



All content of this publication was produced by Leen Aghabi, Dr Neven Bondokji, Alethea Osborne, and Kim Wilkinson. This publication is generously supported with funds from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands. This publication reflects the views of the authors only.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE

The information in this publication may not be reproduced, in part or in whole and by any means, without charge or further permission from the WANA Institute. For permission to reproduce the information in this publication, please contact the WANA Institute Communications Department at info@wanainstitute.org.

Published by the WANA Institute, Royal Scientific Society in Amman, Jordan

Authors: Leen Aghabi, Dr Neven Bondokji, Alethea Osborne, and Kim Wilkinson

Editor: Dr Erica Harper

Design: Lien Santermans

Cover image: John Hain (CC0)

Printed in Amman, Jordan

© 2017 WANA Institute. All rights reserved.

Manufactured in Jordan

Table of Contents

1. Introduction.....	2
2. Terminology.....	4
3. Why Social Identity Theory?	6
4. Concepts.....	8
4.1 Threat and Uncertainty	8
4.2 Belonging.....	10
4.3 Collective Identity	11
4.4 Resistance Identity	12
4.5 Modernity and Alternative Identities	13
4.6 The Periphery and Individual Mobility.....	14
5. Future Research	17
6. Summary.....	18

1. Introduction

The growth of radical armed groups in the West Asia - North Africa (WANA) region has impelled academic and policy interest in radicalisation pathways and their drivers.¹ But while radicalisation models usually incorporate identity-related factors, identity itself is rarely a central focus. To fill this gap, this literature review examines a specific area of social psychology – Social Identity Theory (SIT) – to explain how identity and related nuances of group membership, depersonalisation, and self-esteem, can operate to transform individuals into radicals.

SIT research has facilitated the development of a rich literature on intergroup relations in the context of religious² and ethnic conflicts,³ as well as the linkages between terrorism and group dynamics.⁴ Social psychologists, such as Reicher and Haslam, have linked radicalisation, extremism, and group processes: “we are learning that radicalisation does not happen in a vacuum, [and that it is] driven in part by rifts among groups that extremists seek to create, exploit and exacerbate.”⁵ Reciprocally, terrorism studies have also begun to offer insights into how intergroup relations affect behaviour. One outcome is the proliferation of theories that seek to explain intergroup dynamics in conflict contexts, including Social Exclusion Theory,⁶ Optimal Differentiation Theory,⁷ Terror Management Theory⁸ and Optimal Distinctiveness Theory.⁹

This review begins by briefly defining three key terms (Identity, Social Identity, and Role Identity), after which it explains the focus on SIT in this review. Because the role of identity in radicalisation is highly contextual, the review starts by discussing how instability and uncertainty

¹ Borum argues that social psychology, Social Movement Theory and Conversion Theory offer theoretical frameworks that can significantly improve radicalisation research. Randy Borum, “Radicalization into Violent Extremism I: A Review of Social Science Theories,” *Journal of Strategic Security* 4 (2011): 16-25. Crosssett and Spitaletta review of 16 theories from psychology and sociology also offer a set of radicalisation mechanisms pertaining to individuals, groups, and mass radicalisation. Chuck Crosssett and Jason A Spitaletta, *Radicalization: Relevant Psychological and Sociological Concepts* (Ft. Meade, MD: U.S. Army Asymmetric Warfare Group, 2010), <https://info.publicintelligence.net/USArmyRadicalizationConcepts.pdf>.

² For example, Jeffrey R. Seul, “‘Ours is the Way of God’: Religion, Identity, and Intergroup Conflict,” *Journal of Peace Research* 36, no. 5 (1999): 553–569.

³ For example, Stephen Worchel, *Written in Blood: Ethnic Identity and the Struggle for Human Harmony* (New York: Worth Publishers, 1999).

⁴ The literature on Northern Ireland illustrates this. For example, drawing from data from 823 Belfast adolescents over a period of four years, Merrilees et al. found that the ethno-political social identity of Belfast youth had protective effects on them in addition to risks. This in-group membership has helped youth deal with the mental health consequences of political violence, but this effect was not universal - the degree could differ between ethno-political groups. Interestingly, researchers found that in the same context strength of identity could increase propensity of violence and delinquent behavior towards out-groups. Christine E. Merrilees, Laura K. Taylor, Marcie C. Goeke-Morey, Peter Shirlow, and E. Mark Cummings, “Youth in contexts of political violence: A developmental approach to the study of youth identity and emotional security in their communities,” *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology* 20 (2014): 26-38.

⁵ Stephen D. Reicher and S. Alexander Haslam, “Fueling Extremes,” *Scientific American Mind* 27 (2016): 36.

⁶ Jean M. Twenge, Roy F. Baumesiter, Dianne M Tice an Tanja S Stucke, “If You Can’t Join Them, Beat Them: Effects of Social Exclusion on Aggressive Behavior,” *Journal of Personalist and Social Psychology* 81, no. 6 (2001): 1058-1069.

⁷ Geoffrey Leonardelli, Cynthia L. Pickett, and Marilynn B. Brewer, “Optimal Distinctiveness Theory: A Framework for Social Identity, Social Cognition, and Intergroup Relations,” *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* vol. 43(2010): 63-113.

⁸ Jeff Greenberg, Tom Pyszczynski, and Sheldon Solomon “Anxiety Concerning Social Exclusion: Innate Response or One Consequence of the Need for Terror Management?,” *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* 9 (1990).

