Transcript

Emmanuel Kattan, Host: This is “Vis à Vis”, a podcast series brought to you by the Alliance Program at Columbia University. "Vis à Vis" features conversations that challenge our understanding of key global, economic and social issues by casting them in a transatlantic perspective. I’m Emmanuel Kattan. I head the Alliance Program, a partnership between Columbia University and 3 French universities: Sciences Po, Paris 1 Panthéon Sorbonne and École Polytechnique. Every episode, I sit down face to face — or as we say in French, “Vis à Vis” — with some of the most insightful thinkers on both sides of the Atlantic. I hope you enjoy our conversation.

(Theme music out)

Kattan: Since September 11th 2001, there have been close to 150 Islamic terrorist attacks in Europe. But in order to understand the phenomenon of jihadism, one has to look beyond the attacks themselves. The periods of high tide, justifiably, grab public and media attention. But we need to focus on jihadist networks at periods of low tide in order to understand their evolution and develop mechanisms to protect democracies from the next attack. This is precisely what Hugo Micheron, Professor at Sciences Po, did in his latest book, La colère et l’oubli – Les démocraties face au jihadisme européen (“Wrath and Forgetting – Democracies and European Jihadism”). What is the ideology that drives jihadist movements in Europe? What is their origin? Why did they root themselves in European countries? And how does technology help them spread their message? These are some of the questions Hugo Micheron explores in his book, and some of the issues we will be discussing with him today, allowing us to go beyond the headlines and, as he says, watch the entire movie, subtitles included.

Hugo Micheron is an internationally renowned expert of jihadism. Professor at Sciences Po, he was a researcher for 2 years at Princeton University. Hugo Micheron’s PhD, which he earned at École Normale Supérieure, is the result of in-depth surveys in French and Belgian neighborhoods affected by jihadist recruitment. For his work, Micheron conducted 80 interviews with convicted “returnees” from ISIS who were incarcerated in French prisons. His book, Wrath and Forgetting, received the prestigious Prix Femina last year. Micheron also directed the widely-watched documentary “Jihad On Europe” and is a frequent contributor on French television and radio.

Hugo Micheron, welcome to “Vis à Vis.”

Hugo Micheron: Thank you very much for having me.

Kattan: In your book La colère et l’oubli – Les démocraties face au djihadisme européen (“Wrath and Forgetting – Democracies and European Djihadism”), you debunk some of the myths around jihadism in Europe. First, to understand European jihadism, you go back to the Soviet war in Afghanistan and the retreat of Soviet troops in 1989. Why is it important to go back to that particular period in time in recent history?

Micheron: It's very important to go back to Afghanistan in the '80s, because that's the cradle of contemporary jihadist movements. If you want a birthplace or birth certificate, you need to go there and understand what happened following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. I see that with my American students in Paris, my former Princeton students, they tend to discuss the evolution of jihadism by considering the role of the U.S. in the support of, you know, what will become al-Qaeda in Afghanistan in the 1980s.

But one should not forget that, in the first place, this very situation was created by the invasion of Afghanistan by the Soviets. So at the end of the day, in 1979, this miscalculation from the Soviets generated a chaos in Afghanistan for a decade from which groups emerge from, you know, all across the world, supporting the Afghan resistance against the Soviets. And some of them will become what is now known as jihadi movement, especially one very famous, which is al-Qaeda. And in that role, of course, because we're in the context of the Cold War, you know, Western powers, such as the United States or European powers — of course, Saudi Arabia, and, and Pakistani intelligence services — ended up you know, supporting different groups, and some of them will be the one creating al-Qaeda. But in the first place, if you want to understand what happened there, you need to look at the dynamics on a global scale. And then at what happened on the ground.

Kattan: After the retreat of the Soviet troops, the al-Qaeda emerged, but then how did the jihadist leaders end up in Europe and what is specific about the ideology that they develop in European countries that is distinct, say, from jihadist ideology and in the Middle East or or in South Asia?

