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The Islamic State and terrorism: inner working of ISIL related to the role of *foreign fighters*

SERGIO SALAZAR VILLAMARÍN

Abstract

The Islamic State (IS) is one of the most deadly terrorist organizations completely different to the many ones existing nowadays. Its difference relies on the idea of achieving a world-wide “Caliphate”, meaning an organized self-productive institution ruled by Shar’ia Law as its political and religious code to govern, looking towards to be considered as a structured state. However, the purpose of this paper is to analyze the role of Foreign Fighters, which has developed into one of its most important elements in order to spread a new wave of terrorist attacks around the world.

The main idea of the article is an attempt to answer a particular question: by the analysis of the profile of Foreign Fighters and the modus operandi of the attacks, Does IS performs its terrorist attacks as organized cells, as self independent lone-wolfs or by the new procedure known as zombies supervised by a Command Control Body? Or the Islamic State’s propaganda is the only trigger needed to perform such violent outbreaks anywhere, at any time?

Keywords

Islamic State, Foreign Fighters, Radicalization, Europe’s terrorist Attacks, IS Recruitment, IS Modus Operandi

1. Understanding the Radicalization Process within IS Foreign Fighters

Nowadays, the world is facing countless problems in different scales. Many of these issues had been developing through many years of wrong actions and avoidable political, economic or military decisions. This essay is aimed to analyze a particular outcome of a conjunction between military/political actions taken by strong actors, which are not necessary to be mentioned, and had bring the Middle East, as the principal scenario for the birth of what we know today as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) or simply: the Islamic State (IS).

Nonetheless, our interest will be focused in analyzing one of ISIL main weapons: the Foreign Fighters Phenomenon. The concept of Foreign Fight-

ers has not a universal definition per se, however as the composition of the concept arise, it can be stated that refers to individuals who gets involved in a conflict, which is not developed in their own country. Therefore, the reasons to joining this fight can be different, nonetheless it can be categorized in two major groups: first is related to certain ties with local fighters through “pre-existing connections or friendship gangs”¹. In other words, is a matter of transforming old costumes from former groups that were involved in illicit activities such as drug trafficking, delinquency with no future at all, into a *mujahedeen group* defending and pursuing a cause.²

On the other hand, a particularly group of young people, who had always felt misunderstood, underestimated, surviving with difficulties faced in their daily life, plus permanently feeling excluded and with lack of opportunities within their societies. These fragile groups are becoming more solitary and isolated, looking for a place to belong, a space where they can embrace a purpose of living, a cause. This behavior is developing into a mixture of feelings, where the final outcome is anger.³ Therefore, one of the motors driving both groups to decide their commitment to the fight is merely based on exploiting their necessity to feel connected or belonging to a cause, where their lives can provide significance about their purpose or their duty in the society.

As it can be seem, these patterns share a social background as one of its main conjunctions, therefore the analysis of this behaviors were under the loop of the process known as *Radicalization*. This concept has been formally addressed after the 9/11 attacks, in order to understand the process which individuals change their behavior and especially, understanding the consequences of this shift. The main focus to analyze was why individuals living mainly in European societies, decide to embrace violent activities as their way to expression this “anger” which was developed during the process.⁴ Through the development of this new threat, it could be expected that the first way to address the issue was to collect information of possible suspects turning into “radicals”, in order to elaborate a general profile, which could help to identify any clue before the fulfillment of their tasks.

While going deep into the process of *Radicalization*, it is necessary to understand its first step, which I would like to call **Profile Analysis**. During

¹Rik Coolsaet. Egmont Paper 81: *Facing the Fourth Foreign Fighter Wave, What drives Europeans to Syria and to Islamic State? Insights from the Belgian Case*. Pp 3.

²Rik Coolsaet. Egmont Paper 81: *Facing the Fourth Foreign Fighter Wave, What drives Europeans to Syria and to Islamic State? Insights from the Belgian Case*. Pp 3.

³Rik Coolsaet. Egmont Paper 81: *Facing the Fourth Foreign Fighter Wave, What drives Europeans to Syria and to Islamic State? Insights from the Belgian Case*. Pp 3.

⁴Rik Coolsaet. “Al Radicalization is Local” *The Genesis and Drawbacks of an elusive concept*. Pp 3.

the development of the post 9/11 attacks, the counterterrorism policies lead by Belgium and Netherlands, were focus on the development of a general profile system, which would help to analyze the behavior of possible attackers. The principal shift towards to the analysis of developing a profile for the suspects was the main difference between the perpetrators in the U.S (attacks made by foreigners, after a period of carefully planning and financing) and the attacks in London and Madrid (made by people grown within European societies, from migrant communities settled decades before).⁵

One of the first attempts to elaborate these profiles, were developed by the counterterrorism officials in Belgium shortly after September 2001, once taking into consideration the “anger behavior” of young Moroccan students in France. This social expression was now under surveillance by Belgian and Dutch Intelligence Services, especially by the latter in the reason that they had been watching closely particular cases of young Dutchmen recruitment by what is described as “fundamental Muslims” mainly from abroad. The ages of the youngsters oscillated between 18 to 31, most of them Netherland nationals with Moroccan origins.⁶

