Variations on a Theme: Radical Violent Islamism and European North African Radicalization

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Takfiri jihadists, typified by an al-Qaeda perspective, claim that the "true" Muslim *Umma* (the Islamic community) is held together by a centrifugal universality based on religious identity, and that this religion compels people to engage in a form of radical violent Islamism to confront the evils of the *Dar el-Harb* (non-Islamic World).[1] A closer examination of those mechanisms of individual radicalization (whether cultural, political, social-psychological, etc.), which lead people to carry out violence in the name of Islam, demonstrates that unique combinations of chance encounters; ideological commitments; individual and collective interactions with state and international organizations/institutions; and individual experience account for propensities to support and participate in radical violent Islamism. Individual processes of mobilization and radicalization and "macro-cultural" contexts serve to ground identities and create recruitment potential for radical violent Islamists to encourage others to join and participate in their cause.

This article will focus on the relationships between identity and mobilization to understand how and why some individuals from North African immigrant communities, specifically those of Moroccan, Algerian, and Tunisian origin living in the United Kingdom, France, and Spain, become radicalized into, and operationalized in radical violent Islamism. Individuals living in these immigrant communities are confronted by differing realities on the ground in the three states examined here, not least because of the variation in the historical relationship between these states and North Africa, the differing nature of their "interventions" in the colonial past, and the demonstrable variation in the present reality of the interaction between these states, in terms of societies and institutions, with these immigrant communities. A careful analysis of the processes that lie behind radical mobilization and participation, when combined with an examination of specific experiences, finds that mechanisms for micro-mobilization and macro-cultural factors may help to explain some shared aspects of radicalization among the small minority of North Africans living in these three states. It may begin to illustrate how radicalization can be understood to emanate from, reinforce, and sustain a more universal threat to European security. I will suggest here that this threat is not least a function of colonial and (later) independent state violence and repression, culturally defined religious and moral obligations to confront injustice,[2] and keen senses of national, tribal, and/or ethnic identity throughout North Africa. These factors have served universally among North African immigrant communities to create prisms through which contemporary events and experiences are interpreted, and have served to create the basis that helps to determine perceptions of what are reasonable courses of responsive political action.

Radical Violent North African Islamists

Why focus here on North Africans, given the broad range of ethnicities reflected in Muslim communities throughout Europe? Some obvious reasons include the geographic proximity of North Africa to Europe; the difficulty faced by the regimes in Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia due to Islamist challenges; and the many examples of links between North Africans and terrorist violence in Europe. A cursory glance at recent terrorist acts and successful counterterrorist interventions demonstrates how individual North Africans and North African immigrant networks have contributed significantly to radical violent Islamism in the UK, France, and Spain. A combination of transnational takfiri jihadist and ethnic community links directly facilitated the import of Russian SA-18 Grouse surface to air missiles from Chechnya to France via Georgia in 2005 (Anderson 2005). These same networks could be seen in play in the conviction of Reda Abderahmane, who used France as a base to carry out logistical support for the two Tunisians who assassinated the leader of the Afghani Northern Alliance on September 10, 2001, as well as in the process of radicalization that led Idris Bazis, a second generation Franco-Algerian, to become a suicide bomber in Iraq in February 2005 via experiences of fighting jihad in Bosnia and Afghanistan (Field 2005; *The Guardian* 2005). Transnational takfiri jihadist networks in Spain helped to facilitate North African migration to fight U.S. forces in Iraq (*Agence France Presse* 2006). In June 2007, Spanish authorities arrested what they declared to be a three man cell of "Al-Qaeda of the Islamic

