Jihadism in Italy: an analysis of the Islamic State-inspired radicalisation process of Anas El Abboubi and Maria Giulia Sergio

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ABSTRACT

The terrorist group known as IS (The Islamic State) has been remarkably successful in recruiting young European Muslims, including Italians, into joining its armed jihad. IS skilfully uses Islamist narratives to exploit the vulnerability of aggrieved individuals, which raises important questions regarding the role of Islam in the radicalisation process. This dissertation conducts an analytical inquiry into the journey to radicalism of two young Italian jihadists, Anas El Abboubi and Maria Giulia Sergio, in an attempt to present qualified supportive evidence for the claim that Islam is used as a justification factor rather than being the primary motivator in the adoption of radical beliefs. The purpose of this study is to investigate how the two subjects internalise IS's framing ideology and to better understand how ordinary narratives of discrimination and other non-ideological grievances are hidden behind Islamist discourse. With the analysis of the selected case studies, this research aims at highlighting that the phenomenon of homegrown radicalisation is not religious, but rather that religion serves as an ideological contour for the legitimisation of the terrorist group's message.

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Abbreviation

IS, Islamic State, also called ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria), ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levante), and Daesh, which is the acronym for the Arabic translation of ISIL.

Glossary

Al Kafirun are the disbelievers, the infidels, those who reject the Oneness of God and the message sent by Prophet Mohammad.

Du'a is the supplication intended to ask God favours and forgiveness.

Dunya literally means world but it is often used to refer to frivolous heartly concerns as opposed to the spiritual sphere.

Haram refers to something forbidden by the Islamic law.

Hijra originally intended to describe the Prophet's peaceful journey to Medina after him and his followers were persecuted in Mecca. The Islamic State uses it as a call to arms to migrate away from the land of disbelievers.

Imam means leader and refers to the person leading the prayers in the mosque.

Ka'ba indicates the small cubical black structure located in the centre of the Great Mosque in Mecca. It represents the focal point of prayers.

Khilafah Arabic word for Caliphate, the unification of all Muslim communities under one ruler who is considered to be the descendant of Prophet Mohammad.

Jannah literally means garden but symbolically indicates Paradise.

Munaqqabat are the women wearing the niqab.

Niqab, in the Islamic tradition, denotes the black veil covering the head and the face but not the eyes.

Shahada is the short sentence with which Muslims declare their faith. It testifies that the person is a Muslim or is embracing the religion of Islam.

Shahid indicates a martyr, but it literally means witness, observer. It is used as an honorific to refer to a Muslim who died fulfilling a religious duty.

Sharia is the Islamic law based on the Quran and the sunnah of the Prophet.

Sunnah indicates the set of teachings and behaviours of the Prophet as well as what his companions reported of him. Together with the Quran, it represents the primary source of Islamic tradition.

Tawhid is Islam's central and most important pillar. It indicates the indivisible Oneness of Allah.

Ummah means community, nation. In the context of Islam, it is used to describe the community of believers and thus the whole Muslim world.

Introduction

Less than seven years ago, jihadist violence was widely considered to be in decline, if not defeated, after Osama bin Laden and his closest collaborators had been killed. By the end of 2014, the entrance of the Islamic State to the scene of global jihad signed the recrudescence of Islamist terrorism, inspiring vulnerable youth to fight to return to an invented religious past characterised by fanaticism and revenge (Entenmann et al., 2017:11). Since 2015 the attacks in the United Kingdom, Belgium, Spain, Germany, and France - and even more failing to take place for a variety of reasons - proved that the phenomenon is not limited to the Middle East and North Africa, but that also Europe is experiencing a fresh outbreak of jihadist terrorism. With the recent success of the crackdown on IS in its strongholds in Iraq and Syria, we are witnessing the emergence of the so-called "*self-activating*" terrorists (Picart, 2015:355). The militant Islamist group is successfully inspiring Europe-based individuals to facilitate and legitimise radical violent behaviours. In the majority of the cases, the perpetrators of the attacks are either born or bred in Europe, self-identifying as members of the network but, in reality, unaffiliated from the leadership located in the Middle East and North Africa (Vidino, 2015:7-10).

This phenomenon is called homegrown terrorism. It has been a common trend in most central and northern European countries since the beginning of the last decade, and only over the past few years it has begun to spread across Italy as well, yet in a significantly smaller scale. According to Vidino, the difference should be attributed to demographic reasons. Muslim mass immigration to Italy, in fact, began only in the late 1980s and early 1990s, with a delay of more than 20 years with respect to other European countries. Now, the first second generation of Italian-born Muslims is becoming adult, with only a statistically small yet disturbing quota adopting radical views. They are well familiarised with the culture of their home communities, but slowly becoming angry and intoxicated by what they believe are the West's unkept promises of integration

and social mobility (Vidino, 2014:19-29). This sense of exclusion is accompanied by a hard form of laicism characterising their European communities, which cause them to detach from the society and find refuge and appreciation in radical Islam.

This new wave of Islamism-inspired jihadism has a new face. With the advent of internet and social media, operational scenarios are different. Networks and enabling environments are becoming de-structured. The signals that the radicalisation process has started are more and more impalpable because homegrown jihadists do not have official ties to wider terrorist groups and no longer frequent mosques. The majority are not involved in any violent action, but, rather, limit their militancy to online propaganda, where it is easier to satisfy their subversive nature and disseminate their anti-West hatred. It is an information warfare as they are contributing to creating a virtual Caliphate and connecting a virtual *ummah*. Many remain operational only in the online world and only a few leave for Syria, despite not having any formal military training but only self-indoctrination to the jihadist cause. This is the case of Anas El Abboubi and Maria Giulia Sergio, two renowned Italian jihadists (Vidino, 2015:70-86).

With Islamist terrorism on the rise, the new visibility of Muslim identity is disseminating a fear of its symbols and followers and it is prompting wild speculative assumptions about the relationship between Islamic values and radicalism. In turn, this is also facilitating Islamophobic and xenophobic behaviours, which heighten the alienation and stigmatisation of the European Muslim population, and potentially contribute to the radicalisation of some individuals.

Radicalisation leading to terrorism is a rather slow and pervasive process. It can be considered a social movement as homegrown jihadism is widely driven by social dynamics filled with Islamism-inspired violent rhetoric to the point that the moral and critical conscience is lost (Kirby, 2007:415). The kaleidoscopic

ensemble of root causes explaining the reasons behind the adoption of radical ideologies and behaviours needs to be better understood. Various studies have identified vulnerability factors that predispose some individuals to the adoption of jihadist ideologies, but it is not possible to elaborate a predictive one-size-fits-all jihadist profile as the dynamics are complex and unique for every case (Pretch, 2007; Schmid, 2013). However, if one wants to have a glimpse of the motivations and understand the radicalisation patterns, it is possible to read the messages and the tweets that jihadists post online. We might not understand them in full, but surely, we have become familiar with their personalities (Roy, 2015). The homegrown feature of this new wave of Islamism-inspired jihadism is leading law enforcement agencies as well as experts to focus on the structural internal characteristics of Western societies.

Research question and purpose of the study

All these events lead me to my research question:

- How is Islam being used as a justification in the Islamic State-inspired radicalisation process?

This research study aims at investigating the role of Islamic ideology in the radicalisation process of young Muslims inspired by the Islamic State with a focus on two homegrown Italian jihadists, Anas El Abboubi and Maria Giulia Sergio, who left their hometowns for Syria with the intention of joining IS. The main goal is to show that religious beliefs are not the primary motivators of radicalised actions and justifications for ruthless killings. Instead, this dissertation explores how Islamist rhetoric is used as a ritual to legitimise in-group membership and to settle the identity crisis of vulnerable people, while satisfying their lost sense of belonging and upgrading their social status.

This dissertation is rather straightforward in its objective. It provides an explanatory and phenomenological analysis to promote a better understanding of the various psychosocial factors involved in the radicalisation process and how young troubled Muslims find refuge in extremist Islamist rhetoric. I am not concerned with investigating the content of Islam's sacred text and teachings and their vulnerability to exploitation by radical groups. Instead, I draw upon a rich theoretical base in order to explore the main narratives characterising the radicalisation process of two young homegrown Italian jihadists to identify the non-ideological factors that make them vulnerable and receptive to extremist rhetoric. My goal is to understand why and how these acts are associated with religious justifications.

As there is little to no academic research applying the presumed root causes of radicalisation to the Italian jihadist panorama, with the analysis of the selected case studies I go beyond discussing the phenomenon in an exclusively theoretical manner. I look for explanations in a puzzle of social and

psychological real-life issues in order to understand how what the literature agrees to be the most common factors of radicalisation are channelled through Islamist rhetoric as a justification for the radical and violent ideology adopted by Anas and Maria Giulia.

Given the current Islamophobic sentiments on the rise in Italy, it is of the utmost importance to examine what role faith plays in IS's recruitment process. As government and media reports frequently draw links between Islamic ideology and violent jihadism, this is creating a fertile soil for Islamophobia to rise and it is raising concerns within European Muslim communities. In fact, the misinterpretation and misunderstanding of the role of Islam in the radicalisation process of IS-inspired youth is putting at risk the entire Islamic *ummah* by branding all Muslims as terrorists in the eyes of the rest of the population. Such links only intensify the existing intolerance and fear, serving the purpose of IS's agenda. Therefore, the apparent use of religious values to justify radical actions needs to be researched.

Moreover, trying to answer the research question of this study is connected with the issues included in the security agenda of almost all European countries (Europol, 2017). In other words, there is an urgent need to review and dismantle the notion that Islamic values incite to embrace IS's brutal ideology: to understand what are the issues that young jihadists hide behind a distorted Islamist rhetoric in order to design effective counterterrorism and de-radicalisation programmes without being misguided. Radicalisation is really a complex puzzle and as such cannot be simplified. Understanding the root causes of the exploitation of Islam and the modus operandi of IS's persuasive grip is critical to top decision-makers and law enforcement agencies as it facilitates their identification and, as a consequence, increases the possibility for intervention. In fact, it is vital to intervene on these push factors, otherwise there will always be a crowded pool of individuals vulnerable to the appeal of radical ideologies (Renard, 2017:6).

Structure of the thesis

In order to adequately answer the research question of the dissertation, this paper is divided into six chapters that reflect the different stages required to reach useful findings. Chapter One is dedicated to the explanation of several ambiguous and politically charged terms that are fundamental when investigating the topic of radicalisation. This aids at uncovering potential misunderstandings related to critical contested terms and clarifies how they are intended throughout this paper.

Following the conceptual analysis, in Chapter Two I highlight the theoretical framework in support of my research. The literature review is aimed at reviewing and discussing in detail the most commonly agreed-upon causes of homegrown radicalisation in the West. Apart from being a theoretical summary, this section also stresses the limitations of the existing scholarly literature and identifies the research gaps that my dissertation intends to fill as well as emphasising the nature of my contribution to the existing knowledge on the topic.

Next, in Chapter Three I conduct a thorough explanation of my methodology. In this section, I outline the advantages of using the narrative analysis of case studies, but I am also critical of its disadvantages. It is important, in fact, to conduct the research while being aware not only of the strengths of the method used but also of its limitations in order to be objective about the reliability of the findings.

Chapter Four and Chapter Five represent the body of context of my research. In these sections, I explore the ways in which Anas and Maria Giulia embraced IS's message and made its radical ideology their own to solve their personal battles. More specifically, in the fourth chapter I narrate the stories of the two Italian jihadists based on a wide range of available Internet content. In the fifth chapter, instead, I discuss the findings revealed during the analysis of the

publicly available data, in particular text and video interviews, phone interceptions, and original jihadist material. This discussion links my findings to the concepts explained in Chapter Two and the literature reviewed in Chapter Three. Here, I identify broad framing narratives and show how young jihadists inspired by IS use them in the guise of Islamic values in an attempt to find answers to their personal psychological and social battles. This chapter filters the available material on Anas and Maria Giulia surrounding each explored theme and is key in framing my argument.

In Chapter Six, I broaden the discussion by moving the specific focus of the research to a more general view. I move beyond discussing the peculiarities of the selected case studies to conducting a more comprehensive and expansive analysis of IS's ideology in the radicalisation process in the way it leverages key vulnerabilities of would-be jihadists and not only of Anas and Maria Giulia.

Finally, in the conclusive chapter, I summarise the results of my research and the findings in support of my initial assumption and research question. Although I recognise that the findings of the case studies cannot be generalised to a wider sample of Italian or European jihadists, the aim of this chapter is to recap the most relevant points highlighted throughout the study and to suggest ideas for further research.

Chapter One: Understanding the terminology

Investigating the topic of radicalisation requires the use of several ambiguous and politically charged terms. For example, it is essential to understand what it is meant by being radical in order to explore the root causes of the process and be able to detect them at an early stage. Scholars and experts have yet to agree on a commonly shared definition of what words such as terrorism and radicalisation mean, and hence the terminology itself is a cause of confusion (Sedgwick, 2010). In particular, the notion that terrorists were foreign-born and foreign-trained individuals, entering a Western country with the purpose of conducting an attack has changed as homegrown, Western-born and Western-bred jihadists are the authors of an increasing number of attacks targeting their homelands. In this brief section, I highlight the most used definitions related to the phenomena dealt with in this research study as they provide the foundations not only for understanding the literature review, but for building the dissertation's body structure.

Radicalisation

Being the core topic around which this dissertation revolves, it is essential to understand the definitional debate over the concept of radicalisation as the lack of consensus on its definition has proven to be a key challenge in grasping how this phenomenon works. Most scholars consider radicalisation as a gradual process through which individuals familiarise with and later adopt extremist political or religious ideologies and may eventually encourage or practice violence (Hafez and Mullins, 2015:960). While the majority of the scholars agree on the fact that adopting an extremist set of beliefs - one that is contested and refuted by mainstream society - is a process, some prefer to use the metaphor of a puzzle because it does not imply a linear sequence of events. Studies show, in fact, that radicalisation is a nonlinear phenomenon that entails several push factors and random dynamics, which do not follow an orderly

timeline (Sageman, 2008; Horgan, 2009; Hafez and Mullins, 2015). This is evident in Anas and Maria Giulia's radicalisation paths.