Micheron: If you look at what moment, you know, jihadists started to become organized in the wake of the war in Afghanistan, then first you realize that it was at the very end of the war — you know, by the late 1980s — and more importantly, that the highest number of volunteers for jihadi groups in Afghanistan was actually after the withdrawal of the Red Army. So, after the very reason why these groups gathered there was gone. So that's one aspect.

The second aspect is that most of the jihadi movements that was created there were actually not located in based in Afghanistan, but in the neighboring country in Pakistan, in a city called Peshawar, which is right next to the Afghan border. And so that's very important to look that 95% of the first jihadi movements, were actually spending their time in Peshawar, which is not on the frontline, but at the rear. And the third element, if you look at what they were doing in Peshawar, then you will be surprised to see that most of them were not fighting, of course, they were spending time learning, teaching their views about the Qur'an and religious interpretations. They were funding schools, they were funding seminars, they were funding organizations, they were supporting refugee camps, they were basically doing activities that were very different from the common perception of what's a jihadi movement, which is most of the time perceived as a fighter, as a terrorist. Actually, most of the estimation is like only 5% of the jihadists in Peshawar ended up fighting in Afghanistan.

So my point here is that if we look at this in the first place, in the cradle of the first jihadi movements, what we see is that it first appeared as an ideological movement. As groups that are very much attracted by the idea of developing their ideology — more than practically fighting on the ground. Second, that it happened at the, at the rear and not on the frontline. And third, that they were very diverse people coming from all across the world. Once you get that, then you realize that jihadi movements from from the onset, were way more than just terrorism or just people who wants to fight.

And, and from that, you can understand what happened in Europe. Because at the end of the war in Afghanistan, by the beginning of the late 1980s, we have a split among the first jihadi movements, and some of the veterans from Afghanistan will end up in different places in the world. Some will try to recycle themselves in new conflict that look just like the war in Afghanistan for themselves. So it will be the civil war in Algeria in the 1980s. The war in Bosnia in 1980s. The war in Chechnya, for instance. The civil war in Somalia. But there is a second group of guys, who will be like, "Let's find asylum somewhere." And some of them will end up in Sudan, just like, for instance, Osama bin Laden will be in exile there for a few years. Some other will end up in Indonesia, and a group of them, a few dozens, ended up in Europe.

And what struck me a lot is like there is a very precise geography of, you know, where these first jihadists ended up. And the capital, the center of this geography is London in the 1980s. To the extent that, you know, the British capital will end up with the nickname of the so-called "Londonistan" because it was home of, you know, a handful of jihadist veterans from Afghanistan who were basically doing in London exactly the kind of activities they were developing in Peshawar (which is not planning terrorist attack): trying to attract new people and new population that were young Muslim, British Muslims. And this is how you start to see the very beginning of what will then become, 10 years afterwards, what we now call "European jihadism." So if you want to understand what's jihadism, first you need to look at what's happening in the low tide mode, what I call the "low tide mode," which is everything but the attacks. You know, it's like what is happening before, in the period of preparation.

Second, you need to look at the spread of jihadis' ideologies and ideas. And this is, this is very concrete. I really want, you know, our American audience to understand that ideas are very concrete things. You know, what they did in London, what they did in France, what they did setting up in Brussels, or Madrid, or in Germany in the 1990s, was, you know, writing books, publishing books, publishing magazines, setting up some websites on the internet. You know, very basic stuff. But at the end of the day, it was concrete things. And if you look at the number of Europeans involved in the last crisis in Syria in the last decade, there were 6,000 of them. So to put it differently, we went from a few thousand in the 1980s to 6,000 jihadists involved in jihadi organizations in Syria and Iraq. And to understand the difference between the two, we need to look at the spread of ideas through these very concrete methods.

Kattan: And, and so focusing on the spread of ideas, how can we understand their goals? I mean, it seems like a pretty basic question, but how should we understand this? Is the goal to destabilize Western governments and sort of turn Europeans and groups of Europeans against

each other, so create a kind of civil war atmosphere? Or is it to establish an Islamic state or a caliphate as has been done, for example, in Syria and northern Iraq?

