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Terrorists and their faith

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Chapter 1

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A place in paradise

One day, ten young men from Delft did not appear on the square where they usually hung out; they had left for Syria. They were part of a group known as the Paradijspoort boys, after the shopping mall in Delft where they would often meet. There were about fifty young men in the group, with an average age of sixteen. They were of Moroccan origin and had grown up in the Gillisbuurt neighbourhood of the city. Some of them had criminal records, often for drug dealing. City councillor Abdel Maanaoui, who knew many of the boys and their families, said that he was dumbfounded by their departure. Things seemed to be going better for them, they were less restless and less recalcitrant towards their parents and the authorities. ‘When they started showing a fanatical interest in Islam, we thought “That’s fine, they’re taking life more seriously”,’ said Maanaoui. No one predicted that it could be the first step towards them joining the terrorist conflict in Syria and Iraq.¹

The boys were bound together by their shared experiences of clashes with the city authorities and failed work placements. But the real cause of their radicalisation was a drama in December 2010 that affected all of them. One of the boys, ‘Mo’, decided to rob a supermarket in the nearby village of Moerkapelle, together with two friends. They were caught in the act and, after grappling with a supermarket employee, ‘Mo’ fell from a stepladder and broke his neck. He died of his injuries the same evening. ‘Many of the young men suddenly realised that they would never get to paradise if they went on living as they did,’ said Maanaoui. ‘Then they thought, if we’re going to die, let it be on the path of the jihad and not as shoplifters’. The group, until then not regular visitors to the mosque or noted for their devout behaviour, began to dedicate themselves to the Islamic faith. They sought answers from increasingly radical preachers, first at the As-Soennah mosque in The Hague,

¹ Andreas Kouwenhoven, “Daar waren we dan, in het gezegende land”, *NRC Handelsblad*, 5 July 2014.

where imam Fawaz Ineid was still preaching, and then from Mohamed Talbi at the Al-Qibla mosque in Zoetermeer. Radical activists from a group known as Straat Dawah and Behind Bars encouraged them to set out on the path of jihad.²

At the end of 2012, Mourad Massali left the Netherlands to join Jabhat al-Nusra, a jihadist organisation in Syria allied to Al Qaeda. Nine of his friends followed him. They threw themselves into the fight with full gusto, proud to be a group of friends taking part in the jihad, ‘by the grace of Allah’. In the course of 2013, first Mourad, then Choukrie Massali, Soufian El Fassi and Abu Jandal lost their lives, in the ‘blessed land’ where, as martyrs, they hoped to reach the real paradise.

To understand what drove them to become jihadists and throw themselves into the bloody civil war in Syria, we need to take their convictions and their faith seriously. That is no easy task in itself, given all the atrocities committed by terrorist organisations in Syria and Iraq, with Islamic State (IS) at the forefront. But being ready and willing to understand transcendental religious motives is a challenge for people with a secularised background whose lives are not structured around such beliefs. And it is perhaps even more difficult for people who are religious but for whom the core of their belief lies in the conviction that God is full of love and abhors evil.

In this book, I try to identify what terrorists believe and how that belief brought them to commit their deeds, by recording the life stories of almost thirty convicted terrorists. I met them in and outside prison in the Netherlands and was able to speak to some of them more than once. To enable a valuable qualitative comparison and to make their stories more universal, I not only visited Dutch detainees convicted for jihadist terrorism, but also spoke to a number of Indonesian jihadists, indirectly recorded a number of accounts by Boko Haram members in Cameroon, and involved Syrian detainees and one Pakistani (in detention in the Netherlands) in the study. I also interviewed people convicted of terrorism who hold a completely different, diametrically opposed set of beliefs, that of right-wing extremism. The focus lies on individuals convicted of jihadist terrorism in the Netherlands, but these stories of non-Western terrorists and Western right-wing extremists are important in identifying patterns that will aid understanding of perpetrators’ beliefs and how they give them meaning. There is one common denominator in the interviews and life stories: all of those involved have been convicted and/or detained in the past ten years. In that sense, the context of the period (9/11,