⁹ Marilynn Brewer, (2003). “Optimal Distinctiveness, Social Identity, and the Self” In Mark Leary and June Tangney, eds., *Handbook of Self and Identity*. (New York: Guilford, 2003), 480–491.

influence social identity. It then moves to examine key concepts including belonging, collective identity, resistance identity, alternative identities, and social mobility. Through this, it seeks to elaborate on the important role that social identity can play in radicalisation processes. The review also acknowledges how the modernity crisis in the WANA region has led to the rise of radical groups through their consolidation of a unique and attractive collective identity. Finally, areas of future research are suggested at the end of this review to assist in understanding the phenomenon further and in developing P/CVE efforts.

This review offers new insights into the identity dimensions of radicalisation, for the benefit of Preventing and Countering Violence Extremism (P/CVE) efforts, as well as future research. It should be used as a guide for policy makers and P/CVE stakeholders so that they may better understand the radicalisation process, and design appropriate and effective P/CVE initiatives. The same concepts should also guide efforts on returnee rehabilitation and reintegration.

This review is written as part of the project “Religion for Peace and Development in the WANA Region,” and should be read in tandem with related WANA Institute research on radicalisation drivers among youth in Jordan,¹⁰ and psychological drivers of radicalisation.¹¹

¹⁰ Neven Bondokji, Kim Wilkinson, Leen Aghabi, *Trapped between Destructive Choices: Radicalisation Drivers Affecting Youth In Jordan* (Amman: The WANA Institute, 2017), available at <http://wanainstitute.org/en/publication/trapped-between-destructive-choices-radicalisation-drivers-affecting-youth-jordan>

¹¹ Erica Harper, *Examining Psychological Drivers of Radicalisation in Jordan* (Amman: The WANA Institute, May 2017), available at <http://wanainstitute.org/en/publication/examining-psychological-drivers-radicalisation-jordan>

2. Terminology

As a rubric, **identity** is a nebulous concept. In academia, identity is defined as “a combination of socio-cultural characteristics which individuals share, or are presumed to share, with others on the basis of which one group may be distinguished from others.”¹² More simply, identity is the sum affiliations of an individual, as well as how one perceives him or herself. An individual has multiple affiliations, and at any time, one may take precedence in determining individual behaviour.

Definitions of social identity developed as scholars began to examine dynamics of intergroup conflict. In a broad sense, **Social Identity** provides individuals with ‘a shared/collective representation’ of who they are and how they should behave as members of that group.¹³ The starting point in this shared representation is: “the individual’s knowledge that he belongs to certain social groups together with some emotion and value significance to him of the group membership.”¹⁴

For the purposes of this paper, and in order to connect social identity to radicalisation theory, social identity refers to an individual’s membership in a social group that offers him/her pride and self-worth, and prescribes what is acceptable behavior – as a group member – towards out-groups. Related social identity processes include out-group differentiation, competition, and antagonism. These processes can, under certain conditions, deteriorate into intergroup violence.

Important to our understanding of identity is also the notion that identity is a social construct shaped by multiple factors and as such it “responds to changes in both long-term intergroup relations and immediate interactive contexts, and elaborates the underlying sociocognitive mechanism.”¹⁵ This means that an individual’s social identity, and resulting behaviour, are products of circumstance, including threats, frustrations, and socio-economics.

The term social identity is usually compared to **role identity**, the latter referring to an individual’s function in society. An individual can have more than one role identity at any given time; for example, ‘mother,’ ‘lawyer,’ ‘writer,’ ‘friend,’ ‘tribe elder,’ etc. These role identities prescribe specific functions for an individual within society, which are distinctive from the roles of others.¹⁶

Separating role identity from social identity is important. Social identity offers meaning, whereas

¹² Ogo Alubo, *Citizenship and Identity Politics in Nigeria* (Lagos: CLEEN Foundation, 2009), 9, <http://www.cleen.org/Citizenship%20and%20Identity%20Crisis%20in%20Nigeria.pdf>

¹³ Dominic Abrams and Michael Hogg, *Social Identifications: A Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations and Group Processes* (Florence, US: Routledge, 2006), 3.

¹⁴ Henri Tajfel, (1972). “Social Categorization.” English manuscript of “La catégorisation sociale.” In S. Moscovici (Ed.), *Introduction à la Psychologie Sociale* (Vol. 1, pp. 272–302). (Paris: Larousse, 1972), 292.

¹⁵ Hogg, Terry, and White, “A Tale of Two Theories: A Critical Comparison of Identity Theory with Social Identity Theory,” 266.

¹⁶ Michael A. Hogg, Deborah J. Terry, and Katherine M. White, “A Tale of Two Theories: A Critical Comparison of Identity Theory with Social Identity Theory,” *Social Psychology Quarterly* 58, no. 4 (1995): 256.

role identity assigns functions.¹⁷ For example, a radical group, due to the collective identity it constructs for itself and the value it assigns to group membership, shapes an individual's social identity and worldview. However, an individual's role identity can prescribe their function within a radical group.

Second, the difference between social and role identity also clarifies the significance of group affiliation in the radicalisation process. Stets and Burke refer to the idea of 'depersonalisation' when individuals see themselves as "an embodiment of the in-group prototype."¹⁸ As a result, individuals assess their self-worth based on membership in the group.¹⁹ This facilitates behaviour at the service of the group even when it entails self-sacrifice.

A final exploration of this difference is that social identity is related to the solace an individual finds in the shared value system, perceptions, and attitudes of group members. This facilitates an individual's role in extreme violence, because he/she will act within acceptable group norms, in a process usually referred to as Group Think.²⁰

To summarise, the three terms Identity, Social Identity, and Role Identity carry important nuances which explain how individuals' perceive who they are, to which group they belong, and how to behave as members of a group. These are crucial questions for an individual going through the radicalisation process and engaging in violent extremist behaviour. This brief discussion of terms here offers the background necessary for understanding the concepts discussed in the following sections.

