

The emotional discourse of an activist on his engagement and disengagement of ISIS: between social norms, memory and oblivion

Introduction

At the beginning of 2015, when most of the European countries were facing an increase of the attacks claimed by jihadist movements, Switzerland seemed miraculously spared. Nevertheless, the Swiss authorities did not remain indifferent to the threat faced by neighboring countries and adopted several measures. Among them, they have in particular strengthened the power of the security services by increasing staff numbers and expanding their scope of work with a law allowing strict control of potential suspects (telephone tapping, infiltrations of computers, installation of cameras in private apartments, the right to enter mosques).¹

But because of the ineffectiveness of the only repressive measures – attacks in West European countries occurred despite elaborate security systems and increased control of individuals suspected of sympathy for the jihadist movements – the federal authorities also wanted to act upstream. That is why the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA), the Federal Department of Home Affairs (DFI) and the State Secretariat for Migration (SEM) have mandated the High School of Social Work in Zurich to develop preventive measures with the aim of preventing people from engaging in jihadist movements.

This project (named “Background to jihadist radicalization in Switzerland: An explorative study with recommendation for prevention and action”) was conducted over seven months, from January to July 2015, by twelve researchers in the different linguistic areas of Switzerland (High school of Social Work: 2015). My contribution to this project consisted, among other things, of conducting and analyzing an interview with a person who joined the Islamic State (ISIS) in Syria from December 2013 to March 2014. This person who testified anonymously was called R. At that time, no other person was interviewed because R. was the only person who had returned to Switzerland.

¹ “Intelligence Act”, September 26, 2016, website of the Federal Department of Defence, Civil Protection and Sports. Online: <http://www.vbs.admin.ch/fr/themes/recherche-renseignements/loi-renseignement.html>

His testimony allowed us to understand the role and the effect of ISIS propaganda available on the internet as well as to specify the measures that could eventually be taken by the various social actors directly concerned with this topic – schools, educational centers, integration offices, Muslim associations – in order to prevent departures and to provide frameworks for the people who return.

With this article, I would like to highlight another dimension of the interview: the role of emotions during R.'s involvement with ISIS. Indeed, when I analyzed our meeting, it appeared that emotions occupied a preponderant place in the different decisions he took during his experience with ISIS. The emotions he mentioned were not only a mere reaction or a sounding board in the face of a lived situation, but they contributed to shaping his experience insofar as they were a determining factor in the rational choices he has made. Thus, a better understanding of the emotional drivers of his engagement should clarify his motivations for joining ISIS, a movement that defines itself as Salafist-jihadist, operating in an extremely violent war context, and whose propaganda uses cruel and brutal codes.

Theoretical frame and issues

Emotions allow us to apprehend the world and to express the way in which we represent it to ourselves. They are part of a complex process that articulates both biological signals, so-called “reflex” emotions such as fear in front of a spider, and socially and culturally constructed effects that are more durable (Jasper James: 2010 and 2014).² Thus, in Western societies, we learn that it is not appropriate to express joy at a funeral or sadness at a party. However, although these theoretical categories are useful in an analytical framework, in practice the distinction is more blurred insofar as there is no “pure emotion.” Every situation generates a combination of emotions, and it is also a mix of effects that makes us act and think (Elster Jon: 1999, pp. 61-81 and 2009). For example, envy or jealousy, socially discouraged emotions, are often coupled with feelings of shame or guilt.

Thus, emotions, like most cultural elements such as discourses, ideas, rituals or arts, are subject to social norms. They are constrained by particular contexts that contribute to their variations in social space (Frevert Ute: 2011, Goodwin Jeff, Jasper

² By considering emotions as a process combining emotions and feelings, I do not distinguish between the two of them. See: Traïni Christophe, “Des sentiments aux émotions (et vice-versa). Comment devient-on militant de la cause animale?” *Revue française de science politique*, 2010, 2, (60), pp. 335–358.