The conclusions of the studies were drafted in a report, which mainly summarize and matches the characteristics of the second group: young people feeling completely lacked from comprehension, in an identity and in a social level as well. For them, this visualization portrayed by radical Islam faith brought them what their societies did not offer: confidence, closeness among them and especially, a purpose to find their identity. However, the most important fact from this report is the feeling from these youngsters to be involve in a fight between right and wrong, which at the end results as complete commitment to their actions.⁷

Another very important outcome from this report relies on the importance to understand two main things: first of all, that *Radicalization* is a complex and very long process, which aims particularly the involvement of the individual to join and fight in the *Jihad*. By the other hand, is also the first time that instead of only focusing on the group joining to this process, there is a brief analysis of the role of the “Recruiter” as a matter of fact, the role of this individual becomes a key factor in order to achieve the commitment of the group into the cause. Is the one, which has to play along with tons of patience and

⁵Rik Coolsaet. “Al Radicalization is Local” *The Genesis and Drawbacks of an elusive concept. The Genesis of a Concept (2001-2004)* Pp 5.

⁶Rik Coolsaet. “Al Radicalization is Local” *The Genesis and Drawbacks of an elusive concept. The Genesis of a Concept (2001-2004)* Pp 7.

⁷Rik Coolsaet. “Al Radicalization is Local” *The Genesis and Drawbacks of an elusive concept. The Genesis of a Concept (2001-2004)* Pp 8.

psychological manipulation towards convincing the fragile group of youngsters into fulfilling their tasks in this new journey acquired.⁸

Nonetheless, after the development of the 2004 terrorist bombing attacks in Madrid, the *Profile Analysis* needed to wide its scoop into a deeper and more structured investigation. The consideration into local groups of people engaging into violent behaviors towards especially to western societies, developed many concerns about the analysis for preventing further attacks, meaning that was not only necessary to focus into a Profile Analysis, but into understanding the reasons of what was causing particular group of people to join and accept this ideals as well.

This new feature was denominated as “home-grown”, and it was especially emerged after the 2003 US invasion to Iraq, which helped to fuel once more anti-western feeling among locals but it widespread to migrant communities in Europe, particularly Muslim. This phenomenon was a complete shift towards in how the radicalization process took shape. This new awakening of hate against foreign invasion in Iraq, trigger many people to join the view of radical Islam thought but the message was not necessary to join the fight with direct involvement, there were no necessary to use former soldiers to gather groups and brainwash the communities. The former connections, and the importance of the unity among people sharing the radical view of Islam in some of these communities were already present.⁹ Therefore, it was time to take into consideration many other layers, especially to understand the nature and the principal cause of this path of radicalization.

The new approach of studying *Radicalization* was now concern about the main causes that might turn a certain individual against the society. It was labeled as “root-causes” and it was linked most of all due to social factors such as poverty, inequity, lack of opportunities and general frustration. Within the world of Terrorism Analysis, these characteristics are known as part of the *Strain Theory*, which emphasizes that terrorist mobilization might be the response from a group of people living under these conditions.¹⁰ Once more, it can be seemed that the common issue regarding the understanding of the process of radicalization tends to be related to a kind of social discrimination, or at least, a feeling from it.

From a personal point of view, the process of understanding the root causes of the dilemma is a key factor in order to address the proper way to devel-

⁸Rik Coolsaet. “Al Radicalization is Local” *The Genesis and Drawbacks of an elusive concept. The Genesis of a Concept (2001-2004)* Pp 8.

⁹Rik Coolsaet. “Al Radicalization is Local” *The Genesis and Drawbacks of an elusive concept. The Genesis of a Concept (2001-2004)* Pp 9.

¹⁰Peter Neumann, Brooke Rogers. *Recruitment and Mobilization for the Islamist Movement in Europe. Introduction: Social Movements Theory.* Pp 7.

op counterterrorism effective policies. In order to understand why a certain group of individuals are convinced to join violent acts in order to be listened is a sign of addressing a necessity as soon as possible. This do not mean that it can stop the problem immediately, whoever it can create relieve and portrayed a different view especially to the problematic of youngsters been more and more attractive to radical ideals in order to express the inconformity with the system.

Reaching up to close this first topic, a possible question might surface: *is there any particular profiling system to point out if an individual is involved into this process?* Well, this had become a very sensitive subject since it can be dealing with physical appearances that in fact will be dealing with discrimination, nonetheless people changing habits and behaviors might be a hint towards developing a comprehensive study into profiling possible subjects.

