



# **The Western Volunteers in Syria and Iraq - A Case Study of Violent Political Engagement**

**Mémoire**

**Guillaume Corneau-Tremblay**

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**The Western Volunteers in Syria and Iraq**  
**A Case Study of Violent Political Engagement**

**Master's Thesis**

**Guillaume Corneau-Tremblay**

Under the supervision of:

**Aurélie Campana**

## Résumé

En utilisant le cas des volontaires occidentaux ayant combattu l'État islamique (EI) en Syrie et en Irak, et une triangulation intraméthode, ce mémoire explore l'engagement dans la violence politique de ces individus et contribue à l'élaboration d'une théorie typologique plus large. À partir de données originales—des entretiens et des autobiographies—et secondaires, le mémoire identifie deux profils typiques de mobilisation—les Militaro-Escapistes et les Politico-Utopistes—avec chacun leurs mécanismes propres, analysés au travers du cadre théorique proposé par Xavier Crettiez en 2016. Le mémoire soutient qu'il n'y a pas de chemin unique et linéaire vers la violence politique et qu'il n'est pas nécessaire d'avoir la présence d'un événement déclencheur pour y conduire. Il s'agit plutôt d'un processus lent et progressif s'étalant sur de nombreuses années d'interactions en personne qui pousse les militants à considérer cette option comme judicieuse et faisable. La socialisation violente est donc essentielle, car elle développe les identités collectives et les cadres cognitifs des acteurs. De plus, le mémoire propose que ces acteurs possédaient tous la volonté d'acquérir un statut, la reconnaissance des autres et une raison d'être. Finalement, le cas étudié permet de confirmer que les individus ne doivent pas nécessairement être immédiatement disponibles biographiquement pour ultimement rejoindre une guerre à l'étranger. Certains volontaires se sont rendus disponibles, mettant de côté des responsabilités personnelles, ou ont attendu d'être disponibles, parfois pendant plusieurs mois.

## **Abstract**

Using the case of Western volunteers who fought against the Islamic State (IS) in Syria and Iraq, and a within-method triangulation, this thesis explores the engagement processes into political violence of those individuals and contributes to the development of a broader typological theory. Drawing from original material—interviews and autobiographies—and secondary data, it identifies two ideal-type profiles of mobilization—the Militaro-Escapists and the Politico-Utopists—with each their specific mechanisms, analyzed using the framework proposed by Xavier Crettiez in 2016. The thesis argues that there is no unique and linear path toward political violence, and there is no need for such thing as a triggering event to lead one into using it. It is rather a slow and progressive process spanning over many years of in-person interactions that push militants to consider this option as sound and feasible. As such, violent socialization is essential for the development of collective identities and cognitive frames. Moreover, the thesis proposes that violent political actors all greed status, recognition from others, and significance. Finally, the case studied confirms that individuals do not necessarily have to be biographically available in the first place to ultimately join a foreign war. Some of the volunteers made themselves available, setting aside responsibilities they had, or waited to be available, sometimes for many months.

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## **List of Acronyms**

IFB: International Freedom Battalion (Tabûra Azadî ya Îternasyonal)

PKK: Kurdistan Workers' Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê)

YBŞ: Şengal Resistance Units (Yekîneyên Berxwedana Şengalê)

YPG: People's Protection Units (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel)

YPJ: Women's Protection Units (Yekîneyên Parastina Jin)

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# Introduction

October 2017; five masked combatants are posing for an historical picture. Wearing military fatigues commonly worn by members of the People’s Protection Unit (YPG) and its female equivalent, the Women’s Protection Units (YPJ), the most important Kurdish militias in Northern Syria, these fighters are standing in front of half crumbled buildings in Raqqa, which had been, a short while earlier, the capital of the Islamic State (IS) in Syria. On the left-hand side of the photograph, a man holding a red and black flag. The flag reads: “London Anti-Fascists.”<sup>1</sup>

These men and women are part of the International Freedom Battalion (IFB), a highly ideological unit of the YPG. It is made up of far-left militants, mostly from Turkey, but also from Europe and North America, hence the reference to the British antifascist movement. They are a handful of fighters among hundreds of other Western volunteers engaged in the fight against the IS in Syria, but also in Iraq, alongside Kurdish, Yezidi and Assyrian groups since 2014.

The YPG is part of the Apoist movement, a reference to the founder and leader of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), Abdullah Öcalan, dubbed Apo, “uncle,” by its members. Öcalan’s and the PPK’s doctrine—Apoism—has long had the capacity for ideological innovation. In the early 2000s, the Apoist ideology evolved from a mix of Marxist-Leninism and nationalism<sup>2</sup>, to the belief in a libertarian system of direct democracy, advocating for the liberation of women, ecology and autonomy, and rejecting the concept of the nation-state.<sup>3</sup> This philosophy is known as “Democratic Confederalism.”

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<sup>1</sup> IRPGF, Twitter publication dated October 21<sup>st</sup>, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Gilles DORRONSORO and Olivier GROJEAN, “Engagement militant et phénomènes de radicalisation chez les Kurdes de Turquie”, *European Journal of Turkish Studies*, 2004; Paul WHITE, *The PKK, Coming Down from the Mountains*, London, Zed Books Ltd, 2017, p. 29.

<sup>3</sup> Mathieu LÉONARD, “Le Kurdistan, Nouvelle Utopie : Un Nouveau Chiapas au Moyen-Orient?”, *La Découverte*, number 4, 2016, pp. 128-143; “Combattant volontaire au Rojava #7 : « Une ligne antinationaliste clair »”, *Union Communiste Libertaire*, , [Online], 2017, <https://www.unioncommunistelibertaire.org/Combattant-volontaire-au-Rojava-07-Une-ligne-antinationaliste-claire> (Web page visited on February 1<sup>st</sup>, 2021).

Except for an attempt to establish such a system by the PKK and its youth branch in very limited regions of Turkey, the Syrian Civil War represented the first opportunity for the Apoist political movement to initiate a social revolution based on Democratic Confederalism. This effort was launched in July 2012 under the impulsion of the YPG's political party in Syria<sup>4</sup> and was threatened mostly by the presence of the IS.

The Western volunteers travelled to the region to oppose this specific threat. It was on October 2, 2014, that a YPG official publicly acknowledged that there were three American volunteers fighting against the IS threat alongside the group in Syria.<sup>5</sup> Yet, as early as the summer of 2014, Western volunteers were reportedly seen in the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) camps in Iraq, waiting to join the YPG in Rojava, the name given to the Kurdish region in northern Syria.<sup>6</sup> Since then, not only have they augmented the ranks of the YPG, but hundreds have also joined other Kurdish groups in Syria and Iraq, as well as affiliated Assyrian and Yezidi organizations.

This study suggests that this phenomenon of transnational armed militancy against the IS represents a unique opportunity to study contemporary political violence, and more specifically, the individual processes of engagement therein. To better understand what contribution this opportunity may represent, below is an overview of the current state of this field of study and an exploration of the pitfalls still impeding its development.

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<sup>4</sup> “Una Bandiera Chiamata Solidarietà : Un'intervista Agli Internazionalisti in Rojava”, *Prometeo Blog*, [Online], 2017, <https://www.prometeoblog.org/2017/05/05/una-bandiera-chiamata-solidarieta-unintervista-agli-internazionalisti-in-rojava/> (Web page visited on February 1<sup>st</sup>, 2021); Miro FURTADO, “In Syria, a Battle Between Radical Leftism and Militant Islam”, *Harvard Political Review*, [Online], 2017, <http://harvardpolitics.com/online/radicaleleftismandmilitantislam/> (Web page visited on February 14<sup>th</sup>, 2017).

<sup>5</sup> Gul TUYSUZ, Jennifer RIZZ and Chelsea J. CARTER, “3 Americans fighting alongside Kurds in Syria against ISIS, official says”, *CNN*, [Online], October 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2014, <https://www.cnn.com/2014/10/02/world/meast/isis-american-syria-kurds/index.html>, (Web page visited on May 13<sup>th</sup>, 2020).

<sup>6</sup> Joanna PALANI, *Freedom Fighter, My War Against ISIS on the Frontlines of Syria*, London, Atlantic Books Ltd, 2019, p. 158.

## Current State of the Field

Unlike the phenomenon of Western militants fighting against the IS, political violence *per se* is far from novel. Humans have fought for political ideas for centuries, and political violence as a research topic has been studied in a systematic manner for over 60 years.

Research focused on the individual as the central actor of political violence gained popularity in the 1970s, with the work of Ted Robert Gurr<sup>7</sup>. The 1970s also witnessed the beginning of what is now known as the field of terrorism research, a subset of political violence studies that has become predominant in the field today.<sup>8</sup> It is in the 1960s and 1970s that terrorism first developed as a topic of choice for researchers, mainly due to the emergence of international far-left and nationalist groups. However, many failed—and are still failing today—to recognize that terrorism is in fact only one of the multiple forms and facets of political violence, mostly used as a tactic among broader violent political campaigns.

The 1970s' studies focusing on the individual as an independent violent political actor led to the development of psychological approaches to the study of the phenomenon.<sup>9</sup> According to these new theoretical contributions, terrorists were viewed mainly as the victims of mental disorders.<sup>10</sup> Advocates of these approaches were generally mental health professionals, with no expertise in political violence.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, these theories gained popularity with the emergence of suicide terrorism, as for mental health experts, “[m]ost people can conceive of killing for a cause, as police and military are called to do. But for most, suicide is simply beyond the call of duty and therefore must be indicative of some sort of underlying pathology”<sup>12</sup>. Yet, more than four decades of research on this topic have failed to demonstrate

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<sup>7</sup> Ted Robert GURR, *Why Men Rebel*, Routledge, 2015, 14<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition, 440 p.

<sup>8</sup> Edna F. REID and Hsinchun CHEN, “Mapping the Contemporary Terrorism Research Domain”, *International Journal of Human-Computer Studies*, volume 65, number 1, p. 42-56.

<sup>9</sup> Lorenzo BOSI, “État des Savoirs et Pistes de Recherches sur la Violence Politique”, *Critique Internationale*, volume 1, number 54, 2012, p. 171-189; John HORGAN, *The Psychology of Terrorism*, Routledge, 2014, 224 p.

<sup>10</sup> See for instance Gustave MORF, *Le Terrorisme Québécois*, Éditions de l’Homme, 1970, 219 p.

<sup>11</sup> Marc SAGEMAN, *Understanding Terror Networks*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004, p. 80; Donatella DELLA PORTA, *Social Movements, Political Violence, and the State: A Comparative Analysis of Italy and Germany*, Cambridge University Press, 1995, p. 7; Wilfried RASCH, “Psychological Dimensions of Political Terrorism in the Federal Republic of Germany”, *International Journal of Law and Psychiatry*, volume 2, 1979, p. 79-85.

<sup>12</sup> SAGEMAN, *op. cit.*, p. 82.

that mental illness is a significant characteristic among terrorists, let alone violent political actors more broadly.<sup>13</sup> Instead, researchers have found them to be “extraordinarily normal”<sup>14</sup>.

In trying to break with these approaches searching for a “terrorist personality,” scholars began to look at violent political actors through rational choice theories. However, in trying too hard to distance themselves from pathological approaches, researchers ended up defining terrorists as “too rational”<sup>15</sup>. The problem with these approaches is that they underestimate emotions created by social bonds, shocking events, and perceived situations of injustice.<sup>16</sup> If violent political actors were to be wholly rational, they would act as free riders and wait to benefit from others’ achievements. For instance, Western volunteers would not have gone to Syria or Iraq to fight against the IS, facing the very real risks of death, injury, or prison; they would have let local forces fight this war on their behalf. Instead, violent political actors do not always calculate rationally how and why they act.<sup>17</sup> They are rational from a mental health perspective, but they do not always behave like the rational choice theories would predict.

Meanwhile, following other trends in political science<sup>18</sup>, several scholars attempted to find root causes for political violence and terrorism, in low levels of education and poor socio-economic conditions. Yet, they also felt short, as none has been proven to be consistently significant.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Andrew SILKE, “Cheshire-Cat Logic: The Recurring Theme of Terrorist Abnormality in Psychological Research”, *Psychology, Crime & Law*, volume 4, 1998, p. 51-69; Marc SAGEMAN, *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008, 208 p.; Gérald BRONNER, *La pensée extrême. Comment des hommes ordinaires deviennent des fanatiques*, Presses Universitaires de France, 2016, 280 p.

<sup>14</sup> Lorne DAWSON, “Trying to Make Sense of Home-Grown Terrorist Radicalization: The Case of the Toronto 18”, In Paul BRAMADAT and Lorne DAWSON (eds), *Religious Radicalization and Securization in Canada and Beyond*, University of Toronto Press, 2014, p. 71.

<sup>15</sup> Donatella DELLA PORTA, *op. cit.*

<sup>16</sup> Benjamin DUCOL, “Les Dimensions Émotionnelles du Terrorisme : Émotions, Radicalisation Violente et Engagement Terroriste”, *Canadian Graduate Journal of Sociology and Criminology*, volume 2, number 2, 2013, p. 89-101.

<sup>17</sup> Marc SAGEMAN, *op. cit.*, 2004; *Id.*, 2008.

<sup>18</sup> Peter A. HALL, “Aligning Ontology and Methodology in Comparative Research”, In James MOHNEY and Dietrich RUESCHEMEYER (eds), *Comparative Historical Analysis in the Social Sciences*, Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 373-402.

<sup>19</sup> Aurélie CAMPANA and Luc LAPOINTE, “The Structural ‘Root’ Causes of Non-Suicide Terrorism: A Systematic Scoping Review”, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, volume 24, number 1, 2011, p. 79-104.

Several of these scholars then began working on innovative research, using different levels of analysis—micro, meso and macro—whereas an individual involved in political violence is seen as a complex rational actor embedded in a specific environment, subject to group dynamics, where emotions, subjective interpretative frames, and personal motivations interact with one another in a process ultimately leading to political violence.<sup>20</sup> Breaking with the one-level approaches allowed the field of political violence to evolve further. As della Porta summarizes,

[t]he macro-analysis fails to consider the intermediate processes between general structures and individual behaviour. The meso-analysis [on its own] gives us a voluntaristic interpretation of violence as a strategic choice carried out by single groups or organizations. And the microanalysis [without the other dimensions] tends to attribute this political phenomenon to purely psychological factors.<sup>21</sup>

Personal motivations for violent political actors vary so much that most scholars also stopped searching for an answer in these highly personal variables. In other words, they stopped looking for the “why” and started focusing on the “how” of violent political engagement—the process through which one gets involved in this particular form of contentious politics.<sup>22</sup> However important this shift was, it has not yet been totally effective.

While the innovative nature of some recent studies led to a better understanding of political violence as a phenomenon, the question of how factors leading to political violence interact with one another remains mainly unanswered. In their study of American volunteers engaged in the fight against the IS, for instance, Fritz and Young<sup>23</sup> were the first to suggest looking at mobilization pathways instead of individual motivations for this specific case. However,

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<sup>20</sup> Martha CRENSHAW, “The Causes of Terrorism”, *Comparative Politics*, volume 13, number 4, 1981, pp. 379-399; Michael J. BOYLE, “Progress and Pitfalls in the Study of Political Violence”, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, volume 24, number 4, 2012, pp. 527-543; Donatella DELLA PORTA, *op. cit.*

<sup>21</sup> Donatella DELLA PORTA, *op. cit.* p. 10.

<sup>22</sup> John HORGAN, “Understanding Terrorist Motivation: A Socio-Psychological Perspective”, In Magnus RANSTORP (editor), *Mapping Terrorism Research: State of the Art, Gaps and Future Direction*, Routledge, 2006, p. 106-126; Xavier CRETTEZ, “Penser la Radicalisation”, *Revue Française de Science Politique*, volume 66, number 5, 2016, p. 709-727.

<sup>23</sup> Jason FRITZ and Joseph K. YOUNG, “Transnational Volunteers: American Foreign Fighters Combating the Islamic State”, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 2017, p. 1-20.

although they proposed interesting hypotheses on the relation between personal motivations and the effect of social movements, they have yet to test them empirically.

The field therefore lacks a typological theory<sup>24</sup>, explaining the interactions between the different variables influencing the engagement process in the aggregate. According to George and Bennett, typological theories “provide one way of modelling complex contingent generalizations. They frequently draw together in one framework the research of many social scientists, cumulating their individual efforts into a larger body of knowledge”<sup>25</sup>. Typological theories further “specify the pathways through which particular types relate to specified outcomes. [... They are] similarly open to the possibility of equiphinality—the same outcome can arise through different pathways”<sup>26</sup>. Ultimately, “the goal of typological theorizing is to identify the variety of causal patterns that can lead to the outcome of interest and determine the conditions under which these patterns occur”<sup>27</sup>.

In addition to the absence of a broad typological theory, one of the main gaps currently affecting the field of political violence is the tendency for scholars to look at individual violent political engagement within a unique linear step-by-step process. Indeed, different models have been proposed in the past two decades, wherein an individual actor is believed to undertake rigid and well-defined steps, predictively leading to political violence.<sup>28</sup> Yet, this reasoning fails to grasp the complexity of politics in general<sup>29</sup>, and of political violence more specifically. One “fundamental error [...] is that such efforts essentially try to compress a very complex process (and the individual’s engagement with it) into something linear, static and uniform”<sup>30</sup>. These models obfuscate the very important fact that one’s decision to

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<sup>24</sup> Alexander L. GEORGE and Andrew BENNETT, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences*, MIT Press, 2005, 331 p.; Lorenzo BOSI, *op. cit.*

<sup>25</sup> Alexander L. GEORGE and Andrew BENNETT, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 235.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 244.

<sup>28</sup> Fathali M. MOGHADDAM, “The Staircase to Terrorism: A Psychological Exploration”, *American Psychologist*, volume 60, number 2, 2005, p. 161-169; Diego MURO, “What Does Radicalisation Look Like? Four Visualisations of Socialisation into Violent Extremism”, *Notes Internacioals, CIDOB*, volume 162, 2016, p. 1-51; Randy BORUM, “Understanding the Terrorist Mindset”, *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, volume 72, number 7, 2003, p. 7-10; Mitchell D. SILBER and Arvin BHATT, “Radicalization in the West: The Homegrown Threat”, *New York City Police Department*, 2007, p. 1-90.

<sup>29</sup> Gabriel A. ALMOND and Stephen J. GENCO, “Cloud, Clocks, and the Study of Politics”, *World Politics*, volume 29, number 4, 1977, p. 489-522.

<sup>30</sup> John HORGAN, *op. cit.*, 2006, p. 109.

engage—knowingly or unknowingly—in the first place is in no way predictive of what the actor will end up doing once involved.<sup>31</sup> For instance, an individual may follow their friends and join a group to help with logistical tasks just to become the leader of a suicide operation a year later.

Additionally, academic contributions to the field of political violence in the last two decades have been mainly limited to the subfield of terrorism studies, confining the study of individual engagement into one specific manifestation of political violence. In the few cases where research was conducted on other categories of violent political phenomena, the subfield of terrorism studies generally failed to integrate their contributions into its broader theoretical discussions. Even within the terrorism subfield, some researchers have limited themselves to their original areas of expertise (psychology, sociology, economics)<sup>32</sup>, reducing the possibility that a typological theory—of which multiple theoretical inputs are a core characteristic<sup>33</sup>—be developed. As Boyle argues,

treating terrorism as an exceptional or unique category of violence is not productive. Relocating terrorism within the wider study of political violence would not only illuminate the related causes and dynamics of similar types of political violence, but would also yield new avenues of research to be pursued over the next twenty years.<sup>34</sup>

Moreover, while several scholars have worked for decades on defining what terrorism means<sup>35</sup>, the concept itself continues to lack a clear and consensual definition.<sup>36</sup> The subjectivity of this term is best exemplified in the case of the Western militants fighting against the IS within Kurdish groups, and the perception nations such as Turkey have toward their organizations and engagement. While they are In 2016 for instance, a Turkish

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<sup>31</sup> John HORGAN, “From Profiles to Pathways and Roots to Routes: Perspectives from Psychology on Radicalization into Terrorism”, *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, volume 618, number 1, 2008, p. 80-94.