² This group of young Salafist men called itself ‘Straat Dawah’ when they went out onto the streets to ‘convert’ people and ‘Behind Bars’ when they protested to demand the release of detained jihadists. See Nikki Sterkenburg, ‘Dit zijn de gezichten van de jihad in Nederland’, *Elsevier Weekblad*, 8 September 2014.

the advent of worldwide jihadism, the Arab Spring and the Caliphate), technology (the spread of the internet and social media) and major geopolitical changes (the new chaos of the ‘war on terror’, the wars in Iraq and Syria, and the great refugee crisis) are to some extent comparable.

Below and in chapter 9, I explain my selection and approach in greater detail, but first this: these are intense accounts and it cost me a great deal of time, effort and especially emotional energy to conduct the interviews. Visits to prisons are demanding and often extremely depressing. And thinking about the relationship between religion, beliefs and violence is by no means an easy process. This book is an attempt to take readers along on that quest for a better understanding of what drives terrorists to do what they do. I start at the beginning: with the desire for greater sense and meaning that was the root cause of the radicalisation process for all of those I interviewed.

The search for meaning

In this book, I retrace the steps that convicted terrorists have followed in their search for sense and meaning. Trying to give life meaning over and above satisfying our own immediate, short-term needs is not the sole domain of radical activists, extremists or terrorists. It is a path that practically all human beings take or have taken. In the Netherlands, a substantial majority of the adult population is seeking to find some sense and meaning in their lives. More than 80 per cent donate to charity, and more than half is a member of an idealist organisation, whether that is Amnesty International, a religious community, an environmental organisation or a political party. Not to mention all the parents who help at local sports clubs, voluntary firefighters and those who go door to door collecting for one good cause or another. We live in a country where people are ready and willing to help one another – and see in that something of transcendental value for themselves. By that I mean all values and goals that go beyond immediate self-interest, are relevant to a larger group or future generations, and related to the greater whole.

That is, after all, what makes us human. To paraphrase psychologist and Pulitzer Prize winner Ernest Becker: man is the only living being who is conscious of his mortality and spends the rest of his life trying to deal with it. Some deny the limitations of that mortality of life and body and flee from death. Others acknowledge and accept the finite nature of life and try to transcend their own insignificance by achieving immortality in something outside themselves: in children or good causes (or by writing books). We see this all too human incentive to deny, shout down or accept death and our own insignificance among those who commit acts of terrorist or political violence.

It is essential to acknowledge that before looking more closely at religion: the search for meaning, for transcendence, is part of all forms collective belief, including religion, and is something that occupies us all, consciously or unconsciously. That is an important basic principle in this study of terrorists' beliefs and actions. Searching for meaning, embracing religious or other beliefs and committing violence can become closely intertwined. Violence and religion is a toxic combination, one that scientists and politicians generally try to avoid. Lastly, freedom of religion is a valuable and fundamental right that has been central to Dutch national consciousness since the Eighty Years' War, but has often been appropriated by populists and agitators. And yet it is crucial to emphasise and further recognise the link between religion and terrorism. Scientific research into radicalisation and terrorism has erupted in a wide variety of disciplines, specialisations and highly detailed areas of inquiry – as a result of which the simple link between belief and violence is often lost in abstract or psychologised jargon.³ At the same time, in politics and in society at large, it is an issue that cries out for clear and unambiguous definitions and explanations. Today, jihadist terrorism is often reduced (intentionally and misleadingly) to a problem of 'Islam'. Other reductionist interpretations see terrorism as a direct consequence of discrimination or exclusion, or conclude even more simplistically that 'all terrorists are mentally disturbed'. Such reductions preclude any further discussion or reflection.