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Maghreb," on warrants issued by Morocco, who were thought to be on their way to train in Southern Algeria to eventually return to carry out terrorist acts in Europe (*Agence France Presse* 2006). Similar links apparently exist between North African immigrant communities living in the UK with the cell that carried out the 3/11 Madrid train bombings. The brother of two of the bombers, the Moroccan Hassan Akcha, is alleged to have aided in this plot and disappeared from his UK home in its immediate aftermath, and another Moroccan, the religious scholar Mohammed Guerbouzi, has been allegedly implicated in the bombings both of Madrid and Casablanca (Mather and Brady 2005). Three key individuals associated with the so called "Crevice Cell" who plotted to blow-up shopping malls and nightclubs in Britain were Algerians living in Britain. These links are often described in terms of a trans-Mediterranean axis providing logistical support for terrorism in Europe, but they also have global implications, apparent in the alleged terror ring broken up in Sydney, Australia, where connections among suspected French based Algerian terrorists and an alleged Australian terrorist cell were based on ethnically defined social connections as much as religious and ideological commitment (Saleh and Carswell 2005). While all of these cases represent an incredibly small minority of North African immigrants living in the UK, France and Spain, it may be possible here to begin to understand why these individuals were willing to carry out violent political actions in the name of radical Islamism.

Three Different Cases, Three Similar Problems?

There are an estimated 5,000 Maghrebi sympathizers with the *Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat* (GSPC)/ Al-Qaeda of the Islamic Maghreb in France, and the palpable concern of the French government is evident in the recent tripling in size of its anti-terrorism unit (Allen 2007). Within Spain, there has been a great deal of discussion of radical Islamist perceptions of the Iberian peninsula as part of the historical *Al-Andulus* and how these perception may make Spain the frontline in a confrontation between radical violent Islamists and Europe (*Agence France Presse* 2006; Reinares 2007). While in post-7/7 UK, some focus has shifted away from North African radical Islamists to the threats posed by radicalized members of British South Asian communities, the potential role of North Africans in radical indoctrination and activism has not been forgotten at the intelligence and policy making levels in the UK let alone other European states. How should scholars and policy-makers think about these transnational North African communities—communities whose identities can be a complex combination of the tribal, ethnic, national, regional, and religious—and who can live, travel, and work across two to three different states in Europe and the Middle East North Africa (MENA) region? (Begag 2002; Maddy-Weitzman 2006; Murphy 2001, 15–7; Wilce 1998).

There are three general ways to understand the relationship between the UK, France, and Spain and their North African immigrant communities: *liberal political*, *historical*, and *proximal* respectively.

Liberal Political—British Institutional Engagement with Islamism

The North African community accounts for an extremely small minority of the UK population (<1%), and is geographically confined to urban areas, especially North London. North African immigrant communities in Britain include both those who have legitimately immigrated to the UK, i.e., those who have been granted asylum, and those who stay illegally, either having failed to obtain to asylum or not sought it at all, the latter condition leading to problems both in terms of policing, and in terms of the provision of basic needs and welfare for this population. Popular perceptions among immigrant communities, policy-makers, and the security services identify Britain as a safe-haven for North African immigrants who feel oppressed in their country of origin or in other European states. The North African immigrant community in London reflects political upheaval in the Maghreb, with a cursory glance over the records of the Special Immigration Appeals Court (SIAC) tribunals indicating many of those seeking asylum claiming to have been caught up either in Islamic activism in Algeria, Morocco, or Tunisia, or fleeing because of being drafted into the army or police to carry out the repression of such activism. Locations such as the Finsbury Park Mosque became focal points for community welfare efforts, especially for those whose status to remain in the UK was not legal, by providing food, shelter, and basic aid, as well as serving as point of contact for those newly arrived to the community and facing similar problems. Such locations have also become focal points for recruitment into, and the general organization of radical violent Islamist movements, domestically within the UK and abroad with examples of individuals who have gone on to become "Mujahadin" in Israel-Palestine, Chechnya, Kosovo, Bosnia, as well as Iraq and Afghanistan. The ability of radical Islamists to carry out this kind of recruitment earned London the nickname "Londonistan," a condition typified by the attitude that as long as this radical activism was carried out in the UK, the security services did not believe it constituted a tangible threat to the British state (Phillips 2006). From the perspective of one French-Algerian Mufti who spoke out in the run-up to the French general elections of June 2007, the greatest threat of terrorism comes from "Anglo-Saxon countries" where there is too much "freedom for the sake of freedom" so that it becomes a form of "debasement" and various French commentators regularly decry what they see as over-indulgent tolerance of radical Islamist preachers in the UK (Burns, Guthrie, and Khalaf 2005; *El-Khabar* 2007). While in the vast majority of cases this Islamic activism has been peaceful and stayed well within the boundaries of the liberal political of the host nation, there are examples, such as the activism of radical clerics such as Abu Hamsa and Abu Qatada have clearly exploited and manipulated liberal attitudes towards radical Islamism.

