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**THEORIES OF RADICALIZATION:
FRENCH ALGERIAN MUSLIMS AND INCARCERATION**

by

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**THEORIES OF RADICALIZATION:
FRENCH ALGERIAN MUSLIMS AND INCARCERATION**

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is a comparative case study of two French Algerians who were radicalized in the French prison system. Social Movement Theory, Social Identity Theory, and Relative Deprivation Theory are applied to their individual circumstances during their time spent in prison on their unique paths to radicalization. Chérif Kouachi, the Charlie Hebdo terrorist, was greatly influenced by his interpersonal network; Social Movement Theory best explains Kouachi's radicalization process. Mehdi Nemmouche's self-identity was altered in prison. When he was released from prison, he traveled to Syria to fight with ISIS before returning home to carry out the terrorist attack at the Brussels Jewish Museum; Social Identity Theory best explains his path to radicalization.

French society's unwillingness to welcome French Algerians' integration into French culture creates an environment that fosters radicalization risk factors. Both Kouachi and Nemmouche are French Algerian, have had social or economic struggles, were discriminated against in French society, and spent time in prison for minor crimes. They were both exposed to radical Islam in prison. This comparative case study examines the impact of risk factors on the individual through the application of three radicalization theories. More theories of radicalization can be applied in future case studies to determine similarities between how individual exposure to risk factors differentiates the path to radicalization.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ACEs	adverse childhood experiences
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
RDT	Relative Deprivation Theory
SIT	Social Identity Theory
SMT	Social Movement Theory

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I. INTRODUCTION

Which theory of radicalization most thoroughly explains the radicalization of French Algerians in the French prison system?

A. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESEARCH QUESTION

A significant amount of research has been conducted studying Muslim inmates in France.¹ The director of integration and religious groups for the French prison system, Jeanne Sautière, explains that ““many immigrants [specifically from North Africa and other Islamic countries] arrive in France in difficult financial situations, which make[s] delinquency more frequent;”” these circumstances, in their turn, may contribute to the relatively high number of Muslim inmates in French prisons.² Muslims make up seven percent to nine percent of the total French population according to those who self-identify, as secular France has not collected religious census data since 1872—fewer than ten percent by best estimates today.³ At the same time, Farhad Khosrokhavar has posited that 70 percent of the French prison population is Muslim, based on the number of inmates who registered for Ramadan in 2013.⁴

Amid this large Muslim prison population an issue of inmate radicalization has arisen. France took a hard stance against terrorism offenses up until 2014, issuing prison sentences for any terror-related crime rather than taking such softer counter-radicalization measures as counseling or exit programs.⁵ Muslim prisoners serving time for petty crimes are interacting with radical jihadist prisoners, sometimes resulting in criminals becoming

¹ Antoine Krempf, “60% Des Détenus Français Sont Musulmans?” [60% of French Prisoners Are Muslim?] France Info, January 26, 2015. https://www.francetvinfo.fr/replay-radio/le-vrai-du-faux/60-des-detenus-francais-sont-musulmans_1770701.html.

² Molly Moore, “In France, Prisons Filled With Muslims,” *Washington Post*. WP Company, April 29, 2008. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/04/28/AR2008042802560.html>.

³ Central Intelligence Agency. Accessed February 23, 2021. <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/france/#people-and-society>.

⁴ Farhad Khosrokhavar, “Radicalization in Prison: The French Case,” *Politics, Religion & Ideology*, 14, no 2. (2013): 284–306. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21567689.2013.792654>.

⁵ Dorle Hellmuth, “Countering Jihadi Terrorists and Radicals the French Way,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 38, no. 12 (2015): 979–97. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2015.1076277>. 987.

radicalized extremists who carry out attacks once released.⁶ Prison sentences in France are seven years on average, but Christian Fraser reports that “57 percent of prisoners are re-convicted within five years of their release,” which Hellmuth attributes to Islamist prisoners facilitating “proselytization and radicalization behind bars.”⁷ The spreading of extremist ideology in prisons poses a very clear threat in that the radicalized individuals will continue to harbor a dangerous ideology after being released and carry out a violent terrorist attack.

France is typically silent about exactly how many convicted terrorists are being held in their prisons, so it is difficult to develop a trend analysis on how many terrorists with likeminded ideas are being held in a prison at once.⁸ Yet, Jean-Luc Marret reported that “France has the largest number of individuals from the EU imprisoned for terrorist activities. The national Counter-Terrorism system shows that the DCRI [Direction centrale du renseignement intérieur] and other specialized services arrest individuals in a very preventive/pre-emptive way. This also explains the small sentences, with an average of seven years in 2008, that are handed out to the guilty.”⁹ These shorter prison sentences are resulting in mass releases of prisoners with radical ideas. According to the French Justice Ministry, “some inmates with expiring terms were convicted of non-terrorist crimes but embraced radical Islam in prison.”¹⁰ Matthew Dalton reports that, according to the Ministry of Justice, “about 50 people serving terrorism-related sentences and a further 400 classified as ‘radicalized’ while in prison will be released before the end of 2019.”¹¹ A quantitative study noted that “in Europe, as much as half of terrorism offenders have known

⁶ Eleanor Beardsley, “Inside French Prisons, A Struggle To Combat Radicalization,” NPR. NPR, June 25, 2017. <https://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2017/06/25/534122917/inside-french-prisons-a-struggle-to-combat-radicalization>.

⁷ Hellmuth, “Countering Jihadi Terrorists and Radicals the French Way,” 987.

⁸ Mark S. Hamm, *The Spectacular Few: Prisoner Radicalization and the Evolving Terrorist Threat*. NYU Press, 2013.

⁹ Jean-Luc Marret, “Prison De-radicalization and disengagement: The French case,” *ICSR Project on Deradicalization in Jail* (2009). 18.

¹⁰ Marret, “Prison De-radicalization and Disengagement: The French Case.”

¹¹ Matthew Dalton, “France Begins Release of Hundreds of Radicalized Inmates,” *Wall Street Journal*, Dow Jones & Company, July 16, 2018, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/france-begins-release-of-hundreds-of-radicalized-inmates-1531760795>.

criminal pasts” but recognize that it is difficult to determine accurate recidivism rates because most statistics are taken from the number of participants in deradicalization programs, failing to account for untreated individuals.¹²

De Graff categorizes various types of terrorism to describe three levels of analysis.¹³ The macro level examines root causes of terrorism with a focus on mass theories about general conditions.¹⁴ The micro-level questions of who becomes a terrorist to determine how to prevent it, concentrate on the terrorist as an individual.¹⁵ The meso-level examines the “radicalization process at the group level” to understand how “radicalization as a process” relies on socialization and interaction between a group and an individual.¹⁶ This thesis focuses on the meso-level and seeks thereby to contribute to the academic understanding of the radicalization process and capture a fragment of the multidimensional issue of terrorism required to formulate counterterrorism policies.

B. LITERATURE REVIEW

Terrorism remains a contentious scholarly realm, exemplified by conceptual issues that Crenshaw and LaFree recognize like the “absence of a universally accepted and rigorous definition of terrorism that distinguishes it from other forms of political violence” that leads to complications when it comes to gathering data.¹⁷ The indefiniteness of the term contributes to the issue of a “lack of agreement on an overarching causal theory of terrorism” and creates challenges that policymakers must consider when determining counterterrorism best practices and approaches due to counterterrorism and terrorism’s interdependent relationship.¹⁸ Similarly, the term “radicalization” is ambiguous. Indeed,

¹² Hasisi, Badi, Tomer Carmel, David Weisburd, and Michael Wolfowicz, “Crime and Terror: Examining Criminal Risk Factors for Terrorist Recidivism,” *Journal of Quantitative Criminology*, 2019. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10940-019-09415-y>.

¹³ Martha Crenshaw, and Gary LaFree, *Countering Terrorism: No Simple Solutions*, Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2017, 16, <https://doi.org/10.7864/j.ctt1hfr14r>.

¹⁴ de Graaf, B.A, “Terrorisme- en radicaliseringsstudies: Een explosief onderzoeksveld,” trans. 14.

¹⁵ de Graaf, B.A, trans. 15.

¹⁶ de Graaf, B.A, trans. 16.

¹⁷ Martha Crenshaw, and Gary LaFree, *Countering Terrorism: No Simple Solutions*, 16; 23–25.

¹⁸ Martha Crenshaw, and Gary LaFree, 18; 28–32.

Neumann argues that it is more difficult to define radicalization than it is terrorism.¹⁹ While Neumann identifies terrorism at its core as “a violent tactic, sometimes a strategy, which can be distinguished from other means and modes of pursuing violent conflict,” radicalization “is inherently context-dependent,” resulting in reoccurring disputes over an all-encompassing definition.²⁰ Debates over whether radicalization is defined by beliefs or by behavior, ultimately, conclude that “at the most basic level, radicalization can be defined as the process whereby people become extremists” to include both notions.²¹

Some scholars specify that their approach examines not only how “people come to adopt beliefs,” but how their thoughts turn into actions.²² Randy Borum recognizes that understanding variations of the radicalization process is crucial to implement mitigating and preventative counterterrorism policies.²³ Radicalization “refers to some kind of process of change,” and recognizes that it is common for recruiters to intentionally convert new members to adopt extremist ideology and participate in extremist violence.²⁴ Yet, Marc Sageman samples 150 subjects involved in jihad (the violent struggle for Islam) and finds that 75 percent of participants knew members of the movement before joining themselves.²⁵ Sageman uses this statistic to argue that no one is recruited to “armed jihad” but rather enlisted “through friendship and kinship.”²⁶

A similar dynamic—among others—operates in prisons. Immaculada Marrero Rocha and Humberto M. Trujillo Mendoza believe that the presence of personal and situational factors, and the lack of social protective factors, explicitly influence an inmate’s

¹⁹ Peter R. Neumann, “The Trouble with Radicalization,” *International Affairs* (London) 89, no. 4 (2013): 873 <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12049>.

²⁰ Neumann, “The Trouble with Radicalization,” 878.

²¹ Neumann, 873–874.

²² Randy Borum, “Radicalization into Violent Extremism I: A Review of Social Science Theories,” *Journal of Strategic Security* 4, no. 4 (2011): 8, <https://doi.org/10.5038/1944-0472.4.4.1>.

²³ Borum, “Radicalization into Violent Extremism I: A Review of Social Science Theories,” 8–9.

²⁴ Borum, 13.

²⁵ Marc Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 2; 113, <https://doi.org/10.9783/9780812206791>.

²⁶ Borum, “Radicalization into Violent Extremism I: A Review of Social Science Theories,” 14.

susceptibility to the process of radicalization more so than an un-incarcerated individual.²⁷ These scholars acknowledge that prisoners must cope with personal factors such as a need for change, an identity crisis, and are in need of support from peers, protection, and the feeling of belonging.²⁸ While in the unique prison environment, individuals are oftentimes in the presence of extremists who take advantage of these vulnerabilities which serve as catalysts for the radicalization process.

Organizational cohesion is dependent upon avoiding “internal strife, competition, ideological disagreements and splits.”²⁹ Organizational cohesion is quite rare. In fact, only ten percent of terrorist organizations have a life span greater than ten years.³⁰ Therefore, only a small minority of terrorist organizations are strong enough to endure irregular splintering. Those terrorist organizations that do survive have a sort of “brand appeal” to attract potential recruits and revitalize the organization if it falters.³¹ Crenshaw and LaFree argue that the brand’s attractiveness stems from its ideological appeal. The authors discuss “branded jihadist efforts through standardized logos that establish the authenticity and credibility of their claims” but then fail to acknowledge that the jihadist media network plays a stabilizing role in the organization even when it struggles with group cohesion.³² Carruthers recognizes that “terrorism is a weapon of the weak, adopted by aggrieved groups that want to up-end the existing status quo” so becoming a member of a legitimate organization opposing societal limits may appeal to prisoners suffering within the French prison system.³³ Once they are radicalized, Nacos believes that terrorists have communication-related goals when they carry out a violent attack. They demand public

²⁷ Rocha, Inmaculada Marrero, and Humberto M. Trujillo Mendoza, eds. *Jihadism, Foreign Fighters, and Radicalization in the EU: Legal, Functional and Psychosocial Responses*. London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2019. 252.

²⁸ Rocha, Inmaculada Marrero, and Humberto M. Trujillo Mendoza, eds. *Jihadism, Foreign Fighters, and Radicalization in the EU: Legal, Functional and Psychosocial Responses*, 253; 262–264.

²⁹ Martha Crenshaw, and Gary LaFree, *Countering Terrorism: No Simple Solutions*, 115.

³⁰ Crenshaw and LaFree, 116.

³¹ Crenshaw and LaFree, 111.

³² Crenshaw and LaFree, 123.

³³ Susan L. Carruthers, *The Media at War*, 2nd ed. (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011) 176.

attention/intimidation, recognition of grievances and demands, respect and sympathy, and a degree of legitimacy that propels organizational status and global recognition.³⁴

C. POTENTIAL EXPLANATIONS AND HYPOTHESES

Social movement theory (SMT) may explain French Algerian Muslims being radicalized in prison by examining how the recruiter attracts the prisoners through small group interactions in prison that create “an insulated and protected environment that successfully translated identity into action.”³⁵

Applying social identity theory (SIT) may examine the terrorists’ group membership as both French Algerians and in the context of their role as a prisoner. Studying their relationship with their mentor, who recruits them into the extremist organization, may explain their path to radicalization as their self-concepts are altered to the point where they chose to define themselves as terrorists because it gives them a sense of community and purpose.³⁶

Relative deprivation theory (RDT) may explain how the discrimination French Algerians experience in France has become a grievance that cause the prisoners to embrace extremist Islamic ideals in prison and results in violence.

D. RESEARCH DESIGN

I will apply three theories of radicalization to two similar cases in which French Algerian Muslim inmates were radicalized within the prison system; I will then determine which is most applicable to explain the phenomenon. The thesis question is an empirical question that can be explained by real world observations.

³⁴ Brigitte Nacos, *Mass-Mediated Terrorism: Mainstream and Digital Media in Terrorism and Counterterrorism*, (Rowman & Littlefield in *Mass-Mediated Terrorism*, ed. 3 2016 [3rd ed.] Chapter 2 of: *Mainstream and Digital Media in Terrorism and Counterterrorism*. Rowman & Littlefield. 38–40.

³⁵ Craig A. Thompson, “Millennial Jihadism and Terrorism in France,” Master’s thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, 2019.

