

Denys Proshyn\*

## **BREAKING THE WAVES: HOW THE PHENOMENON OF EUROPEAN JIHADISM MILITATES AGAINST THE WAVE THEORY OF TERRORISM**

**ABSTRACT:** David Rapoport’s Wave theory of terrorism is one of the most often-cited theories in the literature on terrorist violence. Rapoport is praised for having provided researchers with a universal instrument which allows them to explain the origin and transformation of various historical types of terrorism by applying to them the concept of global waves of terrorist violence driven by universal political impulses. This article, testing the Wave theory against the recent phenomenon of homegrown jihadism in Europe, uncovers this theory’s fundamental weaknesses and questions its real academic and practical value.

**KEY WORDS:** the Wave theory of terrorism, the Fourth Wave terrorism, European homegrown jihadists, critique

### **Introduction**

Recent decades have witnessed wide academic debate over the issues of the genesis of terrorism, its historical types and trends in terrorist violence. In this debate the dividing line runs between two major camps of researchers. The first of the two includes those who understand modern, “new” terrorism as being qualitatively and quantitatively different from previous forms, deriving its hatred and its force from new sources, organizing its activities along new lines and, as a result, becoming much more dangerous than “old” terrorism (Hoffman, Lesser et al., Neumann, Zanini and Edwards). The second camp is represented by those who deny this “old-new”

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\* Department of Political Science, Dnipropetrovsk Alfred Nobel University, 18, Naberezhna Lenina, 49000, Dnipropetrovsk, Ukraine, bishop.74@mail.ru.

dichotomy and view terrorism's metamorphoses as parts of a continuous process with "the old" and "the new" being intertwined and "the new," after all, not being as new as it is regularly said to be (Copeland, Crenshaw, Tucker).

Among those whose ideas are often cited in the context of this "old" vs. "new" terrorism debate is David Rapoport, professor at University of California, Los Angeles, and an originator of the Wave (or, alternatively, the Four Waves) theory of terrorism (Rapoport, "The Four Waves"). According to Rapoport, starting in the 1880s, terrorism, previously a local "nuisance" (such as actions of the Ku Klux Klan in the post-Civil War United States), became a global phenomenon. Since then, Rapoport argues, the world has experienced four consequent waves of terrorist violence, each one being informed by the influence of a certain political or ideological impulse. These are the anarchist wave, the anti-colonial wave, the "New Left" wave, and – most recently – the religious wave, which dates back to 1979, the year of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the beginning of a new century according to the Muslim calendar. All waves are said to last approximately forty years, sometimes overlapping each other (which means, "if the pattern of its three predecessors is relevant," that the fourth wave will give way to a fifth one sometime around 2025); and all of the waves allegedly display an internal homogeneity of political or ideological principles, strategy and tactics (Rapoport, "The Four Waves" 4). According to Rapoport, even those terrorist organizations that emerge in a context alien to a dominating wave impulse are at least partially transformed by its influence (e. g., turn to tactical methods that appear with the arrival of a new wave of terrorism).

Obviously, the scope of the Rapoportean theory is much wider than the issue of the current trends in terrorist violence. On the other hand, it is no less obvious why the Wave theory is regularly cited in relation to this issue. Since the 1990s, it has become a common point to depict modern terrorism as predominantly religious in character. Present-day terrorists are said to be driven for the most part by the Manichean vision of the global battle between good and evil, inspired to engage in indiscriminate violence against the unfaithful or non-believers – and to do so on an unprecedented scale and even end their own lives in fanatical suicide missions. The picture drawn by Rapoport of a completely new, religious, wave of terrorism emerging early in the 1980s perfectly corresponds with the views of those who assert that terrorist violence changed its nature

and its forms at the turn of the twentieth century. Moreover, because of its universality, the Wave theory seems to add depth to the “old” vs. “new” terrorism dichotomy. In such a perspective, recent trends turn out not to be a singular anomaly but rather a fresh part of a recurring historical pattern.

