslim youth who are eager to wax and wane their definitions of religion so as to better integrate into society, yet are unsure as to whether doing so is religiously legit. These organizations bring religion to the fore in environments where religion to its adherents is individualized, cherry-picked, and does not reign supreme. In effect, the inability to reconcile identities is not an inherent characteristic of the European Muslim, but one that is gradually built in to him/her as exposure to abovementioned Islamist groups grows.

Given the collectivist characteristics of many diaspora communities, the more influential these organizations become in society as the official representatives of Islam, the more Muslim youth will be pressured to succumb to their frameworks of meaning. As the basic tenets of Islamist ideology are inherently hostile to the surrounding society, individuals adopting their frames of reference not only withdraw from society, but are also likely to develop hostile attitudes towards other out-groups. On the one hand, immigrants gradually lose other group memberships because the religious cognitive frameworks they employ no longer allow for positive self-evaluations belonging to them. On the other, the individual finds him/herself strongly committed to a social identity whose group prototypes—the Islamists—constantly propagate a narrative of victim-hood and discrimination.

For better-integrated immigrants, exposure to Islamist ideologies through their control of religious social or else non-related Islamist forms of activism on university campuses is bound to be a source of confusion. At the very least, these organizations work to instill doubts in these individuals’ minds as to the soundness in engaging with the mainstream. Here, a variety of tools may be used to do so. Depending on the context, these could range from emphasizing the negative out-group stereotypes as set down by the ideology’s cognitive framework, or else summoning negative feelings by warning well-integrated youth of the religious consequences of partaking in certain activities.

In both cases, the portrayal of the West as engaging in a conspiracy to defeat Islam as portrayed by the media and other propaganda buttresses the narratives of organizations in their attempts to demonize surrounding societies. This process of instilling better-integrated Muslims with confusion and doubt is the first step in tampering with the natural functions of social identities in providing self-assuredness, confidence, and positive feedback. It helps explain why even better-integrated Muslims may be prone to identity crises: continued exposure to conflicting feelings may lead to an identity search which leaves the individual prone to influence and indoctrination.

Islamist organizations not only demonize the other but also argue that a return to a more purified version of Islam is the answer to the woes of Muslims worldwide. These organizations may not call for violent means to change the status quo, but nevertheless agitate for a change in the status quo. European Muslims adopting the Islamist religious identity are not only restrained by it in terms of passing into other groups or taking on other group memberships, but are also taught to believe that the status of Islam and Muslims is not legitimate.

¹⁰⁰ Erik H. Erikson, "Pseudospeciation in the Nuclear Age," *Political Psychology* 6 (1985): 213-17.

The desired outcome of all Islamist groups (even the violent ones) is the eventual implementation of *Shari'a* at the state level, and the widespread practice of Islam throughout the world, for example, elevations of Islam's status as a social category within society. These two conditions—inability to pass into other social members and the perception of an illegitimate groups status—are found in SIT to be conducive to conflict-prone behavior. What's more, the manner in which the status of Islam is supposed to be elevated according to Islamism is through the adherence of its followers to a strict moral code that attempts to apply religion in every aspect of life. Once Muslims have returned to the true religious path, God will respond in kind and elevate their status in the world. In the diaspora, this inevitably leads to frustration as this worldview does nothing more than further segregate Muslims, heighten their sense of seclusion and disenfranchisement, and limit their opportunities in other fields or jobs.

The worldview this identity encompasses also turns perceived discrimination into real hostility between in and out group members, as escalating identification with the religious identity translates into higher levels of outward hostility. The final step to adopting violence may result from the inability of the religious identity to immediately fulfill its promise—status elevation—and thus encourages some to adopt violence as a means to effect change faster. The final step of dehumanizing the out-group to legitimize the use of violence against them is made easier by religious understandings that view them as immoral aggressors; the strategies for which constitute the cornerstone of Jihadist propaganda and indoctrination processes. Further studies are needed to explain the connection between demonizing and dehumanizing as this is arguably the main difference in outlook between extremists and violent extremists.

Conclusion

Studies on homegrown radicalization show that identity is an important element in the process. The main views on identity in the literature suggest that one of the main causes of radicalization is an identity crisis that is triggered by a handful of exogenous factors, of which a perceived threat to religious identity is key.