Historical—France and the Legacy of Colonialism

France differs greatly from the British case, where the legacy of the French colonial occupation of Algeria and the establishment of sympathetic protectorates in Tunisia and Morocco loom large for contextualizing the relationship between France and North Africa. The French colonization of Algeria was particularly brutal, including the destruction of basic social, economic, political, and cultural structures, and the eventual Algerian War of Independence (1954–1962) is marked by its legacy of blood, death, torture, terrorism, and massacre (Githens-Mazer 2007). This colonial legacy not only lives on in the historical narrative used to explain the failure of the French Fourth Republic and establishment of the Fifth, nor just in the role France played in the establishment of the independent states of Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia, but also in terms of the population exchanges that have marked the latter half of the two centuries of this relationship. While North Africans have constituted the longest continuous wave of immigrants to Europe, the bulk of this immigration has (historically) gone to France, with over three million North

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Africans living in France alone (Brand 2006; Hargreaves 2001, 217; Maddy-Weitzman 2006, 72; Migdalovitz 2005, 5; Waxman 1997, 19). The reasons for North African immigration to France have varied considerably over time, from providing a low wage workforce for agricultural and industrial sectors following the First World War, to fleeing the Algerian Civil War in the 1990s. *Beurs* (individuals of second or third generation North African origin) often describe feeling disenfranchised and discriminated against, with unemployment rates two to three times higher in North African neighborhoods, and feelings of otherness have been further exacerbated by the banning of the hijab in French schools—a situation which exploded onto the streets during civil unrest in October and November 2005. One Franco-Algerian member of the Toulouse city government described the sentiment of these communities as being that, "They view the future and see nothing" (*Facts on File World News Digest* 2005; Tran 2002; Williams 2005). The Maghrebi immigrant community broadly, and Algerians specifically, feel caught between identities—as links with Algeria have changed so dramatically over the course of two or three generations, yet their position within in French society remains politically, culturally, and economically insecure (Begag 2002). This condition leads to dissent, which is, for the most part, not motivated by conceptions of Islamic activism, but rather by a belief that discrimination (whether religiously or ethnically based) has reduced any opportunity for North Africans to look beyond the ghettoized confines of the *banlieues* (urban suburbs). Coupled with increased police power for detention without being charged (from four days to six) and without recourse to a lawyer, as well fairly severe anti-terror laws in place since 1986, tensions remain high between North African immigrant communities, who perceive themselves as embattled, and the security services who see the prevention of terrorism as paramount. Despite these tensions, in terms of identity and the relationship between North African immigrant communities and the French state, the historical legacy of this relationship, exemplified by the shared French language and existing familial and social ties, continue to make France a desirable destination for potential North African immigrants.