³⁶ 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): 255–69. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2787127>. 259.

I will look at two case studies in which each individual is a) of French Algerian descent and b) successfully carried out a terrorist attack after c) being radicalized in prison, which allows for a close inspection of their upbringings and prison experiences: Chérif Kouachi and Mehdi Nemmouche. For each case, I will examine the background on the attack, the individual's personal background (including a rundown of French Algerian ties), their criminal past and prison experience (crimes sentenced for, amount of time spent incarcerated), and finally, his radicalization process.

I plan to focus specifically on the meso-level to examine radicalization's contribution to the larger issue of terrorism. Applying developed radicalization theories to the two cases discussed above may determine which is most pertinent. My aim is to contribute to future research efforts by either having my case study findings supported, built upon, or nullified as the field of terrorism changes over time. My research on the radicalization process will support previous research that established a definition for the term radicalization and build upon its importance. Examining two cases of radicalization within French prisons that resulted in terrorist attacks may add to the more narrowed scope of research that specifically examines the radicalization process resulting in violent extremism.

Before applying the three theories of radicalization to both of the cases, outlining the theories' applicability will set the stage. Chérif Kouachi will be referred to by his first name throughout this thesis to avoid confusing him with his brother Saïd. Saïd Kouachi is referred to throughout Chérif's case study because he was Chérif's partner in the *Charlie Hebdo* terror attack where they were both killed two days after in a police shootout.³⁷ Each theory will examine different parts of Chérif and Nemmouche's life. Chérif and Nemmouche's role in French society, each of their prison experiences, their interpersonal networks, and their sense of self will all be scrutinized by the following theories. SMT and RDT will analyze their identities as French Algerian citizens, prisoners, and extremists.

³⁷ Evans, Martin, Barney Hendderson and David Blair, "Saïd and Cherif Kouachi: The Two Brothers Suspected of the Charlie Hebdo Massacre" *Telegraph*. January 8, 2015. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/france/11332411/Saïd-and-Cherif-Kouachi-who-are-the-two-brothers-suspected-of-launching-Charlie-Hebdo-attack.html>.

SIT is applied to their prisoner and extremist identities in the analysis section of each case. SIT is applied in the background portion on their French Algerian citizen identities to avoid repetition in the analysis.

1. Social Movement Theory

Social movement theory will be applied to assess Chérif and Nemmouche's identities as French Algerian citizens, prisoners, and Islamic extremists. First, SMT will frame how political exclusion and repression in French society may have played a contributing role in Chérif Kouachi's and Mehdi Nemmouche's initial incarceration. Then SMT will be applied to assess their individual radicalization processes within the prison environment. SMT application will analyze how their early-life circumstances may have led to their early, amateur interest in jihad that resulted in their imprisonment by looking at their mobilization potential, recruitment network and active participation in jihad.

Quintan Wiktorowicz has applied SMT to "the roots of Islamist recruits" triggering Islamic activism as both a broad whole and specifically those who use it as justification to engage in terrorism.³⁸ An experienced scholar, Borum explains that Wiktorowicz also completed a study on "how people came to join a militant Islamist group (Al-Muhajiroun) based in a Western democracy."³⁹ Numerous scholars have since reviewed the aforementioned study. Titled *Radical Islam Rising: Muslim Extremism in the West*, Christine Fair explains that she values Wiktorowicz's approach that "seeks to explain *why* Muslims in the West are drawn to radical groups and *how* they are convinced to engage in what the author [Wiktorowicz] calls 'high-risk, high-cost activism.'"⁴⁰ The second application of SMT will apply the same four-part model Wiktorowicz used in his *Radical Islam Rising* study to Chérif and Nemmouche's radicalization processes in prison. In doing

³⁸ Quintan Wiktorowicz, *Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Theory Approach* (Indiana University Press, n.d.), Introduction, 4. <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ebook-nps/reader.action?docID=238838&ppg=14#ppg=302>.

³⁹ Randy Borum, "Radicalization into Violent Extremism I: A Review of Social Science Theories," 18.

⁴⁰ Christine Fair, "Radical Islam Rising: Muslim Extremism in the West," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*. Cambridge University Press (2007), <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743807302560>.

so, SMT may determine their potential for “openness to new worldviews.”⁴¹ For example, Chérif’s social worker Bourice stated that Chérif had expressed regret for his actions that resulted in his imprisonment.⁴² When did Chérif first change his mind in prison and allow a “cognitive opening” to occur and reconsider participating in a radical Islamic organization?⁴³ The next step is addressing how the extremist religious rhetoric provided meaning to both of their lives to satisfy both of their personal needs.⁴⁴ The third step in Wiktorowicz’s model is assessing how each man came to accept the extremist organization’s credibility and general agenda.⁴⁵ The final step in Wiktorowicz’s SMT model is scrutinizing the socialization or recruitment efforts within the prison that led to both of their full-fledged “indoctrination into the movement” resulting in two successfully executed terrorist attacks upon their release from prison.⁴⁶

2. Social Identity Theory

While SMT delves into interpersonal networks, Social Identity Theory examines how both Nemmouche and Chérif view themselves within both the larger social setting of prison and within the smaller Islamic extremist group formed in prison. Jan Stets and Peter Burke describe the general concept of identity as being “composed of the self-views that emerge from the reflexive activity of self-categorization or identification in terms of membership in particular groups or roles,” emphasizing the significance of group-based identity.⁴⁷ Stets and Burke’s SIT model is broken down into four steps and is applicable to observe how each became an inmate, a member of a terrorist organization abroad, and an active terrorist upon return to Europe. Khosrokhavar recognizes “Islam as the ‘religion of the oppressed’, the rigid application of laïcité [secularism] in some prisons, the

⁴¹ Randy Borum, “Radicalization into Violent Extremism I,” 18.

⁴² France, “Paris Terror Suspect Shown in 2005 Film.”

⁴³ Borum, “Radicalization into Violent Extremism I,” 18.

⁴⁴ Borum, 18.

⁴⁵ Borum, 18.

⁴⁶ Borum, 18.

⁴⁷ Stets, Jan E., and Peter J. Burke, “Identity Theory and Social Identity Theory,” 224–226, *Social Psychology Quarterly* 63, no. 3 (2000): 224–37. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2695870>.

overcrowding, and the lack of acceptable means for inmates to practice their religion” may be commonly experienced by Muslim inmates like Chérif and Nemmouche.⁴⁸ Further analysis will be conducted to determine how their general experience as inmates may have commenced their search for similarities between their inmate peers, to find connections between themselves and their Muslim inmates that allowed each of them to cling to a group image.⁴⁹

After examining what may have driven their interest in joining an extremist Islamic organization as a foundation, SIT can be built upon to determine how Chérif and Nemmouche’s radicalization processes resulted in both of them committing a violent terrorist attack. Recorded in the Encyclopedia Britannica, Henry Tajfel is best known as the father of the “concept of social identity,” which is “a central idea in what became known as social identity theory.”⁵⁰ Tajfel argues that membership to “numerous social groups contributes, positively or negatively, to the image that he [an individual] has of himself;” that focusing on solely “inter-individual comparisons” fails to take into account group membership.⁵¹ Tajfel’s model dissects the process of identity categorization.⁵² Applying Tajfel’s SIT model will first assess how each classifies himself as a member of the extremist organization in prison.⁵³ Then, analysis will be conducted to view how both Chérif and Nemmouche determined his membership in the organization was valuable enough to him to alter his personal social identity.⁵⁴ This SIT process is finalized by the emotions they both evoked as their self-perception modified to include the significance of their membership to the extremist organization and carry out a terrorist attack once released from prison as a contribution to the organization’s social identity.⁵⁵

⁴⁸ Khosrokhavar, “Radicalization in Prison: The French Case,” 288

⁴⁹ Stets, Jan E., and Peter J. Burke, “Identity Theory and Social Identity Theory,” 225

⁵⁰ *Encyclopedia Britannica*, “Henry Tajfel | Biography, Theories, & Facts,” accessed June 9, 2022. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Henri-Tajfel>.

⁵¹ Henri Tajfel, “Social Identity and Intergroup Behaviour,” 68–69.

⁵² Henri Tajfel, 69.

⁵³ Henri Tajfel, 69.

⁵⁴ Henri Tajfel, 69.

⁵⁵ Henri Tajfel, 72.

3. Relative Deprivation Theory

Similar to SIT, Relative Deprivation Theory can be applied to the individual, but more so emphasizes the individual's interpretation of their personal disadvantage and perceived disadvantage as a member of an organization.⁵⁶ Like SMT, RDT can be applied to both Nemmouche and Chérif's grievances surrounding the conditions in French society, (that may have led to) their imprisonment, and their complaints about the perceived disadvantages they inherently suffer as members of extremist organizations. RDT may be similar to SMT in the way that both hypothesize that general grievances within French society may have led to both of their initial interest in jihadism that resulted in their imprisonment.

Ted Gurr's book *Why Men Rebel* won the Woodrow Wilson Prize as the best U.S. book on political science in 1970.⁵⁷ Gurr's intent was to explain political violence through the application of RDT to create an analytical framework. In *The New York Times'* book review, Lewis A. Coser acclaimed *Why Men Rebel* to be "the most important book that has been published on social violence in a good number of years... a superb piece of work."⁵⁸ His RDT suits the needs of this thesis because it contemplates how grievances may trigger discontent that leads to violence. For example, Muslim leaders, sociologists, and human rights activists have found "more than in most other European countries, government social policies in France have served to isolate Muslims in impoverished suburbs that have high unemployment, inferior schools and substandard housing" leading to questions about whether the country's justice system is equally discriminatory.⁵⁹ Both of their perceived grievances about French society resulting in their imprisonment presents the potential for

⁵⁶ Smith, Heather J, and Thomas F Pettigrew, "Advances in Relative Deprivation Theory and Research," 2.

⁵⁷ *Encyclopedia.com* "Gurr, Ted Robert 1936-," accessed June 8, 2022.
<https://www.encyclopedia.com/arts/educational-magazines/gurr-ted-robert-1936>.

⁵⁸ "Why Men Rebel," Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, November 30, 2011,
<https://www.routledge.com/Why-Men-Rebel/Gurr/p/book/9781594519147>.

⁵⁹ Moore, Molly, "In France, Prisons Filled With Muslims," *The Washington Post*.

their interest in collective violence to be a response to their perceived disadvantage.⁶⁰ This potential for collective violence transfers to the prison environment where fellow prisoners may share similar beliefs and grievances.

I am optimistic that applying the theories of radicalization to these cases may potentially offer more insight into the role recruiters play in the radicalization process, and if friendships formed or additional factors in prison impact a recruit's path to radicalization. I also anticipate that determining the organizational support a recruit receives—once radicalized—will contribute to further research on organizational ties to violent extremist actors. Finally, this thesis considers how a radicalized individual interacts and interprets an extremist organization's brand and continues to promote violent extremism by carrying out a terrorist attack that garners media attention.

⁶⁰ Abell, Peter, Robin Jenkins, and Robin Jenkins, "Why Do Men Rebel?: A Discussion of Ted Robert Gurr's *Why Men Rebel*," 85.

II. CASE 1: CHÉRIF KOUACHI

Case 1 shows how Social Movement Theory makes the most sense of Chérif Kouachi's radicalization journey. Chérif is the first focus of this case study because of his French Algerian background and the amount of time he spent in prison.⁶¹ This analysis will attempt to determine whether Chérif's radicalization within prison may be attributed to his interpersonal networks (Social Movement Theory), if it evolved from his new personal identity (Social Identity Theory), or if it originated from his interpretation of his own disadvantage in French society and in prison (Relative Deprivation Theory),

Twelve people died during an attack on the French satirical newspaper *Charlie Hebdo* on January 7, 2015.⁶² Brothers Chérif and Saïd Kouachi carried out the attack on behalf of Al Qaeda as "defenders of the 'prophet Muhammad'" after the prophet was depicted by the newspaper's cartoonists.⁶³ Although not explicitly stated in the Quran, Muslims discourage imagery of Muhammad based on "religious rulings by Islamic scholars."⁶⁴ Both brothers were killed in a police shootout two days after the *Charlie Hebdo* attack.⁶⁵ Before he died, Chérif took a phone call from a reporter and stated that they had carried out the attack "on behalf of Al Qaeda's branch in Yemen"⁶⁶

Born to French Algerian parents, Chérif was orphaned and placed in the group home of a Corrèze establishment in Treignac at twelve years old.⁶⁷ Working as a pizza

⁶¹ Chérif will be referred to by his first name throughout the thesis to avoid confusing references because he shares a last name with his brother Saïd Kouachi, his partner in the Charlie Hebdo terrorist attack.

⁶² Petrikowski, Nicki Peter, "Charlie Hebdo Shooting," *Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc.*, February 13, 2019. <https://www.britannica.com/event/Charlie-Hebdo-shooting#ref1264091>.

⁶³ Petrikowski, "Charlie Hebdo Shooting."

⁶⁴ Daniel Burke, "Why images of Mohammed offend Muslims," CNN, May 4, 2015, <https://www.cnn.com/2015/05/04/living/islam-prophet-images/index.html>

⁶⁵ "Charlie Hebdo: Fourteen Guilty in 2015 Paris Terror Attacks Trial," *BBC News*, December 16, 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-55336094>.

⁶⁶ Callimachi, Rukmini, and Jim Yardley.

⁶⁷ "Ce Que L'on Sait Sur La Radicalisation Des Frères Kouachi," *Le Monde*, January 9, 2015, trans. https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2015/01/09/ce-que-l-on-sait-sur-la-radicalisation-des-freres-kouachi_4552422_3224.html.

delivery man at the age of 18, he fell into a crowd that one lawyer described as the “lost children of the Republic.”⁶⁸ In this group of low-income, second-generation French Muslims, Chérif looked up to the leader, Farid Benyettou, who convinced Chérif to travel to Iraq to fight as a jihadist as part of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi’s network (eventually part of Al Qaeda). Chérif was arrested before he could board his flight and was sentenced to a “relatively light” prison sentence as a result.⁶⁹ It is likely that Chérif’s interactions with Beghal in prison strengthened his extremist beliefs.⁷⁰ Chérif was sentenced to serve time in the Fleury-Mérogis prison from 2005 to 2006, made a pilgrimage to Mecca in 2008 for his honeymoon with bride Izzana Hamyd, and reunited with his radical inmate friends upon their release from prison between 2009 and 2010—to begin planning the *Charlie Hebdo* attack.⁷¹

A. CASE FINDING

Ultimately, Chérif Kouachi underwent the radicalization process in prison resulting from his strengthened associations with Islamic extremists. This analysis finds that Social Movement Theory is most applicable and availing in light of the centrality of the prison setting to Chérif’s story.