<sup>32</sup> Michael P. ARENA and Bruce A. ARRIGO, “White Supremacist Behavior: Toward an Integrated Social Psychological Mode”, *Deviant Behavior*, volume 21, number 3, 2000, p. 213-244.

<sup>33</sup> Michael J. BOYLE, *op. cit.*

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 540.

<sup>35</sup> John HORGAN, *op. cit.*, 2014, p. 31.

<sup>36</sup> Alex P. SCHMID, *The Routledge Handbook of Terrorism Research*, Routledge, 2011, 718 p.



spokesman stated that Turkey would treat as a terrorist any Briton fighting alongside Kurdish forces in Syria.<sup>37</sup>

Foreign fighters' studies—a new subfield that emerged during the mid 2000s<sup>38</sup>—could have bridged the gap between different types of political violence studies. Indeed, some of these fighters are involved in many forms of political violence, ranging from insurgencies to terrorism. However, this subfield remained theoretically poor. Scholars studying foreign fighters have mainly focused on *jihadis*, looking at motivations and push and pull factors, neglecting their contribution to broader theoretical frameworks.<sup>39</sup> Studies on foreign fighters suffer notably from the fact that the majority of them are published by think-tanks.<sup>40</sup> The absence of blind peer-reviews for most of them could reduce research standards and affects their contribution to the broader field of political violence studies.<sup>41</sup>

In addition to the limited theoretical contributions of foreign fighters studies, there is fundamental confusion as to what “radicalization” is and how it should be defined. While few authors used this terminology before September 2001<sup>42</sup>, since then, and especially since the London bombings in 2005 and the Madrid attacks in 2007, the concept has grown in popularity, without being well defined in the first place.<sup>43</sup> This new “buzzword” has even led to the emergence of a separate “radicalization” subfield within political violence studies.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Josie ENSOR, “Turkey warns: we will treat Britons fighting with Kurds as terrorists”, *The Telegraph*, [Online], September 1<sup>st</sup>, 2016, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/09/01/turkey-warns-we-will-treat-britons-fighting-with-kurds-as-terror/>, (Web page visited on May 16<sup>th</sup>, 2020).

<sup>38</sup> David MALET, “Foreign Fighter Mobilization and Persistence in a Global Context”, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, volume 27, number 3, 2015, p. 454-473.

<sup>39</sup> See for instance: Guillaume CORNEAU-TREMBLAY, “Tunisian Fighters Joining the War in Syria (and Iraq): A Comparative Study”, *The Canadian Journal for Middle East Studies*, volume 1, number 1, 2015, p. 1-28; Daan WEGGEMANS, Edwin BAKKER, and Peter GROL, “Who Are They and Why Do They Go? The Radicalization and Preparatory Processes of Dutch Jihadist Foreign Fighters”, *Perspective on Terrorism*, volume 8, number 4, 2014, p. 100-110.

<sup>40</sup> See for instance: Rik COOLSAET, “Facing the Fourth Foreign Fighters Wave: What Drives Europeans to Syria, and to IS? Insights from the Belgian Case”, *Egmont*, paper 81, 2016, p. 1-52; Lorenzo VIDINO and Seamus HUGUES, “ISIS in American: From Retweets to Raqqa”, *Program on Extremism, The George Washington University*, 2015, p. 1-35; Edwin BAKKER and Peter GROL, “Motives and Considerations of Potential Foreign Fighters from the Netherland”, *ICCT Policy Brief, International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague*, 2015, p. 1-19.

<sup>41</sup> Edna F. REID and Hsinchun CHEN, *op. cit.*

<sup>42</sup> Farhad KHOSROKHAVAR, *Radicalisation*, Maison des Sciences de l’Homme, 2014, p. 7.

<sup>43</sup> Peter NEUMANN and Scott KLEINMANN, “How Rigorous is Radicalization Research?”, *Democracy and Security*, volume 9, number 4, 2013, p. 360-382.

<sup>44</sup> John HORGAN, *op. cit.*, 2014, p. 83.



But its main problem rests with the fact that numerous scholars do not differentiate between “cognitive radicalization” and “behavioural radicalization.” There is an important difference between radical beliefs and radical actions, and the process by which an individual comes to adopt one or the other.<sup>45</sup> Khalil argues for a sharp distinction between what he calls Behaviours contributing to Political Violence (BPV) and Attitudes supportive of Political Violence (APV).<sup>46</sup> He claims that APVs are mostly not leading to BPVs, and that BPVs sometimes materialize without the influence of APVs.

Like “terrorism,” the term “radicalization” also causes confusion by being used in a variety of contexts and with different intentions. For instance, it is used by some states to delegitimize political enemies<sup>47</sup> or as a political tool to target specific communities in the “fight against terrorism.”<sup>48</sup> As a result, some scholars proposed to replace the term “radicalization” with more defined and concrete concepts, such as “involvement”<sup>49</sup> or “engagement”<sup>50</sup> into political violence.

Furthermore, studies on violent political engagement have also suffered from empirical and methodological weaknesses.<sup>51</sup> Indeed, of all the research on political violence surveyed by Neumann and Kleinmann, 34% was considered either empirically or methodologically poor.<sup>52</sup> While these numbers would be unacceptable for most of the social sciences, the field of political violence studies continues to be affected by this issue.

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<sup>45</sup> Mitch BERBIER, “‘Half the Battle’: Cultural Resonance, Framing Processes, and Ethnic Affectations in Contemporary White Separatist Rhetoric”, *Social Problems*, volume 45, number 4, 1998, p. 431-450.

<sup>46</sup> James KHALIL, “Radical Beliefs and Violent Actions are not Synonymous: How to Place the Key Disjuncture Between Attitudes and Behaviours at the Heart of our Research into Political Violence”, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, volume 37, number 2, 2014, p. 198-211.

<sup>47</sup> Mark SEGWICK, “The Concept of Radicalization as a Source of Confusion”, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, volume 22, number 4, 2010, p. 479-494.

<sup>48</sup> Xavier CRETTEZ, *op. cit.*

<sup>49</sup> John HORGAN, *op. cit.*, 2014.

<sup>50</sup> Benjamin DUCOL, “Devenir Jihadiste à l’Ère Numérique : Une Approche Processuelle et Situationnelle de l’Engagement Jihadiste au Regard du Web”, *PhD thesis, Département de Science Politique, Université Laval*, 2015, p. 1-348.

<sup>51</sup> John HORGAN, *op. cit.*, 2006.

<sup>52</sup> Peter NEUMANN and Scott KLEINMANN, *op. cit.*, p. 377.

One of the main reasons is that few studies are based on primary data. Terrorism studies, for instance, have suffered from a lack of primary data-based research since their emergence.<sup>53</sup> Likewise, only 54% of data used in “radicalization” research is based on primary sources.<sup>54</sup> In fact, most articles in the field continue to use already published papers as the empirical basis for their research.<sup>55</sup>

This lack of primary data in studies of political violence is mainly caused by the limited number of cases to study. The nature of political violence also makes it hard for researchers to access data safely.<sup>56</sup> There are certainly real risks in trying to access violent political actors in their own environment. However, as argued by Horgan, “[u]npalatable as this may seem, it is inevitable that in order to understand the development and structure of terrorist behaviour we eventually have to meet with and speak to people who have been, or are, involved in terrorist violence”<sup>57</sup>.

### **Objectives of This Research**

As we have seen above, the recent and ongoing contributions to the field of political violence studies are generating promising results, but there are still many obstacles and pitfalls to overcome. This study humbly aims at addressing some of those obstacles.

This thesis is a contribution to the field of political violence and the development of a typological theory<sup>58</sup> in explaining *how people engage in political violence*, defining political violence as a broad term for “deeply contested actions, events, and situations that have political aims and involve some degree of physical force”<sup>59</sup>. This definition is large enough

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<sup>53</sup> Bart SCHUURMAN and Quirine EIJKMAN, “Moving Terrorism Research Forward: The Crucial Role of Primary Sources”, *ICCT Background Note, International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague*, 2013, p. 1-11.

<sup>54</sup> Peter NEUMANN and Scott KLEINMANN, *op. cit.*, p. 373.

<sup>55</sup> Bart SCHUURMAN and Quirine EIJKMAN, *op. cit.*

<sup>56</sup> Kathleen M. BLEE, “Ethnographies of the Far Right”, *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, volume 36, number 2, 2007, p. 119-128; Thomas HEGGHAMMER, “Saudis in Iraq: Patterns of Radicalization and Recruitment”, *Cultural & Conflicts*, 2008; Edna F. REID and Hsinchun CHEN, *op. cit.*

<sup>57</sup> John HORGAN, *op. cit.*, 2006, p. 108.

<sup>58</sup> Arend LIJPHART, “Comparative Politics and the Comparative Method”, *The American Political Science Association*, volume 65, number 3, 1971, p. 691.

<sup>59</sup> Patricia STEINHOFF and Gilda ZERMAN, “Introduction to the Special Issue on Political Violence”, *Qualitative Sociology*, volume 31, number 3, 2008, p. 213.

to include terrorism, insurgencies and guerilla warfare, and allows for the integration of multiple theoretical contributions—including this one—that would have otherwise been kept apart due to concepts being too restrictive. From there, this research used a contemporary and understudied case and was specifically guided by the central question of *how did Western volunteers engage in the fight against the IS?*

In Chapter 1, I first present the theoretical framework used as part of this thesis to explain the individual processes of engagement into political violence. In Chapter 2, I explain the methodological approach used throughout this research and elaborate on what I included—and excluded—when I studied this phenomenon. In Chapter 3, I describe the characteristics of what I call the Militaro-Escapists and develop on the variables influencing their engagement processes. Chapter 4 presents the Political-Utopists and the specificities related to their mobilization pathways. Finally, I discuss my findings and how they contribute to our larger understanding of political violence in the Conclusion.

# Chapter 1 - Violent Political Engagement: A Theoretical Framework

This study focuses on the process of engagement of Western volunteers who travelled to Syria and Iraq to fight against the IS. Taylor and Horgan define a process as a “sequence of events, involving steps or operations that are usually ordered and/or interdependent”<sup>60</sup>. The French political scientist Xavier Crettiez, for his part, proposed in 2016 to summarize the existing literature on the individual processes of engagement into political violence within three broad sets of factors.<sup>61</sup> This chapter explores this theoretical framework and details each of these sets of factors, contributing to the development of a typological theory.

## Psychosocial Mechanisms

The first set of factors identified by Crettiez in his 2016 paper refers to psychosocial mechanisms, or the so-called “psychology of interactions”<sup>62</sup>, a broad range of personal psychological drivers facilitating one’s engagement into political violence. The need for self-valorization and recognition—termed the “quest for significance” by Kruglanski and *al.*<sup>63</sup>—has been identified as one of the most influential of these mechanisms.<sup>64</sup> Indeed, for some potential militants, the belief that their engagement will force others—inside or outside of their movement—to value their existence, through genuine respect or fear, and will facilitate the achievement of a meaningful existence, is a significant driver for engagement.<sup>65</sup> Arielli argues that since the eighteenth century, almost all of the foreign volunteers have been driven

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<sup>60</sup> Max TAYLOR and John HORGAN, “A Conceptual Framework for Addressing Psychological Process in the Development of the Terrorist”, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, volume 18, number 4, 2006, p. 586.

<sup>61</sup> Xavier CRETTIEZ, *op. cit.*

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 723.

<sup>63</sup> Arie W. KRUGLANSKI, Jocelyn J. BELANGER and Rohan GUNARATNA, *The Three Pillars of Radicalization: Needs, Narratives, and Network*, Oxford University Press, 2016, 272 p.

<sup>64</sup> John HORGAN, “From Profiles to Pathways and Roots to Routes: Perspectives from Psychology on Radicalization into Terrorism”, *op. cit.*; Mark. S. HAMM, “Apocalyptic Violence: The Seduction of Terrorist Subcultures”, *Theoretical Criminology*, volume 8, number 3, 2004, p. 323-339; John GEORGES, “Neo-Nazis in Europe and the United States: Motivations, Media, and the Future”, *The European Legacy*, volume 1, number 4, 1996, p. 1658-1663; Xavier CRETTIEZ, “«High Risk Activism»: Eléments pour un modèle de l’engagement dans l’action politique violente”, *Congrès Association française de science politique*, Grenoble, 2009.

<sup>65</sup> Mauricio FLOREZ-MORRIS, “Joining Guerrilla Groups in Colombia: Individual Motivations and Processes for Entering a Violent Organization”, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, volume 30, number 7, 2007, p. 615-634.

by the search for a sense of purpose and meaning.<sup>66</sup> For instance, most of the young men going to train in military camps in Afghanistan during the 1990s were reportedly pulled by a quest for fame, glory and excitement.<sup>67</sup>

The demand for self-appreciation found in some of the potential militants often results from personal failures, or the lack of accomplishments,<sup>68</sup> contributing to what McAdam labelled the “biographical availability”<sup>69</sup> of an individual—the absence of personal constraints for engagement (employment, family, friends, etc.).<sup>70</sup> The biographical availability of an actor can be real or constructed, meaning that they can “make” themselves available if their motivation to join is strong enough to work around their personal barriers, or to change them.<sup>71</sup> This concept can also be expanded to an individual’s psychological “openness”—also called “cognitive opening”—that is to be receptive to new ideas and experiences at a critical point in life, heightening one’s desire to join a politically active organization.<sup>72</sup>

Another important psychosocial mechanism affecting an individual’s engagement into political violence is escapism. Indeed, many individuals engaged in political violence did so in part or in whole to escape from their daily lives in the search for adrenaline and adventure.<sup>73</sup> For instance, della Porta argues that

[Left-wing] militants [in Italy and Germany ...] glorified the idea of an adventurous and active life. The dangers involved in participation in a terrorist organization were

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<sup>66</sup> Nir ARIELLI, *From Byron to bin Laden: A History of Foreign War Volunteers*, Harvard University Press, 2018.

<sup>67</sup> Marc SAGEMAN, *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century*, *op. cit.*

<sup>68</sup> Alessandrio ORSINI, “What Everybody Should Know about Radicalization and the DRIA Model”, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 2020, p. 23.

<sup>69</sup> Doug MCADAM, “Recruitment to High-Risk Activism: The Case of Freedom Summer”, *American Journal of Sociology*, volume 92, number 1, 1986, p. 64-90; Jeff GOODWIN and James M. JASPER, “Who Joins or Supports Movements?”, in Jeff GOODWIN and James M. JASPER (editors), *The Social Movement Reader: Cases and Concepts*, John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., 2015 (3<sup>rd</sup> edition), p. 73.

<sup>70</sup> Jocelyn S. VITERNA, “Pulled, Pushed, and Persuaded: Explaining Women’s Mobilization into the Salvadoran Guerilla Army”, *American Journal of Sociology*, volume 112, number 1, 2006, p. 1-45.

<sup>71</sup> Jeff GOODWIN and James M. JASPER, *op. cit.*, p. 73.

<sup>72</sup> John HORGAN, *The Psychology of Terrorism*, *op. cit.* Alessandrio ORSINI, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

<sup>73</sup> Marc ASKEW and Sascha HELBART, “Becoming Patani Warriors: Individuals and the Insurgent Collective in Southern Thailand”, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, volume 35, number 11, 2012, p. 779-809; Marc SAGEMAN, *Understanding Terror Networks*, *op. cit.*; Farhad KHOSROKHAVAR, *op. cit.*

considered “the expression of a dynamic and interesting life,” a contrast to the dullness of normal life.<sup>74</sup>

Nussio adds that individuals with a personality inclined to risk taking are more likely to become involved in political violence.<sup>75</sup> Escapism is also closely associated with the desire to become a “warrior,” that is the need to fulfill a popular fantasy of martial heroism, contributing to the reinforcement of an activist’s self-confidence and valorization.<sup>76</sup> These mechanisms are influenced by the status given to veteran militants in a particular movement or group. Such is the case with the cult of the martyrs, a quasi-mythological worshipping of dead comrades, present in most clandestine organizations.<sup>77</sup> These rituals show potential recruits the standing they might acquire by engaging in similar activities and the adoration they will be rewarded with should they sacrifice for the cause.

Psychosocial mechanisms demonstrate that political violence “can be profoundly thrilling, empowering and spiritually intoxicating”<sup>78</sup>. Although they are insufficient on their own and are often highly personal factors, these mechanisms play an essential function in driving an individual toward political violence.

### **Cognitive Frames and Opportunity Structures**

Psychosocial mechanisms must be accompanied by cognitive frames and opportunity structures—the second set of factors proposed by Crettiez—for a person to consider violence as a legitimate and sound political strategy.<sup>79</sup> These two sets of factors constantly interact with one another throughout the process of engagement into political violence and must be conceived as interconnected and interdependent.

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<sup>74</sup>Xavier CRETTEZ, “«High Risk Activism»: Essai sur le processus de radicalisation violente (Première partie)”, *Pôle sud*, number 34, 2011, p. 45-60; Donatella DELLA PORTA, *op. cit.*, p. 172.

<sup>75</sup> Enzo NUSSIO, “The Role of Sensation Seeking in Violent Armed Group Participation”, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, volume 32, number 1, 2020, p. 1-19.

<sup>76</sup> Xavier CRETTEZ and Romain SÈZE, “Saisir les mécanismes de la radicalisation violente : Pour une analyse processuelle et biographique des engagements violents”, *Rapport de recherche pour la Mission de recherche droit et justice*, 2017, p. 21; Farhad KHOSROKHAVAR, *op. cit.*

<sup>77</sup> John HORGAN, “Understanding Terrorist Motivation: A Socio-Psychological Perspective”, *op. cit.*; *Id.*, *The Psychology of Terrorism*, *op. cit.*

<sup>78</sup> Simon COTTEE and Keith HAYWARD, “Terrorist (E)motives: The Existential Attractions of Terrorism”, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, volume 34, number 12, 2011, p. 965.

<sup>79</sup> Michael P. ARENA, and Bruce A. ARRIGO, *op. cit.*

This second set of factors refers to the individual's political beliefs and the sense of belonging to a collective identity, generated when a movement's frames are adequately diffused and aligned with a potential recruit's own cognitive frames. They provide justifications for violence, replace cognitive filters with emotional ones, allow for the identification of a common enemy, victimize the militant and its affiliated community, and define the struggle as a fight between Good and Evil.<sup>80</sup>

As an example, a group or movement might claim that an existential war is being waged against their community, pushing their militants to justify violence against their perceived aggressor and to find the means to secure the survival of the victimized collectivity.<sup>81</sup> In this sense, Gupta highlights that

[t]he strength of collective identity, which clearly identifies the “in” and “out” groups—the “community” and its “enemies”—prompts people to take part in violent actions in the name of their group. In other words, it is not enough for an individual to turn to terrorism because of the frustration resulting from his own [...] condition until he is certain that his misery is caused by the machinations of a well-defined group whom he identifies as his enemies.<sup>82</sup>

These mechanisms generate intense emotions in an individual, representing strong drivers for political violence, often more than political beliefs alone. As della Porta argues, most militants first get involved in political violence for moral reasons—political ideas come later.<sup>83</sup> Most importantly, cognitive frames are all about perceptions. The crisis does not need to exist or persist for a would-be militant to mobilize.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Benjamin DUCOL, “Les dimensions émotionnelles du terrorisme : Émotions, radicalisation violente et engagement terroriste”, *op. cit.*, p. 89-101; Xavier CRETTEZ and Romain SÈZE, *op. cit.*; Marc SAGEMAN, *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century*, *op. cit.*, p. 73.

<sup>81</sup> Joseph A. SCHAFER, Christopher W. MULLINS and Stephanie BOX, “Awakenings: The Emergence of White Supremacist Ideologies”, *Deviant Behavior*, volume 35, number 3, 2014, p. 173-196; John HORGAN, “From Profiles to Pathways and Roots to Routes: Perspectives from Psychology on Radicalization into Terrorism”, *op. cit.*, p. 85.

<sup>82</sup> Dipak K. GUPTA, *Understanding Terrorism and Political Violence: The Life Cycle of Birth, Growth, Transformation, and Demise*, Routledge, London, 2008, p. 71.