### **The Wave Theory and Its Contradictions**

In the debate over the nature of these trends one can take any side. (I personally do not subscribe to the opinion of those who view current developments in terrorism as the manifestation of something fundamentally “new.”) Certainly, there are a great many controversial questions related to what precisely “religious terrorism” means, how much religious fanaticism affects terrorists’ intentions, etc. Even such a prominent expert as Paul Wilkinson faces difficulty trying to answer these questions in a conclusive way. In one and the same chapter of his classic work, *Terrorism versus Democracy*, Wilkinson first writes about “a dramatic emergence of terrorism motivated by extreme Islamist movements” citing Lebanon’s Hezbollah, Palestine’s Hamas, Egypt’s al-Gama’a al Islamiyya and the transnational al-Qaida network as examples (31), and then admits that “one is struck of the *political* [i. e. secular] nature of their agendas” (35). He continues:

Hence we see what *appears to be at first sight a purely religious phenomenon* is in fact in large part about political control and socio-economic demands [italics added] (Wilkinson 35).

But whichever side a researcher takes in the “old” vs. “new” terrorism debate, the Wave theory will not be of much – if any – help. For sure, one can be impressed by its chronological and factological scope. It would seem that Rapoport’s arguments are supported by the historical evidence. Clearly, there were periods in the history of terrorism marked by the rise and fall of anarchist, anti-colonial or leftist sentiments, with terrorist organisations or individual terrorists active during these periods sharing common features in their ideology or practice. The same events indeed quite often influenced terrorist actors that belonged to the same periods (the war in Vietnam as a symbol and example of “anti-imperialist resistance” for various left-wing terrorist groups around the world in the 1960s-70s). Some underground movements and organisations indeed played the role of “trailblazers” in employing

certain strategic or tactical novelties later emulated or adopted by other terrorist actors (such as the urban guerrilla warfare concept in 1969 pioneered, or reintroduced after a long time, by the Brazilian revolutionary Carlos Marighella and then borrowed by diverse terrorist groups like the Tupamaros in Uruguay, the Red Army Faction in West Germany or the Irish Republican Army in the United Kingdom). And, regardless of all possible controversies, there *has been* a significant increase in the weight of the religious factor in terrorist activity in recent decades.

All this is reflected in the Wave theory with reasonable accuracy. Nevertheless, on closer examination, some fundamental questions arise. Does the Rapoportean theory offer anything beyond the arranging of numerous well-studied facts in a certain order? Is it capable of not merely portraying events but explaining them? And, probably the most important of all: when explanations are provided, do they actually uncover anything substantial? Is the “wave phenomenon” allegedly “discovered” by Rapoport *real*, which means that a wave constitutes not merely a bundle of contemporaneous / loosely interrelated events but a coherent *entity*? As I have argued recently, the answers to all these questions are negative (Proshyn). Rapoport’s “Wave theory,” which has been hailed as one of the most important breakthroughs ever achieved “in the vast literature on terrorism” (Simon 44) and “one of the greatest contributions to the study of terrorism in the past two decades” (McAllister and Shmid 228), in fact represents an unsuccessful attempt to find a single explain-all solution for the extremely complex problem of the origins and transformation of terrorism. It “works” only if one agrees not to notice how superficial and sometimes even flimsy its author’s reasoning is.

It is obvious that quite often the activity of terrorist organisations is not conducted in parallel with the dynamics of “their” waves. For instance, within both the anti-colonial and leftist waves we observe the cases of sharp increases in terrorist activity towards the end of the wave (full-scale terrorist-backed insurgencies in Cyprus, Algeria, and Peru). Rapoport conveniently explains this away by saying that while “a wave is composed of organisations,” waves and organisations “have very different life rhythms” (Rapoport, “The Four Waves” 4). What matters for Rapoport is the impulse forming a particular wave, not the dynamics of individual terrorist groups, which might emerge at any point along the wave. Some groups may disappear long before “their” wave is gone; others may even outlast “their” wave, “adapting” to the next one. But

this explanation barely explains anything. If the global wave-forming impulse is *the major driving force* behind all terrorist groups related to a given wave, then, once again, why are some organisations so slow to emerge in response to “their” generative impulses? Furthermore, what factors enable terrorist organisations to continue their campaigns after “their” wave impulses expire?

