

# Understanding Islamic Radicalization

How the North Caucasian Field Research  
Can Enrich Theory

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## **Abstract**

This article addresses two main issues: 1) the research progress in radicalization theory and its development trends; 2) the relevance of field research of Islamic communities in the North Caucasus for the radicalization theory. The author maintains that different conceptions of radicalization, from simple to more complex and most comprehensive ones, have failed to cope with the key problems inherent in this approach. One of the main ways to enrich the radicalization theory is to expand its information basis, including through field research. The results of field research conducted in the North Caucasus by the author suggest the need to look closely at the role of macro processes in understanding radicalization; at religious radicalism as a “commodity” not only on the religious market, but also on

the market of ideologies and youth cultures; and at competition among different religious ideologies as a mechanism that can turn mutual relations between the opponents and proponents of violent actions into a “two-way street,” and not a “conveyor belt” or “firewall.”

**Keywords:** Islam, fundamentalism, root causes of terrorism, radicalization, ideology, rational choice, North Caucasus.

The problem of radicalization motivated by fundamentalist interpretations of Islam has been faced by countries around the world for several decades. And there are no reasons to say it may be resolved in the near future. The search for effective measures to resist radical ideas and religion-motivated violence rests upon a certain theoretical foundation, to a large extent on ideas formulated within the “terrorism studies,” a trend in Western science that has taken shape over the last two decades. But is this academic groundwork sufficient for finding efficient approaches to resolving the problem at least in the long term? And can an analysis of the situation in the North Caucasus somehow promote progress in conceptualizing radicalism and in drafting concrete political measures to resist it? This article attempts to find answers to these questions.

### **THE TRAPS OF THE RADICALIZATION THEORY**

Early theories of radicalization began to appear in Western science in the mid-2000s, following a series of large-scale terrorist attacks in the United States and European countries. However, this was not the first time the issue was addressed. Starting from the 1960s, researchers studied the problems of political violence and terrorism within the framework of a general trend called the “root causes of terrorism.” However, at that time the problems associated with the so-called “Islamic terrorism” were not yet so urgent as they are now. Experts were primarily concerned about the extreme leftist groups in Europe that used terrorist methods, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam that massively trained teenagers as “suicide bombers,” and

the adherents of the Shining Path movement in Peru, notorious for boiling peasants alive.

This period was marked by a striving for global theories that would be able to cover all factors influencing the formation of incentives for terrorist activity, from structural conditions at the macro level to catalysts and specific reasons for carrying out terrorist attacks. “Terrorists view the context as permissive, making terrorism a viable option. In a material sense, the means are placed at their disposal by environment. Circumstances also provide the terrorists with compelling reasons for seeking political change. Finally, an event occurs that snaps terrorists’ patience with the regime. Government action is now seen as intolerably unjust... For the terrorist, the end may now excuse the means” (Crenshaw, 1981, p. 385).

The excessive breadth and abstractness of approaches that made their practical use impossible were the main reasons for the criticism of such works. Critics noted that the set of variables included in the proposed models was actually arbitrary and not confirmed by anything except that the results of the analysis made it possible to build some logical chain. They saw no evidence that this set of causes inevitably led to terrorist activity (Van de Voorde, 2016).

Another approach, widespread during this period, failed to live up to expectations, too. Within its framework, researchers tried, using econometric methods, to correlate terrorist activity with only one fundamental factor, such as poverty, education, or the political structure of the state. However, it was not possible to obtain any consistent results: attempts to apply different models to different cases produced inconsistent and sometimes conflicting conclusions. Nonetheless, all this does not give grounds to assert that the study of the “root causes of terrorism” has yielded no serious scientific results at all.

*Firstly*, a negative result is a result in its own right. Studies of this period proved the futility of a simplified understanding of the sources of terrorism and helped realize the complexity of the phenomenon. “Terrorists may be deprived and uneducated people, or affluent and well educated. Even if young males are usually highly over-represented in most terrorist organizations, one also finds terrorists among people

of both sexes and of most ages. Terrorism occurs in rich as well as in poor countries; in the modern industrialized world and in less developed areas; during a process of transition and development, prior to or after such a process; in former colonial states and in independent ones; and in established democracies as well as in less democratic regimes” (Lia, 2004, p. 8). The important conclusion was the almost unanimous rejection of the so-called psychopathological theory—the delusion that terrorists are persons with deviant behavior resulting from mental disorders (Crenshaw, 1998; Lia, 2004; Berrebi, 2009). And although the spread of “lone wolf terrorism” later brought the issue to the forefront again (for the case of Anders Breivik, see Ravndal, 2012), this does not overturn the importance of the general conclusion.