Proximal—Spain and North Africa

Both at the institutional and social levels, there is a palpable fear in Spain concerning their geographic proximity to North Africa, especially in the wake of the 3/11 Madrid train bombings. This sense of vulnerability is exacerbated by Spain's two enclaves in Morocco, Melilla, and Ceuta, where fears of an Islamic incursion into Spanish territory are so high that the authorities have constructed over 20 kilometers of four-meter-high fencing to keep out illegal immigrants (Crain 1999, 23). The mainland is also near enough that small boats called *patéras* are able to ferry immigrants across the straits of Gibraltar from North Africa to the Spanish Southern Coast. Illegal immigration dominates Spanish concerns about this geographic proximity, and conservative estimates assert that more than one million immigrants have arrived in Spain from North Africa since 2000 (Crawford 2007). Whereas Britain may be understood as a safe-haven for North African immigrants, and there are clear historical links between France and North Africa, Spain represents an easy destination for North African immigrants, and is now increasingly attractive as a location for immigration because of established social networks for immigrant communities. Maghrebi immigration to Spain has exploded in importance and as a matter of debate, not least because of the unresolved legacy of Moorish rule in Spain, and the fact that North African immigrants to Spain are almost entirely Muslim. These issues were further exacerbated by 3/11, as the members of the cell that carried out the Madrid train bombings were almost entirely North African. Even before the horrors of 2004, some security analysts asserted that the Moroccan Islamic Combat Group was more active and had a greater tactical capacity in Spain than in Morocco itself. Recent books and academic reports have asserted that Spain is "under threat" because of its Moorish past, and that Islamists want to regain possession over the former entity of *Al-Andulus* either by violence or by "silent reconquest," further fueling a belief that Spain is under a form of Islamic siege. Requests by Muslims to transform the former Grand Mosque in Cordoba from a place that bans Muslim prayer into an ecumenical space, or reports of Saudi Arabian purchases of Spanish schools to create a new generation of radicals who will reject the Catholic King and Queen of Spain, are often cited as examples of this Islamist agenda (Aristegui 2005; Crawford 2007; Reinares 2007; *Roundup, BBC Media* 2007). The 2004 bombings have resulted in intensified scrutiny for the Muslim population living in Spain—especially for those of North African origin, and have led to crackdowns on illegal immigration and regular deportations of illegal immigrants under much stricter anti-terrorism laws enacted after the bombings.

Three Different Stories—One Universal Threat to Security?

While all three nation-states apparently share the same concerns about a North African radical violent Islamist threat, is it fair to say that all face the same threat from the same potential actors? Is the threat really three different phenomena sharing a name only? How do we explain how and why some North Africans become radicalized, and is it the same process among different immigrant groups living in different states? One problem with the literature is that examinations of radicalization—in terms of mechanisms and individual narratives—have focused on individual structural or social-psychological causes. Such perspectives are ever present in the academic and policy literature. Bloom asserts a "reductionist" view—that those who are most susceptible to be converted into the most radical form of Islamist violence, suicide bombers, are "young and impressionable" (Bloom 2007, 36; Craig and Palmer 2006). The notion that Islamists specifically, and Muslims more broadly, "don't get Western liberal freedoms and lifestyles" is part of European popular political discourse, and governments see this as a function of alienation and marginalization (Jackson 2005, 54–5). At a governmental (as opposed to security) level, the focus on integration and alienation may be as much about protecting domestic Muslim populations (of all ethnicities) from a popular working class backlash, as about trying to maintain control over the infinitesimal minority of radical and violent Islamists (Ranstorp 2005, 22; Waxman 1997). The focus on citizenship tests and courses, already in place in Britain, and currently being debated in France and Spain, emphasizes elements of "respect and tolerance and the emphasis it places on human life," which they feel is not necessarily part of the immigrant community's cultural makeup (Hurst and Norfolk 2007). These interpretations support and/or parallel "old world" views of terrorism, that "Terrorists are usually seen as being ignorant and immature, as coming from a poor background and a broken family with no skills or family responsibility" (Doward, Townsend, and McDonald 2007; Maleckova 2005, 34). Given that the social and institutional structures that govern lifestyles, economic outcomes, and political opportunities are so different in the UK, France and Spain, can we talk about radicalization among some North African immigrants as being a universal experience and leading to a common European threat?