I argue that the emergence, activity and life span of terrorist organisations (however powerful global influences may be) are in the first place determined by local factors, i. e. socio-political conflicts inherent in particular societies, not by global impulses (Proshyn). Surely, Rapoport is aware of those conflicts, but we are never given the answer to the inevitable question: how exactly do global wave-forming impulses (by definition external to the absolute majority of conflicts) “override” the context of local socio-political issues to become the main force and, correspondingly, the main explanation behind the activity of variegated terrorist organisations throughout the world? It is presented as an a priori assertion that a “wave’s energy” (*somehow*) “inspires” or ceases to “inspire” terrorist activity (Rapoport, “The Four Waves” 5).

Terrorist organisations may appear or disappear at any time through a wave’s life span, evidently in accordance with local socio-political conditions, and nevertheless they are supposed to be viewed as “inspired” by external – “global” – influence. Other groups outliving “their” waves and entering new ones are described as changing their nature under the influence of new impulses. However, the mechanism of such transformation is also never revealed and analysed in any significant detail (what happens to an organisation’s previous goals, leadership, supporters, etc.; why should a changing terrorist organisation be viewed as transformed in the first place from the outside, by an impulse emanating from a distant source, but not from the inside, by local factors?). When Rapoport is attempting an explanation, he says too little and basically manages only to rephrase himself by simply asserting that a terrorist organisation transcending its wave “reflects” (*somehow* once again) “the new wave’s influence,” which “may pose special problems for the group and its constituencies...” (Rapoport, “The Four Waves” 5).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Moreover, citing the case of the IRA as an example (Rapoport, “The Four Waves” 5) Rapoport moves in the diametrically wrong direction, for instead of relinquishing in the late 1960s its nationalist nature to adapt to the third, “New Left,” wave, the IRA, a left-oriented organisation for approximately ten years, rejected its Marxist sympathies to become (in the form of its most aggressive Provisional faction) a stridently nationalist force (Coogan 341).

In short, Rapoport fails to prove the entitic reality of his alleged “waves of terrorism.” From what he says, only one “definite” conclusion could be derived – namely, that different subjects of terrorism may be in one way or another influenced by the same political events. No reasonably identical or regular pattern of such influence was shown by Rapoport. Obvious differences in the behaviour of terrorist groups belonging to the same wave were never convincingly explained.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, arguing that a wave could be studied and understood virtually independently of the subjects of terrorism it is composed of, Rapoport further underscores the weakness of his theory. To produce a wave of terrorism a political impulse needs to manifest itself in the activities of concrete terrorist subjects. If a researcher dismisses such concretics as epiphenomenal details and focuses exclusively on “universal” factors (which is basically what Rapoport does), his or her theory will turn out to be a kind of tautology. A global wave is generated by a certain global political impulse, but since the activities of particular subjects pertaining to a given wave are assertedly of secondary importance, the impulse itself appears to be the only thing that matters, or *stands for a wave*. To put it differently, a wave is an impulse is a wave.

Despite its weakness, the Wave theory of terrorism, as previously mentioned, remains one of the most widely cited theories in the literature on terrorism. Besides earning its author praise from other academics, this theory became the starting point for a great deal of research – from dissertations (Smith) to monographs (Gupta) to collective research projects (*Terrorism: Critical Concepts; Terrorism, Identity and Legitimacy*). Such popularity seems to be accounted for by the seductively simple answers to complex questions which

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<sup>2</sup> For instance, if the major driving force of the third wave of terrorism was the agonising Vietnam War, why did the terrorist Weather Underground Organisation (WUO) that acted in the 1970s in the United States, the nation most deeply involved in the Indochina conflict, cease all its violent activities after less than ten years of existence, while the Red Army Faction that emerged in West Germany almost simultaneously with WUO continued its struggle for more than two decades, the deaths of its “historical leaders” and arrests of many rank-and-file members notwithstanding? Is it possible that the impulse of the Vietnam War affected American extremists less than their West German counterparts? Is it not self-evident that for West German left-wing terrorists active from the early 1970s through to the early 1990s (as well as for left extremists in many other countries during the same period) the war in Indochina (which ended in 1975) was only one of numerous driving factors, the rest of them originating from internal political conflicts? Even WUO’s strategy, tactics and eventual dissolution could not be exhaustively explained by referring solely to the war in Vietnam.