¹⁷ Manuel Castells, *The Information Age: Economy, Society, and Culture Volume II: The Power of Identity* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, Ltd., 1997), 7.

¹⁸ Jan E. Stets and Peter J. Burke, "Identity Theory and Social Identity Theory," *Social Psychology Quarterly* 63, no. 3 (2000): 224-237.

¹⁹ This can be compared to the concept of 'self-verification' in role identity: "seeing the self in terms of the role as embodied in the identity standard." Jan E. Stets and Peter J. Burke, "Identity Theory and Social Identity Theory," *Social Psychology Quarterly* 63, no. 3 (2000): 224-237.

²⁰ Irving L. Janis, *Groupthink: Psychological Studies of Policy Decisions and Fiascoes*. 2nd Edition. (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1982).

3. Why Social Identity Theory?

Social Identity Theory (SIT) is a body of research first developed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner that examines intergroup relations and intergroup conflict. Traditionally, social psychology has explained behaviour as the interaction between individuals.²¹ But this was later considered a weakness because it fails to explain how groups provide individuals with an identity.²² SIT was later developed to explain how the group influences individuals.²³

SIT describes how social identity is formulated through four processes:

- Social categorisation: an individual's self-identification with a social group;
- In-group positivity: the positive emotions and self-esteem produced by group affiliation;
- Intergroup comparison: the comparison between different groups and the perceptions on group status this creates (later expanded by Turner as Social Categorisation Theory);²⁴ and
- Out-group hostility: hostility towards other groups that results from intergroup comparisons and perceptions about the illegitimacy of intergroup power relations in society.

According to SIT, humans naturally desire inclusion and differentiation.²⁵ They seek to belong to groups, and tend to classify groups within a given society. Social groups also compete with each other. Groups seek to maintain their perceived upper status by reinforcing prejudices and negative stereotypes of out-groups. In certain conditions, this competition can translate into intergroup hostility and violence.

Cases of large-scale intergroup violence, including the Rwandan genocide (ethnic social identity) and Balkans war (religious social identity), contributed to a shift in the focus of SIT research. What initially was confined to lab-controlled experiments evolved to include an examination of sectarian violence, genocide and, most recently, radicalisation. Research examining how social identities influence the violent behaviour of individuals against out-groups is a vital contribution to better understanding radicalisation processes.

Results suggest that behaviour is determined by membership in a group that offers belonging, self-esteem, and a role for the individual. Because the individual values this membership, he/she behaves as expected by the collective norms and value system of the group. As a result of this research, SIT has helped to clarify how individuals engage in extreme violence in conflicts and genocide as a result of these collective norms binding the in-group members against out-groups.

²¹ Abrams and Hogg, *Social Identifications: A Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations and Group Processes*, 3.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ John C. Turner, "Social Categorisation and the Self-Concept: A Social Cognitive Theory of Group Behavior," in *Advances in Group Processes: Theory and Research*, ed. E. J. Lawler (Greenwich, CT: JAI Press, 1985).

²⁵ This was expanded and explained in Optimal Distinctiveness Theory. For more, see Roy. F. Baumeister and Mark. R. Leary, "The Need to Belong: Desire for Interpersonal Attachments as a Fundamental Human Motivation," *Psychological Bulletin* 117 (1995).

Once an individual adheres to radical ideology, and based on the context around them, he/she often adopts the group's exclusivist 'us versus them' worldview. The dynamics of belonging, self-fulfillment, and pride in the in-group, prepare an individual to sacrifice themselves for the group's survival. This process is common to all radical groups, whether religious, ethnic, or political.

4. Concepts

This section sets out how contextual factors and psycho-social dynamics enable individuals to accept and engage in acts of violence in defense of their social group, and thus how social identity contributes to the radicalisation of vulnerable individuals.

4.1 Threat and Uncertainty

As discussed above, social identity can be understood as the sum of individual cognitive affiliation, the comparative value of group status, and feelings of group membership.²⁶ These intergroup relations can all be altered by political and social upheaval.

Maalouf argues that individuals usually hold multiple identities. When one of these identities is threatened, it can become heightened, along with a desire to revenge it.²⁷ For example, many in the WANA region argue that globalisation is threatening their social, and particularly Muslim, identity, and as a result they adopt increasingly religious behaviour or dress as a sign of resistance.²⁸ Alternatively, individuals may attempt to conceal the element of their identity they perceive as under threat.²⁹ Maalouf suggests that Muslims and Islamist groups tend to disproportionately assert their Muslim identity (or political Islamist identity), which is sometimes manifested as radicalisation and/or fundamentalism.³⁰

SIT builds on this thinking to pinpoint three threat-related factors: legitimacy, stability and uncertainty. Specific considerations on each can link social identity with radicalisation. Intergroup relations, and out-group hostility, are closely connected to perceptions of stability and legitimacy in any given society.³¹ When a group considers existing intergroup relations to be illegitimate, it may try to alleviate its inferior status through 'social creativity',³² and by developing alternative identities which can institute a new power context.

For example, when state power is illegitimately vested in political groups that came to power through authoritarian means, Islamist political groups might protest these intergroup relations by proclaiming religious superiority, and hence –in their view– presenting themselves as a legitimate political actor.³³ In such situations, perceptions of illegitimate political power structures can drive

²⁶ Henri Tajfel and John Turner, "An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Conflict." In W. G. Austin and S. Worchel (eds.) *The Psychology of Intergroup Relations* (33-48). (Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole, 1979), 28-29.

