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DO JIHADIST “MARTYRS” REALLY WANT TO DIE?

AN EMIC APPROACH TO SELF-SACRIFICIAL
RADICALIZATION IN PAKISTAN

Amélie Blom

Translated from French by Sarah-Louise Raillard, PhD

Suicide bombings and other related forms of self-sacrificial violence have become the most widely used repertoire of contention amongst contemporary armed Islamist movements. In South Asia, Jihadist groups¹ have been employing such tactics since the end of the 1990s in the disputed Kashmir territory, and subsequently in the rest of India and Pakistan, where around fifty attacks of this nature have occurred per year since 2007. The historical, political, and strategic factors behind this phenomenon vary by country and region and have been studied in depth.² Yet, we continue to be puzzled by what could possibly motivate these actors, for “why [would] people kill themselves for other reasons than that they do not want to live?”³

Explanations for why suicide bombers are motivated to sacrifice themselves abound. It has been suggested that self-destruction entails “a plethora of meanings, where are all jumbled together despair, hate, an immense disillusionment with modernity, but also the feeling of belonging to a religious and at times even national community, and perhaps also the hope of divine salvation, social recognition, happiness, and even sexual pleasure. Here, the perpetrator of violence displays an intense subjectivity, jumping from one socio-political space to another. Dreamlike, his gesture seems to him incredibly charged with meaning”.⁴ Other motives proposed include vanity, ambition, the desire to avenge a loved one’s death or a past humiliation, a feeling of inferiority, a quest for purity, or even the need to give meaning to an otherwise tiresome and underprivileged existence. But in the end, even those who have identified such motives admit that the motivations of suicide bombers remain “an enigma wrapped in a puzzle”. Jon Elster concludes: “We may not ever know the exact motivational and cognitive states of the suicide attackers for the simple reason that (to some extent at

1. The term “Jihadist” here emphasizes the ideologization of the concept of “jihad” (in the martial and not the ethical sense), which for these groups is the only legitimate way to fight injustice, and even sometimes considered a divine duty on the same level as prayer or fasting.

2. For a discussion of these factors, see: Amélie Blom, Lætitia Bucaille, Luis Martinez (eds), *The Enigma of Islamist Violence* (London: Hurst, 2007).

3. This is the question asked by Jon Elster in “Motivations and beliefs in suicide missions”, in Diego Gambetta (ed.), *Making Sense of Suicide Missions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 233-58 (233). Talal Asad suggests that suicide bombings might be perceived as “horrifying” not simply because the executant killed innocents or was prepared to die (something common enough in war) or because he killed himself (something not uncommon in peace) but because the functioning of modern law and retributive justice requires that crime and punishment be separated in time, an “eventalization” that suicide bombings clearly prohibit (Talal Asad, *On Suicide Bombings* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 40 and 90-1).

4. Michel Wieviorka, *La violence. Voix et regards* (Paris: Balland, 2004), 235.

least) *there is no fact of the matter*".¹ "We lack for now the [scientific] instruments", adds Hamit Bozarslan, that would enable us to understand why and how individuals "become mentally prepared to destroy themselves" for a political cause.² And for Mia Bloom, it even boils down to "explaining the unexplainable", for "clearly different would-be suicide bombers have different motivations, some rational and others irrational, and may be provoked by any number of overlapping incentives for their actions all of which resist mono-causal explanations".³

For Bloom and John Horgan, the origins of this impasse might be the misleading analytical assumption of voluntariness as well as the fact that "experts will engage in a psychological autopsy to trace perpetrators' intentions and motives after the fact".⁴ The identification of these two biases actually puts us on the path towards an alternative approach. Indeed, what happens if we adopt a perspective that, without denying the death wish of some executants or the interest of determining individual motivations, does not consider these questions as the only key to understanding sacrificial violence? And what can we discover if we put aside the inductive "post-hoc" approach – which depends on third-party narratives and on the testaments of "martyrs" – and instead examine sources like the accounts of former militants who at one point in their lives contemplated dying in order to kill, but ultimately abandoned their projects?

The first consequence would be a renewed delineation of the object since this very issue is inherently tied to the problem of individual motivations in the existing literature. A "true suicide attack" is differentiated from other violent acts by the fact that "the terrorist knows full well that the attack *will not be executed* if he is not killed in the process".⁵ Nevertheless, the terrorist's prior knowledge is not always verifiable, nor exhibited (for example, "mules" unaware that they were transporting explosives were used in the 1988 Lockerbie attack and in 1986 against an El Al airplane in London). Should we therefore dissociate two different types of "martyrs"? On the one hand are those who die in action with a "passionate love for death" (resulting from a "mortiferous vision" that "sees life as something inferior to the happiness that can be found through the annihilation of self and other, or martyrdom"). These individuals would not have "anthropologically speaking, the same mindset as disciples who will fight to the death against their enemies /.../ in a battle's uncertain outcome" but without seeking this death.⁶ In reality, drawing such distinctions is a rather arduous task, given the difficulty of inferring the different "sacrificial mindsets" of these two groups. And in fact, even a conflict with an uncertain outcome can be viewed as necessarily entailing one's death (as seen in the case of the Japanese militant who, sole survivor of a commando

1. He adds that it is thus impossible to know if Mohammad Atta (one of the authors of the September 11th attacks) was more disturbed by the injustice or the apostasy of Egypt's public power, or if religious beliefs merely provided consolation value rather than truly serving as premises for action (J. Elster, "Motivations", 256, emphasis is the author's).

2. Hamit Bozarslan, *Violence in the Middle-East. From Political Struggle to Self-Sacrifice* (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2004), 131 and 135.

3. Mia Bloom, *Dying to Kill. The Allure of Suicide Terror* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 17 and 88.

4. Mia Bloom, John Horgan, "Missing their mark: the IRA's proxy bomb campaign 1990", *Social Research*, 75(2), 2008, 579-614 (580). "The term 'suicide bomb' or 'martyrdom operation' gets thrown around far too easily to encompass many behaviors that may not in fact be voluntary", these authors remark.

5. Boaz Ganor cited in J. Elster, "Motivations", 236 (emphasis is the author's).

6. Farhad Khosrokhavar, *Les nouveaux martyrs d'Allah* (Paris: Flammarion, 2002), 99. However, the author includes in the first group (and with the suicide bombers of 9/11) the Iranian Basijis who were used as cannon fodder in the war against Iraq (some of whom survived).

attack on Ben Gourion airport in 1972, asked for a weapon so that he could kill himself in exchange for his confession). Likewise, Jihadist groups who organize “*fedayin* missions” in Kashmir¹ give an intensive doctrinal training to prepare for “martyrdom”. Moreover, actions performed by perpetrators who fully know their death is inevitable might be preferred to suicide attacks for reasons of efficiency, rather than because of a “passion” for death. This is why Jon Elster classifies both types as “politically motivated suicides”, the determining criteria being that the author of an attack fully believes he will die (regardless of whether he is ultimately right or not), and/or that he wishes to die in the attack. Although it is in our best interest not to differentiate these two modes of violence *a priori*, Elster’s definition brings up the same problem: it assumes, on the one hand, that an outside observer is able to ascertain that these beliefs and desires existed *ex ante* and, on the other hand, that an expected death was necessarily a desired one.

If the definition of the object should remain “open” it is precisely because of the indeterminate nature of any terrorist’s initial motivations – ie. unknown to an outside observer – as well as of the uncertainty regarding the exact knowledge the perpetrator may have had of the act he set out to accomplish. In this light, the concept of “self-sacrificial violence” remains problematic. But for lack of a better one, it will be used here to describe a violent act culminating in the death of its perpetrator (for reasons we may very well ignore), termed by its own author or responsible organization as a “sacrifice”. This is the case of Pakistani Jihadist groups who use this term (*qurban*) to describe the death of their “martyrs”; the latter also use this word to refer to their own actions in their writings. So if “classification [by the individuals involved] is supreme”, as it alone determines the intentions behind actions,² it is also important to take note of the descriptions of militant organizations, precisely to avoid the assumption of a voluntary “suicide”.

As soon as the voluntary nature of the act is no longer considered an inherent property of this type of violence, a critical analysis of the sources on which prosopographies of “martyrs” are usually based becomes crucial. This methodological question is especially important since “false martyrs” may exist (for this reason, we will keep this term in scare quotes throughout). It thus becomes equally feasible to imagine that some individuals recruited by radical groups that prepare them to die in action are in reality performing these acts in contradiction of their original intentions, which were quite possibly to live, even to live intensely; this is exactly what we see, for example, in the case of Japanese kamikaze pilots during WWII.³

This article will deal with this issue by referring first to a selected review of literature on self-sacrificial violence, and second to field research I conducted in Pakistan during the 2000s on Jihadist movements fighting in Kashmir, and in particular a set of interviews with three

1. These missions of “those who sacrifice themselves” for a cause generally imply tactics such as introducing a small group of militants who shoot as long as they can, in order to produce the greatest number of victims, in military camps, police stations, or other crowded areas (airport, train station, etc.). Three outcomes are possible: the perpetrators eventually flee (this is quite rare), they are killed, or they kill themselves. Jihadist leaders implicitly recognize that these missions are potentially suicidal, but the opprobrium associated with suicide, as well as the necessity of letting new recruits believe that they might survive, explains why they do not explicitly call them “suicide missions”. In any case, Indian counter-insurgency rarely offers options other than death or arrest.

2. Baudoin Dupret, Jean-Noël Ferrié, “L’idée d’une science sociale et sa relation à la science politique”, *Revue française de science politique*, 60(6), 2010, 1159-72 (1165).

3. On this topic, see Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney’s remarkable work, *Kamikaze, Cherry Blossoms, and Nationalisms. The Militarization of Aesthetics in Japanese History* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2002).

recruits who had joined and then left the Lashkar-i-Tayyiba (“The Army of the Pure”). These interviews considerably altered my initial hypotheses:¹ the unpredictable, confused and constantly shifting nature of these recruits’ self-sacrificial commitments was in sharp contrast to the generally accepted linear trajectory attributed to the violent projects of “martyrs”-to-be. The narratives of these “ex”-militants therefore reveal the importance of applying the “processual” and “incremental” interpretative frameworks of militancy² to other environments, such as Pakistan, in the hopes of understanding Jihadist recruitment. By positing a certain reverse symmetry between recruitment and disengagement, this allows us to consequently rethink the following critical steps: remaining in the group and progressing to violent action.