⁶⁸ Angelique Chrisafis, “Charlie Hebdo Attackers: Born, Raised and Radicalised in Paris,” *The Guardian*, January 12, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jan/12/-sp-charlie-hebdo-attackers-kids-france-radicalised-paris>; “Ce Que L’on Sait Sur La Radicalisation Des Frères Kouachi,” *Le Monde*.

⁶⁹ Evans, Martin, Barney Hedderson and David Blair, “Said and Cherif Kouachi: The Two Brothers Suspected of the Charlie Hebdo Massacre” *Telegraph*. January 8, 2015. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/france/11332411/Said-and-Cherif-Kouachi-who-are-the-two-brothers-suspected-of-launching-Charlie-Hebdo-attack.html>.

⁷⁰ Sayare, “The Ultimate Terrorist Factory: Are French Prisons Incubating Extremism?,” 53.

⁷¹ “Paris Attacks: Suspects’ Profiles.”

B. BACKGROUND

Chérif attended prayers at the Adda'wa Mosque where he met self-taught “janitor-turned-preacher” and congregant Farid Benyettou.⁷² Chérif attended Benyettou’s lessons in the Mosque where Benyettou is alleged to have incited the worshipers to jihad.⁷³ The Fleury-Mérogis prison, where Chérif served his time, is France’s largest prison.⁷⁴ In 2021 there were 187 prisons in France, with an occupancy level of 117.1% based on official capacity, so Chérif was likely able to interact with a large population of inmates.⁷⁵ When Chérif was sentenced to twenty months in 2005, his lawyer Vincent Olliver observed that Chérif was “a lost kid who was scared to death,” and thoughtfully contemplated Chérif’s demise, stating “I will never know if the person he became is the result of his time in jail, or else the result of a hardening of his commitment.”⁷⁶ Myriam Benraad, an expert on militant movements who studied the Kouachi brothers, explained that after an individual is in prison for an extended period of time and in close contact with extremists, the radicalization taking place in prisons makes it “very difficult to come out and turn things around.”⁷⁷

During his time in prison, Chérif encountered one of Al Qaeda’s top operatives, Djamel Beghal.⁷⁸ The inmates were confined in their cells for 22 hours every day but

⁷² Callimachi, Rukmini, and Jim Yardley, “From Amateur to Ruthless Jihadist in France.”; Elaine Sciolino, “Return of Jihadists: Europe’s Fears Subside,” *New York Times*, April 7, 2008. https://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/07/world/europe/07iht-terror.4.11744190.html?#0;!--Undefined%20dynamic%20function%20data_sanitationlib::sanitize_string:1%20called--=>=&pagewanted=all; Terrence McCoy, “How a Suspected Charlie Hebdo Gunman Turned into a Jihadist,” *Washington Post*, May 3, 2019. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2015/01/08/how-a-suspected-charlie-hebdo-gunman-turned-into-a-professional-jihadist/>

⁷³ Callimachi, Rukmini, and Jim Yardley, “From Amateur to Ruthless Jihadist in France.”

⁷⁴ “Record Number of Suicides in France’s Largest Prison,” *RFI*, August 8, 2018. <https://www.rfi.fr/en/france/20180808-record-number-suicides-france-s-largest-prison> .

⁷⁵ *World Prison Brief*, “France,” accessed June 10, 2022. <https://www.prisonstudies.org/country/france>.

⁷⁶ Callimachi, Rukmini, and Jim Yardley, “From Amateur to Ruthless Jihadist in France.”

⁷⁷ Michael Birnbaum, “French prisons, long hotbeds of radical Islam, get new scrutiny after Paris attacks,” *Washington Post*, January 28, 2015. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/paris-killers-radicalized-in-prison-now-leaders-want-to-fix-that-problem/2015/01/28/52271e28-a307-11e4-91fc-7dff95a14458_story.html.

⁷⁸ “Paris Attacks: Suspects’ Profiles,”

communicated through windows and passed notes through networks of tied sheets to reach various floors; therefore able to communicate despite systemic isolation efforts.⁷⁹ Fleury-Mérogis prison, Chérif also befriended petty criminal Amedy Coulibaly, who later carried out an attack in a Jewish supermarket the same day as the *Charlie Hebdo* attack.⁸⁰

Beghal resumed mentoring Chérif and Coulibaly once they were all released from prison in 2009. Beghal and Coulibaly were sent back to prison in the summer of 2010 for plotting to break out a jihadist inmate serving a life sentence for the 1995 bombing of a Paris rail station, but there was not enough evidence to convict Chérif of being a part of the plot.⁸¹ A lawyer involved in the case later stated that Chérif's computer had considerable incriminating evidence, including a document titled "Operation Sacrifice" that described a plot that was unsettlingly similar to the *Charlie Hebdo* attack.⁸² The *New York Times* also reported he had studied a "virtual AK-47" online.⁸³ Beghal taught his mentee Chérif the value of being discrete about his jihadist beliefs.⁸⁴ Indeed, the surveillance conducted on Chérif ended in 2013 after two years of being watched as a priority target to no avail.⁸⁵

Before the attack took place, one of the Kouachi brothers traveled to Yemen to train with Al Qaeda.⁸⁶ Initially believing Saïd made the trip, U.S. officials now believe it is likely that Chérif used his brother's passport to travel to Yemen to train and receive funding for the terrorist attack, particularly in light of accounts from Saïd's wife and Chérif's own statement to the reporter prior to being killed by the police.⁸⁷ Most likely, Chérif received training and \$20,000 from Al Qaeda while in Yemen, and Al Qaeda in Yemen later claimed

⁷⁹ Callimachi, Rukmini, and Jim Yardley, "From Amateur to Ruthless Jihadist in France."

⁸⁰ Torres, Anthony, "Were French Intelligence Forces Complicit in the Charlie Hebdo Attacks?" *World Socialist website*, January 20, 2016. <https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2016/01/20/char-j20.html>.

⁸¹ Callimachi, Rukmini, and Jim Yardley, "From Amateur to Ruthless Jihadist in France."

⁸² Callimachi, Rukmini, and Jim Yardley.

⁸³ Callimachi, Rukmini, and Jim Yardley.

⁸⁴ Callimachi, Rukmini, and Jim Yardley.

⁸⁵ Torres, Anthony, "Were French Intelligence Forces Complicit in the Charlie Hebdo Attacks?"; Petrikowski, "Charlie Hebdo Shooting."

⁸⁶ Callimachi, Rukmini, and Jim Yardley, "From Amateur to Ruthless Jihadist in France."

⁸⁷ Callimachi, Rukmini, and Jim Yardley.

responsibility for the *Charlie Hebdo* attack, stating that leaders of the organization had “chosen the target, laid the plan and financed the operation,” which aligns with the comment Chérif gave to the press.⁸⁸

Chérif Kouachi had evolved from studying an AK-47 online to using the weapon in a terrorist attack that killed twelve people.⁸⁹ Sentenced to prison as an amateur jihadist, but released as a hardened radical, Chérif’s time in prison undermined the sentence’s intention.

C. ANALYSIS

This section applies the three theories of radicalization to assess the role of Chérif’s social networks, self-perception, and perceived disadvantages in his radicalization process. Chérif’s radicalization process is unique in terms of his association with extremists before his imprisonment. Examining Chérif’s networks in prison and after his release may offer insight into his radicalization journey. Considering how Chérif’s self-concept evolved may also illuminate aspects of his path to radicalization. Inspecting the experiences Chérif had as a French Algerian citizen, a prisoner, and an extremist will contextualize whether the discrimination he faced caused feelings of discontent over his perceived disadvantages. After each theory is applied to Chérif’s case, the determination of which theory has the most potential to explain Chérif’s radicalization process will be established.

1. Social Movement Theory Application

Social movement theory will first contextualize Chérif’s life and relationships he established outside of prison. Applying SMT will investigate whether Chérif’s social network as a French Algerian Citizen affected how his network expanded in prison and influenced his prisoner identity.

⁸⁸ Callimachi, Rukmini, and Jim Yardley, “From Amateur to Ruthless Jihadist in France.”

⁸⁹ Callimachi, Rukmini, and Jim Yardley.

a. ***“French Algerian Citizen” Identity***

Chérif had a difficult childhood. His father had passed away only a few years before the then-12-year-old Chérif found his mother dead from a drug overdose, so he was relocated to a group home.⁹⁰ According to Kirszbaum et al., Chérif’s “social origin, limited personal networks, and discrimination” likely hurt his career opportunities.⁹¹ Indeed, the French government’s strategy division, France Stratégie, reported in 2015 that only seventy percent of French North Africans earned a high school diploma.⁹² French citizens with French parents are half as likely to not finish school, with a 35 percent drop-out rate.⁹³ It is likely that the higher number of French North African students without a diploma contributed to the North African unemployment rate of 32 percent in 2015.⁹⁴ The national unemployment rate was 10.35 percent.⁹⁵ Contemporary news reports noted that Chérif had “poor school records,” and he did not attend university.⁹⁶ With a deficient educational background, Chérif had limited social mobility—and economic prospects.⁹⁷

⁹⁰ Walklate, Sandra, and Gabe Mythen, “Fractured lives, splintered knowledge: Making criminological sense of the January, 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris,” *Critical Criminology* 24, no. 3 (2016): 335. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10612-016-9324-9>.

⁹¹ Thomas Kirszbaum et al., “The children of immigrants in France: The emergence of a second generation with the collaboration of Esin Gezer Special Series on Children in Immigrant Families in Affluent Societies” (Innocenti Working Papers Special Series on Children in Immigrant Families in Affluent Societies, UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, 2009), 6 https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/iwp_2009_13.pdf

⁹² “North Africans,” Minority Rights Group, February 5, 2021, <https://minorityrights.org/minorities/north-africans/>.

⁹³ “North Africans,” Minority Rights Group.

⁹⁴ “North Africans,” Minority Rights Group.

⁹⁵ “France Unemployment Rate 1991–2022,” Macrotrends, accessed June 3, 2022. <https://www.macrotrends.net/countries/FRA/france/unemployment-rate>

⁹⁶ Angelique Chrisafis, “Charlie Hebdo ATTACKERS: Born, Raised and Radicalised in Paris,” *The Guardian*, January 12, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jan/12/-sp-charlie-hebdo-attackers-kids-france-radicalised-paris>; Scott Bronstein, “Cherif and Said Kouachi: Their Path to Terror,” *CNN*, January 14, 2015. <https://www.cnn.com/2015/01/13/world/kouachi-brothers-radicalization/index.html>.

⁹⁷ Kirszbaum et al.’ “The children of immigrants in France: The emergence of a second generation with the collaboration of Esin Gezer Special Series on Children in Immigrant Families in Affluent Societies.”

Chérif was filmed in an “investigative documentary about jihadism” the summer of 2004 sharing an interest in rap with his neighborhood peers.⁹⁸ The 19th arrondissement is comprised of a large immigrant population, with many French immigrant rappers whose lyrical content focuses on the hardships of migrants, oppressed individuals, and the difficulties that come with being Muslim in the Western world.⁹⁹ Benyettou had successfully recruited other young men that were interested in rap by recognizing their grievances and using them to inspire them, and eventually Chérif, to fly to Syria and Iraq to receive jihadist training.¹⁰⁰ Benyettou’s recruitment efforts ultimately resulted in the death of two of his recruits and Chérif’s prison sentence.¹⁰¹ Ian Bourice, Chérif’s social worker, was also interviewed in the film. There he explained that Chérif had not recognized that he had been radicalized until his arrest, and that Chérif was thankful that he had been stopped from traveling to Syria and Iraq.¹⁰² Forming interpersonal networks by bonding with French North African immigrant peers over shared limitations caused by exclusion and repression, Chérif had a higher mobilization potential that resulted in his imprisonment.

b. “Prisoner” Identity

Persecution continued within the prison walls. Jonathan Laurence references the Grenoble study by Roché and Dagnaud that concluded young French Muslims are “prosecuted more vigorously than those of their peers.”¹⁰³ To support this conclusion, Laurence states that forty percent of French prisoners are estimated to have a father born abroad, with approximately twenty five percent of that forty percent descending from a

⁹⁸ France, “Paris Terror Suspect Shown in 2005 Film.”

⁹⁹ Elian Peltier, “Médine: The Pugnacious French Rapper Who Hits Back at Critics,” *New York Times*, December 13, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/13/arts/music/medine-france-rap.html>.

¹⁰⁰ Terrence McCoy, “How a Suspected Charlie Hebdo Gunman Turned into a Jihadist,” *Washington Post*, May 3, 2019.

¹⁰¹ Terrence McCoy, “How a Suspected Charlie Hebdo Gunman Turned into a Jihadist”; Mythen Walklate, “Fractured lives, splintered knowledge: Making criminological sense of the January, 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris,” 335

¹⁰² France, “Paris Terror Suspect Shown in 2005 Film.”

¹⁰³ Jonathan Laurence, *Integrating Islam political and religious challenges in contemporary France* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2006), 42, Proquest.

father from North Africa.¹⁰⁴ A large majority of French prisoners with foreign fathers are Muslim, and although French Muslims between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four comprise of only 8.5 percent of this age group in France, they make up 39.9 percent of prisoners within this age group.¹⁰⁵ In contrast, 75 percent of all French young adults within this same age group have French fathers, but only account for the 38.8 percent of prisoners in this age group.¹⁰⁶

Imprisoned French Muslims, including Chérif, impacted by this chauvinism take notice of the unequal treatment. French Muslims' awareness of the inequality within the French justice system rises, as hundreds of French Muslim individuals have reported racist crimes against them and only forty-eight of those reports were taken to court.¹⁰⁷ Angenendt et al. argues that familiarity with the repressive French system causes the younger French Muslim population to "no longer trust in more or less theoretical promises of citizenship, given that they face de facto day-to-day marginalization and discrimination."¹⁰⁸ There were no members of Muslim origin in French parliament in 2007, only four in 2012, and eight in 2017 after the *Charlie Hebdo* attack.¹⁰⁹ With so little representation in parliament, the disheartened youth have little hope for reform.

The marginalization and discrimination experienced by Chérif and other French Muslims likely increases their potential for extremist mobilization. While it cannot be argued that Chérif's sentencing for his attempt to travel to Syria and Iraq was particularly discriminatory as a result of France's unequal policing and sentencing, Chérif was likely

¹⁰⁴ Laurence, *Integrating Islam Political and Religious Challenges in Contemporary France*, 41.