Another point of debate is the involvement of violence. Some scholars consider the justification of violence as a necessary requirement in an individual's radicalisation process (Porter and Kebbel, 2010:213; Vidino, 2011:7). Others, instead, refer to it as a potential but not inevitable risk (Horgan, 2009:152). They stress the difference between radicalisation and violent extremism, which does not only legitimate the use of violence to achieve social or political goals, but also escalates to actual participation in terrorist activities. In other words, radicalization may be a precondition for violent extremism, but it does not directly imply that radicals are bound to become violent extremists (Hafez and Mullins, 2015:960-961). In this dissertation, I will refer to both subjects as radicals for simplicity purposes and because, despite having explicitly incited to violent behaviours, whether or not they concretely took part in violent terrorist activities in Syria remains unknown.

Salafi jihadism

One of the most frequent argument when speaking of jihadism is that it is unfairly associated with the religious notion of jihad. For the purpose of this study, it is important to differentiate between jihadism – "*a modern revolutionary political ideology mandating the use of violence to defend or promote a particular, very narrow vision of Sunni Islamic understandings*" (Neumann, 2014:9) - and the Islamic concepts of jihad. In Islamic doctrine, in fact, jihad is manifested in its greater and lesser forms. Both are synonyms for struggle or strive, but while the greater jihad refers to the inner efforts to improve oneself by obeying to Allah's will, the lesser form justifies the use of violent force when Islam itself is in danger and no peaceful alternative is possible - yet very strict rules apply. Therefore, this paper takes into consideration the conceptual confusion that leads many to commonly confuse

jihadism with jihad and to refer to it as a "*holy war*" that sees the Muslim *ummah* in its entirety against the Western world (Wiktorowicz, 2006).

This definitional confusion, however, is particularly encouraged by Salafi jihadists, who minimise the more spiritual and non-violent side of the concept of jihad. As a movement, Salafi jihadism endorses a strategic religious plan of recreating past Muslim glory in the form of a great Islamic state, eliminating present national boundaries. To do this, it encourages a tactic of violent jihad and terror legitimised as the only means to their end. They urge all Muslims to understand that Islam is in a constant state of decline caused by Western globalisation and attacks to Muslim countries. Thus, they promote the restoration of an authentic form of Sunni Islam, an extremely puritanical interpretation centred on strict devotion to the concept of *tawhid* and which rejects all other forms of interpretation in an attempt to reinstate the pious era of Prophet Mohammed (Wiktorowicz, 2006:208).

However, not all the adherents to the Salafi movement are jihadists. In fact, while all Salafists share common religious values, they embrace different interpretations of some contextual matters, including the role of jihad. While Salafi purists do not engage in politics and promote non-violent educational methods (Wiktorowicz, 2006:217-221), Salafi politicos take a more favourable position towards political engagement and use it as a vehicle to promote their purist interpretation of Islam (Wiktorowicz, 2006:221-225). Finally, Salafi jihadists reject man-made laws to avoid human subjectivity and impose their own version of social norms with force (Wiktorowicz, 2006:225-228).

The Islamic State

The concepts of radicalisation and Salafi jihadism outlined above have little value on their own if they are not contextualised within this dissertation topic. To narrow down the focus, I will explore the two phenomena in relation to my

research question in the context of Islamist radicalisation and, in particular, the radicalisation process inspired by the Islamic State.

In June 2014, from a mosque in Mosul, Iraq, a Sunni militant group proclaimed the establishment of a new *Khilafah* called the Islamic State and led by Abu Bakr Al Baghdadi. Since then, its ruthless violence accompanied by Islamist justifications have been a cause of concern across the Western world. The literature abounds with explanations of IS's core narratives and of the most salient points of its strategy. To begin with, the group aims at re-establishing the golden age of Islam, which was a pious era later intoxicated by the West. This is in line with the Salafi tradition on which the group has built its ideology. IS, in fact, identifies Western civilisation as the main enemy of Islam. Their jihad is global as it aims at defeating the 'devil' not only in the Middle East. The creation of a unified global *ummah* is intended as part of a bigger plan aimed at erasing all Western influences (National Centre of Excellence for Islamic studies, 2016). As explained in one issue of Dabiq, IS's most read online magazine, "*Just as they terrify the Muslims in the lands of Islam, so should you terrify the disbelievers in their homelands. But unlike them, your terror shall be just, an equitable response to their crimes against Islam and the Muslim nation.*" (ISIS, 2016:29). It is presented not as a senseless violence, but as retaliation.

Like for other Salafi jihadist groups, IS's ideology repudiates political pluralism and diversity of thought, and does not accept any compromise. It justifies its violence through its commitment to maintaining *tawhid,* fighting *al kafirun* and mounting offensive on non-Muslim territories to achieve the full establishment of the Caliphate (National Centre of Excellence for Islamic studies, 2016). The group's apocalyptic narrative of the world promises rewards in *Jannah* to its soldiers and has a detailed political plan to reinstate a successful and smoothly-run Caliphate. It draws upon a strategic reinterpretation of injustices and group identity through the lens of Salafi jihadism (Westphal, 2017:19).

Foreign fighters

Defining the figure of foreign fighters is particularly complex as definitional arguments often fail to match the fighters' sense of identity. Nevertheless, the literature agrees that they have distinguishing characteristics, which are (a) joining an insurgency; (b) not having the citizenship of the country where they engage fighting; (c) not being openly supported by a State; and finally (d) being motivated by ideological rather than pecuniary rewards (Hegghammer, 2013: 57-58).

Believed to have started in the 1980s in Afghanistan, the phenomenon is gaining renewed attention due to the recent flow of IS-aligned foreign soldiers into Syria (Hegghammer, 2013). In fact, one of the most remarkable element of IS' success is the group's ability to attract supporters from abroad. Although the fighters do not constitute the majority of combatants in the Caliphate, the number of those travelling from European countries to strongholds in the Middle East is striking. As a consequence, their return to their countries of origin represents the highest threat for several European States as they go home more radicalised and determined to pursue their cause (Boncio, 2017). Anas and Maria Giulia fall into this category as both engaged armed conflict on foreign soil, without being officially affiliated to any military organisation and apparently more due to ideological rather than material rewards.

Homegrown terrorism

Experts are saying that IS is on the verge of military collapse, but its ideology is still very much alive. It is harder to defeat, and it is re-emerging in the form of "*do-it-yourself terror*" involving homegrown self-declared jihadists choosing ordinary citizens as targets of their attacks (Entenmann, 2017:12). The new phenomenon of homegrown terrorism is causing a paradigm shift in the radicalisation process and it is encouraging further recruitment. It is characterised by two key dimensions: belonging to the West and autonomy from

terrorist groups located abroad. A review of the literature discussing this issue indicates that, in order to be homegrown terrorists, individuals need not be born in a Western country as long as they have a strong attachment to it. In other words, they have either spent their formative phase in the West or are culturally influenced by a Western lifestyle. In addition to this, they must act independently from a foreign militant network and on their own initiative, although the degree of autonomy and the possibility of having had outside contacts is still much debated.

Upon closer inspection, all the definitions present in the literature focus on different aspects of the phenomenon depending on what the purpose of the research is and stress the importance of either the upbringing location or the citizenship and birth place (Crone and Harrow, 2011:521-523).

Both subjects of the case studies analysed in this dissertation can be defined as homegrown terrorists and have, indeed, been charged with offences of this type before travelling to Syria. However, while Maria Giulia Sergio was born in Italy, Anas acquired the Italian citizenship after having moved from Morocco at an early age. Therefore, in this study, I will focus on a more expanded definition that emphasises the role of education upbringing in a Western country (Precht, 2007) rather than narrowing it down to being both born and raised in it (Nesser, 2008; Genkin and Gutfraind, 2011).

Chapter Two: Literature Review

In conducting this literature review, my intention is not to nominate one model of radicalisation as superior or one factor as more decisive than others, nor it is to suggest new ones. The following review, instead, should be considered a beginning and a recognition of the assumed factors of radicalisation, with two objectives. Firstly, I summarise the literature review on the most commonly agreed-upon causes of radicalisation among current models investigating homegrown terrorism in the West. Secondly, in Chapter Four and Chapter Five I use these underlying themes to guide my analysis of the two selected case studies supporting this research paper.

While the most significant factors influencing the process of radicalisation are roughly predictable, the different dynamics with which they manifest are preventing the creation of an overarching jihadist profile. In fact, there is no consensus on the time frame nor on the order of the process (Klausen et al, 2015:68). With this in mind, my theoretical summary acknowledges that it is not possible to identify a defined and comprehensive set of factors driving radicalisation at the individual level, but it is nevertheless possible to highlight the most frequent ingredients. As no single factor can be considered causal on its own, the scholarly community agrees on a combination of four root causes that, in different intensities and scales, may facilitate the adoption of violent beliefs and behaviours: grievances, networks, ideologies, and enabling environments.

Causes of radicalisation

<ins>Grievances</ins>

When speaking of the root causes of radicalisation, a dominant concept at all levels of analysis is that of grievance. Research suggests that contextual factors, such as marginalisation and discrimination as well as economic deprivation,

play a crucial role in setting the stage for the adoption of radical beliefs, in particular if the perceived injustices are experienced in relation to other individuals or groups. Grievances can be related to political, economic, or social contexts and can be individual or collective. They lead to a cognitive opening as the individual identifies with the victim of a larger threatened group. It follows an identity crisis and a quest for a new outlook on life that is often exploited by extremist groups, such as IS, by using a victimhood narrative to instigate anger and justify political violence (Aghabi et al., 2016).

From a socio-economic perspective, the perceived discrepancy between expectations of personal upgrade and the current status quo can be a persuasive motivation to justify and use violence. When indicators of relative deprivation, such as high poverty and unemployment rates, are associated with in-group inequality, they become even more powerful. Grievances, however, transcend economic disadvantages and also involve religious and ethnic discrimination. In many European countries, being Muslim is seen as a synonym for immigrant. This is creating a xenophobic and Islamophobic environment that promotes the idea of second-rate citizens because of faith or ethnicity (Schuurman et al, 2016). As a consequence of this culture of social stigma, some Europe-born or Europe-raised Muslims detach from their Western upbringing and fully embrace their Islamic identity. Fleischmann and Voas (2012:532 cited in Hafez and Mullins, 2015:963) call this self-reinforcing marginalisation process "*reactive religiosity*". Thus, second-generation European Muslims are not happy with their host societies, but many do not have the possibility to return to their country of origin, where they would also be seen as foreigners. Trapped as they are in this "*double sense of non-belonging*" (Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2010:800), they become more receptive toward the radical purified interpretation of Islam suggested by Salafists promoting the removal of all cultural and mundane impurities (Hafez and Mullins, 2015:963).

Political grievances, instead, refer to the perception that policies of Western governments in Muslim countries in the Middle East and North Africa are unjust and are unfairly targeting fellow Muslims. The moral outrage towards events such as the protracted American occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq or the Western position on the Arab-Israeli conflict is very common in radical propaganda and depicts Western countries as biased against Muslim populations. This leads frustrated individuals to adopt group grievances based on shared ethnic or religious identity as their own. As they cannot address these grievances through legal channels to obtain effective changes, some individuals embrace extremist beliefs and justify violence because they see it as a moral act needed to revenge Muslims' sufferings (Schuurman et al., 2016:11). According to the 2016 report of the WANA Institute, IS provides a concrete opportunity to the youth looking for political accomplishments after the failure of the Arab Spring revolutions. Contrary to other Islamist groups, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, which promoted gradual political changes, IS has already set up a running political structure, which is alluring to those in search of tangible and quick rewards (Aghabi et al., 2016:13-14). The literature agrees on the notion of jihadism as a factor that facilitates the satisfaction of a sense of belonging, personal accomplishments, and a purpose in life (Hafez and Mullins, 2015; Aghabi et al., 2016; Schuurman et al., 2016).

With this context in mind, it is possible to recognise that IS exaggerates the tensions existing between the in-group members and the 'others', the infidels, in order to give them motivation and encouragement to join their cause. According to Roy (2004 cited in Dzhekova, R. et al., 2016:47), this recruitment strategy distances European radicals from their culture and territory as they feel closer to a virtual *ummah*. Building on from this conceptualisation, in the analysis of the selected case studies I try to explore how some of the aforementioned imaginary or real grievances are exploited through religious

rhetoric with the intention to persuade individuals' minds to join the armed jihad.

<u>Networks</u>

Some scholars consider the radicalisation process to be a group phenomenon as individuals do not usually radicalise in isolation, but rather after a period of intense social interactions with other jihadists (Sageman, 2004; Bakker 2006). These ties, however, do not necessarily rely on formal communications with global Salafi networks. Instead, today's would-be jihadists often develop kinship bonds with local radicals without the participation of an official recruiter. These friendly local circles offer opportunities to satisfy psychology needs, such as providing those feeling marginalised with a sense of personal empowerment and a strong group identity, even in virtual networks which tolerate an extremist subculture, and hence serve as ideological sanctuaries (Silke, 2008:111).

In fact, many young European Muslims experience an identity crisis as they are divided between the religious culture inherited from their parents and the Western laic society where they live. As they are not understood by neither their parents nor their local *Imams*, they turn to others who share the same conflicting position. The ongoing Islamophobic atmosphere in Europe is facilitating Muslim urban segregation as many fence in communities with the same cultural and religious background (Precht, 2007:42-46). The existence of these parallel societies may contribute to creating group contexts where pre-existing friendship bonds with already radicalised individuals are an easy route to armed jihad. Recruitment, in fact, is facilitated if individuals share similar beliefs or are part of the same social category. If they feel that there is a shared sense of identity and common struggles, they are more likely to align with the group's frame of reference and identify themselves with the role of victims as well. A group that promotes and justifies the use of violence, in fact, must rely on the

solidarity and trust built among its members to survive (Hafez and Mullins, 2015:964-966).