<sup>83</sup> Donatella DELLA PORTA, *Social Movements, Political Violence, and the State: A Comparative Analysis of Italy and Germany*, *op. cit.*

<sup>84</sup> John HORGAN, “Understanding Terrorist Motivation: A Socio-Psychological Perspective”, *op. cit.*

One of these strong emotional reactions is called “moral outrage” or “moral shock,” embodied by a feeling of distress, surprise and outrage to a perceived unjust situation.<sup>85</sup> These reactions are highly influential in pushing an individual into action and seeking solutions to stop, or take revenge for, the perceived injustice.<sup>86</sup> Organizations and movements use frames as a way to fuel this outrage and suggest concrete solutions. Therefore, frames must remain simple to be effective and to bolster as many potential recruits as possible.<sup>87</sup> For instance,

[w]hen shown pictures of Muslims suffering because of wars, [future jihadis] began to feel a common bond of victimhood based on Islam. [...] The elegance and simplicity of this interpretation attract many who seek a single solution devoid of ambiguity.<sup>88</sup>

This set of factors also includes the opportunity structures, a collection of real and perceived opportunities—or lack thereof<sup>89</sup>—that, coupled with cognitive frames, can represent a way into political violence. Opportunity structures affect the process of engagement by showing individuals what opportunities they and their communities are being denied access to—by an unjust system, society, or group—and what options are now available for them to retaliate with action.<sup>90</sup> As an example, the perception that existing traditional political channels are “closed” to non-violent political activism and that political powers are illegitimate and repressive, might push a militant to use clandestine operations instead.<sup>91</sup> Opportunity structures also refer to national and international events, such as a conflict, a humanitarian

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<sup>85</sup> Jeff GOODWIN and James M. JASPER, “When and Why Do Social Movement Occur?”, in Jeff GOODWIN and James M. JASPER (editors), *The Social Movement Reader: Cases and Concepts*, John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., 2015 (3<sup>rd</sup> edition), p. 46.

<sup>86</sup> Xavier CRETTEZ, “«High Risk Activism»: Eléments pour un modèle de l’engagement dans l’action politique violente”, *op. cit.*; Marc SAGEMAN, *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century*, *op. cit.*; Lorenzo BOSI and Donatella DELLA PORTA, *op. cit.*

<sup>87</sup> Gérald BRONNER, *op. cit.*

<sup>88</sup> Marc SAGEMAN, *Understanding Terror Networks*, *op. cit.* p. 115-116.

<sup>89</sup> Lawrence A. HUZNAR and James M. LUTZ, “Risk Sensitivity and Terrorism”, *Political Studies*, volume 55, number 2, 2007, p. 341-361.

<sup>90</sup> John HORGAN, “Understanding Terrorist Motivation: A Socio-Psychological Perspective”, *op. cit.*

<sup>91</sup> Robert W. WHITE, “From Peaceful Protest to Guerrilla War: Micromobilization of the Provisional Irish Republican Army” *American Journal of Sociology*, volume 94, number 6, 1989, p. 1277-1302; Martiza, FELICES-LUNA, “Déviance et politique : La carrière des femmes au sein de groupes armés contestataires”, *Déviance et Société*, volume 32, number 2, 2008, p. 163-185; Donatella DELLA PORTA, *Clandestine Political Violence*, Cambridge University Press, 2013; Lorenzo BOSI and Donatella DELLA PORTA, *op. cit.*; John HORGAN, “From Profiles to Pathways and Roots to Routes: Perspectives from Psychology on Radicalization into Terrorism”, *op. cit.* p. 85.



crisis, or a revolutionary process, which provide future militants with motivation, inspiration, and grievances.

One well-known relation between opportunity structures and cognitive frames is what scholars call “relative deprivation”<sup>92</sup>. It consists of seeing one’s situation as unjust compared to what one should expect.<sup>93</sup> In other words, when an individual believes they deserve more than what they get (politically, economically, or socially), they tend to seek new political channels—sometimes through armed militancy—to change the balance of power.<sup>94</sup> Indeed, Sageman suggests that

[a]lthough relative deprivation (perhaps in the context of rising expectation) is not specific to terrorism, it is probably a necessary condition. People who are satisfied with life are unlikely to join a religious revivalist terrorist movement. They will continue to do what they are doing and not subject themselves to the upfront costs, social sanctions, and sacrifices involved in such movement.<sup>95</sup>

### **Violent Socialization**

As fundamental as cognitive frames and opportunity structures can be, one must be exposed to a group’s influence and dynamics for their beliefs to be shaped and developed.<sup>96</sup> This last set of factors is called violent socialization and represents the bonding element between psychosocial mechanisms and cognitive frames and opportunity structures in the process of engagement into political violence.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Pete SIMI, Bryan F. BUBOLZ and Ann HARDMAN, “Military Experience, Identity Discrepancies, and Far Right Terrorism: An Exploratory Analysis” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, volume 36, number 8, 2013, p. 654-671; Diego GAMBETTA and Steffen HERTOG, *Engineers of Jihad: The Curious Connection Between Violent Extremism and Education*: Princeton University Press, 2016, 208 p.; Jeff GOODWIN and James M. JASPER, “When and Why Do Social Movement Occur?”, *op. cit.*, p. 38; Lorenzo BOSI, *op. cit.*; Ted Robert GURR, *op. cit.*

<sup>93</sup> Gérald BRONNER, *op. cit.*, p. 245.

<sup>94</sup> Mauricio FLOREZ-MORRIS, *op. cit.*

<sup>95</sup> Marc SAGEMAN, *Understanding Terror Networks*, *op. cit.* p. 95.

<sup>96</sup> Alessandrio ORSINI, *op. cit.*

<sup>97</sup> Miguel Peco YESTE, “Cognitive-Behavioral Approach to Violent Radicalization, Based on a Real Case”, *Psicología Política*, number 49, 2014, p. 7-26.

The socialization first has an effect on the initial exposure to a movement—the early stages of the engagement process—through a person already involved or contemplating doing so.<sup>98</sup> The initial exposure does not necessarily lead straight into political violence; but having acquaintances—a friend, family member or colleague—in the violent political *milieu* has a significant influence on who is ultimately going to join.<sup>99</sup> For instance, Sageman indicates that 75% of the members of the Global Jihadist Movement had a family member or a friend already involved when they joined.<sup>100</sup> In certain cases, these connections will lead a person to seek membership in an organization based on friendship or kinship, before a process of frame alignment occurs between the individual’s cognitive frames and the group’s ideas.<sup>101</sup>

These acquaintances serve as role models and legitimizing authorities throughout the process of engagement.<sup>102</sup> They show potential recruits how to act and why they must act<sup>103</sup>, and fulfill the need for recognition associated with psychosocial mechanisms.<sup>104</sup> Role models are often charismatic figures with strong influence on a prospective recruit, fuelling a process of hierarchical validation and charismatic bond.<sup>105</sup> Examples of charismatic figures are the veterans of the Afghan jihad who returned to their home countries and used the legitimacy and prestige of their past war experiences to impress and recruit new militants to the cause.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Jeff GOODWIN and James M. JASPER, “Who Joins or Supports Movements?”, *op. cit.*, p.54; Gemma EDWARDS, *op. cit.*, p. 207.

<sup>99</sup> Macartan HUMPHREYS and Jeremy M. WEINSTEIN, “Who Fights? The Determinants of Participation in Civil War”, *American Journal of Political Science*, volume 52, number 2, 2008, p. 436-455; Lorne DAWSON, *op. cit.*

<sup>100</sup> Marc SAGEMAN, *Understanding Terror Networks*, *op. cit.*

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.* p. 131; Aurélie CAMPANA and Samuel TANNER, “The Process of Radicalization: Right-Wing Skinheads in Quebec”, *Working Paper Series, Canadian Network for Research on Terrorism (TSAS)*, 2014, p. 19; Laurent GAYER, “Le parcours du combattant: une approche biographique des militant(e)s sikh(e)s du Khalistan”, *Questions de Recherche*, number 28, 2009, p. 21.

<sup>102</sup> John HORGAN, “From Profiles to Pathways and Roots to Routes: Perspectives from Psychology on Radicalization into Terrorism”, *op. cit.*; John HORGAN, *The Psychology of Terrorism*, *op. cit.*

<sup>103</sup> Gérald BRONNER, *op. cit.*

<sup>104</sup> Mauricio FLOREZ-MORRIS, *op. cit.*

<sup>105</sup> Raphael S. EZEKIEL, “An Ethnographer Looks at Neo-Nazi and Klan Groups: The Racist Mind Revisited”, *American Behavioral Scientist*, volume 46, number 51, 2002, p. 51-71; David C. HOFMANN and Lorne L. DAWSON, “The Neglected Role of Charismatic Authority in the Study of Terrorist Groups and Radicalization”, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, volume 37, number 4, p. 352.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 360; Marc SAGEMAN, *Understanding Terror Networks*, *op. cit.*

Violent socialization also includes the inner group dynamics in closely-knit “bunch of guys”<sup>107</sup>, “cliques of friends”<sup>108</sup>, and families<sup>109</sup>. These dynamics foster peer pressure—or what della Porta calls “spirals of encapsulation”—a process of constant reinforcement of a group’s cohesion and consensus through ideological validation<sup>110</sup> and social isolation in order to prevent the outside world to morally corrupt the inner group.<sup>111</sup> In this sense, social ties constantly pull would-be militants toward the group and therefore, accentuate the cost of leaving it.<sup>112</sup> Just like the cults of the martyrs plays a role in psychosocial mechanisms, these group rituals also strengthen the solidarity between members and provide a common cultural language.<sup>113</sup>

Emotions are key to understand the mechanisms behind violent socialization.<sup>114</sup> In fact, positive emotions like love and brotherhood are central to clandestine groups’ dynamics. They are occasionally more influential than negative feelings such as hatred and anger generated by cognitive frames. Indeed, many people are ready to kill to protect their loved ones, less are those who could do so out of hatred.<sup>115</sup>

Socialization dynamics have a stronger impact if an individual has been progressively exposed to the movement’s ideas and actions through previous lower-risk activism or participation in associated political organizations.<sup>116</sup> McAdam argues that

one is rarely if ever recruited directly into high-risk/cost activism; it is instead the byproduct of a gradual process of integration and resocialization through which the

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<sup>107</sup> *Loc. cit.*

<sup>108</sup> Donatella DELLA PORTA, *Social Movements, Political Violence, and the State: A Comparative Analysis of Italy and Germany*, *op. cit.*

<sup>109</sup> Aurélie CAMPANA and Samuel TANNER, *op. cit.*; Lorenzo BOSI and Donatella DELLA PORTA, *op. cit.*

<sup>110</sup> Arie W. KRUGLANSKI, Jocelyn J. BELANGER and Rohan GUNARATNA, *op. cit.*, p. 423.

<sup>111</sup> Alessandrio ORSINI, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

<sup>112</sup> Marc SAGEMAN, *Understanding Terror Networks*, *op. cit.*, p. 115.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*; John HORGAN, *The Psychology of Terrorism*, *op. cit.*

<sup>114</sup> Benjamin DUCOL, “Les Dimensions Émotionnelles du Terrorisme : Émotions, Radicalisation Violente et Engagement Terroriste”, *op. cit.*; Donatella DELLA PORTA, *Clandestine Political Violence*, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

<sup>115</sup> Marc SAGEMAN, *Understanding Terror Networks*, *op. cit.*, John HORGAN, “From Profiles to Pathways and Roots to Routes: Perspectives from Psychology on Radicalization into Terrorism”, *op. cit.*

<sup>116</sup> John HORGAN, “Understanding Terrorist Motivation: A Socio-Psychological Perspective”, *op. cit.*; Donatella DELLA PORTA, *Social Movements, Political Violence, and the State: A Comparative Analysis of Italy and Germany*, *op. cit.*; Jocelyn S. VITERNA, *op. cit.*; Laurent GAYER, *op. cit.*

individual *becomes* an activist in the same way he or she learns and internalizes any new role (emphasis original).<sup>117</sup>

In the context of political violence, Crettiez further adds that

[i]t is through game playing that the actor becomes progressively active: by playing the activist—initially a spectator, then a marginal actor, then a demonstrator, then an activist and finally a clandestine one—that the actor gradually builds a sufficient stature to reinforce its confidence and provide the group with evidence of its voluntarism (my translation).<sup>118</sup>

Previous activist experiences in a less risky movement, therefore, generate a “cyclical process,” increasing and strengthening a feeling of belonging to the collective identity and a gradual acceptance of riskier and costlier activism through a slow and gradual process.<sup>119</sup>

### **Developing a Typological Theory**

Together, psychosocial mechanisms, cognitive frames and opportunity structures, and violent socialization are three key sets of factors that must be analyzed holistically to understand the process of engagement into political violence, a process that is both dynamic and progressive and that can span over many years.<sup>120</sup> Care should therefore be given in identifying the specific interactions between each factor in order to build an exhaustive typological theory. It is these interactions that this research aims to identify in the case of the Western volunteers.

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<sup>117</sup> Doug MCADAM, “High and Low Risk/Cost Activism”, In David A. SNOW, Donatella DELLA PORTA, Bert KLANDERMANS and Doug MCADAMS (eds), *The Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social and Political Movements*, Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2013, p. 1.

<sup>118</sup> Xavier CRETTEZ, “«High Risk Activism»: Essai sur le processus de radicalisation violente (Seconde partie)”, *Pôle sud*, number 36, 2011, p. 104-105.

<sup>119</sup> Clark MCCAULEY and Sophia MOSKALENKO, “Mechanisms of Political Radicalization: Pathways Toward Terrorism”, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, volume 20, number 3, 2008, p. 419; Mauricio FLOREZ-MORRIS, *op. cit.*; Doug MCADAM, “High and Low Risk/Cost Activism”, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

<sup>120</sup> Andrew SILKE, “Holy Warriors: Exploring the Psychological Processes of Jihadi Radicalization”, *European Journal of Criminology*, volume 5, number 1, 2008, p. 99-123.; Mauricio FLOREZ-MORRIS, *op. cit.*; Marc ASKEW and Sascha HELBART, *op. cit.*; Max TAYLOR and John HORGAN, *op. cit.*

## Chapter 2 – In their Own Words: Case Study and Methodological Approach

Case studies are among the main methodological approaches for the study of individual engagement into political violence.<sup>121</sup> In a survey of papers published on this matter, Neumann and Kleinmann found that case studies are dominant in the field.<sup>122</sup> They add that

for “micro phenomena” such as terrorism and radicalization, the use of qualitative methodologies—such as detailed case studies and narratives—may, in many cases, be more appropriate and produce more valid results than the construction of large—and largely meaningless—datasets<sup>123</sup>.

Gerring defines a case study as “an intensive study of a single unit for the purpose of understanding a larger class of (similar) units” over a delimited period of time.<sup>124</sup> It is this approach that has been favoured for the present study. More specifically, I have chosen the phenomenon of Western volunteers engaged in the fight against the IS within Kurdish groups and their affiliated organizations in Syria and Iraq as the single unit of my research, with each volunteer representing subunits analyzed synchronically.<sup>125</sup> All these volunteers make up for the population under study<sup>126</sup>, answering the fundamental question as to “what is this case made of?”<sup>127</sup> Like all case studies, this phenomenon represents a “well-defined aspect of a historical episode” in a broader “class of events”<sup>128</sup>, i.e. political violence.

The case study approach is particularly appropriate to explore many aspects of complex causalities, especially in the case of typological theories.<sup>129</sup> I also used both a deductive

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<sup>121</sup> Alexander L. GEORGE and Andrew BENNETT, *op. cit.*

<sup>122</sup> Peter NEUMANN and Scott KLEINMANN, *op. cit.*

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 379.

<sup>124</sup> John GERRING, “What is a Case Study and What is it Good For?”, *American Political Science Review*, volume 98, number 2, 2004, p. 342.

<sup>125</sup> John GERRING, *op. cit.*

<sup>126</sup> Barbara GEDDES, “How the Cases You Choose Affect the Answers You Get: Selection Bias in Comparative Politics”, *Political Analysis*, 1990, p. 131-150.

<sup>127</sup> David COLLIER, “Translating Quantitative Methods for Qualitative Researchers: The Case of Selection Bias”, *American Political Science Review*, volume 89, number 2, 1995, p. 461-466.

<sup>128</sup> Pascal VENNESSON, “Case Studies and Process Tracing: Theories and Practices”, in Donatella DELLA PORTA and Michael KEATING (editors), *Approaches and Methodologies in the Social Sciences*, Cambridge University Press, 2008, p. 226.

<sup>129</sup> Alexander L. GEORGE and Andrew BENNETT, *op. cit.*

approach to test the theoretical framework presented in Chapter 1 and inductive reasoning to provide new combinations of factors in this case study, contributing to the development of this broader theory. Going back and forth between the theory and the data as such is in fact an important feature of this type of research.<sup>130</sup>

The phenomenon of Western volunteers fighting against the IS began in the summer of 2014 and arguably stopped existing—in this form at the very least—at the end of October 2017 with the conclusion of the Battle for Raqqa, the *de facto* capital of the IS in Syria. I acknowledge that with the end of this battle, the jihadist organization was far from being defeated and a number of Westerners remained in Syria to fight—and even died fighting—the group in enclaves such as Deir ez-Zor.<sup>131</sup> However, the Battle for Raqqa was an important symbol in the “defeat” of the IS and was considered by most volunteers as the final effort of their engagement. Many Westerners extended their stay in Syria to participate in this battle and veterans came back again to the region to partake in this symbolic event.<sup>132</sup> As one British man with the YPG explained, “I think if you ask any volunteer, any western volunteers [sic], would you like to be part of that fight, I think all the hands would go up for that”<sup>133</sup>.

In addition to this short timespan controlling for time<sup>134</sup>, this case study is restricted to a specific geographic zone with regards to the provenance of the volunteers: the West in its broad definition, including Europe and the Americas. Therefore, Asia and Africa—including the Middle East—are outside the scope of this research. YPG volunteers from China<sup>135</sup>,

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<sup>130</sup> Gary KING, Robert O. KEOHANE, and Sidney VERBA, *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research*, Princeton University Press, 1994, 264 p.; Pascal VENNESSON, *op. cit.*, p. 236-237.

<sup>131</sup> The British volunteers Jac Holmes and Olivier Hall for instance died from the detonation of explosive devices in Raqqa after the end of the fighting, on October 23<sup>th</sup>, 2017, and November 25<sup>th</sup>, 2017, respectively.

<sup>132</sup> André HÉBERT, *Jusqu'à Raqqa Avec les Kurdes contre Daech*, Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 2019, p. 26.

<sup>133</sup> “British actor returns to Syria to fight Isis”, *Channel 4*, [Online], 2016, <https://www.channel4.com/news/british-actor-returns-to-syria-to-fight-isis> (Web page visited on July 5<sup>th</sup>, 2020).

<sup>134</sup> Barbara GEDDES, *op. cit.*; Gary KING & *al.*, *op. cit.*

<sup>135</sup> Vincent NI, “The Chinese man fighting Islamic State with the YPG”, *BBC News*, [Online], 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-35036879> (Web page visited on July 5<sup>th</sup>, 2020).

Japan<sup>136</sup> and Kazakhstan,<sup>137</sup> for instance, were excluded. Similarly, the volunteers from Turkey, as well as all militants from Kurdish background—both joining from neighbouring countries like Iran or from the West—were not included. These militants are the product of very different dynamics at all levels—micro, meso, and macro—that would require a separate study (or studies).

### **Data Used and Methodological Triangulation**

In this research, I proceeded to apply a within-method triangulation—that is the correlation of data from multiple data collection methods<sup>138</sup>—in combining interviews with autobiographical accounts, while also including secondary data to augment the depth of knowledge of the case studied.<sup>139</sup> Borsi and della Porta used such an approach in their study of micro-mobilization into the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA) and the Red Brigades, triangulating interviews, autobiographies and other sources.<sup>140</sup>

I started studying the phenomenon of Western volunteers fighting against the IS in early 2015, when the first accounts of Westerners in Syria and Iraq started to emerge in the media and on Facebook.<sup>141</sup> I then began following the different pages, groups and individuals associated with this emerging phenomenon on social media (Facebook, Twitter and Reddit), using profiles with my full name and the academic institution I belonged to. I sent friend requests to volunteers as I identified them and I became embedded in their networks,

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<sup>136</sup> Wladimir van WILGENBURG, “Japanese YPG fighter: Kurds, Arabs and foreign volunteers work together against ISIS in Syria”, *ARA News*, [Online], 2017, <http://aranews.net/files/2017/04/japanese-ypg-fighter-kurds-arabs-and-foreign-volunteers-work-together-against-isis-in-syria/> (Web page visited on July 5<sup>th</sup>, 2020).