*Secondly*, during this period discussions about the motivation for terrorist actions were in progress (their content remains of interest today). The leading researchers of the root causes of terrorism generally recognized that terrorists’ actions were rational, although this rationality may not be immediately obvious to onlookers. “Terrorists may follow their own rationalities based on extremist ideologies or particular terrorist logics, but they are not irrational” (Bjorgo, 2005, p. 257). Martha Crenshaw interprets their choice as the outcome of a learning process that follows a review of available options: “...terrorism is often the last in a sequence of choices. It represents the outcome of a learning process. Experience in opposition provides radicals with information about the potential consequences of their choices. Terrorism is likely to be a reasonably informed choice among available alternatives, some tried unsuccessfully” (Crenshaw, 1998, p. 11).

*Thirdly*, important conclusions were formulated about the differences between the causes of terrorism and the reasons for its sustainability. The latter included, above all, the so-called vicious circle of violence. In the course of violent actions, heroes and martyrs appear on each side of the confrontation to make further struggle worthwhile. As a result, violence becomes self-replicating and gains momentum (Bjorgo, 2005; Silke, 2005). However, other factors, too, can support terrorist activities. Conflict situations can create opportunities for highly profitable criminal activities. Or terrorists simply have no way

out—the alternatives to terrorist activities are death, torture, or long imprisonment (Bjorgo, 2005).

In the 2000s, this problem began to be scrutinized anew within the framework of the radicalization concept, which replaced the “root causes of terrorism” theory. The new approach focuses on the so-called Islamic terrorism and the mechanisms that help filter out terrorists from the mass of Muslims. Its authors put forward quite practical tasks—to equip counterterrorist structures with analytical tools that would increase the effectiveness of their fight against terrorism. A comprehensive review of relevant theories is impossible to make within one article (the reviews worth mentioning include Koehler, 2017; Van de Voorde, 2016; Kundnani, 2015; Schmid, 2013; Davis and Cragin, 2009, with the authors expressing very different opinions about the validity and efficiency of this approach). Yet it would be reasonable to illustrate the main ideas and trends in the development of this approach with several most characteristic examples.

At early stages, various step-by-step models—“pyramids” or “ladders” showing the gradual progression of the bearer of certain Islamic views towards terrorist activities—were extremely popular as part of the radicalization theory. Among the most indicative ones is a model developed by experts at the New York Police Department (the NYPD model) and summarized in a report (Silber and Bhatt, 2007). Let us look at its main features.

**Firstly**, according to this model, ideology is declared the unique reason that pushes Muslims to violence. “What motivates young men and women, born or living in the West, to carry out ‘autonomous jihad’ via acts of terrorism against their host countries? The answer is ideology” (Silber and Bhatt, 2007, p. 16). Importantly, although the authors consider the Salafi-jihadist ideology only as one of the many trends in Salafism, as its militant interpretation, the model clearly traces the link between radicalization and Salafi Islam in general. Salafi mosques are seen as “incubators of extremism,” where future jihadists receive an incentive for further radicalization.

**Secondly**, according to the authors of the model, the process of radicalization consists of four phases:

1. Pre-radicalization—life situation before an individual is exposed to and adopts Salafi jihadism as his own ideology.
2. Self-identification—gradual study of the jihadist ideology and the first contacts with like-minded individuals. During this phase, any traumatic event—loss of job, discrimination, death of a close relative—can work as a catalyst for “religious seeking” and “cognitive opening,” or “crisis, which shakes one’s certitude in previously held beliefs” (Ibid, p. 6).
3. Indoctrination—a phase where an individual progressively intensifies his beliefs, wholly adopts Salafi jihadism, and becomes fully committed to militant action.
4. Jihadization—when a member of the cluster accepts his individual duty to participate in jihad and “self-designates himself as a holy warrior.”

Each phase is characterized by a certain set of rigid indicators that can serve as a tool for identifying potential terrorists.

**Thirdly**, everyone who has embarked on the path of radicalization is perceived as a threat: “It is useful to think of the radicalization process in terms of a funnel. Entering the process does not mean one will progress through all four stages and become a terrorist. However, it also does not mean that if one doesn’t become a terrorist, he or she is no longer a threat. Individuals who have been radicalized but are not jihadists may serve as mentors and agents of influence to those who might become the terrorists of tomorrow” (Silber and Bhatt, 2007, p. 10). It is not easy to recognize this threat in time, since potential jihadists have “ordinary” jobs, live “unremarkable” lives and had little, if any, criminal history. “Taken in isolation, individual behaviors can be seen as innocuous; however, when seen as part of the continuum of the radicalization process, their significance becomes more important” (Silber and Bhatt, 2007, p. 85).