Some of these features are related to exceeded long of the beard (common lengths do not exceed the three fingers measure), or the shortness of their hair cut, use of the *Jelaba (Traditional Islamic Dress)* or a form of wider pants up to the ankles along with sometimes the use of traditional hat and a particularly rejection to use shorts or engage in sport activities.¹¹

However, there is a much important fact rather than physical appearances and is to take into consideration the changes within the individuals behavior. Per instance, the individual takes extraordinary attention to avoid places where alcohol consumption is permitted, stop smoking or even listening to music. Its social life is less and less reduced evading public places and especially, shifting their behavior with women even to stop looking at them.¹²

Individuals start to change its behavior even with their close ones. They would like their family or closest friends to understand its new point of view. The relation toward its family (especially women) would turn into obligates them to cover their bodies when they want to go outside or even to avoid been around when male visits are at home. This behavior becomes some intrinsic that sometimes individuals break communication with people that do not approve its new point of view.¹³

These features come along with many other aspects regarding political and religious expressions, which somehow can differ with a common view of the topics, especially when the individual is concentrated in blaming all of Muslim's suffering to the West, embracing the use of violence or approval

¹¹ Javier Jordan, Fernando M. Mañas. *External Signs of Radicalization and Jihadist Militancy. Anthena Intelligence Journal Vol 2 N°1. Individual Indications: Physical Appearances.* Pp 2-3.

¹² Javier Jordan, Fernando M. Mañas. *External Signs of Radicalization and Jihadist Militancy. Anthena Intelligence Journal Vol 2 N°1. Individual Indications: Individual Behavior.* Pp 4.

¹³ Javier Jordan, Fernando M. Mañas. *External Signs of Radicalization and Jihadist Militancy. Anthena Intelligence Journal Vol 2 N°1. Individual Indications: Individual Behavior.* Pp 4.

of any fierce reaction as a form of self-defense. Such behavior could be connected along with interests in acknowledging and reading information from jihadist sources (which might not be expressed openly) however with the use of Internet, is nowadays a useful tool to collect any kind of material in relation to it.¹⁴

It needs to be clear that many of these features are not officially labeled as profiling possible radicals, whoever it helps in order to understand or analyze individuals towards comparing many subjects, which had been involved in or had been suspects to be joining terrorist activities. Counterterrorism organizations are trying to develop better and reliable guidelines in order to address the analysis of human behavior as primarily, therefore the importance taken into the comprehension of “root-causes” such as the environment surrounding individuals had been up leading the research in the last years.

2. Foreign fighters and the islamic state

The phenomenon of Foreign Fighters is the most interesting topic regarding the analysis of the Islamic State. The purpose of this section is to review the figures of Foreign Fighters joining the war on Syria and especially, to understand why the message from terrorist organizations such as the Islamic State is so attractive to many people from all over the world. However is also very important to understand the role of Foreign Fighters returning to the countries where they grew up (Europe in this case), in order to be involved in any violent activities, particularly related in terrorist attacks.

According to The Soufan Group, by 2014 the first numbers related to foreign fighters joining the war in Syria were 12,000 from at least 81 countries, where around 3,000 of them belong to Western states.¹⁵ There are 3 important terrorist groups, which benefit from the flow of people joining the war in Syria: Ahrar al-Sham, Jabhat al-Nusra and The Islamic State, with the share characteristic of being founded by Al-Qaeda members. These groups are known to be well financed, better organized and most of all, very inclusive to new recruits.¹⁶

There are many reasons why Foreign Fighters decide to join the terrorist groups as first option. One of them is that most of these groups do not have a

¹⁴ Javier Jordan, Fernando M. Mañas. *External Signs of Radicalization and Jihadist Militancy*. Anthena Intelligence Journal Vol 2 N°1. *Individual Indications: Individual Behavior*. Pp 5.

¹⁵ Richard Barret Senior Vice President of The Soufan Group. *Foreign Fighters in Syria. Key Findings*. Pp 6.

¹⁶ Richard Barret Senior Vice President of The Soufan Group. *Foreign Fighters in Syria. Key Findings*. Pp 6.

problem managing the language and skills; it is not necessary to speak Arabic or not having any military experience, only the willing to be committed to the terrorist groups ideals. By the other hand, while Foreign Fighters start its journey, among the first people they met are Jihadi fighters, which become their guides and mentors making it easier their involvement to Jihadi cause.¹⁷

Nonetheless, the numbers of Foreign Fighters had been increasing since 2014, from 27,000 to 31,000 involving people from 86 countries.¹⁸ The top 3 countries in 2014 were: Tunisia (around 3,000 people), Saudi Arabia (2,500 people) and Morocco (around 1,500).¹⁹ However, by the year 2015, it can be seen what was expressed before regarding the increase in the number of individuals joining the war and a sudden change: Tunisia had increased its numbers up to 6,000 people, then Saudi Arabia had maintain its figures and Russia had taken the third place with 2,400 people.²⁰

The main difference that this phenomenon had brought to the scenario of analysis is the use of social media as its main tool to attract many recruiters as it can. Applications such as Twitter or Facebook had proven to be very effective to widespread IS violent ideology and its message to the world. By spreading propaganda, testimonials from former fighters, or even extreme messages of violence (beheadings, public executions), the group had got the attention from many other supporters as fundraisers as well in order to welcome everyone who shares its views.²¹

Many of these foreigners might also like to join these groups in the reason of having already a contact or particularly by checking the experiences shared by these individuals on the media. Various new members shared their life under the Islamic State, portraying a simple life with optimistic outcomes surrounded by acceptance, friendship and especially, a purpose in their lives, especially if these actions are surrounded by courageousness and bravery.²² Despite the other kind of propaganda related to violence, many foreigners are willing to take the risk of joining especially due to the last statement, since

¹⁷ Richard Barret Senior Vice President of The Soufan Group. *Foreign Fighters in Syria. Introduction*. Pp 10.