James, Polletta Francesca: 2001, Gould Deborah B.: 2004). The German historian Ute Frevert has shown that love and passion in Europe, for example, as well as moral emotions such as empathy and pity, have had different meanings in the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries (Frevert Ute: 2011, Frevert Ute, Dixon Thomas: 2014).

R. has therefore integrated a set of social norms relating to the expression of his emotions. That is why when I met him, nine months after his engagement with ISIS, the narrative of his experience in Syria was partly modeled on these collective codes. However, needless to say, his emotional discourse has not been influenced only by norms. The context and his background are also important aspects.

First, since its creation in 2006, ISIS has been considered a terrorist movement by most Western democracies. Concern for this group increased in 2014 when the movement extended its influence from Iraq to Syria, but especially with the threat that it planned attacks on its own territories (Roy Olivier: 2016, Steinberg Guido: 2015, Stanley Tony, Guru Surinder: 2015, Wichmann Peter: 2013). Early in 2014, North America and most European countries were reluctant to accept the possible return of their citizens who were active alongside ISIS in the Middle East. That is why R., to avoid getting stuck in Turkey too long and to be able to return to Switzerland without undergoing a very strong punishment, has certainly adjusted his narrative and adopted an adequate emotional register. Thus, even if he testified anonymously and the research project had clearly defined social objectives, the risk of the results being misinterpreted by the political authorities, the police or the media means that R. controlled his discourse to avoid any legal problems.

Then, when the interviews were carried out, the attack against the newspaper *Charlie Hebdo* had just occurred. The shock caused by the murder of the editorial team of the weekly journal and the assassination of Jewish people during the hostage-taking at a kosher supermarket in Paris provoked an emotional context of fear and anger toward ISIS which grew from remote threats to become a major public enemy. This collective apprehension for ISIS in Europe may also have influenced R.'s interpretation of his motivations for joining ISIS.

Finally, his narrative is not only the result of a coldly calculated elaboration. It results from a traumatic experience, and the narration of his history is made of memories reconstructed from his own experience and what his memory has recomposed to

correspond to a coherent image of himself (Abrams Lynn: 2010, Descamp Florence: 2001).

The aims of this article are two: the first one is related to R.'s representation of emotional social constraints and how he has integrated them in order to elaborate a discourse on his experience. What are the emotions he evoked to legitimate his motivations for joining the Islamic State, a movement perceived as extremely violent and therefore strongly criticized by Western countries? What are the emotions he mentioned but whose role was diminished? Finally, which ones are keep quiet?

The second aim will go beyond the analysis of the biographical sketch and will seek to question the *sensitizing devices* of ISIS, that is to say:

The material supports, the arrangements of objects, the staging, that actors who are studied deploy in order to inspire an emotional reaction that predispose those whose experience them to support the proposed cause (Traïni Christophe, Siméant Johanna: 2009, p. 20).³

In other words, the sensitizing devices generally aim to arouse public attention and to convert it to its cause, as well as to strengthen the convictions and especially the loyalty of activists. What are the emotional strategies developed by ISIS?

Furthermore, every social movement generates its own norms which are defined according to its inclusion in a particular environment (social, cultural and temporal), its ideology, its objectives and its organization (among many references: Della Porta Donatella: 2014). What about emotional codes valued or imposed within the group? How did R. position himself in relation to this emotional shaping? These two research aims will be examined through two particular moments of R.'s course with the Islamic State: his engagement with and his disengagement from the group.

The process by which an individual chooses to join a movement that uses violence is highly complex (among many references: Alimi Eitan Y., Demetriou Chares, Bosi Lorenzo: 2015, Della Porta Donatella: 2013, Villiger Carole: 2017). To understand it, we need to consider the historical, political and cultural contexts of each conflict, as

³ "L'ensemble des supports matériels, des agencements d'objets, des mises en scène, que les acteurs étudiés déploient afin de susciter des réactions affectives qui prédisposent ceux qui les éprouvent à soutenir la cause défendue." Translated by the author.

well as the particular circumstances that link a person to the conflict and to a particular movement. This is why R.'s experience will be briefly contextualized before examining his motivations.