Micheron: When it comes to jihadi organizations, what's fascinating is that the long-term goals are pretty much the same for any given jihadi organizations. They want to establish, at some point, an Islamic caliphate where they will implement their perception of what are god-made laws, you know, like, divine laws on Earth. A very orthodoxy, very conservative and exclusive approach of, of religious laws. But that's the main goal of any given jihadist organization, to put it in a nutshell. But if you look at the short-term goals, it is very diverse. And it will evolves differently over time.

And that's something that I tried to underline in my work, is that jihadist organization, they are just jihadist actors, or activists. They have a very clear perception of the balance of power between themselves and what they considers as the enemy. So for instance, the first veterans from Afghanistan, when they ended up in London in the 1990s, in the first place, there were asylum seekers. So they were not in the first place, you know, trying to plan terrorist attack in London, or in Great Britain. And that was one argument for the British intel community, you know, not to be too afraid of these very small group of men who were basically vulnerable, because they just arrived from foreign countries, they were not very stabilized. And yes, they were very extreme in their views of religion. But at the end of the day, they didn't look very, like, you know, terrorist threats. They were looking more like an ideological threat.

And that's the problem: We didn't take seriously the ideological threat. So on this basis, if you look at the coverage of the very first jihadi movements in the UK, you will be surprised to see that they were considered as clowns. Or as, you know, as people who are not serious, who are not supposed to be taken seriously. They were talking about converting the queen to Islam. They were organizing rallies and march on Trafalgar Square calling for a caliphate in the UK. And, you know, everybody was tempted to laugh at them. But at the end of the day, they were pretty much serious. And of course, they were just touching a very small basis, a few hundreds of people at max. But this is among these people, that you will end up with the first British terrorists of the next decade, and especially those involving 7/7, which is the London Metro bombing, which is a massive attack that happened in July 2005. In London, and the pattern that I briefly described for London, what I tried to show in my book is that it works the same way in France, in Germany, in Belgium, in the Netherlands, in Denmark, in Sweden, in Spain. So in most countries that were affected by, you know, jihadi recruitment in the past decade.

Kattan: I just wanted to ask about the way in which this pattern that you describe — how would you characterize it? Because what's really interesting in your book is that you show, for example, that the cities from which the jihadist networks have developed and the 6,000 combatants who went to fight in Syria came, they're not necessarily the cities that we necessarily immediately think about. And they don't necessarily come from underserved or poor areas. What is it that characterizes these different centers for the emergence of jihadism in Europe?

Micheron: Yes, it's very true. And there is a lot of misconception from what is happening in Europe about jihadism, and especially from the U.S. I realized that when I was lecturing at Princeton University, that the temptation — and I understand, you know — is to basically explain jihadism through the lens of disenfranchised kids or youngsters who want to rebel against injustice and a system that discriminate them. And therefore, they will tend to go to basically use the, the strongest dope that you have on the ideological market. And the strongest drug that you will find on the ideological market is ISIS. You know, that's the bottom line that we hear a lot. And I understand, it's very convenient. It gives you the impression to be able to explain very complex phenomenon. But a closer look at the trends at stake is actually proving this approach wrong.

So I will try to put it in a nutshell. But there are very, very basic facts, which is the fact that there was 6,000, European involved in jihadi organization in the last decade between 2012 and 2018. Around 90% of them are coming from eight countries in the entire European Union 28. So over 28 country, there is only eight countries that are, you know, home of 90% of the jihadists. You should look at what, where are they countries are: It's northern, western European countries. But it's not all of them. So for instance, France, like, represents a third of this entire total. 2,000 European jihadists are French. All right? But if you look at Italy, for instance, which is France's neighboring country, it's only 11 Italian nationals who ended up in Syria. So how do you explain France on the one hand with, you know, 1/3 of the entire European total, and Italia where it's almost close to none, right? And this goes for everywhere. There is very specific countries that are highly affected. For instance, if you look per capita, by far, the country that is the most affected by these trends is Belgium, with 600 people who join a jihadi organization in Syria, for a very small population of a few millions. Then you have Denmark. And then you have Sweden. You know, two of the most richest countries in Europe with the best welfare system, and that are well known for the attention they pay to equality and equity among their people. So how come Scandinavia is so affected in proportion to their population? Countries with no colonial history? We don't have a long history of grievances as you can find in France or the UK, for instance, with regard to their imperialist and colonial history. So how do you explain that?