the Wave theory proposes (practically everything in the genesis and evolution of terrorism is attributed to the influence of a single factor) and by the apparently close match of the facts cited to its assertions (if we dismiss concretics in favour of broad, “global” strokes).

Paradoxically, what in fact is the reflection of the weak points of the Rapoportean theory, of its schematic and superficial nature, is perceived as its advantage. But what is probably even more paradoxical is that there have been, to the best of my knowledge, no attempts whatsoever to fashion a comprehensive critique of the fundamental flaws in the Wave theory. Even in those works that are devoted to the multi-aspect analysis of terrorism (of its origin, different types, transformations, etc.) and where it would seem natural to encounter at least partial criticism of Rapoport’s theory, we find nothing of the kind (*Critical Terrorism Studies; Networks, Terrorism and Global Insurgency; Root Causes of Terrorism*). Taking into consideration how widely and uncritically the Wave theory is used, it appears doubly desirable and appropriate to judge its analytical value and its applicability to the needs of counter-terrorism. I have already made a step in this direction (and some of the present arguments are borrowed from my above cited article), but that previous criticism was broad and focused mostly on what Rapoport calls the first three waves of terrorism, all of them long gone. In this article, my intention is to test the Wave theory once again, this time against the much more recent and dangerous phenomenon, which, according to Rapoport’s logic, belongs to the newest, fourth, wave of terrorism – namely, homegrown jihadism in Europe.

### **The Fourth Wave and the Coming of Homegrown Jihadists**

Disturbing examples of the phenomenon of European homegrown jihadism are plentiful these days. The tragic case of the French satirical weekly *Charlie Hebdo* and ensuing events in Paris and its surrounding area are a painfully fresh reminder of the extreme virulence of this threat. But at the time Rapoport first published his theory in the very early 2000s (Rapoport, “The Fourth Wave”), only the initial signs of Europe becoming a hotbed of homegrown jihadists had appeared. Thus the problem has remained outside the Rapoportean theoretical scheme. However, it is exactly because of its late origin that homegrown jihadism may serve as an almost ideal example of the distribution of another Rapoportean global wave of terrorism, and consequently it is the perfect test case

for the Wave theory. European jihadism originated long after the events, which, according to Rapoport, had started the wave of religious terrorism and in an environment sharply distinct from that where those events and their immediate repercussions had taken place. If Rapoport's theory works, it should coherently explain the chain of events stretching from the late 1970s and early 1980s Middle East and Afghanistan to the 2000s-10s United Kingdom, Germany or France.

For objectivity's sake it must be underlined that neither for Rapoport himself, nor for those who share his views, is religious terrorism to be identified exclusively with Islamic terrorism. As early as 1984, almost a decade before going public with his Four Waves theory, Rapoport published an article dealing with early examples of terrorist violence in no less than three religious traditions – Jewish (the Sicarii), Muslim (the Assassins) and Hindu (the Thugs) (Rapoport, "Fear and Trembling"). Regardless of their controversial nature,<sup>3</sup> these examples demonstrate Rapoport's readiness to look at the problem of religious terrorism from different angles. Later, in his Wave theory proper, along with Islamic terrorism Rapoport mentioned activities of Jewish and Christian fundamentalists, the Japanese totalitarian sect Aum Shinrikyo as well as Sikh and Tamil separatists supposedly influenced by the global impulse of religious extremism. Still, it is Islam that is the main current of the religious wave. As Rapoport puts it:

Islamic groups have conducted the most significant, deadly, and profoundly international attacks. Equally significant, the political events providing the hope for the fourth wave originated in Islam, and the successes achieved apparently influenced religious terror groups elsewhere (Rapoport, "The Four Waves" 17).