The model described above lucidly represents the features that are traced, not so vividly though, in many other earlier models of radicalization:

- Developed by experts working directly for a law enforcement agency, it proceeds from counterterrorist tasks and sends a clear message for strengthening securitization.

- It focuses not on the question of “Why?” but “How?” The authors of the report are not interested in the social context in which the phenomena they are analyzing emerge. The focus is entirely on personal, individual factors and life trajectories.

- The model is extremely rigid: the process of radicalization appears as linear and unidirectional, and each phase is marked by a certain system of indicators; ideology is viewed as the only reason for violent actions. There is no place for human beings in this model, there are robots moving mechanically in the preset direction.

- The conclusions are based on information sources and methods that can hardly fit into academic standards. Let me dwell on this last point in greater detail.

It is noteworthy that conclusions that are argued to be universal are based on a dozen of cases, and far from all information they contain is uniform and verifiable. The postulated universal indicators of radicalization are not supported even by the cases analyzed in the report itself. Some indicators are vague: “men over 35,” “unremarkable life and job,” “involvement in social activism.” However, some recurring characteristics, for example, the involvement of terrorists at some point in the culture of violence, have escaped the attention of the authors.

One of the most serious methodological shortcomings of the report is that only individuals who participated or planned to participate in terrorist acts are the object of analysis. The authors of the report do not raise the question of what specific factors in a terrorist’s life trajectory make him or her ready for violent actions, and what factors terrorists have in common with the broader masses of Muslims who do not seek violence. Misrepresentations associated with this approach are, unfortunately, inherent in the greater part of radicalization studies. Attempts to juxtapose jihadists with moderate fundamentalists are quite rare (Bartlett, Birdwell and King, 2010; Bartlett and Miller, 2012).

Today it can be stated that the theory of radicalization has made a long way since its emergence, and there is practically not a single provision in this report that has not been called in question. The most heated discussions revolve around the understanding of ideology as the universal cause of radicalization. This thesis has been attacked from two positions.

On one side, it is argued that the postulate about a direct correlation between ideas and actions is not true. “Ten years of counterterrorism practice has taught us that many people say very violent things, but very few follow up with violent actions” (Sageman, 2016, p. 117). The separation of ideological and behavioral radicalization has now become commonplace in related theories. For example, McCauley and Moskaleiko, who previously suggested looking at radicalization as an upward movement from the base of the pyramid, where those who share the aims proclaimed by the terrorists are concentrated, to its top (McCauley and Moskaleiko, 2008), now talk about two separate pyramids—that of ideological radicalization and behavioral one (McCauley and Moskaleiko, 2017).

On the other side, various alternative factors influencing an individual’s involvement in violent actions have been proposed. Social ties are the most obvious “competitor” in this respect. According to some leading experts, any ideological commitment is preceded by personal relationships, social networks, and interaction in small groups (Sageman, 2008). Individuals are primarily drawn into violent action through their environment: family, friends, and acquaintances. Such a threat arises when “someone for some reason is bitten by the fly of jihad” (Atran, 2016, p. 68). Now experts recognize that there may be a wide range of reasons for behavioral radicalization of individuals who are indifferent to ideological affinities or even dislike them. These are material incentives, the sense of belonging, adventure, status, etc. Or, these individuals may be simply forced to take part in violent actions (Khalil, Horgan and Zeuthen, 2019).

Today analysts increasingly often point to subcultural factors that contribute to the involvement of young people in radical movements. Marc Sageman, for example, speaks of cool jihadist counterculture



that unites young people, including those who are engaged in peaceful activism, into a single, albeit loose and polycentric, protest community (Sageman, 2016). Olivier Roy goes farther and defines jihadism as a “youth movement that is not only constructed independently of parental religion and culture but is also rooted in wider youth culture” (Roy, 2017).

Thus, the idea about the universality and linearity of radicalization, and the possibility to measure it with a simple set of indicators has been rejected. “Backgrounds of terrorists are very diverse; there are many paths to terrorism and there is no single profile of a terrorist” (Schmid, 2013, p. 20). It is now recognized that the movement towards violence in radicalization is not linear and can be reversed (Khalil, Horgan and Zeuthen, 2019). Jihadists can both be recruited by organizations and adopt radical views independently, seeking to participate in violent actions.

