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RESEARCH PAPER  
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**François Géré** is President of the Institut Français d'Analyse Stratégique (Paris), a non-governmental think tank. He lectures on cyber-strategy, counterterrorism, counterproliferation in various universities and French governmental institutes of higher learning. In 2011 he obtained the Castex Chair in Cyber-Strategy of the Institut des Hautes Etudes de Défense Nationale. Prof. Géré is an expert on nuclear proliferation, counterterrorism, psychological warfare, information warfare, and grand strategy.

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AGAINST THE SALAFIST MYTH**

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GINO GERMANI INSTITUTE FOR SOCIAL SCIENCES AND STRATEGIC STUDIES  
AT LINK CAMPUS UNIVERSITY  
Via Nomentana 335 – 00162 Rome (Italy)  
Tel. +39-06-40400232 Fax +39-06-40400211  
info@fondazionegermani.org  
www.fondazionegermani.org

## The Origins of the Myth

Today the world has to cope with a powerful myth which is not a new one since it is roughly one century old. Since the foundation in 1928 of the Muslim brotherhood by Hassan Al-Bana Salafism has been rampant. Another Egyptian, Sayyid Qutb gave the first radical interpretation of Salafism during the Fifties. Jihad was grossly diverted from its original meaning, i.e. the spiritual effort of each single believer to conduct his life according to the Quran, a struggle with himself to become a better Muslim.

Now what do we intend by myth? An ideological narrative which pretends to build a brand new future based on true and superior values. The myth offers a picture of the “golden age” of power and greatness of Islam under the Ummayyad Caliphate, a political model of a decentralized state under a single authority. It aims for the general gathering of the community of believers. The jihadi fighters accept proudly to give their lives for the ultimate victory of the myth.

The present violent Salafist myth carried by Daesh has a tradition encompassed in three different branches:

1) The Egyptian branch, dominated since 1980 by Ayman Al Zawahiri, is probably the most elaborate one, building on a long and rich tradition of theological and political thinking.

2) The second component comes from Palestine and Jordan. After the end of the war against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, Abdul Azzam, a respected intellectual, went in 1988 to Peshawar (Pakistan) and established the “base”, the home (Al-Qa’ida), and was subsequently murdered. Abu Mu’sab al- Zarkawi, born in 1964, killed in 2006 by an American strike, founder of Al-Qa’ida in Mesopotamia, belongs to a younger generation, poorly educated, who became religious in jail and inflicted extremely savage violence against Shiites in Iraq. Al-Baghdadi is the ultimate byproduct of that evolution.

3) Thirdly, the Yemeni branch, sometimes called “bedouin”, is a blend of Saudi Wahabbism and Salafi ideology, partly influenced by late Hassan Al-Turabi from Sudan (who supported and inspired Osama bin Laden).

## **The Present Enemy**

In order to develop a comprehensive strategy one should address two layers of people : 1) the operatives who engage directly in the terrorist attacks; 2) those who inspire and prepare the minds of the operatives without participating directly in terrorist actions.

Most of the former are young, poor, insufficiently educated, and lacking the support of a well-structured family. Moreover, in most European countries the conscription system for the army has been eliminated. Young people do not receive a civic education therefore lack any milestone to refer to. For them there is no future, little chance to succeed in their social environment. Often they have been jailed several months for drug dealing, robbery and aggression. They are looking for some hope, some dignity and a chance to escape from their condition. They are psychologically vulnerable. In the loneliness of their boring cell they welcome every kind of discussion, contact with their fellow prisoners and all the persons who visit them from the outside.

The second layer, much smaller in numbers, is made of adults who are well-educated, skilled speakers and sometimes have real charisma. These are the major enemy because of their power of influence. They are responsible for the mental transformation of the instinctive desire for life into an artificial desire for destruction and death.

The task of counterpropaganda is to counter those individuals by demonstrating to the first category that they have been brainwashed, disinformed by deliberate lies, deceived by false promises. It is difficult to detect the second layer since Sunni Islam is neither organized nor hierarchically structured. Everyone who is recognized as a moral authority by a group of people can pretend to be an imam.

