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## SEVEN

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# France

### *Joining Jihad and Joining the Army—A Comparison*

Elyamine Settoul

The series of attacks that occurred on French soil in 2015, along with the growing numbers of foreign fighters on their way to Syria, have made jihadist radicalization a top priority in the hierarchy of threats. With roughly 1,500 to 2,000 of its nationals involved, France is arguably the first supplier of foreign fighters in the West, and the fifth worldwide. While it remains mostly male in its composition, the phenomenon also encompasses women and families with children. Far from being restricted to socially marginalized immigrant youth, it also comprises a significant share of converts and individuals hailing from a wide range of social backgrounds (Kepel 2017; O. Roy 2017; Bakker 2006; Sageman 2004). Although a substantial portion originates from disadvantaged suburban areas, the social and geographic repartition of fighters actually points to a great diversity of origins. Daesh can boast of having recruited 25,000 to 30,000 fighters hailing from more than 90 different countries over the span of a few years (Lister 2015). The mass increase in the number of fighters has been greatly enabled by the geographical proximity of the Syrian military theater, which is easily reached by European nationals, but also by the sharp increase in communication abilities afforded by new digital tools and social networks. Grasping the scope of the phenomenon requires a thorough investigation into the strategies launched by the Islamic State organization. This chapter intends

to provide insights on radicalization processes as they unfold within the French context. In this regard, it should be noted that the French debate became quickly polarized on the issue of whether there was or was not a religious dimension to jihadism. For instance, Gilles Kepel argues that the phenomenon results first and foremost from the “radicalization of Islam.” He claims that the dynamics of jihadism fall in line with rigorist Islamic practices, such as Salafism (Kepel 2017). In this perspective, Salafism acts as the antechamber for jihadism, and the difference between the two is one of degree rather than kind. Conversely, the analysis provided by Olivier Roy refers to the “Islamization of radicalism.” He argues that jihadism is the only ideology of global protest against Western hegemony that is currently available. More than religion itself, it is nihilism and fascination with death that structure young jihadists’ sense of identity (O. Roy 2017). Moving beyond this debate, my investigation into the French case indicates that these dynamics actually coexist.

In this chapter, I start by providing a typology highlighting the diversity of jihadist actors’ profiles. Far from being a monolithic phenomenon, commitment to jihadism resembles a mosaic aggregating a wide range of actors whose motives and expectations vary significantly (Thomson 2014). The originality of my analysis lies in the comparison I draw between the rationales of jihadist commitment and those of military commitment in conventional armies. Perhaps counterintuitively, I hypothesize that the deeper motives underlying these two types of commitment are comparable on multiple levels. Both can be interpreted as attempts to (re)construct identity and overcome affective and/or narcissistic deficiencies. The comparison mostly relies upon data I collected during doctoral research on second-generation immigrant youth joining the army in France (Settoul 2012); interviews I conducted with jihadists’ families; and the literature on commitment to jihadism. The discussion is also informed by insights from military sociology. This enables me to address both the operational modes and the communication and recruitment strategies of these two social spaces, which are usually deemed to be worlds apart.

### The Mosaic of “Made in France” Jihadism

France is the West’s largest supplier of Daesh fighters (Soufan Group 2015, 12). Many attempts have been made to account for what appears to be a “French exception.” William McCants and Christopher Meserole argue, for instance, that the French *laïcité* (secularism) and the francophone politi-

cal culture in general are factors conducive to radicalization. The authors contend that the conjunction of an “aggressive” version of secularism (regulations on conspicuous religious symbols) along with widespread urbanization and mass unemployment provides highly fertile ground for such phenomena to emerge (McCants and Meserole 2016). While stimulating, their research presents a number of biases. First, it encompasses countries whose levels of Francophonie, political cultures, and public management of religion greatly differ. Second, upon taking a closer look at statistics, it appears that the ratio of the number of fighters over the total population is smaller in France than in other countries such as Sweden, Switzerland, and Denmark. The assertion that there is a “French exception” or a “Francophone exception” is therefore highly questionable.