Scholars disagree on the role of extremist networks and organisations as they have been found to be either directly or indirectly involved in the radicalisation process. The models proposed by Wiktorowicz (2004) and Moghaddam (2005) consider radical networks as crucial in actively recruiting individuals, waiting for the right opportunity to integrate the new recruit. However, Sageman (2004) and for the New York Police Department (Bhatt and Silber, 2007), networks are a "*bunch of guys*" (Sageman, 2004:115) who mostly reach out to bigger cells for training opportunities or for strategic purposes, such as increasing their public exposure, without them being directly involved in the radicalisation process. The organisations themselves are not as important as the social movements that they inspire, which are the real instigator of radical beliefs. In fact, studies show that groups of homegrown jihadists are increasingly proliferating and operating without any formal ties to larger terrorist organisations, which is not the same as saying that they are not inspired by groups like IS (King and Taylor, 2011:612-614).

As there is evidence in support of both sides of the argument on the role of extremist networks, the threat posed by small homegrown jihadist groups should not be minimised. Although established terrorist organisations are more and more indirectly involved in the radicalisation process of young European Muslims, they are inspiring the development of independent cells with strong in-group dynamics, which are pursuing an even more effective terror strategy. In other words, radicalisation is the outcome of a multi-faceted process, and social networks are generally acknowledged as a crucial ingredient incentivising individuals to adopt extremist beliefs. Group identity and categorisation in the context of the virtual *ummah* had a crucial role in the radicalisation process of Anas and Maria Giulia. Indeed, they are key to understanding the dynamics of their journey to armed jihad.

Ideology

Ideologies have a different meaning depending on the area of research. In this study, I consider ideologies as a set of political opinions entrenched in universal, even utopian, beliefs with the aim of either justifying or criticising the status quo (Westphalia, 2018:21). A key assumption supported by the literature and guiding my analysis is that radical movements often identify a socio-political issue, assign responsibility to an external force, and ultimately create a "*call to arms*" to mobilise collective action (Benford and Snow, 1988:198-202 cited in Westphal, 2018:21). In this context, ideologies serve as master narratives through which the group contextualises grievances into broader criticisms of the status quo using symbolic but rather explicit rhetoric to justify and encourage the use of political violence.

Studies have shown that ideologies cause observable changes in the behaviours of would-be jihadists, despite not being alone a causal factor of the radicalisation. This process can either take place with the facilitation of a radical milieu (Wiktorowicz, 2005; Helfstein, 2012) or in isolation – as for the case of lone wolves -, but in either case, individuals who radicalise are driven to persuade others to join their cause (Klausen et al., 2015:68). They question established norms and adopt a specific perspective of the world which frames existing social conditions as unfair and tyrannical. This framing strategy leverages shared religious or ethnic identities as it relies on the subjectivity of the individuals rather than their objectivity. As individuals are presented with this fatalistic idea of the world they live in, they are outraged and will inevitably seek rebellious ways to make their own version of good triumph. However, these narratives deliberately minimise or neglect religious values that are in evident contradiction with the underlying radical message (Westphalia, 2018:24).

In this dissertation, I follow the above conceptualisation of ideology to explore the role of IS's message in the radicalisation process of Anas and Maria Giulia

as well as in the wider jihadist panorama. The group's narratives transform Salafi values into an easy equipment of pre-made apocalyptic sentences and prophetic traditions that are used as a sacred script for the group's strategic propaganda. Key to its ideology is the exploitation of grievances that are not personal, but rather are adopted from the representation of Muslim oppression. The underlying themes of the West's moral bankruptcy, dissolute behaviours, and indiscriminate war against Muslims allow the group to present its armed jihad as the only legitimate means by which Muslims can defend their puritanical faith and defeat their enemy. IS makes sense of events through its ideological lenses and fabricates a twisted interpretation of the world to legitimise its violent acts (Mahood and Rane, 2017:18).

Enabling environments: internet and social media

Radicalisation is understood as a process that takes place at the "*intersection of an enabling environment and a personal trajectory*" (European Commission's Expert Group on Violent Radicalisation, 2008:9). An enabling environment is a physical or virtual setting that assists individuals on ideological and material terms during their radicalisation process. While training camps located in the Middle East are factories churning out effective terrorists prepared to conduct attacks in their countries or to travel to Europe to execute their plots, the internet and social media have become the easiest and most fruitful recruitment pool in the West via self-indoctrination. With IS's persuasive online propaganda, for vulnerable individuals the web becomes the only source of information and a way to meet like-minded people free from watchful eyes and physical limitations (Center for the Study of Democracy, 2016:32).

The internet and social media do not only show proclivity to work as propaganda platforms where terrorist groups can provide information on their jihadist movements and disseminate extremist narratives through videos, audios, tweets, and magazines, but they are also a resourceful platform to gain knowledge about how to construct homemade explosives or how to travel to foreign countries in

complete anonymity. The added value of social media is the possibility of engaging instantly with jihadist content so as to bring vulnerable individuals into the orbit of terrorist activities. As Hafez and Mullins (2015:969) comment, social media brought a new "*relational and horizontal dimension*" to the radicalisation process. The diffusion of ideological content is horizontal because information is not disseminated exclusively by the leadership, but anyone interested in sharing jihadist material can and is rather encouraged to do so. It is relational because it facilitates the development of supporting virtual communities where meaningful social relations are formed and take the place of the ones built in real life (Hafez and Mullins, 2015:969).

By bombarding the web with images of Muslims dying in wars orchestrated by Western countries, the jihadist message is more likely to appeal to vulnerable individuals that turn to online communities to seek answers that they have failed to find elsewhere. In this research paper, I build on from the idea that IS and like-minded Salafi extremist groups create a sense of communal belonging as young European Muslims adopt the cause of distant brothers and sisters and progressively isolate from their home society. As Egerton (2011:94-96 cited in Schuurman, 2016:101) defines it, this "*political imaginary*" fosters indignation and facilitates the acceptance of radical views as terrorist groups astutely turn grievances into a vehicle to make their ideology more appealing (Schuurman et al., 2016).

The role of the online world as facilitator in the radicalisation process is evident in Anas' and Maria Giulia's journey to armed jihad. In my dissertation, I intend to explore the role of internet and social media as both subjects are engaged in online activities, either in the learning or in the mobilisation phase.

The role of religion

The literature uniformly concludes that the radicalisation process is subtle and hard to detect. There is not a comprehensive psychological profile that could

comprise the depth, the length, and indeed the very nature of jihadists' personalities (Precht 2007; Jenkins 2010; Klausen et al, 2015). The most relevant investigative issue to this dissertation is the role of religion as the primary factor instigating individuals to adopt radical views and justify the use of violence.

As Roy (2015) explains, the debate proceeds in two opposing directions: 'Islamisation of Radicalism' and 'Radicalisation of Islam'. The former explores the non-ideological factors that lead troubled youth to find suitable criteria for their revolt in Islamic teachings, yet it does not exonerate religious fundamentalism. His argument stresses the fact that while radical Islam can cause significant societal problems, it does not instigate radicalisation simply because terrorist groups borrow religious frames for political purposes. Being a strong advocate of this approach, Roy claims that ideology is often layered up at a later stage, once vulnerable and angry individuals seeking a new meaning in life channel their frustration through religious discourse. This happens even though the source of their disillusion is non-ideological (Roy, 2015).

Similarly, many scholars argue that the radicalisation process expands beyond religious devotion. Jenkins believes that extremist views are more closely associated with the desire to commit heroic action rather than to obey to an Islamic duty (2010:3). Sageman mentions social networks as more crucial to the proliferation of Salafi jihadist ideology than religious instructions (2004:137-174). Religion is, thus, a means to an end and not a spiritual guideline to armed jihad.

An alternative branch of literature argues that there is a robust connection between religious devotion, in particular Salafi Islam, and violent radicalisation. On the lines of the 'Radicalisation of Islam' argument, many scholars and experts have warned against the belief that religion has nothing to do with what turns individuals into terrorists. Instead, they state that concepts like self-sacrifice and honour are the main causes of radicalised beliefs and actions

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(Silber and Bhatt, 2007; Neumann, 2013). Among this line of literature, the four-phase radicalisation model set up by the New York City Police Department (Silber and Bhatt, 2007) stands out for concluding that extremist acts are a direct consequence of the adoption of Salafi ideology as a spiritual guide. They use the aforementioned dynamics of identity crisis affecting Western Muslims as a proof that Islam is fundamentally incompatible with the Western world.

Along these lines, Neumann points out that radical behaviours could not be explained without investigating the ideological presumptions that individuals have come to adopt (Neumann, 2013:880). He identifies ideology as the factor encouraging the use or the rejection of political violence and contradicts Borum's assumption that unless members of terrorist groups have been thoroughly educated on every aspect of their group's ideology, they cannot be considered ideologically well-versed (Borum, 2003). This theory, in fact, suggests that religious indoctrination does not play a crucial role in influencing the radicalisation process. Similarly, several sources have reported that the majority of Islamist fundamentalists are far from being religious experts. Most of them do not have pursued advanced Islamic studies but are, instead, religious novices (Travis 2008; Hasan 2014).

Generally, religion is presumed to be the motive behind an individual's decision to commit or support radical actions, but this association might be superficial. While some individuals truly believe in extremist ideologies, the reasons behind their violent behaviours may be broader. In light of this, my dissertation will follow Roy's theory of 'Islamisation of Radicalism' in an attempt to explain how Islamic discourse is used as a framing strategy to legitimise revolutionary and vengeful interpretations of the world.

Research gaps and my contribution to the research

The literature on radicalisation is useful in painting a picture of the myriad of circumstances that may serve as facilitators in the adoption of radical beliefs. It

discerns a set of common factors that usually appear before and during the radicalisation process and, as such, have proven essential in laying out prevention strategies. It does not, however, sufficiently explore the role of religious ideology in the context of Italian homegrown jihadism.

While Italy has largely escaped the plague of jihadist attacks and does not suffer from the same high levels of radicalisation as its European neighbours, IS has threatened Rome numerous times and the flow of foreign fighters travelling from Italy to Syria is increasing (Marone and Olimpio, 2017). Yet, the scholarly community explores the phenomenon of radicalism in Italy and how its dynamics differ from those of other European countries, but no extensive research has been conducted to investigate how Islamic values are used as mere justification factors in the complex radicalisation process of the two young Italian students, Anas and Maria Giulia (Vidino, 2015; Marone, 2016; Boncio, 2017). With societal tensions growing and Islamophobia on the rise, I believe that it is deeply relevant to go beyond discussing the evolution of jihadism on Italian soil and, instead, to understand what makes these individuals vulnerable to radicalisation through religious rhetoric masked as righteous Muslim conduct.

Vidino (2015), Marone (2016) and Boncio (2017) explored the peculiarity of the phenomenon in Italy. However, while Vidino chose to explain the historical roots of the phenomenon and to investigate the first most evident cases of homegrown jihadism in Italy, Marone focused on the threat of foreign fighters leaving Italy to join the armed jihad in Syria. Similarly, Boncio (2017) focused on Italian foreign fighters returning to their home country "*veteran*" of jihad. While these research papers are highly relevant to my dissertation, they lack an analysis of the root causes of radicalisation. Therefore, my contribution consists in investigating the underlying factors leading the radicalisation process of Anas and Maria Giulia in order to explore how they are framed through Islamist rhetoric in a way to legitimise IS's brutal ideology and satisfy socio-

psychological needs of their aggrieved personalities. The originality of my contribution can be found in the evidence-based focus of the analysis of the subjects' Salafi jihadist discourses.

Chapter Three: Methodology

Methodological approach

In this study, I pursue a critical analytical inquiry. My research builds heavily upon a qualitative review of the relevant approaches to the problem of violent Islamist radicalism in an attempt to give an assessment of the various factors that are assumed to be making young Muslims more vulnerable to IS's brutal ideology. The purpose is to point out major trends and push factors of the radicalisation process and to apply them to the two case studies of Anas and Maria Giulia to show how structural non-ideological factors, disguised as religious justifications, influenced their involvement in radical extremism.

My study engages with a wide range of online content linked to the violent ideologies that influenced or that were promoted by the two subjects. A list of key resources was made publicly available by the Italian authorities following the two operations that led to the capture of the Albanian networks behind both subjects' journeys to Syria. Pre-radicalisation interviews, phone interceptions, original forums' material, and a comprehensive legal document released by the Milano's Office of the Judge for Preliminary Investigations are examined and provide key insights into how the two subjects and those supporting their cause promoted their narratives and interacted with others.

The use of case-specific qualitative data is more suitable for researching the topic of radicalisation, I believe, as it is not possible to develop a single standard jihadist profile. In fact, although several theories and models attempt to describe the stages of the radicalisation process, laying out one that reflects all situational eventualities from an infinite number of cases is an arduous task at best (Hafez and Mullins, 2015).

For this reason, my dissertation is an exercise of theory application, in which I apply what the literature agrees to be the most common root causes of Islamist radicalisation to the situational patterns that make extremist ideologies

appealing to the subjects of the two case studies. The methodology I use goes beyond the mere story narrative and attempts to explain the rationale of using Islamic religious beliefs to justify violent acts inspired or committed by IS, and to explore in what ways these values appear as safe refuge to troubled youth.

Case studies and their advantages

Among the available data types, original data from phone interceptions, video and phone interviews, and public accessible court proceedings provide detailed examples of and invaluable insights into the development dynamics of their radicalisation process.

The case studies analysed in this dissertation are explanatory, which are useful to investigate causal relationships between theoretical observations and empirical findings, such as in the case of theory testing (Yin, 2009). It is important to note that the protagonists' own narratives are vital to this research. The first reason why I chose the two case studies analysed in this dissertation is the amount of available and documented original information. In the design phase, I was aware of the risk of prejudices in case selection, hence they were carefully chosen to avoid any bias. Anas is a so-called 'born again' Muslim of immigrant origins, while Maria Giulia is a young Muslim convert. Both are case points of autochthon radicalism in Italy inspired by IS.