1. From a well-to-do Swiss family to Syrian war front

In February 2015, when the interview with R. was conducted, he had just turned 31 and was back from Syria where he stayed with the Islamic State from December 2013 to March 2014. He was still fairly traumatized; remembering his experience was painful and his speech was interspersed with silences and tears. We met several times over a two-month period in a café in Lausanne.

R. comes from a wealthy, middle-class and secular Swiss family. His formal education ended with elementary school, after which he traveled a great deal, and for many years he practiced paragliding and photography intensively. Before committing to ISIS, he had previously visited Palestine several times and enrolled in NGOs:

I am curious and I have always been interested in the international conflicts. In 2007, I contacted the Palestinian Red Crescent and I was a volunteer as an ambulance man in Ramallah, twice for three weeks in 2008 and 2009. It was a very strong experience. I met a lot of people and I had strong friendships.⁴

In 2010, he went to Gaza where he met some members of the Hamas. This experience was so striking that he wanted to go back a year later with the project to make a photo-essay on the living conditions of the Gazans. But in the meantime, relations in the Gaza Strip had sharply deteriorated and Arab revolts were rumbling in the neighborhood. That is why at this time he could not go to Gaza.

Then he made several visits to Israel and Palestine before converting to Islam in March 2013, nine months before his departure. According to R., this conversion was not related to his decision to engage in the Syrian war:

- Had you been converted to fight?
- No, it was for my own reasons.

At the end of 2013, when he chose to go to Syria, the Middle East was shaken by a major geopolitical change and Syria was torn apart by a civil war that had begun two

⁴ The interview was conducted in French and has been translated by the author.

years earlier in the wake of the Arab Spring. The Western mass media represented these events in simplistic terms, with on one side the army of Bashar al-Assad and another one the Free Syrian Army, offering shocking images of the massacres orchestrated by the president against his people. At that time, ISIS was not yet a major actor in the conflict, in which it established itself in June 2014, when it proclaimed the establishment of a caliphate in the territories under its control (Benraad Miryam: 2015, Gerges Fawaz A.: 2016, Luizard Pierre-Jean: 2015, McCants William: 2016). At this time, R. was already back in Switzerland and was about to be tried.⁵ The look into R.'s background is thus difficult because it is colored by the representation of events subsequent to his experience triggered by the Islamic State, in particular war crimes, destruction of arts and archeological sites, and numerous attacks targeting the civilian populations in the Middle East and in Europe.

In Switzerland, the case of R. was not an exception. According to the estimations of the Confederation's Intelligence Services, when he joined ISIS in December 2013, some twenty people living in Switzerland were already members of the movement in Syria.⁶

It is complicated to make a comparison with other European countries for the same time period because the official censuses made public announce a later count. In Germany, France and England, systematic enumeration apparently started in 2015. In June 2015, when 70 people had left Switzerland to join ISIS, German security services estimated that 700 German residents were active with ISIS in Syria.⁷ It seems that French and English intelligence services do not clearly show these public figures on their websites. According to the French newspaper *Le Monde*, the attraction to ISIS among the inhabitants would have been important since by mid-

⁵ The verdict of the judgment was given in November 2014. R. was sentenced for participating in a criminal organization and for completing military service in a foreign army. The punishment of two hundred hours of community service, the creation of a photo report for peace and mandatory psychotherapy was quite acceptable to him, and he cooperated with the security services.