On the propensity to die as a “martyr”

The majority of works on “Islamic martyrs” published since 11 September 2011 share one feature in common: they all offer propensity accounts, which consist of “reconstructing a given actor’s state at the threshold of action, with that state variously stipulated as motivation, consciousness, need, [...] or momentum”.³ First, and in response to the demand for expertise emanating from governments worldwide, several works outlined a sociological profile of the typical Jihadist “martyr”. When applied to Pakistan, for example, such an individual is said to be a product of *madrasas*, alternatively dubbed “schools of hate”,⁴ indoctrinated by leaders who are “spiritually addicted to *jihad*”, and someone who seeks to address the “‘God-shaped hole’ in modern culture” and not to respond “to political grievances, as was common in the 1960s and 1970s, and which might, in principle be remediable”.⁵ For others as well, Jihadism is also a radically new form of terrorism but the determining element predisposing recruits to “martyrdom” is the accessibility of a link to the *jihad*, via a member of a terrorist network.⁶ The Islamic “martyr” is also presented as a victim of poverty, as “in poor families with large numbers of children, a mother can assume that some [...] will die of disease if not in war. This apparently makes it easier to donate a son to what she feels is a just and holy cause”.⁷ In fact, one of the rare statistical studies devoted to Pakistani Jihadists who have died in Kashmir identifies a prototypical family that

1. And led me to revise my previous works in which I had too quickly attributed “playful”, “instrumental” and “martyropathic” motivations to Jihadist recruits, based on the published testimonies of such “martyrs” and interviews with third parties (mothers, high-ranking militia members, army officers, etc). This typology was adapted from Farhad Khosrokhavar’s “Le modèle Bassidji”, *Cultures et Conflits*, 29-30, 1998, 59-118). Cf. Amélie Blom, “Les kamikazes du Cachemire, ‘martyrs’ d’une cause perdue”, *Critique internationale*, 20, July 2003, 135-49.

2. Olivier Fillieule, “Propositions pour une analyse processuelle de l’engagement individuel”, *Revue française de science politique*, 51(2), 2001, 199-215; “Introduction” in Annie Collovald, Brigitte Gaïti (eds), *La démocratie aux extrêmes. Sur la radicalisation politique* (Paris: La Dispute, 2006), 32.

3. Charles Tilly, Robert E. Goodin, “It depends”, in Robert E. Goodin, Charles Tilly (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Contextual Political Analysis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 1-32 (13).

4. Jessica Stern, “Pakistan’s Jihad culture”, *Foreign Affairs*, 79(6), 2000, 118.

5. Jessica Stern, *Terror in the Name of God. Why Religious Militants Kill* (New York: Harper Collins, 2003), 200 and 283. Stern (a “Superterrorism Fellow” at the Council on Foreign Relations and a professor at the Kennedy School of Government) thus recommends that this “new” form of terrorism be considered as a “virus”. It is a Pakistani Jihadist leader Fazlur Rehman Khalil, and not a recruit, who said the following: “A person addicted to heroin can get off it [...] but a *mujahid* cannot leave the *jihad*. I am spiritually addicted to *jihad*.” Let’s recall that this leader subsequently “kicked the habit” rather easily.

6. Marc Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 120. A professor of social psychology at the University of Pennsylvania, Sageman was put in charge of profiling Afghan *mujahidin* by the State Department in 1986-89.

7. J. Stern, “Pakistan’s Jihad culture”, 122.

“produces martyrs” as being poor and with many children, but with a son who is better educated than the national average, and parents who approve of his choice to go on *jihād* (for 70% of the families studied).¹

This approach to “new terrorism” allows newcomers to the field of anti-terrorist expertise to position themselves against “the old guard” (specialists in radical left-wing terrorism); as such, it is perhaps more instructive about institutional and generational conflicts than about the subject under study.² It has recourse to a commonsensical attribution of responsibility,³ of the type “there’s no smoke without fire”, which leads to the profiling of entire “deviant” social groups (as the subject doesn’t speak, his intentions remain impenetrable). In doing this, these “professionals of fear” stabilize fluctuating representations – e.g., the criminogenic nature of *madrasas*, mosques and the poor (if they are educated) – an act which is not without repercussions in the sphere of public policy.⁴ But this type of interpretation does not explain why the pressure exerted by *madrasas*, families and militant networks are effective in some cases but not in others. In reality, the interminable search for initial conditions, which are endlessly variable, is of limited use for predicting an individual’s behavior, as it does not allow us to “distinguish causation from correlation”.⁵

The pinpointing of individual motivations partially fills this gap. Based on secondary sources dealing with ten regional cases (including Kashmir), Elster first emphasizes the importance of differentiating between motivations and beliefs (even though he designates a number of the former in terms of “beliefs”, “hopes”, and “desires”).⁶ The men and women performing these attacks are undoubtedly “fearless people with strong convictions”,⁷ and in particular devoted to a cause that is more important to them than their own life. Many scholars support this thesis of mainly “altruistic” motivations (in contrast to “egoistic” and “fatalistic” suicides, according to Durkheimian typology). The cause they fight for can be “as narrow as the honour of one’s kin or as abstract as social justice, and as human as one’s people’s fate or as heavenly as one’s faith in God”.⁸ It can also take the shape of an abstract passion for “a global Muslim community”, a generic and disembodied form of humanity reduced to its mere suffering, which a suicide attacker converts from victim to agent by exhibiting “the

1. Christine Fair, “Who are Pakistani militants and their families?”, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 20(1), 2008, 49-56. Fair was then a researcher at the RAND Corporation.

2. See Martha Crenshaw’s critique in “The debate over ‘new’ vs. ‘old’ terrorism”, in Ibrahim A. Karawan *et al.*, *Values and Violence. Intangible Aspects of Terrorism* (Salt Lake City: Springer, 2008), 117-36. See also Romain Bertrand, Sylvain Laurens (eds), “Les salaires de la peur. Métiers et dividendes de l’expertise des risques”, *Savoir/Agir*, 9, September 2009, 9-64.

3. Frank D. Fincham, Joseph M. Jaspars, “Attribution of responsibility: from man the scientist to man as lawyer”, in Leonard Berkowitz (ed.), *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* (New York: Academic Press, 1980), 81-138.

4. One of the consequences of Pakistan’s collaboration with the US on the “war on terror” was the revision of school and *madrasa* textbooks, accomplished with financial support from the US. Pakistan’s ambassador to the United States participated in the development of the questionnaire used by Christine Fair, as she mentions in a footnote.

5. J. Elster, “A plea for mechanisms”, in Peter Hedström, Richard Swedberg (eds), *Social Mechanisms. An Analytical Approach to Social Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 45-73 (69).

6. J. Elster, “Motivations”, 238. This ambiguity is in fact inherent to the “notion of motivation, [which] does not position itself on the objective plane of reality but rather on the level of desire [...] which is the level of the imagination”, according to Madeleine Grawitz, *Méthodes des sciences sociales* (Paris: Précis Dalloz, 9th edn, 1993), 449.

7. J. Elster, “Motivations”, 239.

8. Diego Gambetta, “Can we make sense of suicide missions?”, in *Making Sense*, 259-300 (271).

fundamentally human virtues of courage and sacrifice” in his or her actions.¹ Such motivations ultimately end up resembling the patriotism of “a soldier who accepts a ‘suicide mission’ in an ordinary war”.²

Nevertheless, another “extraordinarily strong” but completely opposite motivation is also proposed by Elster: the desire for revenge against enemy acts, subsequently termed “personal interest motivation” – whereas patriotic fervor would fall in the category of “disinterested motivations”.³ How can we know when one type of motivation or the other takes precedence? Moreover, must we truly separate the two? For Alain Wolfelsperger, altruistic fervor would explain suicide attacks only because it is inevitably tied to malicious intent with regard to the attack’s targets.⁴ The primary motivation would thus be a “malevolent disinterest”. This analysis, nevertheless, is founded on the primacy of hate, whose causal nature is even more problematic because only the hate-laden speeches of leaders (in this case, the high-ranking members of Al Qaeda) are given as proof of the spiteful motivations of combatants.

By striking contrast, and according to the majority of observers, the words of the individual attackers themselves (their narratives or posthumously published testaments) would suggest that their primary motivation was often the desire to transform an unbearable life on earth into salvation in the afterlife. In fact, simony⁵ is a paradigmatic argument in the analysis of self-sacrificial violence, especially that occurring in Pakistan. It is argued that this type of subjective transfer finds its roots first and foremost in personal despair: “*Jihad* has done roaring business in Pakistan because it appeals to the imagination of people whose prospects are severely limited. Death offers worldly glory and security in the hereafter, whereas their lives would otherwise promise nothing but oppression and humiliation”, explains Ayesha Jalal.⁶ The most in-depth study to date of the Lashkar-i-Tayyiba “martyrs” likewise concludes that, by committing suicide, these individuals exchange their worldly despair for the promise of higher status in the afterlife.⁷ Joining such a group “allows [them] to compensate for frustrated desires”, whether these are tied to the recruits’ *muhajir* identity,⁸ or the *de facto* “uprooted and unstructured” nature of their families, or the impossibility of “upward social mobility” and of “emigration, due to a lack of resources and connections”; a desire that is attributed to them on the basis of their “lower middle class” condition. In the same study, Mariam Abou-Zahab also draws an “interesting parallel” between “the increase in the number of would-be martyrs and a rise in the number of adolescent and young adult suicides” in Pakistan.

1. Faisal Devji, *The Terrorist in Search of Humanity. Militant Islam and Global Politics* (London: Hurst, 2008), 39. The life histories of these self-proclaimed defenders of humanity are remarkable precisely for their banality and ordinariness notes F. Devji (a conclusion reached by examining British police reports on the suicide bombers involved in the 2006 London attacks), 73.

2. Robert Pape, *Dying to Win. The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism* (New York: Random House, 2006), 173.

3. Jon Elster, *Le désintéressement. Traitée critique de l'homme économique I* (Paris: Seuil, 2009), 236 and *passim*.

4. Alain Wolfelsperger, “Le désintéressement malveillant ou le chapitre manquant du *Traité de l'homme économique* de Jon Elster”, *Revue française de science politique*, 60(4), 2010, 769-85 (773-4).

5. In the Catholic tradition, simony is “a deliberate intention of buying or selling for a temporal price such things as are spiritual or annexed unto spirituals”. Killing oneself while killing others with the sole aim of attaining eternal life can be compared to a form of simony according to Elster. (“Motivations”, 242).

6. Ayesha Jalal, *Partisans of Allah. Jihadin South Asia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 287.

7. Mariam Abou-Zahab, “Je vous attends à la porte du Paradis’. Les martyrs pakistanais du Lashkar-i-Tayyiba”, in Aminah Mohammad-Arif, Jean Schmitz (eds), *Figures du 11 Septembre. Disciples et martyrs, réfugiés et migrants* (Paris: Karthala, 2006), 91-122 (105-06).

8. Muslim refugees who migrated from India to Pakistan in 1947. None of the recruits that I met, however, belonged to this ethno-linguistic group.