It should be stressed that in order to avoid drawing opinionated rather than evidenced conclusions, I have thoroughly examined the academic foundations surrounding the agreed causes of radicalisation and taken into consideration opinions of a variety of scholars and experts, who work towards refining the understanding of the IS-inspired radicalisation process. These include the branch of literature that strongly supports the existence of a relationship between the adoption of radical beliefs and religious devotion (Silber and Bhatt, 2007; Neumann, 2013).

In addition to this, analysing the words that Anas and Maria Giulia purposely selected to call on their family and the wider Muslim *ummah* to join them in serving the cause of the Caliphate offers a unique opportunity to explore how the person intentionally presents him or herself. In fact, scholars recognise the importance of cultural narratives as they are exploited by radical groups, such as IS (Mahood and Rane:20). This is in line with the general focus of case studies, and of qualitative research as well, which have explanatory and descriptive purposes. For this reason and in an attempt to find a balance between theoretical richness and manageability of the research, I chose narrative inquiry as the basic interpretative method to investigate the case studies. Also called narrative analysis, this discipline focuses on the role of the narrative describing and analysing particular characteristics and situations by arranging the data more coherently yet keeping the complex texture of the stories. With a detailed description of the analytical findings, one can enhance the validity of the data (Polkinghorne, 1995).

Investigating case studies has a number of advantages:
- Collecting detailed qualitative observations reflects and helps explain the complexities of real-life situations at the micro level, which quantitative or other types of qualitative research, such as surveys or interviews, may fail to capture (Yin, 2009);
- It is a valuable alternative when a big sample of the population is difficult to obtain. In the case of my dissertation topic, as it has proven impossible to lay out one-size-fits-all profile for jihadists, case studies provide better insights into the detailed behaviours of the subjects of interest without, of course, aspiring to generalise the conclusions to a wider sample. They can, instead, supply empirical evidence by confirming or refuting the initial assumptions, or could lead to establishing new hypotheses to test (Schuurman et al., 2016:2);

- Finally, case studies allow for greater flexibility and are better equipped to produce interesting findings, benefitting from the richness of theoretical propositions that guide data collection and analysis. In fact, contrary to experiments and surveys, case studies do not create the settings artificially, hence allow the researcher to investigate the area of interest "*in the real world*" (Gomm et al., 2000:5-6).

Reliability and limitations

Conducting research on any topic will always entail limitations. Probably, the primary methodological concern of this and most studies on radicalisation is the lack of primary data on jihadist profiles, which reduces the possibility of using experimental research methods with success. It happens because researchers cannot read the mind of jihadists who already adopted extremist views in an attempt to examine their motivations. Those who are currently in the stages of the process are, for apparent reasons, not available to be involved in research studies, and those who are serving their sentences are unwilling to be interviewed about the real factors leading their journey to radicalism. If available, they are often eclectic and tend to distort the full picture, making it more difficult to collect reliable information (Ahmed and Pisoui, 2016). To put it another way, I am trying to analyse something impalpable, hence it is vital to collect data from a variety of sources for the triangulation of the findings.

As it is impossible to conduct comparative studies with control groups in the field of radicalisation, a lack of empirical rigor is unavoidable. The data I analyse are open source and available online - which, as already mentioned, is one of the reasons guiding my case selection -, and as such are subject to analysis and interpretation. This makes case studies inappropriate for generalising conclusions as the sample size is limited (Tellis, 1997). However, in my opinion, the benefits of using case studies as research methods outweigh the disadvantages of being subjective and difficult to duplicate. In fact, the main theme of my dissertation itself limits the possibility of generalisation, but I

believe that the strong theoretical basis and the fair portrayal of the analytical findings strengthen the validity of my claims.

For all the aforementioned reasons, my research study does not attempt to be a comprehensive and detailed summary of the IS-inspired radicalisation process of young Italians, but it provides an original analysis of the factors behind the radicalisation journey undertaken by Anas and Maria Giulia. It contributes to a more detailed understanding of the roles that non-religious factors play in facilitating the adoption of radicalism by following the idea suggested by King and Taylor, which is that "*empirical verification of the existing assumptions surrounding the process leading up to terrorism should take precedence over additional theorising*" (2011:616). Thus, my study is a theory exercise leading the way for further practical research on the topic.

Chapter Four: Selected cases of homegrown jihadist radicalisation

In analysing the radicalisation process of Anas and Maria Giulia, it is essential to place it in the appropriate context. Drawing on a rich database of original jihadist material and legal documents made publicly available by the Italian authorities, this chapter briefly reconstructs Anas and Maria Giulia's backgrounds and main activities before, during and after the radicalisation took place. Beyond the contextualisation of their biographies in the evolving Italian jihadist scenario, these two particular cases are mapped in a way so as to explore key elements of their transformation. I believe that it is essential to pay attention to jihadists' biographies because they provide key insights into the social and personal contexts they are exposed to and that might have been crucial in making them vulnerable to radical propaganda. Therefore, the information presented here serves as a basis for the analysis laid out in the next chapter attempting to answer my research question.

Homegrown jihadism in Italy

Italy's experience with jihadism differs from that of other European countries. There are several characteristics that would make it the perfect focal point for jihadist networks. For example, it is closer to the conflict-torn regions of the Middle East and North Africa than many other European countries, and it embodies the symbol of Christianity and Western civilisation. In fact, Rome is frequently mentioned in IS's propaganda and the group named its official magazine 'Rumiyah', Rome in Arabic. Nonetheless, Italy's jihadist threat is insignificant in comparison with the rest of Western Europe facing multiple attacks per year and maintaining the highest security alert level (Marone and Vidino, 2017). The phenomenon has been defined "*disappearance typology of jihadism*" (Solfrini, 2017) as Italy has not been directly attacked but is threatened by the issue of returning foreign fighters.

Experts claim that the Italian jihadist scenario owes its peculiarities to a demographic factor. Mass Muslim immigration to Italy came in the late 1980s and early 1990s, with over 20 years of delay with respect to the rest of Europe (Vidino, 2015:19-20). During the last decade, Italian authorities did not face any evident form of homegrown radicalisation, but what is believed to be the turning point that changed the face of Italian jihadism is the failed attack targeting the military compound of Santa Barbara, close to Milan, in 2009. Although the author, Mohammed Game, a Libyan national living in Italy since 2003, does not represent a case of homegrown jihadism, the attack is considered to be the moment when Italy realised that it was not going to escape the risk of domestic radicalisation (Vidino, 2014:42-47). In fact, now that the second generation of Italian-born Muslims is becoming adult with only a statistically small yet disturbing quota turning to radicalisation, the country is beginning to test IS-inspired jihadism with bottom-up propaganda proliferating and inspiring small independent clusters and foreign fighter mobilisation (Marone and Vidino, 2017).

Italian homegrown radicals are called 'jihadisti da tastiera', which translates into 'keyboard jihadists'. The internet and social media remain their operational platforms as the majority of them do not engage in violent activities but limit their jihadist fight to disseminating IS-inspired material online (Vidino, 2015:203). In fact, in Italy radical individuals controlling or frequenting mosques are exceptions. Generally, radicals form small groups and orient all their activities to the online world, where they are in contact with other prominent figures of jihadism. They are leaderless clusters without a formal hierarchical structure. Yet, only a statistically insignificant number becomes violently militant or develop contacts in an operational form (Vidino, 2014:87-91). Travelling solo to any place where jihad is fought without anyone having facilitated the process is not the common rule among most of the Italian radicals. More frequently, individuals make use of their pre-existing personal ties to find

a gatekeeper with the right connections to facilitate their travels (Vidino, 2014:95).

For all the aforementioned reasons, it is harder for Italian law enforcement agents to detect and quantify the threat. The lack of institutional figures renders jihadists manoeuvrable and dynamic while continuing to adhere to IS's grand vision (Solfrini, 2017). Although the jihadist community represents only a small minority of the Muslim population in Italy, it is impossible to provide exact numbers but just rough estimates of its scale. As the majority of homegrown radicalising individuals in Italy have either tried or succeeded in travelling to Syria, research studies focus more on the phenomenon of foreign fighters. Anas El Abboubi and Maria Giulia Sergio are among them.

Anas El Abboubi

Born in Morocco in 1992, Anas moved to Vobarno, a mountain village close to Milan, when he was seven. His Muslim family perfectly integrated in the Italian community and Anas became passionate about music. While studying to become an electronics consultant, he rapped in his free time and started to establish himself in the Brescian hip hop scene with the name of McKhalif. He was active on YouTube where he used to post his melodic Islam-inspired music and collaborations with Dr. Domino, a fellow but more famous rapper with Moroccan descent as well (Vidino, 2015:60-61). In March 2012, he even appeared in a short MTV documentary on young Muslim musicians. In the interview, he shared with eloquent openness conflicting sentiments towards his town, whose inhabitants he compared to a "*racist Heidi*" yet ready to help when needed (MTV Italia, 2012).

Although used to light drugs, alcohol and to channelling his rebellion through rap music, Anas drastically changed his lifestyle and the content of his YouTube channel. After a re-discovery of the Islamic faith, it was only in the summer of 2012 that he started to follow, share, and produce Islamist jihadist propaganda

material. From McKhalif he became Anas Abu Shakur. The newly-found religious fervour was evident in his speeches against Western values and institutions, from capitalism to the banking system and lifestyle. He abandoned music because *haram*, started to wear Islamic clothes and spent most of his time online visiting jihadist websites (Vidino, 2015:62-63).

He even tried to establish the Italian branch of Sharia4Italy, the radical network promoting the imposition of *sharia* law in Europe and that was highly popular in Belgium and England. Anas not only did not have the same success as his European counterparts, but he even captured the attention of the Italian authorities, who were concerned by his increasing online jihadist propaganda activities and that he could be planning attacks in the city of Brescia (Marone, 2016:12). Alongside sharing traditional jihadist material, he also recorded his own videos and researched specific locations on Google maps. However, the Digos in Brescia, the Police department dealing with political security, began the investigations when Anas went to their headquarters to ask how to arrange a public protest where he was planning to burn Israeli flags and show posters against Obama. This manifestation, as he himself admitted, was aimed at protesting against 'The Innocence of Muslims', an American movie with strong Islamophobic tones (Vidino, 2015:60).

He had made explicit that he wanted to travel to fight jihad in Syria, despite being also fascinated by Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb operating in Mali. As he did not know personally other jihadists, he sought help online. He was in contact with Giuliano Delnevo, another Italian foreign fighter who died in Syria fighting alongside the Al Qaeda's branch of Al Nusra in June 2013 (Vidino, 2015:64). When Delnevo died, as the communication between the two had been constant, Anas was arrested and charged with the accusation of providing training and instructions for terrorism purposes. However, he was released shortly after given the amateurism of his representations which were not found a real threat (Vidino, 2015:67).

A few months later, Anas travelled to Turkey and from there he managed to arrive in Syria to join the Caliphate as a foreign fighter. He maintained an active online presence. On Facebook, he posted pictures of himself with heavy weapons, praises to the Syrian population, and videos, including the one containing his spiritual testament and another in which he rapped his denounce of the "*perverse and melancholic*" Western society (Vidino, 2015:68). His last call with his mother was in January 2014. To date, his whereabouts remain unclear, but his war name, Abu Rawa Al Italy, is mentioned in a Syrian database listing 122 aspiring kamikaze. After Anas' departure, the Italian Police started the 'Balkan Connection' counter-terrorism operation, which uncovered a jihadist cell with two Albanians who facilitated Anas' travel to Syria (Panorama, 2015).

Anas was not shy to share his ideas in front of a camera. The original jihadist material and the interviews with his close group of friends are key to collecting insights into his troubled and aggrieved personality.

Maria Giulia Sergio

Maria Giulia was born in Torre del Greco, near Naples, in 1987 (Tribunale di Milano, 2016:18). She moved to Inzago, near Milan, with her Catholic family looking for job opportunities as they were having financial problems (Marone, 2016:13). As her dream was to study new medications for degenerative diseases like Alzheimer and Parkinson, she enrolled in the Faculty of Biotechnologies in Milan, whose frenetic city life appealed to her. To pay the student fees she worked at a call centre and in a bar because she did not want to weigh on her family's modest economic situation. In fact, her father was on unemployment insurance while her mother had occasional seamstress jobs (Assumma, 2013).

As she herself narrated, her first contact with Islam happened thanks to a painting. It was a gift from her then Italian boyfriend's grandfather, who loved to travel and collect religious souvenirs. The painting represented the *Ka'ba* in

Mecca. She did not know what it was nor did she was interested in finding it out, but it was "*a beauty dream*" (Assumma, 2013). One day she saw the image of the *Ka'ba* on television and immediately went online to learn more about it. This is how her journey to Islam and, eventually, IS started (Assumma, 2013).

In 2007 she took the *shahada* and converted to Islam. Her identification with the Islamic faith did not involve any man, but she found her way to Islam on her own, despite her family's disapproval. She became a frequent attender of the mosque and started to read the Quran, which she described as "*unbelievable. I started shivering, sweating. I am going to try again tomorrow, I said to myself. It was impossible to go on with the reading, I could not pronounce those words*" (Assumma, 2013). She swapped the usual mini skirt with trousers, long blouses, and scarves, and chose a new name, Fatima az Zahra (Assumma, 2013).

After a trip to Slovenia with her Muslims girl friends, "*something happened*" (Assumma, 2013). She decided to become a *munaqqabat,* so she chose the *niqab* and started covering from head to toe. In the first interviews she released as an ordinary Italian convert, her excitement about her newly found spirituality seemed genuine. She trusted that, even if no one could see her smiling under her black cloth, they could feel it (Assumma, 2013). Although she was subject to all forms of discriminations, from being refused entrance in a supermarket and a bus to being fired from her job, she continued to promote Islam in a pluralistic society and even participated in a popular TV show (Marone, 2016:14).