As a result, on the one hand, the theory of radicalization has become more realistic and less ideologically determined, and it has acquired a more academic character. On the other hand, it has lost inner harmony and become in many ways as eclectic, vague, and less applicable in practical terms as the “root causes of terrorism” approach. Also, this theory has failed to resolve key theoretical issues, such as relation between ideological and behavioral radicalization. Furthermore, directly opposite positions have been voiced as to how proponents and opponents of violence interact in a radical milieu: from the “conveyor” theory—the invariable movement of individuals caught in the funnel of fundamentalist Islam to the acceptance of violence—to the conviction that participation in the activities of moderate fundamentalists averts an individual from jihadist ideas and practices (sometimes metaphorically referred to as the “firewall”). Neither position has been confirmed or refuted by serious research. So, it is not surprising that early, seemingly long-disproved models are still in demand and continue to influence both academic debate and counterterrorist policies (Schuurman and Taylor, 2018).

Russia has developed its own tradition of studying terrorism and radicalization; it echoes the Western one but does not fully fit into

the discourses that have developed within its framework (among the few exceptions worth mentioning is Sokirianskaia, 2019). Most common are studies of radicalization processes in individual regions, and these are largely of descriptive nature (Dobaev, Berezhnoy and Kraynuchenko, 2002; Yemelianova, 2010a; Savvateev, Nefliasheva and Kisriev, 2017). Special attention is paid to the North Caucasian republics, above all Dagestan (Makarov, 2000; Kisriev, 2004) and Kabardino-Balkaria (Babich and Yarlykapov, 2003; Zhukov, 2008; Yarlykapov and Shterin, 2011). The processes of radicalization in Chechnya were considered in the context of the Russian-Chechen conflict (Tishkov, 2001; Malashenko and Trenin, 2002).

As for theoretical research, there are three features characteristic of Russian studies related to radicalization.

*Firstly*, they largely reproduce—based on Russian practical material—the discussion of the alternatives that are characteristic of the Western discourse: “radicalization of Islam” vs “Islamization of protest” and interpretation of Islamic fundamentalism as archaism vs as a specific form of modernization.

The idea of the endogenous nature of radicalism in Islam was actively propagated by Alexander Ignatenko (2000). He maintained that Islam, due to its internal heterogeneity, inevitably breeds fundamentalism and radicalism. The variety of interpretations raises the believer’s doubts about their truth and pushes him towards studying the primary sources—the sacred texts and practices of the early Muslim community. As a result, Salafism begins to spread far and wide to proclaim the rejection of existing interpretations and present the sacred texts as “a sum of norms, recommendations and rules that do not need interpretation at all but should be understood as such.” In his explanation of radicalization, Ignatenko postulates the priority of ideology over socioeconomic and political factors, and invites those eager to understand the actions and prospects of Salafi movements to “brush the dust off the medieval treatises authored by Ibn Taymiyyah and look for possible benchmarks there” (Ignatenko, 2000).

Another Russian expert on Islam, Alexei Malashenko, also regards fundamentalist Islamist views and the existence of an “Islamic

alternative” as arising directly from the essence of Islam (Malashenko, 2006a). “This is not a ‘disease of Islam,’ contrary to the widely spread belief, but part of the Islamic tradition and a fragment of the political culture of Islam” (Malashenko, 2006b). However, he attributes the increased interest in the Islamic alternative primarily to social factors. “Internal socioeconomic root causes are the dissatisfaction of the Muslim population with their financial position, disillusionment with the ruling elites who are unable to offer a quick and painless way out of the crisis. ... Social protest takes on a religious form, where slogans of social justice and calls for the establishment of a ‘fair government’ become especially popular” (Malashenko and Trenin, 2002, pp. 76-77).

Enver Kisriev points out that the ideology of Salafism can resist modernization and act as an “ideology of isolation from external influences” (Kisriev, 2004, p. 135). Alexei Vasiliev (2017) considers Salafists to be adherents of national and religious identity who oppose modernization and globalization. However, Dmitry Makarov assesses this movement from an utterly different position: “Salafism can be viewed as the ideological shell of the process of social modernization and the separation of the individual from the system of clan ties that still cement Dagestani society” (Makarov, 2000, p. 27).