The high number of French jihadists can probably best be explained by other factors. First, it should be emphasized that France is host to Europe’s largest Muslim population (Pew Research Center 2011). Whilst the share of converts engaged in radical militancy can at times be substantial, it is established that the majority of fighters who joined the Islamic State were raised in Muslim cultural heritage families (practicing or not). Consequently, the potential pool of French candidates to jihad is structurally larger than in most European countries. Another socio-political explanation pertains to what is commonly called “the *banlieues* [suburbs] predicament.” Although French jihadists display a great diversity of sociological and geographical origins, the bulk of the recruiting ground hails from disadvantaged urban areas (Beckouche 2015). Located at the periphery of most large cities in France, the *banlieues* are places of social marginalization, where inhabitants are the primary victims of discrimination in access to housing, employment, and in their relations to the police (Valfort 2015; Dubet 1987). Socially mixed when they were first built in the 1960s, French *banlieues* have progressively become ethnicized and ghettoized from the 1980s onward. In spite of numerous announcements made by political officials, who declare on a regular basis that they want to launch a “Marshall Plan for the *banlieues*,” public investment has never really met the challenges at hand. In these deprived neighborhoods, low voter turnouts also contribute to worsening inhabitants’ political marginalization. Such a lasting state of affairs has led to a rigidification of identities and a deepening rift between French people and “*banlieue* French people.” The situation is further aggravated by the depoliticized interpretation of the urban riots that periodically engulf these areas. Rioters’ demands are often discredited, and the state response tends to focus on security issues (Kokoreff 2008; Marlière 2008; Mauger 2006). The objective is to end violence rather than identify its deeper roots.

As a result, feelings of marginalization have become deeply internalized by social actors, who in turn develop a binary worldview. Such a Manichean outlook does not only manifest itself in the religious dichotomy between Muslims and non-Muslims/infidels. It also unfolds in a multitude of binary oppositions that oversimplify the reality: whites/visible minorities (Mansouri 2013; Blanchard, Bancel, and Lemaire 2005); policemen/*banlieue* youth (Fassin 2011; Jobard 2002); rich/poor; Israelis/Palestinians (Hussey 2015). Such otherization of “them” against “us” creates an environment conducive to breakaway and radical attitudes.

The variety of the Islamic State French fighters’ sociological profiles is a striking fact. Quite evidently, and as illustrated by several studies, such as John Horgan’s (2008), the terms “pathways,” “itineraries,” and “social trajectories” are best suited to account for the dynamics of commitment (McCauley and Moskalenko 2008; Moghaddam 2005). The Islamic State has developed well-proven communication strategies to attract a broad spectrum of individuals, be they male or female, hailing from various social backgrounds, and converted or not. In a way, Daesh communication experts have appropriated McDonald’s famous motto: “come as you are” and the organization will take care of the rest. While identifying definite profiles remains a difficult endeavor, it is nonetheless possible to make an inventory of their general sociological features and clusters of motives. Sociological analyses performed on 265 French jihadists who died in Syria and Iraq (2013–16) reveal that 52% hailed from immigration backgrounds and 56% came from priority neighborhoods. Their average age was 28, and 48% were unfavorably known to the police (e.g., for delinquency, etc.). The French Coordination Unit of the Fight against Terrorism (*Unité de Coordination de la Lutte Antiterroriste*, UCLAT) notes that a large share is made up of youth combining several kinds of difficulties (educational failures, economic hardship, etc.).<sup>1</sup> The interviews I conducted between 2015 and 2016 with 15 families who were directly affected by a relative’s commitment to jihadism have enabled me to distinguish six main types of motives. These include humanitarian, religious, political, romantic/marital motives as well as regressive post-feminism and identity quest. It should be emphasized that these various motives are not mutually exclusive and can intersect in a variety of ways. Thus, one candidate can simultaneously be willing to engage in humanitarian work and rescue his “Muslim brothers from Syria” in the name of a Salafi-like religious ideal. Another candidate

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1. See the article “Portrait-robot des 265 Djihadistes Français Tués en Irak et en Syrie,” *L’Express*, September 1, 2017. [https://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/societe/portrait-robot-des-265-djihadistes-francais-tues-en-irak-et-en-syrie\\_1939559.html](https://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/societe/portrait-robot-des-265-djihadistes-francais-tues-en-irak-et-en-syrie_1939559.html)

can define his commitment in highly political terms (anti-imperialist struggle) while being at the same time fascinated by violent action. Beyond such specific motives, as will be demonstrated, the dynamics of enrollment tend to be embedded in precarious social and family backgrounds. The media-friendly word “jihadist,” therefore, encompasses widely disparate realities and refers to actors whose motivations can be very remote from the official project of restoring the caliphate. Research on this issue has demonstrated that, as soon as 2011, a number of youth went to Syria for humanitarian purposes (Bozarslan 2015; Burgat and Paoli 2013). Their aim was to rescue Syrian populations who were being bombarded by Bashar al-Assad’s regime in the wake of the Arab Spring’s popular uprisings. The proliferation of online videos displaying civilian casualties at the hands of the Syrian army prompted many young Westerners to converge to the area.

