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# The street-jihadi spectrum: Marginality, radicalization and resistance to extremism

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## Abstract

For over a decade, jihadi terrorism in Europe, and the recruitment of Europeans to fight for ISIS in Syria, have increasingly involved marginalized youths from a social context of street culture, illegal drug use and crime. Existing theoretical models of the crime-terrorism nexus and radicalization arguably do not sufficiently explain the fluid and dynamic ways by which the street cultural come to be politico-religiously violent. This paper provides a novel retheorization, the street-jihadi spectrum, which is better placed to explain a wide range of behaviours, from the merely stylistic to the spectacularly violent. On the street culture end it includes subcultural play with provocative jihadi symbols and on the jihadi end the terrorism of ‘gangster-jihadists’. We emphasize that the spectrum, consisting of a multitude of confluences of street and jihadi cultures, also includes resistance to jihadism.

## Keywords

Crime-terror, extremism, ISIS, jihadism, radicalization, street culture

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## Introduction

Many jihadi terrorist attacks have been perpetrated by impoverished individuals, with negative experiences of immigration combined with prior experiences of conventional criminality and drug use. This experience of marginality and what has been called 'street culture' has been found in a significant number of foreign fighters in Syria and jihadi recruiters (Basra et al., 2016; Ilan and Sandberg, 2019). Studies of terrorism show that feelings of marginalization and maltreatment are a root cause of extremism in Europe (Hafez and Mullins, 2015), whilst negative interactions with police and security services can be counterproductive and reinforce the will to sedition (see e.g. Verkaik, 2016). Socio-economic marginalization (Anderson, 1999; Wilson, 1987), drug use (Bourgois, 2003), social stigmatization (Bucerius, 2014) and sometimes police brutality (Goffman, 2015) are similarly push-factors for street culture.

Arguably, some young men are first drawn towards street culture, and/or violent jihadism, in a search for the recognition and status that they feel they cannot achieve in mainstream socio-economic life. At the same time, political and religious extremism present opportunities for experiencing excitement, meaning, enjoyment and group affiliation (Cottee and Hayward, 2011; Hemmingsen, 2010; Sunde et al., 2021). Basra and colleagues (2016: 3) describe how criminal and jihadi recruitment today both draw 'from the same pool of people, creating (often unintended) synergies and overlaps that have consequences for how individuals radicalize and operate' (see also Bakker, 2011; Basra and Neumann, 2016; Lakhani, 2020; Rostami et al., 2020). These empirical trends merit greater sociological and criminological understanding and theoretical development.

Whilst advances have been made in adding specificity and rigor into the concept of the crime-terror nexus (see e.g. Basra and Neumann, 2016), and the many similarities and differences across criminal, deviant, gangs and extremist groups (Decker and Pyrooz, 2011, 2015), it remains necessary to better articulate the nuances of a street-jihadi nexus or the ways in which contemporary urban marginality and jihadi terror intersect. The reasons for doing so are many-fold: it allows for researchers, security services and others to better pierce through the noise of radical (seeming) talk and symbols to better distinguish murderous intent from 'cool' performance; it allows for a better understanding of contemporary urban marginality as a driver of terrorist violence (in the rare occasion where it manifests as such); it encourages the development of more organic and meaningful forms of deradicalization; and importantly it would better reflect empirical reality on the streets of contemporary societies.

In this theoretical paper, we introduce and develop what we describe as the street-jihadi spectrum. First, we propose and explicate the theoretical concept, reflecting on the different ways in which street and jihadi subcultures might intersect. Second, we explore intersections of street criminal and politico-religiously motivations, noting both push and pull factors (i.e. socio-economic drivers and affective, subcultural seductions). Third, we set out the ways in which street radicalization can occur in these empirically rare instances. Finally, we reflect on how Islam in street culture usually acts as a desistance promoting force (i.e. promoting the abandonment of 'conventional' criminality) and reveal the less emphasized resistance to extremism that may emerge in criminal environments. Cumulatively we argue that the street-jihadi spectrum represents a

significant advancement on the scholarly understandings of the relationship between contemporary urban marginality and western jihadi symbolism, radicalization processes and violence.

## From crime-terror nexus to street-jihadi spectrum

In an early discussion of the links between criminal and terrorist organizations, Schmid (1996) argues that despite the obvious differences, both kinds of organization are rational actors using intimidation and violence, and producing victims. This straightforward conceptualization of the crime-terror nexus, emphasizing rationality and group-level analysis, proved influential. For example, both terrorist and criminal organizations tend to be conceptualized as sharing operational interests in obtaining weapons and funding, and sharing enemies in the form of the state and the police (Picarelli, 2006). It has been claimed that: ‘criminal and terrorist groups appear to be learning from one another, and adapting to each other’s successes and failures’ (Makarenko, 2004: 129); that ‘organised criminal and terrorist groups have found niches of cooperation and “marriages of convenience”... to operate in an efficient and effective manner’ (Makarenko and Mesquita, 2014: 259); and that a ‘leaderless nexus’ emerging after breakdowns in hierarchical structures in illicit organizations facilitate cooperation between ‘criminals’ and ‘terrorists’ (Dishman, 2005). Hutchinson and O’Malley (2007) accentuate rationality and organizations, arguing that limited access to funding has pressed terrorist groups into crime and that political distinctiveness and ideology has hindered too close cooperation. Makarenko (2004: 129) similarly describe a ‘crime–terror continuum’, where the different points on this continuum include alliances, operational motivations and convergences.