²⁷ Ameen Maalouf, *In the Name of Identity: Violence and the Need to Belong*. Trans, Barbara Bray (London: Penguin books, Inc., 2003), 26.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ John Turner and Rupert Brown, "Social Status, Cognitive Alternatives and Intergroup Relations." In *Differentiation between Social Groups: Studies in the Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, ed. Henri Tajfel (London and New York: Academic Press, 1978), 221.

³² 'Social creativity' refers to the process whereby a group redefine their identity. This includes comparing groups using different criteria, changing values assigned to the in-group, or changing the out-group against which a group compares itself.³² Tajfel and Turner, "An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Conflict," 34.

³³ Ruling regimes in the region have also historically referred to Islam to "bolster" their legitimacy. Ahmad Shboul, "Between Rhetoric and Reality: Islam and Politics in the Arab World." In *Islam in World Politics*, ed. Nelly Lahoud and

instability as different groups seek a relatively superior position. Libya is a prime example of where such dynamics evolved into intergroup conflict and violence.

In other contexts, the threat to a group is linked to uncertainty. During the Arab Spring, Gulf States sought to re-assert their legitimacy by re-enforcing their rentier systems — in essence, disbursing cash benefits to citizens in exchange for loyalty.³⁴ In this example, state authorities attempted to maintain political stability and *avoid* any questioning of the legitimacy of intergroup relations.

But perceptions of illegitimate intergroup relations can create social instability as inferior groups attempt to improve their status. In turn, this instability increases individuals' uncertainty about attempts to modify group status, or how they feel about their group membership. Some prefer to change their group membership, while others choose to contribute to their group's efforts to elevate its status. The former can be seen as individuals that are searching for new identities that may provide them with greater stability and enhanced superiority.

Hogg and Blaylock have sought to clarify the interaction between social identity and uncertainty to explain how such individuals become radicals.³⁵ Hogg's Uncertainty-Identity Theory, the principles of which are drawn from SIT, posits that uncertainty leads individuals to identify with specific social groups. The groups that are particularly alluring are highly *entitative*, meaning they have a clearly articulated and unique identity, an affiliated belief system, and requirements for behaviour.³⁶

Extremist groups are appealing to individuals trying to ameliorate uncertainty, because they meet these criteria. Daesh is a good example of a highly entitative group – it has a strict behaviour code and an affiliated ideology, along with punishments for transgressions.³⁷ Membership reduces self-doubt because individuals take on a strong sense of who they are and how they should act.

Iannaccone and Berman make a similar argument, noting that *any* ideology is effective in contexts of uncertainty because of the stability it offers. It provides a worldview that explains ambiguous contexts and reference points for individuals' behaviour by merit of their group

Anthony H. Johns, (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 174. Hanafi also argues that when a secular system is weak, it needs religion because it offers historic and moral legitimacy. Hassan Hanafi, "Religion and Culture in the Arab World: Evidence of Links to Political Violence," in *Tangled Roots: Social and Psychological Factors in the Genesis of Terrorism*, ed. Jeff Victoroff (Amsterdam: IOS Press, 2006).

³⁴ Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, "Domestic implications of the Arab uprisings in the Gulf." In *The Gulf States and Arab Uprisings*, ed. Ana Echagüe (Spain: FRIDE and the Gulf Research Center, 2013), 38-40.

³⁵ Michael A Hogg, "From Uncertainty to Extremism: Social categorization and Identity Processes," *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 23 (2014): 338-342; Michael A. Hogg and Danielle L. Blaylock (eds.), *Extremism and the Psychology of Uncertainty* (West Sussex: Blackwell, 2012).

³⁶ Hogg, "From Uncertainty to Extremism: Social categorization and Identity Processes," 339.

³⁷ Noman Benotman and Bikita Malik, *The Children of Islamic State*. (London: Quilliam Foundation, 2016), 34. <https://f.hypotheses.org/wp-content/blogs.dir/2725/files/2016/04/the-children-of-islamic-state.pdf>

affiliation.³⁸ This explains why individuals experiencing an identity crisis find refuge in ideology during times of crisis precisely because of the certainty it offers.

Likewise, according to Taylor and Louis, camp-based refugees represent a group that is vulnerable to recruitment because of the uncertainty they experience. Despite what is stated in international law, young refugees often *see themselves* as having no legal status,³⁹ no clear future, and no collective identity, and in such a situation a radical group can appear to offer a forward-looking outlook with promises of a better status in the future.⁴⁰ However, it is important to note here that there is no evidence of radicalisation among refugees in Jordan or the region.

A final point on threat and social identity is that identity must be evaluated in its historical context. Context both defines threats based on social position, and identifies available opportunities to cope with them.⁴¹ Maalouf argues that Islamic movements are a product of disparities and frustrations, more than they are a product of Islamic history. He argues that when groups fall under attack, they become closed off from others, and contrasts this with earlier periods of Islamic history when Muslims felt safe and societies were more inclusive of different religious and ethnic groups. In extremis, Maalouf notes that, **“any human community that feels humiliated or fears for its existence will tend to produce killers.”**⁴²

4.2 Belonging

To further understand how contextual factors affect an individual’s social identity, it is important to examine the psychological human need for group belonging. People usually seek an affiliation that makes them proud,⁴³ and when a social group believes it has a superior status, members enjoy higher self-esteem. This can also inspire others to join. Daesh, which is perceived by some young people as a “fearsome and powerful group”, appears to offer its members increased power status.⁴⁴ Members work to protect this superior status and contribute to the group’s strengths and moral standpoints.