The second issue that plays a central role in fostering this type of commitment relates to politico-religious motives. Many young people traveled to that region to perform jihad (i.e., the holy war against the enemies of Islam) and restore the caliphate. Here, the objective is to bring justice for those Muslim populations who have fallen prey to “crusaders” throughout the world. Such gathering of international combatants willing to fight in the name of their coreligionists is not unprecedented. Afghanistan, Bosnia, Chechnya, and even Iraq have all been the theater of jihad operations in the past. Yet, Daesh stands out because of its fierce determination to reestablish a caliphate by means of weapons. The project of rebuilding a Muslim empire has a powerful appeal to the youth. The idea is to return to the early days of the Muslim empire, a mythical golden age, which is in fact utopian. Scott Atran stresses this point by recalling that the Islamic State’s current success can only be grasped by acknowledging that it is first and foremost an ambitious collective endeavor (Atran 2016). Such an endeavor contrasts with the inertia of so-called unholy and corrupted Muslim states, which have proven unable, since the collapse of Arab nationalism, to offer a true political vision. Religious motives are also apparent in the desire to perform *hijra*, migrating to a Muslim land. Whilst *hijra* originally refers to the Prophet Muhammad’s migration from Mecca to Medina in order to gain protection from the physical threat posed by wealthy polytheist Arab tribes, the concept has since then been enlarged in some currents of Islam to become a religious duty for all Muslims settled in the West. It should also be underlined that *hijra* to Syrian-Iraqi lands takes on a specific meaning, for those lands correspond to the Sham, which is a blessed territory from a Qur’anic standpoint. In some interpretations, living and dying in the Sham opens the doors to paradise, not merely for the believer but also

for all his loved ones. This motive is clearly expressed by a number of Nice inhabitants who left for jihad after being exposed to the religious indoctrination of ideologue Omar Omsen: “When I met Omar, I realized that as a Muslim, it was my duty to go to this part of the world as an act of solidarity with my Muslim brothers and sisters. I am still in contact with my family in France but I do not wish to return. It is my duty as a Muslim to stay here” (Lina, 29 years, Nice).

While their profiles tend to be neglected, some young people also went to Syria with a highly sophisticated geopolitical outlook and firm convictions. These actors are able to articulate a critical reflection on Western powers’ foreign policies in the Middle East (Crettiez et al. 2017). Like other generations before them, they denounce Western imperialism, the “double standards” of managing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by the international community, as well as the cynicism that shows through the diplomatic relations that Western democracies continue to cultivate with some of the region’s authoritarian regimes (e.g., Saudi Arabia, Qatar, etc.). Such massive volunteering is not new in itself and has many historical precedents. From 1936 to 1939, the International Brigades recruited about 35,000 volunteers hailing from 53 different countries to fight in the Spanish civil war (Prezioso, Rapin, and Batou 2008). Between 1980 and 1992, roughly 20,000 Muslim combatants (mostly Arabs) entered Afghanistan to counter the Soviet invasion (Hegghammer 2010). In the more recent period, it is estimated that between 1991 and 1995, 500 to 1,000 French nationals joined the various factions involved in the ex-Yugoslavia war.<sup>2</sup> Driven by political and ideological factors, such commitment can also fulfill a sense of adventure. In France, these aspects are often left unaddressed, and the government response to radicalization has tended to favor a depoliticized approach. Radical individuals are more often than not apprehended from a pathological standpoint. They are seldom considered political actors but are rather perceived as extremists or victims of brainwashing and cultish manipulation who require medical treatment. The fact that the issue is framed in terms of mind control has resulted in an inadequate response. Despite millions of euros invested in the first deradicalization center, its doors closed permanently after only a few months<sup>3</sup> (Benbassa and Troendlé 2017).

The few studies devoted to “female jihad” put forward two types of

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2. Figures quoted by Pascal Madonna in “Les Volontaires Français dans les Guerres de Yougoslavie, 1991 à 1995,” working paper, research seminar, IRSEM, March 4, 2016.