The crime-terror nexus looks different depending on the organizations involved and it varies historically and contextually. There are great differences between the narco-terrorism of Latin America and the ways that organizations such as IRA, PKK and FARC have interacted with criminal groups. A decade ago, Makarenko and Mesquita (2014) pointed out that most crime-terror research had centred on unstable regions, such as Latin-America, the Middle East, Africa and South East Asia. Turning their attention to Europe, they found that the characteristics of the region kept it on ‘one end of the spectrum, focusing on alliances, appropriation of tactics, and integration’ (Makarenko and Mesquita, 2014: 259). Valasik and Phillips (2017: 194) summarize the crime-terror continuum accordingly:

At one end of this continuum exist organised crime groups seeking to maximise profit while avoiding scrutiny. At the other extreme exist terrorist organisations seeking to pursue political or religious objectives, most commonly through violent or threatening means. At various middle-points between these extremes lie theoretical possibilities for transformations where-upon one type of group, whether organised crime or terror, adopts the tactics of the other to accomplish its goals.

When Basra and Neumann (2016; Basra et al., 2016) set out to suggest a *new* crime-terror nexus, they maintained this emphasis on rational actors and instrumental strategies, but focused on Europe and jihadism, and most importantly, expanded the focus from

criminal and terrorist organizations to include the movements of particular *individuals* from criminal to extremist environments. Their starting point was how the crime-terror nexus for a long time had been used to understand the links that terrorist organizations shared with 'conventional' criminal activity: to generate money, to access weapons, to obtain information, to recruit personnel, and to develop expertise in violent conflict. They emphasized that for 'the first time, there is complete alignment between a group like Islamic State and the people who are attracted by its core counter-cultural message of redemption through strength, power, and violence' (Basra and Neumann, 2016: 36).

Their reconceptualization of the crime-terrorism nexus has many advantages, including a narrower focus on a particular historical and geographical context allowing more specificity and detail, and highlighting individual engagements, in addition to group characteristics. We argue that as a theoretical idea it is nevertheless reliant on rationalist and teleological thinking. Both the traditional and the 'new' understanding of the crime-terrorism nexus represent a model that is too simple (see also Alimi et al., 2015; Ruggiero, 2019; Wang, 2010). While maybe able to explain the relationship between crime and terrorism in some particular cases, the emphasis on the 'rationality' of highly organized groups and individuals does not fit the contemporary nature of loosely networked terrorist organizations and street gangs, and the hybrid street-jihadi culture that draw street youths into jihadism in more indirect ways.

The merging of crime and terror seen, for example, in the recruitment for ISIS' war in Syria and Iraq, was based on more than rational cooperation and exchange between organized and defined groups and instead emerged from phenomenological and cultural similarities, shared violent fascinations and the desperation of marginalized populations (usually young men). In Europe, these were often associated with street culture (see e.g. Conti, 2017; Larsen and Jensen, 2019). A large proportion of contemporary European jihadists have a history of street crime (Bakker, 2011; Basra and Neumann, 2016; Lakhani, 2020; Rostami et al., 2020), which can be broadly defined as property, violent and drug crimes that often take place publicly, usually committed by those who are economically, educationally and socially marginalized (Hallsworth, 2005). Existing research demonstrates the extent to which the movement from 'conventional' street crime to violent politico-religious jihad is not linear or rational but instead a haphazard combination of the desperate search for respect, status, meaning and excitement (Ahmed and Pisoiu, 2017; Cottee and Hayward, 2011; Ilan and Sandberg, 2019; Roy, 2017). The phenomenon is not limited to Europe but can be seen in several African countries as well (Jensen and Vigh, 2018; Lewis and Diarra, 2012).

Arguably, the traditional and broad understanding of the crime-terror nexus lacks the cultural, organizational, historical and contextual specificity that is necessary to understand recruitment, radicalization and desistance in contemporary terrorist and extremist organizations. We therefore suggest that instead of continuing the academic pursuit of a broad and all-encompassing crime-terror nexus, more specificity is warranted to advance the understanding of the relationship between crime and terrorism. Moreover, more specified versions such as the *new* crime-terror nexus (Basra and Neumann, 2016) or the gang-terror continuum (Valasik and Phillips, 2017) require more sociological theorizing and understanding of the cultural, social and emotional dimensions of radicalization (in itself a problematic concept, Sedgwick, 2010), in addition to the

more instrumental and organizational dimensions. What we develop here as the *street-jihadi spectrum* speaks to these overlaps, homologies and links between western street culture and violent jihadi subcultures.

Reviewing many years' worth of theoretical and empirical studies on the intersections between jihadism and street culture and criminal environments in Europe, our contribution is based on 'theoretical inference' or abduction. Abductive inferences can be seen as 'a reasonable (working) hypothesis' that 'gives us a clue to reality', but 'always remains on the level of a maybe' (Bertilsson, 2004: 337). Our review of extant literature is wide-ranging, but somewhat selective in terms of supporting our main aim: developing a more sophisticated theoretical conceptualization of the many cultural, social and emotional connections between criminal environments and jihadi extremism in contemporary Europe.