<sup>137</sup> “Hakikat Yolculuğunun Şehidi: Çiya Rus(Merdali Süleymanov)”, YPG Rojava, [Online], 2017, <https://www.ypgrojava.org/Hakikat-Yolculu%C4%9Funun-%C5%9Eehidi%3A-%C3%87iya-Rus%28Merdali-S%C3%BCleymanov%29> (Web page visited on July 5<sup>th</sup>, 2020).

<sup>138</sup> Patricia FUSCH, Gene E. FUSCH and Lawrence R. NESS, “Denzin’s Paradigm Shift: Revisiting Triangulation in Qualitative Research”, *Journal of Social Change*, volume 10, number 1, 2018, p. 19-32.

<sup>139</sup> Uwe FLICK, “Triangulation in Qualitative Research”, in Uwe FLICK, Ernst von KARDOFF and Ines STEINKE, *A Companion to Qualitative Research*, Sage, 2004, p. 178-183.

<sup>140</sup> Lorenzo BOSI and Donatella DELLA PORTA, “Micro-Mobilization into Armed Groups: Ideological, Instrumental and Solidaristic Paths”, *Qualitative Sociology*, volume 35, number 4, 2012, p. 368.

<sup>141</sup> For the first research note written on this topic, see Guillaume CORNEAU, “Le phénomène des combattants nord-américains dans les groupes kurdes en Syrie et en Irak”, *Perspective Sécurité*, volume 1, number 1, [Online], 2015, [https://www.csi.hei.ulaval.ca/sites/csi.hei.ulaval.ca/files/perspective\\_securite\\_volume\\_1\\_numero\\_1.pdf](https://www.csi.hei.ulaval.ca/sites/csi.hei.ulaval.ca/files/perspective_securite_volume_1_numero_1.pdf) (Web page visited on June 21<sup>st</sup>, 2020).



collecting public information posted online by the many Westerners publicizing their engagement. This data collection lasted throughout 2015, 2016 and 2017.

Using my presence online as an entry point<sup>142</sup>, I selected 10 Western volunteers on Facebook and Twitter that I had access to and represented the greatest variety of profiles, groups, and countries of origin. Instead of using a randomized selection process, I used this convenience sampling to select the volunteers it would be easier to reach, which according to Kenney, “works well when researchers spend substantial time interacting with people from small, hard-to-access populations, building trust and establishing rapport with potential respondents”<sup>143</sup>. With the approval of Université Laval’s Ethics Committee, I contacted the 10 volunteers with a recruitment message sent directly to their social media accounts.

Such an approach enables researchers to build trust with the potential participants by giving them just enough space and control to make an informed decision. Sikkens and *al.* reported, in a similar context, that

an approach via a private Facebook message gave respondents the power to open, ignore, delete, or contemplate the request in their own time. Potential participants could then quietly consider whether they were willing to participate in an interview and they were able to leave “the field” at any time, making the approach less intrusive.<sup>144</sup>

Out of the 10 individuals approached, four male volunteers and one non-binary responded. One of the males refused to participate in the study, out of concern that it would serve the agenda of state and non-state actors trying to delegitimize their cause. The other four volunteers agreed to an interview with me, a more positive outcome than initially anticipated. This relatively high turnout (40%) is hard to explain but might be related to the fact that actors involved in political violence are often willing to give interviews to a neutral

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<sup>142</sup> Gretchen B. ROSSMAN and Sharon F. RALLIS, *An Introduction to Qualitative Research*, SAGE Publications, 2016, fourth edition, p. 129.

<sup>143</sup> Michael KENNEY, “Learning from the ‘Dark Side’ – Identifying, Accessing and Interviewing Illicit Non-State Actors”, In Adam DOLNIK (editor), *Conducting Terrorism Field Research: A Guide*, Routledge, 2013, p. 34.

<sup>144</sup> Elga SIKKENS, Marion VAN SAN, Stijn SIECKELINCK, Hennie BOEIJE and Michal de WINTER, “Participant Recruitment Through Social Media: Lessons Learned from a Qualitative Radicalization Study Using Facebook”, *Field Methods*, volume 29, number 2, 2017, p. 137.



researcher in the hope they can provide their side of the story.<sup>145</sup> It also shows how investing time and energy in embedding oneself in the community under study can pay off later in the research process, when approaching participants for interviews.

Yet, four interviewees might be considered a very small sample. However, considering the circumstances<sup>146</sup> and that only one study on this phenomenon so far included interviews<sup>147</sup>, and since I applied a triangulation of other primary and secondary data—presented below—to improve the number of subunits analyzed, I judge the overall number of Western volunteers included in this study to be high enough for it to remain valid. Of note, Koch—one of the few scholars who have published on this phenomenon—reported that volunteers approached for interviews have not responded to him and were not interested in talking<sup>148</sup>, highlighting the difficulty in securing even a small number of interviews with such participants.

**Table 1. Interviewees and their country of origin**

Interviewee #	Country of origin
Interviewee 1	United States
Interviewee 2	United States
Interviewee 3	France
Interviewee 4	United Kingdom

The four volunteers were interviewed while they were in their home country in May 2018 during one-on-one semi-structured online interviews conducted in Canada over the software

<sup>145</sup> Michael KENNEY, *op. cit.* p. 29.

<sup>146</sup> I wish to disclose that I commenced working for the Canadian Government in the field of national security after the completion of the first four interviews. I judged that this new job could have been perceived as a potential conflict of interest by future participants and external reviewers. Therefore, I decided to immediately terminate my field work and move to other sources of data. Directives and guidance from the Ethics Committee were nevertheless followed and applied throughout the first four interviews.

<sup>147</sup> Stéphane BARTH, “Les militants internationalistes engagés au sein des Forces Démocratiques Syriennes”, *Master’s Thesis (first year), Université Paris Nanterre*, 2019, 96 p.; *Id.*, “Pluralité de l’engagement armé internationaliste dans les Forces Démocratiques Syriennes : Étude des combattants français et belges”, *Master’s Thesis (second year), Université Paris Nanterre*, 2020, 137 p.

<sup>148</sup> Ariel KOCH, “The Non-Jihadi Foreign Fighters: Western Right-Wing and Left-Wing Extremists in Syria”, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 2019, p. 3.

Skype and recorded using the software MP3 Skype Recorder. Consent was provided verbally as most of the participants might have been too suspicious of being targeted by security services or IS sympathizers to fill out a consent form.<sup>149</sup>

The semi-structured interview method was used to unearth the interviewees' life's history, with a focus on their situation, motivations and perceptions prior to their engagement in Syria and/or Iraq.<sup>150</sup> As Horgan argues, "only through in-depth interviews as part of case studies [...] are we able to understand the meaning associated with each individual's experience and how that meaning affects motivation to act (i.e., mobilization)"<sup>151</sup>. The interviews were finally transcribed using a word processing software and were coded under themes reflecting the three sets of factors detailed in Chapter 1.

Such a process—with an initial contact over social media and interviews conducted through Skype—has been used previously in Canada to study jihadist foreign fighters<sup>152</sup> and anti-authoritarian militants, with a high level of success.<sup>153</sup> Conducting online interviews with software such as Skype provides great benefits. It allows for the participants to choose a place and time they consider to be adequate for an interview and to remain in a known and comfortable environment. It also broadens the pool of participants that can be included in the study by connecting the researcher with interviewees from all over the world. However, this method may represent a risk for the participants and the researcher as it leaves online traces for state actors to target and identify potential opponents. This risk was mitigated by choosing volunteers already publicly identifiable as such, by not asking for the full names of those who have been obfuscating their true identity online—such as Participant #4—and by deleting original recordings once the transcriptions were completed. The more general risk for the

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<sup>149</sup>Magnus RANSTORP, "Research Challenges Involved in Field Study on Terrorism in the Middle-East", in Adam DOLNIK (editor), *op. cit.*, p. 54; Elga SIKKENS & *al.*, *op. cit.*; Michael KENNEY, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

<sup>150</sup> Donatella DELLA PORTA, *Social Movements, Political Violence, and the State: A Comparative Analysis of Italy and Germany*, *op. cit.*, p. 137; John HORGAN, *The Psychology of Terrorism*, *op. cit.*, p. 87.

<sup>151</sup> *Id.*, "Interviewing the Terrorists: Reflections on Fieldwork and Implications for Psychological Research", *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression*, volume 4, number 3, 2012, p. 199.

<sup>152</sup> Lorne L. DAWSON and Amarnath AMARASINGAM, "Trying to Talk to Terrorists: Ethical and Methodological Challenges in Canada", *Working Paper Series, Canadian Network for Research on Terrorism (TSAS)*, number 16-13, 2016, p. 1-24.

<sup>153</sup> Barbara PERRY, David C. HOFMANN and Ryan SCRIVENS, "Broadening our Understanding of Anti-Authority Movements in Canada", *Working Paper Series, Canadian Network for Research on Terrorism (TSAS)*, number 17-02, 2017, p. 1-84.

participants of being identified by insiders or outsiders during the many phases of this research—specifically with the final publication—was also alleviated by anonymising the transcripts and removing information from this thesis that may be linked back to the interviewees.

In addition to interviews, this research also includes autobiographical accounts written by Western volunteers. These books are a great alternative to interviews, as Western volunteers have written many of them since 2015 and they are almost all available for sale online.<sup>154</sup> Seven individual autobiographies were selected to reflect the variety of profiles, groups and countries of origin of the broader population under study. Books in languages other than English and French were discarded due to my language limitations. In addition to the seven individual autobiographies, I have included seven chapters from the book *Hommage au Rojava*, a compendium of 22 accounts written by Western volunteers, including three women.<sup>155</sup> The seven autobiographical books and the seven chapters from *Hommage au Rojava* were therefore analyzed and coded using the same themes as those used for the interviews.

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<sup>154</sup> Jørgen NICOLAI, *Heval*, 2015, 309 p.; Tim LOCKS, *Fighting ISIS: The Riveting, Action-Packed True Story of a British Civilian Fighting ISIS on the Frontline*, Pan Macmillan, 2016, 300 p.; Jim MATTHEWS, *Fighting Monsters, From British Armed Forces to Rebel Fighter: A First-Hand Account of Battling ISIS*, Mirror Books, 2019, 364 p.; Azad CUDI, *Long Shot: My Life As a Sniper in the Fight Against ISIS*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2019, 272 p.; Dillon HILLIER with Russell HILLIER, *One Soldier: A Canadian Soldier's Fight Against the Islamic State*, HarperCollins Publisher Ltd, 2016, 270 p.; Erwin STRAIN, *CAB Hunter*, 2017, 464 p.; Joanna PALANI, *Freedom Fighter, My War Against ISIS on the Frontlines of Syria*, London, Atlantic Books Ltd, 2019, 352 p.; Ed NASH, *Desert Sniper: How one ordinary Brit went to war against ISIS*, Abacus, 2018, 272 p.; André HÉBERT, *Jusqu'à Raqqa Avec les Kurdes contre Daech*, Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 2019, 250 p.; B. ŞOREŞ, *Plaidoyer pour le Rojava: Réflexions d'un internationaliste sur les aléas d'une révolution*, Acratie, 2020, 300 p.; Mike PESHMERGANOR, *Blood Makes the Grass Grow: A Norwegian Volunteer's War Against the Islamic State*, 2018, 198 p.; Karim FRANCESCHI, *Il Combattente: Storia del ragazzo che parti in Guerra contro l'Isis*, BUR Biblioteca Univ. Rizzoli, 2016, 350 p.; Karim FRANCESCHI, *Non Morirò Stanotte: Un comandante, la sua squadra e la caduta dell'Isis*, BUR Biblioteca Univ. Rizzoli, 2018, 502 p.; David GRASSO, *Hevalen : Perché sono andato a combattere l'Isis in Siria*, Edizioni Alegre, 2017, 347 p.; Claudio LOCATELLI with Alberto MARZOCCHI, *Nessuna Resa: Storia del combattente Italiano che ha liberato Raqqa dall'Isis*, Piemme, 2018, 240 p.; Jesper SÖDER, *När världen tittade bort: Svensken som Kämpar mot Daesh I Syrien*, Bokförlaget Forum, 2016, 275 p.; Macer GIFFORD, *Fighting Evil: The Ordinary Man who went to War Against ISIS*, Seven Dials, 2020, 288 p.; Steven GONZALEZ, *Fighting Saddam in Iraq and ISIS in Syria*, iUniverse, 2017, 48 p.

<sup>155</sup> André HÉBERT (ed.), *Hommage au Rojava : Les combattants internationalistes témoignent*, Édition Libertalia, 2020, 341 p.

Autobiographical accounts represent an interesting source of primary data for this research for three main reasons. First, every author dedicated at least one chapter to their life before joining the fight against the IS, describing their personal history, views and experiences with depth and breadth.<sup>156</sup> As such, the use of autobiographies in the study of political violence

increases the likelihood that the data one obtains are valid and meaningful representations of the attitudes, perceptions, and experiences of those involved [...], and that they are reliable reflections of the mindset of participants at that particular point in their developmental trajectory of involvement, engagement, and disengagement.<sup>157</sup>

**Table 2. Autobiographical accounts of Western volunteers included in this research**

Volunteer's name	Country of origin	Book title
Jørgen Nicolai	Denmark	<i>Heval</i>
Tim Locks	United Kingdom	<i>Fighting ISIS</i>
Erwin Strain	United States	<i>CAB Hunter</i>
Dillion Hillier	Canada	<i>One Soldier</i>
André Hébert	France	<i>Jusqu'à Raqqa</i>
Ed Nash	United Kingdom	<i>Desert Sniper</i>
Jim Matthews	United Kingdom	<i>Fighting Monsters</i>
Karker	Germany	<i>Hommage au Rojava</i>
Cïlo	France	<i>Hommage au Rojava</i>
Azad	Albania	<i>Hommage au Rojava</i>
Qandil	France (Britanny)	<i>Hommage au Rojava</i>
Gabar	Canada (Quebec)	<i>Hommage au Rojava</i>
Ciwan	Spain (Catalonia)	<i>Hommage au Rojava</i>
Dilsoz	Italy	<i>Hommage au Rojava</i>

<sup>156</sup> Blake D. MATHIAS and Anne D. SMITH, "Autobiographies in Organizational Research: Using Leaders' Life Stories in a Triangulated Research Design", *Organizational Research Methods*, volume 19, number 2, 2016, p. 204-230.

<sup>157</sup> Mary Beth ALTIER, John HORGAN and Christian THOROUGHGOOD, "In Their Own Words? Methodological Considerations in the Analysis of Terrorist Autobiographies", *Journal of Strategic Security*, volume 5, number 4, 2012, p. 89-90.

Secondly, all autobiographies discuss other Westerners who were part of this phenomenon and provide the authors' own analysis of those characters, and most importantly, how the authors' own stories compared to others. This helps assess how much this sample can be generalized to the broader case. Finally, some of the books were written many months and years following the authors' return from Iraq or Syria—some with mixed feelings about their experience, other volunteers, and the group(s) they joined—allowing for greater nuanced material and hindsight about the authors' highly personal factors influencing their engagement. Autobiographies used as research material nevertheless remain limited by the fact that they are based on the unilateral recollection of the author and can be self-serving and sensational.<sup>158</sup>

Finally, in addition to interviews and autobiographical accounts, I have collected and analyzed 105 pieces written by Western volunteers, such as personal blogs and op-eds posted on blogging platforms such as Blogspot or through independent media such as Alternativelibertaire.org and Kedistan.net since 2014. I have also gathered and examined 73 verbatim of interviews given by Western volunteers to mainstream and independent media, such as Vice News and SOFREP, as well as to other volunteers and the YPG Media Branch.

I highly value this set of secondary data, as it represents comprehensive pieces written by my research subjects, as well as detailed verbatim of their answers to specific questions. These are the closest you can get from first-hand qualitative data. Although the value of the material is limited by the fact that I—and consequently, my project—was not the intended audience of the messages conveyed by the volunteers in writing or during interviews<sup>159</sup>, and because I did not have any control on the questions asked, the data reported in a blog post or a verbatim of an interview have the benefit of having suffered little to no alteration, unlike a media article containing only small excerpts of interviews, or none. Such sources were only used when required for background information on the groups and events, using none in the analysis of the engagement process of Western volunteers fighting against the IS. For this

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<sup>158</sup> Mary Beth ALTIER, Emma Leonard BOYLE, Neil D. SHORTLAND and John G. HORGAN, “Why They Leave: An Analysis of Terrorist Disengagement Events from Eighty-seven Autobiographical Accounts”, *Security Studies*, volume 26, number 2, 2017, p. 305-332; Blake D. MATHIAS and Anne D. SMITH, *op. cit.*

<sup>159</sup> Adam DOLNIK, “The Need for Field Research on Terrorism”, in Adam DOLNIK (editor), *op. cit.*, p. 4.

reason, I did not have to be strict on the reliability or credibility of the platforms publishing these written pieces and verbatim, as the original sources were the volunteers themselves. It is their credibility and reliability that had to be assessed, just as it was with interviews and autobiographical accounts.

## Chapter 3 – The Engagement Processes of the Militaro-Escapists

Through the analysis of the data collected as part of this research, two ideal-type categories of Western volunteers emerged—the Militaro-Escapists and the Politico-Utopists—with each their own communalities characterizing their respective engagement processes and mechanisms at play. Undoubtedly, they all had distinct and unique factors that played more or less of a role in their personal engagement processes, but overall, their trajectories shared fundamental resemblances that further contribute to the development of a typological theory. This clear distinction between these two ideal-type categories was made by many other observers—including volunteers themselves—that have divided the contingent of Westerners in Syria and/or Iraq along similar lines: the “militaries”—or “ex-militaries”—on one side, and the “political”—or “revolutionary”—on the other, reflecting the distinction proposed in this thesis.

The main communality among the Militaro-Escapists is that they—at one point in their lives—were associated with military or military-like *milieux*, especially during the years of the “War on Terror” (post 9/11). Indeed, all the studied subunits included in this category had past experiences with the military, except for two individuals: Tim Lock, a British volunteer who was nevertheless a private security worker who always dreamed of being a soldier<sup>160</sup>, and Ed Nash, a man who had been rebuffed from the British Royal Marines<sup>161</sup> and later volunteered with the Free Burma Rangers (FBR) for three years, assisting and training rebels in Burma.<sup>162</sup>

By the time these men and women decided to volunteer, only one<sup>163</sup> appeared to have still been on active duty. Likewise, except for this man, there is no other recorded case of individuals who left the military explicitly to go join the fight against the IS. In other words,

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<sup>160</sup> Tim LOCKS, *Fighting ISIS: The Riveting, Action-Packed True Story of a British Civilian Fighting ISIS on the Frontline*, Pan Macmillan, 2016, pp. 7-9.

<sup>161</sup> Ed NASH, *Desert Sniper: How one ordinary Brit went to war against ISIS*, Abacus, 2018, p. 12.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>163</sup> Kurt T., “Interview with American YPG Fighter : I Got Shot Six Times Fighting ISIS and I’m Going Back”, *SOFREP*, [Online], 2016, <https://sofrep.com/news/interview-american-ygp-fighter-got-shot-six-times-fighting-isis-im-going-back/> (Web page visited on November 24<sup>th</sup>, 2020).

all had frequented military *milieux*, but almost all were civilians at the time of their engagement.

Although many observers tried to portray these former soldiers in Syria and/or Iraq as devoted Christians or far-right activists, none of the individuals studied in the Militaro-Escapist category perceived their engagement as such—none either stated they volunteered to defend an ideology nor a specific religion. Instead, the presence of Christian and far-right activists in Syria and Iraq appears to be mainly anecdotal<sup>164</sup> and to have been inflated by news outlets and scholars citing, for instances, the cases of one American volunteer who left the YPG claiming they were “a bunch of damn Reds”<sup>165</sup>, and a small group of Christian Spaniards who ended up joining the Şengal Resistance Units (YBŞ), YPG’s sister organization in Iraq.<sup>166</sup>

The reality, as we shall see below, is that, unlike the second ideal-type category, the Politico-Utopists, the Militaro-Escapists’ perception of this conflict was rather simplistic and emotional and was often explicitly presented as apolitical. As Participant #1 highlighted, “I mean, I saw the Kurds as allies of the United States that needed help and were being blocked by political rhetoric. That is as deep as it went in terms of ideology.”<sup>167</sup>

It is important, however, to note that these two categories—the Politico-Utopists and the Militaro-Escapists—are ideal-type profiles and may not apply to all volunteers. As one German militant emphasised, there is in fact a third group of volunteers: those with no military experience and no political motivation.<sup>168</sup> According to an Albanian, the political volunteers represented 30% of all the Westerners in Syria, the ex-militaries around 30%, and

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<sup>164</sup> André HÉBERT, *Jusqu’à Raqqa Avec les Kurdes contre Daech*, Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 2019, pp. 48-49.