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What is becoming increasingly apparent in the literature is that participation in radical violent Islamism is not a function of economic condition or lack of education (Pape 2005; Sageman 2004; von Hippel 2002, 26). If participation in these movements isn't structurally determined, what are the alternative explanations? One potential explanation is based on cultural factors, the assertion that the myths, memories, and symbols of the colonial past, housed in ethno-national identity, can become radicalizing factors because they provide points of entry for individuals to engage with issues at a super-individual, collective level and signpost rationales for legitimate political action (Gamson 1995, 89; Smith 1986, 201). In the case of this small minority of North Africans who become radicalized, these facts are cultivated and mobilized by ideologically committed theological elites, such as Abu Hamsa at the Finsbury Park Mosque during the late '90s until 2005. Such elites cast contemporary events in light of religious symbolism and colonial pasts. By focusing strategies to mobilize and recruit around these points of entry, individuals gain prisms—interpretative mechanisms that assist in breaking down current events. In this cultural approach, the prism effect underpins processes of radicalization, by helping to explain how individuals recognize and identify injustices and grievances in a collective context, helping to determine what are subsequently considered rational reactions to such events (White 1989, 1,294; White and White 1995). Groups experiencing repression and violence are likely to interpret these actions in light of past experiences (whether experienced or shared vicariously through collective memory), and to react to them in line with past (and potentially successful) responses. This cultural approach is often neglected in the mobilization literature, with keystone authors such as Snow, Zurcher Jr,. and Ekland-Olson (1980) suggesting that the most likely explanation for mobilization and recruitment is a combination of "structural availability," a lack of countervailing risks or sanctions, and individuals being anchored in coherent and relevant social networks (in this case the collective identity) that facilitate a following of common interests and provide a point of entry through into a social movement organization (SMO) (Snow, Zurcher Jr., and Ekland-Olson 1980, 792–3; Sturmer and Simon 2004, 275). There can be no doubt that the story behind how and why each individual may come to be a radical violent Islamist is as unique as a fingerprint—not least in terms of how such participants view action as a moral imperative, vocation, or "bolt-on" obligation (Wiltfang and McAdam 1991, 105).

There are several identifiable resonant and accessible cultural ideas that permeate North African consciousness both at home and abroad and that may be broadly understood as related to identity: (1) a belief in a pre-French (pre-colonial) "Golden Age" for the Maghreb (closely linked not only to a sense of national or regional identity, but enshrined in the specific *Sunni Maliki* tradition of *sharia* (Islamic Law) and jurisprudence); and (2) frustration over the failure to address basic political and economic needs in independent North African states (Barbour 1957, 20; Smith 1986, 177). While there is a sense that independence has undoubtedly been better than life under colonial rule and/or protectorate status, the achievement of independence has failed to live up to the rhetoric of revolution, and has yet to achieve the longed for return of the golden age. Particularly in Algeria, economic, social, and political reforms have not yet brought about the social change promised by the revolution (Amnesty International 2003, 3; Murphy 2006; Reinares 2005, 8; Testas 2002, 175). A superficial search for evidence, such as exists in the media's reporting of age ranges of those named and/or reported as terrorist suspects or subject to SIAC hearings reveals that most are between 30 and 40, having been in their late teens and early 20's during the height of the conflict in Afghanistan and the most brutal period of the Algerian Civil War. These tendencies in age and experience are mirrored in many cases found in the unclassified summary evidence for the Guantanamo Administrative Review Board.[3] This experience makes past injustices even more resonant and relevant, as they are constantly retold and performed as a narrative explaining how and why these immigrants felt forced to leave their homeland, thus locking senses of injustice in the forefront of immigrant identity (Frijda 1997, 106).

If al-Qaeda militants, operating closely to the "Franchise" model of operations, can be understood as adhering to one form of insurgent ideology that pits Islam versus the West and Christianity, then there exists the very real potential that this one organization could be recruiting from pools of disaffected individuals from these three different states. Perceptions of injustice were, and continue to be, foci for propaganda by al-Qaeda and other takfiri jihadist recruiters seeking new members among North African immigrants in mosque environments, and they directly refer to conceptions of "Muslims under siege" in Chechnya, Kashmir, Iraq, and most significantly, Palestine (Ranstorp 2005, 3). This ideology isn't only being disseminated in person, but is also aided by technological tools such as the Internet and DVDs, and individuals who are pre-disposed to becoming radical, and who through interaction and coming into contact with other radicals subsequently become "operationalized." Shared perceptions of a universal conflict between radical Islam and the West both rely on and reinforce linkages that exist not only between committed Islamists, but also among immigrant communities from one state to the next—a belief that where immigrant experiences are difficult, the *Umma* will provide stability and help. These linkages are key in providing support and encouragement for the entire immigrant population, legitimate and illegal, the vast majority of whom are peaceful, to deal with governmental institutions in host countries. This creates a very serious security dilemma: where does non-radical support for potentially illegal immigrant populations end, and where do networks that facilitate recruitment into radical violent Islamist SMOs and/or add to their tactical capacity begin? The 2005 conviction by French authorities of the Franco-Algerian Ouassini Cherifi indicates how actions such as the provision and production of fake passports help to blur the line between criminal acts and logistical support of terrorist networks—are these to be used to aid illegal immigrants, or to allow terrorist cells to move from one location to the next undetected?