## The street and jihadi end of the spectrum

The concept of street culture has been widely used in the study of urban crime, gangs and youth crime. It broadly refers to the way of life, behaviours, beliefs, values and customs of people living in the most socio-economically marginalized urban contexts marked by personal and structural violence. At the core of street culture are protest (Connell, 1995) or street (Mullins, 2013) masculinist notions of respect that may be achieved through the exhibition of toughness, violent skill, psychic hardness and conspicuous consumption (Anderson, 1999). Studies show that these street codes exist, in some culturally specific form, in disadvantaged urban contexts across the world (Kurtenbach et al., 2021). Street culture operates as a spectrum encompassing at the weak end the styles and symbols of marginalization that can be decontextualized and adopted by anyone and at the strongest end by a hard-core dedication to violence, 'respect' and entrepreneurial criminality (Ilan, 2015). We suggest that the street-jihadi spectrum operates along a similar spectrum where at its street end the styles and symbols of jihadi worlds are blurred and merged into Western subcultures, whereas at its jihadi end the world views and behaviours of former 'gangsters' manifest in brutal (at least nominally) politico-religious violence.

Researchers and commentators have described a new 'jihadi cool' (Barbara, 2015; Cottee, 2015; Sageman, 2011) or 'pop-jihad' (Dantschke, 2013), which is at the core of the street-jihadi spectrum. These 'aesthetic assemblages' (Crone, 2014) demonstrate a fascination with rugged masculinity, ruthlessness and destructive power wrapped in the visual grammar of violent Islamist causes (Jensen and Larsen, 2021). The preferences can be seen in the type of dress that jihadists typically wear, a rebel 'military style' combining 'the allure of toughness' (Pisoiu, 2019: 195) with the radical symbolism, for example, of a *kaffiyeh*. Cottee (2015) describes the sartorial mix as a combination of street-style clothing such as baseball caps and large jewellery with traditional religious garb. Evident on recruits to violence in Syria (where the militaristic elements are understandably favoured) and in certain stylistic flourishes (e.g. calligraphy, iconography) on streetwear, the sartorial grammar of the street-jihadi spectrum is ubiquitous. As such by itself it is no indication of any kind of violent tendency, rather it is a peripheral aspect of a wider socio-cultural phenomenon which as will later become clear, can explain certain aspects of contemporary jihadi recruitment.

The fusion of jihadi and street styles at the street end of the spectrum are best understood as a form of subcultural practice as they are predominantly concerned with modes of self-presentation, taste, consumption and leisure (e.g. Hall and Jefferson, 2006). As such, they say something to the experience of marginalization. In line with contemporary understandings of subcultural phenomena, these should not however always be viewed as strongly indicative of a clear political stance (Dimou and Ilan, 2018), rather they represent one set of images and practices amidst the wide range of stylistic choices available to younger people grappling with a more fluid and fragmentary sense of identity in late-modernity (Kahn-Harris and Bennett, 2004; Muggleton and Weinzierl, 2003). Sometimes the inclusion of jihadi symbolism in street cultural environments may reflect a real fascination with religious extremism, but far more often it is better understood as the playful display of provocative symbols (see Gelder, 2005). Much like when anti-Nazi punks provocatively embraced the swastika, the deliberate courting of outrage can in part explain street culture's embrace of images of hyper-violence, and indeed its flirtations with jihadi aesthetics. Where suggesting a capacity for irrational levels of extreme violence is a noted performative element of street culture (see Ilan, 2015), a reference to jihad in gangster-rap (Jensen et al., 2022), or strategically presenting oneself as a jihadist simply to gain a profile with the security services (Hemmingsen, 2010: 14), become subculturally logical as part of the creative portrayal of an oppositional self.

Subculture, moreover, provides a means for practitioners to negotiate inherent contradictions and dissonances within an overarching culture. Thus, where street culture celebrates the struggles of poverty inasmuch as the desire for fantastic wealth, jihadi attackers in Europe grapple with biographies that mix hedonistic partying and material obsession alongside austere spirituality and ascetic discipline. For the most part, the street end of the street-jihadi spectrum allows for these contradictions to play out at the level of symbols, whereas increasingly severe radical beliefs and the risks for extremist violent behaviour exist at the jihadi end of the spectrum. Rugged masculinity, anti-establishment sensibility, images of violence and appeals to higher loyalties: there are a wealth of cultural homologies (Levi-Strauss, 1963; Willis, 1978) between the street and jihad end, most evidently seen towards the middle of the spectrum.

The centre of the spectrum is characterized by increasing investment in the development of a particular identity, a fusion of street culture and violent Islamist terrorism embodied by what the French police have described as 'gangster-jihadists' (The Guardian, 2018). These levels involve significantly more than the mere sporting of or flirting with jihadi iconography, and shared symbolism, and suggest a step towards concretizing a commitment to extremist ideology and supportive activities if not necessarily political violence itself. The middle of the spectrum is the realm of genuine identification as both 'gangster' and 'jihadist' and a motivation to, or willingness for concrete activity in support of terrorist violence. This can include participation in political support, fundraising and/or recruitment while still being involved in more traditional crime and street culture (Linge et al., 2022). It is more than sympathy or stylistic adoption to jihadist style – it is an observable change in identity and action, but always with a foot in both camps.