¹⁸ The Soufan Group. *Foreign Fighters An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq. Key Findings*. Pp 4.

¹⁹ Richard Barret, Senior Vice President of the Soufan Group. *Foreign Fighters in Syria*. Pp13.

²⁰ The Soufan Group. *Foreign Fighters: An Update Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq*. Pp 5.

²¹ Richard Barret Senior Vice President of The Soufan Group. *Foreign Fighters in Syria. Key Findings*. Pp 7.

²² Richard Barret Senior Vice President of The Soufan Group. *Foreign Fighters in Syria. Who Goes*. Pp 17.

they are people living vulnerable realities at their home places, looking for a meaning in their lives.

Another significant characteristic about Foreign Fighters regards on the average age of the people involve in this phenomenon. It can be expressed that most of the individuals joining the war on Syria are mainly between 18 to 29 years old. To cite an example, there is a testimonial from Ahrar al-Sham member, who described a Swedish couple arrival in 2014 because of the call of *Jihad*. He was 22 years old converted to Islam and his wife was 21, both of them were provided with guns and accepted in the group.²³

As it can be seen, the terrorist organizations are by far not necessarily interested in military experiences or expertise, the important thing is the willingness from the foreigner to join the ideals and help to the struggle. For most of these young individuals, experience is gained by time and by involvement into the conflict. From this assumption is what makes the Foreign Fighters very interesting and at the same time very dangerous people, in the reason that there is not prove until now, how much emotional damage they had been exposed to after this sort of war experiences.

Therefore, this phenomenon had brought many concerns especially to Western societies in the reason that many of their nationals involved in these journeys might return to their countries, transformed into complete different individuals as they once were. This assumption is commonly known as “blowback effect” and it means that these violent experiences would be taken back to their countries of origin, becoming a possible trigger to be getting in contact with terrorist activities.²⁴

According to some scholars, this effect should be analyzed individually in the reason that there is not enough evidence to prove that all of the Foreign Fighters returnees are engage in terrorist activities, nonetheless a specific case such as the gunman that killed 4 people at the Jewish Museum in Brussels, on May 2014. This individual belonged to a jihadist group from France and it was proved that he went to Syria for about a year, to fight among the Islamic State.²⁵

It has to be taken into consideration that some of the returnees Foreign Fighters from Syria, were already European citizens with Middle Eastern

²³ Richard Barret Senior Vice President of The Soufan Group. *Foreign Fighters in Syria. Who Goes*. Pp 16.

²⁴ Lorenzo Vidino. *New (and old) Patterns of Jihadism: Al-Qa'ida, The Islamic State and Beyond. Chapter 2: European Jihadist in Syria: profiles, travel patterns and governmental responses*. Unprecedented Numbers and Fears. Pp 31.

²⁵ Lorenzo Vidino. *New (and old) Patterns of Jihadism: Al-Qa'ida, The Islamic State and Beyond. Chapter 2: European Jihadist in Syria: profiles, travel patterns and governmental responses*. Unprecedented Numbers and Fears. Pp 33.

origins, therefore they had been living in certain communities for long time. It means that since this phenomenon had appeared and had got many attention about its dynamics, analysis had also been interested to point out possible places where *Radicalization* might occur more easily than anywhere else.

The most interest fact about these places is that are widespread within different countries some of them pretty new such as the Lisleby District of Fredrikstad in Norway, and other very commonly known as principal spaces for promoting *Radicalization* among its residents such as: Bizerte, Ben Gardane (Tunisia), Derna (Libya), Pankisi Gorge (Georgia) and the Molenbeek District in Brussels (Belgium).²⁶

3. Different roles within the islamic state

The Islamic State had become more and more attractive to the world in accordance to the flows of people joining the group as it can be seen in the later paragraphs. Linked to that information, it is necessary to understand how IS necessities in recruitment are hierarchized and how the group will be benefit from the people arriving to its territory. From a personal point of view, IS have three pillars in which their organizational structure had prevail until now: first, the importance of well provided military expertise and experiences. Second, a strong ideological organized Sharia Council (shaping the laws and behaviors of its individuals living within) and third the use of Media tools, in order to recruit not only potential soldiers but neutral personal as well, to address many civilian fronts (medicine, engineering, administration and particularly, women).