<sup>165</sup> “Christian foreign fighters deserting Kurdish YPG in Syria because they’re ‘damn Reds’”, *Middle East Eye*, [Online], 2017, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/christian-foreign-fighters-deserting-kurdish-ypg-syria-because-theyre-damn-reds> (Web page visited on May 26<sup>th</sup>, 2020);

<sup>166</sup> See for instance: Ariel KOCH, “The New Crusaders : Contemporary Extreme Right Symbolism and Rethoric”, *Perspective on Terrorism*, volume 11, number 5, 2017; Amaury BRELET, “Avec les ‘croisés’ d’Occident face à Dae’ch”, *Valeurs Actuelles*, [Online], 2016, <https://www.valeursactuelles.com/avec-les-croises-doccident-face-a-daech-62294> (Web page visited on November 24<sup>th</sup>, 2020).

<sup>167</sup> Interview with Participant #1, May 2018.

<sup>168</sup> Karker, “Karker, Allemagne”, in André HÉBERT (ed.), *Hommage au Rojava : Les combattants internationaux témoignent*, Édition Libertalia, 2020, p. 169.



the remaining 40% represented this heterogeneous group who joined the fight for a variety of reasons.<sup>169</sup> Likewise, it should be mentioned that some Westerners engaged in Syria and/or Iraq may have been influenced by elements that can be found in the engagement processes associated with both of these profiles.

I proceed in this chapter by presenting the different mechanisms that were instrumental in the engagement processes of the Militaro-Escapists, mainly derived from their exposure to the armed forces. Following Crettiez's framework, I first discuss their violent socialization, I then look at their psychosocial mechanisms and conclude with the topic of cognitive frames and opportunity structures.

### **Violent Military Socialization**

To fully understand the processes through which the Militaro-Escapists came to be involved in political violence, we must first look at their previous association with, and exposure to, military and military-like *milieux*. This shaped their identity, provided alternative points of view, and created new grievances, all affecting their pathways toward their final engagement in Syria and/or Iraq.

Although the Militaro-Escapists shared the common characteristic of being former soldiers, the factors behind their decision to join the military many years earlier varied greatly, suggesting that their socialization started while in the military, not before. For instance, Participant #1 joined the US military for “all the typical naïve American reasons”<sup>170</sup>, while Participant #3 joined the French Foreign Legion after a tough childhood, no employment opportunities, and a refusal in the regular French Army, due to a positive drug test.<sup>171</sup> Jim Matthews also joined the British Army after having been thrown out of his home and school and having lived through troubled times.<sup>172</sup> Erwin Strain, for his part, was a self-described

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<sup>169</sup> Azad, “Azad, Albanie”, in André HÉBERT (ed.), *Hommage au Rojava, op. cit.*, p. 66.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>171</sup> Interview with Participant #3, May 2018.

<sup>172</sup> Jim MATTHEWS, *Fighting Monsters, From British Armed Forces to Rebel Fighter: A First-Hand Account of Battling ISIS*, Mirror Books, 2019, p. 193.

“punk kid” who never really wanted to join the military,<sup>173</sup> but who nonetheless ended up following a high-school friend into an Army recruitment centre to join the National Guard.<sup>174</sup>

Yet, through the “total institution”<sup>175</sup> that is the military, the Militaro-Escapists were socialized into embracing a new and unique identity, that of a soldier. The process of military socialization specifically sought to compel the recruits into renouncing their previous identities to produce disciplined and uniformed soldiers, all the while ensuring high levels of cohesion through a shared collective self. Participant #3 explained that his entry into the military “was tough, but it was such a great experience because we all got broken down. That's really like everybody back to the basics, you're a dude, period. The rest you put it aside (my translation).”<sup>176</sup> Another French volunteer similarly reported that “[t]he Army moulded me, like a school of life. I lived through its rhythm, I liked this military life: adventure, friendship, and life balance (my translation)”<sup>177</sup>.

The instruments employed by the military institution in this process include the legitimization of violence, the fostering of “warriorism”, and the desensitization to the risks and dangers of armed combat, including death.<sup>178</sup> When questioned about the very real possibility of dying in Syria or Iraq, none of the Militaro-Escapists was particularly worried with the idea and most dismissed such thought early on in their decision process. Participant #1 explained that “I guess having been in the military I was kind of conditioned to put your safety at risk. That’s just part of the job; that’s part of the profession of arms”<sup>179</sup>, while the Canadian Dillon

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<sup>173</sup> Erwin STRAIN, *CAB Hunter*, 2017, pp. 18-19.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 27-28.

<sup>175</sup> Camilla KYLIN, “Blood, Sweat and Tears - Shared Bodily Fluids, Emotions and Social Identity in a Swedish Military Context”, *International Journal of Work Organisation and Emotions*, volume 5, number 2, 2012, p. 200.

<sup>176</sup> Interview with Participant #3, *op. cit.*, my translation.

<sup>177</sup> Cîlo, “Cîlo, France”, in André HÉBERT (ed.), *Hommage au Rojava : Les combattants internationalistes témoignent*, Édition Libertalia, 2020, p. 253;

<sup>178</sup> Volker C. FRANKE, “Generation X and the Military: A Comparison of Attitudes and Values Between West Point Cadets and College Students”, *Journal of Political and Military Sociology*, volume 29, 2002, pp. 92-119; Volker C. FRANKE, “Warriors for Peace : The Next Generation of U.S. Military Leaders”, *Armed Forces & Society*, volume 24, number 1, 1997, pp. 33-57; Godfrey MARINGIRA, Diana GIBSON, and Annemiek RICHTERS, “‘It’s in My Blood’: The Military Habitus of Former Zimbabwean Soldiers in Exile in South Africa”, *Armed Forces & Society*, volume 41, number 1, 2014, p. 30.

<sup>179</sup> Interview with Participant #1, *op. cit.*

Hillier stated that “sometimes in life, you have to do the right thing despite the risks and dangers. That’s what it means to be a man and a soldier.”<sup>180</sup>

The cohesion and military spirit cultivated inside the armed forces generated strong feelings of belonging to the martial community.<sup>181</sup> As Hillier explained, “the uniform becomes a part of you, a connection that gets stronger the longer you wear it. It’s not just rank insignias and Velcro patches, it’s an identity.”<sup>182</sup> The British veteran Jim Matthews reported that his time in the military “gave me confidence and self-esteem. I found I was good at military skills and genuinely keen, and the army invests vast reserves of tender loving care in shaping someone like that. They really have seen it all.”<sup>183</sup> Even for the Militaro-Escapists who had never served in the armed forces, their exposure to military-like *milieux* and their interest for the profession of arms had a similar influence in shaping their identity, although to a lesser level.

These feelings led the Militaro-Escapists to continue self-identifying with this martial community, even after transitioning to civilian lives.<sup>184</sup> Matthews—who became an anti-war activist and claimed he never really identified as a soldier—found himself “comparing everything [in Syria] to the way the British army did things and frequently referring to myself as a soldier. Fifteen years of anti-war politics—I’d been doing so well till this [the war in Syria] came up.”<sup>185</sup> Unbeknown to him then, Matthews still, deep down inside, kept attachment to his martial identity, despite transitioning to a rather contrasting civilian life.

Swayed by this military identity and changed by their martial experiences, the Militaro-Escapists left the military with common traits and beliefs. As Matthews outlined, “[I]ike millions of others before and after me, I came out of the army a different person from the one who went in”<sup>186</sup>. Remarkably, a significant number of those who would become volunteers

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<sup>180</sup> Dillon HILLIER with Russell HILLIER, *One Soldier: A Canadian Soldier’s Fight Against the Islamic State*, HarperCollins Publisher Ltd, 2016, p. 8.

<sup>181</sup> Camilla KYLIN, *op. cit.*, p. 201.

<sup>182</sup> Dillon HILLIER with Russell HILLIER, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

<sup>183</sup> Jim MATTHEWS, *op. cit.*, p. 193.

<sup>184</sup> Eve BINKS and Sobhan CAMBRIDGE, “The Transition Experiences of British Military Veterans”, *Political Psychology*, volume 39, number 1, 2018, p. 136.

<sup>185</sup> Jim MATTHEWS, *op. cit.*, pp. 183-184.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 196-197.

left the forces under unfortunate circumstances. Participant #1, for instance, stated that he was jaded after being badly treated by the military following an assault he was the victim of outside of the National Guard.<sup>187</sup> Matthews similarly left after having been beaten up by a superior and having been let down by the military machine.<sup>188</sup> Participant #3, for his part, departed the Foreign Legion due to an injury.<sup>189</sup> Despite this, the volunteers remained profoundly attached to their martial community and identity. Participant #1, for example, even re-joined the US military after returning from Iraq.

In addition to their military socialization, most of the Militaro-Escapists also experienced contact with the Middle East—and the Kurdish populations more specifically—throughout their lives, impacting their later mobilization by providing proximity to the conflict and a bond with those the media presented as the most suitable actors to defeat the IS on the ground. For some, like Participant #1, this exposure occurred within the military. The American volunteer claimed that he learned of the Kurds through his superiors, who were themselves exposed to these populations as part of their past deployments to the region. He added that the Kurds were called “heroes” in the American National Guard and the positive view they enjoyed within the forces spread across the political spectrum.<sup>190</sup> Tim Locks got to know the Kurds while he was in Turkey<sup>191</sup> and Jørgen Nicolai has lived and worked in Syria as an engineer where he got acquainted with a family who would later fall victim of the IS.<sup>192</sup> For Erwin Strain, he got exposed to Kurdish cultures while in Iraq with the US military in 2009.<sup>193</sup> He nevertheless learned of the volunteers’ movement later on through the mainstream news platforms and veteran pages on social media.<sup>194</sup>

Just like Strain, some of the volunteers first got to know this cause through the media and veteran circles. Participant #2, for instance, explained that he first learned of the Kurds while watching the IS coverage and the Sinjar massacre over the news. Then he started watching

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<sup>187</sup> Interview with Participant #1, *op. cit.*

<sup>188</sup> Jim MATTHEWS, *op. cit.*, p. 195.

<sup>189</sup> Interview with Participant #3, *op. cit.*

<sup>190</sup> Interview with Participant #1, *op. cit.*

<sup>191</sup> Tim LOCKS, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

<sup>192</sup> Jørgen NICOLAI, *Heval*, 2015, p. 33.

<sup>193</sup> Erwin STRAIN, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

videos of the YPG on YouTube and reading about the group on Reddit, where he learned that there were Westerners travelling to the region to join the fight against the IS.<sup>195</sup> Likewise, Participant #3 initially learned of the volunteers on national television.<sup>196</sup>

Knowing that other veterans were already in Syria and Iraq certainly helped motivate the volunteers in joining members of their own community. The mobilization was socially less costly for them, as there were fewer apprehensions to join volunteers with a shared identity. As Strain explained,

[t]he introductions [with Westerners on the ground] were seamless. That's the thing about meeting strangers who are also veterans. Even if they come from different military backgrounds, you can easily talk to these strangers, shake hands and have a general understanding of each other.<sup>197</sup>

Jim Matthews—who has previously experienced the Middle East as a protester against the wars and the occupation in Lebanon, Iraq and Palestine, and later as an English teacher in Sulaymaniyah, Iraq<sup>198</sup>—was generally aware of the battle of Kobane in Syria and what was happening with the IS but didn't pay much attention until he learned of two British volunteers in Syria through the media. He commented that “[t]he amount of attention they got, you could hardly miss it.”<sup>199</sup>

Despite the fact that many Westerners reached out to volunteers already on the ground, it appears that these contacts took place at a later stage in their engagement processes, when the decision to join was already made or was about to be made. Therefore, their direct interactions with on-the-ground volunteers seem to have only helped reinforce their decision to join and provide clarity on the logistical aspects of their engagement. All made their own informed decision, and all joined on their own volition. Moreover, there are only rare cases of these volunteers leaving their home country alongside friends or family members to join the fight—all the Militaro-Escapists in this study left alone. In other words, the exposure the

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<sup>195</sup> Interview with Participant #2, May 2018.

<sup>196</sup> Interview with Participant #3, *op. cit.*

<sup>197</sup> Erwin STRAIN, *op. cit.*, p. 67.

<sup>198</sup> Jim MATTHEWS, *op. cit.*, p. 4 and 12.

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

volunteers previously had to the military and the Middle East acted as the primary socialization in their engagement processes, providing a strong and defined identity marked by specific point of views and grievances, without the need for a top-down recruitment system or even close-group dynamics outside of military *milieux*.

### **Escapism and the Warrior Dream**

In addition to their military socialization, a key characteristic identified in the Militaro-Escapists' mobilization pathways is the centrality of psychosocial mechanisms in leading them into violent engagement, mainly revolving around a quest for significance and adventure.

The first psychosocial mechanism noted in the engagement processes of the subunits is the quest to fulfill one's warrior dreams. Pederson summarizes this as “a search for experiencing a real war zone and real action in order to realize one's dreams of becoming a ‘true warrior’ or, in emic terms, a ‘real soldier.’”<sup>200</sup> It is a “desire for the real thing, for being tried and tested in real life, for feeling real, for becoming someone for real. In short, it is a desire for rebirth.”<sup>201</sup>

While many of the Militaro-Escapists previously deployed overseas—Participant #3, for instance, deployed to Mali, the Central African Republic and Afghanistan with the Foreign Legion; the Canadian veteran Hillier did a tour of Afghanistan not long before leaving to fight the IS in Iraq; Erwin Strain deployed to Iraq as a Military Police in 2009;<sup>202</sup> and Jim Matthews did a tour of Bosnia with the British military in 1996<sup>203</sup>—most of the volunteers in the study did not have the “opportunity” to participate in direct combat while on duty.

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<sup>200</sup> Thomas Randrup PEDERSEN, “Get Real: Chasing Danish Warrior Dreams in the Afghan ‘Sandbox’”, *Critical Military Studies*, volume 3, number 1, 2017, p. 8.

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>202</sup> Erwin STRAIN, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

<sup>203</sup> Jim MATTHEWS, *op. cit.*, p. 14

For soldiers, combat experience is a matter of status, and often, of belonging. It is, indeed, through the performance of military actions that they confirm their martial identity.<sup>204</sup> It is also a way for soldiers to prove their manliness and to enhance their legitimacy as “flesh witnesses”<sup>205</sup> in the eyes of their fellow soldiers—combat veterans or not—and in those of the broader civilian populations. In the soldiers’ view, you can only truly speak of war if you experienced it. Therefore, from the Militaro-Escapists’ perspective, their confirmation as full-fledged members of this tight-knit community demanded their participation in combat actions. This was particularly true for those trained during the years of the “War on Terror,” when first-hand accounts of military engagement in Afghanistan and Iraq in the forms of best-seller books and movies multiplied in the West, increasing the positive standing combat veterans benefited from and fuelling a romanticized vision of war, increasing the motivation for young men and women to become engaged in the experience of combat.<sup>206</sup>

The American volunteer Erwin Strain illustrated these dynamics precisely with the title of his book—*CAB Hunter*—a reference to the Combat Action Badge (CAB), an award given to non-infantry service members who were actively involved in combat. He stated

I wanted to get into a fight like the ones all our Sgts. [Sergeants] told us about. More importantly, I wanted the badge that came with the fighting. The CAB or as many people in my unit called it; *a shut the fuck up badge*. [...] You were a self-proclaimed badass if you were lucky enough to wear this award, or unlucky enough to be awarded it. However, you want to look at that. You were the guy with the answers and the valuable experience.<sup>207</sup>

Participant #1 further explained:

it is just so engrained in our culture, especially in our military culture. Our credibility comes from time overseas and time in a combat zone. And if you want to have a military

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<sup>204</sup> Rachel WOODWARD, “Military Identities in the Situated Accounts of British Military Personnel”, *Sociology*, volume 45, number 2, 2011, p. 262.

<sup>205</sup> Yuval Noah HARARI, *The Ultimate Experience: Battlefield Revelations and the Making of Modern War Culture, 1450-2000*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, 386 p.

<sup>206</sup> Peter van den AKER, Jacco DUEL, and Joseph SOETERS, “Combat Motivation and Combat Action: Dutch Soldiers in Operations since the Second World War; A Research Note”, *Armed Forces & Society*, volume 42, number 1, 2015, p. 220; Julien POMARÈNE, “Normalizing Violence Through Front-Line Stories: The Case of American Sniper”, *Critical Military Studies*, 2016, p. 6.

<sup>207</sup> Erwin STRAIN, *op. cit.*, p. 39, italic in original.

career, you have to go over there and if you don't get paid, fine, fuck it, it's not for the money. It's for credibility. It's for the respect you get going in.<sup>208</sup>

For some, this lack of combat experience felt like a personal failure. For the Canadian Hillier, “[t]he Afghan campaign was unfulfilling for me. I returned to Canada feeling that a lot of unfinished business had been left on the table, and I would be lying if I said that the feeling didn't contribute in some way to my decision to fight ISIS.”<sup>209</sup> Similarly, Strain explained that:

For the next couple years [after leaving the military], I worked small security and kitchen jobs. I had a smile on my face because I was out of the military but secretly, and as time went on, I wanted to be back in. Along with not enjoying the mundane civilian life, I found myself in; I started to feel like I had cheated myself out of all the things I could have done in the military like jump school, ranger school, etc. I started to feel like I failed and was still fuelled by that piece of metal I wanted for so long [the CAB ...] I became a bit depressed and suicidal.<sup>210</sup>

In addition to the desire to fulfill their warrior dreams, many Militaro-Escapists looked at the opportunity to join the fight against the IS as a way to do something “good” with their lives—to feel useful (again)—and an opportunity to escape the boredom of their civilian existence. Indeed, as soldiers, they have developed an inclination for risk taking and adventure, a way to seek feelings they experienced—or should have experienced—in the military but would have otherwise been hard to find in what they felt were boring civilian lives. As Ed Nash explained,

I think it is fair to say that most of us—whatever our stated intentions—were driven by a sense of adventure. After all, what more extreme experience is there than war? It's a dirty little secret that combat is the most intense thing you can engage in, and, when it's going well, there really is nothing better.<sup>211</sup>

To Jim Matthews's admission, it was the desire to build back a feeling of self-worth that “had been fairly gored at certain stages in my life”<sup>212</sup> that drove him to Syria. Tim Locks, for his

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<sup>208</sup> Interview with Participant #1, *op. cit.*

<sup>209</sup> Dillon HILLIER with Russell HILLIER, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

<sup>210</sup> Erwin STRAIN, *op. cit.*, pp. 41-42.

<sup>211</sup> Ed NASH, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

<sup>212</sup> Jim MATTHEWS, *op. cit.*, pp. 190-191.



part, allegedly lived a great life and was happy, but was nevertheless restless and ready to find a new adventure.<sup>213</sup> Similarly, Participant #3 lived what he defined as a good life, but decided to make his engagement with the Kurds a priority, as he believed his life was missing something that could be fulfilled in fighting the IS.<sup>214</sup> Participant #2 also said that he was pulled by a sense of adventure and the desire to do something with his life, comparing himself to his great-grandfathers who fought the Nazis in Europe at a similar age.<sup>215</sup> He added:

I felt a bit disenchanted with life. Like I wasn't really succeeding, I wasn't really failing, but I wasn't going anywhere. I was just stuck in the middle. So, I was like, mind just well do something. So that's what made me choose to go, I was not really happy with life, I wasn't depressed or sad, I was just bored. I was bored at home and I knew I wanted to do something good [...] If I only did this, this one thing ever, or if I died over there, well at least somebody could remember that I did one good thing before I was dead.<sup>216</sup>

Not only was the conflict against the IS attracting former soldiers looking for their first real combat experience, but it also attracted veterans who experienced combat in the past and wanted to re-enact its unique thrill. Some of those volunteers were transitioning from other battlefields, such as Ukraine,<sup>217</sup> or were discussing other opportunities to continue to fight after their contribution in Iraq and/or Syria was over, such as in Nigeria.<sup>218</sup> One American was looking at few different wars, such as Burma or Nepal, as he knew former comrades from the French Foreign Legion in all those places. He ultimately decided that Syria was his best bet only because he knew the land and its people from his 2008 deployment in Iraq.<sup>219</sup> Similarly, a French volunteer who left the military after being disgruntled with the institution said:

I still had the flame of a soldier, the desire to fight, but I did not believe in the values of France, its Army and its staff. At the end of my contract, I did not renew it. I had as a

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<sup>213</sup> Tim LOCKS, *op. cit.*, pp. 10-11.