¹⁰⁵ Laurence, 41.

¹⁰⁶ Laurence, 41.

¹⁰⁷ Laurence, 43.

¹⁰⁸ Angenendt et al., *Muslim Integration: Challenging Conventional Wisdom in Europe and The United States*, 47.

¹⁰⁹ Akturk, Sener, and Yury Katliarou, "Institutionalization of Ethnocultural Diversity and the Representation of European Muslims," *Perspectives on Politics* 19, no. 2 (2021): 388. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592720001334>.

further exposed “to extremist dogma from fellow inmates who skillfully recruit them [vulnerable prisoners] into terrorist groups.”¹¹⁰

Those who adopt a radical belief system tend to perceive authorities as illegitimate, perceive in-group superiority, perceive a distance between themselves and other people, and perceive a societal disconnectedness.¹¹¹ Chérif belonged to a collective identity as a French Algerian Muslim while growing up in France. These individuals served as his interpersonal network. They recognized the disregard for French Muslims within French society, and due to the discrimination against them, did not perceive French authorities as legitimate.¹¹² This collective identity shifted when Chérif arrived in the prison setting. Searching for similarities between himself and his fellow inmates, Chérif may have found camaraderie by sharing the same frustrations over the lack of Islamic ministers available to offer religious services and lack of halal food.¹¹³

Social movements form as a collective identity that finds injustice has been done to the group and that no one outside the group will offer interest or assistance; action taken against the injustice is required as otherwise the group will remain vulnerable.¹¹⁴ Although Chérif expressed regret to his social worker for attempting to travel to Syria and Iraq, it could be argued that Chérif may have expressed regret for his actions in order to obtain a shorter prison sentence. Alternatively, he may have been forthright and had another change of heart in prison.¹¹⁵ In an isolated prison environment, Chérif perceived a societal disconnectedness and a distance between himself and people in the world outside of prison. The lack of external relationships while in prison may strengthen interpersonal

¹¹⁰ Angenendt et al., *Muslim Integration: Challenging Conventional Wisdom in Europe and The United States*, 70.

¹¹¹ Boosje, Loseman, and Kees Van Den Bos, “Determinants of radicalization of Islamic youth in the Netherlands: Personal uncertainty, perceived injustice, and perceived group threat,” *Journal of Social Issues* 69, no. 3 (2013): 587–588.

¹¹² Wiktorowicz, *Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Theory Approach*, 154.

¹¹³ Khosrokhavar, “Radicalization in Prison: The French Case,” 290–291.

¹¹⁴ Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko, “Mechanisms of Political Radicalization: Pathways Toward Terrorism,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 20 no. 3, (2008): 416, DOI: 10.1080/09546550802073367.

¹¹⁵ Callimachi, Rukmini, and Jim Yardley, “From Amateur to Ruthless Jihadist in France.”

social networks available to Chérif, to include Muslim prisoners he shares a collective identity with.¹¹⁶ These types of networks have the potential to “reinforce shared identities, create group feeling, solidarity, and distinctiveness, and make mobilization easier while reducing its uncertainty.”¹¹⁷ Assuming membership of the Muslim prisoner’s collective identity created a cognitive opening for Chérif, the first of the four steps in Wiktorowicz’s radicalization model would have been achieved.

Perceiving himself as a member of the superior group of Muslim prisoners, Chérif’s identification as a French Muslim outside of prison remained intact.¹¹⁸ The retention of this identity meets Wiktorowicz’s second step in the radicalization process seeking out religion for self-fulfillment—was met, and Chérif continued—to accept Beghal’s message that acts of terror were “religiously permissible.”¹¹⁹ A former French government senior counterterrorism official, Louis Caprioli, stated that “anyone who came into contact with [Beghal] could not have helped but become more radicalized.”¹²⁰

c. “Islamic Extremist” Identity

Interacting with Beghal in and out of prison meant that Chérif remained in touch with his recruitment network. It was evident that Beghal’s teachings had fully indoctrinated Chérif into the radical movement when Chérif committed the *Charlie Hebdo* attack, completing the final step of Wiktorowicz’s radicalization model through active participation.

¹¹⁶ Wiktorowicz, *Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Theory Approach*, 154.

¹¹⁷ Wiktorowicz, 154.

¹¹⁸ Boosje, Loseman, and Kees Van Den Bos, “Determinants of radicalization of Islamic youth in the Netherlands: Personal Uncertainty, Perceived Injustice, and Perceived Group Threat,” 590.

¹¹⁹ Scott Sayare, “The Ultimate Terrorist Factory: Are French Prisons Incubating Extremism?” *Harper’s* 332, no. 1988 (2016): 53–, Proquest.

¹²⁰ Sayare, “The Ultimate Terrorist Factory: Are French Prisons Incubating Extremism?,” 53–.

2. Social Identity Theory Application

SIT is applied to explicate how Chérif 's self-perception as a prisoner and an extremist may impact his susceptibility to radicalization. Analysis through SIT may illuminate how Chérif views himself within prison, and how it changes once released.

a. *“Prisoner” Identity*

Upon sentencing, Chérif assumed a new identity of a prisoner. Livanos recognizes that “isolation in a prison environment is something that affects any type of prisoner” and is something that prisoners must cope with daily which “furthermore enhances their need for finding someone to feel comfortable with.”¹²¹

SIT explains Chérif's familiarization process with his new identity as an inmate within the confines of prison. While SMT analyzes the impact of network radicalization, SIT delves into how an individual perceives himself within a larger group. As noted, the prison did not have enough Islamic ministers available to offer religious services and did not offer halal food to Muslim prisoners.¹²² The services or accommodations unavailable to the Muslim inmates appeared systemic as other religious groups did not share these issues.¹²³ While SMT considers the group reaction, SIT considers how this may have contributed to Chérif embracing his Muslim identity as an individual within a shared social category and finding comfort in this particular in-group.¹²⁴

Chérif's self-identification as a prisoner seemed to diminish as he found relief through the in-group categorization after social comparison with fellow Muslim inmates.¹²⁵ The result of Chérif's self-categorization in a smaller in-group supports Stets and Burke's argument that the accentuation effect is triggered as a response.¹²⁶ Chérif

¹²¹Theocharis Livanos, “Identity Formation and Islamic Radicalization in the 21st Century The Jihadist Propaganda in French Prisons,” (Master's Thesis, Utrecht University, 2018), 44, <https://dspace.library.uu.nl/handle/1874/366990>.

¹²² Khosrokhavar, “Radicalization in Prison: The French Case,” 290–291.

¹²³ Khosrokhavar, “Radicalization in Prison: The French Case,” 291.

¹²⁴ Stets, Jan E., and Peter J. Burke, “Identity Theory and Social Identity Theory,” 225.

¹²⁵ Stets and Burke, 225.

¹²⁶ Stets and Burke, 225.

began to accentuate “perceived similarities between [him]self and other in-group members” and accentuate the “perceived differences between [him]self and outgroup members,” especially once he began interacting with fellow Muslim inmates.¹²⁷ Chérif had historically never considered himself a “good Muslim,” but he heightened his religious practices while in prison, possibly again as a result of his association with Beghal, who Jean-Charles Brisard, the head of the French Center for the Analysis of Terrorism, speculated was “the mentor, the spiritual mentor, and continued the work in some way initiated by Benyettou.”¹²⁸ Smith-Lovin references psychologist Roger Barker’s study that concluded much of what people do “depends much more on where we [people] are and who we [people] are with than who we [people] are,” which supports the accentuation portion of SIT.¹²⁹ Extremist Beghal likely recognized Chérif’s susceptibility to radicalization as he underwent this “identity crisis,” searching for a way to restructure his life in prison through social comparisons with Muslim inmates.¹³⁰

b. “Islamic Extremist” Identity

While SIT applies to how Chérif categorized himself within the smaller in-group of Muslim inmates, SIT fails to explain how Chérif’s self-categorization narrowed further to identify as a member of the extremist organization. Without establishing a clear picture of how Beghal interested Chérif in the extremist organization, the beginning of the radicalization process remains unclear. Yet, SIT is useful when examining how his membership evolved after joining the extremist ranks. Chérif may have recognized the close bonds he shared with other extremists, leading to his regard for himself as a member of the network of Islamic extremists.¹³¹ This concept is supported by the fact that Chérif

¹²⁷ Stets and Burke, “Identity Theory and Social Identity Theory,” 225.

¹²⁸ Scott Bronstein, “Cherif and Said Kouachi: Their Path to Terror,” CNN, last updated January 14, 2015, <https://www.cnn.com/2015/01/13/world/kouachi-brothers-radicalization>

¹²⁹ Lyn Smith-Lovin, “The Strength of Weak Identities: Social Structural Sources of Self, Situation and Emotional Experience,” *Social Psychology Quarterly* Vol. 70, No. 2 (June 2007): 106 <https://doi.org/10.1177/019027250707000203>.

¹³⁰ Theocharis Livanos, “Identity Formation and Islamic Radicalization in the 21st Century The Jihadist Propaganda in French Prisons,” 12.

¹³¹ Felty, “Social Identity Theory and Intergroup Conflict in Israel/Palestine,” 15.

established a close relationship with Coulibaly while under Beghal's influence in prison, and all three continued to interact outside of prison, with Coulibaly and Chérif carrying out terrorist attacks in the name of Islam upon release.¹³²

Chérif's identity is tied to his position as a member of an Islamic extremist organization within the larger prison environment.¹³³ Chérif, as an individual, must evaluate his new role as a group member within the extremist organization.¹³⁴ As Beghal's faithful student, Chérif grew to learn the extremist ideology during his time in prison.¹³⁵ Chérif's actions upon release indicate that his identification with radical Islam was of significance to him. After being radicalized in prison, Chérif refused to stand for a female judge, and made the pilgrimage to Mecca for his honeymoon demonstrating how his internal affiliation with radical Islam which he constructed in prison likely grew stronger.¹³⁶

As Chérif's affiliation to the extremist organization grew more significant, an emotional component may have arisen as his self-concept became defined by his membership.¹³⁷ Chérif continued to practice radical Islamic extremism by engaging with Beghal upon his release.¹³⁸ Beghal's membership in the extremist group was distinct, so Chérif's continuous association with Beghal reflects how Chérif may have valued the emotional bond of their friendship.¹³⁹ Although no direct evidence of Chérif and Beghal's friendship has been documented, Coulibaly stated in 2010 during a series of depositions

¹³² Torres, "Were French Intelligence Forces Complicit in the Charlie Hebdo Attacks?"

¹³³ Felty, "Social Identity Theory and Intergroup Conflict in Israel/Palestine," 16.

¹³⁴ Wilner, Alex S, and Claire-Jehanne Dubouloz, "Transformative Radicalization: Applying Learning Theory to Islamist Radicalization," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 34, no. 5 (2011): 423. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2011.561472>.

¹³⁵ Callimachi, Rukmini, and Jim Yardley, "From Amateur to Ruthless Jihadist in France."

¹³⁶ Callimachi, Rukmini, and Jim Yardley.

¹³⁷ Henri Tajfel, "Social Identity and Intergroup Behaviour," 69.

¹³⁸ Callimachi, Rukmini, and Jim Yardley, "From Amateur to Ruthless Jihadist in France.," David W Brannan, Philip F Esler, and N. T Anders Strindberg, "Talking to 'Terrorists': Towards an Independent Analytical Framework for the Study of Violent Substate Activism," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 24 (1) (2001): 5. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10576100118602>.

¹³⁹ Henri Tajfel, "Social Identity and Intergroup Behaviour," 72.

that “on a human level, he [Beghal] is a person who touched me.”¹⁴⁰ Due to Chérif’s close friendship with Coulibaly and Beghal, it may be inferred that Chérif felt similarly about his own relationship with Beghal.¹⁴¹ The distinctiveness of their shared group membership is tied to what Tajfel refers to as the “superordinate value” of Islamic extremism, with their entire relationship revolving around radical beliefs that consumed their thoughts and drove them each to commit acts of terror.¹⁴²

3. Relative Deprivation Theory Application

Relative Deprivation Theory (RDT) states that “one or one’s group is worse off compared to some standard accompanied by feelings of anger or resentment” which thus results in entitlement.¹⁴³ For RDT to be applicable, Chérif must have compared his situation with others’, determined if his ingroup is disadvantaged based on these comparisons, recognized these disadvantages to be unfair, and finally resented the disadvantage.¹⁴⁴ Thus, the present analysis assesses how recruiters like Beghal may view perceived grievances shared by Muslim inmates like Chérif as a means of establishing common ground and initiating the radicalization process. Muslim inmates’ interest in Beghal’s extremist organization’s views creates the potential for political violence in the name of Islam.¹⁴⁵ Applying RDT to determine how a recruiter like Beghal used Chérif’s value expectations to encourage him to actualize his value capability by committing a terrorist attack once released from prison may provide further insight into the final stage of Chérif’s radicalization process.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁰ Callimachi, Rukmini, and Jim Yardley, “From Amateur to Ruthless Jihadist in France.”

¹⁴¹ Callimachi, Rukmini, and Jim Yardley.

¹⁴² Henri Tajfel, “Social Identity and Intergroup Behaviour,” 75.

¹⁴³ Smith, Heather J, and Thomas F Pettigrew, “Advances in Relative Deprivation Theory and Research,” 1–2.

¹⁴⁴ Smith and Pettigrew, 2.

¹⁴⁵ Abell, Peter, Robin Jenkins, and Robin Jenkins, “Why Do Men Rebel?: A Discussion of Ted Robert Gurr’s *Why Men Rebel*,” 85.

