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Motivations for Jihad and Cognitive Dissonance – A Qualitative Analysis of Former Swedish Jihadists

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ABSTRACT

This study is based on interviews with three former Swedish jihadists, and it uses cognitive dissonance theory to analyze how their motivations for jihad changed—from the early stages of radicalization to fighting as part of a jihadist group and finally leaving jihad. It argues that cognitive dissonance is a causal mechanism, alternative to empathy and collective relative deprivation, that can explain how individuals with collective identities can be motivated to opt for jihad. For none of the interviewees did fundamentalist Islam provide a gateway into jihadism, nor did they seem to use Islam as a mere justification for violent behavior. Cognitive dissonance can also shed light on why some jihadists have not been susceptible to further radicalization by accepting even more radical ideas.

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Introduction

This study is based on interviews with three former Swedish jihadists, and it uses cognitive dissonance theory to analyze how their motivations for jihad changed—from the early stages of radicalization to fighting as part of a jihadist group and finally leaving jihad. The study also briefly discusses the problem of causal inference in interview studies with jihadists.

Scholars have sought to understand why some Muslims in the West become foreign fighters in the battlefields of global jihad in, for example, Syria, or become terrorists in their homelands. So far, however, we know quite little about Islamic radicalization in the West. In an effort to avoid a static view, some scholars have described it as a long process rather than an incident limited in time. It has been labeled a staircase,¹ a pyramid,² and even a conveyor belt.³ However, the results of various studies have often been conflicting.⁴ For example, the impact of educational success, economic resources,⁵ prior criminality,⁶ and family responsibilities⁷ on radicalization is unclear.

While research has failed to establish a typical profile of a violent radical,⁸ two approaches with quite opposite explanatory models have become the center of the debate. Kepel looks for answers in the sociology of the socioeconomically disadvantaged suburbs and the spreading of fundamentalist Islam, especially Salafism.⁹ To him, the

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source of violence lies in the radicalization of Islam, that is, in an Islamic community where fundamentalist ideas abound. Roy argues instead that violent Islamic radicalization should be understood as the Islamization of radicalism.¹⁰ From this perspective, the problem is not Salafism itself, but rather young people who embrace jihadist ideas because they are violent nihilists. Many recruits have previously expressed this radical revolt against society with criminality, and Islam and ideology have become a mere cover to legitimize violence.

Radicalization is often a social process affected by group dynamics such as kinship, friendship,¹¹ and even the increased status that can be gained by joining a jihadist group.¹² Moreover, second-generation Muslim immigrants may sometimes experience tensions between their western identity and inherited ethnic or religious identity. Since jihadism provides a polarized, black-and-white worldview, joining a jihadi group can be a means to reduce uncertainty for those battling with such an identity crisis.¹³ Perceptions of Islam and Muslims as collectively under attack can be especially significant in this mobilization process.¹⁴ While the connection to the suffering of the Muslim community can be more imaginary than real,¹⁵ images of collective relative deprivation suffered by an identity group that is exposed to perceived injustices can motivate individuals to act more strongly than personal relative deprivation does.¹⁶ In addition to collective relative deprivation, another possible mechanism connecting an individual's actions to a collective identity is empathy for the *ummah*, the abstract global Muslim community.¹⁷

This article uses cognitive dissonance theory to analyze the changing motivations of jihadists. It argues that cognitive dissonance—that is, psychological discomfort caused by inconsistent cognitions—rather than empathy or collective relative deprivation, may sometimes be the motivation for individuals with collective identities to opt for jihad. In none of the cases included in this article did fundamentalist Islam provide a gateway into jihadism, which Kepel emphasizes is an important path to radicalization.¹⁸ The respondents also did not seem to use Islam as a mere justification for violent behavior, which Roy argues characterizes many jihadists.¹⁹ However, a focus on cognitive dissonance, in conjunction with the impact of the social setting and ideas such as *fard al ayn* (individual duty), further develops Kepel's contention that the spreading of fundamentalist ideas or "foreign Islamist ideology" can explain behavioral radicalization.²⁰ The question is how and when ideas matter.

As radicalization is a multifaceted and dynamic process, often occurring in response to the events and people surrounding the radicalizing person,²¹ it is analytically important to gain empirical access to its different phases. While research into radicalization has mostly been conceptual and theoretical rather than empirical, some interesting interview studies have been conducted. Scholars have communicated with active jihadists in Syria on social media and using text messaging applications²² and interviewed them when they are visiting their home countries.²³ Scholars have also conducted interviews with former jihadists²⁴ and even recent defectors from the Islamic State (IS).²⁵ When it is difficult to access active or former jihadists, it may be possible to gain an understanding of the circumstances surrounding radicalization by interviewing people who had been in the same environment as the jihadists during their early radicalization phase²⁶ or by interviewing those who aspire to become jihadists.²⁷

While these methods represent different degrees of access to empirical material, they all have their limitations when it comes to understanding why some Muslims in the

West become foreign fighters in the battlefields of global jihad. However, as Weggemans, Bakker and Grol argue, “much more empirical research is needed to be able to arrive at a set of well-defined factors, circumstances or dynamics that will help us to understand this phenomenon.”²⁸ Three former Swedish jihadists were interviewed for this study. While Amir had fought in Bosnia in the 1990s, Ahmed had experience from both Afghanistan and Bosnia in the 1990s. The third interviewee, Safet, had joined IS, but returned home after been disillusioned by the organization. One active IS fighter was also interviewed to further analyze the effect of social surroundings on fighters.