**Secondly**, Russian studies are characterized by conspiracy interpretations that link radicalization with deliberate actions of certain geopolitical actors seeking to undermine Russia’s stability and development prospects. For instance, Igor Dobaev and his co-authors argue that a “Western (American) megaproject,” a “Turanian (Turkish) megaproject,” and an “Arab-Islamist (Wahhabi) megaproject” are being implemented in Southern Russia. The latter two spread the ideas of radicalism and pan-Islamism, seeking to foment separatist sentiment. It is also argued that “the Western (American) geopolitical megaproject in the South of Russia is being implemented primarily through Washington’s manipulation and control of other participants in the geopolitical game” (Dobaev, Dobaev and Nemchinova, 2015, p. 233), and that “the aims of the U.S.-NATO and the Greater Caucasus project have long been behind” the two pro-Islamist megaprojects (ibid, p. 234).

*Thirdly*, some Russian researchers identify, with regard to the North Caucasus, purely local sources of radicalization associated with the traditional abrek warrior—a defender and avenger. “The development of abrekism as a modern culture of violence in post-traditional highland society continues. Today this phenomenon has become one of the new, but essentially Russian-Soviet ‘traditions’ of North Caucasian society” (Bobrovnikov, 2000, p. 42). The author of this observation, Vladimir Bobrovnikov, believes that appeal to Islam is instrumental and manipulative, not reflecting the true views of “modern abreks.”

Thus, Russian and Western studies basically consider the same factors—ideology, poverty, the absence of upward mobility, and state repression—but Russian researchers analyze them in their entirety, mainly on the basis of qualitative, anthropological data, and differences between them are not particularly problematized. At the same time, there is a noticeable confrontation of two discourses within the Russian academic community, which can be figuratively termed as “security-related” and “human rights-related.” The former is characterized by a focus on the ideological causes rooted in Islam or its specific interpretations, and a strong conspiracy theory component. The latter does not deny the role of ideology but draws no less attention to social factors and the repressive policies of the state. The security-related discourse clearly exerts a far stronger influence on practical policy than the human rights-related one. Among the strengths of Russian studies is the broad use of field surveys focusing on various radical groups and movements. However, such studies are not always brought to conceptual theoretical generalization.

### **LESSONS DERIVED FROM THE NORTH CAUCASIAN FIELD RESEARCH**

In this article, I try to move away from the above-described tradition and to incorporate the results of my own fieldwork carried out in the North Caucasus directly into the context of Western discussions on the problems of radicalization. Naturally, the question arises as to how justified such an approach is. Can conclusions about the processes of radicalization in this region be useful in the search of ways to fight radicalism in Western countries? At first sight, such a linkage looks far-

fetched, as Muslims in the West live in conditions completely different from those of the Muslims in the North Caucasian republics. However, upon closer look it becomes clear that there are some significant parallels. In both cases Muslims find themselves in an environment where the state is guided by secular norms and rules, and they are forced to adapt themselves to this environment. In either case, Muslims turn out to be a minority in their country of residence, with all the challenges the status of a minority implies.

It may seem that there is a fundamental difference: in the West, Muslims are overwhelmingly migrants, while in the North Caucasus they are the indigenous population. However, things are not so simple. During the post-Soviet period, large-scale urbanization processes took place in the North Caucasus. The local population, previously living mainly in rural areas and suburbs, rushed en masse to the cities. This development largely determined the social situation in the North Caucasian republics and the trends inside Islamic communities. Consequently, the North Caucasus provides no less rich material than European countries for studying the life of second- and third-generation migrants, the difficulties of their adaptation, the breaking of bonds with traditional cultures, and the inter-generational conflict. In this respect Dagestan, with its incredible diversity of local cultures, landslide urbanization and rich Islamic heritage, is of special interest. Therefore, the discussion points and conclusions presented below were primarily drawn from the study of this republic's experience.

What was the empirical basis for my study of radicalization processes? I spent ten years doing field research in the North Caucasus, and for at least five years I mainly studied the Islamic fundamentalist communities in this region, including both their active part—religious leaders, civic activists and businessmen—and ordinary members of communities. I also analyzed the social context within which the processes of radicalization occurred.

In my research I focused on such urban territories as Makhachkala, Derbent, Grozny, Nalchik, Cherkessk, Karachaevsk, Magas, and Nazran. Also, about fifty rural communities were studied to varying degrees. In addition, limited research was done involving members

of North Caucasian diasporas in Turkey and Europe. The main methods employed were individual and group interviews, focus groups (involving primarily schoolchildren and students), and observation. Informants were selected mainly by the “snowball” method. In the process of my research activity I participated in the implementation of several civil and educational projects in the North Caucasus, which contributed to the diversification of contacts, including those in the Islamic environment.