¹⁴⁶ Ted R. Gurr, “Why Men Rebel,” 13.

a. *“French Algerian Citizen” Identity*

Academics have conducted studies in which Muslim French citizens are asked to describe how they identify. In a study conducted by Tom Rosentiel with the Pew Research Center, 40 percent of Muslim French citizens under the age of 35 self-identify primarily as French, while 51 percent self-identify first as Muslim, with 7 percent perceiving both identities equally.¹⁴⁷ Sloomer and Weezel conducted interviews with sixteen anonymous French immigrant residents living in the 19th arrondissement after the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks to ask about their personal experiences in the area.¹⁴⁸ Sloomer and Weezel selected certain direct quotes from the sixteen individuals that best encapsulated each of their responses. The respondents were asked if they identify less as French because of their Muslim identity.¹⁴⁹ Respondent 3, a twenty-year-old, unemployed, third-generation Tunisian French Muslim man answered:

No, I still feel myself French. They want me to feel less French, but I’m staying. It’s difficult to find a job. We are being discriminated. Companies prefer a French name over an Arab name. But they can’t kick me out. I’m Muslim and French and I’m staying. I won’t give them the pleasure that I give up. That’s what they want. That we give up and leave. But not me.¹⁵⁰

This quote best summarizes the feeling of discrimination shared between the sixteen respondents and Chérif likely had similar experiences while living in the 19th arrondissement. As a French Algerian Muslim, with no parents, living in the inner city, working as a pizza delivery driver, Chérif likely became angry that his identity as a Muslim was reason for his disenfranchisement. Like the respondents, Chérif compared his life to those of white French citizens and may have developed feelings of resentment.

Nationalism contributed to Chérif’s identity as well. When asked to categorize their national values, many of Sloomer and Weezel’s interview respondents failed to see the

¹⁴⁷ Rosentiel, Tom, “The French-Muslim Connection,” Pew Research Center. Pew Research Center, May 31, 2020. <https://www.pewresearch.org/2006/08/17/the-frenchmuslim-connection/>.

¹⁴⁸ Luuk Sloomer and Jip van Weezel, “Je suis francais? A research to the effect of the terrorist attack on Charlie Hebdo on the perception of national identity in the 19th arrondissement of Paris.”

¹⁴⁹ Sloomer and van Weezel.

¹⁵⁰ Sloomer and van Weezel.

French values of *liberté, égalité, fraternité* reflected in their daily life, with Respondent 3 stating

Hmm, not equality. I've seen too much that that's not true. I don't understand what they mean with liberty. What kind of liberty? The liberty to do whatever you want? The best of the three words is brotherhood. But not a French brotherhood, that doesn't exist. But we Muslims are brothers. We support each other. Maybe everyone hates us, and they think that we are terrorists, but they know nothing. We are not terrorists. The terrorists are crazy people."¹⁵¹

Respondent 3's personal experience with discrimination that made him feel like an outsider as a Muslim was common among other respondents. Arguably, the respondents felt as though one must be a white French citizen to enjoy the luxury of the exclusive French values that are not extended to include French citizens of African origin. Like Respondent 3, Chérif resented that French values did not extend to him, which may have angered him enough to fuel resentment and prompt him to seek solace in Muslim brotherhood.

Troubled by the American invasion of Iraq, Chérif began to go to pray at the Adda'wa Mosque in the 19th arrondissement, where he met other young Muslims.¹⁵² Benyettou was one of these individuals, impressing Chérif with his "devoutness."¹⁵³ Bonding over their similar backgrounds and French Algerian Muslims, Benyettou used his charm to encourage French Muslims like himself to travel to Syria and Iraq to join Al Qaeda.¹⁵⁴ Benyettou argued that in doing so, the jihadists would be "supporting the Muslim community."¹⁵⁵ Benyettou, having worked a lower class position as a janitor before becoming a jihadist recruiter, likely shared Chérif's feelings of anger over their

¹⁵¹ Luuk Sloomer and Jip van Weezel, "Je suis francais? A research to the effect of the terrorist attack on Charlie Hebdo on the perception of national identity in the 19th arrondissement of Paris."

¹⁵² Callimachi, Rukmini, and Yardley, "From Amateur to Ruthless Jihadist in France."

¹⁵³ Callimachi, Rukmini, and Yardley.

¹⁵⁴ Callimachi, Rukmini, and Yardley.

¹⁵⁵ *Terror in Europe*, directed by Ricardo Pollack (October 18, 2016; Frontline), <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/film/terror-in-europe/>.

misfortunes within French society.¹⁵⁶ Using shared feelings of anger and resentment over “bigotry among the French against Arabs” and encouraging Chérif to take action against perceived American injustices targeting Muslims, Benyettou convinced Chérif to attempt to travel to Syria and Iraq which resulted in Chérif’s arrest.¹⁵⁷

b. “Prisoner” Identity

When sentenced to prison, Chérif assumed a new role as a prisoner. RDT is applied to Chérif’s grievances (about the French Algerian experience in France) to examine the effect of his subsequent anger, resentment and entitlement. Similarly, RDT is applicable when assessing how Chérif’s individual experience as a prisoner likely created similar anger and resentment. Independent observers have reported that prison violence, poor living conditions, and overcrowding have resulted in an increased number of suicides in the Fleury-Mérogis prison.¹⁵⁸ These unpleasant conditions have similarly been found to impact the radicalization process.¹⁵⁹ Overcrowding of cells frustrated inmates who were unsatisfied with having to share a nine square meter cell with multiple roommates.¹⁶⁰ Chérif’s perception that he is worse off than other individuals who are not prisoners may cause him to experience negative emotions.¹⁶¹

c. “Islamic Extremist” Identity

As discussed earlier, the lack of Islamic ministers available to offer religious services and the lack of halal food was unpopular among Muslim prisoners.¹⁶² There is

¹⁵⁶ Terrence McCoy, “How a Suspected Charlie Hebdo Gunman Turned into a Jihadist,” *The Washington Post*, May 3, 2019. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2015/01/08/how-a-suspected-charlie-hebdo-gunman-turned-into-a-professional-jihadist/>

¹⁵⁷ Terrence McCoy, “How a Suspected Charlie Hebdo Gunman Turned into a Jihadist.”

¹⁵⁸ “Record Number of Suicides in France’s Largest Prison,”

¹⁵⁹ Khosrokhavar, “Radicalization in Prison: The French Case,” 289–290.

¹⁶⁰ Khosrokhavar, 290.

¹⁶¹ Yoxon, Barbara, Maria Grasso, Sotirios Karampampas, and Luke Temple, “Prejudice and Relative Deprivation: The Effects of Self-Referenced Individual Relative Deprivation on Generalized Prejudice in European Democracies,” *European Societies* Vol. 21 (2) (March 15, 2019) 280–302. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616696.2019.1583356>.

¹⁶² Khosrokhavar, “Radicalization in Prison: The French Case,” 290–291.

little Muslim representation in French parliament so there are few Members of Parliament to propose a change in the system.¹⁶³ Boina M’Koubou, an imam at the Fleury-Mérogis prison, is limited to meeting with only 23 people at a time for a few hours twice a week.¹⁶⁴ M’Koubou argues that providing regular, non-extremist religious education paves the way for a long-term solution.¹⁶⁵ The lack of prison imams does not allow for regular, non-radical religious instruction.¹⁶⁶ Without the guidance of a well-educated, moderate imam, radical inmates can preach extremist ideas to interested prisoners and persuade them that these radical concepts are preferable compared to the inaccessible teachings of moderate imams.¹⁶⁷

Khosrokhavar concurs with M’Koubou’s assessment that radicals in prison exert their extremist beliefs to influence Muslim prisoners and mobilize their resentment over their unfair treatment.¹⁶⁸ Yet, Khosrokhavar also acknowledges that feelings of frustration alone do not cause a prisoner to become radical.¹⁶⁹

Muslim prisoners find that when they are compared to Christian and Jewish inmates, they are underprivileged when it comes to regular and reoccurring access to prayer. Frustration related to a prisoner’s faith or ethnicity can exacerbate the radicalization process because their disadvantage is perceived as unfair and discriminatory to solely Muslim inmates.¹⁷⁰ Identifying as a member of the Muslim in-group, Chérif likely saw that his treatment as a Muslim prisoner was unfair which bolstered his resentment towards the French that discriminate against Muslims. Chérif, along with his fellow Muslim

¹⁶³ Akturk, Sener, and Yury Katliarou, “Institutionalization of Ethnocultural Diversity and the Representation of European Muslims,” 388.

¹⁶⁴ Sarah Elzas, “‘Basement Imams’ Spreading Radical Islamism, Muslim Prison Chaplain Warns,” RFI, last modified August 2, 2015, <https://www.rfi.fr/en/france/20150208-basement-imams-spreading-radical-islamism-muslim-prison-chaplain-warns>.

¹⁶⁵ Elzas, “‘Basement Imams’ Spreading Radical Islamism, Muslim Prison Chaplain Warns.”

¹⁶⁶ Elzas, “‘Basement Imams’ Spreading Radical Islamism, Muslim Prison Chaplain Warns.”

¹⁶⁷ Elzas, “‘Basement Imams’ Spreading Radical Islamism, Muslim Prison Chaplain Warns.”

¹⁶⁸ Khosrokhavar, “Radicalization in Prison: The French Case,” 291.

¹⁶⁹ Khosrokhavar, 290.

¹⁷⁰ Khosrokhavar, 290.

inmates, may have expected to receive the same access to religious services as the Christian and Jewish inmates.¹⁷¹ Perceiving the prison to be capable of providing this service and failing to do so caused this frustration among the Muslim inmate population.¹⁷²

The resentment Chérif developed as a result of the discrimination he experienced as a Muslim prisoner may have made him more vulnerable to Djamel Beghal's attempts at recruiting Chérif to join an extremist organization. Although Chérif was imprisoned for attempting to travel to Syria and Iraq as an amateur jihadist, the discrimination he experienced in prison as a Muslim inmate may have hardened his extremist beliefs as he bonded with extremist prisoners over their shared experiences. With French prison policies discriminating against Muslim prisoners, whether intentionally or unintentionally, Chérif resented this discrimination. After experiencing constant deprivation, relative to Christian or Jewish prisoners, Chérif ultimately turned to extreme actions and carried out a terrorist attack against Charlie Hebdo.

D. CONCLUSION

Having considered Social Movement Theory, Social Identity Theory, and Relative Deprivation Theory, this chapter concludes that Social Movement Theory is the most thorough explanation for Chérif Kouachi's radicalization.

Focusing on Chérif's interpersonal networks both outside and inside of prison offers important insight into how he became incarcerated, and how his incarceration further radicalized him. Suffering from political exclusion and repression as a member of French society arguably drove Chérif to interact with Benyettou, who inspired him to travel to Syria and Iraq.¹⁷³ Without this interpersonal relationship Chérif would probably not have been imprisoned. Wiktorowicz's four-part model of radicalization, through interactions

¹⁷¹ Peter Abell and Robin Jenkins, "Why Do Men Rebel?: A Discussion of Ted Robert Gurr's *Why Men Rebel*," *Race & class* 13 (1971) 85. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/030639687101300107>.

¹⁷² Abell and Jenkins, "Why Do Men Rebel?: A Discussion of Ted Robert Gurr's *Why Men Rebel*," 85.

¹⁷³ Terrence McCoy, "How a Suspected Charlie Hebdo Gunman Turned into a Jihadist," *Washington Post*, May 3, 2019. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2015/01/08/how-a-suspected-charlie-hebdo-gunman-turned-into-a-professional-jihadist/>

with Beghal and Coulibaly, explains each step of Chérif's radicalization process while in prison that resulted in his full indoctrination to extremism when he committed the *Charlie Hebdo* attack.¹⁷⁴

Peter Neumann, of the International Centre for the Study of Radicalization, identified three common drivers that are present in a number of "radicalization trajectories."¹⁷⁵ Grievances, extremist narratives or ideologies, and social and group dynamics are the three common dynamics that result in radicalization.¹⁷⁶ These three drivers may be more evident in SMT than RDT, as SMT addresses the social and group dynamic component of radicalization. While Neumann refers to the internet as an example of where these three elements are prevalent, prisons are also the ideal environment for these drivers to prosper.¹⁷⁷

Relative Deprivation Theory successfully explains how Chérif's interpretation of how he as a Muslim French citizen is disadvantaged results in resentment. RDT is applicable when examining Chérif's perception of his disadvantage as a prisoner, along with his perception from within his Muslim prisoner ingroup, and larger disadvantage within the prison system. The overall concept that perceived injustice to oneself or one's ingroup, recognition of the disadvantage when compared to another individual or group, and finally resentment over the disadvantage fails to address how ingroup relations exacerbate or defuse an individual or group's reaction. SMT encapsulates RDT's concept that exclusion and repression are mobilizers. However, SMT's focus on interpersonal relationships explains how radicalizers like Beghal can rely on the anger, like Chérif's, that stems from being at a disadvantage and to push an agenda and strengthen their relationship. RDT's focus on value expectations and value capability is a more limiting scope when compared to Wiktorowicz's radicalization framework under SMT because the four-part model shows how each step escalates due to the original cognitive opening.

¹⁷⁴ Wiktorowicz, *Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Theory Approach*, 154.

¹⁷⁵ Peter Neumann, *Preventing Violent Radicalization in America*. (Washington, DC: Bipartisan Policy Center, 2011), 15.

¹⁷⁶ Neumann, *Preventing Violent Radicalization in America*, 15.

¹⁷⁷ Neumann, 15.

Social Identity Theory effectively demonstrates how Chérif's perception of himself as a prisoner is altered once he identifies with an ingroup as a Muslim prisoner. While SIT is applicable when considering how Chérif may have benefitted from sharing a religion with other prisoners and have accentuated his own characteristics that others in the group shared, SIT does not offer insight into how Chérif's identification as an extremist Muslim prisoner occurred at the individual level. SMT draws into question Chérif's relationships within the prison system, as Beghal may have taken advantage of Chérif's struggle with his identity by offering his own insight into who Chérif could become and how he could view himself if he were to embrace Beghal's radical values. With responsibility for Chérif's radicalization process being attributed to his relationships again, SMT is the more appropriate theory to explain Chérif's extremism.

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III. CASE 2: MEHDI NEMMOUCHE

Mehdi Nemmouche's path to radicalization is the second case examined in this study. Nemmouche was sentenced to prison for more minor offenses such as robbery before committing a terrorist attack in the Jewish Museum in Brussels.¹⁷⁸ Second only to the internet, "radical Islam has spread like an epidemic in detention centers that receive people awaiting a final judgment or who are sentenced to short prison terms."¹⁷⁹ Those who testified against him in court claim that Nemmouche was radicalized in prison, resulting in his travel to fight with the Islamic State (ISIS) before returning to Europe to commit the terrorist attack.¹⁸⁰ According to Byman and Shapiro, "Leading specialists on the topic, including Thomas Hegghammer and Peter Neumann, have estimated that the Syrian war has mobilized more European Islamists than all other foreign wars over the past 20 years combined."¹⁸¹ Nemmouche's terrorist attack was unique because it was the "first attack on European soil by a returning fighter from Syria," with the trial making Nemmouche the "first European foreign fighter to be convicted of terrorism offenses."¹⁸²

A. CASE FINDING

Mehdi Nemmouche's path to radicalization began in prison, continued when he traveled to fight with ISIS in Syria, and persisted when he committed the first "returnee"

¹⁷⁸ "Brussels Jewish Museum Killings: Mehdi Nemmouche Trial Begins," *BBC News*, January 10, 2019. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-46822469>.