The interviewees represent different generations of jihadists. First, jihadists active in Syria, especially IS members, have been increasingly socialized to global jihad without borders. Second, their activities have also been characterized by the increasing dominance of the ideal of fighting to the end as a normal way of life rather than seeing jihad as a time-limited experience for a local purpose. This normalization of jihad often includes building a family in the conflict zone. Third, they have been more likely to use the doctrine of *takfir*—excommunication—to justify fighting rival jihadist groups.²⁹

The interviews took place in Gothenburg, Sweden, between 2014 and 2015. Non-probability sampling was used to locate the respondents as part of ethnographic research into radicalization. Because the sample may be unrepresentative of the larger population of interest, the aim of this study is theory development rather than theory testing. The respondents were asked to reflect on their motivations at different points in time: before they had travelled to a conflict zone, during their time as jihadists in the conflict zone, and after they had returned to Sweden. While these main topics provided the conversations direction, unstructured interviews in a natural environment, such as mosques and cafes, allowed for social interaction and brought forward experiences that the interviewer had not previously considered. Leading questions that could point at any existing theory of radicalization were avoided, and only neutral probes were used so as to let the respondents freely discuss the topic. The results suggest that former jihadists can identify different stages of radicalization and the associated motivations. Moreover, while not the only variable, cognitive dissonance theory can contribute to explaining the three jihadists’ changing motivations and therefore also their actions.

The study first discusses the difficulties of drawing causal inferences when interviewing jihadists, suggesting that interviews with former jihadists are likely to better uncover jihadists’ changing motivations than are interviews with those still active in jihad. To explain how individuals with collective identities can be motivated to opt for jihad, the study then analyzes the empirical material with the help of cognitive dissonance theory.

Radicalization and Causal Inference

Empirical tests in the social sciences are often motivated by the desire to estimate the causal effect of an independent variable on a dependent variable, such as radicalization. For example, one might want to know whether or to what extent being exposed to a charismatic recruiter or to internet propaganda affects the probability that an individual will join a jihadist group. Several research designs are available for measuring and

testing the association between different variables, but their application to the study of radicalization is often limited.

Although they are best for proving causality, for practical and ethical reasons, controlled experiments in which subjects are randomly assigned to treatment and control groups are not always possible in the social sciences. Rather than exposing people to a treatment that is suspected of leading to radicalization, a research design that would clearly violate research ethics, it would be best if scholars were able to interview individuals before, during, and after their radicalization. Such a strategy would resemble a natural experimental design. As compared to controlled experiments, natural experiments represent a somewhat more realistic way of making causal inferences about sensitive research questions. A natural experiment does not involve random assignment by the researcher, but rather it relies on naturally occurring random assignment to treatment and control groups, such as, for example, being exposed to charismatic recruiters or not having this exposure.

Natural experiments, however, have limitations with respect to internal validity, as the randomness of the treatment is often difficult to prove. A natural experiment may then yield results similar to those from a standard observation study. Moreover, radicalization is such a rare event that it is unlikely that one will gain access to subjects before the treatment, even when focusing on people who can be considered to be at risk. For a rare exception, see the case of Samir.³⁰ It might involve interviewing thousands of people, and then “hoping” that some of them will naturally end up in the treatment group. In practice, scholars must construct their sampling frame *ex post facto* and seek to interview jihadists who have already become radicalized and are planning to or have already travelled to conflict zones, which poses different methodological challenges, such as the difficulty of knowing their motivations.

Dawson, Amarasingam, and Bain argued, after text messaging with active jihadists in Syria, that “it is apparent that the fighters we have contacted prefer to use existing jihadi religious conceptions of life in general to make sense of their own circumstances.”

³¹ However, Dawson and Amarasingam also admitted that “it is difficult to determine what bias is present in the accounts we collected and fairly differentiate between trustworthy and untrustworthy statements.”³² Similarly, Roy writes that “we also have biographical information, as their trajectories have been more or less amply described by journalists.... The problem arises when it comes to working on their motivations.... he or she videotapes, tweets, chats, Skypes, messages on WhatsApp and Facebook, is interviewed, and produces plenty of chatter.”³³ Indeed, when interviewing active jihadists or charting their statements on social media, it is difficult to know whether the religious motives for fighting are the result of, for example, earlier indoctrination, or if they are merely justifications taking place in the conflict zone.

The word *motive* can be used in various ways, but in general it implies a reason that one offers for acting in a certain way. However, the concept of *motivation* describes “what produces the desire”³⁴ to act. While many radical Muslims may have the desire to become jihadists but do not act on that desire, many jihadists may also have had motivations that differ from their motives. Ultimately the task of causal inference is uncovering jihadists’ motivations behind the veil of different motives.