In Western countries an administrative organization of the Muslim religion has become a necessity in order to know who is who, where and, possibly, what he says. In all cases money plays a role. Radical imams have a budget for preaching. In sharp contrast, many moderate imams visit prisoners on a voluntary basis. Since they lack resources their impact and efficiency remain limited. Finally, Salafi propaganda is more successful because it offers a myth, radical preachers express the potential for rebellion of youngsters, while the peaceful talk of moderate imams counter this spirit of rebellion and the related flow of energy. All of these elements explain the difficulties of de-radicalization.

The notion of de-radicalization has become fashionable. However, it has quite a long tradition which began in the aftermath of the war in Bosnia (1996), when it appeared that a new wave of Salafi recruitment and indoctrination was developing in Europe. Far from being limited to the prisons and detention camps in Iraq, the eradication of Salafist propaganda has become an emergency in Western countries in the span of ten years. In France, for instance, in 2005 less than one hundred in-

dividuals left the country to join the jihadist groups in Iraq. Today the number of departures to Syria amount to seven hundred. It proves the success of the Salafist myth among a new very young generation.

An additional riddle is linked to the problem of locating the enemy, the “Alien” who is fighting “Us”. Experience has proven that the enemy can be born in “our” country. He does not have to be a migrant, legal or illegal. Because of the influence of the Salafist myth people living inside our territory can suddenly change their mindset and their way of life. Through radicalization they are no longer “Us” but aliens in the middle of our ordinary social environment. Borders are less material but rather increasingly spiritual.

The present situation reinforces the interpenetration between West and East. This highly complex relationship is shaped by the dynamics of attraction and rejection. The Western model and its related benefits have attracted non-Westerners for decades and still continue to magnetize many people in Africa, Middle East and Asia. It is important to note that a number of Arab intellectuals have been disappointed with the West. They felt rejected, turned to a violent rejection of the West and challenged the “mirages” of Western culture.

Nonetheless, today the interpenetration between the two worlds and multiculturalism has become a fact of life. There are no borders for people and ideas. Through social networks cultures melt. The Western world has Orientalized. The major pending question is whether the Orient has Westernized. All over the world political leaders, intellectuals and average citizens in Russia, China, Iran ask this question, which is linked to the degree of globalization our present world has reached.

The situation is different in Eastern societies. On the contrary, today they are distinguished by will to expel the West and its values, which are often challenged and portrayed as hostile, dangerous, hypocritical, and intent on disrupting and corrupting the pure and genuine values of Islam.

The goal of the Salafist myth is to restore sectarian discrimination in order to achieve the clash of civilizations and avoid the global integration which so far has been successful. The myth claims that it is a holy mission to free the suffering Muslims, victims of the oppression imposed by the “infidels”, the “Crusaders” and their accomplices. The Salafist world is divided into the territory of Islam, which is peaceful, and the territory of war (*dar al-Harb*, *dar al-Jihad*). The territory of truce (*dar al-Ahd*) exists but is rejected in the Salafist myth, whose vision is simply black and white.

## **The Struggle for Values: Strengths and Weaknesses**

Western messages are about values and a way of life. Paradoxically, our own weaknesses are linked to the respect of our values, which are at the same time our

strength: respect for privacy, protection of individual liberty, freedom of ideological belief and the right to express such beliefs without limits. Cartoons of Muhammad have become a major example and a topic of controversy about what may or should not be done.

Another weakness is a tendency to find excuses for terrorists. During the spring of 2016, President Rohani of Iran, during a visit to Pope Francis, underscored that poverty and lack of education were the major causes of terrorism and should be addressed. There is no doubt that social injustice still matters. While Salafist propaganda offers fallacies, what does European society offer that it can effectively deliver? The power of integration is also related to the prosperity of the economy which offers jobs and social mobility, not unemployment and social stagnation. Meanwhile the rich are getting wealthier every year while the number of people living under the threshold of poverty is increasing.