Between such over-nuanced and specialised scientific approaches and the simplistic reductions in the public domain, there is a missing link. Terrorism is not only a phenomenon that can be explained by individual or group-based sociological processes. Or that can be divided up into psychological processes or put aside as pathology. It is and remains a broad narrative of individuals looking for sense and an extreme, consistently applied radical meaning in their lives. Terrorism researchers have endlessly analysed the countless overblown pamphlets, statements and holy texts of terrorist organisations, or tried to incorporate religion as an autonomous factor in radicalisation models.⁴ In doing so, they often see religion as a

³ See for example Beatrice de Graaf, 'Terrorisme- en radicaliseringsstudies: een explosief onderzoeksveld' in Edwin Bakker (ed.), *Terrorisme: Studies over terrorisme en terrorismebestrijding* (Alphen aan den Rijn 2018), 49-80.

⁴ It is by no means my intention here to detract from all of these excellent studies, but I wish to add something to them: a greater insight into how terrorists connect their motives and actions and give them meaning. That is a somewhat different approach to that of Lorne Dawson, who focuses mainly on the substance of religions; see for example Lorne L. Dawson, 'The study of new religious movements and the radicalization of home-grown terrorists: Opening a dialogue', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 22 (2009) 1, 1-21. And it is also different from the work of Olivier Roy and Gilles Kepel, who conduct an ongoing debate on the place of religion as a distinct factor in the radicalisation process (according to Kepel, Salafism is one of the drivers of radicalisation, while Roy claims that it is not). For an excellent summary of their debate, see Jytte Klausen, 'Terror in the Terroir: the roots of France's Jihadist problem', *Foreign Affairs*, 96 (2017) 5: 166-172. My concern is to focus on how terrorists themselves give sense and meaning to their actions, which we can better understand if we take practices of redemption as a starting point.

static factor, while faith is a dynamic process, a unity of belief and practice that continually evolves and rarely stands still. Moreover, the focus of many terrorism researchers on texts and radicalisation models means that they ignore the perspectives of radicalised terrorists themselves, what their intentions are when they commit their acts of terrorism. Terrorists develop their own radical and dynamic view of history: they see life as a struggle between good and evil, with themselves at the centre. In their own narratives, they are the main protagonists, holding the future in their own hands (even though they often discover later that this was an illusion).

From this perspective, I want to make an urgently needed intervention into to the discussion on terrorism and religion. Roughly speaking, there are two positions: 1) Terrorism has nothing to do with Islam, as Islam is a religion of peace and Muslims do not want terrorism. Terrorism should be seen as a deviation, and/or as an expression of personal, social or economic inequality, frustrations and traumas – but in any case not as something religious. Or 2) Terrorism is caused by the holy scriptures; religious terrorists want to impose God's will through violence. Religion is after all intrinsically and inherently violent, because the word of God stands above everything else. Both positions seem to me unscientific, statistically incorrect and simple to refute methodologically. What I therefore propose is a third position: 3) Of course religion has something to do with religion – but then more through the praxis and less through the dogma, and in a much more complex way than suggested by the first two positions.

Social, economic and psychological factors are certainly important, and may even be decisive. But an individual's choice to join a terrorist group or embrace images and slogans coming from such groups is not a substantively empty decision. Most terrorists are deeply engaged with the beliefs of their group or network and do not do it for money or comradeship, certainly not in the individualised West (that can often be different in non-Western countries, where ethnic conflicts are fought out along tribal lines). They do it because they want to give their lives some practical meaning. Of course, psychological processes, frustrations and emotions play a role, but the meaning that radicals themselves attach to their actions is more than a narrative or a form of justification after the fact, as is sometimes claimed; their accounts of how they give meaning to their deeds become part of their identity – they come to genuinely believe in them.

Most terrorists are searching for a higher, transcendent meaning for their violent actions. For jihadists and other religious fundamentalists, this takes the form of divine revelation, prophecy, judgment or a final battle. But their search for meaning should not be

seen in the first instance only from the perspective of a study of the texts describing these revelations, prophecies, dogmas, Hadith,⁵ or fatwas from centuries past. Terrorist tendencies cannot be predicted from an individual's principles or even their image of God. What is important is how they apply those principles in a specific *praxis* within which their search for meaning has taken on a violent form. The key to understanding the faith *and* the violence of the terrorist is not their ideology or theology, but their lived and believed *praxis*, or rather 'orthopraxis'.