This hypothesis of a mechanical substitution being operated between a “depressing” life and a “satisfying” death runs up against three obstacles. The first is methodological: the logic only holds if we assume class affiliation as well as emotional and psychological states of mind, which are often impossible to ascertain. Effectively, this approach is based on a “tempting, but fallacious” similarity, according to Robert Pape, between an individual who commits suicide and the author of a suicide attack, as if the latter was “seeking to end [his] life in any case and [is] merely taking an opportunity to die in an especially theatrical way”.¹ The second obstacle that the simoniac thesis encounters is theoretical: for it to *function*, we have to assume that phenomena “have no determining cause save a clear or vague sense of the services they are called upon to render”, even though “to demonstrate the utility of a fact does not explain its origins, nor how it is what it is”.² And finally, the third obstacle is empirical, as one must still explain why individuals subjected to objectively similar conditions make different choices. The majority of young Pakistanis from the lower middle class, though experiencing great levels of “frustration”, would under no circumstances go and get killed in Kashmir.

Other interpretations of the simoniac exchange give it strictly political origins. In a psychological reading of the phenomenon, the author of a suicide attack suffers from “guilt in the face of foreign colonial hegemony”. Such an individual is gripped both by “self-hatred”, which he transforms into “hatred of the Other”, and by a “death instinct” that he converts into “a life instinct in the afterlife”. Burdened by “the failure of the capacity of representations, when nothing is left, no political model, no utopian vision, no hope, no solution [...], he explodes!”³ We can wonder, however, if this transition from figurative to literal meaning does not rather illustrate a certain analytical slippage from actions to mental states, a temptation to which interpretations based on causal inference usually succumb whenever they “inject *en bloc* a propositional architecture into the minds of the persons interviewed”.⁴ The anthropological version of simony, on the other hand, avoids this shift and describes the “contemporary Islamic martyr” as an individual in the process of modernization who finds his agency “in the articulation between the individuality to which one aspires and the imaginary or real community to which one belongs”.⁵ The “martyr’s” act, which seeks to instantiate him as an “agent”, fulfils a function of redemption and of purification: unable to reconcile his political utopia with the reality of shattered ideals, he is thus seized by “a feeling of bitter despair”.⁶ Caught in an “unbearable tension” between his initial feelings of commitment – an attachment to “a core constellation of symbolic resources” such as the “leader”, the “party”, the “fatherland”, “religion”, transformed into “non-negotiable structures of blocs” – and the pragmatic compromises the movement must make, the “martyr” thus tries to “preserve the purity of [his] own engagement, body and mind, by using violence” against others and himself.⁷

1. When he probably would never have committed suicide under other circumstances. (R. Pape, *Dying to Win*, 172). Furthermore, it is impossible to know if the number of would-be “martyrs” has grown in Pakistan (Jihadist groups systematically exaggerate their numbers) and if this is also the case for suicides (only those reported to the police are included in available statistics).

2. Émile Durkheim, *Les règles de la méthode sociologique* (Paris: PUF, 23rd edn, 1987), 89-90.

3. Bruno Étienne, *Les combattants suicidaires* (Paris: L'Aube, 2005), 16-30.

4. Nicolas Mariot, “Faut-il être motivé pour tuer? Sur quelques explications aux violences de guerre”, *Genèses*, 53, December 2003, 154-77 (167). (I am greatly indebted to this article for helping me formulate my initial intuitions.)

5. F. Khosrokhavar, *Les nouveaux martyrs d'Allah*, 88.

6. F. Khosrokhavar, *Les nouveaux martyrs d'Allah*, 128.

7. H. Bozarslan, *Violence*, 12-3.

The hypothesis of self-sacrificial motivations caused by political disappointment, while rich and complex, nonetheless presupposes an actor who lives only by and for the political objectives of his organization. Such an individual would have so deeply internalized these goals that he no longer differentiates between his personal destiny and the collective fate of the group (the latter's failure is so unacceptable that it has to be abolished by the act of suicide). This line of reasoning hence assumes that such an individual is able to freely fluctuate between what is at stake in life and in death. The sphere of action thus finds itself reduced to "an imaginary universe of interchangeable possibilities" (life and death), and practices are limited to "strategies oriented by reference to explicitly or implicitly stated purposes presented by a free project", with no mediation other than his subjectivity.¹ Moreover, even if we are to suppose that an individual puts his life in danger out of a desire to exist, the reasons behind this would be "numerous and intertwined, only [his] personal story could possibly explain why he takes the plunge, whereas someone else, living in a similar situation, might seem content or behave in a different manner".²

This slight detour via the different explanatory models used to illuminate self-sacrificial violence is much too succinct to truly do them justice, but I hope to have underscored the fact that although their conclusions may differ, they are all based on the idea that a suicide attacker is initially motivated by a desire to die. This is even postulated as an inherent property of this type of violence, which can only occur, according to Hamit Bozarslan, "because of the availability of militants to use their bodies as both weapon and message. No one, not even the most cynical bureaucratic apparatus, can buy or sell this weapon, and no one can use it without the consent of the weapon itself."³ It is in an equally hypothetically deductive manner that, by default, political suicides are considered "altruistic": they *cannot* be "fatalistic" as we are to assume that not only was the actor not subjected to the "ineluctable and inflexible" pressures that sustain this form of suicide⁴ but also that he was necessarily drawn from "a pool of volunteers".⁵ And yet, there are many cases of coerced "suicide attacks" which the propaganda obviously never publicizes, as shown by the existence of remotely-operated "suicide-jackets", used on several occasions in Pakistan. Another example is the case of the young boys kidnapped by the Jihadist group responsible for the spate of suicide bombings since 2007 (the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan), who revealed that they had been "controlled" by the threat of repercussions against their families long enough to be transformed into "human bombs".⁶ This phenomenon has also been observed in Sri Lanka, Northern Ireland, and most recently in Iraq and Afghanistan.⁷

Although such examples warn against the temptation of being fooled by appearances, they do not preclude, of course, the fact that some individuals in suicide attacks are voluntary

1. Pierre Bourdieu, *Le sens pratique* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1980), 71.

2. David Le Breton, *Conduites à risque* (Paris: PUF, 2002), 59-60.

3. H. Bozarslan, *Violence*, 131.

4. R. Pape, *Dying to Win*, 175.

5. "Forced recruitment is not compatible with the degree of commitment and self-discipline required by suicide attackers", emphasizes Elster in "Motivations", 239.

6. The young daughter of a militant from the same group likewise managed to flee, and later revealed that her sister had been forced to die in a suicide attack.

7. M. Bloom, J. Horgan, "Missing their mark". The "human bombs" used by the IRA in 1990, for example, were individuals of Catholic faith who had been kidnapped and then forced to drive "vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices" to attack military targets.

participants.¹ And yet even in such cases, it is important that we investigate what being a voluntary participant really means: for Japanese *tokkotai* (kamikaze) pilots, for example, “‘volunteering’ in the pilots’ cases was far removed from such factors as motivation, intentionality, or rational decision-making in a simplistic sense”.² It was “never a clear-cut ‘decision’. Most remained undecided about the step they had already taken until the last moment”, explains Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney. For some, death would free them from indecision; for many, they simply could not refuse to volunteer when their friends and comrades had already offered their life; and for others, there was no alternative, as they had been designated by their superiors. The reading of these pilots’ diaries reveals their “intense agony”, their “desire to live”, the conflict they experienced between “duty and personal feelings”, their “confusion”, as well as the “ambivalence, and great contradictions” of their thoughts and emotions with regard to a programmed death. Before their suicide missions, some even wrote: “I do not want to die!... I want to live!”³

We are able to glimpse the *tokkotai* pilots’ complex motivations because Ohnuki-Tierney fortuitously had access to an exceptional resource: their private diaries and writings. This direct access allowed the anthropologist to overturn the predominant perception of pilots acting out of ultra-nationalistic zeal – a perception that was informed solely by the pilots’ “last wills”, penned after they had learned that their words would be posted on the city walls. This case demonstrates perfectly, in my opinion, that the nature of the sources (and their rarity) is one of the most critical issues at stake when trying to understand the logic of self-sacrificial violence. Most available analyses of “Islamic martyrs”, either because they take this issue for granted or do not pay attention to the very meaning of their sources, tend to move speakers around like pawns on a chessboard. Newspaper articles and investigating committee reports are used as biographical evidence; proclamations from leaders, sympathizers and parents are used to illustrate the recruits’ motives; interviews with suicide attackers who failed (and are thus incarcerated) or trial proceedings help to guess the objectives of those who did succeed; and finally, testaments left behind by “living martyrs” are used to explain retroactively what motivated them to die. Such an opaque methodology even leads some analysts to assume that a militant’s avowed desire to die will naturally result in his death,⁴ although there is absolutely no *natural* progression that must lead from one phase of self-sacrificial radicalization to the next (recruitment, remaining a member or not of the

1. In the manner of a Kurdish PKK militant who survived her self-immolation (protesting the arrest of the group's leader in 1999) and many years later declared: “I felt so strongly that I was willing to die /.../ I thought ‘what can I do to help change something?’” (cited in Farhana Ali, Jerrold Post, “The history and evolution of martyrdom in the service of defensive Jihad: an analysis of suicide bombers in current conflicts”, *Social Research*, 75(2), 2008, 614-54 (642).

2. E. Ohnuki-Tierney, *Kamikaze*, 171. The “desire to die” becomes even more problematic, the author emphasizes, if we integrate into our analysis the processes that naturalize self-sacrifice in the name of a state's war project (or that of an organization, we could add). This hypothesis likewise sheds light on self-sacrificial radicalization occurring in Pakistan, a subject I will return to.

3. E. Ohnuki-Tierney, *Kamikaze*, 6.

4. For example, Nasra Hassan's oft-cited study (“An arsenal of believers: talking to ‘human bombs’”, *The New Yorker*, 19-22 November 2001) determines the motivations of suicide bombers from Hamas and Islamic Jihad in Gaza on the basis of interviews with 250 members of these two groups. Declarations of intent are particularly unreliable sources, as authors of self-sacrificial violence may very well never express their goals while alive. On this point, I refer the reader to the young French Islamists who left for Iraq or Afghanistan in order to realize their “dream” of participating in “*jihad*”, without ever telling their ideological “brothers” about this project. Cf. Luis Martinez, “Structures, environnement et basculement dans le jihadisme”, *Cultures et Conflits*, 69, Spring 2008, 133-56.

armed militia, and the violent act itself). The following works will clearly demonstrate this point.