And to put it in a nutshell, the brief answer is, all of these eight countries were the one where veterans from Afghanistan settled in and started to live in the 1980s. And so they were the countries where these veterans spread their ideologies in the first place. And so, you have a sort of a hub effect. That is very important to understand. Because if you zoom in, in any of these countries, you will find the same pattern: Namely, that you have a few cities highly affected by these trends and others that are untouched. And these cities are not the poorest cities in a given country. They are not the countries in which there is the biggest Muslim population. They are not the country or the city where you will find the highest level of discrimination or socioeconomic or cultural or political marginalization. I will take a few example to, for people to really understand what I'm talking about. So one clear example is in France. Very interesting one. So, the city that was the most affected by jihadi recruitment was Trappes. Trappes is in the Paris region. It's a very poor suburb of Paris, with, you know, loads of criminality, drugs, you know socioeconomic marginalization. You name it, they have it all. And so

you you ended up with between 60 and 70 people who joined jihadi organization from the start this town, from Trappes.

Yet you have Trappes' twin city, which is a few kilometres north of Trappes, it's called Chanteloup-les-Vignes. By all regards, it's the twin city, right? Same population, same demographics, same problems, and you can compare them on, on almost every aspect. It's just on the opposite side of the Seine River. And in Chanteloup-les-Vignes, you've got zero people who ended up in Syria and Iraq. So very interesting. Why is a phenomenon happening in one city and not in the other? The same goes for Marseilles, with half of the city that is highly marginalized. Most of them are coming from Muslim descent. They have all the items you can imagine that will, you know, describe them as a population that suffer from marginalization. In Marseilles, even though we're talking about 300,000 inhabitants in this neighborhood, there is almost no one who ended up in Syria. Whereas a few kilometres from there, you will have Lunel or Nîmes, which is like, you know, white middle-class towns, and you ended up with 25, 30 people in a very small population that end- ended up there.

If you want to understand these differences — and I talk only about France here, but it's exactly the same that you will find in Copenhagen, Denmark, in Aarhus Denmark, or that you will find in Sweden in the few cities like Gothenburg and Stockholm that were heavily affected — you have to look into history. And then you follow the, not the money, you follow the idea. And then you end up with at least part of the explanation.

Kattan: And follow the idea is really at the heart of your book, as you also show that technology is helping the spread of ideas throughout Europe. You show in fact that, you know, the high tides, for example of the 2014 and 2018 terrorist attacks, actually correspond also to the expansion of the use of social media. And we're now facing, of course, today a new technological revolution with AI. And I'm wondering how this will impact, or is already impacting, jihadism in Europe and elsewhere in the world. I mean, will we see, for example, a proliferation of deep fakes of Islamic preachers who are targeting very, very specific groups of individuals? How do you see this revolution impacting both jihadism and the way in which democracies can respond to it?

Micheron: Yeah, it's the $1 billion question. And I'm very happy to try my luck. (laugh) So, first of all, you're absolutely right, there is a strange parallel that I think the community of researchers should explore a little bit further, which is that the beginning of global jihadism, as I said, is basically the late 1980s. And especially the date of the withdrawal from Afghanistan from of the Soviet army, which is 1989. The very same year, you have the creation of the world wide web. If you look then at the trend and evolution of European jihadism on the one hand, and the development of the internet, of social networks, you will see, like, there is a sort of a high correlation between the two.