During this period, hundreds of representatives of fundamentalist Islam were my interviewees, above all, the so-called “moderate” fundamentalists who prefer to fight for their ideals in a peaceful way. Contacts with supporters of the jihadist ideology, for obvious reasons, were casual, and the analysis of their views is based primarily on monitoring discussions in social media. I also studied in detail the conflicts caused by Islamic disagreements in fifteen North Caucasian rural communities; namely, the origins of the conflicts, their dynamics, the reasons for their different intensity in different communities, and the mechanisms for getting out of the conflict.

So, my information sources differ significantly from those which Western researchers mainly use in their works. In my research, I did not rely on the analysis of terrorists’ biographies or court materials concerning relevant cases. I tried to understand the internal composition and functioning of the “radical milieu,” which, according to some theories of radicalization, generates aggression and the desire for violence. The main emphasis was on a more peaceful segment of this environment, which is open to an external observer and which, consequently, can be studied primarily through fieldwork.

What conclusions can be drawn from the accomplished research? Which provisions of the theory of radicalization have been empirically tested and which have not been confirmed? What new findings were made by looking at the problem from an angle not typical of radicalization studies?

The research has fully confirmed the position widely recognized in the radicalization theory that there is no single profile of the radical, and that the paths of various individuals towards fundamentalist

Islam are extremely diverse. Among my interviewees were street children and graduates of prestigious universities, representatives of the technical intelligentsia and bohemians, rural farmworkers, and urban businessmen. Their stories were extremely varied. However, in the overwhelming majority of cases the ideology of fundamentalist Islam responded to demands that arose as a reaction to the general social context of post-Soviet turbulence, exacerbated by the consequences of large-scale urbanization and the Chechen War. Old norms—both traditional local ones and those adopted in Soviet times—were rapidly destroyed, while new ones did not have enough time to take shape, and people found themselves in an atmosphere of social chaos and “rule of the strongest.” This caused, on the one hand, a strong desire to find an anchor, a system of clear rules and guidelines to follow; and on the other hand, a protest against the existing system, which was perceived as disorderly and unfair. Migration to the city broke the intergenerational ties and undermined the authority of the elders. This is easy to explain: what can former shepherds, unable to properly adapt themselves to the new urban environment, offer to their children—townspeople who have to make their way in life amid the chaos of the urban jungle? The weakening of vertical kinship ties created the need for a community of like-minded people united by common ideas about the goals and norms of life, and in an external hostile environment acting as a “corporation of strongmen,” as this was the only way to establish oneself there where the right of the strongest reigns.

Of course, these needs did not always become a fact of conscious awareness, but such feelings were in the air. As result, individuals, primarily young people, found answers to their demands in fundamentalist Islam: a rigid system of rules and guidelines, legitimization of the intergenerational conflict (the previous generations were either not Muslims or “wrong” Muslims) and protest (in contrast to the existing anarchy and corruption, the Caliphate as a social ideal of order and justice). Also, fundamentalist Islam offered a community of like-minded people, where common norms sharply reduced the costs of interaction, and which, if necessary, was able to

protect the lives and property of its members by force, or even take revenge on the “offenders.”

It would be wrong to say that such factors did not attract the attention of specialists before. French expert Olivier Roy investigated the phenomenon of deculturation—the separation of religion from local cultural norms—and attributed it, among other things, to the intergenerational conflict. “Young people are better educated than their parents, and many problems arise from the general crisis of authority, from juvenile delinquency to the rise of Salafism... Radicalized Muslim youth (whether in terms of youth subculture or Islamic fundamentalism) are more a sign of the dissolution of traditional familial structures than of the steadiness of traditional Muslim cultures” (Roy, 2004, pp. 139-140). However, in the mainstream of the radicalization theory, usually the events of an individual life—some kind of trauma that stimulates “cognitive discovery”—take center stage, while the general social context that determines the massiveness of such “traumas” remains behind the scenes.

It is also important that in such conditions there is no reason to consider the choice of the ideology of Islamic fundamentalism as irrational. For a significant part of young people alternative options turn out to be less competitive. Traditional Islam, although it can ensure strict normativity, is ill-suited for servicing the intergenerational conflict (the religion of the fathers) and legitimizing protest (in most cases it coincides with “official” Islam). Nationalism (in the North Caucasus, in fact, ethnic mobilization) is quite suitable for the role of a protest ideology, but in most cases, it is not associated with special normativity and implies intergenerational unity within the ethnic group. The notions of liberalism in the North Caucasus are rather strongly distorted, and it is viewed not as a “remedy,” but as a source of “disease.”