For members of inferior social groups, the need to belong creates an identity crisis driven by a frustration with the status quo. In response, they shift their membership to the superior group. A radical group can offer such individuals, and those with a religious orientation, a worldview that aligns with their own, and provides them with a sense of moral superiority vis-à-vis their

³⁸ Laurence Lannaccone and Eli Berman, “Religious Extremism: The Good, the Bad, and the Deadly,” *Public Choice*, 128, Issue 1 (2009): 109-129.

³⁹ Although refugees have a clear status under international law, the sentence here refers to the perceptions of young refugees, not the actual legal status they have.

⁴⁰ Donald Taylor and Winnifred Louis, “Terrorism and the Quest for Identity.” In Fathali Moghaddam and Anthony J Marsella (eds.), *Understanding Terrorism: Psychosocial Roots, Consequences, and Interventions* (Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association, 2004), 177-178.

⁴¹ Naomi Ellemers, Ad van Knippenberg, and Henk Wilke, “The Influence of Permeability of Group Boundaries and Stability of Group Status on Strategies of Individual Mobility and Social Change,” *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 29, no. 3 (1990): 233-246.

⁴² Maalouf, *In the Name of Identity*, 28.

⁴³ Maalouf, *In the Name of Identity*, 2-3.

⁴⁴ Dr Neven Bondokji, Kim Wilkinson, and Leen Aghabi, “Trapped between Destructive Choices: Radicalisation Drivers Affecting Youth in Jordan”, (Amman: The WANA Institute, 2017), 13.

surrounding community. A desire amongst radicals to isolate themselves from what they perceive as the morally inferior society around them is usually attributed to this adopted feeling of moral superiority.⁴⁵

If the individual is unable to join the socially superior group, they can become 'lost', and thus vulnerable to recruitment from other groups.⁴⁶ In this regard, Schwartz, Dunkel, and Waterman have examined two personal identity typologies –foreclosed identity and diffuse identity– as sources of vulnerability to terrorist recruitment. Of relevance to this discussion is diffuse identity –when an individual is aimless. Such individuals may gravitate towards terrorist groups because of the clearly defined identities and behavioural requirements offered.⁴⁷ One example is a group of foreign fighters from Belgium who chose to join Daesh partially because, according to Coolsaet, they previously had no clear future, experienced personal challenges, and/or lacked a sense of belonging.⁴⁸ The strict behavioural code of Daesh offers these youth what they otherwise lack.

4.3 Collective Identity

Groups succeed in influencing behaviour because they create a collective identity for all members. This collective identity is shaped by both in-group cohesion and out-group hostility. Pivotal to understanding this relationship is the notion of 'Self-concept'.

According to Taylor and Louis, Self-concept comprises four elements: personal identity, personal self-esteem, collective identity, and collective self-esteem. These elements answer individuals' questions on 'who they are' and 'are they worthy', in both an individual and collective sense. Collective identity is the most influential as it offers a normative backdrop against which individuals develop individual identity.⁴⁹

Collective identities can be enhanced by out-groups. "The reality of the one group is constituted by the perceptions and actions of the other."⁵⁰ Taylor and Louis explain that blaming the out-group for illegitimate intergroup relations and for injustices in a given context allows the in-group to maintain self-esteem.⁵¹ They note that Bin Laden lacked a well-articulated collective identity, so fashioned himself one that was defined against a clear enemy: the West/US.⁵² In this way, he created a new collective identity based on the identification of what the group opposed.

⁴⁵ Mohammad Abu Rumman, *I am a Salafi: A Study of the Actual and Imagined Identities of Salafis* (in Arabic). (Amman: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2014), 145-150.

⁴⁶ Taylor and Louis, "Terrorism and the Quest for Identity"; Seth J. Schwartz, Curtis S. Dunkel, and Alan S Waterman, "Terrorism: An Identity Theory Perspective," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 32 (2009): 537-559.

⁴⁷ Schwartz, Dunkel, and Waterman, "Terrorism: An Identity Theory Perspective," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 32 (2009): 537-559.

⁴⁸ Rik Coolsaet, *Facing the Fourth Foreign Fighters Wave: What Drives Europeans to Syria, and to Islamic State? Insights from the Belgian Case*, EGMONT Paper 81, (Brussels, Belgium: Royal Institute for International Relations EGMONT, 2016), 3 http://www.egmontinstitute.be/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/egmont.papers.81_online-versie.pdf. The other group Coolsaet examined is individuals who were already engaged in deviant behaviour.

⁴⁹ Taylor and Louis, "Terrorism and the Quest for Identity".

⁵⁰ Stephen D. Reicher and S. Alexander Haslam, "Fueling Extremes," *Scientific American Mind*, 27 (2016): 34-39.

⁵¹ Taylor and Louis, "Terrorism and the Quest for Identity," 177.

⁵² Ibid, 178.

Importantly, with or without in-group attachment, rejection of the out-group alone can be a strong enough motivating factor to engage in terrorist behavior.⁵³ This is because “terrorists are actively focused on violating powerful out-group norms.”⁵⁴ Accordingly, the presence of an out-group, coupled with perceptions of injustice, can be sufficient to push individuals to engage in violence. **In-group cohesion and group collective identity only work to further drive these dynamics.**

When group boundaries become more impermeable, in-group cohesion often intensifies. This benefits radical groups because collective identity helps members view each other positively and encourages cooperation.⁵⁵ Violent initiation activities, which are often part of joining a radical group, may close off the option of re-joining ordinary society. Thus, individuals who have undertaken these rites have crossed through a liminal stage, and are not only branded as one of the group but will have little opportunity to change group membership again – making strong in-group cohesion imperative.