<sup>214</sup> Interview with Participant #3, *op. cit.*

<sup>215</sup> Interview with Participant #2, *op. cit.*

<sup>216</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>217</sup> Thibault Dupire, Facebook publication dated November 13<sup>th</sup>, 2015.

<sup>218</sup> "Guérilla anarchiste au Kurdistan : « Une lutte non pour le martyr, mais pour la vie »", *Union Communiste Libertaire*, [Online], 2017, <https://www.unioncommunistelibertaire.org/?Guerilla-anarchiste-au-Kurdistan-Une-lutte-non-pour-le-martyre-mais-pour-la-vie> (Web page visited on May 26<sup>th</sup>, 2020); Joe Akerman, Facebook publication dated November 6<sup>th</sup>, 2015.

<sup>219</sup> Joshua RAYMOND-CASTRO, "Op-Ed: From U.S. Marine to Peshmerga Fighter, One American's Journey to Becoming a Kurdish Soldier", *American Military News*, [Online], 2016, <http://americanmilitarynews.com/2016/12/opedfromusmarinetopeshmergafighteroneamericansjourneytobecomingakurdishsoldier/> (Web page visited on March 14<sup>th</sup>, 2017).

project to continue my military life through private military companies. My network and entourage were all paramilitaries and former militaries. We were all looking for a purpose: find private missions to continue doing what we know best. It was during this time that I heard about Rojava (my translation).<sup>220</sup>

Most of these combat veterans looking for new fighting opportunities did so to reaffirm their status within the community and to continuously self-assure they maintained a martial identity, even long after officially leaving the military.<sup>221</sup> For a majority, the transition to the civilian world had been difficult, often *too* difficult. They thereby preferred going back to what they knew best: soldiering and risk taking. One volunteer from the United States, indeed, explained, “I just like war overall. Until the day I die if there is a war going on, I’ll want to be there fighting on the right side of it. When it comes down to the plain and simple of it, I’m just a war junkie. It’s what I thrive at and what I love doing”<sup>222</sup>.

The quest for significance was additionally linked to the pursuit of fame. Even though none of the volunteers made any reference to the desire to become famous out of this experience, several of them highlighted the efforts of others to seek glory.<sup>223</sup> Participant #1 estimated that around 40% of the volunteers went to Syria or Iraq for this reason.<sup>224</sup> Moreover, many volunteers—including some in this study—wrote books, gave interviews to several media outlets and were publicly promoting themselves on social media. It is therefore apparent that this aspect played a role in the mobilization of several volunteers who, knowingly or not, knew that would enjoy the attention gained from their engagement in Syria and/or Iraq.

Central to the above factors was the biographical availability of the Militaro-Escapists. It played an important role in determining who would join and who would not among the veterans presenting similar characteristics. In addition to the openness displayed by most of the volunteers toward this new cause, many of them explicitly claimed they had no personal

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<sup>220</sup> Cilo, *op. cit.*, p. 254.

<sup>221</sup> ; Godfrey MARINGIRA & al., *op. cit.*

<sup>222</sup> Kurt T., “Interview with an American YPG Fighter: Straight Outta Raqqa”, *SOFREP*, [Online], 2018, <https://sofrep.com/news/interview-with-an-american-ypg-fighter-straight-outta-raqqa/> (Web page visited on May 26<sup>th</sup>, 2020).

<sup>223</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>224</sup> Interview with Participant #1, *op. cit.*

commitment—such as no family to take care of—and were essentially free to join when they decided to. For instance, Participant #1 explained:

I had nothing to lose man. I was in a bad place, I had barely any money in my pockets, so I said fuck it, you know. I know a lot of people I told my story to and were “ho man, if I didn’t have a family or have kids, I would have gone you know; if I knew that was an option, I would have gone.” So, I think the difference between me, and other people, is that I had well researched, and I had no responsibility holding me back.<sup>225</sup>

Nevertheless, as we have seen above with Participant #3 who decided to make his engagement a personal priority, some volunteers “made” themselves available, setting aside personal responsibilities they had, knowing that it may have important consequences at their return. Their biographical availability was therefore “constructed” by a stronger desire to fulfill one’s warrior dreams, to heightened one’s status and/or to escape a perceived boring life, regardless of their commitment to other responsibilities at the time. As Strain explained, the volunteers

all had different reasons for being there [...] but we all shared one common interest. Every one of us. We couldn’t bare the thought of having to live a normal life again. As the Kurds fought for their peace, we were taking advantage of the chaos.<sup>226</sup>

### **Moral Outrage and the Call of Duty**

In addition to the violent socialization and the psychosocial mechanisms, the cognitive frames and political opportunities associated with the conflict in Syria and Iraq also played an important role in the engagement processes of the Militaro-Escapists.

The atrocities committed by the IS and the way they were reported by the media initiated and fuelled a strong moral outrage among the volunteers. This outrage was accompanied by the press’ coverage of the local Kurdish forces and the first volunteers joining these groups on the ground. This led the Militaro-Escapists to adopt a simplistic and binary perception of the conflict, using a lexicon often referring to a “black and white” war, or a fight of the Good—the Western aligned forces—facing those of Evil—the IS. Participant #2 explained that for

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<sup>225</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>226</sup> Erwin STRAIN, *op. cit.*, p. 442.

him, “it was black and white. That’s what made my decision. They were evil. Just because of the beheading, the rapes, because of the sex slaves, because of all these things, I felt compelled to act.”<sup>227</sup> He further explained that “it was made very clear, I mean the media played it up, I’ve probably seen every Daesh execution video just being on Reddit and everything and you see that kind of stuff. I was kind of like somebody has got to do something.”<sup>228</sup> Ed Nash summarized how obvious this was for him when he stated that “when people ask me why I went to fight Daesh, I am, to be honest, baffled. How can any sane person not oppose such evil?”<sup>229</sup>

This binary vision also transpired through simplistic patriotic frames, as exemplified by Participant #1 who expressed that “I think what made the Kurds a unique situation is because there was no ambiguity. [...] The Kurds were pro-US, ISIS was anti-US, it was that simple.”<sup>230</sup> In some instances, the demonization of the IS and the need to oppose what it stands for went as far as to push volunteers to join the Kurds only to “kill some Daesh,” as some said<sup>231</sup>.

The widely shared belief that the IS was evil helped the Militaro-Escapists rationalize their mobilization and their ultimate objective to fight and kill IS members. It, indeed, appeared as a legitimate and sound decision, as many of their fellow Western citizens supported their mission morally. As one French volunteer stated:

I think too that the IS, it’s an easy enemy. Easy politically since everyone hates the IS. The IS has no official support at the international level. Saying that you were going to fight the IS was a courageous engagement, but it was one that everyone approved politically (my translation).<sup>232</sup>

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<sup>227</sup> Interview with Participant #2, *op. cit.*

<sup>228</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>229</sup> Ed NASH, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

<sup>230</sup> Interview with Participant #1, *op. cit.*

<sup>231</sup> Ariane BONZON, “Gabar, l’ex-légionnaire parti combattre les « salopards » de Daech”, *Slate*, [Online], 2017, <https://m.slate.fr/story/151013/legionnaire-francais-daech-syrie?amp> (Web page visited on May 26<sup>th</sup>, 2020), my translation.

<sup>232</sup> Pierre LONGERAY, “« J’ai toujours su que le véritable ennemi du Kurdistan était l’État turc »”, *Vice*, [Online], 2018, <https://www.vice.com/fr/article/j5vw83/jai-toujours-su-que-le-veritable-ennemi-du-kurdistan-etait-letat-turc> (Web page visited on May 26<sup>th</sup>, 2020), my translation.

The moral outrage was also exacerbated by unjust experiences some volunteers encountered earlier in their lives, providing personal parallels driving them to act. For instance, Participant #3 recalled having been the victim of unfair behaviours when he was younger, which made justice and liberty fundamental values for him.<sup>233</sup> Tim Locks was bullied as a child and had made it a point to always support the underdog.<sup>234</sup> He stated about the IS, “It’s one of the worst things I have seen [...] It is bullying on the worst kind of scale and you know I can’t stand that. If I carried on just enjoying myself knowing what those people are going through, well then I’d be a hypocrite.”<sup>235</sup> Matthews similarly claimed that

I’ve always hated those who abuse power over others, and, from that same position of power, distort reality by twisting the facts. I don’t just hate it, it really drives me up the fucking wall. Perhaps at some elemental level I saw this mirrored in the treatment of oppressed cultures, in the political rhetoric of the most blatant tyrants endorsed by a biased media and an apathetic public.<sup>236</sup>

The Militaro-Escapists’ initial interest for this conflict was sparked by their curiosity for what was happening around the globe, an awareness they developed while in the military. As an example, Participant #3 stated that, although he has always been highly interested in geopolitics, the military opened his eyes even wider to these issues.<sup>237</sup> Thus, the Militaro-Escapists continued to follow the news and read about international affairs—despite no longer being on active duty—perhaps even more intensely than the average citizen, increasing the impact of this exposure to their moral outrage.

As most of the Militaro-Escapists came from a generation that served during the “War on Terror” and were mainly trained to oppose Islamic terrorism in the Muslim world,<sup>238</sup> some also interpreted this conflict and its main actor—the IS—through the lenses of a battle against the broader *jihadi* threat. Dillon Hillier, for instance, claimed that he joined the army to kill

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<sup>233</sup> Interview with Participant #3, *op. cit.*

<sup>234</sup> Tim LOCKS, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

<sup>235</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 13-14.

<sup>236</sup> Jim MATTHEWS, *op. cit.*, pp. 196-197.

<sup>237</sup> Interview with Participant #3, *op. cit.*

<sup>238</sup> Will HEILPERN, “A 23-year-old British landscape gardener spent 5 months fighting ISIS in Syria – here’s his story”, *Business Insider*, [Online], 2016, <https://www.businessinsider.com/joe-robinsons-journey-into-syria-to-fight-isis-2016-7> (Web page visited on May 26<sup>th</sup>, 2020).

*jihadis*<sup>239</sup> and equated the IS as the very same forces he opposed in Afghanistan during his tour with the Canadian Forces a year earlier.<sup>240</sup> Likewise, the attacks conducted by IS members and sympathizers in the West influenced some volunteers into joining this fight to protect their nation against this “existential threat”, generally seen as such in the West.<sup>241</sup>

Animated by emotional drivers and a simplistic vision of the IS, the Militaro-Escapists came to see themselves as the most suitable combatants for this fight. Disillusioned by what they perceived as too small of a contribution by Western militaries in Iraq and Syria—using expressions such as “tears in a bucket”—the veterans, who viewed themselves as well trained warriors, concluded that they were the best placed to action this call of duty. As an example, one claimed that he “knew I had to do something against these butchers. With my unique set of military skills learned in the Canadian army, I felt I was well positioned to help those who could not help themselves. I felt it was my duty to fight ISIS.”<sup>242</sup> Matthews, for his part, stated that:

Something about the photo of a grinning Daesh fighter clutching a woman’s severed head by the hair, one finger raised to the camera like some kind of gang sign, struck me more deeply than I could articulate. It touched something elemental inside. It was eons since I’d last gone do-gooding in a foreign war zone and been bounced out again by the real world, idealism and certainties in fragments on the floor. But I think I was catching a wave of urgent public feeling that this *just had to be fought* (my emphasis).<sup>243</sup>

The Militaro-Escapists also benefited from the perceived ease of access to the groups and the battlefield, and the publicization of the ways to join them.<sup>244</sup> Ed Nash stated, for instance, that “the foreign press had made quite a meal of the early volunteers who had travelled to Syria, and publicized the contact details that were in use then”<sup>245</sup>. For an American volunteer

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<sup>239</sup> Dillon HILLIER with Russell HILLIER, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

<sup>240</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

<sup>241</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>242</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12-13.

<sup>243</sup> Jim MATTHEWS, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

<sup>244</sup> Heidi HATCH, “Utah volunteer survives fighting ISIS in Syria to tell his story”, *2KUTV*, [Online], 2016, <https://kutv.com/news/local/utah-man-returns-from-syria-after-fighting-isis-to-tell-his-story> (Web page visited on May 26<sup>th</sup>, 2020).

<sup>245</sup> Ed NASH, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

in Syria, he found the YPG in his top results simply by searching “How to fight ISIS” on Google.<sup>246</sup>

Finally, as important for the Militaro-Escapists was the apparent legality of joining Kurdish groups. Participant #2, in this sense, confessed that he wouldn’t have gone if the YPG were a listed terrorist entity.<sup>247</sup> Participant #1 similarly first asked himself:

Is it legal? That’s kind of where my process began. It was never a matter of “should I go?” it was a matter of is it legal for me to go. Because it was such an obvious no-brainer. I really believe that if you had asked a hundred American soldiers in my position, where it’s like “hey if you don’t have like family to worry about, would you go fight for a US ally for free if they needed your help?” ninety-nine out of a hundred would say yes.<sup>248</sup>

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<sup>246</sup> Kurt T., “Interview with an American YPG Fighter: Straight Outta Raqqa”, *op. cit.*

<sup>247</sup> Interview with Participant #2, *op. cit.*

<sup>248</sup> Interview with Participant #1, *op. cit.*

## Chapter 4 – The Engagement Processes of the Politico-Utopists

Unlike the Militaro-Escapists, the second type of volunteers, the Politico-Utopists, perceived their engagement in Syria as explicitly and fundamentally political. As we shall see below, their interpretation of the conflict was far more politically tinted than their former military comrades, and their involvement went beyond the simple desire to fight against the IS. As British militants put it, “[w]e are not ex-soldiers or militaria obsessives, that's not what motivates us—we're Reds”<sup>249</sup>.

In this chapter, I present the mechanisms that had an influence in the engagement processes of these Politico-Utopists. Using the framework employed to analyze the mobilization pathways of the Militaro-Escapists, that of Crettiez's, I first explain the cognitive frames and opportunity structures involved in the mobilization of these militants. I then discuss their violent socialization and conclude with the psychosocial mechanisms at play in their engagement.

### **An Internationalist and Anti-Fascist Utopia**

A first fundamental step in understanding the engagement processes into political violence of the Politico-Utopists, is to look at their cognitive frames and the available opportunity structures allowing for these frames to be turned into action.

While the Militaro-Escapists had a simplistic and mostly emotional reaction to the emergence of the IS, the Politico-Utopists were characterized by more complex and elaborated frames. First, these militants all identified with far-left identities and all subscribed to their associated sets of political beliefs. The French volunteer André Hébert, for instance, self-identified as a Marxist<sup>250</sup>, the Albanian Azad and the Italian Dilsoz were self-described Anarcho-

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<sup>249</sup> Lizzie DEARDEN, “Syrian war: British volunteers in socialist ‘Bob Crow Brigade’ prepared to die fighting Isis”, *Independent*, [Online], 2016, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/syrian-war-british-fighters-in-the-socialist-bob-crow-brigade-prepared-to-die-to-fight-against-isis-a7312161.html> (Web page visited on February 1<sup>st</sup>, 2021).

<sup>250</sup> André HÉBERT, *Jusqu'à Raqqa Avec les Kurdes contre Daech*, Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 2019, p. 33.



Communists<sup>251</sup>, Gabar, from Canada, identified as a Socialist<sup>252</sup>, while Ciwan, from Spain, and Participant #4, from the UK, viewed themselves as Anarchists<sup>253</sup>.

These different far-left political doctrines shared common frames and identity traits, providing specific justifications for the Politico-Utopists' involvement in Syria, all rooted in historical and political interpretations of the actors and events at play. The most important of these were the concepts of internationalism and anti-fascism, two ideas transcending the boundaries of those specific political doctrines and offering rallying perspectives for the militants.

Internationalism is a practice—and most importantly, an element of identity—deeply rooted in anti-imperialism and the history of the far-left, dating back 150 years ago. This practice has been concretely found in attempts to transnationally connect groups, movements, and ideas to address pressing domestic and international problems.<sup>254</sup> In effect, it was understood by the French volunteer André Hébert as

the ability to share the struggles of the excluded throughout the world, to revolt against the injustice that strikes them as if it struck us ourselves, to be aware that despite the barriers separating men, we all share the same conditions and the same fight against alienation (my translation).<sup>255</sup>

This practice was initially born out of the nineteenth century's First International, whose aim was to rally Anarchists, Socialists and Syndicalists from Europe and America into a common movement, with shared perspectives and solutions. It evolved and split into different factions and ultimately only witnessed its most influential period through the Soviet-backed Comintern, from the late 1910s to the mid 1940s. While the practice of internationalism

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<sup>251</sup> Dilsoz, "Dilsoz, Italie", in André HÉBERT (ed.), *Hommage au Rojava, op. cit.*, p. 155; Azad, *op. cit.*, p. 76.

<sup>252</sup> Gabar, "Gabar, Québec: Chaque sacrifice est une graine qui nourrit la révolution", in André HÉBERT (ed.), *Hommage au Rojava, op. cit.*, p. 119.

<sup>253</sup> Ciwan, "Ciwan, Catalogne: Lexin, lexin!", in André HÉBERT (ed.), *Hommage au Rojava, op. cit.*, p. 134; Interview with Participant #4, May 2018.

<sup>254</sup> Talbot IMLAY, "The Practice of Socialist Internationalism during the Twentieth Century", *Moving the Social*, volume 55, 2016, pp 17-38; Leila J. RUPP, "Constructing Internationalism: The Case of Transnational Women's Organizations, 1888-1945", *The American Historical Review*, volume 99, number 5, 1994, pp. 1571-1600.

<sup>255</sup> André HÉBERT, *Jusqu'à Raqqa Avec les Kurdes contre Daech, op. cit.*, p. 26.

weakened after the Second World War<sup>256</sup>, internationalism remained a mythical aspiration for many contemporary far-left militants who practised internationalism as part of armed liberation movements abroad.<sup>257</sup>

The Politico-Utopists saw in the defence of the ongoing revolution in Rojava a transnational symbol of this internationalist resistance<sup>258</sup> and according to Participant #4, an opportunity to not “just try to organize things where we are and ignore everywhere else, [but to] look to other people’s struggles [...] and see where we can help each other and where we can learn from each other.” They further added that, when “I saw [Rojava] surrounded by powerful enemies [...] I felt that the best thing I could do was, as an Internationalist, to go there and to physically defend that space”<sup>259</sup>.

The practice of internationalism has historically been associated with the practice of anti-fascism, and both remain interconnected concepts and identities for the far-left today. Originally, anti-fascism emerged from the 1920s communist and internationalist networks opposing the rise of fascism in Europe.<sup>260</sup> Through these transnational connections, the concept spread to other far-left movements, including to anarchist *milieux* in Europe and the Americas.<sup>261</sup>

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<sup>256</sup> Carl LEVY, “Anarchism, Internationalism and Nationalism in Europe, 1860-1939”, *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, volume 50, number 3, 2004, pp. 330-324.

<sup>257</sup> Fred HALLIDAY, “Three Concepts of Internationalism”, *International Affairs*, volume 64, number 2, pp. 187-198.