3. The paradigm of the mental manipulation was mainly developed by the French anthropologist Dounia Bouzar, who was a privileged interlocutor for the French government.

motives. The first one mostly concerns teenagers and young women and involves a quest for romance. Indeed, the Islamic State's cyber recruitment strategies are not restricted to bloody videos. Much less is known about the various media (pictures or videos) showcasing good-looking and well-built male jihadists, whose purpose is to appeal to young Western women so that they perform their *hijra*. Most of these women encountered personal or family traumas throughout their lives. Such is for instance the case of Julie, a 22-year-old French woman of Asian descent. Her mother, who comes from a Parisian *banlieue*, recounted her journey to me: "My daughter was raped at a very young age and it remained a family secret. . . . Towards the end of her teenage years, she fell in love with a man she had met on social networks, and she went to Syria along with her brother. There, she got married. Her husband died very quickly, and they offered her to remarry. There was nothing religious about her; she did not know Islam." Female jihadism also takes on more complex meanings. According to Farhad Khosrokhavar, some women's commitment relates to what he calls regressive post-feminism. He equates this controversial notion with a disenchanting portrayal of the feminist struggle that was led by previous generations. Promoted by often-converted middle-class women, this post-feminism "glorifies the virile manhood of those who expose themselves to death and who, through that confrontation, prove to be manly, serious and sincere" (Khosrokhavar 2015). By carrying their jihadist project forward, these women seek to recover what contemporary societies do not or no longer offer (i.e., a social world in which male and female roles are strictly codified). In some ways, they willingly swap their autonomy and independence for a clearly delineated and regulated world that provides them with a sense of psychological security against the anxiety of freedom (Benslama and Khosrokhavar 2017). Regardless of their actual motives, women hold a doubly strategic role for the Islamic State. Not only do they provide comfort to male fighters but, more important, they also ensure the sustainability of the caliphal project by giving birth to a future generation of combatants, the "caliphate's lion cubs."

Finally, a significant share of jihadists are looking for a sense of identity and self-worth. I now turn to this segment of combatants. Khosrokhavar has already highlighted the strong recurrence among candidates to jihad of fatherless family backgrounds—which are "beheaded," as he puts it (Khosrokhavar 2015). The search for meaning certainly relates to identity and affective issues (oftentimes both) but does not exclude fascination with action and violence. A recent documentary film depicting young French jihadists enlisted by Omar Omsen is particularly illuminating in that



respect (Boutilly, Husser, and Prigent 2016). The interactions between the propagandist and his young draftees closely resemble those that are commonly taking place in educational centers. Among this youth, the lack of identity or family markers is often combined with narcissistic tendencies. The jihadist commitment project is precisely designed to fill those affective and egotist shortcomings. Enrolling in the jihadist struggle on Syrian-Iraqi lands provides young Westerners with an opportunity for both positive identification and collective exaltation. By bringing them together under the cosmopolitan “foreign fighters” battle flag, it lifts them out of their condition as “Western *banlieues* losers” and grants them the much more gratifying status of “God’s fighters in the East.” The caliphal project fully transforms the individual by instantly turning passive bystanders located at the periphery of the system into actors who actively built a system, in this case the caliphate. Such a project is all the more exciting because it also satisfies a desire for action and adrenaline. The war capital and virile manhood highlighted in Daesh’s propaganda videos are significant pull factors for some young people. Such was the case of Antoine, a former student in the city of Toulouse who eventually left for Syria. His mother stated in her interview that “he could spend entire nights on the internet playing combat games and looking at propaganda videos by the Islamic State. His life was driven by fighting sports and appetite for action. He didn’t know much about Middle Eastern geopolitics. He fought and died there.” Lying behind the homogenizing word of “jihadist” is therefore a multiplicity of highly heterogeneous realities. The term conflates a range of actors whose motivations vary greatly but who all believe that the Islamic State project can meet their desires, needs, and identity and affective flaws.

It should be noted, however, that the literature on jihadists’ motives tends to rely on synchronic frameworks of interpretation. Yet, the effects of jihadist socialization on individuals’ worldviews should also be taken into account. My own research on the military demonstrates that a number of young draftees were mostly motivated by material considerations (e.g., pay, housing, opportunity for travel, etc.) upon joining the army. It is only through their military experiences (e.g., external operations, daily regiment life) that they progressively reoriented their discourses and resorted to vocational arguments (e.g., patriotism, nation, flag, etc.) that were initially completely absent. I argue that the same can be said of jihadists. The motives they express after having experienced jihad in Syria and Iraq are not necessarily the same as those that triggered their commitment in the first place. Some may join Daesh because they are looking for thrill and adventure but may eventually soak up Salafi-jihadi beliefs. As they acquire

a military or jihadist *ethos*, young people's discourses evolve. This points to the need to use a diachronic and longitudinal perspective in order to identify the changing dynamics and narrative evolutions that are most likely to occur. In the armies, the youth themselves are not necessarily aware of these discursive shifts. Such forms of biographical illusion must therefore be carefully considered in order to avoid any bias in scholarly work (Bourdieu 1986).