⁶ These figures are available on the website of the Federal Department of Defence, Civil Protection and Sports: <http://www.vbs.admin.ch/fr/themes/recherche-renseignements/voyageurs-djihad.html>

⁷ These figures are available on the website of the German security services: <https://www.verfassungsschutz.de/de/arbeitsfelder/af-islamismus-und-islamistischer-terrorismus/was-ist-islamismus/salafistische-bestrebungen>

2015, 1274 people had chosen to engage with the movement in Syria.⁸ As for England, according to the American newspaper the *New York Times*, during the same time, about 700 people had stood under the banner of ISIS.⁹ These figures have to be put into perspective for a number of reasons. First, they come from private and public intelligence services whose logic, methods and access to information vary between the different institutes and from one country to another. Consequently, their estimates differ. Secondly, these figures have been made public and are therefore part of a communication strategy by both intelligence services and governments. Nevertheless, these rough evaluations make it possible to determine that in June 2015 the proportion of Swiss residents active with ISIS was in line with the European average, except in the case of France, whose contingent was the highest.

2. Living the adventurous life

R.'s support for ISIS does not come entirely as a surprise. It was in line with his previous experiences in Palestine. When he decided to go to Syria at the end of 2013, he was led by the project he had not been able to achieve in Gaza: producing a photo report about the situation on the ground to serve as a form of eyewitness account:

At the time, the conflict opposed Bashar al-Assad and the Syrian Free Army and I thought that by informing, I could make a difference in favor of the Syrian Free Army. My model was Nicolas Henin.¹⁰ Besides, I did not want to wait idly in Switzerland while a carnage took place there! I had a very good experience in Palestine and I thought it would be the same. I felt like I had been in a war situation and I was strong enough to bear what was going on in Syria.

R. was motivated by his determination to do something about the massacres perpetrated by Bashar al-Assad against the Syrian leader's own people and the wish

⁸ In May 2016, *Le Monde* published an article on this subject, giving an estimation on the basis of a report made by the Ministry of the Interior and presented during a press conference:

http://www.lemonde.fr/les-decodeurs/article/2016/05/18/qui-sont-les-1-900-francais-concernes-par-le-djihad-en-syrie-et-en-irak_4921545_4355770.html

⁹ According to figures from the Soufan Group, an American Institute of private security services:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/19/magazine/her-majestys-jihadists.html>

¹⁰ Nicolas Henin is a French journalist who has made several reports on conflicts in the Middle East. He was held hostage in Syria from June 2013 to April 2014.

to do a photo-essay like an experienced French war journalist. These motivations reveal a humanitarian objective and the need for social recognition.

Faced with what he perceived as an injustice, R. was outraged and wanted to act to rectify what, in his opinion, was wrong. James Jasper called this quite common process in an individual's mobilization in a collective action of *moral shock*:

I have used the concept of *moral shock* to highlight the emotions involved in response to perceived injustice [...]. When we learn or experience something that suggests the world is not morally as it seems, our indignation has a strong visceral aspect. [...] We rethink our moral stands and consider action to redress the wrong. Moral shocks can propel people into action, or at least predispose them to act if there is an opportunity to do so (Jasper James: 2010, p. 88).

In the category of moral emotions, empathy occupies a special place. Besides, in R.'s narrative, it is the main reason that he decided to join ISIS. Several times during the interview, he emphasized his urge to defend Syrian civilians:

I really wanted to help the population who were suffering from attacks by Bashar al-Assad's army. [...] I wanted to fight Bashar and help the suffering population.

Why does R. insist on his indignation at circumstances deemed unjust and his empathy for the victims as one of the fundamental justifications for his involvement? First, empathy, which is the ability to understand the mental and emotional states of others, is valued in Western societies. Compassion, pity and empathy for the weak have always been perceived positively by the Judeo-Christian religions (Wuthnow Robert: 1991). Churches have not held the exclusivity of charity since the end of the 19th century these moral emotions have also been manifested through the development of associations and social movements to protect actors, especially children, the poor and animals, who are easily characterized as victims because they are defenseless.

The human rights abuses committed by Bashar al-Assad reported by the media since the beginning of the Syrian civil war deeply shocked the public. By emphasizing his empathy for Syrian civilians, R. gave a proper representation of his motives and

made his commitment to the Islamic State, a movement perceived as “terrorist,” acceptable.