The impact of these dynamics on individuals is highlighted in the notion that “for someone to follow a group – possibly to the point of violence – he or she must identify with its members and, at the same time detach from people outside the group, ceasing to see them as his or her concern.”⁵⁶ Furthermore, often when an individual identifies with a radical group, he/she ceases to act as an individual and instead behaves solely according to the group norms.⁵⁷ This collectivism benefits radical groups because it encourages a culture in which the group is prioritised above the individual.⁵⁸

4.4 Resistance Identity

This notion of defining oneself by what he/she is not is central in Castells’ classification of identities into three types: legitimising identity, resistance identity, and project identity. Of particular relevance to this discussion is resistance identity, which “constructs forms of collective resistance against otherwise unbearable oppression, usually on the basis of identities that were, apparently, clearly defined by history, geography, or biology...”⁵⁹ This resistance is usually constructed by actors who are lower down in the hierarchy of society. Such actors attempt to create a culture of resistance premised upon principles which oppose, or differ from, those held by mainstream societal institutions.⁶⁰

A resistance identity can be generated by a group to protest and counter a mainstream identity that disadvantages the in-group. In the case of radical armed groups, they have often created an

⁵³ Ibid, 183.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 184.

⁵⁵ Agbiboa, “The Social Dynamics of the ‘Nigerian Taliban’: Fresh Insights from Social Identity Theory,” 415-437.

⁵⁶ Stephen D. Reicher and S. Alexander Haslam, “Fueling Extremes,” *Scientific American Mind*, 27 (2016): 34-39.

⁵⁷ Michael A. Hogg and John C. Turner, “Intergroup behaviour, self-stereotyping and the salience of social Categories,” *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 26, no. 4 (1987), 325-340.

⁵⁸ Schwartz, Dunkel, and Waterman, “Terrorism: An Identity Theory Perspective,” 540.

⁵⁹ Castells, *The Information Age: Economy, Society, and Culture Volume II: The Power of Identity*, 8.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

identity that differs from the mainstream identity, and exists principally to resist and defy oppressive power structures (in their worldview, Western domination).

This has been illustrated by the crisis facing Sunnis in the WANA region who have felt ignored due to the lack of a clear political power protecting their interests.⁶¹ In 2006, Al-Qaeda capitalised on this sectarianism to re-produce itself as a symbol of Sunni force and identity. It has successfully used this disadvantaged position to craft a resistance identity premised on its role as a force for protecting Sunnis, and has further sought to legitimise its existence and violence through this worldview.

Kilcullen has documented how in Iraq the group, which then went under the moniker al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), fermented sectarian friction in order to achieve its goals. It did this by attacking its *own in-group*, to spur retaliatory attacks and create a cycle of increasing sectarian violence.⁶² This artful crafting of the sectarian dimension tapped into grievances felt by Sunni Muslims worldwide and proved largely successful.

Another example of resistance identity is Ghirbali's account of Salafism in Tunisia. He argues that Salafis, who felt marginalised and alienated, generated a resistance identity brought together by bonds of similarity. "This resistance-identity is developed by youth who find themselves in inferior positions with a stigma... They isolate themselves into a puritan world with set boundaries, values, and symbols."⁶³ The "psychological security" on offer was particularly successful in attracting the marginalised.⁶⁴

4.5 Modernity and Alternative Identities

In addition to resistance identities, individuals search for alternative identities when faced with failed national and civic identities. This is increasingly likely when the traditional expressions of identity available, whether they are tribal and/or sectarian, offer no opportunity to alleviate an inferior group status. In the WANA region, this search for alternative identities is influenced by the weak national identities and the challenges of modernity.

In Tunisia, for example, the failure of state institutions and the resulting distortion of state-defined identity drove the crafting of alternate identities, such as Elnahda's version of Islamic governance.⁶⁵ Furthermore, power stakeholders in the region have systematically weakened the national identities to protect their interests. B'albaki argues businessmen in Lebanon, army and

⁶¹ For a brief discussion on the Sunni political crisis, see Neven Bondokji, "The Rise of Armed Radical Groups in the Arab Region." In Mohamad Abu Rumman and Neven Bondokji, *The Growth of Armed Extremist Groups in Syria and Iraq*, Focused Studies 2, (Amman: Middle East Studies Center, 2016), 34-39.

⁶² Kilcullen argues that AQI undertook ambushes and unleashed car bombs in Sunni areas in "...a deliberate strategy of hurting their own". They also sought to provoke the Shia, and to leave the Sunni community with no other option than to support AQI or face Shia death squads. David Kilcullen, *Blood Year; Islamic State and the Failures of the War on Terror* (Victoria, Australia: Schwartz Publishing, 2016), 31.

⁶³ Foad Ghirbali, "Youth and Religion in Tunisia: A Study of New Identity Expression of Tunisian Youth," *Idafat Journal*, 23 and 24 (2013): 41-42.

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 42.

⁶⁵ Ghirbali, "Youth and Religion in Tunisia: A Study of NewIdentity Expression of Tunisian Youth."

Ba'ath Party officials in Syria, and corporate and army leaders in Jordan seek to reinforce traditional vertical identities. At the same time, media, religious, and education institutional discourse encourages 'exclusivist' sectarian and tribal identities at the expense of civic identities.⁶⁶ In the process, this consolidates the narrow identity lines these power stakeholders want to protect, while concurrently further marginalising citizens who search for alternative identities.