This mid-level hybrid identity contains tensions. Alienated, young, second-generation immigrants must contend with the strains that emerge from varied estrangement both



from the traditions of their parent cultures and success and integration within their present countries of residence (Truong, 2018). Their lives are highly fractured between a religious world and a highly secular one (Walklate and Mythen, 2016). Nesser (2016) has emphasized the participation of 'misfits' in jihadi terrorist networks, whilst Cottee (2011) has noted the extent to which terrorist attackers can be identified as 'losers'. Often with histories of exclusion, neglect and conflict with the authorities, commitment to a holy cause serves to elevate their identity beyond others who simply embrace street culture. The fusion of identity adds street credibility to the jihadi identity and the appearance of substance to that of the street.

Given, however, the existence of the stylistic 'play-space' at the street end of the spectrum, the aspiring 'gangster-jihadi' would ultimately need to demonstrate a level of status and activity beyond that which could be dismissed as posing. The hybrid 'gangster-jihadi' is animated by numerous motivations in both street and politico-violent spaces, the homologies between which are considered in the next section. Ultimately many of the dispositions and qualities valued in street culture have a value in the world of jihad (Ilan and Sandberg, 2019). However, a complex set of 'embodied transformations' (Crone, 2016) are required for the gangster to turn jihadi. Hybrid identity arguably represents a mid-way stage that might mark a linear journey between the identities, but need not. It may represent the peak of a marginalized individual's involvement in jihad, or indeed be 'skipped out' altogether.

The jihadi end of the spectrum includes increased levels of political support, fundraising and/or recruitment to extremism, up to a point where this has become the main purpose of life and source of identity. In these cases, the engagement with street culture may have been reduced to a stylistic 'play-space' (in the same way as expressions of jihadi culture is at the street end), or more strategically used to recruit participants. There are for example many street cultural aspects observable amongst some of the western recruits who travelled to Syria to fight for ISIS. Their *lingua franca* is a fusion of street slang with a few phrases from religious Arabic, lines from rap music and gangster films, all wired together with the youthful patter of social media phraseology. Moreover, despite existing as the epitome of western, secular, consumer culture (which jihadism might be understood as opposing) elements of the visual and acoustic repertoires of movies, music and videogames, heavy with references to street culture, are evident in a range of media and practices associated with groups like ISIS. Some jihadi organizations officially condemn music entirely and yet some of their younger members are rap musicians or listens to jihadi-rap (Jensen et al., 2022; Pieslak, 2017). Jihadi photography pays tribute to western superheroes (Ostovar, 2017), IS videos reference popular movies and video-games, with IS indeed producing their own video games (Al-Rawi, 2018; Lakomy, 2019; Pennington and Krona, 2019). This western iconography, itself evident throughout street culture, and indeed direct references to street culture itself is abundant in IS magazines *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah*, which directly appeal to disaffected young people in a manner similar to lifestyle advertising (Andersen and Sandberg, 2018; Sunde et al., 2021).

Ultimately at the utmost jihadi end of the street-jihadi spectrum is the perpetration of an act of political violence. Such destructive behaviour marks entry into this qualitatively different realm of behaviour. Not only is more intense motivation required to take life in

the name of a politico-religious cause but its committal stains identity in a manner that is near indelible. Whilst an individual can become disenchanted with the cause, and remorseful for their actions, drifting away from the identity of the street-jihadi terrorist, they will no-doubt contend with the identity of 'former terrorist' long after their violent intent ceases.

Our conceptualization of a street-jihadi spectrum is inspired by the new crime-terror nexus (Basra and Neumann, 2016) and the gang-terror continuum (Valasik and Phillips, 2017), but differs in that people, culture and emotions are at the core, instead of organizations, tactics and goals – although this is part of it as well. We also draw inspiration from Hegghammer's (2017: 5) work on jihadi culture, but question his suggestion that culture is not 'functionally essential to the military effort'. We argue that the cultural hybridity of the street-jihadi spectrum is crucial to understand military and terrorist recruitment, tactics and efforts. Importantly, the spectrum should not be conceptualized as unidirectional as individuals can move, drift and jump between main categories. We also recognize that there will always be a certain amount of interpretation and ambiguity necessary to apply a concept such as this, but its utility in distinguishing murderous motivation from 'cool' performance is important.

## **Street and jihadi violence: Homologies of motivation**

Both street-criminal and jihadi cultures appear to offer the subject an interpretative frame and practical route through which the experiences of socio-economic marginality can be addressed. As such there are significant homologies in the ways in which both cultures contribute to 'push' (dispositional) and 'pull' (seductive) motivations towards violent crime. Street culture orientates the marginalized subject to embrace alternative forms of recognition – for instance, through a 'conspicuous display of independence' (Shover and Honaker, 1992: 284). As opposed to accepting the status of socio-economic 'loser', street subjects construct themselves as canny masters-of-risk whether in terms of physical violence (Anderson, 1999), drug abuse (Bourgois, 2003), social stigmatization (Bucurius, 2014) and police brutality (Goffman, 2015). The rewards for success in this lifestyle are illicit income and opportunities for hedonistic pleasure (Wright and Decker, 1997), humour and creativity (Liebow, 2003; Sandberg and Tutenges, 2019). Immersion in street culture, as much as in extremist violence can resolve 'existential frustrations' (Cottee and Hayward, 2011), explaining the homologous motivations that have been shown to draw (mostly) marginalized men into terrorism.