Whether it is dictated by sheer necessity, briefly mentioned in a footnote,¹ or, more often than not, entirely concealed, the choice of sources consulted directly determines the kind of motivations that will be attributed to the “martyr”. Examples are plentiful in the aforementioned texts dealing with Pakistan. The 70% family approval rate concerning the death of a son in the ranks of Jihadist groups is in fact due to the nature of the sample used.² The impoverished mother’s satisfaction in giving her sons to *jihad* is, likewise and importantly, expressed in the presence of Jihadist leaders (who, in addition, most probably brought her to their office to meet the “American researcher”). And even if expressions of despair abound in the letters, testaments, and accounts published in Jihadist magazines, one cannot ignore that these sources are nothing but an attempt at “manufacturing exemplarity”³ – something which is interesting enough if understood as such. In other words, they entail a process of emulation, of organizational self-aggrandizement and of paying tribute to the Jihadists who died on the battlefield. This is precisely why this kind of sources portrays would-be “martyrs” as individuals who only perceive their actions in reference to abstract values and to the organization’s ideological mission. That such sources are widely used by analysts thus goes a long way towards explaining the image of a “martyr” whose movement is contained by the walled fortress of his moral and political preferences.

Should we therefore conclude that the author of self-sacrificial violence is a non-observable reality? Not necessarily. Nevertheless, it is crucial to recognize that the situations which allow for access to this reality all pose their own scientific and ethical problems. If the combatant has already died, such access can only come from propagandistic hagiographies, third-party narratives, journalistic accounts, and police reports. If the suicide attacker is still alive and free, then observers have no way of knowing about his violent projects.⁴ If he is captured and imprisoned, his account will naturally be influenced by his circumstances. In borderline cases where the potential attacker has abandoned his, at times quite ambiguous, project of “dying as a martyr”, then the information we can obtain is about his intentions and not about the violent act itself.

1. As it is impossible to interview the suicidal terrorists, post-hoc “psychological autopsies” are a natural alternative, explains Robert Pape, who nonetheless attributes to this methodological weakness the commonly held association between suicides and suicide attacks. He finds this to be a “conceptual gap that confounds efforts to explain what motivates individual suicide terrorists” (*Dying to Win*, 172). The most complete French-language work on the subject offers as its sole methodological clue the following: “The analysis put forth here is based on the study of texts, on field experience that I had as a sociologist and anthropologist in the Islamic world as well as in France, but also on interviews [...] in French prisons with Muslims, some of whom were incarcerated for their association with individuals planning terrorist attacks” (F. Khosrokhavar, *Les nouveaux martyrs d’Allah*, 9).

2. “Martyrs” from the Hizb-ul-Mujahidin and al-Badr are overrepresented in the survey, in part because these Jihadist groups are easier to gain access to. But their main characteristic is precisely to recruit from within the families of the militants of an Islamist party to which they are very close (the Jamaat-i-Islami Pakistan and its chapter in AJK). Additionally, only the head of the family responded to the survey – what father would admit to a stranger that his son had left secretly or disobeyed? (Although this is in fact a rather common occurrence.)

3. Pierres Centlivres (ed.), *Saints, sainteté et martyre. La fabrication de l’exemplarité* (Neuchâtel: Éd. de l’Institut d’ethnologie, 2001).

4. For a reflexive account of this exceptional situation, see Aminah Mohammad-Arif, “De l’auto-radicalisation idéologique à la violence ‘auto-sacrificielle’: la trajectoire d’un jeune jihadiste indien en Grande-Bretagne”, in Gilles Dorransoro, Olivier Grojean (eds), *La dynamique des conflits: seuils, recompositions et logiques de passage*, forthcoming.

Emic and social mechanisms of self-sacrificial radicalization

The former Jihadist recruits that I met between 2006 and 2009 belonged to the Lashkar-i-Tayyiba (LiT), a Pakistani armed group that in 1990 transferred its activities from Afghanistan to Kashmir, and from there to the rest of India. They specialize in particularly risky and spectacular *fedayin* missions, such as the attack on Delhi’s Red Fort in December of 2000. Until the mid-2000s, this Islamist militia and a dozen others were subcontracted by the Pakistani army in a guerrilla movement attempting to bring the Kashmir region back under Pakistani control by wearing out the Indian army.¹ Pakistani officers partially controlled military training,² while delegating recruitment and indoctrination entirely to the militant groups. Throughout the 1990s, this militia conducted systematic mobilization campaigns (in *madrasas*, mosques, high schools, universities, newspapers, bazaars, recruitment offices, funeral services for “martyrs”, street demonstrations, etc.) and even expanded its activities to other sectors such as education, charity work, and trade. Parts of the LiT’s program and ideology were likewise supported, in schools and in the media, by what can therefore be termed “state Jihadism” and the gradual Shariatization of the legal, educational and economic spheres, both policies belonging to the legacy of Genera Zia’s dictatorship (1977–1988). This “authorization of non-state [extraterritorial] violence”³ has provoked the death of 12,000 young Pakistanis in Indian-administered Kashmir, 1,016 of whom belonged to the Lashkar.⁴

Sohail, Ashiq and Abu Mujahid⁵ could all have been one of these “martyrs”. In 1997, 1998 and 2000 respectively, they went to the Lashkar’s training camps with the avowed goal of “embracing martyrdom” in Kashmir, but they ultimately never went to the battlefield. The narratives of these ex-Jihadists, though limited in number, are primarily significant because I encountered them directly in the context of my professional and personal activities in Pakistan, and not through contact with the militant organization.⁶ The non-directive interviews that I recorded with these three individuals over several sessions tell the story of past experiences which are, inevitably, altered by memory and by the interviews’ artificial setting. However, I was partially able to correct this bias by referring to the spontaneous discussions that preceded the interviews and the participant observation that accompanied them (in Abu

1. Formerly a predominantly Muslim princely state of the British Empire, Kashmir is currently a “disputed” territory according to the UN, ever since its division in 1949 following a war between India and Pakistan. The army, which has dominated the Pakistani state since 1958, has never officially recognized this division. In January of 2002, the American military presence in Pakistan forced the military ruler to outlaw these terrorist groups, but enforcement only began around 2004. The majority of the groups submitted to the new law, while others splintered (like the Lashkar), with more or less autonomous factions continuing to plan attacks in India or Pakistan, now officially in opposition to the army.

2. Training is divided into two sessions: first, a 21-day doctrinal preparation with some light military training, followed by commando training (the handling of grenades, Kalashnikovs, mortar artillery; survival techniques and ambush strategies). The combatants are then “launched”, to use the Jihadist terminology, beyond the “Line of Control” which separates the two portions of Kashmir.

3. To use Janice E. Thomson’s expression in *Mercenaries, Pirates and Sovereigns. State-Building and Extraterritorial Violence in Early Modern Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 6.

4. Very few combatants come back alive. Others flee or are steered towards *dawa*, proselytizing.

5. These are pseudonyms. Ashiq is a name which also means “lover” in Urdu. Caste is not explicitly mentioned, as it informs on the last name.

6. This necessarily implies the presence of high-ranking Jihadist officials during the interviews. Whoever uses them as a liaison to meet with recruits is, in any case, immediately flagged by the Pakistani army’s intelligence services. I met Ashiq in a cooking class, Sohail through a friend and Abu Mujahid through his brother. Interviews with two other recruits (a guide and a sympathizer) have not been included here.

Mujahid's family, Sohail's workplace, and Ashiq's job search process). The questions focused on their personal trajectories, as well as on the lived and ordinary experiences of militancy.

A number of sociological studies are hesitant to rely on first-person narratives, on the grounds that "words say nothing about actions",¹ as though "social reality [could] be assimilated into factuality without intentionality, to the degree that one could describe it independently of whether or not it is intelligible to members of society".² The present work is based on the conviction that the interpretations that individuals have of their own experiences is an explanation for their behavior, for "in order to understand why someone acts a certain way, one must understand how he views himself, what he believes he must struggle against, *the alternatives* [that] *were offered to him*".³ And indeed, listening to these three ex-Jihadists was an eye-opening experience: the aspiration to "martyrdom" no longer seemed like a linear project, but rather just one of the many possible outcomes in a complex and entwined series of unexpected events. In addition, while talking spontaneously about love, loneliness, conditioning, confusion, enchantment, and disappointment, these ex-recruits also mentioned different cognitive and affective mechanisms that modified their perception of reality and their expectations at each threshold moment.

The inductive and in-depth approach adopted here thus provides not merely an opportunity to describe singular situations but more importantly to stress the importance of uncertainty in militants' trajectories while simultaneously offering a reflection on the types of social mechanisms that are at play in self-sacrificial radicalization (and de-radicalization). The notion of a "mechanism" is understood as both a set of interacting parts, an assembly of elements producing an effect not inherent in any of them, thus being more about "cogs and wheels" than about "nuts and bolts",⁴ and as a "hypothetical causal model that makes sense of individual behavior".⁵ But in the present case, the identification of mechanisms is derived from the reading of life stories rather than from abstract models. Although the sociology of social mechanisms has great heuristic value for the analysis of self-sacrificial radicalization, in some respects it also suffers from the flaws inherent to its very qualities: according to its tenets, the sociology of social mechanisms is concerned primarily with a "virtual reality".⁶ In an attempt to better grasp what the actor is unaware of and thus cannot express, what he might have to say is generally neglected. And yet, mechanisms can be empirically observable, and in particular in the structure used to comprehend their actions to which "real" agents spontaneously refer. From here, we can extricate the purely causal mechanisms that

1. For an anthropological critique of this theory, see Pierre Olivier de Sardan, "Émique", *L'Homme*, 147, 1998, 151-66.

2. B. Dupret, J.-N. Ferrié, "L'idée d'une science sociale", 1160.

3. Howard S. Becker, *Le travail sociologique. Méthode et substance* (Fribourg: Academic Press, 2006 (1st edn 1970)), 100 (my emphasis). For an analysis of militancy via the life stories of combatants in an Asian context, see Romain Bertrand, "Plus près d'Allah: l'itinéraire social et idéologique d'Imam Samudra", in Annie Collovald, Brigitte Gaiti (eds), *La démocratie aux extrêmes*, 201-22; and also Laurent Gayer, "Le parcours du combattant: une approche biographique des militant(e)s sikh(e)s du Khalistan", *Questions de recherche du CERJ*, 28, May 2009.

4. And thus goes beyond mere "statements of causality", "correlations", or "propensities", without, nonetheless, claiming to pinpoint laws, as one can never know *ex ante* which mechanism will come into play. Cf. Jon Elster, *Nuts and Bolts for the Social Sciences* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 3-4.

5. Diego Gambetta, "Concatenations of mechanisms", in P. Hedström, R. Swedberg (eds), *Social Mechanisms*, 102-24 (102).

6. "A *mechanism* is an intellectual construct that is part of a phantom world which may mimic real life with abstract actors that impersonate humans", according to Gudmund Hernes, "Real virtuality", in P. Hedström, R. Swedberg (eds), *Social Mechanisms*, 74-101 (78).

operate “behind their backs”, so to speak.¹ Starting with this postulate, I would put forth the hypothesis that three types of latent mechanisms can explain the radical commitment originally made by the ex-Jihadists I met: the *fuite en avant*,² the “side-bet” and the desire to belong to a domineering group. Other explanatory mechanisms of social actions such as “cognitive dissonance” and “absurd decisions”, both already well studied, also give meaning to the process of de-radicalization and, concomitantly, to understand the (in this case absent) transition to self-sacrificial violence.

