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## Self-fulfilling Prophecy and Muslim Radicalization: Cases of France and the United States

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**Abstract.** This paper investigates the relationship between radicalization and self-fulfilling prophecy, focusing on the Western contexts with case studies from France and the United States. In France, historical marginalization and "symbolic ghettoization" of Muslim immigrants created an "in-group" versus "out-group" dynamic, intensified by political actions and media portrayals, leading to alienation and radicalization among young Muslim men. Similarly, in the United States, conservative media narratives post-9/11 have portrayed Muslims as threats, influencing public opinion and policy decisions, and setting the stage for potential future radicalization. The paper emphasizes the formation of these restrictive identities pushes marginalized individuals towards radicalism, underscoring the need to reject prejudices for effective radicalization mitigation. It warns of the dangers of symbolic segregation, highlighting the importance of understanding and addressing self-fulfilling prophecies in political and media discourse to combat radicalization in contemporary societies.

**Keywords:** Countering Violent Extremism (CVE); radicalization; self-fulfilling prophecy; Violent Extremism (VE).

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### Introduction

It has been long since Europeans have given the power of words its due credit. Despite the relative lack of empirical referent, the act of speech has been an object of legal scrutiny since the early 1960s in member states such as France, the Netherlands, and Denmark whose legislators passed hate speech laws to guard against the powers that undermine co-existence and tolerance (Bleich, 2011). While regulating hate speech presents a rather specific event conditioned by its historical context, it also has a larger, more profound implication that spoken words can define the 'reality' that European communities perceive and confront. With the emergence of new security challenges such as home-grown terrorism and European foreign fighters

in the Middle East, the public and political discourse needs to be revisited not only as a source of possible remedy to the pressing issues but as a possible source of the very threats that dominate the European security agenda. This paper examines radicalization and its implications in Europe through the theoretical perspective of self-fulfilling prophecy and argues that the discourse created and maintained by European political elites and media contributes to increasing radicalization in member states. The cases of France and the United States are discussed to illustrate the possible links between radicalization and the concept of self-fulfilling prophecy as a potential catalyst for the emergence of violent radicalism in these two countries.

## Main Part

### Self-fulfilling Prophecy - Theoretical Foundation

The self-fulfilling prophecy is a socio-psychological phenomenon in which an originally false expectation results in its confirmation. In other words, an expectation regarding an individual or a group consciously or unconsciously leads the person or entity to act in ways that confirm the existing expectations (Wilkins, 1976). The origins of the concept can be traced to 1928 when William Thomas developed a theory stating that "if men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences" (Merton, 1995). Based on the Thomas theorem, Merton (1948) developed the concept of self-fulfilling prophecy which, despite more than seven decades of application, re-evaluation, and criticism remains largely unchanged and still extremely relevant.

However, to better apply the theory to the context of radicalization, a few concepts and assumptions that interlink with self-fulfilling prophecy should be noted. For one, Merton (1957) argues that a central feature of self-fulfilling prophecy is that men respond not only to the objective features of a situation but at times primarily to the meaning this situation has for them. Consequently, their perceptions and actions are determined by the ascribed meaning. For example, the amount spent on the fight against terrorism by the United States and larger EU countries is not propor-

tionate with the actual damage done by terrorism, as opposed to other more immediate and much larger-scale issues which receive less attention and funding respectively. Such dynamic suggests that decision-making based on acquiring and verifying factual information is compromised which translates into the difficulty of recognizing and changing deeply-rooted prophecies. The Western response to issues such as terrorism is arguably not a response of objective urgency but a response of meaning, in which the meaning does not necessarily correspond with or originate from the factual reality.