Conclusions

Pushing forward a citizenship and integration based agenda to cure marginalization rationales for terrorism in Europe neglects the importance of the cultural canvas that can facilitate radicalization among North African immigrants. So too can indiscriminate and heavy-handed policing that seems to make the lessons of this cultural past seem more salient today, and reinforces those claims of injustice put forward by takfiri jihadist recruiters. Demanding that immigrant groups change without reciprocal public and real recognition that elements of structural bias, racism/ethno-centrism, and injustice mark North African immigrant experiences in Europe is fraught with the danger of creating polarized identities and fomenting deep-seated separation between European Muslim communities. Without broadly addressing and systematically engaging with socio-political injustices in contemporary North African states, Israel-Palestine, Iraq, the Balkans, Chechnya, Afghanistan, etc., perceptions of injustice will continue to fester among North Africans at home and abroad, not just because of shared conceptions of a North African past, but also because of contemporary European engagement with North Africa, and contemporary immigrant experiences in Europe.

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Effective and efficient security interventions to prevent terrorist actions in Europe require a level of sensitivity and awareness of complex identities and basic grievances, and nuanced and well-informed strategic thinking about locating sites where radicalization may be taking place, how best to prevent it, and how such locations, as key points in North African immigrant community networks lead to both ideological and tactical capacities. French security sources are, in fact, reported to have 40 such sites under constant monitoring, and examples of similar locations in Spain, such as the Mosque in Vilanova y Geltru, are evident in the alleged plot to aid North Africans to fight against coalition forces in Iraq—a plot allegedly headed by an Algerian who had been trained in an Afghani Mujahadin camp (*The Guardian* 2005; *Agence France Presse* 2006). This technically complex form of security engagement is made further difficult by the problems of knowing where criminal conspiracy may become potential terrorist action—in terms of what are apparently "low level" criminal enterprises, such as the counterfeiting of passports and credit card fraud. However, without this careful engagement, there exists the very real possibility of further alienation of these communities.

Ultimately, understanding that there may be basic North African grievances in play at any given moment—grievances that are universally defined by a broad North African or specifically Moroccan, Algerian, or Tunisian experiences, and grievances that may be further exacerbated (or ameliorated) by immigrant experiences specific to the UK, France, and Spain—allows for a clear analytical distinction between radicalization as advanced tactical capacity to carry out radical violent Islamic terrorism in Europe and abroad and general senses of dissatisfaction with regimes around the world. Confusion over these concepts—and lumping potential bases for radicalization together with tangible tactical capacities for radical violent Islamism plays directly into the hands of trans-national takfiri jihadist movements that wish to claim that European states are inherently anti-Islamic, that their actions will lead to injustice, and that such movements are in fact the single way to guarantee conceptions of Islamic human security in a religiously polarized world.

Notes

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1. Takfiri jihadists espouse an ideology of violent confrontation with Kafir, or non-believers, and with those Muslims who they believe oppose their actions and do not support their aims. Takfiri in this case means deviant, though the term may also be used to refer to specific groups who espouse that it is acceptable to break Islamic laws and customs, i.e., to drink, smoke, and eat pork, in pursuit of radical violent jihad.
2. This is a key religious/cultural element of Sunni Maliki Islam, the third largest of four branches of Sunni Islam that emphasizes the practices of the people of the Medina over the *hadith*. This obligation does not denote a need for violent or armed confrontation.
3. These can be found at: www.dod.mil/pubs/foi/detainees/csrt/ARB_Factors_Set_2_1046-1160.pdf.

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