As previously stated, Rapoport's theory seems to be reasonably well borne out by the facts. Indeed, the Iranian Revolution and the invasion of Afghanistan sent shockwaves through the Muslim world, providing alarming evidence of the threat to Islam from the infidels and therefore a stimulus to defend the faith. One of the

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<sup>3</sup> Strictly speaking, the actions of the ancient Jewish Sicarii ("daggermen") fighting the Roman occupational authorities and their Jewish collaborators were more of a nationalist nature (however dramatic their religious trappings), while India's Thugs (literally – "deceivers"), worshipers of the dark goddess Kali, never pursued any other goals than to please their dreadful patroness (therefore their numerous murders fall completely outside the scope of any discussions on terrorism).



consequences of this upsurge was the emergence in the first half of the 1980s of a cluster of terrorist organisations that began their struggle under Islamic slogans (Egyptian Islamic Jihad, Islamic Jihad Organisation, Hezbollah). Having first been felt in the Middle East, in the course of the 1980s-2000s this impulse spread to other countries and regions – from East Africa to Asia-Pacific.

In the middle of the 1990s Islamic terrorism reached European shores. In 1994-95 the Algerian Armed Islamic Group delivered several blows against France. In 1998-99 in West Germany a group of radical students from Muslim countries emerged. Later this so-called Hamburg cell was integrated into the structure of the Afghanistan-based al-Qaida, and its members upon receiving their training in Afghan camps played a crucial part in the September 11 terrorist attacks against the United States. However, the role of *European* Muslims in these dramatic developments remained modest until the middle of the 2000s when finally homegrown jihadists themselves burst onto the scene with resonant political assassinations and mass terror attacks (such as the murder of the controversial Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh in 2004 and multiple bombings in Madrid in 2004 and London in 2005).

In another variation on the Rapoportean wave theme, the well-known American expert Marc Sageman depicts European jihadists as the “ripple” on the surface of the wave of religious terrorism, previous “ripples” being the core al-Qaida cadres whose pedigree goes back to the mid-1980s and those Muslim expatriates who, like members of the Hamburg cell, joined the jihadist ranks in the late 1990s (Sageman, “Ripples in the waves” 87-89). But once one moves beyond these vague, metaphorical schemes, which are far more descriptive than analytical, there immediately arise serious questions regarding a possible or already proposed wave-based interpretation of the phenomenon of European jihadism.

### **Breaking the Wave: the Global and the Local in Homegrown Jihadism**

It would be logical to begin with the question of how precisely proponents of the Wave theory envisage the mechanism of preservation of the 1979 wave-forming impulse among homegrown European jihadists. Is it possible to argue in earnest that the events that took place several decades ago far away in parts of south-western and central Asia and which are totally foreign to present-day young

European Muslims are still capable of decisively influencing would-be jihadists? Posing this question appears to be even further justified when one considers the fact that the probing (insofar as it is possible to probe) of the European jihadist scene with its subculture, religious literature, videos, audios, improvised martyrology, etc., has failed to reveal either special interest among European Muslim youth in the distant upheavals of the late 1970s and early 1980s or a special reverence towards those who participated in those past events. Instead of all this, the attention of European (would-be) jihadists was (or still is) concentrated on such recent or contemporary topics as the war in Afghanistan against al-Qaida and the Taliban; the invasion of Iraq; the Arab Spring; the Syrian Civil War; and, most recently, the rise of the Islamic State (Drissel 10, Venhaus 7-8).

No doubt, supporters of the Wave theory would readily object by pointing out that the 1979 impulse was not an “eternal mover” but a “*trigger*” that started the prolonged chain reaction. Considered in this light, the decades-old “global impulse” does not overshadow newer developments. Naturally, at the same time the opposite will be stated: however remarkable succeeding events may be, they do not detract from the importance of the “trigger event.” In this light, whatever the impact on the Islamic world produced by the protracted war in Iraq or the onslaught of the Islamic State’s militants, these conflicts still remain but links in the chain stretching back almost forty years to 1979. Nevertheless, such counterarguments, if they are voiced, will do nothing but once again demonstrate the schematic nature of the reasoning of Rapoport and his followers. One cannot claim to have properly understood the genesis and dynamics of terrorism if one reduces the problem to a few initial “trigger events,” explaining away the rest by resorting to the causally trivial domino effect.