The following section draws a parallel between jihadist commitment and military commitment. It highlights the many similarities between these two fields in terms of the resources and opportunities afforded to their members, as well as from a more formal standpoint (communication, marketing). The comparison takes as a starting point the many commonalities between the social trajectories of jihadists and young servicemen enlisted in French armies.

### Jihadist Commitment and Military Commitment: Beyond Symbolic Antagonisms

In the collective imagination, the figure of the jihadist is most probably seen as the absolute antonym of the Western army man. Such perception is especially warranted in light of the importation, over the last few years, of international conflicts onto Western soil, which is manifest in the increasing number of physical attacks against Western soldiers. For instance, during the tragedy that occurred in February 2012 in Toulouse and Montauban, Mohammed Merah slayed three French soldiers and injured another because of their alleged involvement in the Afghan military theater. In May 2013, French soldier Cédric Cordiez from Gap's 4th cavalry regiment and British soldier Lee Rigby from the Royal Regiment of Fusiliers were respectively assaulted in Paris and killed in London. In October 2014, Michael Zehaf-Bibeau shot a caporal down in front of Ottawa's National War Memorial. Two days before that, in Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu, two soldiers had been knocked over and one of them succumbed to his injuries. In March 2016, Ayanle Hassan Ali assaulted Toronto's army recruiting center and wounded two soldiers with a knife. In February 2017, Egyptian national Abdallah El-Hamahmy attacked a French military patrol next to the Louvre Museum. Ziyed Ben Belgacem assaulted a female French soldier in the Orly Airport in March 2017 before being eliminated. In August 2017, in the city of Levallois-Perret, another Parisian suburb, one man injured six soldiers with his vehicle. Committed by Muslims willing to avenge their

coreligionists suffering at the hands of “crusaders’ armies” throughout the world, this series of attacks exemplifies the emergence and normalization of a threat that is both unpredictable and anxiety-provoking. It also gives credence to the idea that there is an inexorable alterity between two segments of the youth that are opposed in every way, namely those who chose to integrate socially through a profession that stresses patriotism as a cardinal value, and those who are disaffiliated and fall prey to nihilism and serious identity troubles.

Yet, social reality does confine itself to such a binary framework. Specifically, the detailed analysis of some jihadists’ biographical trajectories yields interesting results and exhorts us to be more nuanced in our conclusions, or at least to depart from a Manichean understanding of commitment logics. In fact, the many parallels and porosities between trajectories of jihadist and military commitment are apparent in a number of cases. Thus, Lionel Dumont, a former member of the Roubaix gang (1996), had completed his military service at the 4th Marine Infantry Regiment of Fréjus. He then went to Djibouti with the 5th Overseas Interarms Regiment, where he took part in the UN multinational intervention in Somalia under the French humanitarian operation named Oryx (1992–1993). In July 2010, before conducting his attacks in the Toulouse area, Mohammed Merah had attempted to enroll in the French Foreign Legion. Similarly, a number of testimonies concerning Hasna Ait Boulahcen, who was related to the Bataclan theater attacks’ perpetrators (November 13, 2015), reveal that she was strongly willing to enlist in the French army. Jihadist Quentin Roy, who hailed from the Parisian suburb of Sevrans, had also thought about joining the army (V. Roy 2017, 50). Other examples taken from abroad can also be mentioned. For instance, convert Abdul Shakur (born Steven Vikash Chand) was enrolled during four years in Canada’s Royal regiment (2000–2004) before engaging in terrorist activities, such as the thwarted Toronto attack of June 2006 (Bramadat and Dawson 2014). These examples feature among the most notorious, but other less-known cases can also instantiate this phenomenon.<sup>4</sup> The ambivalent character of these jihadists’ social trajectories is rather unsettling, for the values commonly associated with jihadist and military commitment are deemed diametrically opposed in collective representations.

The research I conducted on the military commitment of second-generation immigrants in France provides insights on the various areas

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4. According to the data I collected from various professionals (prison guards, army men, policemen, intelligence services), several dozen jihadis currently in Syria had attempted to enroll in the French army or the national police force.