While discussing the phenomenon of Foreign Fighters is inevitable to link the attraction to its military expertise and experiences. The Islamic State had demonstrated to be a well equipped and managed military structure especially during its first year of expansion in 2014. This strength demonstrated from the beginning from the so called *Caliphate* had been one of the main reasons why many people is attracted to the idea of joining a powerful organization which was commanded in this field by a former Georgian fighter called Omar al-Shishani (died in July 2016)²⁷. Despite this recently low hit to IS, one of the main characteristics from the military personal is its commitment, enthusiasm and fearless behavior in order to display their violence

²⁶The Soufan Group. *Foreign Fighters An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq. Hotbeds of Recruitment*. Pp 10.

²⁷Roland Oliphant, Josie Ensor. "Isil admits minister of war Omar al-Shishani killed" <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/07/14/islamic-state-admit-minister-of-war-omar-al-shishani-killed/>

during their attacks. Sum up to a military strategy based on the use of terrorist attacks such as parked bomb vehicles and suicide bombings, plus the advertising through the media by issuing this kind of operations under reports or videos, had been one of the most important tools to get attention from possible recruits all over the world as well other organizations in order to obtain monetary funds to continue its operations.²⁸

While IS continued expanding, many soldiers were left behind in order to provide security measures among the new territories. In order to provide a total securitization of the held areas IS combine military presence with the second pillar: the spread of Sharia Law. *The Sharia Council* plays a key role in this action, especially by the establishment of *Sharia police force*, particularly in charge of supervising the population behavior under Islamic costumes and practices. To provide legitimacy of the proper religious behavior the Islamic State had recruited prominent preachers and thinkers supporting the spread of the ideology portrayed, especially Saudi nationals entirely linked to Salafism preaching and practice such as Abu Human Bakr Bin Abdul Aziz al Athari, who was expelled from Bahrain in the reason of its radical discoursing.²⁹

The third pillar of IS attracting Foreign Fighters to its call is related to important use of the Media. The use of this tool had not been always addressed, as the main channel to spread the group's ideology, though is also the main tool for attraction to potential recruits in many different levels. IS wanted to portray a reliable salafist anti western ideal government looking for more local acceptance by providing another different approach from the constant corruption and weak authority from the local governments.³⁰ By this statement, its clear that salafist supporters could play a key role especially in the local administration of conquered lands which could create a considerable movement among the supporters in the majority of the population (Sunni) towards the local control from the Assad Regime (Shi'as).

Many examples can be described within what I would like to label, as "IS Social Recruitment": *Dabiq Magazine*, founded by German citizen called Abu Talha al-Amani, after having a brief military experience with IS he decided to step down and put all of his effort in spreading IS official propaganda through Media.³¹ Another practical example to describe how IS wants to be portrayed as a state is by recruiting people of expertise in social necessities, such as providing a reliable Health Care sector. Dr. Abu Yousef, an Australian

²⁸ Richard Barret. *The Islamic State. Military Operations*. Pp 35-37.

²⁹ Richard Barret. *The Islamic State. Structure*. Pp 30.

³⁰ Richard Barret. *The Islamic State. Administrative Operations*. Pp 41.

³¹ Marco Arnaboldi, Lorenzo Vidino. *Twitter and Jihad: The Communication Strategy of IS. Part III: The Objectives of the Propaganda. The Caliphate, Social Media, and Swarms in Europe: The Appeal of IS Propaganda to 'Would Be' European Jihadist*. Pp 130.

physician had joined a medical team in Raqqah (Syria), city under controlled by the Islamic State. During his interview, he expressed its commitment to “join the jihad and help the Muslim community in the area that he can, which is medical field”³².

What caught much attention from Foreign Fighters roles into the Islamic State is the number of females, especially from European origins, which are willing to join the call for *Jihad*. One of the most common patterns of women joining the Islamic State is by the marriage arrangement to a *mujahedeen*, especially after meeting and preparing everything by the Internet. Nevertheless, there were particular scenarios where the female presence was also related directly in the conflict, such as two girls from Vienna (Bosnian origins) with 15 and 16 years old, leaving their homes in order to reach Syria, posting by social media the use of *niqab* along carrying weapons.³³

4. Europe’s terrorist attacks linked to foreign fighters

Between 2015 and 2016, Europe had been one of the most vulnerable targets to terrorist attacks, especially by the so-called *Islamic State*. The novelty related to the November 13th 2015 Paris Attack and the March 22nd Brussels Attack, is that both situations were perfectly planned and coordinated by a group of supporters to IS, which is completely the worst menace to European Intelligence Services. To provide a general overview of the chaotic situation, Paris suffered 6 to 7 coordinated attacks between the State of France, 10th and 11th District of the city. As a result, the total amount of victims of the attack was 130 dead and around 300 people injured, within around 100 of them in critical conditions.³⁴

Regarding the Brussels Attack, two explosions occurred within the Departures area at Zaventem Airport and a third explosion blasted at Maelbeek Subway station, once again with extreme coordination and organization. The final outcome of these terrible attacks was 31 people killed by the explosions between the airport and the subway station, along with more than 270 injured

³² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Xh6LRZV0I0> Australian doctor join IS in Raqqah/Syria.