Building on a summary of the main schools of thought on identity and radicalization as per terrorism studies literature, social identity theory (SIT) was used in the paper to both expand on and challenge some of the underlying assumptions and findings on the topic. Findings from SIT suggest that identities are not only driven by social categories (i.e. religion or nationality), but are also negotiated and redefined on the community level. On the one hand, identities are formed in response to contextual and social stimuli and cues. On the other, the cognitive frameworks that define the various groups and networks in which the individual interacts have a significant impact on what s/he perceives, as well as consequent behavior. Of utmost importance to human beings is that the groups they belong to furnish them with a positive sense of self. Furthermore, the availability of groups perceived to possess a “higher status” in society (for example those related more to majority categories in society) typically encourage efforts by members from lower status groups (i.e. minority group members) to pass into them.

Findings from SIT lend support to some of the views in identity discourse in studies on radicalization, however they also outline a number of flawed assumptions that require further

research. Amongst these is the prevailing assumption that religious identities for European Muslims are *ipso facto* the most salient, and will inevitably lead to defensive behavior that is more easily manipulated by extremists when threatened. An overview of the literature on European Muslims, as well as threat and social identities, lends little support to this assumption. Similarly, the view that identity crises are a result of tension between two weak identities fails to account for how European Muslims manage their multiple identities, for example, their religious and national identities.

Studies on radicalization have typically focused on extremists and/or *illegal* radical organizations that promote extremist views without taking into consideration the much larger spectrum of *legal* Islamist organizations that share similar worldviews. The assumption is that, because they condemn violence, such organizations should not be discounted as legitimate Islamic fronts, and can perhaps assist in countering violent Islamic extremism. This paper has attempted to begin exploring some of the subtler, non-violent ways those Islamist organizations and NGOs may actually be contributing to the normative environment that allows radical ideas and behaviors to flourish. Although not empirically tested, SIT highlights a handful of identity processes that can aid in understanding the various ways that identities can be radicalized. Crucial to this theory is the human, and more importantly, group/community level factor and how it contributes to the identity formation/transformation process.

There are a number of actors that exert influence on European Muslims, and this paper has offered a humble exploration of the effect of European Islamism, as enshrined in legal “Islamic” institutions and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), on Muslim identity. The preliminary conclusions find that the formal recognition of many of these NGOs by the state not only grants credibility to, but also further entrenches Islamist ideology into the consciousness of European Muslims.

These NGOs institutionalize and champion a collective “Islamic” social identity that suppresses individual identity formation and expression, instead promoting a collective identity grounded in extremist narratives/rhetoric. This social identity is not solely premised on religion, but is shaped in a manner that reflects the rejectionist nature of Islamist ideology and promotes the salience of exclusionist religious identity attributes to the detriment of other identity attributes.¹⁰¹ The more pervasive these cognitive frameworks become as a frame of reference for Muslims, the less able they are to pass into or else retain other group memberships and social identities. Thus the normal coping mechanisms that Muslim members of European societies may resort to if faced with discrimination, or else the feeling of belonging to a stigmatized social category, are intentionally diminished by the existence of such organizations and social movements that religiously de-sanctify interacting with the ‘other.’

From this perspective, radicalization can be understood as a process of first fostering an increase in religious awareness and then manipulating this awareness for political ends. Coupled with a steady demonization of other social identities (for example, ‘Britishness’), Muslims are steadily radicalized as religious frameworks—perceived and real—belonging to their Islamic social

¹⁰¹ See related discussion on fundamentalist ‘value monism’ in Sara Savage, “Four Lessons from the Study of Fundamentalism and Psychology of Religion,” *Journal of Strategic Security* 4:4 (2011), 141, available at: <http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/jss/vol4/iss4/7/>.

identity become dominant frames of reference in daily interactions. These frameworks result in further seclusion, a heightened perception of discrimination and injustice. The adoption of violence/becoming a *violent* Islamic extremist is understood as lying at the very end of the suggested trajectory.

The active search for extremist ideologies as alternatives is not an immediate outcome of identity crises. Rather, there exist within societies external sources of influence that may contribute to making immigrants more prone to adopting extremist means and methods. As Moghaddam suggests in his “Staircase to Terrorism” model of radicalization, “It is conditions on the ground floor that lead to terrorism [...] Only by reforming conditions on the ground floor can societies end terrorism.”¹⁰² In Moghaddam’s “ground floor,” it is the perceptions of individuals, and what shapes them, that provide the foundation for violent radicalization. Further research on the influence of community-level networks and groups in shaping identity and its constituent cognitive elements thus holds much promise for adding to the discourse on radicalization.

¹⁰² Fathali M. Moghaddam, “The Staircase to Terrorism,” *American Psychologist* 60:2 (2005): 166-67.