Then, as empathy for the weak is favorably perceived, expressing it nourishes positive feelings toward one’s own self and thereby improves self-esteem. Doing a good deed then engenders the satisfaction of being a person who accomplishes righteous things (Scheff Thomas: 1997). After acting on behalf of the Palestinian population by joining NGOs such as the Red Crescent, R. mobilized to help Syrian civilians. His empathy for people presented unilaterally as victims has engendered pride, an emotion transversal to his discourse. Before his engagement, he was persuaded that he was acting correctly and that his action would cause the recognition of others. If he did not disclose his project to his family – his Syrian contacts had forbidden him to – he did not hesitate to talk about it with his friends, demanding their opinion:

- Have you talked about your project with your friends?
- My Muslim friends told me to go, that it was good. I also talked about it with other friends, and they said, “If you think what you are going to do is good, then go ahead.”

With a testimony in the form of photographs, for his part, R. aimed to provoke pity and compassion for Syrian civilians from the Swiss public.

Finally, the propaganda of ISIS easily available on social media (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Ask.fm), blogs (Tumblr, WordPress) or digital archives (archives.org, Sendvid, Google Drive) is calibrated to elicit empathy.

A recurring theme is violence carried out by both Bashar al-Assad’s militias against the population and – especially – by the Western armed forces against Muslims: videos or pictures of dead children or rape victims are shown (High School of Social Work Zurich: 2015, pp. 11-12). This strategy that presents a narrative in which an innocent victim is killed by an external enemy has been used by all belligerents since the dawn of time. It has several objectives: the most obvious is to arouse pity and to catalyze anger against a common external enemy that must be eliminated. This kind of propaganda is effective in enlarging the ranks of soldiers, strengthening people’s loyalty and establishing a single authority (Morelli Anne: 2010). It also makes it

possible to legitimize violence presented as defensive. The brutality which Muslims suffered would then authorize, in reaction, violence against the Western populations. With its interpretation of jihad, the Islamic State thus presents itself as a defender of the oppressed.

The sense of duty is another omnipresent pattern of the propaganda of ISIS. Defending one's brothers would be a moral obligation for all Muslims (Dantschke Claudia: 2015). It is an argument that convinced R.:

I really wanted to help the Syrian population who suffered from attack organized by Bashar al-Assad's army. Moreover, I was a convert to Islam and my contact with Syria, Abu al Hassan,¹¹ made me understand that it was the duty of every good Muslim to help his brothers. If I did not, I was somehow no longer worthy to be part of the Muslim community. I wanted to honor my involvement in the community.

Empathy, the sense of duty and finally the call for solidarity are usually part of the fairly conventional sensitizing mechanisms put in place by any country or organization at war to recruit. In this sense, the emotional register for ISIS to mobilize new soldiers lies in a historical continuity of the traditional uses.

If R. emphasized empathy and the sense of duty, he gave fraternity a less important role. Yet it seems to have exercised a notable influence on his choice to go to Syria. Friendship had motivated him to go to Palestine several times and later, through his Palestinian "friends," he came into contact with members of ISIS:

- What are the steps you made in the aim to realize your project?
- The problem was that I had no contacts in Syria and I needed to have one. That is why I spoke to my Palestinian friends. Thanks to them, I got in touch with ISIS members.

¹¹ Abu al Hassan, whose real name is Mourad Fares, is a Moroccan who grew up in France. According to information from the French press (*Le Nouvel Observateur* and *Le Monde*), Mourad Fares would have favored the recruitment of French people for the jihadist organizations in Syria. He was arrested in August 2014 in Turkey and then extradited to France, where he is currently detained.

Love is also an emotion that seems peripheral in R.'s narrative but which has obviously played a non-negligible role in his commitment. His reluctance to evoke it is certainly linked to modesty but also to the social norms of masculinity that proscribe demonstrating his feelings of love and, finally, to his homosexuality, which, though no longer officially condemned by Western societies, is harshly punished by ISIS with the death penalty. Regarding this last point, R. may have feared being judged on his inconsistency in joining a movement that is known for not tolerating homosexuality. On the way from Switzerland to Syria, R. met a man he was attracted to. But he remained very discreet about him and at no time during the interview did he mention his name:

- From where did you leave for Syria?