Three mechanisms of self-sacrificial radicalization

From “love” to *fuite en avant*

“I only ever had one love and that was Rushna, my whole life I always thought ‘either I die, or I get her’. I endured everything, I worked sometimes sixteen hours a day [...] I didn't even think about taking a bath, I confronted all sorts of difficulties, illnesses, I was even part of a Lashkar camp. Six years ago, I was a muscular guy but see now how skinny I am! It doesn't matter, everything is going to be ok now that I've married her [...] You should never lose faith in God, that I learned in my life, if you have faith in God, you will end up meeting him and he will help you.”

It was in this very matter-of-fact manner that Ashiq, 28 when I met him, told me that ten years earlier he had joined the ranks of Lashkar-i-Tayyiba. He evoked this experience in lapidary terms, in a tone that was miles from the hyper-subjectivity often attributed to “martyrs”-to-be. I was even surprised by the fact that his account lacked the usual transformation of an individual trajectory into a collective destiny; there was no mention of past sympathies for the Lashkar's ultra-nationalist brand of Islamism or even of the persecuted Kashmiri Muslims. He simply said that he wanted “to do God's work” by fighting and “embrac[ing] *shahadat* [martyrdom]” in Kashmir.³ Exhibiting a very romantic disposition – he peppered the interview with *ghazals*, poems about impossible loves – this *Majnun* (the Romeo of the Muslim world, to whom he compares himself) seemed, at first impression, to have mistakenly wandered into the Jihadist world.

Ashiq was born in a small Punjabi village in 1979, the year that General Zia had Prime Minister Z. A. Bhutto assassinated – the only one “who ever did something for the poor in this country”. From a poor background but an intermediate caste (small farmers who usually own their plots of land), Ashiq left school to work the land and then, at the age of 16, was sent to a factory in the city, like many Punjabi farm boys.⁴ His background certainly explains his move to Lahore, where he became familiar with the Lashkar, but sheds no light on his decision to join the militia. Upon arrival in the city, Ashiq immediately fell in love with

1. To use the expression found in Peter Hedström and Peter Bearman's “What is analytical sociology all about? An introductory essay”, in P. Hedström, P. Bearman (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Analytical Sociology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 3-24 (14). The critique of what might seem a far too causal explanation would no doubt say “over [their] shoulder” (B. Dupret, J.-N. Ferrié, “L'idée d'une science sociale”, 1171).

2. *Translator and author's note*: The French term *fuite en avant* has no apt English translation; it conveys both the idea of running away from a situation without any precise notion of where this would lead (the priority is to run away, not the destination), and that, sometimes, of a headlong rush into an even more dangerous situation than the one previously experienced.

3. This quotation and the ones that follow in this section are all from Ashiq.

4. Punjab is the most populous of the four provinces that make up Pakistan, accounting for 60% of the country's total population. During the 1990s, it witnessed the continued pauperization of its agricultural workers, as well as a massive rural exodus.

Rushna, who worked in the same textile factory. Both their families were against their marriage. Love marriage (as opposed to arranged marriage), although widely idealized in popular films (which nevertheless often illustrate the disastrous consequences of parental disapproval) is largely condemned by Pakistani society.¹ The configuration of power relations within the family rendered the situation even more complicated: the young man's paternal uncle, the youngest son but richer than his father, insisted on his daughter as Ashiq's future wife. Ashiq yielded, only to flee immediately to Lahore and reunite with his girlfriend. Having brought dishonor to his elders, he could no longer return home and feared retaliation. It is precisely this impasse which he mentioned to explain his entry into the Lashkar:

“It's because of this problem that I went there. [...] I told myself, ‘Ok, I'll go see how things are and then I'll come back and I'll bring Rushna with me to the camp, we'll embrace martyrdom together or we'll go somewhere else.’”

The painful situation brought about by Ashiq's transgression of social norms, likewise experienced by thousands of other young men and women, explains his despair but not his radicalization. Once back in Lahore, he worked as a cook in an upper middle-class family, where he met a boy whose brother “had become a Lashkar martyr” in Kashmir. This friend played the role of a messenger or herald:² he identified the evil, gave it an origin and suggested a solution – the wonderful world of *jihad* † at a time when Ashiq had his back to the wall. He explains:

“We only talked about that, my friend and I, all the miraculous things the *mujahidin* and Lashkar martyrs do. I had heard about them before but I had never met any. I was curious, I told myself, ‘let's go see if it's true or if it's all lies.’”

Intrigued, he showed up a first time at the armed militia's office but his boss, distressed, forcefully brought him home. Undeterred, Ashiq returned to the office, this time under a false name.

Ashiq's choice of this group, affiliated to the Ahl-i-Hadith tradition, is far from being obvious, as he is Barelwi.³ Another part of the ex-Jihadist's narrative helps to understand this apparent paradox. Before joining one of the Jihadist militias – the only groups, other than the army, legally allowed to provide weapons training – another project had begun to form in the young man's mind, to get a weapon:

“I told myself that if I knew how to use a revolver, our families could no longer stop us. I was already thinking about running away with Rushna to marry her.”

1. Marriage is above all viewed as an alliance between families that establishes a relationship of precisely codified reciprocity and protection, hence the standard custom of arranged marriages (ideally between first cousins so that property rights stay in the family and the union has some chance of lasting). Marrying against parents' will can lead to murder or acid attacks in the worst of cases, and ostracism in the majority of them (the rebellious child is excluded from the family unit and can no longer count on its financial support).

2. “Annonciateur” as the expression is used by Jeanne Favret-Saada in *Les mots, la mort et les sorts. La sorcellerie dans le Bocage* (Paris: Gallimard, 1977), 121 and *passim.*, to describe one who reveals the witch to the bewitched.

3. In Pakistan, Sunni Islam is divided into several different doctrinal traditions (*firqa*), also called “sects”. The Barelwis, who represent the majority, emphasize the Prophet's intercession as well as devotional practices inspired by Sufism. Such rituals are condemned by the Deobandis, and especially by the Ahl-i-Hadith (“the people of the *hadith*”) who recognize only the Quran and the *hadith* (sayings attributed to Muhammad) and seek to purge Islam of “deviant” Sufi practices.

As a matter of fact, once at the Jihadist camp, Ashiq stole a weapon. His logic was not, however, strictly instrumental. When I asked him “Did you already think about stealing a weapon before you went to the Lashkar?”, he answered: “No... maybe, I don’t know, things were so confused in my mind at the time, I just couldn’t see any way out”. Ashiq’s testimony reminds us that the expected punishments are rarely clear and unambiguous for social actors. What the young man alludes to, while trying to make his Jihadist activism understandable to me, has more to do with a sense of absolute necessity, of urgency, so great that he could join a doctrinally hostile group. Caught in his headlong rush, he acts almost like Céline’s Bardamu who, upon seeing a regiment on its way to the front, exclaimed “I’ll just go see if that’s the way it is!”¹

From “conditioning” to side-bets

When I met Sohail in 2008, he was employed by an Islamabad-based humanitarian NGO. His narrative was more introspective: he claimed to have thought long and hard about this period of his life, which he dissected with the forensic distance of a sociologist-in-training. Born in a small conservative town of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province,² on the border of Azad (“Free”) Jammu and Kashmir (AJK, under Pakistani administration), Sohail comes from a modest but not impoverished background. His father, employed in a Gulf country, was often absent during his adolescence; his mother worked as a teacher, a rare occurrence in the region. At the age of twelve, like most of the schoolboys in his town, Sohail was sent to learn the Quran in a mosque that happened to be Ahl-i-Hadith, whereas his family is Deobandi. Sohail identifies this first cognitive dislocation as the beginning of his radicalization: he “converted”, spent more and more time in the mosque, which was regularly frequented by the Lashkar *mujahidin*, and finally, in his own words, he was “captured for *jihad* by [his] masters” (the imam of the mosque had already “sacrificed” his own son to the cause).

During the first half of our discussion, Sohail struggled to situate himself as an actor in the trajectory that led him to the Lashkar. He constantly alludes to his “conditioning”:

“There are three types of conditioning that you have to take into account when trying to understand how young people like me end up with the Jihadists and dream of becoming a martyr. One: institutions, school, the mosque, family. Two: your environment, your neighborhood, your friends. Three: events, what happens to you.”

Sohail emphasized institutional indoctrination at school (“That’s where we learn that Hindus, the US, Europeans are all bad. You have no idea what kind of stuff we read in our school books!”) and in the *madrassa* (“The *maulwis*³ indirectly incite us to do *jihad*, they constantly quote *ahadith* that talk about waging war on other religions. I was fascinated by these lessons.”). But it was about his relations with his parents that he spoke the most, and quite bitterly. The alleged influence of “conditioning” thus becomes more complex when I realized that what Sohail wants me to understand is the part played by their passivity and his own

1. Louis-Ferdinand Céline, *Voyage au bout de la nuit* (Paris: Gallimard, 1952), 7-10.

2. A primarily Pashtun province, although Sohail comes from a Hindko-speaking tribe (2% of the population).

3. A title given to *madrassa* graduates (when they hold only a low level qualification), and by extension to all “professionals” in the religious field. In a pejorative sense, it designates any individual who exhibits signs of religious righteousness or makes a lucrative occupation out of religion.

stubbornness. First of all, Sohail's parents did not react when he "converted" to a different Islamic tradition.

"The only thing that mattered to them was that I didn't get into trouble or do bad things: watch movies with actresses in them, play outside. I spent my time reciting the Quran at home and always respected my parents, so they were content. It would have been a lot better if they had let me have a little bit more fun!"

His parents' obsessions drove him to a brutal puritanism, once socialized into the Ahl-i-Hadith ("I was horrible, I wouldn't let my family watch television anymore, I even tried to break the TV!"). When at age fourteen Sohail expressed his desire to "do *jihad* in Kashmir", his father only half refused. The young boy experienced this as an emotional betrayal.

"When I told him for the first time, 'I want to go on *jihad*, give me your permission', he answered 'you're too young, you'll go later'. He didn't oppose my inclination for *jihad* [...] You don't understand! If my parents thought this was not a good thing, they should have said: 'Leave this mosque, go somewhere else', that was their responsibility. But no, they just said 'Go later'. For me, that was a green light."

A year later, the adolescent tried again; this time, his father gave him permission to train at the camp, but not to cross the Indo-Pakistani border as a fully-fledged combatant.