In 2009, she married a pizza maker of Moroccan origin but divorced after less than two years and blamed her husband's low religious devotion. Her online activity continued until 2013. She was determined to stand out from the crowd and intentionally sought confrontation about religious matters (Marone, 2016:14).

The year 2014 was a turning point in her radicalisation process. She married an Albanian citizen, Aldo Kobuzi, in what was apparently a marriage of

convenience arranged by mutual friends. She was seeking a like-minded strict religious man before travelling to Syria, where otherwise she would have been required to marry a stranger in fulfilment of women's duties within the Caliphate. In fact, a few days after the wedding, they both flew to Turkey and crossed the border to reach Syria. They reportedly settled down in the Governorate of Aleppo, where her husband's family already resided with other Albanian jihadists (Marone, 2016:14-15).

Sources report that Aldo Kobuzi had been to Iraq in a training camp before returning to Italy where he married Maria Giulia. Although she could not technically fight as women's tasks are usually limited to doing housework and taking care of their children's education, Maria Giulia expressed her desire to join the soldiers and was learning how to fire with heavy weapons. Her story became viral in 2015, after the media named her 'Lady Jihad' and published a series of phone interceptions with her family (Marone, 2016:15). Maria Giulia, in fact, managed to convince her entire family to convert to Salafi jihadism and instructed them on how to travel to Syria. However, they were arrested on charges of travel for terrorist purposes before they could leave their hometown. Italian authorities started 'Operation Martese' to capture the Albanian network led by the Kobuzi family. Maria Giulia's mother was eventually granted house arrest due to the deteriorating health conditions and died soon later. Her father died in late 2017 while her sister is still in prison as well as almost all members of Kobuzi's family (Marone, 2016:17).

While Maria Giulia's location is still unclear, the counter-terrorism operation was particularly successful as Italian authorities were able to intercept many of Sergio's family communications via telephone, Skype, and SMS. This led to the identification of key figures involved in the radicalisation and the organisation of Italian foreign fighter mobilisation to Syria. Sergio's family was in contact with Bushra Haik, an Italian-born Canadian citizen who preached radical ideas disguised as Skype lessons on the Quran and Arabic language. She apparently

played a crucial role in the online indoctrination of Maria Giulia (Tribunale di Milano, 2016:4).

Maria Giulia's radicalisation process is not linear. She had apparently succeeded in integrating her newly found Islamic faith with her Western everyday life. All of a sudden, she changed, refused any non-Islamic influence into her life, and threatened her family to sever all contacts if they became disbelievers. Her energetic and talkative personality provides invaluable insights into her framing vision of the world and the Caliphate's cause.

Chapter Five: Case analysis

The overall aim of this research is to explore the master narratives and ideologies that lead to violent radicalism hidden behind an abusive and distorted interpretation of Islam. For this reason, the identification and analysis of Anas and Maria Giulia's discourse and of those who fully or partially sympathised for their cause is crucial. In what follows, I conduct an exploration of the ways in which the two young Italian jihadists embraced IS-inspired ideas and made them their own to find answers to their personal battles.

The key benefit of this analysis is that it enables a better understanding of how the radicalisation process is a systemic phenomenon that exploits ordinary narratives of discrimination and other grievances hiding them behind Islamist justifications. The findings generated from each case study draw on diverse subjective contexts that encompass the specific experiences of second-generation Muslims and Muslim converts in Italy. Questions of social marginalisation, outrage for Western policies targeting countries in the Middle East, feelings of disempowerment, and the need to find a purpose in life are the typical trends arising from the radicalisation process of Anas and Maria Giulia. While both the contexts and the social backgrounds of the two are different, the findings provide overarching narratives to the development of their violent radicalisation.

Broad trends and narratives

<u>**Personal uncertainty and identity crisis**</u>

When people question their own identity and are afraid of what the future has in store for them, they become more vulnerable to adopt any idea as long as it provides them with the clarity and the purpose they were lacking (Adelman and Hogg, 2013). IS proposes a black-and-white worldview that promotes straightforward notions of good and bad alongside a strict code of behaviour to follow. It punishes harshly those who do not conform but promises great

rewards for those who do. This helps reduce uncertainty by offering a specific outlook to observe. It is a defensive framing that identifies an enemy responsible for an issue and eventually becomes offensive as it aims to prevail with violence (Westphal, 2018).

In line with this idea, Maria Giulia defined her discovery of Islam with this quote: "*It is not a conversion, rather a reversion. I found my way back.*" (Assumma, 2013). She was interviewed as one of the very few Italian *munaqqabat.* Although this was before her steep radicalisation process started, the idea of having found a newly and pained purpose in life, "*a new science*" (Assumma, 2013) as she herself called it, recurs in the Skype calls intercepted when she was already in Syria. She tries to persuade her entire family to do the *hijra*: "*You need to understand one thing. Until now, we got everything wrong. (...) We abandoned the Prophet. We kill for that here. (...) Easy* [she laughs] *(...)*" (Serafini, 2015). Her uncertainty and feeling of helplessness in a world that did not understand her spiritual choices are nullified with the adoption of IS's cause. She had a clear understanding of what is right and wrong now thanks to the group's norms and values and appreciates this rather relieving sentiment of clarity.

IS's ideology is well suited for reducing self-uncertainty because it allows self-categorisation and creates clear boundaries for in-group and out-group members as well as specific attributes that reflect their strict worldview as membership criteria. Although this does not directly explain radicalisation, it does indicate a condition under which individuals can self-identify and find a way to make order in their life and reduce uncertainty. By categorising themselves and 'others', they regain control of their present and future, which is important to avoid the harm and the sense of disempowerment that characterised their life (Adelman and Hogg, 2013:436-441).

While for Maria Giulia Islam was a discovery and a drastic change from her previous spiritual path, Anas was a 'born-again' Muslim whose faith was given

at birth but later became the reason he was disappointed in his family's Westernised lifestyle. In fact, in times of uncertainty, individuals tend to identify with the aspect of their life that is under attack. Therefore, in present times of increasing Islamophobic and anti-immigrant tones, identity crises are very common among second-generation Italian Muslims who find themselves managing a double identity but feeling incomplete nonetheless (Emmerling and Yusoufzai, 2017:69).

In line with this thinking, Anas and his friends shared feelings of distress and insecurity: "*We are all afraid. We do not expect anything good for the future.*" and also, "*I feel my generation is lost*" (MTV, 2012). In the search for his identity balanced between two completely different cultures, it is not surprising that Anas turned to an abusive interpretation of religion. In fact, IS's ideology proposes strict boundaries, clear moral directions, and authoritarian leadership as means to obtain closure and reduce uncertainty for those battling with an identity crisis. Instead of identifying with the Western society that did not meet their expectations, Anas and Maria Giulia associated themselves with a global *ummah,* seeking revenge against the world of globalisation and secularism that confuse and disappoint them (Serafini 2015; Vidino, 2015).

Experience of discrimination and the need to belong

"*It is a dog of the North League. When it smells a Moroccan, it starts barking.*" (MTV, 2012). This is how Anas spoke about his mountain village in the interview released for the MTV mini-documentary on nascent Muslim rappers in Milan's neighbourhood. He spoke extensively about being a victim of racism: "*It is a block in life, you are dirty for them.*" (Vidino, 2015:61). He was also pictured with his closest friend and fellow rapper, Dr. Domino. They shared the same point of view on how Muslim immigrants are treated in Italy: "*Let's be honest. Integration does not exist.*" (MTV, 2012).

From these quotes, it is easy to see that what Knapton (2014:38) defines as humans' "*consuming desire for social interactions*" is denied to Anas and his friends. According to Knapton's research, everybody naturally feels the need to belong to something, hence if ostracised the possible reactions are two: either the individual tries to re-join the group or seeks revenge for being ostracised (Knapton, 2014:38). Until 2012, like his friends pictured in the video interviews, Anas used rap music to fight what he believed were the distorted values that caused society to discriminate against him on the basis of his ethnic and religious identity. "*It is from there that starts this hatred, this differentiating yourself.*" (Vidino, 2015:61). At a certain point, however, his attitude changed, and the humiliation and the anger developed due to the failed integration led him to be more receptive towards radical beliefs and behaviours. He started regularly producing and sharing jihadist material online alongside keeping in contact with other Italian and European jihadists, most famously with Giuliano Delnevo who travelled to Syria and died a few months later (Vidino, 2015:60-69).

In fact, when individuals experience discrimination and marginalisation, they become more responsive to any opportunity of social inclusion as it satisfies their sense of belonging, re-balances their self-confidence, and eliminates their sense of helplessness that results from being ostracised (Knapton, 2014). Being excluded from the rest of the 'typical' Italian community made Anas feel unable to control his integration into the society around him and left him feel meaningless. Adopting radical beliefs and joining IS's cause gave him a sense of purpose and membership that his offline world did not offer.

In the investigative report conducted by Maddalena Oliva, the close mindedness of the small mountain community of Vobarno where Anas resided is evident (Michele Santoro Presenta, 2015). For example, as the Islamic community publicised an event organised to clarify that they stood against IS's ideology, the people at the market or in the restaurants rejected the invitation on the spot.

A woman said: "*We already have our problems.*" and when asked if the integration of immigrants should not also be considered a matter engaging the entire community, she clearly stated: "*It is their problem. They need to integrate with us, not us with them.*" (Michele Santoro Presenta, 2015).

The literature on the topic of homegrown radicalisation emphasises the importance of networks consisting of like-minded individuals who draw clear boundaries on in-group membership. The existence and the importance of Anas' close group of friends is evident in Oliva's interviews. His friends shared the same experiences of blatant discrimination and their words revealed a bitter outlook on life: "*There are some guys of our age who have their dad's money and everything is ready for them.*". Another says: "*You go to school for 5 years, study and then go look for a job and you do not find it. You are hurt.*", and "*(...) Until the 8th grade, there are no problems. Even if there are differences, you do not notice them because you are still too young. But in high school, then you hear: "do not walk in my hallway, do not walk in front of my classroom, who are you, what do you want" They are the typical skinhead racist guys. Here you forge yourself because you are involved in the first scuffles. This is racial bullying. They call you Moroccan, but not because you are originally from Morocco. It is pejorative. They want to say that you are not worth as much as them (...) My documents say I am Italian, but these people made me go through hell because they burdened me for being Moroccan (...)*" (Michele Santoro Presenta, 2015).

The feeling of living in an adverse society that is suspicious towards the Muslim community is shared by both subjects of the case studies as well as by their families and Muslim friends. Young Italian Muslims are under the increasing pressure of Western secularism as they see their religious freedom reduced. For some, this facilitates the adoption of Islamist radical interpretations in substitution of their Italian and European identity. Maria Giulia was denied entrance in a supermarket and a bus, and fired from her job at a call centre

because of her religious appearance. The feeling of being a victim was inevitable and created the tendency to turn back on her home society, advocating for beheadings and killings. The idea of a global Muslim *ummah* as proposed by IS appealed to Maria Giulia as she was in search for a place to be accepted and be part of a sisterhood which would not have socially alienated her.

'Us versus them' mentality and the need to be a good Muslim

As a consequence of their societal disconnectedness, some individuals find satisfaction to their most profound desire for a re-birth in the adoption of what is presented as a holy cause. Maria Giulia, in fact, denied that what she was doing was terrorism: "*It is illogical and irrational for the Italian police to arrest these people* [referring to her family] *(...) The messages I exchanged with my parents and sister were not incitements to jihad or anything like that. We talked about how my parents could have a good life here in IS*" (Serafini, 2015).

I argue that all the experiences of discrimination and uncertainty described above can lead to strengthening the categorisation of in-group members as opposed to the 'others' identified with the enemy, and to enhance individuals' responsibility to appear as good Muslims. In fact, the identity crisis characterising both subjects entails the key desire and need of distinguishing themselves from the same society that they held responsible for their sufferings. In this context, it is not surprising that in an attempt to persuade her family to join her in Syria, Maria Giulia justified her actions as follow: *"The people beheaded are thieves and hypocrites spying from inside IS. They send information to the unbelievers, who then attack us."* (Serafini, 2015).

She drew a clear line between them, the righteous and true believers, and the rest, *al kafirun*. This feeling of perceived distance from society, and generally from all those not conforming to IS's ideology, increased also the perceived group threat. It is evident in the following quote: "*Those people who dare to say that the jihad does not exist and to doubt why I came here doing the hijra (...)*

they should be beheaded (...) Muslims live with al kafirun, but you are kidding, in Islam this is haram. It is not possible to work for al kafirun, I mean under the sharia law, not under democracy and you even work for them!" (Biondani, 2015). Maria Giulia was firm in her description of everything that related to her family's life in Inzago as antagonistic to their religious duties.

She spoke about her life in Syria with loving words, tasting the sweet rewards her family would receive in *Jannah* if they did the *hijra*. *"The hijra erases all dunya duties"* (Biondani, 2015). Due to her family's economic struggles and her constant feeling of disorientation caused by discrimination and incomprehension, she felt appointed with the responsibility to ease her and her family's sufferings and disconnect from the society that had been so severe with her. *"Al kafirun are never good. We need to be only with the believers. It is simply like this under the sharia."* (Biondani, 2015).

This 'us versus them' rhetoric is a recurring narrative in the phone interceptions. She also tried to persuade her father to accept the money settlement that his employer offered as an alternative to resuming his working duties. She insisted that he must stop working for and with the disbelievers, who should have been enslaved as they were preventing her father from fulfilling his religious duties, such as performing the daily prayers. *"We do not want to befriend disbelievers…we do not need what they do."* (Biondani, 2015). She called her family daily to give them monologues on their religious duties as both her parents were clearly unsure about what to do. She did not leave them any room to express their opinions but, instead, spoke with emphatic tones disapproving their insecurity leading them to sin and eventually to eternal damnation. *"I do not want to hear any of this. Hijra is mandatory. I do not care what you are thinking ok? We do not care. You must come here to… save your souls from the Hellfire and that is it! (...) do not do like those who have a disease in their hearts. (...) Those who do not do the Hijra in Islam's land will pay on Judgement Day with fire and Allah Almighty's fury … Might God save me … Might Allah*

Almighty save us from this unhappy fate and let's hope that God accepts our prayer (…)" (Biondani, 2015).