<sup>258</sup> Mathieu LÉONARD, “Le Kurdistan, Nouvelle Utopie : Un Nouveau Chiapas au Moyen-Orient?”, *La Découverte*, number 4, 2016, p. 69; André HÉBERT, *Jusqu’à Raqqa Avec les Kurdes contre Daech*, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

<sup>259</sup> Interview with Participant #4, *op. cit.*

<sup>260</sup> Nigel COPSEY, “Communists and the Inter-War Anti-Fascist Struggle in the United States and Britain”, *Labour History Review*, volume 76, number 3, 2011, pp. 184-207; Kasper BRASKÉN, “Making Anti-Fascism Transnational: The Origins of Communist and Socialist Articulations of Resistance in Europe, 1923–1924”, *Contemporary European History*, volume 25, number 3, 2016, pp. 573-596.

<sup>261</sup> Mark BRAY, *Antifa: The Anti-Fascist Handbook*, Brooklyn, Melville House Publishing, 2017, p.13; Nigel COPSEY, “Crossing Borders: Anti-Fascist Action (UK) and Transnational Anti-Fascist Militancy in the 1990s”, *Contemporary European History*, volume 25, number 4, 2016, pp. 707-727.

Anti-fascism is not an ideology<sup>262</sup>, but is rather defined by Bray as “a *method of politics*, a locus of individual and group *self-identification*, and a transnational movement that adapted pre-existing socialist, anarchist, and communist currents to a sudden need to react to the fascist menace (my emphasis)”<sup>263</sup>. Its main objectives are, therefore, to deny platforms for fascists and to suppress their efforts at organizing. Copsey further argues that the practice of anti-fascism is multiform and that the definition of what represents “fascism” for anti-fascists only rests with the militants themselves.<sup>264</sup>

As a matter of fact, not only were the Politico-Utopists considering their engagement as internationalist, but they also strongly considered it to be fundamentally anti-fascist. They perceived the IS as a true fascist enemy but also, more broadly, they viewed the other *jihadi* factions in Syria and the Turkish Regime as fascist actors threatening the Rojavan revolution, and therefore, justifying violence against them too. As highlighted by one Greek volunteer,

I deem it my task to do all that I can during the process of a revolution which has been initialized by the Kurds. For the fraternity of all peoples of this world, in which I truly believe, and the downfall of fascism [...] We are internationalists, we fight against fascism no matter where in this world.<sup>265</sup>

Talking about the IS, Participant #4 stated that, “[i]t’s almost like they’ve gone out of their way to be offensively authoritarian and discriminately fascists. I don’t think of any other better term for them to be honest”<sup>266</sup>. The Politico-Utopists also likened the IS to fascist organizations they confronted at home, making it an extension of their local frames of reference, and providing additional justifications for action. One British militant, for

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<sup>262</sup> *Id.*, “Preface, Varieties of Anti-Fascism: Britain in the Inter-War Period”, in Nigel COPSEY & Andrzej OLECHNOWICZ (eds.), *Varieties of Anti-Fascism: Britain in the Inter-War Period*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, pp. xiv-xxi.

<sup>263</sup> Mark BRAY *op. cit.*, p. xiv.

<sup>264</sup> Nigel COPSEY, “Crossing Borders: Anti-Fascist Action (UK) and Transnational Anti-Fascist Militancy in the 1990s”, *op. cit.*

<sup>265</sup> “A Greek fighter on Raqqa’s frontline”, *ANF News*, [Online], 2017, <https://anfenglish.com/features/a-greek-fighter-on-raqqa-s-frontlines-21050> (Web page visited on March 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2021).

<sup>266</sup> Interview with Participant #4, *op. cit.*

instance, compared the *jihadi* organization to the far-right in the UK and stated that there were more similarities than differences between them.<sup>267</sup>

Importantly, the presence of symbols of the Spanish Civil War among the volunteers in Syria was used by the Politico-Utopists to anchor their engagement into an historical example of internationalist and anti-fascist armed resistance. Beginning in the 1960s, the far-left in the West has, in fact, glorified the anti-fascist contribution of the International Brigades, elevating them as a myth used to connect anti-fascism to different political doctrines and to justify subsequent manifestations of internationalist solidarity.<sup>268</sup> In this sense, Participant #4 mentioned

I've always been connected to anti-fascism since I was a teenager. That's always been something that was very dear to my heart. Since a fairly young age, I've identified as an Anarchist and always took a lot of inspiration from both struggles against imperialism and the oppression elsewhere in the world and the Spanish Revolution and the Internationalists associated with that.<sup>269</sup>

Therefore, for the Politico-Utopists, the Rojavan revolution came to represent a unique and unprecedented opportunity to re-enact these historical experiences and live their own collective internationalist and anti-fascist far-left identities in a modern conflict.

Yet, while these militants clearly viewed the IS as a fascist enemy, they did not solely travel to Syria to fight against it. They, as far-left activists, joined Rojava to participate in and defend its revolution, regardless of its enemies at the time. They also wished to witness a concrete revolutionary process “worth putting your life on the line for”<sup>270</sup>. As an American militant explained, “[t]he struggle is more than just violence against fascists; it's to

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<sup>267</sup> “Interview with an AFN activist fighting in Syria”, *AntiFascist Network*, [Online], 2016, <https://antifascistnetwork.org/2016/12/29/interview-with-an-afn-activist-fighting-in-syria/> (Web page visited on March 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2021).

<sup>268</sup> Carl-Gustaf SCOTT, “The Swedish Left’s Memory of the International Brigades and the Creation of an Anti-Fascist Postwar Identity”, *European History Quarterly*, volume 39, number 2, 2009, pp. 217-240; Dan RICHARDSON, *Comintern Army: The International Brigades and the Spanish Civil War*, The University Press of Kentucky, 1982, 232 p.

<sup>269</sup> Interview with Participant #4, *op. cit.*

<sup>270</sup> “An Homage to Rojava: Interview with a YPG Volunteer from Philadelphia”, *The Philadelphia Partisan*, [Online], 2018, <https://philadelphiapartisan.com/2018/03/30/an-homage-to-rojava-interview-with-a-ypg-volunteer-from-philadelphia/> (Web page visited on March 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2021).

implement Democratic Confederalism in Northern Syria”<sup>271</sup>. Likewise, Participant #4 clarified that his enemy was “basically anyone whom I saw as a threat to what was happening in Rojava and the revolution there. I wasn’t signing up to fight X people so much as I was signing up to defend that revolution and to fight whoever was coming for it”<sup>272</sup>.

The Politico-Utopists, in fact, saw themselves as some sort of a revolutionary vanguard, whose duty was to travel the world to protect and experience the only “true” revolution of their time, which, as one German volunteer remarked, was “[t]he centre of revolution [...] in the world”<sup>273</sup>. A French volunteer, indeed, stated that “when one realizes that it is not only a question of a conflict for the right to self-determination of a nation, but also a revolutionary war in the defence of democratic and collectivist ideals, there is no more room for doubt (my translation)”<sup>274</sup>. One American added that

I had this opportunity to come, an opportunity everyone has, really, so I took it. I want to see what revolution is like, what the possibilities are, how we can make new worlds. This is a new synthesis being made here, “new realities” to quote that famous leftist Dick Cheney. I have to be a part of it! I mean it was like my gut was drawing me here, I can’t explain it or I sound crazy.<sup>275</sup>

In all, the political project being built in Rojava, for its political ideas and its revolutionary nature, represented to the Western volunteers a utopia, understood here as a visionary and ideal society worth fighting for. It appears, thus, that these positive feelings associated with this unique opportunity—this chance to be part of something bigger, historical—also played an important role in the mobilization of the Politico-Utopists.

The diversity in the groups and doctrines present in Rojava, such as the YPG or the IFB, further helped potential volunteers to find affinities with the revolution, despite the differences in their far-left political beliefs. In this sense, the ideological broadness of

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<sup>271</sup> Roqayah CHAMSEDDINE, “An American in Syrian: The Anti-Fascist Struggle for Communal Society in the Ruins”, *Shadow Proof*, [Online], 2016, <https://shadowproof.com/2016/12/06/american-syria-ypg-communal-society-ruins/> (Web page visited on March 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2021).

<sup>272</sup> Interview with Participant #4, *op. cit.*

<sup>273</sup> “German YPG Fighter: ‘I Joined The Kurds In War On ISIS To Change The World’”, *ARAnews*, [Online], 2016, <http://aranews.net/german-ypg-fighter-joined-kurds-war-isis-change-world/> (Web page visited on November 18<sup>th</sup>, 2020).

<sup>274</sup> André HÉBERT, *Jusqu’à Raqqa Avec les Kurdes contre Daech*, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

<sup>275</sup> Roqayah CHAMSEDDINE, *op. cit.*

Apoism, and especially Democratic Confederalism, allowed for a diversity of people, from a wide range of political backgrounds, to go and join the project in Rojava. One Greek militant even claimed that if it weren't for the Kurds and the YPG, these people would not have been able to come together.<sup>276</sup> As an example of this dynamic, one American volunteer stated of Democratic Confederalism that “it is a left-wing ideology that I, as a *Communist*, not only find palatable but am willing to help to implement (my emphasis)”<sup>277</sup>, whereas Participant #4 “always felt that *anarchism* should be about letting people do what they want and letting them experiment with ways to organizing society, so I didn't see anything in Democratic Confederalism that conflicted with my views (my emphasis)”<sup>278</sup>.

As shown in these examples, the Politico-Utopists needed to demonstrate some form of cognitive flexibility, as doctrinal rigidity would have made them dismiss Democratic Confederalism as a not pure enough representation of their far-left traditional ideas. Similarly, the volunteers had to show pragmatism to deal with the reality of the US military's involvement in supporting the YPG in Syria, since the US military has been traditionally perceived as an imperialist force within their far-left *milieux*. The Politico-Utopists, therefore, rationalized the US support to the YPG by emphasizing the necessity of action over doctrinal purity. As one French volunteer stated, “I have always had more respect for the imperfection of action than a perfect theory (my translation)”<sup>279</sup>. Likewise, Participant #4 thought that

This is a compromise you have to make. Especially when you are going to a military situation. You need to accept they need military goods. I mean ideally, I'd like to have a revolution without giving a single dollar to the Kalashnikov company. But also, I don't think we would have a revolution without Kalashnikovs, so this was a situation in which I saw there was a lot more good than harm being done and so I had to deal with it.<sup>280</sup>

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<sup>276</sup> “A Greek fighter on Raqqa's frontline”, *op. cit.*

<sup>277</sup> Roqayah CHAMSEDDINE, *op. cit.*

<sup>278</sup> Interview with Participant #4, *op. cit.*

<sup>279</sup> Arthur ABERLIN, “Un communiste libertaire dans les YPG #01 : Pourquoi je suis ici”, *Union Communiste Libertaire*, [Online], 2017, <http://alternativelibertaire.org/?Un-communiste-libertaire-dans-les-YPG-01-Pourquoi-je-suis-ici> (Web page visited on March 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2021).

<sup>280</sup> Interview with Participant #4, *op. cit.*

In addition to these mostly political frames, the propaganda associated with the death of Kurdish and Western martyrs, also played a role in the engagement processes of several militants, providing examples of “infinite courage” and related symbols of internationalist resistance. For example, the story of Arin Mirkan, a YPJ Commander who sacrificed herself during the battle for Kobane to kill several IS members, was mentioned by some volunteers as having had an influence in their engagement. The French militant André Hébert, for instance, remarked that “I was profoundly touched by the courage of this woman and the power of her action (my translation)”<sup>281</sup>. For the Spaniard Ciwan, it was a video published after the death of the American volunteer Jordan MacTaggart that contributed to his decision to join the revolution in Rojava<sup>282</sup>, while similarly, one American militant got interested in this cause through the coverage of the death of a German Politico-Utopist.<sup>283</sup>

Unlike the Militaro-Escapists, that got to learn of the conflict against the IS mostly through mainstream media, the Politico-Utopists got to know Rojava, the IFB, and the YPG, through alternative sources of information. Participant #4, for instance, “first read about them in a magazine called *Rolling Thunder*, which is an American anarchist magazine; and after that I started to research them and particularly just type YPG into YouTube”<sup>284</sup>. Some were in fact skeptical of the initial reporting of the conflict against the IS by traditional news networks, such as a French volunteer who recalled that

I was following the international news dominated by the rapid progress of Daech in Syria, and I was surprised by the tenacity of the last Kurdish stronghold in Kobanê resisting the jihadist wave. However, it took me many months to grasp the extent of what was happening over there. The apolitical coverage of the Syrian conflict by the media considerably hampered my awareness of the real nature of the Kurdish struggle in this country. [...] When I realized that the Kurdish people [...] were leading a democratic and socialist-inspired revolution, I started to inform myself more intensely on these events, far from the dominant media (my translation).<sup>285</sup>

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<sup>281</sup> André HÉBERT, *Jusqu'à Raqqa Avec les Kurdes contre Daech*, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

<sup>282</sup> Ciwan, *op. cit.*, p. 134.

<sup>283</sup> “Interview with YPG volunteer soldier Brace Belden”, *The Yale Review of International Studies*, [Online], 2018, <http://yris.yira.org/interviews/2431> (Web page visited on March 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2021).

<sup>284</sup> Interview with Participant #4, *op. cit.*

<sup>285</sup> André HÉBERT, *Jusqu'à Raqqa Avec les Kurdes contre Daech*, *op. cit.*, p. 34-35.

This exposure, through alternative media sources, allowed for the political frames diffused from the conflict in Syria to align with the militants' beliefs, who would have otherwise been unaffected by mainstream narratives. Finally, the calls made by the different groups such as the IFB for internationalist volunteers to join the revolution starting in 2015, the creation of multiple international units, and the ease of access to the conflict zone, facilitated the engagement of many of these militants by providing opportunity structures for those frames to be put into action.

### **Socialization Through Political Militancy**

The cognitive frames and opportunity structures, so central in the processes of engagement of the Politico-Utopists, had to be constructed and assimilated through mechanisms of violent socialization, by means of years in low-risk political militancy. The internationalist, anti-fascist and far-left collective identities shared by the Politico-Utopists were, indeed, shaped and developed through long and gradual experiences of activism in different militant *milieux*, all being on the far-left end of the political spectrum and associated in one way or another with anti-fascist practices.

Just like the Militaro-Escapists, the contexts behind the Politico-Utopists' entry into political militancy differ greatly from one individual to another. André Hébert, who comes from a middle-class family, first got interested in Marxism theory because of his passion for History.<sup>286</sup> Conversely, Participant #4 was just sorting out their situation as a homeless alcoholic when they got involved in far-left political groups.<sup>287</sup>

It appears, though, that the Politico-Utopists became initially receptive to leftist political ideas through low-level socialization mechanisms within personal circles (family, friends, school) and new experiences. The French YPG volunteer Arthur Aberlin, for example, recalled that "I come from a working-class family from a middle town. I had the chance to study in a provincial university, but in a stream without any future. [There,] I started to be

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<sup>286</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

<sup>287</sup> Interview with Participant #4, *op. cit.*



active in the student movement, before joining an anarcho-communist organization (my translation)”<sup>288</sup>.

For most of the volunteers, it appears that their low-risk activism begun during their teenage years, and as early as 14 years old for André Hébert, who first got involved in distributing zines and attending demonstrations with anti-capitalist organizations.<sup>289</sup> Others became active in an array of causes, using different repertoires of actions, including animal rights organizing<sup>290</sup>, resisting the construction of an airport in a *Zone à défendre* (ZAD)<sup>291</sup>, opposing the construction of a pipeline as a member of the *Shell to Sea* organization<sup>292</sup>, protesting as part of the *Occupy Wall Street* movement<sup>293</sup>, or doing “anti-capitalist smash-up-a-bank thing [...] probably out of frustration at the Stop the War demonstrations’ failure to stop the war”<sup>294</sup>. The experience of the Italian Dilsoz is a prime example of this extended involvement in low-risk far-left activism:

I have never belonged to a specific group in which to do activism, but I have always participated in activities of the so-called autonomous left in Italy. [...] During the fifteen years before the start of this war, I participated in about everything... All the No Global period up until the G8 in Genoa, to the movement against the War in Iraq, the occupation of social centres and the occupation of housing, the occupation of gymnasiums and campaigning against the destruction of the environment and speculation (my translation).<sup>295</sup>

This low-risk militancy progressively became totalizing for most of the Politico-Utopists, exposing them to new frames and experiences, leading them to believe that the possibility of joining the Rojavan revolution was a logical continuation of their own political struggles. For

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<sup>288</sup> Arthur ABERLIN, *op. cit.*

<sup>289</sup> André HÉBERT, *Jusqu’à Raqqa Avec les Kurdes contre Daech, op. cit.*, p. 33-34.

<sup>290</sup> Interview with Participant #4, *op. cit.*

<sup>291</sup> Qandil, “Qandil, Bretagne”, in André HÉBERT (ed.), *Hommage au Rojava, op. cit.*, p. 87.

<sup>292</sup> Jamie GOLDRICK, “Pride, Tinged With Sadness: An Interview From The Front”, *Rabble*, [Online], 2018, <https://www.rabble.ie/2018/01/18/pride-tinged-with-sadness-an-interview-from-the-front/> (Web page visited on March 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2021).

<sup>293</sup> Arvin DILAWAR, “Homage to Rojava: An American Fighter in ISIS Territory”, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, [Online], 2020, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/homage-to-rojava-an-american-fighter-in-isis-territory/> (Web page visited on March 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2021).

<sup>294</sup> Norma COSTELLO, “Meet the Young British Socialists Fighting ISIS and Patriarchy with the Kurds”, *Vice*, [Online], 2016, [https://www.vice.com/en\\_au/article/ppvan7/bob-crown-brigade-interview](https://www.vice.com/en_au/article/ppvan7/bob-crown-brigade-interview) (Web page visited on February 1<sup>st</sup>, 2021).

<sup>295</sup> Dilsoz, *op. cit.*, p. 155.

example, one Canadian volunteer stated that, “I have been an anarchist for over 10 years and I always told myself that if I had lived in 1936, I would have gone to fight in Spain, it was therefore natural for me to come to Rojava and join the YPG/J (my translation)”.<sup>296</sup> Similarly, an American volunteer stated:

Some of the circles I’ve run in have very militant rhetoric. You can go years talking that talk, and giving one form of support or another to revolutionary movements. And then something comes up where it’s like, you can absolutely go and do the right thing. Having spent so long immersed in radical politics, it was such a clear decision for me. I didn’t ever stop to think, “What’s it going to be like? Is this a good idea?”<sup>297</sup>

This progressive totalizing socialization through political militancy launched the Politico-Utopists into a cyclical process, gradually increasing their acceptance of riskier activism. They ultimately came to accept the idea of violence as a “necessary and inevitable”<sup>298</sup> solution to oppose fascism in Syria and to participate in an armed struggle in the defence of a revolutionary project, facing the very real risks of being injured, killed, or arrested at their return. As the French militant André Hébert stated, “the life of a revolutionary fighter is either of a violent death, or the prison: it is inevitable. No one was a fool. We were aware of what we were doing (my translation)”<sup>299</sup>. Yet, for a fellow militant, “dying in a car crash is a tragedy, dying for socialism is an honour”<sup>300</sup>.

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<sup>296</sup> “Entrevue: Un wobbly de Montréal au Rojava”, *Dure Réalité Webzine*, [Online], 2016, <https://durerealite.wordpress.com/2016/12/16/entrevue-un-wobbly-de-montreal-au-rojava/> (Web page visited on February 1<sup>st</sup>, 2021).

<sup>297</sup> Michael MCCANNE, “Fighting for Rojava”, *Jewish Currents*, [Online], 2019, <https://jewishcurrents.org/fighting-for-rojava/> (Web page visited on February 1<sup>st</sup>, 2021).

<sup>298</sup> “Da Pachino in Siria per combattere contro l’Isis”, *Nuovo Sud*, [Online], 2017, <https://www.nuovosud.it/56313-cronaca-siracusa/da-siracusa-siria-combattere-contro-lisis> (Web page visited on March 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2021).

<sup>299</sup> “Prendre les armes pour la révolution du Rojava : entretien avec André Hébert”, *Revue Ballast*, [Online], 2010, [https://www.revue-ballast.fr/prendre-les-armes-pour-la-revolution-du-rojava-entretien-avec-andre-hebert/?fbclid=IwAR1jl6JO8gsGmJxI\\_DWYsyDPqRldR28Y1MTZF0V8-wSMasPnnJoFjL9Pv\\_4](https://www.revue-ballast.fr/prendre-les-armes-pour-la-revolution-du-rojava-entretien-avec-andre-hebert/?fbclid=IwAR1jl6JO8gsGmJxI_DWYsyDPqRldR28Y1MTZF0V8-wSMasPnnJoFjL9Pv_4) (Web page visited on March 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2021).