of convergence that are likely to bring closer two realms that are, on the face of things, highly antagonistic. Throughout this study, I developed a typology of commitment logics for this segment of the population. One of the categories, called “rupture commitment,” encompasses actors whose social trajectories share many commonalities with those who are attracted by radical religious projects, especially in their extremist or Salafi version. Specifically, these included many youths hailing from unstable, if not precarious, social and family backgrounds. Upbringing in dismantled families and lack of a father figure were especially recurring characteristics. Without necessarily articulating it in an explicit manner, many embraced the arms profession because of the affective, familial environment it provided. While they appear very different at first sight, the military and religious fields are therefore characterized by a number of similarities that are worth delving into. In both cases, there is a search for a positive identity in a socially structuring environment, or at least a rewarding normative framework. Danièle Hervieu-Léger, among others, has highlighted various common features between the religious and military experiences. Besides subordination to a transcendental power, be it God for the former and the mission (militarily speaking) for the latter, both appeal to notions of obedience, asceticism (especially through physical training in the military case), and starkness. More specifically, the congruence between the two is most apparent in their use of the notion of “sacredness.” Hervieu-Léger stresses that the experience of the sacred is to be found in the “feelings of depth” that occur when societies produce a specific type of collective experience, the “us experience,” which characterizes those moments where individuals realize they form an entity that is greater than the sum of their single atoms (2009). Like religious commitment, military careers provide an opportunity for young draftees to exit a negative cycle, recover a form of life balance, and *in fine* escape the downward spiral of failure and self-deprecation.

Beyond their apparent divergence, religious and military commitments share one additional attribute: that of fostering positive identities and alleviating protean affective deficiencies by providing a sense of brotherhood, which can take the form of a community of believers (*umma*) or that of the arms profession (brothers in arms). This quest for an environment that is both affective and authoritarian is also a feature of born-again’s social experiences. Being included in a religious or military group provides a sense of both safety and collective power that is particularly looked for by youth in search of identity. Psychologists would use the notion of “containing” to describe this quest for guidance and boundary-seeking. Both types of commitment can therefore appeal to youth with similar socio-psychological

profiles, some of whom wander in a kind of “identity no man’s land.” Such weak identity anchoring is also tied to generational and cultural factors. The overwhelming majority of jihadists are between 18 and 26 years old, a time in their lives when they are leaving behind their childhood ideals to look for those that will structure their adult life. According to Fethi Benslama, the strength of the jihadist offer lies in its ability to connect the global to the intimate. For these young people, the harm caused to the Muslim world (domination, colonization) resonates with individual and narcissistic wounds (Benslama 2016).

Their identity quest is also made more complex by a series of secondary factors. Deep anthropological shifts in contemporary families (e.g., single-parent households, stepfamilies, etc.) along with the disappearance of those rites of passage that used to provide symbolic landmarks (national service) and the increasingly precarious conditions of entry into working life have undeniably affected young people’s identity formation. This process is further aggravated by intergenerational ruptures. Young people’s socialization, particularly those who hail from postcolonial immigrant backgrounds, is punctuated by traumas, whose traces are particularly enduring for they have never been put into words nor cathartically released by the parental generation. The symbolic, linguistic, and cultural gap stemming from parents’ cultural uprooting produces great identity uncertainty, the consequences of which have been carefully studied by sociologists such as Abdelmalek Sayad (1999). Generally hailing from poor rural areas in the former colonies, parents have been socialized in cultural environments in which the oral tradition prevails and where the Muslim religion is relatively permeable to syncretism and cultural borrowing (e.g., North African Malikism, African marabout practices). They speak dialectal Arabic, whose symbolic prestige is considerably lesser than classical Arabic and Qur’anic Arabic. By contrast, most of their children grew up at the periphery of large Western industrial cities and have been educated in French schools. Enlisted in the 1960s and ’70s as a conveniently cheap and docile labor force, many fathers have experienced a sharp drop in social status following the massive waves of industrial relocation in the 1990s and 2000s. Unable to support their families after experiencing this social downgrade, fatherly figures have symbolically collapsed in the domestic realm, for the identity of the father is often inextricably tied to his professional standing. The ensuing (cultural and symbolic) duality between parents and children provides fertile ground for alienation. Hence, young people start looking for symmetrical counter-models in order to offset degrading feelings. Parents’ oral and “folkloric” Islam is cast aside in favor of a “pure” Islam and an

orthopraxy that feeds on texts and videos released by international Muslim scholars (Amghar 2011, 162–63). The invisibility of the working-class father who used to hug the walls has now made way for the conspicuousness of traditional Islamic clothes (*qamis*). The derogatory designation of “beur”<sup>5</sup> as a category of second-class citizenship has now made room for the figure of the Muslim, which allows for identification with a transnational community. Such an identification process is also fueled by the hyperpoliticization of Islam-related debates (e.g., headscarf, minarets, halal, etc.) and the negative media coverage of Islam (Hajjat and Mohammed 2016; Deltombe 2007).