Assuming that our positive values are indeed a source of power, we need to practice them much better than we actually do nowadays. The spread of racism remains a major contradiction in a society based on tolerance. There is also a widespread democracy deficit, a lack of trust and respect towards politicians and politics. More and more the average citizen suspects that current leaders use disinformation on a massive scale.

This situation nurtures a lack of moral confidence in ourselves and an increasing sense of guilt. For instance, there is a tendency to blame the West because of its actions a century ago, such as the “imperial” Sykes-Picot agreement in 1916 which divided the Ottoman Empire establishing artificial borders and imposing them on the inhabitants.

Another weakness stems from an unfortunate ability to create dilemmas that we are not able to overcome. One of the most widespread is the antagonism between liberty and security, between the protection of our privacy and the protection of our persons. It requires a lot of political skill to convince people that those notions are not antagonist but complementary, and there is space for both assuming that individuals accept some balanced and moderate compromises. Finally, many European countries suffer from a serious coherence deficit: the flow of Wahhabi propaganda benefits from wide tolerance in Europe: it can be expressed through preachers and books in cultural centers, madrassas (Islamic schools) and mosques. Some areas like Molenbeek in Belgium have been abandoned to Salafist influence and have become “safe heavens” to dispatch violent propaganda.

The cultural attitude toward life and death and the meaning of suicide offers a remarkable example of the struggle for values. Even though suicide is prohibited in all monotheist religions, including Islam (but clever theologians know well how to justify and even celebrate it), the value of life and death looks very different depending on the societies. For the materialist death is the end of everything, for the

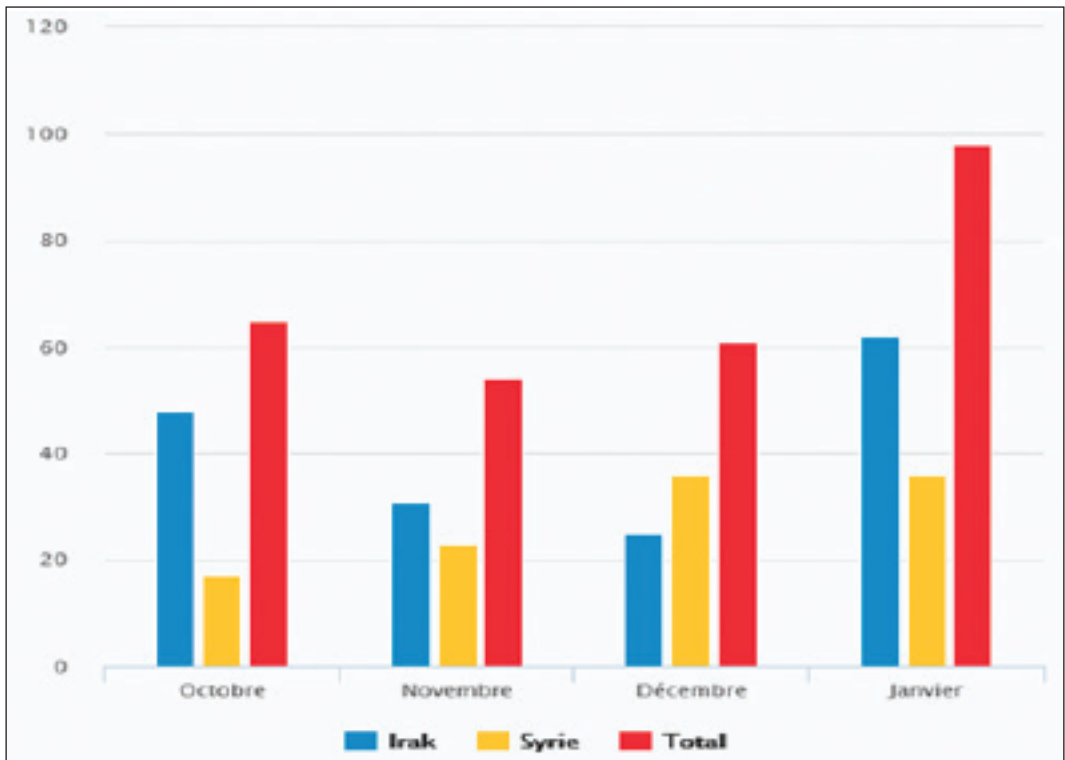


spiritualist it is just the beginning of something else. According to Salafi propaganda, death is rewarded by God in different ways, in mysterious dimensions. There is a major difference between religious societies and those who have departed from any belief in God and another kind of existence beyond present life. It is a major weakness of many European countries to consider that their vision of human life should be shared by the whole world, while in fact they are a minority.