Utilizing Sumner's concept of "in-groups" and "out-groups" further intensifies the negative implications of self-fulfilling prophecy. The in-group is primarily based on a sense of the members' psychological belonging and naturally, psychological identification with only one group makes individuals impervious to perspectives of the out-groups that could otherwise inform a more holistic view. In-groups strive not only for differentiation from outgroups but for positive distinctiveness (Passini, 2009). In the context of radicalization and terrorism, out-groups are portrayed as inherently evil forces that undermine the in-group's right to life, liberty, and self-determination. This narrative implies a moral superiority based on victimhood that unifies the sense of in-group and maintains its identity through shared insecurities. The measures that supposedly protect Europeans from terrorism contribute to more fear and alienation, the overcoming of which requires stricter distinctions between in and out-groups and their identities (Zirakzadeh, 2010).

In certain scenarios, the overdependence on the in-group can lead to an exercise of perverse logic, that is, "damned if you do and damned if you don't syndrome" (Wilkins, 1976). In this variation of self-fulfilling prophecy, the perverse logic turns in-group virtues into out-group vices where the in-group's definition of the situation and the belief system are not dependent on the out-group's behavior. In other words, changes in the behavior of the out-group do not affect the beliefs of in-group members and as a result, any prophecy

comes true regardless of what out-group members do because the prophecies are rooted in the false definition of the situation. For example, the perception of migrants as a possible terrorist threat precedes the migrants' opportunity to earn the status of non-terrorist actor. Therefore, the most well-integrated and highly contributing migrants may also be viewed as potential terrorists which essentially invalidates individuals' choice to condemn terrorism and pursue their interests through different means. If the out-group is viewed in a certain way regardless of their actions, the members of the group are more likely to take violent or radical action because the partial cost of such actions has already been imposed on them. In the European context, second and third-generation Muslims face the challenge of negotiating multiple identities across ethnic, social, and religious dimensions (Costanza, 2015). The hostile sociocultural environments that comprise prejudice and false definitions catalyze those who are in the process of establishing stable personal and collective identities to find these identities in radical ideologies.

#### **Self-fulfilling Prophecy as Discursive Exercise**

Ironically, while post-truth politics and the lack of a factual basis for decision-making can be viewed as contributing elements to a self-fulfilling prophecy, the data-driven Western approach presents another unfortunate attempt to understand and address radicalization. Categorization may serve mere means to deduce a problematic aspect of reality but it stands dangerously close to stigmatization and discreditation. A more interdisciplinary approach would suggest that researchers focus on 'pathways', rather than 'profiles' and 'root causes' when seeking to discern radicalization and terrorism (Costanza, 2015). In the context of self-fulfilling prophecy, this would imply fundamental transformations in the whole discourse around the issue since the political and media discourse can be viewed as the primary drivers and enablers of self-fulfilling prophecy. They are, in essence, the carriers of words and knowledge that reflect prophecies much larger than strictly political or media outlets produce.

On the other hand, terrorism itself is a rhetorical phenomenon. It seeks to create a response and become an event that produces urgency and dominates the agenda (Zulaika, 2010). Consequently, the writing of the event and the event itself become inseparable and give each other their meaning. According to Zulaika (2010), thinking of terrorism as an inevitable threat is a self-fulfilling prophecy itself. The supposedly realistic mantra regarding terrorist events being a "matter of when not if" speaks for the twisted Western logic that has dominated the thinking of elites in charge of countering radicalization and terrorism inspired by radical ideologies. Therefore, along with the variations of self-fulfilling prophecy taking place on social levels, the very counterterrorism efforts, happen to promote terrorism. The discursive element of self-fulfilling prophecy lies exactly in the fact that it is not merely false expectations that result in their confirmations but the way both expectations and confirmations are framed and communicated breed more of each with increasing intensity.

#### **Case Study I – France**

The theoretical concepts outlined above can be observed in varying degrees in virtually all Western countries. However, France proves to be a striking example, as it houses both one of the largest Muslim communities in the Western World and also has faced considerable terrorist activities throughout the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Much of the terrorist challenges that France faced in the last years can be attributed, at least partially, to the relationship between mainstream French society and French Muslims as well as the perception of Muslims in both the political as well as the broader social realm.