A sense of grievance over perceived unjust circumstances is a key factor motivating violent radicalization (Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2010; Hafez and Mullins, 2015; Ahmed, 2023). Such grievance may come from being poor, having bleak prospects on the job market, disagreeing with political developments and being subjected to stigmatization, racism and exclusion (Kepel, 2004; Khosrokhavar, 2017). Radicalization discourse and related police repression can further add to this exclusion and marginalization (Heath-Kelly, 2013). Violent extremism arguably provides a cathartic expulsion of pent-up disaffection and an opportunity to reclaim a sense of significance in life (Bäck et al., 2018; Kruglanski et al., 2014). In a manner analogous to the ways in which

street culture allows for the realization of a sense of 'respect', jihadi culture arguably offers the opportunity to redress negative status judgements and the lived sense of powerlessness. Illustratively, in a recent study Nilsson and Esholdt (2022) point out that with the decline of ISIS, gangs are now pulling in youths who a few years ago might have found greater appeal in Salafi-jihadist environments. Such observations indicate that jihadists are not only recruited from street cultural environments, but that the cultural homology also means that these different subcultures can be seen as competing for the same marginalized youths.

Second, jihadist groups provide opportunities for extreme experiences, ranging from the prolonged excitement of living underground and planning attacks to the rush of violent actions against civilians or enemy soldiers (Cottee and Hayward, 2011: 966–972). Valuing such experiences resonates with those embedded in street culture who place high value on embodying violent skills (Crone, 2016), having a personal repertoire of violent stories (Sandberg et al., 2015) and being fearless, cool and 'ice cold' in the face of danger (Kalkan, 2018). Indeed, at the stronger end of street culture, such as within organized gangs, some individuals willingly undergo severe pain and injury to acquire group recognition or membership (Anderson, 1999: 86–87; Collins, 2008: 74). Jihadism not only resonates with this orientation but indeed in Europe where guns and explosives are in short supply it may present as an appealing option for those seeking violent excitement beyond ordinary street violence to experience the 'lunatic intensity' of terrorism and combat (Cottee and Hayward, 2011: 968).

Third, jihadism provides a stage for exhibitionistic antinomianism – allowing individuals to signify their rejection of/from western society in the most overt and visible ways. ISIS and other jihadist groups through their exploitation of new and traditional media have made their organizations and practices visibly synonymous with the most violent repudiation of those things that liberal capitalist democracy seems to value (Juergensmeyer, 2003; Pennington and Krona, 2019). Street culture is oppositional in that it emerges from exclusion from mainstream socio-economic life (although it may share many of the values of capitalism). As such it can value visible rejections of the exclusive society. This partly explains why street youths tend to converge in inner-city 'staging areas', close to 'the action', where they can be seen, show off and be respected for being there (Anderson, 1999: 78, 99; Collins, 2004: 275–277). Here, they can gain a reputation of being 'badass' (Katz, 1988) through countercultural presentation, intimidating demeanour, and risk-taking behaviours. For those who wish to take it further, becoming a violent extremist can be a way to be perceived as the ultimate badass, 'the worst of the worst' (Hemmingsen, 2010: 106) who take pleasure in injecting chaos into other people's world (see Katz, 1988: 99) to the extent that they may be capable of commanding the shocked attention of the entire world (Wiktorowicz, 2005: 4).

Fourth, jihadist groups promise community, both in this world and the next. This community is promoted as superior to being part of a vilified out-group of nonbelievers (Husain, 2007: 36). The belief is that dedicated insiders will be granted access to paradise, whereas outsiders will have an afterlife of immense suffering (Halverson et al., 2011). On a basic level, street cultural groupings often simply trace patterns of friendship and peer solidarity. This sense of group membership and superiority is vital for violent subcultures

and gangs of every stripe (see e.g. Fraser, 2017). It may facilitate out-group aggression and inspire 'heroic' acts of self-sacrifice for the group while preventing insider information from leaking to outsiders (Rosenfeld et al., 2003). Also, perpetrating violence as a group can solidify relationships to the point that group members become willing to die for each other (Junger, 2010). A terrorist group can embody similar processes where there is a permanent threat of 'capture or death... creating a powerful sense of identity and "in-group love" among its members' (Cottee and Hayward, 2011: 974; see also Attran, 2010). For people feeling that they are generally unwanted (Bucerius, 2014) and socially nullified (Vigh, 2016), the prospect of inclusion in a tightly knit group that appears to value them is alluring.