In that sense the true major enemy is less the person who kill himself and innocent people but those who create and motivate the killer. Recent studies (fig. 1) show the increase in the use of martyrdom operations in Iraq and Syria: one hundred each month means three per day. We are back at the worst levels of suicide attacks in Iraq reached in 2006-08.

Today Daesh uses two kinds of suicide bombers: the traditional martyrs “*istish-hadi*”, who perpetrate specific terror actions particularly in Western countries, and “*inghimassi*”, who penetrate the enemy lines and cause as much damage as possible. The latter don’t kill themselves but they have almost no chance to stay alive: death is at the end of the combat mission. Since the beginning of 2016 43% of Daesh’s suicide operations belong to the *inghimassi* category. Just like in

Fig. 1



Afghanistan such operations become a weapon of war, offensive or defensive, according to the requirements of the operational situation. The example of the Japanese kamikaze is a relevant point of reference for these operations.

## **The Basis of Counteraction**

To address what is to be done three basic questions should be answered : What kind of psychological actions should we conduct against the Salafist myth? What kind of communication? Who should be in charge?

A first difficulty comes from the very nature of information operations and the tendency to confuse three different notions: information, propaganda and disinformation.

Disinformation is a hidden deliberately built lie. The skill consists in the ability to remain unmasked. The target will never know he has been disinformed. We may suspect disinformation but not prove it with certainty.

Information is the fair translation of reality, as close as possible of the facts, even though it is always a subjective construction. However, the intention remains to be as objective as possible.

Propaganda is usually divided into three components depending on the source: “white”, “grey”, “black”. The first one is transparent: you know who is talking to you and trying to convince you. It may be clever or just stupid. “White” propaganda sometimes pretends to be fair information instead of distorted information, and sometimes can be a total absurdity and lie. It is up to the listener to agree or disagree, to test and check.

“Grey” propaganda is a noise, a vague rumor, the origin of which is uncertain but one can try to look for it. Black propaganda, which is more or less similar to disinformation, masks its source under a false source, sometimes a network of fake origins which can create the appearance of a reliable environment. The receiver does remains unaware of this since he believes that it is true information.

The legitimacy of democracies stems from the fundamental difference that separates them from totalitarian organizations. Obviously, it would be a strategic mistake to adopt a symmetric approach in order to counter the messages and communication of the Salafist myth.

To be sure, the first and major task is to restore information against the lies clearly exposed by Salafist propaganda. It is not counterpropaganda but rather the development of messages about our own values in order to demonstrate that they are superior and deserve attention and affection among the younger generations who should get together to adopt and practice them.

Symmetric counter-disinformation is clearly another and more sensitive matter.

It is not a job for democracies. However, creating confusion among the enemies might be legitimate. Nonetheless, it should remain a limited endeavor reserved for secret services and specialized units.

Now who is doing what, when, where and how to counter the Salafist myth? The actors involved run the full gamut of individuals and organizations. They can be public or private, civilian or military. They should be a combination of moral authorities: religious, teachers, educators and media professionals.

Consider several examples in Europe. In France, in the civilian sector, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has established a website : *Stop Djihadisme* (fig. 2) to inform

**Fig. 2**



Fig. 3



the people on the real activities of Daesh and develop de-radicization. A private association of academics, professors and students has created “*La mécanique Daesh*” (fig. 3) which analyses and counters Daesh’s propaganda.