Thus set loose when he was already spiraling out of control, Sohail found himself cut off from the rest of the world: "I spent every day and every night with the Lashkar *mujahidin*, it became my routine, I had no other life". After a while, the young man could no longer resist the entanglement of perceptions, emotions and situations that end up forming "a reciprocity of motivational relevances".¹ Jihadist magazines incite a thirst for justice: "They tell you that the Indian army came into a house, raped all the girls, forced the father to lie naked on a block of ice, all this just because they were Muslims, and that your duty is to save them." Camp leaders very astutely maintained high levels of humanitarian aspirations and of emotional tension:

"All night long, the Lashkar guys tell these fantastical, sometimes terrifying stories about Kashmir. I know now that it was all lies but at the time I believed it. I used to tell myself 'God, just give me an opportunity to go, I will kill these bastard Indian soldiers and I will embrace martyrdom.'"

High-ranking camp officials likewise encouraged recruits to emulate heroic *mujahidin*:

"Once, a *mujahid* gave us a big speech after he came back from Kashmir, he was a super smart guy, an engineer who left university during his last semester to join *jihad*! We thought, 'we're worth nothing compared to that guy', we were totally fascinated."

Sohail's story appears to be the perfect illustration of a "trajectory", of a radical *habitus* continually reconfirmed, as Pierre Bourdieu understands it.² And yet, despite the fact that his predispositions to submit to authority were solidly established, the young man ended up leaving the Jihadist camp to undertake... a degree in sociology. We must thus not fall for

1. To borrow Alfred Schütz's concept. Cf. Andrew T. Weigert, "Alfred Schütz on a theory of motivation", *The Pacific Sociological Review*, 18(1), 1975, 83-102 (90).

2. Pierre Bourdieu, "L'illusion biographique", *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, 62-63, June 1986, 69-72 (71).

the notion of the individual “who would be such a simple or docile thing that all along his trajectory, he could instantiate a *habitus* intrinsic to himself, just like all along a curve, a point realizes the function that defines the curve”.¹ In fact, Sohail believes that the main factor that rendered him susceptible to the Jihadists’ pressures was his “personality”:

“I’m the exact opposite of a *mustaqil mizaj* [a strong character or firm temper], my mother would tell me all the time, ‘you have no consistency’. She was right, today I’m this, yesterday I was that, Deobandi and then *Ahl-i-Hadith* and *Jihadi*, and now a liberal. I have to admit it, someone who is so easily influenced by others can easily be trapped.”

In order to combat this “weakness of the will”,² Sohail stayed at the Lashkar’s camp and made, to use Howard Becker’s felicitous expression, a “side-bet”: for once, he bet against his inconsistency and “on the coherence of his behavior”, as “the consequences of inconsistency would have been so costly that it was no longer a conceivable option” with regard to the implicit negotiation that he had initiated with his parents and with himself.³ It was difficult for this “martyr”-to-be to detach himself from his self-ascribed role – he was only able to do so once high-ranking Jihadist officials revealed their own incoherence and inconsistency (see below).

From “the Savior of Humanity” to group belonging

At first, my 2009 interview with Abu Mujahid (who was 31 years old at the time) in Lahore seemed to me a complete failure. Nevertheless, in the interest of “integrating into an analysis all materials, both ‘successful’ and ‘unsuccessful’ interviews – in other words, all the difficulties encountered during the investigation”,⁴ I decided to retain the interview. Like Ashiq and Sohail, Abu Mujahid was born in the late 1970s and thus belongs to the “Zia generation”. Unlike them, however, Abu Mujahid still admires the former dictator and comes from a relatively well-off background. His father (a high-ranking civil servant from an influential Punjabi caste) explained that he “crisscrossed practically the entire country to forcibly bring his son home each time that he ran off with a Jihadist group”. He finally married his son to a cousin and found him a job as head of marketing in a packaging company (a job which Abu Mujahid hates). Over dinner, I often witnessed Abu Mujahid being rebuffed by his parents, when, for example, he alluded to his frustrated dream of being a professional body-builder. Although he was compelled by his family to take anti-depressants since his “episodes with the Jihadists”,⁵ Abu Mujahid still remains very attached to their worldview: “martyrdom [*shahadat*] remains my goal”, he says. When I asked him which pseudonym he would like to be called by in my study, he replied without any hesitation “Abu Mujahid” (“the father of the *mujahid*”) in the hopes, said he, that his four year-old son, then playing on his lap, would accomplish what he has not been able to do.

1. Jean-Claude Passeron, “Biographies, flux, itinéraires, trajectoires”, *Revue française de sociologie*, 31(1), 1990, 3-22 (20).

2. A temporary but reiterated reversal of preferences: cf. Jon Elster, *Agir contre soi* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2007).

3. H. S. Becker, *Le travail sociologique*, 351.

4. Michael Pollack, with Nathalie Heinrich, “Le témoignage”, *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, 62-3, 1986, 3-29 (12).

5. I had to obtain his mother’s permission to conduct an interview, as she was afraid that this would “awaken his old demons”.

He had tried out many Islamist groups: the Islami Jamiyat-i-Tulaba (IJT), of which he was the chapter president at university, the Tablighi Jamaat (TJ), the Sipah-i-Sahaba (SSP)¹ and various Jihadist groups (including the Lashkar) – “I tried them all”, he says, nevertheless refusing to describe his experiences on the inside in any detail. On a quest for the ideal Islamic organization, Abu Mujahid outlined the pros and cons of each. As we proceeded with the interview, I increasingly realized that my personal questions undoubtedly troubled him – one of his friends from the IJT had just “disappeared”, or in other words had been arrested by the intelligence services † but more importantly, profoundly annoyed him as well. He constantly interrupted me to insert incredibly detailed accounts of the divine miracles accomplished by “martyrs” and *mujahidin*, or to explain the meaning of the Jihadist struggle to me. It became clear that, to the role of an interviewee, he much preferred that of a spokesman, and I was the “Western” audience to whom he wished to speak;² hence the verbal duel that he clearly enjoyed. Which one of us was really going to lead the interview?

His rhetoric was not explanatory but ideological, in the sense that it “presents itself as truth and evidence, essentially refuting the objectivation that a sociological investigation forces it to undergo”; therefore, “the observer’s cold gaze [...] is felt as an attack by the believer, who does not see a ‘phenomenon’ in his discourse but the intensely experienced proof of his action”.³ And so, when I asked Abu Mujahid why he “tried out so many different Jihadist organizations”, he responded in an irritated fashion (perhaps thinking that I was criticizing the doctrinal divisions of an Islam that can only be “one”):

“In the United States, there are hundreds of organizations to protect cats, dogs, snakes, crocodiles...and you are shocked that there are a few dozen different organizations that try to help our Kashmiri sisters, raped by the Indian army? Are their lives worth less than a dog’s?”

This answer strikingly confirms one of the more perceptive insights into contemporary Jihadist ideology, that of F. Devji who argues that “alongside the environmentalists or pacifists who /.../ are their intellectual peers, the men and women inspired by Al-Qaeda’s militancy consider Muslim suffering to be a “humanitarian” cause that, like climate change or nuclear proliferation, must be addressed globally or not at all”.⁴ However, Devji underestimates, in my opinion, the importance of the personal context in which a militant might be prone to identify with this “suffering humanity”. In the case of Abu Mujahid, two biographical elements cast light on his humanitarian quest. First, the young man explained his gradual process of Islamist radicalization by referring to his “loneliness” and his “desire to make friends”. Secondly, and on many occasions, Abu Mujahid mentioned his father’s violence: “it’s very simple, he beat me from ages seven to seventeen, non-stop!” His youngest brother and confidant added:

“As you saw, it’s not great fun in our house! We never speak to each other, it’s suffocating. My father is a hard man who never listens to anyone else, he is violent too. Not with me, because I was good at school and I obeyed. But [my brother] wasn’t so lucky, early on he rebelled and since he was a bad student, he got beat up. He met those IJT guys at university and what attracted him was the fact that they were dominant and subjugated others with violence. After that, he was caught in the net, and started running off to the Jihadists.”

1. The IJT, the student union branch of the Jamaat-i-Islami Pakistan (an Islamic party based in Lahore), operates as a sort of morality police in public universities and recruits for Jihadist groups. The TJ is a Deobandi pietist and missionary movement. The SSP, of the same denomination, is a violently anti-Shia group.

2. Abu Mujahid told me that it was the first time he had the chance to speak to a “Westerner”.

3. Pierre Ansart, *Les idéologies politiques* (Paris: PUF, 1974), 13.

4. F. Devji, *The Terrorist*, 6.

In conclusion, loneliness and abuse led Abu Mujahid to look for a different type of social interaction within dominating and violent groups. This process is reminiscent of the mechanism identified by the first studies on the role of life stories in religious commitments: the correlation which exists between a personal situation of “acutely felt tensions” (which the strong affective ties with a new group appear to resolve), a “religious problem-solving perspective”, and a project of “becoming a world-saver”.¹ Unfortunately, I was only able to briefly touch upon the first phase of this configuration, which harkens back to “the libidinal economy” of high-risk commitment,² the most difficult element to grasp.

Disengagement or self-sacrificial violence?

The deradicalization of Jihadist recruits: cognitive and affective dissonance

We often forget that joining a group that calls for death in combat, like other forms of radical militancy, is “a specific social activity, with its own recruitment phases and ebbs and flows”.³ Ashiq, Sohail and Abu Mujahid had envisioned themselves as “future martyrs”, but after having channeled their emotions towards a “*jihad* in occupied Kashmir”, they ultimately all abandoned the idea – the first two by choice, the third under duress, but ultimately accepting his lot. In the end, cognitive dissonance – having “two or more ‘cognitions’ [factual beliefs, consciously held values and mental representations] that are inconsistent with each other”⁴ – was the mechanism that prompted their deradicalization. Ashiq explains:

“On the twentieth day of training, I fled. It was not at all what I had imagined!”

First, he experienced the intolerance of his fellow recruits:

“This conflict between Sunnis (Barelwis) and Wahhabis,⁵ I didn't like that at all. I'm a Barelwi and when they see one coming, they make fun of him.”

Then he was shocked by the immorality of his superiors:

“These *maulvis* think they're so much better than us, but they're just robbers, they chat and eat their fill without going to fight in Kashmir.”

Having originally planned to bring his fiancée to the camp, Ashiq was even more scandalized by the presence of “poor girls, orphans, the kind who don't know where to go, who thought they were going to go on *jihad* but end up as servants”. And lastly, the straw that broke the camel's back was when Ashiq witnessed violence against new recruits (mentioned off the record):

“Some boys were treated like dogs. [The Jihadist leaders] would tell them: ‘You try to flee and I'll bury a bullet in your skull’. If a guy disagreed with them, they would kill him, throw his body away and then tell his family that he became a martyr [in Kashmir]. I saw this happen with my own eyes.”

1. John Lofland, Rodney Stark, “Becoming a world-saver: a theory of conversion to a deviant perspective”, *American Sociological Review*, 30(6), 1965, 862-75.

2. Jeff Goodwin, “The libidinal constitution of a high-risk social movement: affectual ties and solidarity in the Huk rebellion, 1946 to 1954”, *American Sociological Review*, 62, 1997, 53-9 (55).