There is no doubt that the events of 1979 mentioned by Rapoport<sup>4</sup> influenced the Muslim world to a considerable degree. There is also no denying the fact that this influence is still felt indirectly by millions of adherents of Islam. And of course there is an obvious connection between the dramatic developments of late 1979 and the emergence of a number of religiously motivated terrorist groups, whose activities inspired other groups in their turn. What the proponents of the wave theory are unable to do, however,

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<sup>4</sup> The impact of the advent of the new Muslim century, the third of 1979’s wave-forming events mentioned by Rapoport, was not nearly as compelling as the political and armed strife in Iran and Afghanistan. It seems that by including this third factor Rapoport sought to add intricacy to his scheme, which hardly speaks in favour of the Wave theory.

is to substantially expand this simple causal scheme. Knowing that the Islamic Revolution in Iran was a force behind the emergence of the Lebanese terrorist organisation Hezbollah, which (under various *noms de guerre*) pioneered the use of suicide bombing in the early 1980s, will add little to understanding why twenty years later young British Muslims decided to blow themselves up along with their co-citizens in the trains of the London Underground. And even if we pay due attention to the much nearer conflicts in Iraq or Syria and their effect on European Muslims, the key question will remain of why radicalisation of certain elements within the Muslim diaspora in Europe should be traced to chronologically and geographically distant sources rather than to the influence of intra-European and intra-diasporic factors in the first place? I have already raised a similar question with regard to the Wave theory taken in general and pointed out that Rapoport's assertions about universal wave-forming impulses coupled with his tendency to ignore local specifics have led him into some kind of political "mysticism" (Proshyn 264-65).

The workings of the European Muslim diaspora and the personal circumstances of its individual members turning to terrorist violence deserve special attention. Here it will suffice to highlight the most significant topics.

The very definition of "*homegrown* jihadism" coined by experts in the field clearly indicates that we are dealing with a predominantly endogenous phenomenon. Seeking to uncover the roots of European jihadism, researchers constantly address the lack of promising economic perspectives for many representatives of the Islamic diaspora in Europe, the voluntary or involuntary ghettoisation of European Muslims and the unmistakably xenophobic attitudes towards Muslims held by a large portion of "autochthonous" Europeans (*Understanding Violent Radicalization*).<sup>5</sup> To that one must add deep fission among Muslims themselves<sup>6</sup> and the absence of influential Islamic forces in the mainstream of European

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<sup>5</sup> A number of 2013 surveys showed that more than 60% respondents in Spain, more than 50% respondents in France and Germany and more than 40% respondents in Britain view Islam as "incompatible with the West" (qtd. in Islam in Europe).

<sup>6</sup> In this regard, the notion of the "Muslim diaspora," used here because of its brevity, is not strictly satisfactory for it fails to reflect substantial ethnocultural differences between immigrants (or the children and grandchildren of immigrants) from various parts of the Islamic world (North Africa, the Middle East, Southwest Asia, etc.), not to mention specific religious differences between Sunni and Shia Muslims.

politics (these could potentially resemble the Christian Democratic parties), which would have closely integrated Muslims into the socio-political systems of European countries and helped to channel the discontent of many potential jihadists in a legal and constructive manner (Warner and Wenner).

In this context, sentiments engendered by the conflicts in the Middle East or Afghanistan, the theme of relentless animosity between the Muslims and the “unfaithful,” extremist ideas and the “escape into jihad” for a sizable number of European Muslims represent more a framework to shape the feeling of alienation already grown on European soil than an original source of militant zeal. In a great deal of cases opting for the jihadist struggle and joining the secret ranks of the “brethren in arms” serve as an ersatz for non-existent social opportunities and solid attachments. It is worth noting that in their earlier lives many of the future jihadists did not evince the slightest interest in either the plight of their coreligionists abroad and or even the main tenets of Islam, as they followed the lifestyle typical of secular European urban youth with all its hedonistic pastimes, vices, and excesses (*Understanding Violent Radicalisation*; Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad*).