Similarly, Anas questioned the reasons behind his and his friends' disconnectedness from the Italian society: "*We read, we study, we are devout, we have a job. What do your sons do?*". And his fellow rapper, Mussie: "*You ask me what I am doing, but you should really be asking 'What am I doing?'*" (MTV, 2015). These quotes capture the concept of social distance as the sympathy felt for in-group members and an increased 'us versus them' mentality. Anas used rap music at first in an attempt to emphasise the increasing disconnection of the Muslims community. Then he turned to IS's ideology: self-categorisation and self-identification with the terrorist group and its defined idea of a global sympathetic community of Muslims appealed to his need of escaping a society that he felt as exclusionist and discriminative.

His friend, Dr. Domino, interpreted Anas' journey to Syria with the following words: "*For him, what he is doing, like for many others, is all in all a positive thing because he went to defend a country in need.*" (Ruotolo, 2015). He defined Anas's project to travel to Syria as "*a 360-degree idea*". He continued: "*Some ideas might be positive, but if personalised can become negative. This might be Anas' case.*", describing the idea behind it as follow: "*Spread the Islamic way of life across the world (...) To reach an objective, you can take several routes, some are wrong and negative, others are right. There are a lot of good guys, like Anas, who left with good sense, with the good and positive idea to help a population in need.*" (Ruotolo, 2015).

As these quotes show, the need to follow IS-inspired idea of righteous Muslim conduct is prominent. In view of the shared moral outrage towards the sufferings inflicted by Western policies to innocent people in the Middle East, Anas found a noble and global cause in IS's interpretation of jihad and an answer to his need of empathy. Within the context of radicalism, the factor of empathy is particularly contradictory as it is directed exclusively to the Muslim community

of 'true believers', while it is completely absent towards innocent Western civilians. Yet, again, this happens because in times of distress and crisis individuals tend to turn assertively to what they perceive to be under attack (Emmerling and Yusoufzai, 2017:73-74). In the case of Salafi jihadism, radicals show altruism only for those they hold victims, the Muslim community. The group's ideology offers a narrative of restructuring individuals' life in line with an absolute truth and good that eventually lead them to believe that they will become heroes for the global Muslim *ummah* (Emmerling and Yusoufzai, 2017:73-74).

Heightened political and societal criticisms

Both subjects of the case studies revealed acute political positions on various matters ranging from foreign policy to the banking system. In their furious rants against the Western civilisation, Anas and Maria Giulia flaunt Arabic religious terms and show a collective outrage against global affairs.

While Maria Giulia was committed to persuade her family to move to Syria where they could freely live under *sharia* law, Anas was particularly determined in his project to bring Italy under the *sharia*. Inspired by the success of the Belgian and British branches of the notorious radical blogs of Sharia4Belgium and Sharia4UK, Anas tried to re-create the same movement in Italy but without much success. His activities were limited to two blogs with a couple of posts, where he defined this project as "*the real solution for the world (...) just a peaceful suggestion.*". He denounced: "*Today's law is based on political interests hiding objectives other than those shown on tv. In reality, it is a dictatorship that oppresses the poorest and enriches the richest.*" (El Abboubi, 2012a). He was very critical of Western institutions and especially of the banking system and its mechanisms of interest (El Abboubi, 2012b).

In the final stages of his radicalisation process, the tones of the videos he recorded and shared on his YouTube channel became more ferocious. He ranted

while the screen showed pictures of IS's flag waving over Italy's map, the European flag fusing together with a Nazi one, black children, women and men enslaved, and Pope Ratzinger with bloody hands and face. It is evident that his condemnation of the West's corruption is mixed with the need to revenge the discrimination he suffered: "*Today, people representing the West are too hegemonic towards those who do not wish to abandon their traditions, customs, habits, language. And in the society, you are always marginalised, avoided, discouraged, intimidated, just because Europe wants to represent the best global development model to which everybody must submit. All Western media fight to create a standard way of thinking in order to patronise its citizens by conquering others' rights pretending to liberate them.*" (McKhalif, 2012a).

He was furious to the broken promises of what is considered as the land of democracy, freedom, and human rights protection. The idea that the West dishonoured Muslim populations is highly prominent in all his videos and posts: "*This is the way America wants to take its civilisation and public order to the East (...) what is Muslims' fault for having to suffer so much defamation and for being attacked by the public opinion?*" (McKhalif, 2012a).

In a video he posted on his Facebook account when he was already believed to be in Syria, he spoke about his days of detention in Brescia. The video is no longer available, but Vidino reports that Anas showed disappointment in the Italian authorities who labelled him as a terrorist without even trying to understand his motivations or the reasons of his anger towards the Western society. He reportedly said: "*I am one of the many immigrants who have rooted their childhood in this Europe consumed by hypocrisy.*" (Vidino, 2015:68). It is evident that he believed that his attempts to do his best failed and was left with no choice but blaming his situation on the authorities and the Italian society: "*With whom should I integrate my principles?*" (Vidino, 2015:68). Failing to see an end to his situation in sight, Anas accumulated enough anger and bitterness to see the non-Muslim society only through its flaws which he listed

as individualism, sexual promiscuity, discrimination, and maltreatment of the elderly, among others. IS, instead, promotes the idea of one comprehensive Islamic authority that rules over modern borders and has a precise definition of ethics. This appeals to disillusioned Muslims living in the West, like Anas.

Similarly, Maria Giulia harshly inveighed against the West's 'war on terror': "*You know that the whole world is attacking us? You know that, don't you? I will give you an example. Two days ago, a 'self-controlled' aeroplane* [ed. a drone] *packed with explosives flew in here to destroy who knows how many…There are women and children here.*" (Serafini, 2015). She was strict when denouncing Europe's and the United States' campaigns in Syria but found killing the disbelievers a legitimate action. Better, a religious duty. In all her intercepted monologues, she highlighted that Westerns are not innocent because citizens of the very countries sending their armies to kill Muslims. Therefore, in her eyes, westerns became people to repel and, eventually, to kill. These are the same people who made her suffer when she decided to convert to Islam and changed her habits and appearance.

The religious and political wisdom that both Anas and Maria Giulia flaunted hides, in reality, a deep generalisation and, in some cases, also ignorance about global affairs. While neither was completely in the dark with regards to religious matters, their consciousness was clouded by their anger. They felt powerless in front of the West's double standards towards Muslims and rationalised it in a radical and strident way. They refused to get information about wars, conflicts, and religion from traditional sources and remained trapped into self-selected bubbles only to isolate themselves from the outside. Maria Giulia kept close contacts with a radical preacher, Bushra Haik, who is believed to have had a key role in her radicalisation process, while Anas did not even share his plans to travel to Syria with his closest friends.

Emancipation and self-empowerment

Maria Giulia is described as a particularly smart woman, but her family's volatile economic situation and her father's inability to keep a job did not allow her to fully exploit her potential. Instead, she had to do various demeaning part-time jobs to afford her student fees (Assumma, 2013). What IS's ideology offered her was to leave behind *dunya* concerns. She could finally ignore the worldly affairs that appeared to be so important in defying one's social status. Instead in Syria, she was empowered regardless of her social and financial background and, most importantly, she felt more powerful than the same people who discriminated against her in Italy.

She was aware that her family's accomplishments in terms of material belongings mattered a lot, especially for her mother. For this reason, she tried to convince them to join her in Syria by describing the magnificent and rich life awaiting them. "*Mom, here you can do everything. (...) Dad can go to the Tawla, the Tribunal, to ask for a piece of land. Mom, they do not give you just a piece of land, they ask you 'Do you want the entire Syria?'"*. Her mom, visibly excited: *"Yes, I want everything".* Maria Giulia:*" Because here, mom, they need people farming (...) because it is full of abandoned land"* (Biondani, 2015). She used all sorts of persuasion tricks, from more material rewards like a house with a garden to explaining that it was Allah's will. After all, they were drowning in debts and would have been eventually evicted from their house in Inzago. Her dad would have been able to "*stop working as a slave"* for the disbelievers (Biondani, 2015). She made jokes about her parents' insecurities and the police's attempts to intercept her. She felt powerful (Biondani, 2015).

In her monologues she flaunted Arabic words and religious references and it is evident that she yearned for power. She had the possibility to make a qualitative leap by attending university but never really fulfilled her dreams. IS's cause was the opportunity she was waiting for to finally upgrade her existence. As she reminded her parents, their destiny was "*...there, among the best men*" with

people waiting for them "*with open arms*" (Biondani, 2015). Armed jihad was a total upgrade that won Maria Giulia over and that then she used to persuade her family to join her.

Similarly, Anas said: "*My father was a worker, so I have to be an entrepreneur*" (Vidino, 2015:62). The two case studies share the same narrative of emancipation. Second-generation Muslims are called *"the difficult generation"* because they are finally standing up to discrimination and social marginalisation (Ruotolo, 2015). They are Italians and feel fully fledged Italians, but their religious and ethnical origins are a burden that they are determined to fight. They aim at obtaining bigger results than their first-generation immigrant parents both in terms of social integration and quality of work opportunities (Ruotolo, 2015).

The construction of a faith-centred identity rejecting the problems associated with the material world, which are the reasons behind the sufferings, can be viewed as an emancipatory response to the aforementioned social stigma (The Change Institute, 2008:104). There are aspects of emancipation and feeling of power and control which I argue are driving forces in the radicalisation process. Anas and Maria Giulia adopted the idea of a 'totalitarian Islam' in spite of the community's opinion. It was a complete and drastic change that allowed them to be in full control of their situation while leaving behind the material concerns associated with mainstream class division.

<u>Quest for significance through sacrifice</u>

As Kruglanski (2014) explains in his theory of significance quest, individuals who feel the need to restore their personal significance are more likely to embark in a bigger project, even if violent and radical. Against this explanation, the Caliphate's message is well suited to intercept individuals' need to commit to a cause, including extreme actions like suicidal missions as means to prove oneself.

"I cannot wait, I cannot wait to do die shahid" (Biondani, 2015), said Maria Giulia on the phone with her family. The myth of reaching the 'garden' of Paradise and becoming a martyr was exciting to her and served as a primary factor in her radicalisation process. She was an enthusiastic volunteer looking for heroic actions and sacrifice. In fact, unlike other women travelling to Syria to be subjugated spouses and mothers, Maria Giulia wanted to take up arms. "*I make du'a everyday that Abu Bakr Al Baghdadi gives permission to women to go fight the jihad, and when he does…bye bye! Because I cannot wait (…) to die shahid, because shahid goes to the first level of Paradise*" (Biondani, 2015). As she herself explained, regardless of how she was going to die - either infected by a disease or fighting on the field - she would have been a martyr anyways for the sole reason that she had moved to Syria to live in an Islamic State.

This is a case in point for Kruglanski's theory: when people are rejected and discriminated against, they feel humiliated and are motivated to re-establish their self-worth (Kruglanski, 2014). IS's ideology offers an invaluable reward: true believers are called to join the fight against the disbelievers to win the status of martyrs and heroes of the *ummah* in exchange for a spot in history and one in Paradise. As Maria Giulia explained: "*In Jannah you can be whatever and however you want. (…) Every time the husband looks at her wife or her wife at her husband, they see each other always more beautiful (…) What do you want in Jannah? Flowers (…) do you want to fly as birds? Swim? Allah Almighty will give it to you*" (Biondani, 2015). The myth of Paradise has become the deadliest weapon of IS's strategy.

While Anas did not manifestly express his desire to die martyr, he is believed to have been assigned to a suicidal attack. However, the idea of Muslims' self-worth and superiority is also evident in one of the video he uploaded on his YouTube channel. He talked at length of the fasting month of Ramadan as the moment that reveals "*the real value of human beings and the difference between 'us' and animals (…) So, this Ramadan even contradicts that men come from*

monkeys, because monkeys do not fast. Monkeys and pigs do not fast. The Muslim man is superior to everything, why? Because he fasts. (…) When your instincts prevail, when they control you, you are at the same level as animals." (McKhalif, 2012b).

This quote reveals a need for grandiosity together with a need to be paid attention, and perhaps even admiration and respect. Studies have shown that perceived in-group superiority is a primary motivator to violence, especially when the group is perceived to be under threat. Some define these personal traits as narcissistic (Emmerling and Yusoufzai, 2017:72-73). However, while asserting that Anas and Maria Giulia suffered from pathological narcissism would be a presumption, it seems obvious that the feelings of humiliation and exclusion contributed to heighten their idea that only an Islamic State could give significance to their life. Indeed, while at age 16, Anas' life revolved around drugs, beers, and rap, his newly found Islamic spirituality transformed his everyday life and gave him a new meaning. *"Before, I never laughed because society really ruined me. Now I just need to do the ablutions, do the washing, and I feel free, I spiritually fly"* (Vidino, 2015:62).

The meaning and purpose he was looking for are embodied in the Syrian children he praised online: *"Here children are very dignified despite their situation; every time I offer them money or food, they refuse, as if they were already rich."* (Vidino, 2015:67). Like Maria Giulia, Anas viewed life in the Islamic State as peaceful and free from the humiliation he suffered in Italy. It was his chance of proving his self-worth in the most rewarding way, that is dying *shahid* as a hero fighting the jihad. This way, he would not only be a champion for innocent Muslims suffering because of the West, but he would also earn a place in Paradise. In other words, this sense of heroism reduces the fear of death and convinces individuals to commit actions on behalf of the *ummah* even if this will most likely cause their death (Kruglanski et al., 2014:83).