And, as I noted in almost all of the interviews I conducted, terrorists often mentioned or described a process that I came to recognise as a narrative of radical redemption.

[...]

General Van Uhm

Bilal was born into a close Moroccan family in Amsterdam in 1988. His brother and sister did well at school and went on to university. Bilal successfully completed a secondary vocational education and became a youth worker in Amsterdam. But then his career ground to a halt.

I started having the usual problems, you know, that all minorities have. I did a placement somewhere, and was promised a contract that I never got. Here in the Netherlands, people see me as a Moroccan, and in Morocco, they see me as Dutch, so nothing happened automatically. The doors just wouldn't open for me. That might be partly my fault, because I didn't feel I was being treated like a normal Dutch person. I felt I had the right to all the things that native Dutch people have, maybe that's why I made less effort. Because, you know, as a member of a minority, you have to work even harder.

In that situation – Bilal was now 22 – the war broke out in Syria. It is worth letting Bilal tell his story in his own words:

I wasn't disappointed with life or anything like that, but I did have an attitude of, like, fuck everybody. And then, in 2011 and 2012, all the images started to come in. Of dead children, slaughtered babies, kids from six months to three years old killed, just

⁵ Traditional Islamic accounts of the actions and statements of the prophet Muhammed.

like that. And that was exactly the age group I was working with in a day-care centre with kids from one to eight. And then I saw all those children lying dead, on a plastic sheet. I thought, that can't be happening, what is this? So I started to find out what was going on. I couldn't speak Arabic or Turkish. I hadn't been brought up particularly religiously and we hardly went to the mosque, if at all. But I recognised a couple of words. *Hürriyet*, the people in Syria were crying out, for freedom and justice. They were also asking for help: 'Where is the world? Help us!' And then I saw General Van Uhm on the television. He called the people who fought against Assad, who stood up to help the repressed children, heroes. That was of course long before the Caliphate, and IS.⁶

I decided I wanted to help. I started by collecting clothes. But then I wanted to go along with the aid convoys to Turkey. I was arranging something through an uncle in Belgium, but my father forbade me to go. I found that very selfish. How hypocritical can you be? My dad didn't want me to go there and help, but said I had to stay here and find a job and continue studying. The world was on fire and he thought it was more important for me to get a good job ... But that's not what I was like, I wanted to make my own decisions. I tried to set up a foundation with my brother, so that I was doing something myself, but that didn't work out. So I upped and left for Istanbul. I wanted to do something good if I could. Then I would be helping, not for the media or for my parents, but for myself. And for my faith. No one was doing anything, the United Nations, America, nobody. You saw all the people in the camps. They had nothing. So that's why I went. Not necessarily to become a martyr, but to do something practical. To help liberate people. At that time, that was no problem at all, and with my Dutch passport I crossed the border without any trouble.

In Syria, I joined Ahrar al-Sham. I had crossed the border with a friend, and a Syrian who had helped us took us to the group. They gave us a house in Idlib, where there was plenty of space. I'd come from Amsterdam and didn't know much about fighting. So I had to do my training first. And help distribute goods. And that's what I wanted to do. If people there were suffering, I would suffer along with them. If I could help, I would help. And I was fit and healthy. But I wasn't allowed to use a gun at first, because I hadn't learned how and ammunition was very expensive. And I'd called my parents, who'd begged me not to fight and to stay and help in the camps.

⁶ Interview with Bilal, 5 February 2020, PI Vught.

But then, around the end of 2013, early 2014, the geopolitical game started and chaos erupted. My organisation suddenly received a lot of support, weapons, tanks, ammunition, from the West, from America. I've been convicted as a terrorist, but my organisation was supported by the West and wasn't even on the list of terrorist groups! By then, I had a wife and small child there. I smuggled them into Turkey, because it was getting far too dangerous. In Syria, everyone was fighting everyone else. Our group was fighting against IS. We wanted nothing to do with the Caliphate; that was all about territory, weapons and power. We just wanted to help the Syrians.