Lastly, jihadist symbols, narratives and cultural codes (Halverson et al., 2011) resonate with those found in street culture. For example, to fight and win against an overwhelming enemy is a central plotline in jihadi storytelling (e.g. the story of the battle of Badr), which corresponds with key stories in street culture about underdog gangs who rise to the top against all odds. The notion of 'fighting the world' is central both in street culture, gangs (Kynoch, 2005) and jihadi subculture. Moreover, jihadi narratives about the hypocrite, the 'al-Munafiqun', bear much resemblance to the condemnatory street narratives about 'snitches' (Rosenfeld et al., 2003), snakes, 'frenemies' and haters. Similarly, depictions of the masculine Muslim warrior (Sageman, 2008) have many parallels with the ideals of masculinity that are promoted in street culture (Sunde et al., 2021). There are also overlaps between certain strands of street culture and jihadism when it comes to the celebration of horror (Cottee, 2019) and the documentation of violence for self-promotion and propaganda (Pennington and Krona, 2019).

Jihadist groups also offer a 'redemption narrative' (Basra and Neumann, 2016: 28–29), suggesting that conversion and commitment to jihadism will wash away past sins. Such promises of forgiveness and future glory can have a powerful impact on people who have lived a tough street life (Roy, 2017). Some of this more specifically religious dimension of Salafi-jihadism has arguably had a particular draw for women. While many of the mechanisms and homologies we describe above appeal to both men and women, Esholdt (2022) contend that among those who travelled to join ISIS, opposition to Western beauty ideals and superficiality, and a patriarchal gender order, was a 'female-specific' attraction of Salafi-jihadism. This is also a reminder that not all motivations for street culture and extremism can be framed as homologies and that the relationship between the two is complex. While consumerism, promiscuity and emphasis on looks is characteristic of street culture, and contrasts with Salafi-jihadism, street culture often adheres to traditional gender roles.

These homologies between valued traits, experiences, images and scripts reveal similarities in some of the factors that motivate street crime on the one hand and terrorist violence on the other. Whether 'push' motivations (around feeling a lack of alternative) or 'pull' (where the criminal activity appeals in itself) – there are clear commonalities between the factors that can inform participation in violent street culture and jihad. Such subcultural and motivational homologies do not seem lost on recruiters, where there is the possibility to strategically deploy the resonances to reach 'misfits' (Nesser, 2016) and street criminals and to produce cultural products that seek to encourage 'self-recruitment'.

## Stairway, puzzle – or spectrum

So far, we have emphasized the possible contributions of a street-jihadi spectrum for the crime-terror nexus literature, including a better understanding of the cultural dimension of radicalization (a hybrid culture), how individuals move physically, ideologically and stylistically between violent environments, and how they to a greater or lesser extent are involved simultaneously in different ‘oppositional’ and/or extremist cultures and groups. We also argue that a street-jihadi spectrum approach has a lot to offer existent models of radicalization, such as those based on staircase and puzzle metaphors. We argue that the spectrum acts as a metaphor with greater explanatory purchase and accuracy.

The linear ‘staircase model’ of radicalization has been influential (Moghaddam, 2005), but also much criticized (Lygre et al., 2011). Some critics have suggested the alternative metaphor of the ‘puzzle’ (Hafez and Mullins, 2015). This model conceptualizes radicalization as a process that emerges from different overlapping factors which, when taken together, may push an individual toward extremism (see also Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2010). First, a key factor that may fuel radicalization in this model is a sense of disappointment, dissatisfaction and grievance over unjust circumstances. These negative emotions may emerge out of situations of being poor, having bleak prospects on the job market, strongly disagreeing with political developments and being subjected to stigmatization, racism or exclusion (e.g. Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2010; Kepel, 2004; Roy, 2017; Sageman, 2008). Thus, the first element of the ‘puzzle’ of radicalization is arguably shared with street culture.

Second key factors in processes of radicalization are extremist narratives and ideologies (Halverson et al., 2011). More than influencing what people think, narratives and ideologies can arouse people’s emotions, galvanize feelings around political issues, and gather multitudes around a common cause, including violence (Presser, 2018). For example, extremist ideology can be said to provide a ‘tool kit’ of discursive resources (Hafez and Mullins, 2015: 968) that highlight various social problems, the causes of these problems and the actions that need to be undertaken to solve them (Hogan and Haltinner, 2015). Street culture tends to lack such grand ideological narratives (Ilan, 2015). For street youth, extremist narratives can thus be particularly attractive, since they explicitly and elegantly address the grievances that drove them towards street culture in the first place.

The third factor in the puzzle of radicalization is social networks, which often play a key role when a person or group becomes radicalized (e.g. Bakker, 2006; Carlsson et al., 2020). People who become radicalized tend to do so through social bonding with extremist friends, family members or charismatic recruiters (Nesser, 2016). The typical pattern is that individuals go through the process of radicalization, not on their own, but together with a group of peers (Cottee, 2011; Sageman, 2011). Networks are similarly important in street culture, facilitating collective action and forming a resource that individuals can draw upon (Ilan, 2013). Street youths can meet jihadi recruiters in street cultural environments such as prisons (Silke, 2014), street drug markets (Tutenges and Sandberg, 2022), or they can know them from earlier, growing up in the same neighbourhoods (Truong, 2018). Combined with the many cultural homologies between jihadi and street cultures, this mean that such

networks can at times be understood as 'enabling environments', the fourth piece of Hafez and Mullins' (2015) radicalization puzzle.