³³ Lorenzo Vidino. *New (and old) Patterns of Jihadism: Al-Qa’ida, The Islamic State and Beyond. Chapter 2: European Jihadist in Syria: profiles, travel patterns and governmental responses. Who are the European foreign fighters?* Pp 34.

³⁴ BBC. “Paris Attacks: What happened on the night”. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34818994>

in both attacks.³⁵ Europe was now facing one of the most terrible scenarios related to terrorist attacks since the once taken place in Madrid in 2004. The new ways of proper intelligence cooperation and shared information might be the path to understand how these terrible situations can be stopped.

By analyzing the Paris Attack scenes, an abandoned black Volkswagen near the Bataclan theatre was linked to a Belgian national named Salah Abdeslam, who became the first prime suspect in pursuit.³⁶ However, during the examination of evidence, the security forces also discovered that another suspect was even more important to be found, his name was Abdelhamid Abaaoud, who was under surveillance radar since the uncovered plot of an IS cell in Verviers (East Belgium) in January 2016, where after a fierce battle between the police and suspects of terrorist activities, Abaaoud became a wanted extremist by the police by the allegation of being the head of this terrorist cell. He was a Belgian national, with origins from Morocco who spent sometime in Syria and appeared in IS videos, driving a truck transporting mutilated bodies supposedly to a mass grave.³⁷ All the connections to be referred as the “mastermind” of the Paris Attacks were later confirm by an interview made by *Dabiq Magazine*, where Abaaoud reveals how he was able to plan several attacks under the “local intelligence services nose” by travelling back to Belgium with two other jihadists (the ones killed in Verviers raid) obtaining weapons, hiding places and preparing ways to expand the fear within the European societies.³⁸

On November 18th 2015, after a couple of days later of the Paris Attacks, the intelligence services organized a raid in the Saint Denis neighborhood in northern Paris. After a fierce gun battle, the suspects were finally eliminated. Authorities confirmed the main target of the operation was Abdelhamid Abaaoud, the principal organizer of the Paris attacks, along with his cousin Hasna Ait Boulahcen and a third individual which was connected to the Paris

³⁵ Claire Phipps. The Guardian. “Brussels bombings: what we know so far”. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/23/brussels-bombings-what-we-know-so-far>

³⁶ Ben Farmer, Telegraph Staff. “Who is Salah Abdeslam and who were the Paris terrorists? Everything we know about the Isil attackers.” <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/france/11996120/Paris-attack-what-we-know-about-the-suspects.html>

³⁷ Joss Halliday, Jonathan Bucks. “Abdelhamid Abaaoud: what we know about Paris attacks mastermind”. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/nov/16/abdelhamid-abaaoud-suspected-mastermind-of-paris-terror-attacks>

³⁸ Joss Halliday, Jonathan Bucks. “Abdelhamid Abaaoud: what we know about Paris attacks mastermind”. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/nov/16/abdelhamid-abaaoud-suspected-mastermind-of-paris-terror-attacks>

Attack by fingerprints founded in the abandoned car which was used for the shootings in the 10th and 11th District.³⁹

As investigations were developing, new data helped Intelligence Services to undercover the group behind the Paris Attacks. The main important facts to underline about this group relies on family connections (Salah's brother was the suicide bomber Comptoir Voltaire Café), a possible dangerous subject undermined by authorities named Omar Ismail Mostafei, radicalized between 2010-2014, especially after his trip to Syria in 2013. Turkish authorities labeled him as a "possible terror suspect" notifying the French government in December 2014 and in June 2015, with no reply until after the attacks.⁴⁰ Abaaoud and Abdeslam share childhood friendship and both of them lived in Molenbeek neighborhood were on March 18th 2016, Salah Abdeslam was arrested after more than 4 months on the run since the Paris attacks.⁴¹

Authorities managed to connect both terrorist attacks by many of these facts, whoever one person of interest beside Salah Abdeslam and Abdelhamid Abaaoud, who was connected in both attacks was Najim Laachraoui. His fingerprints were recovered in the both attacks and he was the second suicide bomber identified in the Brussels airport.⁴² Along Laachraoui, another high profile suspect linking both attacks is Mohamed Abrini, detained in April 9th 2016 in Brussels. He was accused of being part in logistics activities related to the Paris attacks, especially by being seeing in surveillance videos with Salah Abdeslam days prior the Paris Attack, using a car, which was possible one of the vehicles used to help the attackers reach the Stade of France. In the other hand, he confessed that he was the person involved in the Brussels airport attack, who did not proceed to detonate the bomb and fled the scene.⁴³

However, new information had surfaced by November 2016, explaining that the principal suspect in connection with both attacks is "Abu Suleyman

³⁹The Guardian. "How the events of the St-Denis raid unfolded-a visual guide". <https://www.theguardian.com/world/ng-interactive/2015/nov/18/st-denis-raid-what-we-know-so-far-paris-attacks>