The fact that individuals engaging in extremist behavior are often looking for meaning has been theorized by social psychology scholars working on radicalization (see Morrison, chapter 5 of this volume). Thus, according to Arie W. Kruglanski (Kruglanski et al. 2014), the desire to “get respect by becoming someone” is a central driving force in radicals’ trajectories. As for Michael Hogg (2011), he relies on uncertainty–identity theory to characterize the experiences of actors whose identity construction is faltering. In a way, extremist movements provide certainty and composure to individuals who are looking for them. Small radical groupings also tend to foster homogeneity among their members by suppressing individual distinctive features. This process, which Max Taylor (1988) calls “deindividuation,” is also found in military socialization. Both types of socialization (military and jihadist) aim at creating a self-reinforcing identity and cultivating a binary worldview that clearly demarcates the inside from the outside. These homogenization and cohesion techniques are also apparent in the use of songs and recitations. As in Western military cultures, jihadists resort to chanting to strengthen the fervor and internal cohesiveness of the group. For instance, *anashid* are chanted Islamic poems that are particularly valued among these groups (Hegghammer 2015). The role and significance of such activities in reinforcing group identity has been extensively documented by military sociologists. Investigating military cadences, Marie-Anne Paveau demonstrates for instance how they are meant to strengthen group bonds by picturing the relation between what is “inside” and what is “outside” as deeply antagonistic (1998). Akin to the black flag under which Daesh fighters unite and with which they self-identify, chants enable combatant groups to cement their internal identity and galvanize one another in times of adversity.

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5. Stemming from the word “Arab” written in backward slang, the term “beur” refers to French nationals of North African descent. Widely used in the 1980s, it has now fallen into abeyance and has negative, if not derogatory, overtones.

In addition, jihadist and military commitments both closely relate to the body. The literature in military sociology highlights young people's strong willingness to use their bodily capital (i.e., their physical dispositions) as a resource to succeed professionally (Teboul 2017; Settoul 2015; Sauvadet 2006; Wacquant 2002). The same holds true for Daesh's foreign fighters. Investigations into jihadists' biographical trajectories reveal the central significance of manly and war capital. Many aspirants to jihad practice combat sports and take great care in attending to and increasing their physical capital (Crettiez et al. 2017, 44). Furthermore, both jihadist and military commitments have the specificity of valuing and transforming the body. They offer the opportunity to incorporate a new *hexis* as well as specific body techniques. In the army, such bodily work involves daily physical training (e.g., attention, muscular development, etc.), while socialization into jihadist groups favors a greater observance of religious rituals and even the embodiment of diligent religious orthopraxy (e.g., daily prayers, fasting, etc.).

The parallel can be further extended to decision-making processes, which often entail significant biographical shifts. The concept of biographical bifurcation I use in my research to account for the commitment process of some of my military interviewees is equally illuminating to grasp and describe the social trajectories of jihad volunteers (Settoul 2012; Bidart 2006). The decision to enlist rarely stems from a lengthy reflection, time-wise. Some choose to join the army to put a halt to a downward spiral of social marginalization (e.g., economic hardship, crime, etc.). Others do it out of boredom with their socio-professional or family environment. And still others enroll after a friendly or romantic encounter. Their decision often takes the shape of a biographical bifurcation, for it is both rapid in its process and heavy in its consequences for one's subsequent pathways. The various testimonies gathered from jihadists' friends and relatives frequently point to the oftentimes abrupt and almost unpredictable nature of their decision to leave. Media stories tracing combatants' trajectories always insist on the surprise and even the stupefaction that invariably struck their social circles. Furthermore, a number of youth left for Syrian-Iraqi lands only a few weeks after their conversion to Islam.

### Recruiting at All Costs! A Comparison of Recruitment Systems

Comprehending commitment logics, whether in the military or jihadist realm, requires shifting the attention upstream to what may be called the