In a related argument, Farasin, Battaloglu, and Bensaid have elaborated on the three primary drivers that encourage radical Islamic ideology to flourish as an alternative identity in response to modernity. First, the lack of access to legitimate and legal means of socio-political change in the WANA region; Second, the easily available chances to engage in violence; And third, the marginalisation of moderate Islamic actors by states, who have instead supported secular and liberal elites. These elites are distant from the grassroots and unable to engage in cultural and/or political expression and discourse that appeals to the majority of citizens.⁶⁷ In response to these three factors, radical Islamic groups provide an alternative to confused youth in the region.

In a broader cultural sense, Arkoon notes that "Islam represents a refuge for communities and groups that feel uprooted from its traditional value systems due to modernisation, and for social forces that cannot express itself politically unless with a form of political protection."⁶⁸ Similarly, in his analysis of radicalisation in Algeria, Semmouk argues that religion offers people an escape from their social realities. Often influenced by charismatic leaders, religious movements can provide stability, security, and a solution at times of political, social, and economic hardship.⁶⁹

The search for alternative identities, the threat/instability of modernity, and the sense of finding a refuge in Islam all contribute to the appeal of Islamic radical groups. These factors attain more significance for marginalised individuals as will be explained shortly.

4.6 The Periphery and Individual Mobility

Bourdieu's concept of the 'periphery' explains how marginalisation leads to radicalisation. The link between marginalisation and joining a radical group is shown in the response from a Syrian participant in a study carried out by the WANA Institute: "when my immediate environment marginalises me and does not grant me my rights, an [armed radical] group will attract me saying they will take care of me and my family".⁷⁰

The 'periphery' is culturally defined as the difference in worldview held by an individual compared to the prevailing culture.⁷¹ Membership in a radical group allows the individual to

⁶⁶ Ahmad B'albaki, "The Concept of Middle Class and Identity in Arab Mashriq Societies," *al-Mustaqbal al-Arabi*, 403 (2012): 221-229.

⁶⁷ Fadi Farasin, Cihat Battaloglu, and Adam Bensaid, "What is Causing Radicalism in the MENA?" Research Paper Series. (Doha: Aran Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2017): 24-31.

⁶⁸ Ghirbali, "Youth and Religion in Tunisia: A Study of New Identity Expression of Tunisian Youth."

⁶⁹ Ali Sammouk, "The Multiple Divisions in Algerian Society and Identity Movement in the Sociology of the Other," *Idafat Journal* 9 (2010): 122-123.

⁷⁰ Dr Neven Bondokji, Kim Wilkinson, and Leen Aghabi, "Trapped between Destructive Choices: Radicalisation Drivers Affecting Youth in Jordan", (Amman: The WANA Institute, 2017), 12.

⁷¹ Hafez bin Omar, "Assertion of Identities in the Sociology of the Other: A Psycho-social Analysis of the Rise of Salafism in

achieve self-fulfillment, attract the attention of others who may have marginalised him/her, and assert his/her presence. Loyalty to the in-group that offers this is expressed through violence against the out-group.⁷²

At another level, and although SIT is mainly concerned with group dynamics, the role of marginalisation and individual mobility explains how radicalisation works. SIT examines how groups improve their comparative status vis-à-vis other groups through 'social creativity'⁷³ and 'social change'⁷⁴ whereby a group upgrades its status. These options are more pertinent in contexts where group boundaries are impermeable. In these contexts, individuals contribute to the group's collective effort instead of pursuing individual options.

But in contexts where individual mobility is possible, like in Europe, the risk lies in blocking channels for individual mobility. One social experiment can explain how marginalisation and individual social immobility may have affected European radicals. Reicher and Haslam re-ran the famous Stanford Prison Experiment (SPE). The SPE explains how ordinary people, taking on a role, can commit acts of extreme violence. In the experiments university students took the role of prison guards, and proceeded in a tyrannical fashion.⁷⁵ Reicher and Haslam built their study, the BBC Prison Study, on the SPE but changed one variable: they made it possible for some prisoners to assume the role of guards if they show good behaviour. After a period of time, this possibility of individual mobility was taken away. The actions of one prisoner is particularly useful for understanding how marginalisation and blocked individual mobility can contribute to radicalisation.

From the outset of the study, one particular prisoner had very clear ambitions to be a future guard. He saw himself as capable of uniting the guards and getting them to work as a team. Then, during the promotion process, the guards overlooked this prisoner and promoted someone he viewed as weaker and less effective. *Almost immediately, his demeanour and behaviour changed.* Previously he was a model inmate who shunned his fellow prisoners, but now he identified strongly with them... he began to emerge as a key instigator of a series of subversive acts that ultimately led to the overthrow and destruction of the guards' regime. His dramatic conversion came after a series of psychological steps that are occurring regularly in our communities today: aspiration to belong,

Tunisia" *Idafat Journal*, 23 and 24 (2013): 214-227.

⁷² *Ibid*, 220.

⁷³ 'Social creativity' refers to the process whereby a group redefine their identity. This includes comparing groups using different criteria, changing values assigned to the in-group, or changing the out-group against which a group compares itself.⁷³ Tajfel and Turner, "An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Conflict," 34.

⁷⁴ Naomi Ellemers, Ad van Knippenberg, and Henk Wilke, "The Influence of Permeability of Group Boundaries and Stability of Group Status on Strategies of Individual Mobility and Social Change," *British Journal of Social Psychology*, vol. 29, 3, (September 1990), 233-246.

⁷⁵ Thomas Carnahan and Sam McFarland, "Revisiting the Stanford prison experiment: could participant self-selection have led to the cruelty?" *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 33, 5 (2007): 603-614.

misrecognition, disengagement and misidentification.⁷⁶

This case explains how individuals sometimes disengage from society and search for alternative means for self-actualisation when individual mobility is blocked, along with feelings of injustice in their society. The prisoner in this case adjusted his self-perception and group affiliation, developed a resistance identity, and mobilised other group members to change the collective in-group inferior status.