As opposed to the staircase model, this more flexible, sporadic and fluid view of radicalization resonates more with post-subculture theory (Kahn-Harris and Bennett, 2004; Muggleton and Weinzierl, 2003), which emphasizes the contingency and fluidity of lifestyles, rituals, claimed symbols and narratives. The puzzle model still does not explain so well the modes of sudden and partial radicalization that have been observed in the case of many jihadi attackers with a background in street culture (e.g. in Toulouse and Montauban in 2012 and in Copenhagen 2015). It also fails to explain cases where radicalization emerged suddenly, as if by a whim or impulse, or when individuals move in and out of jihadi and street cultural behaviours over and again (see e.g. Cottee, 2016). 'Osama in the morning and Tupac in the night', is one observation from a fieldwork in Guinea-Bissau, highlighting how it is possible to 'engage tentatively and intermittently with fundamentalist ideas and radical environments' (Utas and Vigh, 2017: 24).

The notion of the street-jihadi spectrum has implications for the ways in which the radicalization of socio-economically marginalized subjects in the west might be understood. The street jihadi spectrum metaphor challenges staircase models by highlighting that radicalization rarely exists in a unidirectional or exclusively linear form. As opposed to the puzzle metaphor it also suggests that radicalization can happen suddenly and partially. There are however, limits to such cultural fluidity. While street-jihadists may deradicalize, their habitus will remain entwined with the street culture in which it formed (Ilan and Sandberg, 2019). At the strong end of the street cultural spectrum, the experience of war or spectacular violence can for example boost the reputation of the de-radicalized street-jihadi if they return to the street milieu. Deradicalization alone might thus not be enough as a response to the street-jihadi who might return to conventional crime and violence with enhanced capacities and reputation. For street youths who have radicalized, deradicalization should be aimed, not only at turning them away from extremist rhetoric and organizations, but also away from their violent and criminal street lives prior to radicalization. This is of course a harder task, but arguably one where criminological desistance theory and research (e.g. Maruna, 2001; Maruna et al., 2006) may have a lot to offer. It also implies that both those theorizing radicalization processes in street culture and those working in the field of (de)radicalization must have some basic knowledge of street culture, criminology and the sociology of deviance and marginalization in addition to knowledge of terrorism, radicalization, religion and political ideology. Arguably, the street-jihadi spectrum can be of help for both of these groups.

## **Resistance to jihadism**

Importantly, whilst much of this paper has been concerned with exploring the links between street culture and jihadism, the far most common relationship between Islam and crime and the street and radicalization, is that the former factors mitigate against the latter ones. Studies of religion and desistance have repeatedly classed the development of religious belief and identity as one of the factors that can explain transitions away from criminal lifestyles and reoffending (Adamczyk et al., 2017; Maruna et al., 2006). Indeed, Webster and Qasim (2018) and Wilkinson et al. (2021) have found that practising Islam in prison supports

'rehabilitation' and Linge (2023) demonstrates how aspects of faith feature in the 'desistance narratives' of Muslims who turn away from crime. Islamic practice is antipathetic to 'conventional' criminality and those who profess adherence to the faith whilst offending unsurprisingly tend to experience or exhibit dissonance (Bucerius, 2014; Qasim, 2018). Despite this, western concerns about Islam have tended to be haunted by fears of crime and jihadi terrorism (Jackson, 2007; Jones et al., 2019), which in turn has had adverse consequences in terms of anti-Muslim hostility (Mason and Poynting, 2007) and securitization (Awan, 2012; Hussain and Baguley, 2012).

There is evidence indeed, to understand conventional Islam as a deradicalizing force. Hamm (2009) concluded that a movement rooted in traditional Muslim practice had become an important de-radicalising force in the Californian prison system, whereas Norwegian Muslims who eschewed radicalization cited their knowledge of religion as countering factor (Ellefsen and Sandberg, 2022). A study of young Muslims' views of jihadi organizations further demonstrated that they tended to view extremist groups as 'criminal', tainted by pathology and to be rejected (Sandberg et al., 2018). Young Muslims in that study argued at length that jihadists were 'brainwashed', 'crazy' and 'psychopaths'. Ultimately their argument was that jihadists had a flawed grasp of and commitment to Islam, thus offering strong resistance to jihadism. Moreover, what they saw as the many personal, symbolic and sub-cultural links between street culture and jihadism made extremist Islamic beliefs less attractive to them, demonstrating another consequence of the street-jihadi spectrum.

Street culture can thus be antithetical to radicalization in a broad range of contexts. To understand the contradictions of a scenario whereby street culture elides with radicalization sometimes, but much more frequently hinders it, neither the staircase nor the puzzle model of radicalization is ideal. Instead it is better to conceptualize the many meetings between jihadism and street culture as spectrum of subcultural convergences or confluences. Kupatadze and Argomaniz (2019, see also Argomaniz and Bermejo, 2019) distinguish between functional, financial and ideological confluences, while Linge et al. (2022) expand the approach in terms of criminological theory, and differentiate between spatial, embodied and narrative confluences. Unlike staircase or puzzle models, the notion of confluences opens up consideration of important differences between extremist and criminal groups (e.g. Decker and Pyrooz, 2011; Pyrooz et al., 2017) as well as where confrontation and resistance to extremism emerge in settings that might otherwise have seemed suitable for extremist radicalization.