- From Lyon. There I met two other French men who wanted to join ISIS too. Then, we made the journey together. One of them came from Paris and I liked him very much.

The attraction he felt for this man prevented him from turning back and thus contributed to keeping him in his commitment in spite of a strong anxiety about what awaited him in Syria:

That night, I felt uneasy. I was very distressed, I had doubts and I had the impression that I could not go back. I felt caught in a turmoil in which I no longer had any grip, like a truck that slides on the ice and slips into a ravine.

The important role of friendship and love in the organization of a movement has been amply demonstrated (among many references: Goodwin Jeff: 1997, Goodwin Jeff, Jasper James: 2004, Goodwin Jeff, Jasper James, Polletta Francesca: 2001, Jasper James: 2014, Traïni Christophe: 2015). These emotions promote loyalty and imply trust and respect for other activists, which facilitates the organization of collective actions and keeps activists in or away from the group. In the case of ISIS, because of its illegal nature, trust in the group is necessary for its cohesion and for maintaining some of the secrets of its activities (Bosi Lorenzo, Demetriou Chares, Malthaner Stefan: 2014, Della Porta Donatella: 2013; Villiger Carole: 2017). Furthermore, friendship is one of the absolutes proclaimed by ISIS. Through its propaganda, the

group presents itself as a tight-knit community where social and cultural origins do not matter. On this point, ISIS thus appears as a counter-model of Western societies (Dantschke Claudia: 2015).

Although R. had expressed sadness many times during the interview by silences, mental blank and body sagging, it was absent in his discourse. Yet he certainly felt it, especially when he left his family to join ISIS. Why did he not mention it? Probably, he did not remember or it was too painful to relive that moment of his experience. Furthermore, men are not supposed to express sadness; that is not valued in Western societies because it reveals a sensitivity they are supposed to hide. This is why it is often replaced by anger, an emotion seen as more virile (Frevert Ute: 2011, pp. 87-147). When we spoke about the separation with his family, R. instead evoked shame:

- How did you justify your departure to your family?
- I told them I was going to pass a microlight (ULM) exam in Lyon. I blame myself terribly.
- When did you leave your family to join ISIS?
- On December 17, 2013. I wanted to leave at the beginning of 2014, but I would have had remorse to accept my Christmas gifts and then leave for Syria.

Shame occurred when the idea he had of himself – a person who defended the weakest – did not match with the image his actions gave him, that of a person who lied to his family. This discrepancy caused a dissonance that he did not interpret. If his choice was the right one, why did he hide it from his parents?

The general picture that emerges from R.'s motives for opting for a high-risk engagement with ISIS seems to be based on an intuitive decision, a need for social recognition, admiration and envy to live an exciting adventure: saving Palestinians and Syrians, and witnessing their lives in extreme conditions with photo-reportage. R. had a clear idea of neither Syria's particular political and conflictual context nor its stakes, since he imagined he should live something similar to what he experienced in Palestine. Furthermore, R. did not speak Arabic and despite his conversion to Islam, he was illiterate in a religious and theological sense. Finally, it appears that he did not really choose ISIS since, initially, he did not differentiate this movement from Jabhat al-Nosra. Ignoring everything about its ideology, he joined ISIS only when he arrived

in Raqqa, encouraged by the smugglers who helped him to cross the border between Turkey and Syria.

3. The daily reality of war

During his trip via Lyon, in France, he came in contact with other men willing to travel to Syria to fight. Listening to their motivations for jihad, he realized that his reasons for joining ISIS were out of step:

When I spoke to them [his two French companions], I realized that in their point of view, I was really too moderate [...].

The next day we flew to Hatay in Turkey. There we met other people. When we talked together, I was made to understand that I was too moderate and I felt very out of the step, but at the same time I felt good because I was close to this man who interested me. We talked about what was right or wrong and the truth. In their opinion, ISIS was the truth and everything else was without value. I ended up believing I would have another life over there.