3. Olivier Fillieule, “Avant-propos”, in Olivier Fillieule (ed.), *Le désengagement militant* (Paris: Belin, 2005), 11.

4. J. Elster, “A plea for mechanisms”, 52.

5. This term is meant to underscore the alien nature of Ahl-i-Hadith followers (inspired by Saudi Arabia's Wahhabism) when compared to what is, for Ashiq, the orthodoxy (Barelwism).

The spell was broken, and Ashiq once again began to fear for his life. He fled again, but this time brought along a weapon.¹

Sohail, on the contrary, spent “a very happy time” in the Lashkar training camp:

“Everyone was super nice, not at all the criminal type, they shared their food, they spoke to you very politely, all the time they would ask, ‘Hey, brother, how are you doing? Come on, let’s do this or that together.’ They made you feel special and you would tell yourself ‘OK, so I’m worth something after all!’”²

He also insisted on the good faith of the Jihadist leaders, described as “innocent” (*masum*), as manipulators who were in fact manipulated by the Pakistani army. However, the gradual deceleration of Sohail’s radicalization also demonstrates the importance of cognitive dissonance. Just as he was preparing to begin his “commando training” to secretly infiltrate the Indian border, his grandfather’s death meant that he had to go back to his family. But Lashkar officials were reluctant to let him leave to attend the funeral. Sohail found this attitude “inhuman”; the first seed of doubt was planted. Once back home, his childhood friend tried to convince him to quit *jihad*. He told Sohail: “All of this is just a dirty game. Why do the Jihadists send innocent people like you to die? Why isn’t it regular army soldiers who do this war?”

Doubt crept in, but Sohail resisted and even tried to convert his friend to the cause by bringing him to the Lashkar’s mosque. That day, a *mujahid* was displaying the severed head of a “Hindu soldier”. This incident was a “veritable turning point” said Sohail, who, outraged by the cruel gesture, remembers thinking:

“Why didn’t they just kill the soldier with a bullet and leave him with his people? He has a right to respect, he has a family as well after all!”

The young man became then more receptive to his friend’s opinion. Although he did not sever all ties with the Lashkar, he pushed back again and again the date of his return to the camp. In the meantime, he reunited with his childhood sweetheart and took the decision to marry her. Needing to find a job, he enrolled at the university. The marriage never took place but he also never returned to the camp. In conclusion, Sohail remarks, “My grandfather, my friend and that girl all saved my life”, thus confirming the interdependency of activism, even in its radical form, with other “spheres of life”.³

The relational experiences of these two men in the Jihadist camps provoked dissonance with regard to the moral values that they had originally associated with their commitment to *jihad*. The confrontation of their initial ideals with the group’s compromised principles – considered in the anthropological interpretations of simony previously discussed as one of

1. “Nothing is more active than a flight”, writes Gilles Deleuze, “it’s the opposite of the imaginary. It is also to put to flight – not necessarily others, but to put something to flight, to put a system to flight as one bursts a tube. Georges Jackson [a Black Panther leader] wrote from prison: ‘It may be that I am fleeing, but throughout my flight, I am searching for a weapon’”. (Gilles Deleuze, Claire Parnet, *Dialogues* (Paris: Flammarion, 1996), 47).

2. It is probable that the Lashkar does not reserve the same treatment for all recruits, but rather takes into account their religious background (Barelwi or Ahl-i-Hadith) and how they were recruited. Ashiq’s recruitment was likely marred by suspicions, as the LIT is also a refuge for delinquents and criminals on the run.

3. On this subject, see Florence Passy, “Interactions sociales et imbrications des sphères de vie”, in O. Fillieule (ed.), *Le désengagement militant*, 111-30.

the primary causes of brinkmanship – here instead leads to the opposite outcome: defection. In a situation where an individual desires something (“x”) to be the case and he suspects that it is not the case, Elster states that the individual can use at least five different mechanisms to reduce the dissonance.¹ The reality principle begins to operate and either 1) The individual accepts that the world is not as he would want it to be (as Ashiq does) or; 2) The individual tries to modify the world so as to make it fit with x (the subjectivist hypothesis). The individual might also continue to take his desires for reality (3). His desires may change naturally and he may no longer wish that x were the case (4). Finally, he may adapt the formation of his preferences so that he absolutely no longer wishes x were the case (5), thus provoking often a strong adverse reaction to the original preference. Sohail’s case illustrates mechanisms 3, 4 and 5: first, he insisted on staying within the group, then he tried to reduce tensions by eliminating contradictory elements (his attempt at converting his friend to Jihadism), and finally he abandoned the cause and completed a “180-degree turn” (in his words). “Disgusted by religion”, he even stopped praying and began to fervently admire President Musharraf (1999–2008), who outlawed Jihadist militias.

The experience of the camp also gave rise to what we might call “affective dissonance”: the recruits experienced tension with regard to the emotions that they had originally associated with Jihadism. Ashiq discovered that within the fascinating world of *jihad* there were false martyrs and that the camp, far from being an alternative society, was instead a criminal enterprise that repeats the modes of domination existing in the outside world. As for Sohail, and after his initial enchantment, he realized that the *mujahidin* who purport to be the defenders of the oppressed often lack compassion and even exhibit cruelty. The charm thus gave way to fear; heroic ambitions ceded to outrage and disgust. In this context, being confronted with violence played a crucial role. These young men, like many others, were attracted by the fantastical dimension of *jihad*, something that Jihadist militias are well aware of: their propaganda cleverly draws parallels with sports and movie heroes.² The combat takes place in India (a country that they have seen only in the movies) and the intention was for them to “kill the whole world” (Ashiq) or “those bastard Indian soldiers” (Sohail). These enemies are as formidable as they are far away. The same “virtual” violence of Jihadism attracted Abu Mujahid. This young man who confessed to having left the IJT after witnessing, in horror, the sight of a rival group member being tortured with a hot iron, claimed that “[in the Jihadist camp], you train, you work out, but you don’t hurt anyone”. But as soon as the violence of war is felt – a friend’s death, an enemy’s corpse – these three apprentice-Jihadists came back to reality.

Violence, collective pressure and “absurd decisions”

Ajmal Kasab, perhaps the most famous Lashkar militant of all, remained with the militia and ended up committing the most murderous *fedayin* attack ever witnessed in India, on 26 November 2008 in Mumbai.³ Wounded and arrested, Kasab was the only surviving member of the ten-person commando group. Can Ashiq, Sohail and Abu Mujahid’s

1. J. Elster, “A plea for mechanisms”, 52.

2. “Neither cricket champions nor movie stars, we are the *mujahidin* of Islam!” proclaimed one of the Lashkar’s banners during a 2001 demonstration in Lahore.

3. Several teams took hostage the occupants of two luxury hotels and Nariman House, a Chabad Lubavitch center. They then shot individuals on sight in a popular café, a hospital, a college and finally the central train station (where Kasab alone killed 50 individuals and was filmed). This attack caused 166 deaths.

trajectories help us explain the mechanisms that drove Kasab to commit this highly risky *fedayin* mission? This is a difficult matter, precisely because individual militants are not interchangeable. Yet, “by interrogating the crisis which drives the individual agent [...] to break with past loyalties and beliefs”, such an analysis *en creux*, somehow comparable to an intaglio printing, has the merit of “emphasizing, *a contrario*, the requirements, both material and subjective, of pursuing and maintaining such a commitment”.¹

Is it possible that Kasab, described as a small-time gangster before he joined the Lashkar, exhibited a greater tolerance for violence than the three recruits I have introduced?² Could his past likewise have ensured the transformation of his personal hatred of the rich into a punitive expedition against India? This is precisely what Kasab’s makeshift biographers claim, basing their argument on the police interrogation that took place right after his arrest. Born a few kilometers from Ashiq’s village, this Punjabi villager is the son of an itinerant snack vendor and left school at age thirteen. He went to his brother’s house in Lahore, argued with him, ran away and lived from small jobs for a while. He then turned to armed robbery. One day, on his way to buy weapons in Rawalpindi, he met Lashkar officials and “after a discussion lasting a few minutes, [he] decided to join – not because of [his] Islamist convictions but in the hope that the Jihad training [he] would receive would further [his] future life in crime”.³

If this “biography” is indeed true, it still presents several serious interpretive problems (and ethical ones, given the manner in which the data was collected): how to explain Kasab’s shift from a purportedly instrumental approach to Jihadism (advancing his career in organized crime), to an attack risking his life and attempting to create the maximum number of victims, rather than acquire the maximum amount of loot? Lacking verifiable testimony from this militant’s experience within the Lashkar, we are naturally reduced to mere conjectures. We are in no way obliged, however, to posit a natural link between delinquent violence and self-sacrificial violence. A certain number of plausible mechanisms, operating at both the organizational and individual levels, can help us understand how recruits who, just like Ashiq, Sohail and Abu Mujahid, may have joined the Jihadist cause with objectives other than self-sacrifice, ultimately remained until the fatal outcome.

Judging by the accounts of defection described above, it clearly seems that the very first challenge for Jihadist militias is to keep their recruits “in”. To this end, different techniques of social control are used: the role of “fun”⁴ and of the friendly but incredibly insistent solicitations of peers (who didn’t leave Sohail alone for a minute); the daily humiliation and death threats against uncooperative recruits that Ashiq alluded to; the incessant sermons on the sacred nature of death in combat; parents being “invited” to express their uncomplaining satisfaction with the “martyrdom” of their sons; a form of depersonalization often brought about by a change in religious tradition but also in one’s name (each militant receives a “code name”, usually that of a warrior-hero of medieval Islam, and then becomes a “number”

1. Philippe Gottraux, cited in O. Fillieule (ed.), *Le désengagement militant*, 11.

2. Testimonies from the “martyrs” of another Jihadist militia, the Hizb-ul-Mujahidin, reveal that these individuals were often socialized to violence very early on while fighting in Afghanistan or during fights between the IJT and rival groups on university campuses, as well as in prison.

3. Praveen Swami, “A journey into the Lashkar”, *The Hindu*, 2 December 2008.

4. Jihadist training is offered in the form of “summer camps” for schoolchildren. On the role of “fun” in political violence in Pakistan, see Oskar Verkaaik, *Migrants and Militants. Fun and Urban Violence in Pakistan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

if he is sent to infiltrate the Indo-Pakistani border); and finally, the isolation of the militant who is practically cut off from his family (as evidenced by Sohail’s emphasis on the Lashkar leaders’ aversion to letting him go home, even temporarily). This isolation might be even more effective when the recruits are already estranged from their families (as in Ashiq’s and possibly Kasab’s case).¹ The group then becomes their only source of protection. Or if the recruits suffer from parental indifference, the organization can encourage them to take further steps towards radicalization (Sohail). A more precise analysis of organizational pressures should include, in addition, an understanding of the selection process for militants sent on *fedayin* missions in Kashmir – unfortunately, such information is woefully lacking. Are collective ceremonies organized in the camps?² Should we believe high-ranking Jihadist officials when they claim that the “martyrs”-to-be nominate themselves? There is room for doubt here, at least in some cases, since in their testimonies, “martyrs” often mention that they were “chosen” by a certain “*mujahid* brother”, and as the drafting of their “last will” is regularly supervised by their superiors.³ Both of these circumstances may act as points of no return for Jihadist recruits.