Youth in Europe, who have joined radical groups, may have gone through a similar process and shifted their group affiliation in response to frustration with their individual social immobility. Marginalisation have blocked their chances of social mobility and as a result belonging to a radical group offered them an opportunity to advance their status and respond to perceived injustices.

⁷⁶ Reicher and Haslam, "Fueling Extremes," 39.

5. Future Research

While this paper has made a case for the relevance of SIT in explaining radicalisation dynamics, it is important to acknowledge limitations within the theory, particularly when it is applied to political phenomena. These include the existence of identity choice (ascribed versus acquired identity), the subjective meaning of identities, gradations in identity strength, and the stability of many social and political identities.⁷⁷ Other limitations include the relationship between identification and in-group bias, the self-esteem hypothesis, positive/negative asymmetry in intergroup discrimination, the effects of intergroup similarity, and choice of identity strategies by low status groups.⁷⁸ Future research should seek to address and overcome such issues in order to allow SIT to fully contribute to our understanding of radicalisation.

The literature on social identity also identifies important areas for future investigation. An example of this has been highlighted by Brown and concerns the ambiguity about how members of low status groups react to their “negative identity.”⁷⁹ In the current regional context, a main concern relates to the rehabilitation and reintegration of returnee fighters. Thus far, little is known about how returnees will overcome their negative identity and what psychosocial processes will best facilitate this. This has particular relevance for Jordan, and the inevitable number of fighters who may return home having been in Syria and Iraq.

Another area of inquiry concerns the “Contact hypothesis” –the idea that tolerance can be promoted between groups through contact.⁸⁰ With the rise of sectarianism in the region, P/CVE researchers might explore how contact between groups can reduce out-group hostility. Such a reduction could limit the vulnerability of individuals to engage in violence against the sectarian other.

Finally, future research can also assist practitioners and government actors on how to use the concepts discussed here to strengthen national identities in the WANA region, and limit the impact of tribal and sectarian affiliations. Strong national identities and a better sense of belonging to and pride in civic structures can guard against the appeal of radical groups that construct a resistance identity to challenge the status quo.

⁷⁷ Leonie Huddy, “From Social to Political Identity: A Critical Examination of Social Identity Theory,” *Political Psychology*, 22, no. 1 (2001): 127-156.

⁷⁸ Rupert Brown, “Social Identity Theory: Past Achievements, Current Problems and Future Challenges,” *European Journal of Social Psychology* 30 (2000): 745-778.

⁷⁹ *Ibid*, 760.

⁸⁰ Robert V. Guthrie, “All you need is contact,” *American Psychological Association* 32, no. 10 (2001).

6. Summary

This review has examined the insights available in the literature on how social identity impacts the radicalisation process. Social identity refers to an individual's membership in a social group that offers him/her pride, self-worth, meaning, and a worldview. This is distinguished from role identity that prescribes functions for an individual.

Social identity is context-determined. Threats play an important role in defining social identity, as group membership is based on perceptions of legitimacy, stability, and certainty, or lack thereof.

Individuals have a psychological need to belong that dictates many of the underpinnings of social identity. Marginalised individuals can suffer an identity crisis, and as a result, shift group memberships in search of inclusion and purpose. Belonging is further solidified by the collective identity that a social group offers its members, particularly when the boundaries between groups is made impermeable. This comes with enhanced in-group cohesion and out-group hostility, which in turn facilitates the turn to violence against out-groups.

Another form of social identity is resistance identity, which occurs when ostracised individuals bond together in an attempt to fight the oppressive status quo and illegitimate intergroup power structures. Often a resistance identity is constructed by the marginalised to assert power and attain presence in societal power structures.

Other than resistance identity, the search for alternative social identities is often a response to the challenges of modernity that have alienated youth and disconnected them from social and cultural heritage. In light of the oppressive governing structures in the WANA region, individuals search for assertive alternative identities to boost their self-esteem.

Marginalisation also impacts individual mobility. Groups generally attempt to upgrade their inferior status in collective efforts because group boundaries are impermeable. But in contexts where individuals can change group affiliation, marginalisation can block individual mobility, leading to frustration. In response individuals change group affiliation towards groups that offer them a sense of superiority and justice.

After exploring some of these important dynamics and how they can affect radicalisation in the WANA region, this brief literature review concludes with three knowledge gaps that could be addressed by future research at the intersection of radicalisation and Social Identity Theory in the Jordanian context:

- Examining how low status groups will react to their “negative identity”, this is useful for designing rehabilitation and reintegration programmes for returnees from ISIS-controlled territories to Jordan.
- Exploring the “Contact Hypothesis” in the CVE domain, particularly the way in which contact could reduce out-group hostility, and how this reduction might limit the

vulnerability of individuals.

- Analysing how SIT and related concepts can be applied to strengthen the national identity among citizens who have resorted to sectarian, tribal, or radical identities in response to the unstable and illegitimate current power structure.

This literature review has examined how SIT and related concepts can guide P/CVE research and practice. It emphasises the role of identity in the radicalisation process, and acknowledges at the same time how contexts (political, socio-economic, cultural, and historical) influence the decision of individuals to change their group affiliation. The review serves as a background and entry point for P/CVE actors interested in addressing issues pertaining to identity, belonging, and social mobility.



West Asia-North Africa Institute
Royal Scientific Society
70 Ahmad Al-Tarawneh St
Amman, Jordan

info@wanainstitute.org
www.wanainstitute.org