Another aspect that attracts attention is very high heterogeneity within the “radical milieu” and its extreme fragmentation. Constant debates, irreconcilable positions, unity on some issues and divisions on others are a natural mode of existence in such communities. What should a Muslim do in a society that does not adhere to Sharia law?



Try to isolate himself from the “infidels” as much as possible, locking himself up in a narrow world of like-minded people? Protect the rights and interests of Muslims in public? Focus on propagation of Islam (Da’va)? Take up arms and fight the enemies of Islam? Is it appropriate to participate in elections? How important is secular knowledge? The list of questions for discussion is endless. Moreover, the matter is not always confined to discussions. During the period when illegal armed groups were active in the North Caucasus, supporters of violence often threatened the leaders of moderate fundamentalists, and sometimes carried out their threats.

Thus, there are no grounds to affirm that there is a “conveyor belt” or a “firewall” between moderate fundamentalists and jihadists—the dilemma itself is incorrect. If we choose to use metaphors, it would be more appropriate to speak of a “two-way street.” Indeed, as fundamentalist groups follow different interpretations of Islam and compete with each other in recruiting adherents, some individuals may be drifting from more moderate to more militant views, but there is also a reverse movement: disillusionment with the jihadist interpretations of Islam and the transition to more moderate positions. Among my informants there were several people who had undergone such an evolution. There are similar references in the academic literature (Lambert, 2011). If research is focused entirely on studying terrorists’ life stories, it apparently reflects only the movement in one direction.

Mechanisms of competition between various fundamentalist movements have been mentioned in the analysis of radicalization before. Marc Sageman (2016), for example, notes that there is an intense internal competition between various Islamist and Salafi organizations for the right to lead the countercultural protest in a community. It is through the efforts of political entrepreneurs that an unorganized protesting crowd is transformed into what he calls a “social blob.” However, this idea is still far from becoming dominant.

If we agree that the matter is primarily not about “indoctrination” or “zombification” (although denying the existence of such cases is senseless), but about the choice, what factors can influence the

preference for the jihadist ideology and violent actions? We can find examples confirming practically all motives mentioned in the literature on radicalization. Here I would like to discuss only some of them.

The first question arising in this context is: Can the choice of jihadism be considered rational? In my research there was a case when my interviewee, while explaining such a choice, presented an almost classical version of the cost-benefit analysis. The logic looked as follows. If peaceful instruments of struggle for the interests of Muslims do not work, and their costs (repressions) are comparable to the costs of armed struggle, violent methods become more attractive, forcing the “enemies of Islam” to refrain from violating the rights of Muslims out of fear. As an example he cited the attempt to ban hijabs in Dagestani schools. As peaceful protests against the ban had proved ineffective, jihadists chose to kill two school principals who were most intolerable towards girls wearing hijabs. As a result, the issue of hijab ban vanished from the agenda.

Obviously, the corresponding perception of rationality is far from universal and is possible only there where violence is perceived as a legitimate way of resolving conflicts; for everyone else such a choice is unacceptable. The prerequisites for such a perception of rationality are diverse: socialization within the framework of the “culture of violence” (for example, in a criminal environment<sup>1</sup> or in traditional communities that legitimize violent practices, such as blood feud and honor killings); experience of violence against oneself and one’s family and friends; participation in hostilities; etc.

However, when violence is concerned, we can talk about many irrational motives and situations where, as I was told in one of the interviews, “emotion takes over”: revenge, teenage romanticization of “Robin Hoods,” or desire for adventure. The psychological impossibility of coming to terms with the surrounding reality also plays an important role. Remarkably, the reasons lie not only (and maybe not so much) in global events (the Palestinian-Israeli confrontation or the situation of migrants from Muslim countries), the trigger can be an intra-family

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<sup>1</sup> The transition from the criminal world to Islam was an almost universal phenomenon characteristic of Russian regions with Muslim culture in the 1990s.

conflict: parents trying to make their daughter marry against her will; an elder brother beating up a younger one in front of everyone; father beating mother and there is no way of resisting it. The logic “I cannot live with this, so I’d rather become a martyr and go to heaven” is the basis for decisions in such situations.

The influence of foreign religious education on the processes of radicalization is also important and rather controversial. In the analyzed specific local conflicts in rural areas, groups of students from foreign Islamic institutions played different roles. In some situations, they contributed to the aggravation of the conflict, while in others, on the contrary, they called for reconciliation and acted as intermediaries. There were also cases when a person returned from abroad with quite moderate views but was subsequently radicalized under the influence of local social realities and trends. In general, the participation in a conflict of people with combat experience in Chechnya is a much stronger predictor that the conflict will turn violent than the involvement of foreign Islamic university graduates.