And so, what about now? Since we have an AI revolution, we are like at a turning point. Well, first, jihadi movements, historically, they've shown they are brilliant adaptations to technological moves. Even though they are, like, you know, spreading medieval ideologies, they are quite fast

in adapting and adopting new, new use of internet. You know, one to remember, for instance, how ISIS ended up producing Hollywood-like propaganda videos and posting them online. So what we start to see now is that there is a few jihadi groups that start to use LLM, you know, like, AI generative methods. So we have that online already. For the moment it's not super well-developed and well-conceived models, but at least, you know, there is some attempts. So it means that there is an interest in that direction. What we can expect is that, as everyone else, there will be some some guys, some activists within these movements that will try to build some AI models. And of course, to just give you a concrete idea of what it can be, you take some old speech from bin Laden or from the American Anwar Al-Aulaqi, who was the first American to be droned by the U.S. in 2011. By just prompting those speeches into an AI model, you will turn into a jihadist chatbox, basically, that will be able to talk to you and that will be able to produce a ready-made propaganda just for you based on your personal grievances and stuff like that.

So, to put it differently, we will have terrorist groups that were defined, up to this day, by the asymmetrical use of violence. This is because they are small, and it's quite difficult to, to monitor them that they're able to plan terrorist attacks. But what about these empowering AI model that will make these groups able to sometimes launch maybe disinformation campaign that will be highly disruptive for Western public debates? Or propaganda campaign on a mass scale that we've never seen before? This mean that we should collectively, and especially Western democracies, should start to think of the technological revolution as a political one. We need to conceive it on the political stage. And for that, we need political leaders who are able to think the technological changes that are happening quite fast now.

Kattan: That's fascinating. And I'm wondering whether, you know, to keep it in the present, how the conclusions and insights of your book are applied to current developments in the world, and in particular to the October 7 terrorist attacks and the ensuing war in Gaza. You show in your book that jihadist groups don't provoke crises, but they thrive on them. What does the current context in the Middle East mean? And is there a risk that the war in Gaza will offer a launchpad or a pretext for the next jihadist attacks, whether it's in Europe or elsewhere in the world?

Micheron: What I show in my book, like if you want to understand the history of European jihadism, and more broadly of Western jihadism — so including the U.S., including Australia — you look over the last three decades, and what you will find is that there is three main cycles that happen. One per decade. And every cycle is made of a hide tide moment and a low tide moment. So high tide moment is when jihadi organization worldwide is the best organized and the best able to launch terror campaign. So, as you said, every time that we see a high tide in terms of global and Western jihadism, it's because there is a geopolitical crisis in which jihadi groups emerge, and they organize, and from this basis, they project their, you know, attacks, and they plan terrorist plots all across the world using the human resources they have.

So all of this to say that now, since October 7, there is a massive geopolitical crisis. To many extents, unparalleled. So what we see is a lot of jihadist propaganda surrounding this — and

actually, not only jihadist; we have so many Islamist groups that try to instrumentalize and weaponize daily pictures and footage that are produced around the horrible situation in Gaza.

But there is some differences. The first one is that all of the international crises in the 1990s, 2000s, and 2010s were places where jihadists could access. They could get into it. So, they could travel to Syria, they could travel to Iraq, they could travel to Algeria, and so on. It's not the case for Hamas, like joining Hamas in Gaza. Because it's landlocked and you cannot access through the sea. So the second stuff is that the dominant groups in Gaza is Hamas. And to a lesser extent, the Jihad islamique, who is backed by Iran. So to put it differently, ISIS and al-Qaeda, they don't historically have, you know, a strong presence there. And so jihadi groups, because they are not able, first, to receive foreigners and second, to be present in Gaza like they were in Syria and Iraq, it's less of an occasion for them to thrive.