Discussion

The purpose of the previous section was to show how IS-inspired Islamist rhetoric conceals the need to cure other non-ideological pathologies in the radicalisation process of Anas and Maria Giulia. The intention of identifying the main narratives behind their decision to embrace the jihadist ideology was to shed light on the most common justifications for the adoption of radical beliefs and to identify how and where these radical ideas have been normalised into the everyday discourses of the subjects.

As the literature shows, each case of radicalisation is unique. The most common underlying narratives are interpreted in different ways as they are interconnected with personal experiences and contexts, even if these are often shared among vulnerable and troubled individuals. I attempted to summarise complex narrative dynamics as far as possible under thematic categories and to illustrate them with quotations and examples. The narratives outlined above, in fact, followed a turbulent development process influenced by personal grievances which functioned as rational motivators - rational as, in the eyes of the subjects, they were justified by religious conceptualisations and contextualised to their own reality. In fact, the analysis of the case studies indicates that real and perceived grievances have informed the adoption of radical beliefs and the advocacy of violence by raising questions of personal identity, belonging and significance. Experiences of discrimination and social marginalisation as well as the desire to upgrade the social status and revenge years of humiliation were among the factors that instigated the two young Italian jihadists to reject everything related to the West and stubbornly embrace their Islamist identity. It is a "*crusader narrative*" that assimilates personal experiences that are common among aggrieved individuals who are looking for an answer to their problems (Mahood and Rane, 2017:31-32).

My analysis shows that Islamist discourse is used as an interpretative lens to contextualise unsatisfying social, political, and psychological problems and

thereby to justify radical reactions. It is evident in the way Anas and Maria Giulia framed their ideas and actions, and how they gave them legitimacy. The analysis revealed that IS's rhetoric of 'us versus them' is the focal point of the group's strategy consisting of creating a collective action plan and mobilising participation from all across Europe, including Italy. To begin with, this plan focuses on emphasising the feeling of victimhood, which is very common among second-generation Muslim immigrants as they are battling with an identity crisis between Islamic faith and Western secularism. It is also very common among young Muslim converts who experience a harsh societal backlash in response to the different spiritual path they chose. These are the cases of Anas and Maria Giulia whose frustration led them to take shelter in IS's global *ummah* identified as "*both a mirror and a form of revenge against the globalisation that has made them what they are*" (Roy, 2005). It becomes both what they want to be part of and the reason they seek violent revenge against the West.

It followed their definite disconnection from the Western society. Drawing on this 'things are not as they should be' and 'it is not fair' mentality, IS strengthens its grip on individuals' vulnerability by providing them with answers to their innermost desires, a re-birth and a chance to stop the sufferings and avenge the injustices. For Anas and Maria Giulia, the vision of a 360-degree Islamic State was synonym for acceptance and discipline, something they did not have in their home communities.

Next, since injustices are usually caused by something or someone, they need to identify a responsible (Borum, 2003). IS comes in their help by providing a pre-packaged story of Western hegemony targeting innocent Muslims. It is unavoidable, at this point, that susceptible youth contextualise this interpretation to their home environments and connect it with their personal experiences of discrimination. IS's promises of inclusion and acceptance are appealing to Anas and Maria Giulia as both yearned for a community of like-minded individuals

which could serve as a shelter and where they could fully manifest their Islamic identity without incurring in the eventuality of being fired, expelled from the supermarket, and being insulted.

IS takes advantage of this ambiguity of feeling inappropriate in the Western world that seems to encourage the Western Muslim youth to choose between one of their identities. It enriches them with the possibility of closure, so they can find a place and a role in the society. Both Anas and Maria Giulia had very limited prospects in Italy, but the Caliphate attracted them with the possibility of starting a new life in a State where social and economic statuses do not matter. What is important, instead, is the preservation of the same Islamic faith which was the reason of rejection and exclusion in their home country. In other words, IS is presented as the place where they would really feel at home, accepted, and even welcomed.

The impact of being constantly reminded of their Islamic identity in pejorative terms can be juxtaposed with IS's message that they can practise and express their faith freely in the Caliphate. The group poses as a champion of inclusion and equality and promises revenge against the 'others'. I argue that the violence it advocates towards the West and Muslim apostates is not meaningless. It is not nonsense nihilism because it is connected to political and social meanings which reflect specific contexts of grievances and injustices suffered by aspiring jihadists. IS is incredibly detailed in its unequivocal explanations of "*why we hate you and why we fight you*", citing disbelief, secularism, liberalism, and conflicts in the Middle East as the main reasons (ISIS, 2016:31).

This is evident in Maria Giulia's monologues to her family. She obstinately provided them with a general picture of the life in Syria suggesting good morale, purposeful activities, and a life with all comforts. All this is mixed with the message that, alongside material prizes, the spiritual rewards are infinite. Similarly, Anas seemed to truly believe that the Caliphate and its imposition of *sharia* law was the real solution to the invented European economic crisis and

the West's moral perversions. Through the 'us versus them' discourse, IS highlights the inferiority of the disbelievers and therefore appeals to the vulnerability of both Anas and Maria Giulia who have always been belittled.

The examined audio speeches and video interviews do not reveal that Anas and Maria Giulia joined IS for adventure. Instead, it seems that they desired both to resolve and revenge the feeling of being outsiders in their home country, where social rejection was the norm. IS provided them with a ready well-thought-out identity and the promise of redemption through sacrifice and retaliation. Indeed, both case studies show that the subjects were likely unhappy with their personal lives. They felt disrespected and humiliated. For them, joining the Caliphate meant to act on behalf of a collective cause that helped them restore their self-worth and significance. IS promises a place of respect and a new identity based on the future rather than the past. Their trivial everyday life is drastically turned into a cosmic fight where they aim at defeating injustices and inequalities and imposing their rightful alternative of worldly affairs (Hafez and Mullins, 2015:966-968).

Aspiring jihadists can regain command of their destiny and even control that of the West. The idea of having the power to impose one's deliberate choice of life or death on the disbelievers is appealing to respect seekers like Anas and Maria Giulia. It is in the hands of the Caliphate and its adherents to decide when and if to stop the terror attacks as any possibility of control and prediction is denied to the West (ISIS, 2016:31).

Against this context, I argue that the role of Islam is negligible in the IS-inspired radicalisation process of the two Italian jihadists. As my findings show, religion serves as a vehicle to interpret personal and collective grievances and to give them legitimacy, but it is not the motivator of their journey to radicalisation. Factors such as personal failure, social marginalisation, feeling of victimhood, repressed anger, and the need to demonstrate self-worth are the real root causes that lead individuals to adopt radical beliefs and promote violence. These factors

are simply framed through religious discourse so as to gain more relevance and validity, but Islam is only an excuse. In fact, as Aly explains, if religion was to blame for the radicalisation of individuals, it could be assumed that by presenting them with an alternative and evidence-based interpretation of the same beliefs, they would be persuaded to take the right path (Aly, 2015). Unfortunately, this is not the case. Religious discussions with radicalised individuals are, in fact, not successful at all. This happens because their beliefs are rooted in personal sufferings which they want to revenge and inner desires which they strive to realise (Aly, 2015). In her article on the Italian newspaper L'Espresso, Sironi defines Islam as "*a cloak to wear to cover the most profound social and personal holes*" (Sironi, 2015).

Chapter Six: Broadening the discussion

This section is dedicated to broadening the discussion started above. I will move the specific focus of the research to a more general view, going from exploring the peculiarities of the selected case studies to analysing the role of IS's message in the radicalisation process more expansively. This is to highlight how IS's radical ideology is used to leverage key vulnerabilities of would-be jihadists.

The Islamic State's totalitarian religious ideology

For the purpose of this dissertation, it is important to stress the definitional difference between an ideology and a religion as it comes in support of my argument that Islam is not a primary motivator in the IS-inspired radicalisation process (Moghadam, 2008:2). What distinguishes IS's message and framing narratives from a religion is that the former promote a tailored action plan aiming at making drastic changes which are often political, social, or economic in nature and principles. On the contrary, a religion supports the current affairs and does not operate with the aim of correcting them. Hereby, the set of beliefs and ideas that the group fosters to impose its world vision is referred to as an ideology, which directs its message to a group and leverages in-group solidarity and empathy to increase the participation of singular individuals. Instead, a religion points at creating the maximum benefits for the individual through participation as a member of the group (Moghadam, 2008:2).

Awareness raising, diagnosis of the problem, and group identity formation are the three main phases that characterise the creation of an ideological framework. Each of them can be applied to IS's message. First of all, the explanatory role (Moghadam, 2008:1). IS's ability to validate its arguments by flaunting Quranic verses and the Prophet's teachings is well-known. The group attributes meaning to certain social and political events and interprets them through Islamic framing processes. By doing so, it encourages a specific understanding of the world. Next, the group conducts a diagnosis of the identified problems and concludes

that the West is the reason of Islam's decay and Muslims' sufferings. Lastly, IS's message presents aspiring jihadists with the possibility of creating a group identity which offers them a full menu of material and spiritual benefits well attuned to their needs and desires. In fact, it focuses on satisfying the sense of belonging of vulnerable individuals who have suffered social marginalisation in their home communities and, hence, are attracted by the idea of being part of a global *ummah*. Through the indoctrination conducted by either astute recruiters or anonymous users of online forums, IS's message focuses on the idea that it is not the individual per se that matters, but his identity within the group. This is sufficient to persuade aspiring jihadists to embrace sacrifice and martyrdom in the name of the *ummah*'s dignity and safety.

Differently from a religion, ideologies are based on an action plan aimed at fixing the status quo (Moghadam, 2008:2). In the case of IS, its message heavily relies on the call to arms to persuade young Muslims to conduct attacks in the West. As detailed in an issue of Dabiq, its program of action aims at leading all disbelievers to either convert to Islam or submit under an Islamic rule; at eliminating the West's deviant lifestyle; at stopping the killing of Muslims and liberating those who have been imprisoned; and at reclaiming Muslim territories (ISIS, 1437:31-33).

This strategy mirrors the characteristics of a totalitarian ideology which, according to Sørensen's definition (2011 cited in Steindal, 2015:26), pursues a strategy of revolutionary changes and violently rejects all current political and social realities. Similarly, IS seeks a revolutionary break with the world of *al kafirun* and intends to build a new world order after having removed the West's perverted customs. Its disruption of the status quo also refers to the Middle East, as the group views the establishment of the Islamic Caliphate as the only legitimate ruling option and, in particular, calls Saudi kings apostates because of their collaboration with the West (Bunzel, 2016). In IS's words, the creation of the Caliphate itself is a revolution: *"This phenomenon is something that has*

never occurred in human history, except in the case of the Islamic State! And nothing like it will ever occur thereafter except in relation to it; and Allah knows best" (ISIS, 2014b:5).

Contrary to a religion, IS does not concentrate on understanding the divine world, in spite of what it might appear after a superficial analysis. In reality, the group's interpretation of Islamic values is deeply rooted in its own brutal version of religion and does not engage in theoretical confrontations. Instead, the group's message revolves around a thorough understanding of the human vulnerability and the extent to which it can be exploited for the group's strategic purposes. Anchored in the creation of a collective identity which puts clear boundaries between 'us' and 'them', the group's message provides aspiring jihadists with the possibility to satisfy their sense of belonging and group membership, and it creates a cohesive community that will support its action plan in the knowledge that they are gaining a place in Paradise by revenging against the West. Its solution is interpreted as indispensable for the safety of the Muslim *ummah* and the establishment of a global Caliphate. Its adherents believe they are pursuing a good cause because IS's ideology is apparently legitimised by religious concepts (Westphal, 2017:26-28). In fact, IS's political objective, that is the establishment of a global Caliphate, is "*a fantasy*" that entirely relies on the power of its supportive community of followers (Roy, 2015).

In line with what Moghaddam (2008:2) concludes with regards to the wider Salafi jihadism tradition, I argue that also IS's message is a religious ideology. The reasons of this can be found in the use of selected Quranic verses and the *sunnah* of Prophet Mohammed to legitimise its strategy as a mask strategically used to hide worldly ambitions. Its discourses, in fact, are funded on an "*ideological heritage*" which means that its ideology does not spring from nowhere (Klandermans 2007:368 cited in Westphal, 2018:24). Instead, its message gains support as the group uses Salafi tradition to earn the appearance

of legitimacy. Yet, it deliberately ignores the theological argumentations that would contradict the group's radical reasoning (Moghadam, 2008).

Drawing from this discussion, I conclude that analysing IS's message as a totalitarian religious ideology enables critical insights into how and why it has such a rampant appeal to vulnerable youth. It is based on a Salafi foundation, which gives legitimacy to the group's action plan of revolutionary societal changes, yet it is never stagnant. Rather, it is an ideology that takes inspiration from historical events but is shaped accordingly to current ones as well as the grievances of its targeted recipients. It is, however, formulated in a coherent manner, but is continuously refined as new events and experiences take place. This is key to enable mobilisation: the group's message must resonate with its targets.

Against this background, it is possible to contextualise IS's skilful use of social media as propaganda platforms and its ability to incorporate in its message elements, such as injustices, identity crisis, and feeling of victimhood, which are very common nowadays and to which many can relate. As the group capitalises on these mobilising mechanisms and on human vulnerability, also called the "*frame alignment*" phase (Borum, 2011:20), its message finds a favourable context to circulate.

My analysis revealed how Anas and Maria Giulia were influenced by IS's discursive framing strategy and which non-religious factors facilitated their ideological alignment to the group's cause. It is important, therefore, to take into consideration, first of all, the bigger socio-political and psychological environments in which they were raised. There is a wider range of elements key to the understanding of the reasons why individuals choose to join IS's ranks. In fact, the wide resonance of its message is due to its emotional leverage as well as to the emotional complexity of aspiring jihadists.

The argument: religion as a non-factor

The profusion of scholarly and journalistic work on whether Islamic doctrine instigates political violence or not is impressive. After the increasing number of lone-wolf terrorist attacks in European cities and of European foreign fighters travelling to Syria to join the Caliphate, the question of what the role of Islam in the radicalisation process of young Muslims is has seen experts from all fields committed to finding an answer.