⁴⁰Ben Farmer, Telegraph Staff. "Who is Salah Abdeslam and who were the Paris terrorists? Everything we know about the Isil attackers." <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/france/11996120/Paris-attack-what-we-know-about-the-suspects.html>

⁴¹Ben Farmer, Telegraph Staff. "Who is Salah Abdeslam and who were the Paris terrorists? Everything we know about the Isil attackers." <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/france/11996120/Paris-attack-what-we-know-about-the-suspects.html>

⁴²Larry Buchanan, Hayeoun Park. "Uncovering the links between Paris and Brussels Attackers". <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/03/23/world/europe/how-the-brussels-and-paris-attackers-could-be-connected.html>

⁴³Larry Buchanan, Hayeoun Park. "Uncovering the links between Paris and Brussels Attackers". <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/03/23/world/europe/how-the-brussels-and-paris-attackers-could-be-connected.html>

al-Firansi”, former French soldier, born in Morocco as Abdelilah Himich. He had been pointed out by many IS defectors as the face of the *Amn al-Kharjee*, the external operations branch in charge of planning and carrying attacks in Europe. Firansi, defected the French Legion in 2010 and by 2011, he was arrested in Paris by cocaine possession. He was convicted to 5 years in prison by 2013, however he only served 5 months. By 2014, he managed to travel to Syria, where he joined Al-Qaeda before pledging alliance to the Islamic State.⁴⁴

5. Terrorist attacks modus operandi

The first approach is the commonly known *terrorist cells*. This is considered as the smallest component into a large and complex terrorist organization, it works as a group of individuals sharing a common goal, a common ideology, with an expertise in a specific role, supervised and guided by a command and control chain, demonstrating planning and coordination when the task is fulfilled.⁴⁵ These individuals are highly trained or have some previous knowledge into their specific roles (bomb making, guerilla tactics, logistics, weapons handling) becoming a well-organized group, which are only waiting for an order to perform their action.

After the detailed information about Paris and Brussels attacks, the main assumption is that according to proven links and connections with each other, these individuals were part of an *sleeping cell*, meaning that the group was organized and each of them had their specific roles (suicide bombers, gunmen, logistics). Usually the members of the group are deeply committed to the ideology and to the purpose, therefore these actions are taken to the last step, which is dying and causing as much casualties as they can.

The second approach is a very complex one especially to identify and prevent: *the lone wolf*. Completely opposite to *cells*, these individuals are self-independent and present no coordination at all by the time their attacks are performed. Usually they do not have any skill or expertise in any area (weapons, logistic, bomb making) and rely very much on improvisation, nothing sticks right up to a plan or to a coordinated action.⁴⁶ The *lone wolf attacks* represents a leaderless action, in the reason that the person involved in this

⁴⁴ Counter Extremism Project. “Abu Suleyman al-Firansi”. <https://www.counterextremism.com/extremists/abu-suleyman-al-firansi>

⁴⁵ Marco Lombardi. *Global Security: Terrorism and Organized Crime*. Lecture from Master in Middle Eastern Studies Program (2016), Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore.

⁴⁶ Marco Lombardi. *Global Security: Terrorism and Organized Crime*. Lecture from Master in Middle Eastern Studies Program (2016), Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore.

situation decides to take involvement only by portraying the ideology or a certain cause, which it thinks it represents. Most of the time, the representatives of the ideology or the cause are not aware of the support carried by the attacker until it is proven, mainly by the attacker itself.⁴⁷

Finally, the last approach is a concept recently developed named *zombie approach*. The word *zombie* comes from the cyber domain vocabulary meaning an infected computer seems apparently normal until an external stimulus activates the virus targeting a specific objective. Therefore, the *zombie approach* is related to individuals with expertise and trained to fight, which are already socially connected in their societies making them easily blend into the population, linked with the cause or the ideology (mainly driven by sentimentalism) waiting for a signal in order to engage the attack.⁴⁸

6. Is there a command control body behind the organization of the attacks?

Finally, the analysis of the terrorist attacks and its approaches would help the investigation to understand the following question: is there a Command Control Body within the Islamic State, which is completely in charge to arrange any attacks or plots to conduct terrorist attacks worldwide, by the use of *terrorist cells*, *lone-wolf attacks* or *zombie approach*? Or the Islamic State's propaganda is the only trigger needed to perform such violent outbreaks anywhere at any time? After the review of the information presented in this paper, it can be expressed that the answer could be a combination of both assumptions.

One of the assumptions refers to an organizational body, which is in charge of coordinating the entire topic related to Foreign Fighters, especially related to its task as tools for terrorist attacks. The Islamic State Organizational Chart portrays a Fighters Assistance Council, which is in charge of providing aid to these individuals, nonetheless it is not clear specifically what kind of support the Islamic State had delivered either economically, militarily or ideologically.⁴⁹ According to Europol Public Information, Intelligence services believe

⁴⁷ William E. Dyson. *Terrorism: An Investigator's Handbook. Section I: The natures of terrorism and the threats it presents. Chapter 2: Defining, Delineating and Dissecting Terrorism*. Pp 35.