¹⁷⁹ David Rieff, "France's Grand Illusion," *National Interest*, no. 137 (May – June 2015): 56–64, Proquest; Denis Demonpion, "How Jihad Recruitment Spreads In French Prisons," *Worldcrunch*, January 19, 2015. <https://worldcrunch.com/terror-in-europe-1/how-jihad-recruitment-spreads-in-french-prisons>.

¹⁸⁰ "Brussels Jewish Museum Shooter 'An Angry French Teen' Who Was Radicalized in Jail," *France 24*, August 3, 2019. <https://www.france24.com/en/20190308-brussels-jewish-Museum-attack-mehdi-nemmouche-french-teen-radicalised-jail>.

¹⁸¹ Daniel Byman and Jeremy Shapiro, "Homeward Bound? Don't Hype the Threat of Returning Jihadists," *Foreign Affairs* 93, no. 6 (2014): 40, JSTOR.

¹⁸² Adam Hoffman and Marta Furlan. *Challenges Posed by Returning Foreign Fighters*, Program on Extremism, The George Washington University. March, 2020. <https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/Challenges%20Posed%20by%20Returning%20Foreign%20Fighters.pdf>, 8.

terrorist attack in Europe.¹⁸³ This case study explores whether Nemmouche's radicalization process is best explained by his altered self-perception and acceptance of a newfound identity, his perceived disadvantages that triggered resentment and radical action, or if it were his interpersonal networks that had the greatest influence. Unlike Chérif Kouachi's case, Social Identity Theory best explains Nemmouche's radicalization.

B. BACKGROUND

Nemmouche was born on April 17, 1985 in Roubaix, which, according to Perliger and Milton, is "currently one of the poorest towns in France and a hub for immigrants from North Africa."¹⁸⁴ Born to parents of Algerian origin, Nemmouche never met his father, and investigators discovered his mother was deemed "not 'capable' of raising him" so he was placed in foster care –where he lived on and off– in Lille, France, until he turned 16.¹⁸⁵ There were no other Muslim children with Nemmouche in foster care.¹⁸⁶ It Lille is known as a largely French Algerian town with high tensions due to the lack of opportunities for socioeconomic growth presented by the native French that promote far-right anti-immigration rhetoric, despite second generation citizens being born and raised in France.¹⁸⁷ Real and perceived discrimination often manifests in fewer opportunities, with Nemmouche acting out and committing his first recorded crime at only thirteen years old; displaying "early warning signs for violent behavior."¹⁸⁸ Shortly after his first offense,

¹⁸³ R. Kim Cragin, "The November 2015 Paris attacks: The Impact of Foreign Fighter Returnees," 217.

¹⁸⁴ Arie Perliger and Daniel Milton, "Introduction," in *From Cradle to Grave: The Life cycle of Foreign Fighters in Iraq and Syria*. (Combatting Terrorism Center at West Point, 2016), 1. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep05619.4>.

¹⁸⁵ France 24, "Brussels Jewish Museum Shooter 'An Angry French Teen' Who Was Radicalized in Jail."

¹⁸⁶ Arie Perliger and Daniel Milton, "Introduction," in *From Cradle to Grave: The Life cycle of Foreign Fighters in Iraq and Syria*. (Combatting Terrorism Center at West Point, 2016), 1. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep05619.4>.

¹⁸⁷ Michele Norris, "Native-Born, Immigrant French at Odds in Lille," *NPR*, November 10, 2005. <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5007770>.

¹⁸⁸ France 24, "Brussels Jewish Museum Shooter 'An Angry French Teen' Who Was Radicalized in Jail." "Early Warning Signs and Resiliency Factors for School Violence," U.S. Department of Justice Office of Justice Programs, 1999, <https://www.ojp.gov/ncjrs/virtual-library/abstracts/early-warning-signs-and-resiliency-factors-school-violence#:~:text=Early%20warning%20signs%20for%20violent,aggressive%20behavior%2C%20intolerance%20for%20differences%2C>.

Nemmouche was sentenced to three weeks in juvenile prison for a hold up with an air pistol.¹⁸⁹ Nemmouche's lawyer for these juvenile crimes "remembers a client 'intelligent, neither religious nor violent. Suffering from educational deficiencies, he lived in an environment marked by family difficulties.'" ¹⁹⁰ Yet this event was only the start of Nemmouche's criminal career, as he continued to commit traffic offenses and muggings resulting in his grandmother losing count after his second stint in jail.¹⁹¹ Nemmouche attended a technical institute but failed to obtain his electrician's license, then fell back into the criminal lifestyle.¹⁹²

Nemmouche was convicted of crimes seven times and sentenced to jail on five occasions.¹⁹³ Paris prosecutor François Molins believes Nemmouche was radicalized while serving his fifth sentence between 2007 and 2012. He left for Syria three weeks after his release on December 31, 2012.¹⁹⁴ Molins explained that "during this last detention, he [Nemmouche] 'distinguished himself by his extremist proselytism and the call to collective prayer for a walk, "' gathering prisoners to gather in a common area for a prisoner-led group prayer despite not having a formal service."¹⁹⁵ Nemmouche's aunt concurred, having seen him when he was released from prison at the end of 2012 before he traveled to Syria; she testified in court that before serving time "'he didn't go to the mosque, he didn't talk about religion (...). It is necessarily in prison'" that Nemmouche was radicalized.¹⁹⁶

¹⁸⁹ France 24, "Brussels Jewish Museum Shooter 'An Angry French Teen' Who Was Radicalized in Jail."

¹⁹⁰ "Brussels murder: Mehdi Nemmouche, Radicalized Repeat Offender in Prison," *Le Figaro*, June 1, 2014. <https://www.lefigaro.fr/actualite-france/2014/06/01/01016-20140601ARTFIG00113-tuerie-de-bruxelles-ce-que-l-on-sait-du-suspect-mehdi-nemmouche.php>.

¹⁹¹ France 24, "Brussels Jewish Museum Shooter 'An Angry French Teen' Who Was Radicalized in Jail."

¹⁹² "Brussels Jewish Museum killings: Suspect 'admitted attack,'" *BBC*, June 1, 2014. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-27654505>.

¹⁹³ "Brussels Shooting Suspect's Journey from Troubled Childhood to Jihad," *Agence France-Presse*, June 2, 2014. NewsBank.

¹⁹⁴ Agence France-Presse, "Brussels Shooting Suspect's Journey from Troubled Childhood to Jihad."

¹⁹⁵ *Le Figaro*, "Brussels murder: Mehdi Nemmouche, Radicalized Repeat Offender in Prison."

¹⁹⁶ *Le Figaro*, "Brussels murder: Mehdi Nemmouche, Radicalized Repeat Offender in Prison."

Former prison staff similarly testified that Nemmouche was radicalized in prison.¹⁹⁷ Once radicalized, Nemmouche continued the cycle of radicalization within the prison walls. Believing Nemmouche to be “intelligent and charismatic,” the former prison director testified that Nacer Bendrer, Nemmouche’s accomplice in the Brussels attack, was radicalized by Nemmouche in prison.¹⁹⁸ Bendrer was convicted as Nemmouche’s accomplice in the Brussels attack and sentenced to fifteen years in prison.¹⁹⁹

Traveling to Syria and fighting as a jihadist with ISIS for one year, Nemmouche is “believed by Belgian prosecutors to be the first European jihadist to return from war-torn Syria to carry out terror attacks in Europe.”²⁰⁰ Investigators discovered that Nemmouche met Najim Laachraoui, the “suicide bomber in the Brussels airport attack of March 2016, which killed 32 people” and that both men guarded the four French journalists held hostage in Syria.²⁰¹ The allegations against Nemmouche were reaffirmed by former hostage Nicolas Henin identifying Nemmouche as “his jailer and torturer in Syria,” who knew him as a ““sadistic, playful, and narcissistic”” man ““filled with hate and especially towards Jews.””²⁰²

As a member of the ISIS “external operations cell in Syria, led by Abdelhamid Abaaoud,” Nemmouche returned with the intent to commit a terrorist attack in Europe.²⁰³

¹⁹⁷ Community Security Trust, *Mehdi Nemmouche & The Brussels Jewish Museum Attack: A case study in jihadist antisemitic terrorism*, Research Briefing of April 2019, 12. <https://cst.org.uk/data/file/9/9/FINAL%20Mehdi%20Nemmouche%20Web.1615560037.pdf>.

¹⁹⁸ Community Security Trust, *Mehdi Nemmouche & The Brussels Jewish Museum Attack: A case study in jihadist antisemitic terrorism*, 12.

¹⁹⁹ “Brussels Jewish Museum killer Nemmouche jailed for life,” *France 24*, December 3, 2019. <https://www.france24.com/en/20190312-brussels-jewish-Museum-killer-nemmouche-sentenced-life-prison>.

²⁰⁰ “Brussels Jewish Museum Murders: Mehdi Nemmouche Jailed for Life,” *BBC*; Agence France-Presse, “Brussels Shooting Suspect’s Journey from Troubled Childhood to Jihad,” child

²⁰¹ *BBC*, “Brussels Jewish Museum Murders: Mehdi Nemmouche Jailed for Life.”

²⁰² *BBC*, “Brussels Nemmouche trail: Suspect ‘Was My Jailer and Torturer,’” *BBC*, February 7, 2019. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-47156247>.

²⁰³ R. Kim Cragin, “The November 2015 Paris attacks: The Impact of Foreign Fighter Returnees,” *Orbis* 61, no. 2 (2017): 217, <https://reader.elsevier.com/reader/sd/pii/S0030438717300091?token=01593e5b59ae1293db75d22fed33f60d156aca4e1e9104484e7cfbe98bf5f0c31a1c37c84fd0fe82a287d27c0537066d&originRegion=us-east-1&originCreation=20210909020238>.

Witnessing Nemmouche's success, ISIS strategized to dedicate more resources to fund external operations utilizing "foreign fighter returnees" in the future.²⁰⁴

C. ANALYSIS

Applying the three theories of radicalization will illuminate issues that contributed to Nemmouche's radicalization process. SMT and RDT will be applied to Nemmouche's experience as a French Algerian citizen, prisoner and extremist, while SIT analyzes to his experience as a prisoner and extremist.

1. Social Movement Theory Application

SMT will examine Nemmouche's established relationships outside and inside of prison, and his relationships as an extremist. SMT may illustrate the effect Nemmouche's associations had on his radicalization process.

a. *"French Algerian Citizen" Identity*

Nemmouche's upbringing was unstable, with him bouncing between his grandparents' home, foster care, and an orphanage from the time he was three months old until his late teens.²⁰⁵ His juvenile criminal record, was by some estimates, practically inevitable.²⁰⁶ He served five jail sentences as a juvenile.²⁰⁷ A study by Michael Foucault determined that courts often deem "minor boys to be at risk when they came from single-parent, blended, or disadvantaged households,"—much like Nemmouche.²⁰⁸

The issue of juvenile delinquency has been a public policy subject in France since the 1980s.²⁰⁹ The French spoke in terms of "immigrant" delinquents, even though they

²⁰⁴ R. Kim Cragin, "The November 2015 Paris attacks: The Impact of Foreign Fighter Returnees," 217.

²⁰⁵ Agence France-Presse, "Brussels Shooting Suspect's Journey from Troubled Childhood to Jihad."

²⁰⁶ Agence France-Presse, "Brussels Shooting Suspect's Journey from Troubled Childhood to Jihad."

²⁰⁷ Agence France-Presse, "Brussels Shooting Suspect's Journey from Troubled Childhood to Jihad."

²⁰⁸ Susan Terrio, "Criminalizing 'Immigrant' Youth in France," *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* 10, no. 1 (2009): 9, JSTOR.

²⁰⁹ Susan Terrio, "Criminalizing 'Immigrant' Youth in France," 91.

were second-generation French citizens.²¹⁰ The French viewed “new” delinquents as “less amenable to rehabilitation and integration within French society, based on their economic marginality and cultural difference,” and this view altered juvenile law.²¹¹

Denis Salas “coined the term ‘delinquency of exclusion’” to explain the “new challenge,” i.e. that second generation youth are delinquent because of their culture, yet failed to consider their “economic circumstances or psychological pathology as underlying causes.”²¹² The left attributed “youth violence as the result of an inevitable culture clash between mainstream French values and backward immigrant traditions magnified by poverty and exclusion,” while the right argued that “a total lack of culture within immigrant families whose children are said to lack moral values, social norms, and grounded identities” result in youth delinquency.²¹³

Many second-generation French citizens from such post-colonial countries as Algeria have described “ethnic penalization,” as they face discrimination for being second-generation French citizens.²¹⁴ While Salas argues that French Muslims are delinquent because of their culture, French Muslims believe that they are excluded from opportunities that interfere with the attainability of upward socioeconomic mobility.²¹⁵ Second-generation French Muslims face difficulties when entering the workforce, despite the belief that “early socialization or birth in France” would result in “improved chances of finding a job.”²¹⁶ Facing discrimination that seemed to bar Nemmouche from supporting himself financially, he may have turned to crime in order to support himself.

²¹⁰ Susan Terrio, “Criminalizing ‘Immigrant’ Youth in France,” 91–94.

²¹¹ Susan Terrio, 92.

²¹² Susan Terrio, 95.

²¹³ Susan Terrio, 94–96.

²¹⁴ Dominique Meurs, Ariane Pailhe, and Patrick Simon, “Discrimination Despite Integration: Immigrants And The Second Generation In Education And The Labour Market In France,” in *International Migration in Europe: New Trends and New Methods of Analysis*, ed. Corrado Bonifazi, Marek Okolski, Jeanette Schoorl and Patrick Simon (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2008), 248.

²¹⁵ Meurs, Pailhe, and Simon, “Discrimination Despite Integration: Immigrants and the Second Generation in Education and the Labour Market in France,” 248.