One of the most noticeable and controversial works that animated the debate is the article by Wood (2015), 'What ISIS really wants'. With polemical tones, Wood discredits the common argumentation that IS soldiers are a group of psychopaths. In his own words, "*The reality is that the Islamic State is Islamic. Very Islamic.*" (Wood, 2015). He aims at challenging the Western definition of IS-inspired jihadism as epiphenomenal and insists that denying the religious character of the group is dangerous because the ideas preached are coherent and supported by thorough theological arguments which can be found in the Quran and in the wider Islamic tradition (Wood, 2015).

After it was published on The Atlantic, the article attracted a large number of responses disputing IS's Islamic core nature and demonstrating how it is systematically in open disagreement with the religious tradition practiced by the majority of Muslims. This debate has sparked a wider and still ongoing discussion about the relationship between Islam and jihadism and it dredged up numerous studies showing the key causal role of non-religious socio-political factors in triggering the radicalisation process.

This non-ideological paradigm is the key to understand the phenomenon of IS-inspired radicalisation, according to Roy (2015). He defines modern-day jihadism as a "*youth movement*" centred on the fascination caused by "*the idea of pure revolt*" (Roy, 2015). He supports the argument of 'Islamisation of Radicalism' which sees religious fundamentalism as unrelated to the process of

violent radicalisation. It is, indeed, true that the two might follow the same dynamics, but IS has built a cult-like message that justifies and encourages the use of violence. Religious fundamentalism is not excused, as it often causes frictions in a secular society, but does not require the use of violence (Roy, 2005).

The successful seductive appeal of IS's message is its framing ideology as it targets vulnerable youth that volunteer to fight, so much as to making them literally desire to die. The case study of Maria Giulia Sergio, in particular, serves as an example. It shows how the nihilist dimension of the group is essential to the point that violence and sacrifice are not a means but the end itself for her. IS is remarkably astute in picturing the Caliphate as the only place where aspiring jihadists - *"rebels without a cause"* as Roy defines them (Roy, 2015) - can finally find acceptance, purpose, and even salvation. It is to the psychological twist of its message that the group must credit its success.

The decision to join IS's cause is not simply a strategic choice. As my analysis shows, Islamic religious principles do not merely operate as ex post rationalisations for radical beliefs and actions but are used to give them legitimacy ex ante. They do not act as motives but rather as justifications to shape the boundaries of the radical conduct. In fact, in order for the jihadists to claim that their actions are instigated by religious arguments, they must maintain them compatible with the same principles which they say they believe in. This is to say that Islam does matter in the radicalisation process, but not in the causal role that many want to assign it. Jihadists choose radicalism not because they misunderstand the Quran, but because violence is the only suitable option for their troubled and aggrieved character. It is, in fact, no coincidence that aspiring jihadists are not the most devout Muslims, as also confirmed by the two British men who, before leaving for Syria, purchased copies of the books 'Islam for Dummies' and 'The Koran for Dummies' (Hasan, 2014). In response to Wood's article, some argued that it is not IS's interpretation of Islam that leads to the

use of violence, but instead it is the other way around: the need for power and revenge facilitates a brutal interpretation of Islamic values (Gilsinan, 2015).

I argue that the Quranic verses and the Islamic historical events narrated in the issues of Dabiq are not the reasons behind Anas and Maria Giulia's radicalisation. The religious narrations only helped find a theological justification for the violence that the two promoted. As my findings show, their religious references are not based on real knowledge of the Islamic texts, but on the need to find answers to their problems and achieve their aspirations. In their videos and monologues, Anas and Maria Giulia speak of reaching an 'ultimate truth', but they do not allude to an Islamic reality. Instead, they are referring to their personal truth, that is escaping their problems and joining an emotionally rewarding community in which they can openly express their identity and their desire of revenge against the West.

IS, in fact, has gone great lengths to show that the life in the Caliphate is much more than fighting and bombings. In Dabiq, there are fighters pictured petting kittens in their arms (ISIS, 2016), and they promise jobs, lands, and fair wages, and so does Maria Giulia in her committed attempts to persuade her family to move to Syria. Her radicalisation, as well as in the case of Anas, must be understood as a focal goal commitment, where the goal is self-achievement through the success of the Caliphate. The fact that all these scenarios are framed with Islamic words is irrelevant because the Quranic verses that IS uses in support of its cause are taken out of context and have been firmly rejected by the majority of prominent Muslim figures around the world (Open Letter to Al Baghdadi, 2014). The reference points that IS uses to explain and justify its violence do exist but they are deliberately manipulated, and the fact that the group uses religious symbols that are scarcely considered in Islam is also omitted in its narrative.

Conclusions

Summary

This dissertation addressed the primary question as to how Islam is being used as a justification in the IS-inspired radicalisation process. I conducted an analytical inquiry into the journey to jihad of two young Italian jihadists, Anas El Abboubi and Maria Giulia Sergio, and presented supportive evidence for the claim that religion is not the primary motivator that instigates them to adopt radical beliefs. My objective was to investigate how the two subjects internalised IS's framing ideology and to better understand how ordinary narratives of discrimination and other personal and collective non-ideological grievances are hidden behind Islamist discourse. With my analysis, I concluded that the radicalisation process of the subjects of the two case studies was driven by a complex set of social and psychological conditions masked under the label of religious justifications.

Upon analysis of the literature and previous research on IS-inspired radicalisation process, my study highlighted four commonly agreed-upon causative factors: grievances, ideology, networks, and enabling environments with a focus on internet and social media. In conducting this theoretical summary, my intention was not to favour one model of radicalisation to the others, nor was it to suggest a new one. Instead, it acknowledged that it is not possible to lay out a one-size-fits-all terrorist profile because the four aforementioned elements usually appear in different scales and intensities. In the plethora of explanations and discussions on the topic of homegrown radicalisation, my literature review is an attempt to cast light onto the assumed factors of radicalisation to facilitate the theory application to the selected case studies.

In this section, I considered various theories and approaches, but the primary focus was on the research conducted by Olivier Roy in relation to the

'Islamisation of Radicalism' in contrast with the 'Radicalisation of Islam'. As the objective of my dissertation was to explore the role of religious values in relation to the adoption of radical beliefs, I directly took up the debate over the relationship between Islam and radicalism. This debate has, in turn, driven scholars and experts from all fields to wider discussions on the nature of Islam and its fragility to be exploited by jihadist groups for their own strategic purposes. However, my dissertation did not intend to engage with the topic on a theological level. Instead, the theoretical framework established with the literature review was key in facilitating the identification of broad narratives in the analysis of the case studies.

Next, the steps planned for this research included analysing the explanatory case studies of Anas El Abboubi and Maria Giulia Sergio. My inquiry went beyond the mere story narrative and used a variety of available data types, including phone interceptions, video and phone interviews, original blog posts, and public accessible court proceedings, to gain invaluable insights into the complex real-life dynamics characterising their radicalisation process.

The thesis has provided adequate evidence in support of the study's hypothesis as I went through the process of mapping the narratives used to justify violent radical beliefs and actions. My findings highlighted that the phenomenon of homegrown radicalisation is not religious, but rather religion serves as an ideological contour for social and psychological grievances and ambitions. These are identified in my research as the following:

- Personal uncertainty and identity crisis: for individuals who question their identity and are afraid of what the future might bring, IS's ideology is presented as a straightforward black-and-white worldview that helps reduce self-uncertainty and regain control in life by offering a specific outlook to observe.
- Experiences of discrimination and the need to belong: when individuals experience social marginalisation, they become more responsive to any

opportunity of social inclusion as it satisfies their sense of belonging, re-balances their self-confidence, and eliminates their sense of helplessness, even if the opportunity entails radical and violent actions. IS exploits the feeling of victimhood and presents the Caliphate as a place of acceptance and inclusion.

- 'Us versus them' mentality and the need to be a good Muslim: experiences of discrimination and identity crisis strengthen the desire of distinction from the same society identified with the enemy. As a consequence, IS's clear boundaries between 'us', the true believers, and 'them', the disbelievers, is appealing to individuals who are convinced that social distance is the only solution and perceive in-group members as superior.

- Heightened political and societal criticisms: besides personal grievances, collective outrage for the West's political strategies in the Middle East also revealed crucial in the case studies. Muslims are perceived as innocent victims of Western hegemony and this feeling, combined with personal experiences of discrimination and social marginalisation, is easily exploited to legitimise IS's fight as a religious duty to ensure the community's security.

- Emancipation and self-empowerment: perceived and real relative deprivation is crucial in making IS's message successful. Life in the Caliphate is presented as a way to upgrade their social status, because social and financial backgrounds do not matter. This faith-centred world rejects all material concerns and makes aspiring jihadists feel powerful for the sole reason of having embraced IS's totalitarian cause.

- Quest for significance through sacrifice: when people feel rejected and discriminated, they feel humiliated and are motivated to re-establish their self-worth, even it means to sacrifice their life. IS's ideology offers an invaluable reward: true believers are called to join the fight against the disbelievers to win the status of martyrs and heroes of the *ummah.*

The material examined supported the claim that psychological and social problems, such as identity crisis, discrimination, perceived in-group threat, and desire for emancipation and significance, are intercepted by IS's message and exploited to persuade individuals to join the group's cause. The analysis of the case studies' material enabled me to show that the underlying narratives are interpreted in different ways depending on personal contexts and experiences, but Islamic symbolism is always used as an interpretative lens to provide them with the legitimacy they need to thrive. In fact, my findings allowed me to conclude that IS's message is a religious totalitarian ideology to the extent that it proposes a revolutionary break from the status quo and presents it in religious terms.

Collectively, the analysis provides qualified support for my initial assumption. IS's framing message is successful because it offers aspiring jihadists with the possibility to resolve all their problems and achieve their innermost desires. In other words, troubled Muslim youth is allured by IS's promised rewards and views the group's 'ultimate truth' as the only way out of the discriminative reality they are living in. Islam is simply a means to an end, a mask used to give legitimacy to a brutal interpretation of the world based on a strict categorisation of the society. Islamic values are not the primary motivators to the adoption of radical behaviours but are used as a justification of otherwise inexcusable actions. The Islamic essence of the terrorist group has, therefore, an explicit instrumental purpose to the extent that it is simply serves the objective of legitimising its message and of providing a justifying framework.

Relevance and limitations of findings

The purpose of this research paper was to examine an alternative proposition about the role of Islam in the Islamic State-inspired radicalisation process. A study of the non-ideological causes of radicalisation has essential value because of the current large-scale impact of the phenomenon and its spreading effects worldwide. However, the scope of my dissertation has theoretical and empirical

limitations. I did not intend to offer a general model explaining radicalisation in the entire Italian peninsula, but rather my empirical focus is on the situational circumstances characterising my own sample of IS-inspired radicals in order to explain how personal features are, in reality, hidden behind Islamic justifications.

As it is not possible to articulate an overarching jihadist typology, I believe that studying individual cases and identifying shared narratives within radicalisation processes is imperative. By doing this, it will be easier to recognise the social, political, and psychological contexts that are more likely to produce jihadists. The significant point of my research is that I intended to 'profile' both the person and the process of radicalisation as a whole in an attempt to have a comprehensive picture of the root causes and how they interrelate with the person's traits along the road to jihadism.

Yet, again, my dissertation does not pretend to be a definite analysis, and neither does it offer a comprehensive theorisation of the diversity of jihadist profiles. Rather, it raises the question of understanding what hides behind exploitative Islamist discourses, thereby highlighting the danger of the phenomenon and attempting to inspire further research. The discussion around IS's Islamic nature, in fact, has seen scholars and experts from all fields joining proxy debates over the nature of Islam and its incompatibility with secularism in the West. It is, indeed, an important and necessary discussion because religion is deeply entrenched in all aspects of our social and political life. At the same time, it is also creating a fertile soil for Islamophobia to rise and concerns among European Islamic communities as Islamic teachings are increasingly being associated with terrorism. In this context, my study proves valuable in the examination of IS's framing processes contributing to a more informed discussion of IS-inspired radicalisation process in an attempt to 'excuse' Islam in its role of primary motivator.

In order to reduce terror attacks and the threat of foreign fighters' mobilisation, we must focus on the socio-political and psychological root causes of radicalisation. We must also understand how religion serves as a vehicle for IS's 'us versus them' mentality and a justification for its brutality. Islam does not lead individuals to become jihadists. Unpleasant and traumatic experiences of discrimination, social marginalisation, and deprivation do, and they are conveniently expressed in religious terms.

Basis for further research

By observing and studying what made vulnerable individuals radicalise in the past, it will be possible to identify broader narrative patterns. These shared narratives are what potentially contributes to the adoption of radical beliefs, which are given a voice through Islamic values. A more comprehensive model of radicalisation could be helpful in this regard and in emphasising how religion is used as a justification factor. Also, it will contribute to a better understanding of the dynamics of personal and collective factors that IS exploits. Further research, however, is needed to understand how Islamist narratives are used in the recruitment not only of Anas El Abboubi and Maria Giulia Sergio, but of the wider Italian and European Muslim community. Thus, my findings can be used as a complementing case study and a basis to expand the analysis to a bigger number of jihadist profiles with the hope that my distinction between Islam and IS's Islamist frameworks results useful for future research.

The challenge for intelligence and law enforcement agencies as well as for scholars lies in understanding how Islam matters and in what ways it is used in the guise of an Islamic apocalyptic cult. An urgent policy question is that European governments deal also with the perceived and real political grievances that generate jihadists in the first place. In addition to this, it is also important to counter IS's message with better and more compelling ideologies. In fact, IS might be on the verge of a military defeat in the Middle East, but its ideological and emotional grip is stronger than ever. This is what gives the Caliphate its

advantage in the war of ideologies with the West. The group's message might also be distorted, and surely not the most truthful, but it is passionate in its determination.

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