The question of the possibility of knowing jihadists’ motivations is reminiscent of the debate about how to interpret classical works of political theory. Quentin Skinner,

critical of many previous scholars' interpretations, argued that a starting point to knowing a writer's motivation "is to know the relationship in which he stands to what he has written," whether the writer was joking, serious, ironic, or in general what "speech-act he was performing."³⁵ When being interviewed, rather than reflecting on their deeper motivations, active jihadists often seek either to justify their behavior or to make statements that are conducive to recruiting new members. Such statements can be filtered out by focusing on research questions that do not deal with motivations.³⁶ However, when interviewing active jihadists, the need to have a critical attitude to one's sources is more crucial than it is in some other fields of research in which the respondents have a better ability to reflect on their experiences or can be trusted more.

According to Skinner, scholars of classical political theory have created a "mythology of doctrines," resulting from the expectation that each writer must "enunciate some doctrine on each of the topics regarded as constitutive of his subject."³⁷ Moreover, as classical writers are seldom consistent in their arguments, the "mythology of coherence" contributes to finding a coherent system of thought when there is none.³⁸ It is important to try to avoid such mythologies in research into jihadism, as the motives that active jihadists offer do not always fit into a coherent political ideology that may be expected to motivate their behavior. And if they seem to do so, it is still not always clear what speech act they are involved in, that is, whether one can trust them.

Although active jihadists' "justifications are not always post hoc inventions but can be seen as being embedded in psychological and social processes that also seek to justify future activity in a continuous process of self-reflection,"³⁹ they do not reliably grant access to information about what motivated the jihadists before they joined the jihadist group because they are still in the middle of the radicalization process. Indeed, human motivations are seldom constant, as we are continuously exposed to changing circumstances and ideas affecting not only our perceptions of ourselves and our surroundings, but also our goals and strategies for reaching them. Thus, radicalization can be seen as a discursive journey, *jihadiship*, consisting of (e)merging ideas, meanings, problems and solutions that change with individuals' encounters with new circumstances—both material (e.g., people and place) and immaterial (e.g., ideas).⁴⁰

Lacking access to people during the early stages of their radicalization, and not always being able to trust the motives of those who have joined a jihadist group, a researcher may find the next best option is to interview people who have had time to reflect on their *jihadiship* or are in a position to do so during an interview. The rest of the article studies how three former Swedish jihadists analyze, in retrospect, their motivations before they had travelled to a conflict zone and when they were in the conflict zone.

Cognitive Dissonance and Perceptions of Motivations

Cognitive dissonance, a form of psychological discomfort, is an everyday condition especially related to goal-driven behavior.⁴¹ Cognitive dissonance occurs as, with few exceptions, an "individual strives toward consistency within himself."⁴² Thus, dissonance is a motivational factor that refers to "nonfitting relations among cognitions," cognition meaning "any knowledge, opinion, or belief about the environment, about one self, or about one's behavior."⁴³ Dissonance can arise from a perception of logical inconsistency,

often in relation to past experiences of cause and effect associated with certain behaviors and cultural mores that define what comes to be seen as dissonant.⁴⁴ Whatever the cause, when faced with dissonance, an individual has two options to reduce it: change cognitions about behavior and change actions; or change cognitions about the effects or meaning of actions.⁴⁵

Ahmed first fought in Afghanistan, among the ranks of Hizbi-Islami Gulbuddin, which emerged as a splinter group of one of the most radical of the seven mujahidin factions fighting the Soviets in the 1980s. Ahmed said that when he was a young man living in Sweden, “there was increasing talk in the local mosques about the need to go to Afghanistan to fight to defend the country against anti-Muslim forces.”⁴⁶ The Soviet Union had recently withdrawn from Afghanistan, but the war continued between different factions.

When he was a young boy in the early 1980s, Ahmed was greatly influenced by his family’s reaction to developments in world politics, as they were “appalled by the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan.”⁴⁷ He said that his radicalization and that of many others at the time resulted from the situation in Afghanistan: “You see injustices in a Muslim land and want to set things right. ... You feel bad for not doing anything.”⁴⁸ Thus, he was motivated to help fellow Muslims whose country was occupied by a foreign power. While he may also have experienced empathy, not acting on his conviction that justice should be served was a source of discomfort, or cognitive dissonance, which prompted him to act.

Rather than changing his cognitions about his current actions, Ahmed chose to change his actions by becoming a jihadist. It remains to be further studied why others choose the former option and do not become violent radicals. It is clearly less demanding, in terms of the sacrifices one must make, to change cognitions about the effects or meanings of staying at home by arguing that one individual cannot make a significant difference, rather than risking one’s life by becoming a jihadist. A possible reason for his choice was that Ahmed’s social setting led him to embrace an understanding of jihad as an individual religious duty, *fard al ayn*, “a religious duty to help other Muslims.”⁴⁹ This understanding led him to focus on the ethical dimension of the fight and to disregard any rational choice calculations of the impact that one person could have on the outcome of jihad.⁵⁰

The social setting in the local mosque was essential for establishing the legitimacy of jihad in Afghanistan. Ahmad explained that he “did not know much about Islam”⁵¹ or jihad at the beginning of his radicalization, even though he visited a mosque catering mainly to the needs of one ethnic group of Muslim immigrants. In the mosque, primarily Arabs who had been jihadists in Afghanistan preached publicly and in private about “the need for more people to join the jihad.”⁵² This preaching continued, becoming more successful in recruiting young men for jihad, when another mosque—which turned out to be even more radical and reached a wider audience across various ethnic groups—opened in the same town.