The Rapoportean concept of the universal impulses behind continent-sweeping waves of terror is too abstract to provide us with a reliable research instrument. The maximum (yet regrettably modest) result it can help us to achieve is to describe some connection between various events lined up along a common historical vector and remind us that certain developments are indirectly linked to a distant “trigger event.” This fundamental superficiality, if I may allow myself an oxymoron, will be once again made obvious, should we try to apply the Wave theory to explain the phenomenon of European homegrown jihadism. Instead of being a part of some “global wave of terrorism” driven by a historically remote impulse from the far abroad, this particular kind of jihadism reflects essentially intra-European contradictions and is in the first place powered by internal conflicts and tensions. We can still use the notion of a “wave of terrorism” if we wish to stick to it, but we must be aware of the local nature of this wave, of its being a European “wave in itself,” so to speak. The same applies to the Sageman’s “ripples in the waves.” In a sense, homegrown jihadism is the “ripple,” the splash of religiously motivated – or religiously “coloured” – violence, however, not on the surface of a global wave of some sort but rather in the variegated stream of local developments.

Whatever the importance of the questions addressed above, they may be perceived as objects of abstract theorising. But the next question is definitely of practical value.

Rapoport argues that the general character of a wave of terrorist violence manifests itself in the practice of terrorism – in the ways terrorists organise their activities, in the methods they use. There is obvious logic to this; after all, if it were not for the efforts to find such connection, the Wave theory would be nothing but the collection of commonplaces. Unfortunately, this does not mean that Rapoport’s reasoning on this matter is immune to criticism (Proshyn 266-67). In the case of European jihadism, attention should be paid to the following.

In his discussion of the organisational and tactical specifics of religious terrorism Rapoport goes no further than to point out the relatively large scale and resilience of Islamist terrorist groupings as well as their predilection for staging suicide attacks, the latter being attributed primarily to religious fanaticism and expectation of heavenly bliss reserved for martyrs (Rapoport, “The Four Waves” 18-19). Yet at the very time that Rapoport was promoting his ideas, the trend became visible – and not least in Europe – towards decentralisation of the jihadist movement and the emergence of networked and leaderless (often virtual) jihadist structures (Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad*; Zanini and Edwards). Quite possibly, in the long-term perspective, this will prove to be the most important organisational and tactical peculiarity of present-day jihadism and, correspondingly, the main source of the threat it poses. However, the Wave theory says nothing about this peculiar feature of Islamic terrorism. (Here is a telling detail: in all Rapoport’s widely touted works we will hardly find the term “Internet,” not to mention the in-depth analysis of how the Internet has influenced terrorist activity.)

The problem here, however, is not that Rapoport was too “hasty” in publishing his works, which focused attention on large and long-established terrorist organisations such as Hezbollah or al-Qaida (before latter’s Afghanistan bases were wiped out by the forces of the US-led coalition) and therefore “missed” the most recent developments in Europe and elsewhere (Rapoport, “The Fourth Wave”).<sup>7</sup> The main problem is essentially that the Wave theory does not provide any ground whatsoever for the accurate prognosis of changes

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<sup>7</sup> It is worth noting, though, that in his contemplation of *the future* of Islamic terrorism Rapoport dwelled on the Palestine and Kashmir issues but never mentioned European countries.

in terrorist practice (be it terrorist violence of a religious or any other nature). Regarding the concrete case of networked jihadism in Europe, it is clearly impossible to explain its networked / leaderless nature conjuring the overthrow of the Shah of Iran or the “exploits” of the assorted Mujahideen who fought the Soviet troops in Afghanistan or, much less so, the jubilant celebration of the birth, on November 19, 1979, of a new Muslim century. Even *if we agreed* to view these events as a global impulse initiating a new, religious, wave of terrorism, we would still have difficulty figuring out what is specifically *religious* about the formation of amorphous and acephalous networks or autonomous cells comprised of like-minded people or about online sharing of extremist content.