But there is two, I will say, push factors that we should bear in mind. The first one is the role of the internet. Since October 7, the world is living, maybe the first global informational war. The scale of involvements and of content production on social media is unparalleled. Even the war in Ukraine is not as producing as much comment and, and involvement and emotion than what's happening in Gaza. So that's one one aspect. And so groups can instrumentalize this. The second aspect is like you have jihadi groups that are still organized. Not, of course, in this very conflict, but not too far. There is still some ISIS cells in northwest Syria, for instance. And of course, if the situation worsened in the Middle East — and everybody has this in mind — you might have some Hezbollah proxies, who are now located in Syria, who will be bring back to, to Lebanon and to the border. And this will mean that it will open a vacuum that maybe some ISIS cell will, you know, exploit to come back on the, on the international scene in Syria. So I'll say that the backyard of the Ga- war in Gaza might be northern Syria, you know.

And the second place is Afghanistan, because since 2021, since the withdrawal of U.S. troops from there, there is the Taliban who came back to, to power and they are empowering some jihadi groups. And, and what group that is operating in Afghanistan at the moment? It's ISIS. And they are planning — not succeeding so far, but they are willing — to develop some terrorist cells, to, to exploit them. So we should highly monitor the evolution of the war in Gaza. having in mind Syria, having in mind that ISIS was destroyed, militarily speaking, in the last decade, but we should not make the same mistake over and over, which is to consider that when terrorist groups are down, that the ideology is gone. And at least if we can learn something from history, you know, let's, let's try to, to learn not to make always the same mistake over and over.

Kattan: This is very, very sobering, Hugo. And my last question, therefore, is where do you see hope?

Micheron: (laugh)

Kattan: How, you know, how can democracies react? Do you see hope, for example, in infiltration and, and law and order policies? Or, or do you think that building trust with different communities or, you know, supporting school teachers and education initiatives can also help in this essentially sensitization around the low tide periods of jihadism?

Micheron: So first, I will say that we definitely learned from these very tough moments. And one of it is, the security response is much better now. There is no more the kind of naivety that we saw in the 1990s in Europe and in the States. And definitely, in that regard, the last terror campaign in Europe from ISIS in 2015, 2016, was a giant wake-up call. Like, I remember when I started my research a decade ago in France, no one knew about it. No one will pay attention to that. Now, there is a sort of, of this spread of — not of a vaccine, but at least have awareness, that is, I will say the condition to build a stronger response. I will say something maybe a little bit more, more historical, maybe. If democracies are slow to react, they tend to win. You know, they tend to win.

Over the course of the last few hundred years, European democracies ended up winning — to sometimes going through massive turmoil and wars, but they ended up on their two feet. When it comes especially to Europe, and also to the U.S., it's like, in the past few hundred years, we basically went through any kind of situations one can imagine. You know, the rise of fascism. Two world wars. You know, nuclear threats. The rise of democracies, of populism, you name it. And at the end of the day, we're still there. So my point is, we need to better understand ideological threat.

I think in the time we're getting in, ideologies and narratives are getting stronger. And so we need to sort of get more politically active. Like Europe was asleep for since the fall of the Berlin Wall, since actually 1989, the very same year that jihadism started to become a movement. We tend to believe too much to the idea of the "the end of history." And now we are sort of historically very naive. So we need to sort of wake up from this. And, and there is some tests right at our borders, which is the war in Ukraine. And, and I think America should get what's at stake there. It's not only European interests, it's also American interests that are at the forefront of that battle. We should not expect a mass mobilization. You know, in Europe, it's mostly like, it's always like a minority moving, 20-15% of the people. But it's enough to contain and to, and to react.

Kattan: Thank you. Thank you so much, Hugo Micheron. This has been really very enlightening. And you've given us so much, really, to think about, reminding us also that casting light on these complex phenomena really necessitates going back to history and long-term narratives. And so, we'll be listening to your, your words of wisdom both in high tides and in low tide periods, but, thank you so much.

Micheron: Thank you very much for having me. It was a pleasure.

(Theme music in)

Kattan: “Vis à Vis” is brought to you by the Alliance Program, a partnership between Columbia University, Paris 1 Panthéon Sorbonne, Sciences Po and École Polytechnique. This podcast is produced by Monica Hunter-Hart and Georgia O'Neil, and I’m Emmanuel Kattan. Special thanks to Columbia Libraries.

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