This ability to openly preach about the need for more people to join the jihad was due to the political developments during the Cold War. During the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s, many western countries, along with Saudi Arabia, looked favorably on Muslims who were willing to fight the communists in Afghanistan. Similarly, in Sweden it was not as controversial to speak openly of the need for jihad

and to recruit jihadists in local mosques then as it is today. There was a relative openness to and apparent tacit approval of jihadism by the local authorities in Sweden, who were more worried about the communist threat than the mujahidin fighting them in a faraway country. This made jihadism seem not such a controversial path for Ahmed and others around him to take.

Ahmed made his decision to become a jihadist when Islamic thought about jihad found itself at a critical juncture where new ideas about motivation and legitimacy were spreading. Traditional jihad, prevalent before the abolition of the Ottoman Caliphate after World War I, emphasized that fighting was *fard al kifaya*—that is, a collective responsibility to defend Muslim lands—which stipulated that, as long as there were enough Muslims to fulfill this duty, not everyone was obliged to join in the fighting. In addition, jihad was traditionally often characterized by the presence of a clear political and religious authority to make decisions concerning war and peace.

However, the Caliphate had been dismantled, leaving a void of political and religious authority. During the 1980s, new ideas started to spread from Afghanistan about the need to regard jihad as *fard al ayn*—an individual rather than collective duty. Devji argues that the focus on an individual duty meant that jihad became more of an ethical than a political activity.⁵³ Therefore, the motivational forces behind jihad were also in flux, especially as Abdullah Azzam started to play a pivotal role in organizing an influx of foreign fighters to support the mujahidin resistance to the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s. In *Defence of the Muslim Lands, the First Obligation After Faith*, he formulated the main pillars of what can be called classical or territorially based jihad. Abdullah Azzam argued that *fard al ayn* obligated all Muslims to join in the fighting to help their Muslim brethren throw off foreign occupation. The concept of jihad as an individual duty had already been present in Sayyed Qutb's earlier writings on the importance of fighting local political leaders, but Azzam now used the same principle or norm against the foreign occupiers of Muslim lands.

Norms can be defined as “standards of behavior defined in terms of rights and obligations”⁵⁴ or as “a set of intersubjective understandings readily apparent to actors that makes behavioral claims on those actors.”⁵⁵ According to Florini, “Norms are most likely to obtain their initial foothold through the efforts of a ‘norm entrepreneur,’ an individual or organization that sets out to change the behavior of others.”⁵⁶ The new norm of jihad as an individual duty to protect Muslims spread quite unimpeded through many mosques, not only in Saudi Arabia, which organized and financed much of the jihad in Afghanistan, but also in the West. Without this openness and support from norm entrepreneurs in mosques, the spread and adoption of a new interpretation of religious duty would not have been likely. While this new *fard*, or religious duty, has often been placed in the juridical sphere of Islam, its main function as an ethically compelling motivational force was to intensify the level of cognitive dissonance that a Muslim might face when observing the apparent occupation of Muslim lands. By adding a strongly ethical aspect to cognitive dissonance, it increased the level of mental discomfort that Ahmed experienced so much that changing his actions—that is, opting for jihad—became more likely than changing his cognitions about the meaning of his current actions.

After having adopted the new norm of *fard al ayn* and the ethical duties it entailed, Ahmed was motivated to leave Sweden and ended up fighting in the ranks of Hizbi-

Islami Gulbudding. The group trained local and foreign jihadists and was viewed favorably by the CIA and the Directorate for Inter-Services Intelligence in Pakistan, receiving most of the foreign assistance given to the mujahidin. It also received funds from Saudi charity organizations, the Muslim Brotherhood, bin Laden, and other wealthy Arabs. After the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, a bloody civil war erupted in which different jihadi groups started to fight one another. Even Hizbi-Islami Gulbudding could engage in a fierce battle against a rival group one day and later form an alliance with the same group. According to Ahmed, for many jihadists this was confusing in terms of religious principles and ethics. He explained that, despite the changing circumstances in the field, he “tried to keep the motivation.”⁵⁷

He lamented that some other jihadists changed their motivation by adopting new goals and strategies, for example, accepting the new idea of *takfir* (excommunication), which served to legitimize fighting other Muslims. The idea seemed to be originating from Ayman Al Zawahiri and those with experience with local jihad in Egypt. Faced with cognitive dissonance, such as when the religious prohibition of killing other Muslims conflicts with the strategic goals of a jihadist group, people can change cognitions about behavior and change actions; or they can change cognitions about the effects or meaning of actions. Under the socializing pressures of conformity and self-sacrifice within the jihadist group, the latter course of action will often be chosen, and new radical beliefs and ideas such as *takfir* will be adopted.