It is difficult to discern whether this gap between R.'s objectives and those of his companions was actual or whether it is an a posteriori reconstruction allowing him to distance himself from a group which he has left and which during our interviews in February 2015 was strongly condemned because of the attacks in Paris that had just occurred.

Then his narrative also implies that the prospect of going to battle did not engender the emotions displayed by his traveling companions:

In Turkey, I was surrounded only by people who had Al Qaeda as their model and who were proud to go fight. I had also a Muslim identity because I was converted, and sometimes I felt it took over, but I was torn between several positions.

Thus, even before he became a member of ISIS in Syria, R. was already subjected to a militant shaping. His travel partners made him understand that his convictions and emotions did not conform with those advocated by the jihadist movement: he was supposed to feel proud and brave to defend Muslims' interests and to regard dying for this cause as a honor. Honor, pride and courage are not moral emotions

proper to ISIS. These emotional dispositions have served as a banner in most armed political conflicts: defending the honor of one's country and one's sovereignty is a recurrent motive for the patriotic propaganda of all countries at war (Frevert Ute: 2017). The aim of this apparatus is to develop national pride and to exhort men to sacrifice themselves by fighting. Victories won over the enemy are celebrated and arouse pride while defeats are experienced as humiliations. Thus, dying in the name of a territory, of ideas, of a culture or of a religion is not a peculiarity of the martyrology developed by the Islamic State.

When he arrived in Syria, R. was forced to give all his belongings to ISIS: his digital equipment, his passport, his money and almost all his clothes (he could keep only two days' worth of clothes). Then he was compelled to undertake a martial training which was complemented by the obligation of prayer three times per day – prayer that he did not understand since it was given in Arabic. If R. was supposed to bend to the attitudes and grooming habits imposed by ISIS (beard and depilation of the body), it seems like it was difficult to obey because of lack of sanitary facilities:

- What were your living conditions?
- Very rudimentary. We ate couscous and we slept with several other people in the same room. And there were practically no restrooms.

No training on the objectives of the movement, its ideology or its organization seems to have been dispensed:

- How was the group organized? Was it hierarchical? Who made the decisions?
- It was an emir and his aides who organized the day. Three prayers were made a day.
- Was there a dominant ideology in the movement?
- I don't know. It seems to me that it was more religious than political. I think that the Islamic University of Madinah was involved.

This kind of supervision that keeps some members of the group in ignorance while changing their habits aims to promote blind obedience. Once these people are made docile, the task of sending them to combat is facilitated.

How did R. respond to this indoctrination? The precipitation of events as well as the control of his daily life by the movement prevented him from taking some distance to analyze what he felt; hence, this probably resulted in the confusion he expressed. However, his refusal to die stopped this brainwashing:

Most people who were there wanted to die as martyrs. They truly believed that they would go to Heaven. We had the choice between dying as martyrs or fighting, but those who wanted to fight had to do it with Kalashnikovs, without bulletproof vests and without helmets, so it meant death within a more or less short term. I did not want to die, so I refused to train. Then I was assigned as a guard and took care of those who were sick.

Initially, a survival reflex allowed him to refuse to go on the battlefield. Then it was a series of ruptures that led him to make the decision to disengage from the movement.

First, the direct confrontation with war and dead people made him realize that his objectives did not correspond to those of ISIS. Then his attraction for the Parisian he met during the trip vanished:

I realized that the group in which I was integrated was not fighting against Bashar but wanted simply to kill non-Muslims. It killed civilians, which is contrary to Islam and especially to my personal values. It was madness! It was not at all what I wanted. I also realized that the Frenchmen I liked behaved like he was in a video game. I was terrified. So I decided to go back home.