At the intersection of the collective and the individual, derealization is another mechanism allowing for consent, and one that all three ex-recruits frequently referred to. This process needs to be analyzed in relation to the “personalities” – “romantic”, “malleable”, “lonely” – of the recruits, even though this dimension is, no doubt, out of fashion in the social sciences. As the recruits were swept along by uncontrollable circumstances, the “wonderful” world of *jihad* exerted such a strong “fascination” (a word they often used) on them that, years later, they still remember in detail all the stories of miracles performed by *mujahidin* on the battle fields and by “martyrs” after their deaths. Jihadist propaganda is teeming with these phantasmagorical models, and even if academic literature is often quick to mock them,⁴ I am of the view that they play an essential function in identification with the combatant group. They allow for the scriptural and abstract ideological versions of Islam promoted by Jihadists to be heard and accessible in a society where a repertoire of magical deeds and invisible forces permeates all spheres of activity. It may be useful here to compare this fascination with a process whose importance in the transition to self-sacrificial violence has been highlighted by Ohnuki-Tierney, who describes it as a “symbolic *méconnaissance*”: the absence of communication which results when people do not share a meaning but rather derive different meanings from the same mobilizing symbol.⁵ In fact, the equivocal meaning of *jihad*⁶ is

1. Which seems not to be the case of Indian Kashmiri recruits based in refugee camps in AJK. On this, see: Cabeiri deBergh Robinson, *Body of Victim, Body of Warrior: Refugee Families and the Making of Kashmiri Jihadists* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).

2. Such ceremonies existed for *tokkotai* pilots. For example, once all grouped together, the pilots all had to put one foot forward; this unanimity was frighteningly effective, as it became unthinkable to try and protect one's own life when fellow pilots were all willing to offer theirs (E. Ohnuki-Tierney, *Kamikaze*, 169). In other cases, the names of undecided pilots were automatically put on the list, or a small tap on the shoulder from a superior officer meant that their fates were sealed.

3. Otherwise, it is impossible to explain how villagers who quit school at age ten could express themselves in the sophisticated Urdu used in these testaments.

4. “In the *Majallah Al-Dawah* [the militia's magazine] Lashkar-i-Tayyiba delights in publicizing the amazing deeds of its men”, writes A. Jalal. “Some read like spoofs in a humor magazine, especially stories about bears, cats, and monkeys helping the *mujahidin*. The more glamorous yarns could put some Bollywood scriptwriters out of business [...] and outdo the best science fiction!” (*Partisans of Allah*, 289).

5. E. Ohnuki-Tierney, *Kamikaze*, 3.

6. Signifying simply “a strenuous effort directed towards a conscious goal”, whether this objective is military (offensive or defensive, the latter being more commonly used in the Quran) or strictly personal, in this case seeking moral perfection by fighting against the *nafs* (the “self” in its impulsive and physical sense).

strikingly similar to that of flowering cherry blossoms in imperial Japan. Both are symbols of a quest for ideal purity and both are transformed by the state into symbols of death without idealist recruits being able to recognize their manipulative intentions.¹ This is precisely the veil that Sohail's friend lifted when he criticized the former's credulity and accused him of being "manipulated" by a cynical state, thus helping him return to reality.

What individual mechanisms can lead Jihadists recruits to yield to the pressures exerted by their superiors? As explained in depth above, the fact that recruits may have wished to live, instead of dying, leads us to consider other relevant hypotheses, among which the possibility that their consent stems from "absurd" yet rational decisions, with contradictory and sometimes tragic consequences. Christian Morel has thoroughly detailed the cognitive mechanisms behind this type of decision, and in particular behind those provoked by "a loss of meaning"² – the opposite, then, of the subjectivist thesis which describes self-sacrificial violence as having "too much meaning". In this situation, the individual "is no longer bound by incremental rationality" and can no longer readapt his objectives because his goal is either uncertain or absent, or even impossible to attain. This is illustrated by Kafel Ahmad, a militant of Indian origin who, in June 2007, drove a flaming Jeep into Glasgow airport with the professed goal of protesting the war in Iraq. Selected for its technical efficiency, the self-sacrificial act was provoked by the militant's dismay at not being able to set off a bomb in London the previous day (this "impossible goal" attesting to his initial intentions of staying alive).³ On the other hand, an absent goal which might thus transform the action into "a goal of its own" according to Morel, can explain the deaths of Kasab's acolytes, who, under the injunction of their Jihadist mentors based in Pakistan, blew themselves up with grenades in Mumbai hotels at the end of a hostage situation whose strategic objective may have completely eluded them (provoking an Indo-Pakistani war).

Cases of uncertain objectives seem the most frequent, as Ashiq, Sohail and Abu Mujahid's testimonies suggest as well as, maybe, Kasab's "biography". All of these men joined a group specialized in self-sacrificial violence with quite contradictory goals: fleeing and marrying his sweetheart (Ashiq); being stopped in his martyropathic drive and being "consistent" (Sohail); making friends and defying his father (Abu Mujahid); and becoming a professional thief (Kasab). But as it is "so difficult to balance two simultaneous priorities or two successive steps", many individuals thus have recourse to "rudimentary cognitive tinkering".⁴ These intuitive shortcuts that are also traps might be: believing in the possibility of doing a thing and its opposite (dying and surviving, fighting and fleeing, dying or returning with a weapon); extravagant probabilities (bringing one's fiancée to a Jihadist training camp); or purely imitative reasoning (the "herald's" brother), etc.⁵ Ashiq only had to realize the absurdity of his decision to bring his fiancée to the camp (by seeing women looked down upon by other Jihadists) to start to regain his senses and refocus on a single goal: marrying Rushna at all

1. A manipulation that is entirely accepted by a number of army officers in charge of Jihadist groups; see Amélie Blom, "Seeing like a state: l'État et les milices jihadistes au Pakistan", paper given at the conference "Analyse comparée des phénomènes miliciens", Paris, CERI, 22-3 June 2011, unpublished.

2. Christian Morel, *Les décisions absurdes. Sociologie des erreurs radicales et persistantes* (Paris: Gallimard, 2002), 304 and *passim*.

3. A. Mohammad-Arif, "De l'auto-radicalisation idéologique à la violence 'auto-sacrificielle'".

4. C. Morel, *Les décisions absurdes*, 100.

5. The ambiguity of goals is likewise striking when reading the testaments of recruits: "Either I will be a *ghazi* or I will be a martyr", many write; a "*ghazi*" is the opposite of a "martyr", as he returns victorious from combat. It is not by accident that Jihadist militias hold out the prospect of being the exception to the rule.

costs. For other recruits, and perhaps for Kasab, ambiguous objectives may have been maintained until the end, especially if these individuals fully understood the task entrusted to them and the risk it entailed only at the last minute.

That self-sacrificial violence might sometimes result from an “absurd decision” can possibly explain the omnipresence, in Jihadist propaganda and living “martyr” testimonies, of references to motivations such as the love of Islam, of one’s country, of *jihad*, and of martyrdom – claims from which, let us recall, “altruistic” motivations are generally deduced. In fact, Morel emphasizes that one of the possible fates of “a solution [...] devoid of true meaning [...] is its unification not with an objective but with a very general value”,¹ the all-encompassing generality of the value concealing the loss of meaning. This “cognitive trap” is all the more perilous in that the action ends up being designated as the very symbol of this value. Once more, the case of the *tokkotai* pilots illustrates the great possibilities of this hypothesis: doomed to die a senseless death (though it is forced upon them, they submit to it while doubting its justification to the very end), they transform it into a heroic death for their country.² Of course, this mechanism resists any empirical validation based on the narratives of Pakistani Jihadist recruits who died in Kashmir. However, the remarks of their families and friends do hold a clue. In fact, during my interviews with the mothers of *Hizb-ul-Mujahidin* militants,³ I was struck by their bewilderment and distress when evoking what was for them the primary cause of their sons’ death (which they had sought to prevent): their association with the IJT. It was only later that these mothers sought consolation by asserting their sons’ “passion for martyrdom”.

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* *

If young people can idealize themselves as “martyrs” without ever acting on this desire, if *fedayin* commit suicide in order to avoid capture or being killed, if “false” martyrs exist as well as remotely-activated “suicide jackets” and blackmail, if some kamikazes may prepare for death for years while others adopt this role reluctantly, rationalizing an, at times, entirely efficiency-driven decision, taken against their wishes, by having recourse to an abstract ideal – if these completely different situations all occur, it becomes impossible to believe that all authors of self-sacrificial violence share the same desire for death. Is the identity of Islamic “martyrs” thus so elusive that we can only call attention to the ambiguous relation researchers have with their descriptive tradition? A detour through the internal fabric of the available theses was necessary, if only to underscore that the motivations attributed to “martyrs” are inferred from the selected sources – this might be a banal conclusion, but it is one that needs to be explicitly demonstrated.

Looking at the life stories of Jihadist recruits thus led me to counter both the typical sociological profile of a “martyr”, with altruistic or malicious motivations, and the notion of simoniac exchange, proposing instead a sequential explanatory model of self-sacrificial radicalization. Joining a Jihadist group, staying there, completing various training phases, going into combat, leading a *fedayin* mission or a suicide attack are all practices implemented in

1. C. Morel, *Les décisions absurdes*, 305.

2. “If you were most likely to die anyway, you might as well die a hero”, reasoned some pilots (E. Ohnuki-Tierney, *Kamikaze*, 170).

3. October 2002, Lahore.

different contexts (school, university, the professional world, the camp, the combatants' cell). At each step, the “martyr”-to-be can be diverted from his trajectory.

The cases presented here certainly do not purport to be a generalization of all similar situations. They simply suggest that motivations are perhaps less fundamentally enigmatic than the timing and the mechanisms of self-sacrificial radicalization, three types of which have been identified here: the *fuite en avant*, the side-bet, and the desire to belong to a domineering group. The transition to actually carrying out the suicide mission, however, remains “an enigma wrapped in a puzzle”, as we know nothing of the moments which precede it. Yet, this study proposes the implicit hypothesis (given the nature of the empirical material) that the transition cannot necessarily be explained by a militant's primary socialization to Jihadism (Sohail, for example, was quite well socialized to the group's ideals and yet did not see his project through to its fatal end), nor by an uncontrollable motivation to die. The collective techniques of creating consent and individual absurd decisions can also allow for this form of violence to become intelligible.¹

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