We need nothing more than a brief look at the history of terrorism to find out that underground networks and the very idea of “leaderless resistance” appeared decades prior to the emergence of the first European jihadist cells and networks. Quite possibly, the first to systematically develop the strategy of leaderless resistance was an obscure American anti-communist Colonel Ulius Amoss in the 1960s (Kaplan 266). Later into the second half of the century principles of this strategy, learned from Amoss or on an independent basis, were adopted by various terrorist groups ranging from white supremacist organisations in the United States to the left wing Revolutionary Cells group in West Germany to a motley assemblage of ecoterrorist groups in Britain, the United States, Canada, etc. Needless to say, in none of these cases was the decision to create a dispersed terrorist network motivated by religious dogma of any sort.

As for jihadist autonomous cells and leaderless networks in Europe, their roots similarly lie not in purely religious soil (and definitely not in that “fertilised” from exclusively foreign sources). To better understand the origin of the phenomenon of networked homegrown jihad and find effective means to counter it, we need to remember not so much Ayatollah Khomeini but alienated and frustrated (yet, more often than not, Web-savvy) Muslim youths scattered across Europe; the obstacles many of them face (due to additional security measures) when they are trying to reach the hot spots where the struggle against “enemies of Islam” goes on; the seductive opportunity to substitute for such a complicated voyage by becoming a “martyr” at home by assailing much more easily accessible “soft targets” in crowded European cities.

Once again, an attempt to address a particular case of terrorist activity (this time its practical details) from the Rapoportean universalist position proves to be disappointing. In the practical

dimension it is even more evident than in the ideological or strategic aspects that the clue to understanding the origins and the “mechanics” of terrorism lies first and foremost in the specific circumstances of a given case and not in the far-fetched instances of extraneous political or military conflicts. Terrorists’ organisational solutions and terrorist tactics are at one and the same time an instrument and a result of adapting to the concrete socio-political conditions they face, a “balance sheet” of terrorists’ abilities and weaknesses. To overlook this concretics in favour of distant, permanently “established” factors is to confine oneself to artificially matching reality to a rigid prefabricated scheme.

### **Conclusion**

What is perceived by many as David Rapoport’s main achievement, his idea of global waves of terrorism, each one being driven by its particular wave-forming impulse, proves instead to be an utterly erroneous simplification of the problem of the origin and transformation of terrorist violence. Testing Rapoport’s Four Waves theory against the phenomenon of European homegrown jihadism, we clearly observe basic weaknesses of this much-lauded theoretical “achievement.”

In accordance with the Rapoportean scheme, European jihadism belongs to the fourth, religious, wave of terrorism, which is supposedly powered by the political impulse originating during the dramatic events of 1979 – the Islamic Revolution in Iran and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. However, even if there remains some “relic” influence coming from this historically distant source, one cannot incontrovertibly and exhaustively explain homegrown jihadism on European soil by linking it to already semi-legendary exogenous conflicts. To schematically attribute the origin of a particular type of terrorism to some distant “universal” factor while overlooking immediate – should I say “real”? – causes is not only analytically incorrect but also futile and potentially dangerous from a practical point of view. One will hardly succeed in countering homegrown jihadism by dint of exorcising the shades of Ayatollah Khomeini or the mujahedeen of the 1980s while overlooking the internal – *homegrown* – problems of xenophobia, social frustration and alienation threatening to rent the fabric of European societies.

For the sake of fairness, it must be admitted that probably no such broad theory as Rapoport’s could ever succeed in unravelling

the details of concrete types of terrorism. Quite possibly, the criticism aimed here solely at the Wave theory should be equally distributed among all overarching theories. Nevertheless, this caveat will neither bolster the Rapoportean scheme theoretically, nor improve its practical applicability. While deserving some share of “bibliographical” interest, the Wave theory of terrorism should be decisively cast aside as a crude and misleading research tool.

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