Probably, the behavior of his French companion reflected his own image, that of a person who can hardly distinguish the boundaries between the everyday reality of war and a fictional universe, whether constructed by his imagination – saving the Syrian population – or offered by a video game. When he realized he could die in a fictional universe without consequences for his existence but not the other way around, the general sense of anxiety he had since his departure, but that he denied, gave way to the fear of dying, which he could no longer ignore because this perspective became concrete.

According to Natanson, what differentiates fear, a basic emotion, from anxiety is the immediate presence of a danger, whereas anxiety is characterized by an undetermined threat (Natanson Jacques: 2008). During the journey between Switzerland and Syria, R. anticipated the potentially negative effects of his risky engagement, which made him anxious. Once at the forefront, confronted with the probability of his own death, fear took over and gave him the necessary impetus to flee. Usually, to prevent soldiers from escaping at the first burst and leaving their comrades behind, some coping mechanisms are given to them during a training session. Their courage is notably stimulated not to ignore fear but rather to persist in the face of fear: "The courageous man endures and fears" (Robin Corey: 2004, p. 177).

Although R. completed his military service in Switzerland, he was not trained to sacrifice himself for a country and ideals he did not understand. Making people accept the unacceptable requires preparation that includes not only the use of weapons but also a set of common civic values and representations that are generally conveyed by an ideological and a political discourse (Souryi Pierre-François, Sereni Delespaul Constance: 2015). When these values and representations are inherited by a collective history, persuading one that sacrifice has a meaning becomes conceivable, but without this shared basis, it is not. R's habitus did not allow him to interpret the new environment in which he was propelling in a few days. His apprehension of the conflict and the gap between his values, his feelings and those of the group contributed to his disengagement.

This step was difficult because ISIS was reluctant to let him go. He was first suspected of being a spy and beaten. Then the movement blamed his homosexuality and put him to jail, where he remained in detention for 54 days in harsh conditions. He was finally released after a mock trial:

Two religious men came to judge me. They had to decide whether I would be executed or released. I had to defend myself from being gay. They wanted to execute me because of my homosexuality! Finally, they let me go. I did not know why. Luck? The fact that the one of them spoke French? They gave me my belongings back and I did not ask!

R. was punished because he did not fully conform to the objectives, values and emotional codes defined by the group: he did not adhere to the project, he was afraid of dying as a martyr or on the battlefield and he was homosexual. R was considered deviant and unable to honor his commitment, which led to his rejection of the movement.

Conclusion

The analysis of the role of emotions in R.'s involvement with ISIS makes it possible to demonstrate that he has understood what was or was not appropriate to express. In a context of rejection of ISIS and in the presence of a person associated with institutions, he developed a discourse in which the place of emotions conformed to the cultural norms of his country. He gave empathy, an emotion universally valued, an important function, while the desire he felt for a traveling companion was only evoked and sadness, an emotion considered unmanly, was evaded. This adherence to emotional standards allowed him to distance himself from a group from which he has disengaged and which has no good press. This distancing on which he insisted had allowed him to avoid a serious criminal conviction and a social disavowal to which he seemed very sensitive.

Although R.'s experience is singular and does not permit a collective interpretation (Kundani Arun: 2012), it shed some light on an analysis of the sensitizing devices of ISIS. The impulse on which the movement relied to recruit and then to ensure loyalty of its troops did not deviate much from what has been developed by the majority of belligerents for centuries. The mechanisms of the sensitizing devices of ISIS are thus perfectly integrated into a long warrior tradition. Only the means of spreading propaganda have evolved with the use of social media that have allowed a quick and wide recruitment because of their transnational nature (Wichmann Peter: 2013).

This transnational mobilization has enabled ISIS to quickly become a numerically important movement, to benefit from multiple competences and to strengthen its organization. The scale of this transnational mobilization has thus brought a certain legitimacy to the movement and has allowed its rise to the rank of an actor worth negotiating with nation-states. However, since ISIS is a very hierarchical and

authoritarian movement, establishing a collective identity in the context of war that requires human sacrifices with members who do not speak the same language, who do not share a common base of values and representations, and who do not always have very clear objectives, represents a critical challenge.

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