²¹⁶ Meurs, Pailhe, and Simon, 255.

b. “Prisoner” Identity

As a result of his offenses, Nemmouche spent time in jail where he encountered others who faced struggles similar to his own—and likely found camaraderie and acceptance among like-minded individuals from backgrounds similar to his own. Thomas Mücke argues that Muslim inmates are susceptible to accepting “simple explanations—you’re in prison because you’re not accepted in this society, because Muslims are being persecuted all over the world.”²¹⁷ The likelihood that Nemmouche’s fellow prisoners had also been pushed to the outskirts of French society was high.²¹⁸ The marginalization alone has potential to radicalize the ostracized inmates, increasing their likeliness to “normalise the behaviour, insights, and practices of true criminals” and perpetuate a jihadist ideology.²¹⁹

Being from Roubaix himself, Nemmouche very probably found acceptance in prison through a quickly established connection with members of the “Roubaix gang.”²²⁰ The Roubaix gang is comprised of French Islamist radicals who, according to *Associated Press*, “carried out a crime frenzy in the Lille region of northern France in 1996” after returning from the Bosnian war to fund Al Qaeda.²²¹ Scholars argue that the “main reason why Roubaix has produced so many terrorists, including Mehdi Nemmouche,” is because those living in Roubaix can see the quality of life in Belgium and compare it to life in Roubaix likely leaving them feeling “trapped and abandoned—by the French elite to the south and the new economy to the north.”²²² Seeking mentorship from Lionel Dumont,

²¹⁷ “Prisons: The Centers of Radicalization,” *Deutsche Welle*, January 15, 2015. <https://www.dw.com/en/prisons-centers-of-radicalization/a-18192520>.

²¹⁸ Serafettin Pektas and Johan Leman, *Militant Jihadism: Today and Tomorrow* (Leuven University Press, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvq2vzmt>.

²¹⁹ Pektas and Leman, *Militant Jihadism*.

²²⁰ France 24, “Brussels Jewish Museum Shooter ‘An Angry French Teen’ Who Was Radicalized in Jail.”

²²¹ “Islamist Gang Head Gets 30 Years in French Prison,” *Jerusalem Post*, December 16, 2005. <https://www.jpost.com/international/islamist-gang-head-gets-30-years-in-french-prison>; France 24, “Brussels Jewish Museum Shooter ‘An Angry French Teen’ Who Was Radicalized in Jail.”

²²² Andrew Hussey, “The Decline of the Fifth Republic,” *New Statesman*, 146, no. 5363 (Apr, 2017): 26–29, 31. <https://libproxy.nps.edu/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.libproxy.nps.edu/magazines/decline-fifth-republic/docview/1892640854/se-2?accountid=12702>.

“Nemmouche himself grew in the shadow of his role model,” who was “a Frenchman of Algerian descent who joined the mujahideen in Bosnia in the ‘90s and operated against NATO forces.”²²³ Nemmouche’s worldview had likely already been damaged by his experience as a French Algerian citizen, and the Roubaix gang offered him a sense of familial comfort and belonging.

Prior prisoner Karim Mokhtari who “now works with young offenders in prison, says he can tell who is becoming radicalized by their acute sense of victimhood.”²²⁴ Mokhtari explains “that message of grievance and ‘us against them’ finds a ready audience in prison.”²²⁵ One French prison warden described prison grounds as a prime environment for recruiting extremists, having heard an inmate recruiter say to another inmate: “If you join our family, you’ll never be alone. If your family is ever in need, we’ll be there.”²²⁶ With Nemmouche’s unstable upbringing, it is probable that this type of convincing and welcoming rhetoric satisfied Nemmouche’s personal need for belonging.

Nemmouche had what Wiktorowicz would describe as a “cognitive opening” and found meaning in Islamic extremist religious beliefs.²²⁷ With clear similarities between Wiktorowicz’s four-part model for radicalization, Lofland and Stark’s cult study very well breaks down Nemmouche’s radicalization process in plainer terms.²²⁸ Their first observation states “for conversion, a person must experience, within a religious problem-solving perspective, enduring, acutely-felt tensions that lead him to define himself as a religious seeker; he must encounter the cult {deviant perspective} at a turning point in his life...”²²⁹ Entering prison was a turning point in Nemmouche’s life, making him

²²³ Meir Gershuni, “Lone Terrorist – A Role Model,” *Israel Defense*, February 25, 2015. <https://www.israeldefense.co.il/en/content/lone-terrorist-%E2%80%93-role-model>.

²²⁴ Henri Astier, “Paris attacks: Prisons Provide Fertile Ground for Islamists,” *BBC*, February 5, 2015. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-31129398>.

²²⁵ Henri Astier, “Paris attacks: Prisons Provide Fertile Ground for Islamists.”

²²⁶ Denis Demonpion, “How Jihad Recruitment Spreads in French Prisons,” *Worldcrunch*, January 19, 2015. <https://worldcrunch.com/terror-in-europe-1/how-jihad-recruitment-spreads-in-french-prisons>

²²⁷ Randy Borum, “Radicalization into Violent Extremism I,” 18.

²²⁸ Randy Borum, 18–19.

²²⁹ Randy Borum, 19.

susceptible to religious extremism having experienced discrimination during his life in France.

“There’s not a single institution that, every single day, is not confronted by an act of proselytism that plagues the penitentiary life,” says Emmanuel Gauthrin, secretary-general of “FO pénitentiaire,” a national penitentiary union.”²³⁰ Nemmouche was performing “frame alignment” through disruptive prayer demonstrations, while embracing the extremist group’s “narrative and ethos to ‘make sense.’”²³¹ “Through a process of socialization” within the prison walls, Nemmouche “became fully indoctrinated into the movement.”²³² The second part of Lofland and Stark’s observation is that “within the cult an affective bond must be formed (or pre-exist) and any extra-cult attachments neutralized...”²³³ Nemmouche likely only surrounded himself with like-minded extremist role models (Dumont) and mentees (Bendrer) with a willingness to discuss the extremist group concepts.²³⁴

The final portion of Lofland and Stark’s analysis argued “and there [in the insulated group environment] he must be exposed to intensive interaction if he is to become a ‘deployable agent.’”²³⁵ Nemmouche proved to have intensive interaction through his collective calls to prayer, and certainly wasted little time becoming a deployed agent.

c. “Islamic Extremist” Identity

During his time in Syria, Nemmouche served as a jailer and torturer of French journalists held by ISIS in a hospital that was converted into a prison.²³⁶ Two of the

²³⁰ Denis Demonpion, “How Jihad Recruitment Spreads In French Prisons,”

²³¹ Randy Borum, “Radicalization into Violent Extremism I,” 19.

²³² Randy Borum, 19.

²³³ Randy Borum, 19.

²³⁴ Meir Gershuni, “Lone Terrorist – A Role Model,” Israel Defense, February 25, 2015; Community Security Trust, Mehdi Nemmouche & The Brussels Jewish Museum Attack: A case study in jihadist antisemitic terrorism, 12.

²³⁵ Randy Borum, “Radicalization into Violent Extremism I,” 19.

²³⁶ “French Journalists Tell Trial Alleged Brussels Museum Killer Held Them Hostage in Syria,” *France 24*, July 2, 2019. <https://www.france24.com/en/20190207-french-journalists-trial-alleged-brussels-museum-killer-nemmouche-hostage-syria>

hostages, journalists Nicholas Henin and Didier François identified Nemmouche during a his trial.²³⁷ Nemmouche's lawyers claimed the former hostages had nothing to do with the case on trial, arguing that their testimonies were "a 'stunt' and a 'trial within a trial.'"²³⁸ However, Nemmouche's hostages' recollection of events and Nemmouche's behavior during their time imprisoned foreshadowed the European terrorist attack that had yet to unfold. According to Henin, Nemmouche was openly expressed his "admiration" for Mohammed Merah, the French Algerian citizen that shot "three unarmed French soldiers... a rabbi and three small children at a Jewish school."²³⁹ Merah's violence was so extreme that one media outlet reported that he picked up one of the three young children, "Myriam Monsonego, by her hair to shoot her in the head."²⁴⁰ Stating that this act of terror was driven by "the fate of the Palestinians, the French military presence in Afghanistan and France's ban on the full veil," Merah showed no remorse when he "expressed no regrets other than 'not having claimed more victims.'"²⁴¹

Former hostage François stated:

In our detention, in his permanent remarks, there was a kind of anti-Semitic obsession, an obsession with wanting to imitate or exceed Merah, his model. What is extraordinary: with Nemmouche's career, you can clearly see that he is not an Islamist ideologue! He said it himself: he defined himself as a young criminal transformed into an ethnic cleaner, that's what he said all the time.²⁴²

²³⁷ "French Journalists Tell Trial Alleged Brussels Museum Killer Held Them Hostage in Syria," France 24.

²³⁸ "French Journalists Tell Trial Alleged Brussels Museum Killer Held Them Hostage in Syria," France 24.

²³⁹ France 24, "Brussels Jewish Museum Shooter 'An Angry French Teen' Who Was Radicalized in Jail."

BBC, "Mohamed Merah: Who Was Toulouse Gunman?," *BBC*, March 22, 2012. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-17456541>

²⁴⁰ BBC, "Mohamed Merah: Who Was Toulouse Gunman?"

²⁴¹ BBC, "Mohamed Merah: Who Was Toulouse Gunman?"

²⁴² "Brussels murder: Mehdi Nemmouche, Radicalized Repeat Offender in Prison," *Le Figaro*.

François continued, stating during his testimony “‘I came for three things: to say that we know him, how dangerous this person is and the risk he will repeat the crimes.’”²⁴³ Both Merah and Nemmouche “came from similar backgrounds and had engaged in petty crime before becoming radicalized in prison,” so Nemmouche likely related to Merah’s experience.²⁴⁴ With Nemmouche applauding and admiring this type of anti-Semitic terrorist attack and idolizing Merah, it may be inferred that Nemmouche’s own anti-Semitic beliefs motivated the Brussels Jewish Museum attack. From the testimonies Nemmouche’s hostages shared during his trial for the Brussels Museum terrorist attack, Nemmouche’s sadistic torturing of journalists on behalf of ISIS proved that he was a full-fledged “deployed agent” carrying out extremist attacks abroad.²⁴⁵ While the socialization efforts within prison contributed to Nemmouche’s radicalization process, SMT does not apply to Nemmouche’s radical actions after his release. Nemmouche admired his fellow Islamic radicals which may have inspired his active participation in ISIS, but ultimately his interpersonal relationships played a much smaller role upon his release from prison.

His dedication to radical Islam did not end in Syria. Sensationally, if not strictly accurately dubbed in the popular press as “the first foreign fighter sent home to conduct an attack against the West,” Nemmouche became a member of Abdelhamid Abaaoud’s external operations cell.²⁴⁶ Abaaoud masterminded the attacks carried out in Europe and was infamous for a “video [that] surfaced online showing a laughing Abaaoud wearing a floppy hat and driving a pickup truck towing a group of tethered corpses through a field in northern Syria, apparently en route to a mass grave.”²⁴⁷ Abaaoud likely coached

²⁴³ “Alleged Brussels Museum killer was ‘sadistic’ Syria jailer” *France 24*, July 2, 2019. <https://www.france24.com/en/20190207-alleged-brussels-Museum-killer-was-sadistic-syria-jailer>

²⁴⁴ Anne Penketh, “French Suspect in Brussels Jewish Museum Attack Spent Year in Syria,” *The Guardian*.

²⁴⁵ Randy Borum, “Radicalization into Violent Extremism I,” 19.

²⁴⁶ R. Kim Cragin, “The November 2015 Paris attacks: The Impact of Foreign Fighter Returnees,” 217.

²⁴⁷ Patrick J. McDonnell and Alexandra Zavis, “Suspected Paris Attack Mastermind’s Europe ties facilitated ravel from Syria,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 19, 2015. <https://web.archive.org/web/20151121050913/http://www.sacbee.com/news/article45557136.html>

Nemmouche while in Syria.²⁴⁸ SMT explains why Nemmouche returned to Europe. SMT explains how Nemmouche's satisfaction with extremist ideology spawned his acceptance of Abaaoud's instructions to carry out an attack in Europe.²⁴⁹ Without this driving combination, Nemmouche may have remained in Syria.

2. Social Identity Theory Application

SIT examines how Nemmouche's identity alters as he adjusts to his new role in society as a prisoner and as an Islamic extremist. It is likely that SIT will contextualize how Nemmouche's self-perception changes after being exposed to extremist rhetoric, and how his self-image solidifies after his release from prison.

a. "Prisoner" Identity

Cast to the outskirts of society as a prisoner, Nemmouche assumed a new identity as an inmate. Nemmouche likely viewed himself in a new light because of his relationship to this new social category or classification, compared to his life outside of prison.²⁵⁰ Surrounded by extremists within the confining prison walls, Nemmouche likely listened to extremist rhetoric. The constant conversations radical prisoners had may have driven Nemmouche's interest in joining an extremist Islamic organization. Extremist rhetoric shared between prisoners may come off as "a novel idea or insight, especially one that seems to explain a complex process in a simple or straightforward manner."²⁵¹ Prisoners are exposed to plenty of extremist rhetoric voiced by radicalized prisoners which spread due to the effects of "availability cascades."²⁵² Samuel Leistedt explains that an "availability cascade" causes individuals to "adopt the new insight because other people within the network have adopted it" to achieve social acceptance.²⁵³ Nemmouche's peers

²⁴⁸ Patrick J. McDonnell and Alexandra Zavis, "Suspected Paris Attack Mastermind's Europe Ties Facilitated Ravel from Syria," *Los Angeles Times*.

²⁴⁹ Randy Borum, "Radicalization into Violent Extremism I," 18

²⁵⁰ Stets, Jan E., and Peter J. Burke, "Identity Theory and Social Identity Theory," 224.

²⁵¹ Samuel Leistedt, "On the Radicalization Process," *Journal of Forensic Sciences* 61, 1590. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1556-4029.13170>.

²⁵² Leistedt, "On the Radicalization Process," *Journal of Forensic Sciences* 61, 1590.

²⁵³ Leistedt, 1590.

in prison made extremist ideology readily available to Nemmouche. His acceptance of radical Islam likely felt like a natural transition because he wanted to fit in with his peers in prison.

b. “Islamic Extremist” Identity

After experiencing “social alienation and exclusion at home,” during his prison sentence Nemmouche fits Leistedt’s definition of “identity-seeking.”²⁵⁴ As a result, he searched for “excitement and adventure, an escape from immediate problems, as well as peer pressure or family expectations.”²⁵⁵ Nemmouche demonstrated that his self-identification with radical Islam was a part of his “self-definition” when he continued to practice radical Islam after his release from prison.²⁵⁶ Nemmouche’s knowledge of his membership escalated because he was emotionally attached to the membership and likely wanted to make his extremist identity his reality.²⁵⁷ Through his call to collective prayer in prison, Nemmouche displayed his radical identity to his fellow prisoners.²⁵⁸ Once released from prison, Nemmouche traveled to Syria to fight with ISIS and fully realize his extremist identity.