France has had a history of significant Muslim immigration since the 1960's with many former colonial subjects emigrating to the mainland. Despite their overwhelmingly pro-French sentiment, these new arrivals and their descendants were treated with intense suspicion (Keipel, 2017). Stemming from long-held colonial sentiments, a process of what Boukhars describes as "symbolic ghettoization" placed the major

city of French Muslims in isolated suburban neighborhoods, that significantly lacked opportunities and services (Boukhars, 2009). As these "cities" showed a lower standard of living, increased poverty, and higher crime rates than the rest of the country, Muslims were perceived as potentially dangerous and detrimental to established French society (Boukhars, 2009).

Effectively it was this design that led French society to contain an "in group" and an "out group". The "in-group" was the traditional Christian or secular population of France, which had to defend its values and sovereignty against the "out-group" made up of the "foreigners" that had arrived during the 1960s (Keipel, 2017). This is highlighted by the title of "foreigner", which is maintained despite French citizenship (Cesari, 2005). Similarly, the physical segregation of Muslims and non-Muslims accentuates the identitarian divide that grew in France.

This extensive review of the historical context is vital because it serves as the ideological framework that created the self-fulfilling prophecy in France. Only through the existence of this system of underlying fears and active segregation was it possible for the intensification of rhetoric and political action, following the 9/11 attacks, to occur. Joycelyn Cesari points to a major increase in legislation, concerned with combatting terrorism, in the direct aftermath of 9/11 (Cesari, 2012). Especially striking are the laws tightening immigration to France and facilitating the deportation of criminally conspicuous foreigners. This set of legislation being passed within the same context as "the law on everyday security" clearly implies a connection between "foreigners" and a threat to French society. Given that the political rhetoric of the latter half of the twentieth century suggests that a large portion of French Muslims were seen as foreigners, regardless of their citizenship, the link between Muslims and danger was clearly expressed through political action. As Cesari expressed, "a securitization of Islam" has taken place (Cesari, 2012). These measures taking place at the political level suggest that they echoed a broader sentiment present in French civil

society. As Nickerson points out the media's portrayal of French Muslims reached a new height of hostility, following the 9/11 attacks (Nickerson, 2019). Simultaneously, the French far-right which had been rising since the 1990s gained significantly more support. This both highlights the growing fear among mainstream French society and the perpetual trends that have been inspired by the previously mentioned sentiments.

With such a system in place, young men of immigrant households were effectively placed in an isolated context that never allowed them to fully subscribe to being French, instead forcing the label of "other" on them. This label has certainly served as a major contributor to radicalization in France and consequently, jihadism can be viewed as a way for these young French men to substitute their identity and essentially become "born again" (Levy, 2019). The fact that this process takes place despite the perpetrators being French is supported by the fact that over two-thirds of perpetrators were born in France or held French citizenship (Levy, 2019). In this context, the fact that these people happen to be Muslims plays a secondary role. Instead, it is far more important to observe that these people lack a clear identity and sense of belonging. This is further supported by the notion that the majority of perpetrators lacked a fundamental understanding of Islam and possessed what has been described as "extremely rudimentary knowledge of Islam" (Levy, 2019). Of course, the analysis of terrorism in France cannot only be limited to this dimension and there is an extensive academic debate concerning the motivations behind radicalization. However, the general scholarly consensus suggests that the French response to the growth of its Muslim communities as well as increased immigration contributed towards the establishment of a class of young Muslim men who feel betrayed and alienated by the French society. Consequently, a combination of a variety of legislative initiatives, the political elites' discourse aimed to address the public insecurities regarding the "out-groups" and the media that amplified these develop-

ments have all been crucial in the radicalization of French Muslims.

### Case Study II – United States of America

When compared to the French example, the notion of a self-fulfilling prophecy in the USA takes a different shape. In the previous French example, much of the political and media repercussions stemmed from a long-held belief that was deeply rooted in the French colonial past and the large and relatively sudden introduction of a considerably large Muslim community into French society. By comparison, the United States of America had a relatively small historical Muslim population which had virtually no cultural impact on broader American society. Nevertheless, the concept of a self-fulfilling prophecy when examining radicalization in the United States is still relevant. Essentially, the fundamental difference between the two countries' experiences is that the jihadist incarnation of terrorism in the United States is only influenced by a self-fulfilling prophecy to a minor degree. Despite this event of 9/11 being the first of what could be categorized as modern jihadist terrorism, unlike the attacks in the following decade, 9/11 was still an act at least partially influenced by political events rather than a framework of segregation and identarian motives.