<sup>300</sup> Lizzie DEARDEN, “British anti-Isis fighters ‘trolling’ terrorists as they advance on Syrian stronghold of Raqqa”, *The Independent*, [Online], 2017, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-british-volunteer-fighters-kurds-raqqa-islamic-state-trolling-radio-bob-crow-brigade-kimmie-a7654886.html> (Web page visited on February 1<sup>st</sup>, 2021).

This legitimization—and normalization—of violence was the by-product of many references to past and present armed resistance movements in the Politico-Utopists’ *milieux*<sup>301</sup>, and most importantly, of the regular practice of, and exposure to, violence against/from perceived “enemies,” mostly during local activism<sup>302</sup>, including against/from the police<sup>303</sup>, anti-fascists, and even animal hunters<sup>304</sup>.

The Politico-Utopists were also socialized in dense social networks within political groups and movements, through fellow activists, close friends and relatives, who for some, directly or indirectly contributed to their departure for Syria as role models or legitimizing authorities. For example, the Albanian Azad knew anarchist and communist comrades who went to Syria before him and regularly received news from them. He also wished, through his engagement, to follow the steps of his grandfather, a convinced communist Partisan.<sup>305</sup> An American militant with the YPG was inspired by the death of a fellow union organizer in Syria<sup>306</sup>, while a French volunteer was ultimately convinced to make the move after reading a blog written by a French comrade in Syria.<sup>307</sup> A Greek volunteer, for his part, even recalled his biggest support to join the Rojavan revolution came from his own family. He further stated that

I grew up in a socialist-communist family. I always listened to partisan music and grew up with the stories of the Greek leftist struggle. This revolutionist culture which I inherited from my family became a motivation for me to become part of this revolution. This inspired me. It was always my childhood dream to fight against fascism at the frontline of a war zone.<sup>308</sup>

In the case of Participant #4, they specifically went over to Rojava alongside a friend and fellow activist. They are, however, the only known subunits in all the volunteers studied to have gone as a group, except for some members of an anarchist organization who claimed to

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<sup>301</sup> Pierre LONGERAY, “Entretien avec un jeune Français engagé dans la reprise de Rakka”, *Vice*, [Online], 2017, <https://www.vice.com/fr/article/evw5pp/entretien-avec-un-jeune-francais-engage-dans-la-reprise-de-rakka> (Web page visited on February 1<sup>st</sup>, 2021).

<sup>302</sup> “Statement from a volunteer with MLKP/YPG”, *Boston Indymedia*, [Online], 2015, <http://boston.indymedia.org/feature/display/222952/index.php> (Web page visited on May 11<sup>th</sup>, 2017); Pierre LONGERAY, *op. cit.*

<sup>303</sup> Roqayah CHAMSEDDINE, *op. cit.*

<sup>304</sup> Interview with Participant #4, *op. cit.*

<sup>305</sup> Azad, *op. cit.*, p. 55-56.

<sup>306</sup> “An Homage to Rojava: Interview with a YPG Volunteer from Philadelphia”, *op. cit.*

<sup>307</sup> Arthur ABERLIN, *op. cit.*

<sup>308</sup> “A Greek fighter on Raqqa’s frontline”, *op. cit.*

have known each other for years, through “meeting people in person, struggling shouldertoshoulder with them in their respective movements, and maintaining relationships of solidarity long after we were no longer in the same physical space”<sup>309</sup>. In the specific case of Participant #4 and their comrade, they have

been doing a lot of anti-hunter work and anti-fascism together. When I decided I was going to go, I let my close people know about that to see if we could go as a group and she was the only one who was able to actually go at the same time as me. [...] I first introduced it to her. But it turned out she actually had already been reading a lot about it and researching a lot. She had already decided that if the chance to go came up, that she should take it. So, it just happened that we both have been going through the same process at the same time, and then, like I mentioned, we kind of found out.<sup>310</sup>

The fact that Participant #4 thought they could go with friends as a group demonstrates that people around them were interested in the cause and provided support and validation through “clique of friends” dynamics. It also shows that the Rojavan revolution was a topic of interest for people in their close entourage and that there was no taboo in discussing the possibility of participating in an armed struggle abroad.

It is finally through their political activism that some of the Politico-Utopists also got their first exposure to the Apoist movement and its ideology, and the Kurdish causes generally. For example, a Spaniard explained that as a member of his communist party, he has always worked with the Kurds.<sup>311</sup> An American militant also remarked that, “[b]eing a leftist politically I was already vaguely familiar with the kurdish [sic] PKK”<sup>312</sup>. For another American, his exposure began when he invited a Kurdish activist from Turkey to speak at his college—he has “been following their struggle ever since”<sup>313</sup>. These experiences played a role in the socialization of the Politico-Utopists by creating personal and political proximity

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<sup>309</sup> “Anarchist Armed Struggle in Rojava and Beyond: An Interview with the IRPGF”, *Insurrection News*, [Online], 2017, <https://insurrectionnewsworldwide.com/2017/05/08/anarchistarmedstruggleinrojavaandbeyondaninterviewwiththeirpgf/> (Web page visited on May 11<sup>th</sup>, 2017).

<sup>310</sup> Interview with Participant #4, *op. cit.*

<sup>311</sup> Chris TOMSON, “Interview: Spanish YPG fighter who went to fight ISIS in Syria”, *Al-Masdar News*, , [Online], 2016, <https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/interviewspanishypgfighterwentfightisisyria/> (Web page visited on January 16<sup>th</sup>, 2017).

<sup>312</sup> Eric WINSLOW, “Rest in peace, hero of the Rojava revolution, Michael Israel”, *Amador Community News*, [Online], 2016, <https://amadorsapbox.blogspot.com/2016/11/rest-in-peace-hero-of-rojava-revolution.html> (Web page visited on March 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2021).

<sup>313</sup> An Homage to Rojava: Interview with a YPG Volunteer from Philadelphia”, *op. cit.*

to the conflict, its protagonists, and their political ideas, ultimately enhancing the process of frame alignment, and concretely connecting the volunteers with opportunity structures in Syria.

### **Seeking Significance and Consistency**

In addition to the cognitive frames and the opportunity structures involved in the processes of engagement of the Politico-Utopists, as well as their violent socialization, some psychosocial mechanisms also played a significant role in their mobilization pathways, leading the militants to consider—knowingly or not—the possibility of joining the conflict in Syria as a personal necessity with potential psychological rewards.

As discussed in the previous sections, the most important characteristics of this category of volunteers were their previous involvement in low-risk political activism and their collective identities rooted in far-left doctrines. The psychosocial mechanisms involved in their mobilization pathways were also mostly related to these predominant aspects of the Politico-Utopists' lives. Indeed, throughout their engagement processes, most of the Politico-Utopists began to question their purpose as activists, and sometimes, even as humans. They were looking for meaning—to accomplish something at a greater scale.<sup>314</sup> One American volunteer, for example, explained that before he learned of the opportunity to go to Syria, “[e]very other day I woke up and I had to go to work, but it wasn’t a purpose. I woke up and didn’t want to get out of bed”<sup>315</sup>.

For most, it was their militant lives that turned out to be boring and pointless, exacerbated by the perception of a lack of true meaning in today’s political movements. As André Hébert recalled, “something was missing. This form of militancy appeared vain to me. I was multiplying the attempts to find the one that would satisfy me, by giving me the impression of having a grasp on the course of events (my translation)”<sup>316</sup>. Similarly, an American militant confessed that,

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<sup>314</sup> Gabar, *op. cit.* p. 120.

<sup>315</sup> Nicole MCNULTY, “Born dead”, *Boulder Weekly*, [Online], 2015, <http://www.boulderweekly.com/news/borndead/> (Web page visited on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2016).

<sup>316</sup> André HÉBERT, *Jusqu’ à Raqqa Avec les Kurdes contre Daech*, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

[a]fter that [*Occupy Wall Street* movement] fell apart, I more or less went into political hibernation. Nothing of note was happening in the United States, and when it was happening, it was being limited by weekend warriors who were loudly moderate—think the person who comes to protests on days they have off, but insist on demanding that all marches take place on the sidewalk, so as to not bother people.<sup>317</sup>

The Rojavan revolution, therefore, represented an alternative for these Politico-Utopists to reinvent themselves. As a case in point, one French volunteer mentioned that “[b]y going to Rojava, I had the impression to reconnect with the true nature of my ideas, to finally have the opportunity to comfort myself to the conception I had of a revolutionary.” He further added that “[i]n risking my life and in taking up arms, I thought I would reach the summit of political action, to modestly walk into the steps of my notorious ancestors whom the stories accompanied me throughout my teenage years (my translation)”<sup>318</sup>. This feeling was echoed by a Greek militant, who stated that becoming an internationalist fighter “was my childhood dream, which has come true now and has become a fact, which I will be able to tell my children about. [...] This is a big story, that will never be forgotten. And we are figures in a story of such an extent”<sup>319</sup>.

As shown in these examples, through their experience in Rojava, the Politico-Utopists wished to reinvigorate their perception of their revolutionary selves, and to consequently gain a certain status in their militant *milieux*. It is also clear from the subunits studied, that most of the volunteers in this category saw the defence of the Rojavan revolution as a political duty—a necessity for their actions to be consequential with their own beliefs, as they saw their potential inaction as a personal hypocrisy.<sup>320</sup> André Hébert explained that “[a]fter completing the theoretical analysis of the events in Syria, it appeared undeniable that it was my responsibility to go there. I felt obliged to go to not be contradicting the statements I have made for years (my translation)”<sup>321</sup>.

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<sup>317</sup> Arvin DILAWAR, *op. cit.*

<sup>318</sup> Firat, “Firat, France : Combattre en restant humain”, in André HÉBERT (ed.), *Hommage au Rojava*, *op. cit.*, p. 269-270.

<sup>319</sup> “A Greek fighter on Raqqa’s frontline”, *op. cit.*

<sup>320</sup> André HÉBERT, *Jusqu’à Raqqa Avec les Kurdes contre Daech*, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

<sup>321</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

Finally, much like the Militaro-Escapists, there is evidence that the Politico-Utopists were biographical available when they decided to join the fight against the IS. As one American militant with the YPG explained,

[s]imilar to many volunteers, I was also going through a bad relationship. It was falling apart, and the day we decided to move out of our shared apartment, I got my acceptance letter [from the YPG]. I went to support the revolution, but there was a part of me happy to have a place to go.<sup>322</sup>

It also appears that several volunteers planned their departure to coincide with a specific moment in their lives, therefore waiting to be “available,” rather than making themselves readily disposable to go. One French militant, for instance, decided to first finish his school before leaving<sup>323</sup>, while Participant #4 delayed their departure to bring “my life to a place where not a lot of people were relying on me for that period,” especially as their dad was ill at the time.<sup>324</sup> The limited urgency in these volunteers’ decision to leave may have more to do with the fact that the revolution and the fight against the IS in Rojava were perceived as long-term projects (months, years), rather than with a lack of motivation. Indeed, the volunteers likely preferred to wait for their lives to be in a good place, instead of leaving in a hurry with their minds not in the right setting to fully appreciate their experience.

For most of the Politico-Utopists, their lack of significance and meaning contributed to make them biographical available or strengthened their perception of being personally disposable to join the fight in Syria. The personal situation of one Scottish volunteer is a great example of this combination, as it was described as a constant struggle to find full-time employment, with no real excitement and no future, coupled with the growing perception that protests in Europe were inconsequential.<sup>325</sup> Similarly, a British militant with the IFB explained that his engagement was the result of a lack of employment and the difficulty to relate with his local militant *milieu*, as in “all these various anarchist group meetings [...] most of the time it was people that weren’t from working-class backgrounds, that didn’t live in working-class areas,

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<sup>322</sup> Arvin DILAWAR, *op. cit.*

<sup>323</sup> Pierre LONGERAY, *op. cit.*

<sup>324</sup> Interview with Participant #4, *op. cit.*

<sup>325</sup> Jake HANRAHAN, “From The Dole Queue To The Front Line”, *Esquire*, [Online], 2017, <https://www.esquire.com/uk/life/a18019/from-the-dole-queue-to-the-front-line-the-scottish-man-who-left-to-fight-isis-in-syria/> (Web page visited on March 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2021).

[and] that had no connection to the actual poor people. [...] Our worlds were totally different”<sup>326</sup>.

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<sup>326</sup> Tommy O’RIORDAN, “Bob Crow in Rojava”, *Jacobin Mag*, [Online], 2017, <https://jacobinmag.com/2017/02/rojava-ypg-bob-crowe-volunteers-left-politics> (Web page visited on February 1<sup>st</sup>, 2021).



## Conclusion

This thesis has attempted to contribute to the field of political violence studies and to the development of a typological theory. I proceeded with a qualitative methodology and a within-method triangulation of primary and secondary data. I applied Crettiez's theoretical framework to this data and outlined the communalities in the pathways of two ideal-type profiles of volunteers, the Militaro-Escapists—veterans who joined the fight against the IS—and the Politico-Utopists—far-left militants who viewed their engagement as explicitly political.

I have argued that the processes of engagement of the Militaro-Escapists were initiated during their socialization within military and military-like *milieux*, and after being exposed to populations and experiences associated with the Middle East. This socialization created a well-defined identity with a specific set of beliefs and grievances.

Additionally, I have suggested that, as importantly for the mobilization of the Militaro-Escapists, were psychosocial mechanisms, mainly related to the desire to fulfill one's warrior dreams, to heightened one's status, and to seek adventure. These personal drivers were mostly the result of previous military socialization and its consequences on the veterans' difficult transitions into civilian lives. I also argued that cognitive frames and political opportunities played a role in pushing the Militaro-Escapists toward political violence. Indeed, the moral outrage felt by these veterans and fuelled by the media led the volunteers to find ways to answer what they felt was their own call of duty.

The Militaro-Escapists' reaction to cognitive frames and political opportunities was only possible by the presence of a collective identity forged by prior martial socialization and psychosocial mechanisms leading them into seeking opportunities to experience combat. These factors were finally exacerbated by the presence of the first veterans within Kurdish groups, providing a confirmation that it was the “right thing to do” and they were the “right persons to do it.”

As for the Politico-Utopists, I have suggested that the opportunity to join an internationalist, anti-fascist, and leftist revolution aligned with their frames and identities, as they saw in the IS a fascist enemy against whom violence was justified. Nevertheless, I argued that the Politico-Utopists first travelled to Syria to participate, defend, and experience the only “true” revolution of their time, acting as some sort of a vanguard for the far-left movements today, safeguarding a cherished utopia. The relative diversity in the political beliefs and backgrounds of the Western volunteers was further made possible by the variety of groups and doctrines in Rojava, and the ideological broadness of Democratic Confederalism.

I have also proposed that the cognitive frames and political identities associated with the Politico-Utopists were developed through years of low-risk activism within far-left and anti-fascist *milieux*, acting as violent socialization. Their militant experiences progressively became totalizing, increasing their acceptance of high-risk activities, providing justifications for the use of violence, and confirming that the possibility to join the Rojavan revolution was a logical continuation of their own political struggles. These dynamics were exacerbated through dense social networks, where role models and legitimizing authorities directly or indirectly contributed to the mobilization of the Politico-Utopists. It is through these experiences that they were also exposed to Kurdish causes, providing personal and political proximity with the Syrian conflict.

I have argued that psychosocial mechanisms also played a role in the engagement processes of the Politico-Utopists, as many of them were questioning their purpose as activists—and even as humans—before leaving for Rojava. They found in this experience an alternative to reinvent themselves and gain a certain status in their militant *milieux*. Finally, I have suggested that the volunteers were biographically available before their mobilization, with some militants waiting for the right “timing” in their lives to join.

### **What Can Be Learned from this Case?**

The characteristics of the Militaro-Escapists on one side, and the Politico-Utopists on the other, significantly contribute, alone, to our understanding of this complex phenomenon. But what does this specific case mean for political violence more broadly?

First, it shows that there is no unique and linear path toward political violence. As argued by Viterna,

there are multiple, conjectural causes of mobilization, even amongst individuals embedded within similar identity-producing networks and within similar structural contexts. These multiple paths to participation arise from the patterned interaction of individual-level biography, networks, and satiation context.<sup>327</sup>

For the Militaro-Escapists and the Politico-Utopists, it was impossible to find a common, simple, and homogenous pathway to Syria or Iraq. However, using a framework such as Crettez's has allowed the identification of complex interactions behind their violent political engagement. These interactions, if studied furthered, could make up the basis of a typological theory.

Secondly, few volunteers witnessed a “triggering event” pushing them into going to fight overseas. It was rather a slow and progressive process, spanning over many years, that led them to consider joining this war as sound and feasible. Many veterans were affected by a moral outrage, but this was just one element among the complex mechanisms behind their engagement. Moreover, while these reactions were strongly present among the Militaro-Escapists, it was insignificant for the Politico-Utopists, who were mostly driven by positive emotions associated with the idea of a revolutionary utopia.

Thirdly, violent socialization is an essential component of violent political engagement; and the military can act as such a socializing environment. It desensitizes soldiers to the dangers of war and lead them to accept violence as a legitimate mean. It also provides a set of beliefs and a worldview that shape what it means to be a “warrior”—to witness combat. Coupled with an enemy considered by the masses—and most importantly, within the military community—as evil, opportunities to easily join the conflict zone, and an unsatisfying

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<sup>327</sup> Jocelyn S. VITERNA, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

personal life, several former soldiers could not resist this call of duty to partake in an “unfinished war.”

The flow of Western veterans joining the fight against the IS in Iraq and Syria was, therefore, an example of a significantly broader phenomenon of prior military experience turned into violent political engagement. Belew, for instance, argues that veterans of the Vietnam War played a central role in the American White Supremacist movement in the postwar era. The Vietnam conflict provided the movement with a narrative justifying the targeting of Communists and a workforce of disenfranchised veterans ready to fight against a government they felt betrayed by.<sup>328</sup> Simi and al.—among the only scholars to have studied the relationship between prior military experience and violent political engagement—also identified two related pathways for soldiers to turn terrorists: one associated with an involuntary exit of the military, disrupting the soldier’s identity and creating an uncertain future, and one linked to the veterans’ anticipation of being treated as “war heroes” not being met. In both cases, the soldiers restore their lost identities by joining far-right violent groups<sup>329</sup>.

If an individual’s violent socialization is not the product of past military experiences, then, it must be grounded in previous in-person political militant experiences. They shape how the activists see the world, what they aspire to become, both personally and politically, and who represents their main enemies. They provide historical references of armed resistance, and contemporary examples of its use.

Fourthly, as humans, violent political actors all greed status, recognition by others, and significance. Despite the many differences between the processes of engagement of the Militaro-Escapists and the Politico-Utopists, all were strongly pushed into action by the desire to prove to themselves and to others what they were worth, reassuring their own selves of their warrior or political purity. Without dismissing the selflessness nature of many of the

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<sup>328</sup> Kathleen BELEW, *Bring the War Home: The White Power Movement and Paramilitary America*, Harvard University Press, 2018, 352 p.

<sup>329</sup> Pete SIMI, Bryan F. BUBOLZ and Ann HARDMAN, *op. cit.*

volunteers' decision to join, it is evident that the engagement into political violence is above all the results of deeply personal drivers.

Finally, the case studied confirms that individuals do not necessarily have to be biographically available in the first place to ultimately join a war overseas. Some of the volunteers made themselves available, setting aside responsibilities they had, sometimes with important personal consequences. Others, mainly those who wished to join the long-term revolution project in Rojava, waited to be available before flying out of their country, sometimes for many months, demonstrating the rationality of these actors and the planning that goes into such a decision.

### **The Limits of This Research**

Obviously, these findings have considerable limits. They are, for one, restricted to a specific case study that does not necessarily reflect other instances of foreign war volunteers, let alone manifestations of political violence more broadly. It is also limited by the amount of data used and the number of interviews conducted. Nevertheless, due to the absence of any such study on this specific case and on the sparsity of research based on primary data within the field, this thesis is fulfilling its objective of developing a better understanding of the complexities of violent political phenomena to ultimately, generate the basis for a typological theory.

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