However, Ahmed “doubted the religious legitimacy of killing other Muslims”⁵⁸ and realized that fighting other Muslims would have required adopting the norm of *takfir*. Cognitions vary in the extent to which they are resistant to change. For example, the level of “clarity of the ‘reality’ represented by the cognition” can be such that what is perceived as a “fact” gives rise to “clear and firm cognitions.”⁵⁹ First impressions can be decisive in this respect. Although now, in retrospect, he was critical of what happened, Ahmed explained that his motivation became rather stable because of the foundation laid by the recruiters in the two mosques he had frequented in Sweden: “Just because some people have the longest beards does not mean that they know much about Islam. But when you do not know about anything else, you can be convinced [by them]. When you later come into contact with other opinions, you dismiss them. What you first come into contact with is the most important influence.”⁶⁰

His first motivation for jihad, already established during his contacts with the recruiters at the local mosque in Gothenburg, had been the ethical need to protect Muslims against foreign occupiers. Jihad as *fard al ayn*, an individual duty, had made the ethical dimension so strong that it had prompted him to act on it rather than changing cognitions about the meaning and effects of inaction. However, this focus on individual ethics had also made it difficult to accept new norms that seemingly violated “the need to protect other Muslims.”⁶¹ For Ahmed, not killing other Muslims was a such an important tenet of Islam that the growing acceptance of *takfir* as a norm in Afghanistan created a particularly strong discomfort, and he could not solve this cognitive dissonance by tampering with his basic beliefs.

Wicklund and Brehm argue that “When a person holds two cognitions that are in a dissonant relationship, the amount of dissonance he experiences is a direct function of how important those cognitions are to him.”⁶² However, how this dissonance can be

resolved is also affected by which of the cognitions is the strongest. To keep intact his original motivation of defending Muslims against foreign occupation and to resolve the cognitive dissonance created by internecine fighting among jihadist groups, Ahmed moved to Bosnia, where the Muslim population was pitted against the Orthodox Serbs and Catholic Croats in the Bosnian War. Thus, cognitive dissonance was resolved by changing actions rather than changing cognitions about the meaning of actions, which were too deeply rooted for Ahmed. Other jihadists facing the same situation may be more willing to change their cognitions about the meaning of actions, such as killing other Muslims, if they are more susceptible to socializing pressures from the jihadist group.

When I asked Ahmed whether any other factor—beyond religious ideas, the urge to help other Muslims, the social surroundings of the local mosque, and the tacit approval from society—affected his initial motivation, he was quiet at first. He then said that as a young man he had had “some trouble with the police and authorities,”⁶³ which is not unusual. Two-thirds of those in the quantitative study of Swedish jihadists by Rostami et al. had previously been under suspicion for at least one crime.⁶⁴ Considering these troubles, it did not seem to Ahmed that he had viable alternative plans in Sweden. He also admitted in hindsight that he may also have been searching for something exciting to do. This was not, however, something that he tried to think of when he was a jihadist, because any motivation that did not conform with the religiously correct perception of jihad needed to be overridden: “In the beginning it was also about seeking an adventure, but when the risk of dying becomes obvious, you start looking for the right *niyah* [intention] and making *duah* [supplications]. Finally, all possible remains of adventure seeking disappear.”⁶⁵

Thus, affected by the social and religious norms in radical circles and seeking to avoid cognitive dissonance, which is a form of psychological discomfort especially related to goal-driven behavior,⁶⁶ jihadists downplay the wide array of motivations driving their behavior. In the end, some motivations are weakened or even disappear, while others are strengthened. For example, Ahmed said that some people he knew travelled to Afghanistan seeking adventure, and they trained for jihad in local camps but never engaged in real battle. However, battle makes people change their motivations, as “not knowing whether you are going to survive or not”⁶⁷ often makes one increasingly religious, which then becomes the primary motivation, as it can help one deal with the stress of warfare.

Ahmed explained the ever-present risk of dying, and how he reacted to it based on his religious beliefs, by describing how one day his unit was ordered to move into a village where he was hit by incoming fire: “I fell, and my leg felt warm. I tried to crawl, but my foot got stuck somewhere. I thought it would fall off. There were many explosions around me. Those who came to help me said we would have to wait [before evacuating], so I just huddled. ... There was no fear.”⁶⁸ He had started to pray more after leaving for Afghanistan and his goal was “to establish Afghanistan as an Islamic country ... I wanted to live in an Islamic country.”⁶⁹ Ahmed noted that “foreign jihadists became more religiously inspired,”⁷⁰ as they were looking for a justification for fighting in a faraway country. Such was the case with him.

Ahmed eventually also left Bosnia, briefly returning to Afghanistan for more training, but his desire to better understand Islam led him to enroll at a university to get a

degree in Islamic studies. If his decision to become a jihadist had been affected by cognitive dissonance, as his actions did not match his perceptions of reality, the same process also made him increasingly uneasy about continuing jihad. The ethical dimension created by *fard al ayn* was especially significant in this process. It increased the level of discomfort that first led to his radicalization; later it also made him less susceptible to social pressures for further radicalization within the jihadist group.

His perceptions about the aims of the jihadist organization, the events in the battlefield, and religion were slowly shifting, requiring a new kind of action leading to deradicalization. Ahmed explained that now, after extensive studies, he had “a different understanding of Islam” as compared to when he was as a young man “listening to people talk of jihad at the local mosque.”⁷¹ He saw some fellow jihadists become more radical and change their motivations by adopting new goals and strategies in response to the changing circumstances in Afghanistan: “Many young people who do not have deeper knowledge and *sabr* [patience] can commit terrorist attacks. They do not reflect over what targets are legitimate.”⁷² He viewed the willingness of many other jihadists to change their understanding of the ethics of jihad with suspicion, and eventually moved in the opposite direction by becoming deradicalized as a result of Islamic studies that gave him “a deeper awareness of classical Islam.”⁷³

