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# The Draw of the Death Cult

The battle against the Islamic State will not be won in Raqqa. It's about giving young men with a death wish a reason to live.

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BY IAN BURUMA | NOVEMBER 18, 2015

A photograph in the February issue of *Dabiq*, a monthly magazine run by the Islamic State, shows the grinning face of a young Belgian named Abdelhamid Abaaoud, also known as Abu Umar al-Baljiki. Dressed in combat gear, proudly cradling a machine gun in his arms, Abaaoud looks very pleased with himself. Suspected of being the organizer behind last week's murder spree in Paris, he was reportedly **killed** Wednesday morning in a predawn raid by French security forces.

Something about the macho swagger in Abaaoud's photograph reminded me of an earlier revolutionary killer, now living in a French prison, Ilich Ramírez Sánchez, also known as "Carlos the Jackal" — the same self-satisfaction, the same pleasure in violence, the same delight in a deadly cause. Ramírez was responsible for many kidnappings and murders in the 1970s and 1980s, all in the name of the Palestinian people and worldwide revolution.

Abaaoud speaks for a new kind of revolution, an imaginary Islamist caliphate. Because we now live in the Internet age, his brand of revolutionary violence can spread much quicker than was possible in Ramírez's time. But from what we know about Ramírez, and can guess about Abaaoud, both men married a grand revolutionary cause to a lethal form of narcissism: Killing is sexy.

Grand causes have always had an appeal to young people: They offer a sense of power, of meaning, a feeling of community, and a means to escape from the frustrations of life. The attraction of the Islamic State's holy war, promoted on countless websites, through tweets, and other social media, should be easy to understand. Many young admirers of "Carlos the Jackal" also thought they were fighting "the West," "imperialism," "fascism," or whatever else, for the sake of something higher.

What Ramírez was not was a representative of any particular civilization, religion, or even a coherent political philosophy. And I would argue that Abaaoud is not either. Like Ramírez, he did not grow up poor or downtrodden. The son of Moroccan parents, he went to a smart school in Brussels, where he had the reputation of being a happy-go-lucky fellow, before descending into petty crime and then jihadism.

Whatever, or whoever, converted him to revolutionary violence, his brand of political Islam is an extreme form of religious fanaticism, to be sure. But it cannot be properly understood by learning more about the Quran or the Hadith, any more than the bloodlust of Ramírez can be reduced to readings of *Das Kapital*. Murderous revolutionaries, whether they act in the name of a religious or a secular cause, tend to be mesmerized by a cult of death. More conventional or traditional forms of Islam are far removed from a death cult.

Calling the Paris murders a “clash of civilizations,” to quote the words of presidential hopeful Marco Rubio, is absurd. That would imply that “the West” should embark on a holy war against Islam, wherever it exists, which is precisely what the brutal propagandists of the Islamic State would welcome.

Even French President François Hollande’s declaration of war against the Islamic State, though more precise and less inflammatory than the words of Rubio, seems slightly askew. You can declare war on a state, but not on a tactic (“terrorism”) or a global cause. The Islamic State does not qualify; it certainly occupies territory, but it is a mistake to credit it with the legitimacy it seeks.

Bombing those territories in Iraq and Syria held by Islamic State fighters may, or may not, make military sense. But it won’t reduce the murderous appeal of revolutionary Islam to such men as Abaaoud. In fact, it will probably enhance it. For it confirms their grandiose notion of fighting a “war with the West.”

The strength of a revolutionary movement like the Islamic State is its fluidity. It can pop up anywhere — in failed African states, in Middle Eastern civil wars, or any place where political authority has broken down and armed gangs, revolutionary or simply criminal, or both, can terrorize people into submission. You bomb them in one place, and they will emerge in another: Raqqa today, Chad tomorrow.

But even if bombing would help to diminish the power of the Islamic State, the death cult won't simply vanish. What produces such savage violence in Madrid, Amsterdam, London, Brussels, and Paris is a lethal link between ideologies emerging from civil wars in the Middle East and disaffected, or just bored, young people in the West. As long as that link persists, the problem won't go away.

Hunting down jihadi websites and communications is never going to be entirely successful, unless we follow the Chinese example and crush the freedom of the Internet. But, in fact, the Chinese cannot really do this either, and the West does not have an authoritarian central government that could even try.

The only thing that remains, then, is a long-term strategy to make young people, especially the young sons and daughters of immigrants, less disaffected. This means, as Olivier Roy, a French scholar of Islam, has argued, that Islam in Europe must be domesticated, or "Europeanized," with the guidance of locally trained Imams, rather than men imported from Turkey or the Middle East. It also means that laws and conditions must be adjusted to make it easier for young people named Ahmed or Fatima to get jobs. It means better integration of minorities in schools.

None of this will have an immediate effect. But more direct military intervention in the Middle East can only slow down a process that must take place in Europe. We know that a dangerous minority of young people are attracted by reasons to die. What is needed badly is a superior reason to live.

Dabiq Magazine

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