In Syria, Nemmouche embodied extremist violence; after spending a year in Syria having contributed to ISIS’s cause, Nemmouche traveled back home to Europe. His ISIS peers in Syria had witnessed Nemmouche’s dedication to extremism, and it is likely that Nemmouche was emotionally driven to be categorized world-wide as an extremist. Particularly with the Brussels attack, Nemmouche made his social identity as an Islamic

²⁵⁴ Kristian Alexander, “Returning Islamist Foreign Fighters- Threats and Challenges to the West,” *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol. 33, No. 2 (March 24, 2021): 420, DOI: 10.1080/09546553.2021.1883345.

²⁵⁵ Kristian Alexander, “Returning Islamist Foreign Fighters- Threats and Challenges to the West,” *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol. 33, No. 2 (March 24, 2021): 420, DOI: 10.1080/09546553.2021.1883345.

²⁵⁶ Henri Tajfel, “Social Identity and Intergroup Behaviour,” 69.

²⁵⁷ Henri Tajfel, 69.

²⁵⁸ “Brussels murder: Mehdi Nemmouche, Radicalized Repeat Offender in Prison,” *Le Figaro*

radical known to his in-group, ISIS, and the rest of the world by committing the terrorist attack—for which, in the end, Nemmouche was sentenced to life in prison.²⁵⁹

3. Relative Deprivation Theory Application

RDT may shed light on how Nemmouche perceived his disadvantages as a French Algerian citizen, a prisoner, and an extremist. Reflecting on his hardships, Nemmouche may have felt anger and resentment. RDT will contextualize Nemmouche’s response to his perceived disadvantages and convey the potential impact it may have had on his radicalization process.

a. “French Algerian Citizen” Identity

It is likely that Nemmouche compared his unfortunate childhood experiences to those of his peers. Witnessing other children amid happy families with two parents may have caused Nemmouche to feel anger and resentment toward others. Nemmouche may have considered his “in-group” to be other foster children. Feelings of resentment toward others who never had to live within the foster care system may have surfaced, with Nemmouche finding his and the other foster children’s living situation to be unfair. As a child, surely Nemmouche could not be at fault for having to suffer in the foster care system.

Freeze found that adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) “increase the likelihood that a young person will engage in violent crime.”²⁶⁰ ACEs are separated into two categories, conventional and expanded.²⁶¹ Conventional ACEs often involve abuse, neglect and can include household dysfunction.²⁶² The expanded ACEs category includes when a child faces “discrimination, witnessed violence, unsafe neighborhood, racism, or poverty.”²⁶³ Nemmouche had both conventional and expanded ACEs, which likely

²⁵⁹ BBC, “Brussels Jewish Museum Murders: Mehdi Nemmouche Jailed for Life.”

²⁶⁰ Christopher Freeze, “Adverse Childhood Experiences and Crime,” Federal Bureau of Investigation, April 9, 2019, <https://leb.fbi.gov/articles/featured-articles/adverse-childhood-experiences-and-crime>.

²⁶¹ Freeze, “Adverse Childhood Experiences and Crime.”

²⁶² Freeze, “Adverse Childhood Experiences and Crime.”

²⁶³ Freeze, “Adverse Childhood Experiences and Crime.”

resulted in him feeling underprivileged and fueled his feelings of resentment. RDT applies to why Nemmouche felt disadvantaged within French society because he perceived himself as having less than other French citizens.

b. “Prisoner” Identity

Feeling disadvantaged by his ACEs, feelings of anger and resentment likely contributed to Nemmouche’s engagement in lower-level criminal activities. Nemmouche may have felt entitled and thought that he should not be imprisoned for committing petty crimes because it was unfair since he was already disadvantaged due to having ACEs. Once in prison where he interacted with Islamic extremists, Nemmouche likely considered himself a fellow radical and perceived his new in-group to be disadvantaged behind prison walls. Although disadvantages addressed by RDT may have had an impact on Nemmouche associating with radical inmates, RDT does not consider the influence of social and group dynamics within prison.

Like Chérif, Nemmouche had limited opportunities to access non-radical information in prison.²⁶⁴ Nemmouche clearly perceived this difference between his Islamic peers as unfair when compared to the plentiful Christian and Jewish services available. He displayed his disdain and resentment through the collective call to prayer within his in-group.²⁶⁵ In this case, RDT does not explain Nemmouche’s radicalization, but it helps clarify his belief in radical Islam and encouraged him to become more vocal.

c. “Islamic Extremist” Identity

Released from prison for only three weeks, Nemmouche decided to travel to Syria to fight with ISIS.²⁶⁶ RDT may apply to Nemmouche feeling disadvantaged after being imprisoned for five years, but there is no evidence to support that his resentment caused him to travel to Syria. A deeper, personal acceptance of Nemmouche’s newfound radical extremist identity may better explain his reasoning for traveling to Syria.

²⁶⁴ Khosrokhavar, “Radicalization in Prison: The French Case,” 290–291.

²⁶⁵ “Brussels murder: Mehdi Nemmouche, Radicalized Repeat Offender in Prison,” *Le Figaro*

²⁶⁶ Agence France-Presse, “Brussels Shooting Suspect’s Journey from Troubled Childhood to Jihad.”

Tom Carper stated that “one of ISIS’s key strengths is the large number of recruits that they are able to pull in.”²⁶⁷ Nemmouche became a member of Abdelhamid Abaaoud’s external operations cell while in Syria.²⁶⁸ Having fully accepted ISIS’s radical goals and ideology proven by his title of first “foreign fighter returnee.”²⁶⁹ RDT fails to contextualize Nemmouche’s decision to carry out the terrorist attack because he was already indoctrinated to obey any orders received from an ISIS figurehead. He did not need to perceive any unfairness and realize feelings of resentment because he was already radicalized in prison and propagandized by ISIS.

D. CONCLUSION

After applying Social Movement Theory, Social Identity Theory, and Relative Deprivation Theory, this chapter concludes that Social Identity Theory best explains Mehdi Nemmouche’s radicalization process. Nemmouche was not born a radical member of ISIS. Rather, Nemmouche’s perception of himself as an individual was changed by his identification with radical Islam, starting within prison and growing after his release.

Nemmouche’s relationships within prison likely garnered his interest in radical Islam. Social Movement Theory examined Nemmouche’s interpersonal relationships and effectively explains the first part of his radicalization process. Although he was not initially a radical Islamic extremist when sentenced to prison, Nemmouche viewed the similarities between himself and his radical prisoner peers. Through exposure to the radical extremist prisoners’ ideas, Nemmouche had a cognitive opening where he accepted the extremist rhetoric as a credible belief system through his peers’ socialization efforts.²⁷⁰

It is probable that social movement played a significant role in Nemmouche’s radicalization process, kickstarting his dedication to radical Islamic extremism. Yet, SMT

²⁶⁷ Inside the Mind of ISIS: Understanding it’s Goals and Ideology to Better Protect the Homeland, Senate Hearing, 114–566, (statement of Thomas R. Carpenter, Delaware) January 20, 2016.

²⁶⁸ R. Kim Cragin, “The November 2015 Paris attacks: The Impact of Foreign Fighter Returnees,” 217.

²⁶⁹ R. Kim Cragin, “The November 2015 Paris attacks: The Impact of Foreign Fighter Returnees,” 217.

²⁷⁰ Randy Borum, “Radicalization into Violent Extremism I,” 18.

fails to fully illustrate how Nemmouche decided to travel to Syria to join ISIS. There is a possibility that he was encouraged by fellow Islamic extremists in prison, but there is no documentation to support this theory. Alternatively, SMT contextualizes Nemmouche's decision to return to Europe to commit the terrorist attack in Brussels. His interpersonal network that he expanded with ISIS leaders in Syria may have made him take the initiative to return to Europe. SIT illuminates certain behavior Nemmouche displayed before committing the terrorist acts in Syria and in Brussels because it speaks to the changes he made in his self-perception that altered his overall identity and drove his need to commit extremist acts.

Of the three theories applied to Nemmouche's case, RDT is the most improbable. RDT successfully explains how Nemmouche may have ended up in prison, but it fails to consider the social aspect of prison that was likely to influence Nemmouche's curiosity in Islamic extremism. Nemmouche's perceived disadvantages may have emboldened him to be more outspoken and grow more confident about his radical beliefs but does not explain why he chose to travel to Syria upon release. Examination of Nemmouche's social identity is more applicable because it considers how Nemmouche's identity changed within prison which may have influenced him to take radical action.

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IV. CONCLUSION

The cases of Chérif Kouchi and Mehdi Nemmouche have a lot in common. They are both French Algerian, have both experienced discrimination and limited upward mobility in French society, have both spent time in French prisons for minor crimes, have both experienced Islamic radicalization in prison, and each carried out a terrorist attack in Europe upon release from prison. Yet, despite these similarities their radicalization processes are unique to their individual experiences. The weight of the evidence supports Social Movement Theory as best explaining Chérif Kouachi's radicalization process. Similarly, Social Identity Theory is most consistent with Mehdi Nemmouche's radicalization process. Chérif's interpersonal network played a major role throughout his radicalization process and continued to be a strong influence even after he was released from prison. While Nemmouche's initial radicalization process took place in prison, his overall identity changed through his need to display himself as a true believer. With this shift in Nemmouche's self-perception, he became an emboldened terrorist who committed terrorist acts in both Syria and back home in Europe.

Chérif's interpersonal networks had the strongest influence on him that best explain how he became a radical Islamic terrorist. His case differs from Nemmouche's because he was caught attempting to travel to Syria and Iraq but expressed regret which led authorities to believe he had not truly been radicalized.²⁷¹ His interpersonal relationship with Benyettou outside of prison resulted in his imprisonment. Once in prison, he fell under the wing of Beghal and strengthened his relationship with Coulibaly that continued upon release and resulted in the Charlie Hebdo attack.²⁷² Social Movement Theory's focus on interpersonal networks is therefore the most applicable theory of radicalization to explain Chérif Kouachi's path to becoming a terrorist.

²⁷¹ Terrence McCoy, "How a Suspected Charlie Hebdo Gunman Turned into a Jihadist," *Washington Post*, May 3, 2019. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2015/01/08/how-a-suspected-charlie-hebdo-gunman-turned-into-a-professional-jihadist/>.

²⁷² Wiktorowicz, *Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Theory Approach*, 154.

Alternatively, Mehdi Nemmouche's radicalization was a process of self-reflection. Nemmouche displayed no signs of interest in radical Islam before his prison sentence. Unlike Chérif, Nemmouche decided to travel to Syria to join ISIS upon release from prison.²⁷³ Neither SMT nor RDT can offer an explanation as to why Nemmouche chose to do so. Social Identity Theory explains how Nemmouche contextualizes himself within the prison setting and within ISIS's ranks. Nemmouche's self-categorization as an Islamic extremist encapsulated his identity making SIT the most applicable theory to understand his radicalization process.

If French citizens of Algerian descent remain segregated in arrondissements full of other French Algerians, there is little hope for rapid assimilation into French society or for change in their socio-economic status. This environment is conducive to causing desperation resulting in lower-level crime and feeding into the French prison system. This will likely continue the cycle of Islamic radicalization found in the French prison system.

The need for further research on radicalization processes within French prisons will grow as more inmates become exposed to Islamic extremist rhetoric. Counterterrorism experts have voiced concern over individuals traveling to Syria, etc. and becoming radicalized, and then returning home to execute attacks.²⁷⁴ Nemmouche's case highlights how individuals appear to be getting radicalized at home, potentially inspiring their travel abroad where they learn how to operate, and successfully return and commit a terrorist attack. As a result, "France in 2017 created a special intelligence service for the prison system, which is monitoring some 3,000 people for signs of radicalization. In July, the country set up another surveillance unit to monitor radicalized inmates upon their release from prison."²⁷⁵ Expanding research on this special intelligence service may offer more insight into the radicalization process experienced by the incarcerated.

²⁷³ "Mehdi Nemmouche," Counter Extremism Project, accessed March 30, 2022, <https://www.counterextremism.com/extremists/mehdi-nemmouche>.

²⁷⁴ Daniel Byman, "The Jihadist Returnee Threat: Just How Dangerous," *Political Science Quarterly* 131, no. 1 (2016): 69–99. <https://doi.org/10.1002/polq.12434>.

²⁷⁵ Valentine Pop, "Jihadists Behind Bars Pose New Threats for Europe," *Wall Street Journal*, January 9, 2019. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/jihadists-behind-bars-pose-new-threats-for-europe-11547035126>.

Further research is required on how to minimize long sentences for less severe crimes. Exposing lesser criminals “to the radicalizing elements present in many European prisons” has a negative impact because it is “where minor players may become exposed to hardened jihadists and integrate into broader networks.”²⁷⁶ The cycle of imprisonment further exposes vulnerable individuals to extremist rhetoric. Expanding upon the triggers that may cause an individual to be susceptible to radicalization is the final recommended area requiring further research. According to Leistedt,

Mehdi Nemmouche in Belgium, the Kouachi brothers in France, etc.) (i) They come from immigrant families (second or third generation); (ii) they have previous police records (for various offenses, such as juvenile delinquency); (iii) they have been in jail (sometimes for short periods, prisons have proved fertile recruitment grounds for Muslim radicals); (iv) they have social difficulties, including family problems, economical difficulties, and identity crises; and (v), most have traveled to and returned from a country in which ISIS or another extremist group is active. Because of these commonalities, the author prefers to speak of risk factors rather than of a terrorist personality per se.²⁷⁷

The number of similarities shared by Chérif and Nemmouche are of great interest. If more research could be conducted to increase the number of case studies on individuals that are radicalized, there is a possibility that more preventative measures to decrease the number of radicalized prisoners could be established.

²⁷⁶ Daniel Byman, “The Jihadist Returnee Threat: Just How Dangerous,” *Political Science Quarterly* 131, no. 1 (2016): 96. <https://doi.org/10.1002/polq.12434>.

²⁷⁷ Samuel Leistedt, “On the Radicalization Process,” *Journal of Forensic Sciences* 61, 1589. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1556-4029.13170>.

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Naval Postgraduate School
Monterey, California