And yet I saw wonderful, beautiful things. We were living in the middle of a war zone, but there was plenty of food. That was a real miracle. I think Allah did that for us. After so much bombing, we still had huge supplies of fruit and meat. That was in the old stories. The Levant and Sham are blessed lands, I've seen that with my own eyes. Not like it was in Afghanistan, where people had to eat leaves. We could still buy a whole chicken for 80 cents. I called my mother, who was panicking because she saw the whole of Syria being bombed on television, and reassured her. I told her that the shopping centre was still open, and people were getting married, just as usual. We knew how to deal with the situation, we all had a walkie-talkie and let each other know if a fighter plane had taken off in Homs, for example. Our house was never bombed. We even had an olive orchard and a small business selling olive oil. We were spared. My little son is called Adam; he's a gift from Allah, too.

But in 2015, I'd had enough of it all, the in-fighting, the chaos and the power struggle between the different groups, and Russia and America interfering. So I left Ahrar al-Sham and drifted around for another two years, before smuggling my wife and child – and finally myself too – back into Turkey.

In Turkey, Bilal was ultimately captured and deported to the Netherlands. In 2018, Ahrar al-Sham was added to the list of terrorist organisations, resulting in Bilal being convicted of membership of a terrorist organisation in 2019 and sentenced to six years in prison.⁷

⁷ Ahrar al-Sham was considered a terrorist organisation by the Dutch Public Prosecution Service but was not on the UN or EU lists. It indeed received support from EU countries in 2015, and the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs described it in the same year as 'moderate'. Bilal was added to the terrorism sanctions list in July 2016. See also Ghassan Dahhan and Milena Holdert, 'OM botst in de rechtszaal met Buitenlandse Zaken over Syrische strijdgroepen', *Trouw*, 1 March 2019.

What all the detainees who went to Syria share in common is their overall narrative of redemption, in which geopolitics combines with Salafist beliefs about purity and justice and a sense of personal responsibility and duty, and sometimes even of guilt. ‘I would have felt like a hypocrite if I hadn’t gone,’ Bilal told me.⁸ But why was it their duty to endanger their own lives by throwing themselves into an armed struggle, or at least to go to the war zone and help in some way? They felt that everyone else had failed to support the rights of repressed Muslims. The regimes in the Middle East had failed in their religious duty and let Assad do as he wished. The major powers only intervened because of the oil. ‘Your democratic regimes want only one thing,’ said another detainee, Asaad. ‘To divide and repress the Middle East. Of course, the Arab uprising was a failure, how naive could you be to think otherwise?’⁹

For Bilal and others, the persuasive power of the geopolitical, jihadist-Salafist narrative lay in the fact that they no longer had to wrack their brains trying to understand the complex context of missed reforms, corruption and inequality in the Arab world. That they no longer needed to think about setting up political parties or the difficult process of organising opposition and legal changes but that, with their own lives, they could pursue an ethical programme of purification and struggle, and they could do it immediately. In their own, highly specific redemption narratives, the unsolvable complexity of the inequality in the Middle East and the situation of Muslims worldwide could be brought together and flattened out into simple, apocalyptic conspiracy theories. Altruism, impatience, conspiracy thinking and empathy with Muslims in Syria merged symbiotically with deep feelings of injustice and frustration about their own lives. Thanks to the concrete opportunity of the war in Syria and the propaganda and logistics of groups like Ahrar al-Sham and the Free Syrian Army, those feelings of frustration, powerlessness and guilt could be channelled into armed jihad. Even more so, their own small lives, with all their banal frustrations, became part of a cosmic struggle, an eschatological narrative of the end of days.

⁸ Interview Bilal, 5 February 2020, PI Vught.

⁹ Interview Asaad, 16 January 2020, PI Vught.