Recent empirical research into the crime-terror nexus has revealed this multifaceted relationship between street and jihadi cultures. Street cultural youth in a recent drug market ethnography were clear in their rejection of ISIS and other extremists (Tutenges and Sandberg, 2022). For those young people selling drugs on the street (and we might assume analogous attitudes in many street cultural populations), there was a general acceptance of and attachment to existing nation-states, a sense that terrorists target innocents indiscriminately, that they are thus lacking in masculinist honour and commitment to a respect-based 'code of the street'. Similarly, slightly older Muslims previously committed to street culture and crime, talked about how they had been exposed to jihadism, but mostly rejected it (Linge et al., 2022). The confluences of street culture and jihadism sometimes led to playful uses of jihadi

symbols and radicalization, but at other times to fierce opposition and rejection of extremism. As such, these confluences in the street-jihadi spectrum were not stairs or puzzles, but instead a spectrum of positions characterized by continuous capriciousness and ambiguity.

## **Conclusion**

We have showed that it is useful to explore a wider range of behaviours to better make sense of what is ultimately a wide and nuanced phenomenon. Returning to the street-jihadi-spectrum idea, it is important to be cautious in interpreting the presence of extremist symbols within street culture as any indication of 'real' radicalization (i.e. as 'steps' towards becoming involved in violent extremism). Instead it is worth recognizing that subcultural and extremist affiliations may be fluid, especially among marginalized, attention and excitement-seeking youths. The spectrum has a street and jihadi end, and a multitude of positions and connections in between. Moreover, Islamic beliefs certainly play a part in jihadi radicalization, but in general they are best conceived as an anti-criminogenic force. Similarly, while street culture can foster radicalization, based on research on more general street populations (and not those 'gangsters' that turn 'jihadi'), it seems as if it more often mobilizes resistance and opposition to extremism.

So far, we have emphasized how the street-jihadi spectrum affects street youths and jihadi organizations, and their interaction. Importantly however, the street-jihadi spectrum also has impacts outside of these environments. Crime-terror spectrum studies should be attentive to the possibilities of cross-contamination between categories. For political or risk management reasons political violence can be classed as 'merely criminal' and criminal milieus can be represented as potential hot beds of terrorism. For marginalized populations who have traditionally experienced 'over policing and under protection' – which is in itself a marginalizing force, there is the risk of exposure to ever more caustic forms of social control. Being suspected of terrorism does not only come with a much greater stigma, but also brings in a completely different array of police mandates, controls and technologies of surveillance. This has the potential to deepen and strengthen street cultures and to fortify the forces that both push and pull individuals with a background in poverty, marginality and crime into the hands of jihadi recruiters.

It might instead be recognized, as we argue, that whatever symbolic homologies seem to exist between street culture and jihadism, the more typical scenario by far is that street culture, with all its symbolic infiltration of pop culture, tends to be a de-radicalizing force. The real and symbolic association to the street is thus better conceived as an ambiguous resource for jihadi and other extremist organizations. Moreover, jihadist groups' association with, and recruitment from, street culture may make mainstream mobilization more difficult and force recruitment to stay within marginalized populations. The association with strong street cultural tropes such as hardcore drug use, conventional crime and self-serving violence taint attempts of extremist organizations to cloak themselves in righteousness. While our study has emphasized jihadism, such insights can easily be transferred to right-wing or other forms of political or religious extremism, which also has an appeal to people in gangs and street environments (Reid and Valasik, 2018; Valasik and Reid, 2019).




We argue that the street-jihadi spectrum can be a useful concept for unpicking the complexities of the relationship between marginality, street subcultures and jihadi extremism in contemporary Western societies. It explains the full gamut of phenomena from 'harmless posturing' and empty sloganeering, to embodying identity without consequential action and ultimately to the realization of violent identities. The street-jihadi spectrum eschews simplistic, deterministic models and explanations in favour of a view that recognizes the potential for ideological and cultural fluidity amongst those who are committed to violent behaviour more generally. It challenges the dominant emphasis on groups and rational strategies in the crime-terror nexus literature and highlights instead how a hybrid street-jihadi culture draws street youths into extremism more circuitously. Furthermore, the street jihadi spectrum contests staircase models of radicalization by questioning its inherent unidirectionality, and puzzle metaphors by emphasizing that radicalization sometimes happens partially and in highly unexpected ways. Most importantly, and as opposed to nearly all theorizing in this field, the street-jihadi spectrum starts from the many confluences of criminal and extremist networks and culture, instead of from individuals and groups that are radicalized or labelled extremists. Our theorization incorporates how these confluences can lead to radicalization, but also explores and includes in the analysis those many instances when they do not.

The street-jihadi spectrum approach derives strength from integrating insights from criminology and sociology with disciplines more typically associated with the study of extremism and radicalization, such as political science, psychology, history and religious studies. It identifies symbolic playfulness and purposive subcultural provocations as such, and cultural hybrids that are more incidental, without diminishing analyses that can clarify the existence of security threats where they do exist. Including an insight that street-jihadi confluences have multiple outcomes, the street-jihadi spectrum concept also recognizes the resistance towards extremism that emerges in marginal street environments.

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