Amir also fought in Bosnia during the 1990s to help the local Muslims against the Serbs who “did cruel stuff.”⁷⁴ Just like Ahmed, he was appalled by the killing of Muslims, which he also had become aware of by watching TV and through contacts with his friends: “I did not know what war was like, but I could not avoid going there when I saw people suffering. It really made me feel bad”⁷⁵ Cognitive dissonance, the discomfort created by the mismatch between his perceptions and actions, seemed to motivate his decision. However, unlike Ahmed, he had not had problems with the authorities, nor did he say that a youthful search for adventure had in any way affected his motivation. He explained that he “had good role models as a youth”⁷⁶ and he had recently gotten married, which made the decision to fight difficult: “I needed quite a long time to make up my mind. I saw [on TV] and heard about many terrible things, mass executions, torture, women being raped, and when I had made up my mind, there was no turning back. No one persuaded me to go, there was no recruiter. I went together with two guys and they were not recruiters.”⁷⁷

Thus, unlike Ahmed, he had not been equally affected by external norm entrepreneurs seeking to proliferate the idea of jihad as an individual obligation, *fard al ayn*. For him, the images in the media and the stories told by friends were enough to create such discomfort that he solved the cognitive dissonance by changing his actions rather than changing his cognitions about the meaning of his current behavior. This variation in how individuals opt for jihad is an example of the complexity of jihadiship, consisting of (e)merging ideas, meanings, problems and solutions that change with individuals’ encounters with new circumstances—both material (e.g., people and place) and immaterial (e.g., ideas).⁷⁸

Amir felt that there was wide variation in the fighters’ motivations: “Some prayed extra prayers and asked to become *shaheed* [martyrs], but I did not have the same will to die. You will die when your time has come. I was there to defend basic values.”⁷⁹ He explained that in addition to fighting, he went to Germany several times to get medicine

for the needy. Amir further said that he did not believe fighting is always the right option, but “when good intentions do not help, there is no other choice. You will either be a victim or defend people. You really must take a stand.”⁸⁰ He repeated several times that although he could not stop thinking about the cruelties of war, he had a clear conscience.

He explained that, rather than being a religious fundamentalist, he had had an interest in the spiritual side of Islam through Sufism. As Devji argues, both Sufism and jihadism are often, for their practitioners, deeply ethical activities.⁸¹ Moreover, an individual who is accustomed to viewing his or her religious practice as an ethical activity may under some circumstances be prone to change his or her behavior by resorting to violence for the sake of safeguarding the same ethics that inform his or her religious practice. Indeed, some examples of jihad have involved Sufis who have taken up arms against foreign occupiers of what are seen as Muslim lands. For example, Abdelkader ibn Muhieddine was a prominent Algerian Sufi leader who also led the long military struggle against the French colonial invasion in the mid-19th century.

However, Amir explained that his motivation to fight changed during the war. As he was not strongly affected by the idea of jihad being *fard al ayn*, an individual duty, he was more prone to make rational choice calculations about how his presence in the battlefield could make a difference in the course of the war. He had already left Bosnia and was considering settling down, feeling that he had done his utmost, when he heard that one of his close friends had died in the battlefield. This dramatic event created cognitive dissonance, a feeling of discomfort as his behavior contradicted the newly acquired social obligation to return and fight on: “I thought, how could I look at myself in the mirror, and went back to Bosnia.”⁸² Although he said that his basic understanding of the goals of jihad had not changed, his battlefield experiences had created a sense of brotherhood affecting his motivations. While he had family obligations drawing him away from Bosnia, the friendship ties that had grown stronger in the battlefield drew him back into jihad. Amir explained that “The war created a sense of community. You thought more about the others and you became less selfish. It strengthened friendships. You became more interested in other people’s problems, more generous, and more willing to sacrifice yourself for the others.”⁸³

Thus, this new band of brothers could create a strong sense of cognitive dissonance even without Amir subscribing to *fard al ayn*, as he found it difficult to reconcile the suffering of his old brothers-in-arms with his comfortable family life. He could have resolved the cognitive dissonance by changing his cognitions about what was going on in the battlefield, but the sense of the brotherhood motivated him instead to change his behavior. While most theories of motivation describe it as originating in the individual self, emphasizing individual autonomy in creating one’s personal goals,⁸⁴ from a social psychological perspective, human motivation can be described as social, in that our perceptions, attitudes, and identities are constructed in conjunction with those people with whom we share our social reality. While the attitudes, interests, motivation, and identities of children, in particular, are in large part created through peer groups,⁸⁵ Walton and Cohen argue that not only children but people of all ages “may internalize the goals of others as their own, as well as develop new interests and goals collectively with others to whom they feel socially connected.”⁸⁶

Active jihadists are often socialized into embracing new ideas of jihad during their stay in a jihadi group.⁸⁷ Those who are not disillusioned by their first meeting with the jihadist organization sometimes say that their motivations have changed while in the conflict zone. Bilal was briefly in Gothenburg, Sweden, visiting from IS controlled territories in Syria, when I had the opportunity to interview him. He was adamant about the religious legitimacy of jihad in Syria, and that “It is important to have the right *niyah* [intention].... If you die without having fought for Allah *subhanawatala* [the most glorified and the highest], but, for example, to show off, you will go to hell.”⁸⁸ However, he admitted that some aspects of his motivation had changed in Syria because of what he had learned in the social surroundings of the jihadi group: “I went to Syria to become a *shaheed* [martyr], but you are not allowed to desire death.”⁸⁹ Such changes in motivations point to the effect of the new social surroundings. Roy writes that “their death erases their lives of sin, which explains why the issue of religious observance is non-essential in their eyes: death erases all trespasses.”⁹⁰ While this may be true in some cases, such as lone wolves who radicalize quickly and use the IS narrative to justify their radicalism, Bilal was affected by the jihadi group and afraid that he would not die in a pure mental state created by religious observance and the right religious intention. Merely dying in battle for IS would not lead to salvation.