⁴⁸ Marco Lombardi. *Global Security: Terrorism and Organized Crime*. Lecture from Master in Middle Eastern Studies Program (2016), Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore.

⁴⁹ Nick Thompson, Richard Allen Green, Inez Torre. "ISIS: everything you need to know about the rise of the militant group". <http://edition.cnn.com/interactive/2014/09/world/isis-explained/>

that IS managed to develop an “external actions command trained for *Special Forces style* operations abroad” targeting the European Union particularly.⁵⁰

Within this first assumption, it is necessary to underline that IS prefers to use a n already assembled local *terrorist cells* with the particular difference of being managed by an individual who might received training in Syria, however is not always necessary.⁵¹ In other words, IS relies on assembled groups commanded by a leader with direct involvement with IS (the case of Paris attackers) creating an easier scenario to control the individuals, which are already prepared to engage into an attack. As it was expressed in the previous chapter, these individuals share common expertise such as weaponry handling and explosives managing.

Being part of a local assembled terrorist group usually means being part of local society, and this is linked directly to the *zombie approach*. At least one individual would be under this category in the meaning of easily blending within their own society, establishing the necessary connections to clearly move around without raising any suspicion either from authorities or the public in general. The individual is completely free to plan, to prepare and to wait until the signal is displayed, the “call”, which becomes the green light to take any action.

Linked to this assumption of an “external action command” it can be expressed that IS authorities are not directly involved in the performance of the attacks from Syria. The blueprints or the main ideas of plots and assaults might be developed in Syria; nonetheless the game changer relies on trusting local leaders to proceed with free tactical coordination about how, when and where to deliver the attacks, supporting the Islamic State strongest signature: “strikes at will, at any time and almost at any chosen target.”⁵²

By the other hand, in terms of analyzing *lone-wolf attacks* it is important to address one of IS top officials and main supporters of the approach: Abu Muhammad al-Adnani (killed on August 30th 2016). He was identified as the N°2 leader within IS structure, where he was one of its main charismatic propagandist, famously known by a video posted in September 2014 where he stressed the importance to attack any disbeliever engaging in the war against IS, by “killing them in any way or manner (...) Smash his head with a rock,

⁵⁰ Europol Public Information. *Changes in modus operandi of Islamic State terrorist attacks. Terrorist Involved*. Pp 5.

⁵¹ Europol Public Information. *Changes in modus operandi of Islamic State terrorist attacks. Terrorist Involved*. Pp 5.

⁵² Europol Public Information. *Changes in modus operandi of Islamic State terrorist attacks. Terrorist attacks / Target selection*. Pp 7.

or slaughter him with a knife, or run him over with a car (...).⁵³ By his statement, it is important to understand how IS embraced the idea of promoting *lone-wolf attacks* within their combatants rank, supporting and claiming any related actions to this approach. This is one of the main reasons why the Nice attacks was immediately related to the Islamic State, despite of any relevant connection proven until now.

Reaching up to this point, from a personal point of view, the second assumption (Ideology as the main trigger to provoke terrorist attacks) might be connected with the *lone-wolf approach*, in the reason that *lone-wolf attacks* does not necessary require any planning or structure in order to be done. The effort and the organization dedicated from the Islamic State to the spread of its variety of propaganda, relies on reaching every corner of the globe. The message is completely distributed among all of the population, and it is impossible to control all individuals beginning the path of radicalization, when most of the attention is dedicated to “people of interest” within the Intelligence apparatus.

Therefore, like it was expressed in the previous paragraphs the proper answer to the main question of this project, is a combination of both assumptions. The Islamic State managed to create an external command control body in order to coordinate and handle international attacks, as a main tool of spreading a physical message of its retrograde ideology, using primarily local *sleepers* (well organized, trained in weaponry and explosives) mostly supervised by individuals who were or are directly connected with top officials in Syrian territory, occupied by the Islamic State. People involved in these units are usually familiar with their environment, allowing them to easily proceed with their plans catching no attention, especially from authorities (therefore, is connected as well with the *zombie approach*).

On the other hand, the undeniable effective use of media in order to spread the radical message of violence portrayed by the Islamic State ideology, had also influenced many people in order to get engage in their declared worldwide *Jihad*, especially by performing *lone-wolf attacks*. The complex situation facing the analysis of *lone-wolf attacks* is its nature of unpredictable scenario, where the final outcome is even more complicated to understand, especially while evaluating the main reasons of the attack. The Islamic State had taken advantage of this situation, by claiming responsibility in many recent *lone-wolf attacks* (Orlando mass killing shootings, Wurzburg stabbing attack), linking this approach to IS modus operandi of terrorist attacks. None-

⁵³Robert Windrem, Tracy Connor. “ISIS says N° 2 Leader Abu Muhammad al-Adnani is Dead in Syria”. <http://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/isis-terror/isis-says-no-2-leader-mohammad-al-adnani-dead-n640171>

theless, particularly in the Nice attacks, there is no physical proof to link the attack with IS, despite their claiming of responsibility in the following days.

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