recruitment offer. Most Western armies are now facing massive recruitment imperatives. Indeed, the armies' professionalization process resulted in huge quantitative needs in terms of personnel, of about several thousand people per year. The analysis of military institutions' enrollment strategies shows a wide use of the emotional range. Contrary to popular misconception, the patriotic or nationalist fiber remains scantily mobilized in this communication aiming at attracting youth toward these professions. To enlarge the recruitment pool, the Ministry of Defense increasingly uses emotional fiber, as explained by this colonel, a senior official in charge of the French Army recruitment: "When we want to recruit a young guy, our first objective is to create an emotion by impressing him: we need to show something extraordinary. For instance, we present tanks or helicopters on recruitment booth in order to durably mark his mind."<sup>6</sup> To achieve the enrollment of tens of thousands of young people coming from around a hundred different nations, the Islamic State has also relied on an extremely thorough communication grounded in the creation of emotions among young people. In order to optimize its seduction strategy, Daesh has invested greatly in the internet and social networks. As demonstrated by a large number of studies, this strategy is not new; other jihadist movements, such as the Tunisian group Ansar Al-Sharia, already used such highly efficient media channels to circulate their propaganda. Engaged in jihad 3.0, the Islamic State has progressively mastered the science of internet virality, thereby increasing tenfold the digital impact of its messages. Jihadist propaganda scholar Javier Lesaca has examined more than 800 Daesh-produced videos. His conclusion is that they are far from exclusively based upon traditional religious appeals. In fact, from a formal standpoint, a significant portion of Daesh productions, such as *Flames of War* or *19HH*, are directly inspired from Western pop culture and Hollywood blockbusters, such as *American Sniper*, *V for Vendetta*, or even *The Matrix* (Lesaca 2017).

Video games have also become a chief source of inspiration for the organization's communication strategy. Well-aware of young people's fascination with heroic figures, Daesh public relations officers stretch their imagination and appeal to the youth by passing on footage featuring highly aestheticized combatants. Images frequently display groups of very masculine, heavily armed hooded soldiers striking poses that are highly reminiscent of those commonly conveyed in the most popular war video games, such as *Call of Duty* or *Battlefield*. Interestingly, these ever-more-realistic

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6. Interview conducted with a French colonel responsible for military recruitment strategies.



video games also constitute a strategic medium for human resources managers in the army. Thus, in the United States, partnerships have been established between video games developers, researchers, and the military. Attached to the University of Southern California, the Institute for Creative Technologies is a research center that directly collaborates with the army in order to improve soldiers' training via simulators and maximize the military's recruitment capacities. Distributing free video games is also common practice. In France, such methods are less prevalent and less formalized, yet they are being experimented with. For instance, marketing ads for military trades and occupations have been embedded into video games. National defense actors' growing interest for young people's cultural practices is also apparent in a number of other instances. In 1999, the French Ministry of Defense released a 40-second video clip that was directly inspired by *Matrix's* latest technological processes (Merchet 1999). The virtualization of reality therefore appears as a top-notch marketing technique for recruitment professionals. Having great impact upon teenagers and post-teenagers, such increasingly used marketing strategies have also raised concerns among scholars. Many academics, like Isabelle Gusse, speak out against the blurring of boundaries between, on the one hand, a virtual world that constantly beautifies and glamorizes fighters' heroism, and on the other hand, the cruel, brutal, and bloody reality of any war activity (Gusse 2013).

The French context is characterized by the great numerical significance of French nationals enrolled as jihadists on the Syrian-Iraqi theater. The growing literature on this topic has identified with certainty some of this phenomenon's distinctive features. Far from being a monolithic group, French (and foreign) jihadists make up a heterogeneous batch of actors whose motivations are clearly split. Daesh appears as a kind of supermarket, able to provide a wide range of goods and items to anyone looking for something. The organization has managed to craft an efficient propaganda that simultaneously promises religion, humanitarian work, politics, brotherhood, adrenaline, and even love. French debates have tended to revolve around jihadism's religious dimension (or lack thereof). For some, jihadism stems from the radicalization of Islam. In that perspective, religious interpretations and practices are to be considered crucial explanatory factors. By contrast, according to others, radical Islam amounts to nothing more than a superficial coating that gives meaning to underlying social radicalism. According to this interpretation, the grievances held by some segments of the youth find a semantic expression in the jihadist ideology, which is the only true transnational utopia currently existing in the landscape of protest.

Yet, the great diversity of jihadists' sociological profiles indicates that the two explanations coexist. They are complementary rather than exclusive.

Nonetheless, the conclusions that emerge from drawing a parallel between military commitment and jihadist commitment tend to downplay religious interpretations in favor of an explanation based upon integration and identity issues. Such identity issues stem from a triple predicament, which is simultaneously socioeconomic (difficulties to integrate socially), generational (transitioning into adult life), and migratory (parents' cultural uprooting, feelings of humiliation). The comparison between the military and jihadist fields points to many commonalities. Beyond symbolic antagonisms, the two provide their members with very similar resources. These include access to a gratifying identity and to an affective environment for young people with family problems, along with a sense of brotherhood (brothers in arms/*umma*) and the opportunity to quench their thirst for heroism and adrenaline. These jihadists' trajectories strikingly echo the social psychology literature on radicalization. They are fueled by a quest for self-esteem, and in some cases they are driven by an attempt at identity (re)construction within a particularly precarious social and family environment.

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