Even Amir, who did not seem to be motivated by the norm of jihad as an individual duty, was affected by the jihadi group, which created a sense of a band of brothers, obligating him to return to the fight. However, the social surroundings and the risk of death also led to more negative changes in how the fighters were motivated to choose targets. Amir explained that “there were some who blamed the actions of the enemy on the civilian population,”⁹¹ which led to increasing levels of violence against civilians. Just as it had for Ahmed, this perception of unethical behavior created discomfort for Amir. However, the obligation he felt toward his fellow fighters was so strong that it made him fight on until the end of the war. For Ahmed, the focus on individual ethics, founded on *fard al ayn*, created a particularly strong discomfort, and this cognitive dissonance caused him to leave Afghanistan. However, the cognitive dissonance created by his social surroundings, which Amir experienced for not helping his brothers-in-arms, was stronger than the discomfort created by some fighters taking their revenge on civilians. Thus, he stayed to fight on.

Ahmed and Amir were active in Bosnia and Afghanistan in the 1990s, but the new generation of jihadists fighting in Syria, especially IS members, has been socialized to global jihad without borders. Moreover, their activities have been characterized by the increasing dominance of the ideal of fighting to the end as a normal way of life, and they have been more likely to use the doctrine of *takfir*—excommunication—to justify fighting rival jihadist groups.⁹² These differences, indicating increasing radicalization of jihad, beg the question whether cognitive dissonance can also explain some IS members’ motivations and actions.

Safet was also employed, married, and had children when he left Sweden to join IS in the battlefields of Syria. He also attended Sufi gatherings and even had a Sufi sheikh for spiritual guidance. Unlike the two other former jihadists, he did not say anything about any discomfort that would suggest that cognitive dissonance made

him opt for jihad, and it seemed like he would have been a very unlikely candidate for becoming radicalized. However, this did not prevent him from joining IS in Syria, as Safet's friend convinced him to travel together to Syria to join the jihad.

Since most jihadists are very young—teenagers or in their early twenties—⁹³ they are particularly susceptible to influences from people around them, especially friends, as they construct and reconstruct motivations for action, both in the beginning of their radicalization process and later as a member of the radical group. Classical studies of social psychology indicate that people's perceptions of reality can be different when they are alone as compared to when they are in a group that exerts social influence on them. People often go along with the group for fear of being ridiculed or thought peculiar.⁹⁴ Thus, the discomfort created by being alone with a divergent perception of reality, within the influence-exerting group, can prompt people to change their perceptions. For Safet, this meant that he became convinced that IS is a legitimate Muslim group “fighting to protect Muslims.”

Even media exposure can be part of the social setting that can give rise to changing motivations. For example, a Swedish social worker related an encounter with a young man who had joined IS during its early years. After returning to Sweden, he at first firmly believed that even when IS used violence, it was justified, arguing that “when IS kills one person, it saves one hundred others that this person would have killed.”⁹⁵ He had not followed western media reporting, which portrayed IS as a radical, extremist organization. However, according to the social worker, when he started to follow local news after his return to Sweden, his views of the organization started to change, and he would eventually come to agree that it is a radical organization.

The experience of joining IS would not turn out to be what Safet had expected. He saw things that he “did not expect,”⁹⁶ including “violence that I had never seen before,”⁹⁷ which made him troubled. While it is unclear whether his decision to travel to Syria was caused by cognitive dissonance, and not only by social influence from his friend, seeing the cruel reality in IS controlled areas created mental discomfort: “It did not feel right to stay.”⁹⁸ If he had been deeply convinced of jihad being *fard al ayn*, an individual duty, he could have solved this cognitive dissonance by changing cognitions about IS's actions. Safet's friend, who had persuaded him to join him to Syria, was more convinced of jihad being an individual duty and stayed. Moreover, if cognitive dissonance had motivated him to become a jihadist, the discomfort of not fighting could have been stronger than the initial discomfort created by observing and participating in IS's behavior. However, even during his first days with IS, Safet became so disillusioned that he realized that it had been a mistake to come to Syria. While his friendship had been the motivating force bringing him to Syria, it was not strong enough to motivate him to stay and fight when cognitive dissonance appeared in the form of discomfort created by a conflict between his expectations and the violent reality he faced in Syria, which motivated him to leave.