Research carried out in the North Caucasus confirms that intragroup factors, including social ties, kinship and friendship, play a crucial role in recruiting newcomers into a radical milieu. However, intergroup processes, associated, for example, with Islam-motivated conflicts in certain communities, are of no smaller importance. If a conflict in a local community is inhibited at early stages with the recognition that different interpretations of Islam have a right to exist, prerequisites for further radicalization may not arise. Such success is usually achieved when a community is more or less pluralistic, and/or there are authoritative leaders for both sides of the confrontation in a community, who are ready to act as mediators in conflict resolution. However, if conflicting parties take irreconcilable positions and the conflict snowballs, radicalization is observed on both sides. In such a situation, the lines of confrontation may split families and consanguineous groups, lead to divorces and violent intra- and intergenerational incidents. An individual faces a stark choice between “friends and foes” within the variety of established social ties, which previously were not difficult to maintain, but now become impossible

to preserve as the confrontation has turned irreconcilable. And it becomes ever more difficult to evade this choice.

As for the individual paths of radicalization, the importance of two main factors was revealed here: 1) the set of life trajectories available to the individual at one time or another, and 2) the criteria for choosing between them. Research on radicalization usually focuses on the latter factor as it is believed that people opt for the path of violent actions as a result of indoctrination or personal attachments. However, the former factor should not be disregarded altogether. For example, the radicalization of the religious community in Kabardino-Balkaria before the attack on Nalchik in October 2005 largely stemmed from repression against its representatives (quite peaceful initially), who saw ever more life opportunities shut in front of them. They were massively dismissed from their jobs and thereby deprived of a chance to earn a living. They were denied foreign travel passports, which stripped them of the possibility to emigrate. Besides, physical violence was actively used against them in combination with warnings that things would only get worse in the future (Zhukov, 2008). All this by no means excuses the subsequent armed attack on Nalchik and the death of civilians, especially since part of the community refused to take up arms. Nevertheless, without taking this factor into account the massive radicalization in Kabardino-Balkaria seems difficult to explain.

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What conclusions can be drawn from the analysis of radicalization processes based on the outcomes of the North Caucasian studies? Obviously, their results by no means answered all unresolved theoretical questions. However, they provide a fresh perspective on some of these issues.

*Firstly*, the theory of radicalization cannot be exhaustive without the conditions that emerge at the macro level borne in mind. However, these conditions should not be taken into account in a general abstract form, as was the case within the paradigm of the “root causes of terrorism” that mentioned modernization, urbanization and other similar global processes. It is essential to understand how these macro

processes are transformed into specific social needs at the level of individuals and groups, and to what extent radical ideologies, including radical interpretations of religion, are able to respond to these needs.

**Secondly**, if, on the one hand, we are speaking about individuals with certain demands, striving to maximize their utility, whatever it may be, and on the other hand, about ideologists and political entrepreneurs competing with each other for adherents, we will have a model clearly reminiscent of a market. However, it is important to realize that religious radicalism can be a “commodity” not only on the religious market, but also on the markets of ideologies and youth cultures. Therefore, it is not surprising that the contesters of Islamic radicalism include not only Christianity or Buddhism, but also, for example, liberalism or nationalism.

Importantly, modern information technologies are turning this market into a global one: a Muslim, even in a remote village in the North Caucasus, can get advice from a scholar in any of the largest centers of Islamic thought. In a situation like this the effectiveness of administrative restrictions on the influence of “foreign Islam,” which are so popular both in Russia and in Europe, is obviously called into question.

**Thirdly**, the choice of Islamic fundamentalism amid social turbulence and anomie can be considered quite rational. The choice between peaceful and violent versions of fundamentalist ideological varieties is influenced by both rational and irrational factors, and not all of them boil down to indoctrination or group dynamics.

**Fourthly**, the processes of radicalization are influenced not only by intragroup dynamics, but also by intergroup trends. In the case of a religiously motivated conflict in a community, the need for solidarity with one of the parties may turn out to be practically uncontested, and the individual has to choose between different loyalties, which had not been perceived as antagonistic before the conflict began.

**Finally**, when analyzing the reasons for resorting to radicalism at the individual level, it is necessary to consider not only the reasons for the individual’s choice of certain life options, but also the very range of options available to him/her; a narrow range is likely to predetermine the drift towards radicalization and violence.

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