In the military field, the British have re-activated the 77<sup>th</sup> battalion (the *Chindits* operated behind enemy lines in Burma in the War against Japan). The so-called “*Facebook Warriors*” will use the Internet to foment confusion, uncertainty and suspicion

among the enemy by disseminating rumors and false information.

The French military’s “Centre Interarmées d’action dans l’environnement” established in 2012, focused initially on operations in Mali and the Sahel area, and later expanded to Iraq and Middle Eastern theaters of operations (Chammal Operation).

The struggle of ideas is by nature permanent and takes place everywhere. In real places like schools, jails, mosques, public areas and in the virtual dimension: internet, social networks through simple messages, videos, movies, all the traditional vectors of information.

## Countering the Salafist Myth at the Level of Multinational Organizations: EU, NATO

Generally speaking the EU and NATO are huge organizations that lack flexibility and are ill-prepared to react quickly. A communications operation (to avoid the word propaganda) has to be designed, prepared and approved by 28 countries.

There are two basic disagreements about influence operations. The first disagreement is on the target priority: Daesh or Russia? The second disagreement regards the legitimacy of propaganda. A strategy of influence on the mindset of the average citizen, whose free will should be preserved at all costs, is not legitimate. Some argue that influence operations are mainly aimed at “deliberately damaging the free will of individuals or collective groups by downgrading and falsifying information”.

These difficulties have been aggravated by the new situation Europe and the related disagreements on the migration issue, which has become a vital challenge for the UE. Through the Schengen agreements the EU has created an area of free mobility. In addition, in the democratic states there is a tradition of hospitality, a need for a flexible work force and a tradition of political asylum for those who suffer from repressive policies in their own country because of their ideological beliefs.

The magnitude of the flow used to be manageable under ordinary circumstances, but the instability generated by the revolutionary events in Africa and the Middle East, that turned into chaos and civil war, has dramatically transformed the situation. Tens of thousands of migrants and refugees are trying to enter Europe.

It is commonplace to ask for more cooperation and better coordination, particularly in the area of intelligence. All that is wishful thinking. All services keep information for themselves. The EU is still waiting for its intelligence agency. The lack of intelligence synchronization creates a European security vacuum. In spite of Europe ostensibly being united, its security and intelligence organizations are scattered and unconnected. They do not sufficiently cooperate with one another.

There are six police and security organizations in Brussels alone. Because of their decentralized federal system, Belgium has 192 security organizations, while Germany has 16 intelligence organizations. Intelligence sharing when it happens is always in bilateral mode. 28 nations never sit around the same table to exchange sensitive information. Gilles de Kerchove, EU chief coordinator for counterterrorism repeats that “ultimately action falls under the responsibility of each member state”, implicitly recognizing that the EU does not retain power and authority in this area. A major long-lasting debate in the EU is related to the communication of air-travelers’ data, the so-called PNR (passenger name record). The latter creates a false sense of security enforcement, because one need not buy a ticket and get on board an airplane to bomb an airport.

In NATO even if public diplomacy is dedicated to build uniform messages and deliver a single communication, different visions lead to a different sense of priorities: for some States it is the Middle East and Daesh, but others are much more concerned by Russian propaganda and psychological operations. It is obvious that Moscow has been able during the past fifteen years to build networks, to recreate groups of agents of influence in order to generate controversial perceptions.

The Baltic States are on the forefront with two Centers of Excellence, one in Tallinn (Estonia) focusing on Cyber, and another recently established in Riga (Latvia) dedicated to counterpropaganda. These two countries have adopted an ambitious strategy to create an impetus in the EU through an action plan for strategic communication in the fight against disinformation.

Lithuania has initiated an EU action plan for strategic communication and the

fight against disinformation. Last year, the president of Lithuania has accurately wrapped up the situation by declaring: “propaganda is extremely dangerous since it can destabilize the region, create an environment in favor of (*foreign*) military intervention and paralyze the will of the citizens to oppose it.” The stakes are not small and indeed any long lasting success against the Salafist myth requires victory in the most crucial theater of operations: the heart, mind and will of the people.