Moreover, he did not stay with IS long enough to create a sense of a band of brothers, which had been the case with Amir in Bosnia. While the rate of desertion increased after the defeat in the battle for Kobane in January 2015, many foreign fighters fought on, as they did not see a future in their home countries, or because they felt obliged to fight for their fellow jihadists. Although ideological indoctrination had started from the

day he arrived in Syria, Safet was not successfully socialized into the jihadist group. He came to Syria before the defeat in Kobane, when there was a large influx of foreign fighters, and the commanders believed future victories were at hand. For a month, Safet nagged the commanders to allow him to return to Sweden, until they finally agreed to let him go on the condition that he would not reveal what he had seen during his stay. However, as the number of military defeats started to increase, IS would no longer allow jihadists to leave or even to visit their home countries. Desertion was punished by death.

Safet's religious motivation to become a jihadist did not seem to be as strong as that of Ahmed, who even went on to study Islam after leaving jihadism. In addition to the social influence from his friend, Safet said that it was partly the "adventure"⁹⁹ that was alluring. As the prospect of an adventure with a friend was his primary motivation for going to Syria, he did not need to actively change his understanding of religion to return home. Moreover, he stayed in Syria such a short time that he was not exposed to enduring religious indoctrination by IS, which could have socialized him into internalizing a new motivational force such that he could have resolved his cognitive dissonance without leaving Syria. Interestingly, Ahmed, who had the strongest religious motivation and subscribed to jihad as *fard al ayn*, was first affected by cognitive dissonance during his radicalization, while Safet, who was motivated by friendship and adventure, experienced cognitive dissonance only as part of deradicalization.

Conclusion

An analysis of three Swedish cases of foreign fighters, which may differ from the French context characterized by many domestic terror plots, is not enough to prove or disapprove any theory of radicalization. In some social settings religious fundamentalism can lead to jihadism, while in others, violent nihilism can be the cause. However, in none of the cases included in this article did fundamentalist Islam provide a gateway into jihadism, which Kepel emphasizes is an important path to radicalization.¹⁰⁰ Indeed, two of the respondents had had an interest in Sufism. And the respondents also did not seem to use Islam as a mere justification for violent behavior, which Roy argues characterizes many jihadists.¹⁰¹ Instead the cases showed cognitive dissonance to be a causal mechanism, alternative to empathy and collective relative deprivation, that can explain how individuals with collective identities can be motivated to opt for jihad. It can also shed light on how motivations change and why some jihadists have not been susceptible to further radicalization by accepting even more radical ideas.

Moreover, a focus on cognitive dissonance, in conjunction with the impact of the social setting and ideas such as jihad as *fard al ayn*, an individual duty, adds a new analytical dimension to Kepel's contention that the spreading of fundamentalist or radical ideas can explain behavioral radicalization.¹⁰² While Roy argues that ideas are unlikely to have a great impact,¹⁰³ there is a need to better understand how and when ideas matter. In the case of Ahmed, the social setting at the local mosque was crucial to his embracing the idea or norm of jihad as an individual duty. However, the most interesting aspect from an analytical perspective was that adopting this new idea or norm strengthened the effect of cognitive dissonance by increasing the level of discomfort,

prompting him to act. Thus, ideas do matter, but sometimes in a rather complex manner, as their effect can be indirect.

But what do jihadists do when seemingly innocent people die in the battlefield and new ideas start spreading to legitimize such violence? For Ahmed, the focus on individual ethics, founded on *fard al ayn*, individual duty, created particularly strong cognitive dissonance when he was faced with the idea of *takfir*, and this discomfort caused him to leave Afghanistan. Devji argues that jihad entails an “individualization of Islam”¹⁰⁴ that challenges traditional religious authorities, “an individual duty that is more ethical than political in nature.”¹⁰⁵ However, the variation among the respondents suggests that “jihad’s democratization”¹⁰⁶ not only affects the choice to become a jihadist, but it can also lead to differently changing motivations among active jihadists.

Active jihadists are often socialized into embracing new ideas of jihad during their stay in a jihadi group.¹⁰⁷ Even Amir, who did not seem to be motivated by the norm of jihad as an individual duty, was affected by the jihadi group, which created a sense of a band of brothers, obligating him to return to the fight. Thus, for many jihadists, motivation is created in a social setting, where some actions are framed in such a way that it creates cognitive dissonance, which leads to a desire to act. However, as the case of Ahmed shows, sometimes the norms that one has adopted are so strong that they make one resistant to social influences seeking to change one’s motivations when facing cognitive dissonance. Moreover, Ahmed, who had the strongest religious motivation and subscribed to jihad as *fard al ayn*, was first affected by cognitive dissonance during his radicalization, while Safet, who did not stay with the jihadist group long enough to be socialized into embracing new ideas, was motivated by friendship and adventure and experienced cognitive dissonance only as part of deradicalization.

Future studies should better test whether cognitive dissonance applies to the new generation of jihadists that has fought in Syria. Safet experienced cognitive dissonance after joining IS because of his beliefs about the ethics of war and solved it by leaving the jihadist group. However, the present study did not include former jihadists who have weaker beliefs and are motivated by nihilism, which Roy argues has characterized young men fighting for IS.¹⁰⁸

Instead of relying on active jihadists’ explanations about why they fight, which are more likely to be motives than motivations, this study has shown that respondents who are in a position to reflect on their past behavior can account for how their motivations changed. The results suggest that former jihadists can identify different stages of radicalization and the associated motivations, some of which can be explained with the help of cognitive dissonance. The varying importance of social surroundings and cognitive dissonance on motivations points to the importance of further study of their effect on jihadism.

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