Nevertheless, the American case still serves as an excellent subject to be studied for a potential self-fulfilling prophecy, as it increasingly confirms the theoretical concepts outlined above. As was the case in French society, the American public is increasingly creating a system of the "in-group" and the "out-group". In the direct aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, the hostility of the mainstream American public against Muslims increased significantly. Conservative American media placed a heavy emphasis on the potential threat emerging from the American Muslim population and certainly similar responses were echoed by American political leaders. Especially the 2010s saw increased media attention on deliberately polarizing subjects that sought to demonstrate the growing influence as well as threats coming from Muslims in the United States, the most striking of which was arguably the "ground zero

Mosque" (Powell, 2018). Conservative outlets such as the Fox News television channel quickly picked up on the proposed plans of building a Muslim community center near the site of the former World Trade Centre. Soon the term "ground zero Mosque" circulated among conservative media outlets, claiming that the New York Muslim community was planning on building a mosque on the site of the demolished buildings (Boulahnane, 2018). Similar stories which repeatedly circulated as unconfirmed rumors amongst the American right-wing media were of Muslims publicly celebrating the anniversary of 9/11 and other terrorist attacks.

Unlike in France, these news reports and the subsequent opinions that they influence in the broader public are a relatively new phenomenon in the United States. Accordingly, it would be inaccurate to claim that the climate that they are creating has been the cause of major attacks such as 9/11 or the Boston Marathon bombing. Nevertheless, the media in the United States has a significant impact on public opinion which in turn influences politics. Once political measures aimed at the Muslim community are implemented, the situation becomes eerily similar to the conditions that perpetuated radicalization in France. Unfortunately, the opinions cultivated in the decades following the eleventh of September have already reached the highest echelons of American politics and have certainly had a major impact on policymaking. When President Trump limits immigration from Muslim-majority countries, with the justification of "having to figure what is going on", the administration is actively creating a context in which Muslims are defined as "the other" (Milton, 2017). Similarly, before his presidency, Donald Trump was one of the main voices claiming Barack Obama's supposed Muslim heritage to thus discredit him. The parallels to the French conduct during the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the first years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century are uncanny. What can certainly be assessed is that even if the prophecy has not fulfilled itself yet, the discourse is certainly conducted along the lines of

"when" the perceived Muslim threat will materialize, rather than "if" at all that will be the case.

### Conclusion

There is certainly a link between the theoretical concept of a self-fulfilling prophecy and radicalization in a practical political context. The example of France highlights that once a certain fraction of the population is labeled as a potential threat, a part of the national identity that the mainstream of the population has access to is denied to them. By creating these "in-groups" and "out-groups", the members of the "out-group" inevitably cannot identify completely with the values and identities of the mainstream. This process effectively forces the members of the "out-group" to search for alternative means of identification. Naturally, the absolute vast majority of people affected by this do not turn to radicalism. Nevertheless, it is only possible to cure the issues of radicalization if there is a clear and sincere rejection of the underlying web of predispositions and prejudices which have in part shaped the current problems.

Unfortunately, it is precisely this web that is presently being formed within the American society which could cause significant social challenges in the future. While arguably the notion of a self-fulfilling prophecy has only affected American radicalization to a minor effect, the trends that are forming can nevertheless pose a significant danger. Despite the creation of an "in-group" and "out-group" following significantly more along rhetorical rather than socio-economic lines, the process is still happening. The danger in that is that "Symbolic ghettoization" is exactly what its name suggests – "symbolic". It does not simply refer to the denial of certain opportunities and the physical manifestation of inequality. Instead, it refers to a set of values that are exactly the ideological foundation that has helped to segregate French society, and which could significantly undermine American social cohesion and thus perpetuate and intensify the problem of radicalization.

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