



**Theodore Dalrymple**

## **Liberté, Égalité, Jihad**

*Why are disaffected French youth exchanging France for Syria?*

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What would induce the citizens of a prosperous and peaceful country to leave for an increasingly impoverished and violent living hell? Why would anyone exchange France for Syria?

The French Ministry of the Interior is concerned that the number of French citizens going to Syria to participate in jihad has increased recently, and it fears what they might do when they return home. So far, 18 French jihadis have been killed in Syria, 70 have returned, and 220 (four times as many as in May 2013) are thought to be on the ground there. Another 200 to 300 might be preparing to go. About 80 percent are of North African descent, usually young men who ignored the precepts of their ancestral religion and indulged in debauchery until they were “born again” into a life of puritanical fanaticism. The other 20 percent are French converts.

*Libération*, the left-wing French newspaper, recently carried an interesting interview with the mother of one such convert, Nicolas Bons, alias Abu Abdel Rahman, 30, who died in a suicide bombing in Syria. She has started an organization dedicated to preventing more departures for Syria among young Frenchmen. Nicolas’s paternal half-brother, Jean-Daniel, aged 22, another convert to Islam, also went to Syria, where he was killed in August 2013 in a confrontation with Bashar al-Assad’s army. Shortly before, in July 2013, both half-brothers appeared in a YouTube video bearing Kalashnikovs, exhorting Muslims to come fight in Syria and urging French president François Hollande to convert to Islam.

A few weeks ago, Madame Bons received a text message on her phone: “Your son Nicolas has taken part in an operation with a truck-bomb in an enemy village in the region of Homs. May God accept him as a martyr.” Madame Bons managed to call the message’s sender; a man speaking French told her that her son was henceforth in paradise under the protection of Allah. According to Madame Bons, prior to his conversion Nicolas had said that “he didn’t want to live in a society based on profit and consumption. He couldn’t stand injustice. For him, everyone was exploited. He didn’t want to be exploited. It was for this reason that he didn’t want to work.”

As it happens, I treated a number of patients who refused to work for the same reason. They believed that, under the current system, they would never receive the full value of their labor. It never occurred to them that, since they continued to consume—however much they might disapprove of the consumption of others—they must be exploiting someone, whether taxpayers or their parents. “[Nicolas] was very interested in what happened in the Middle East,” said his mother. “What Israel did to the Palestinians. What Bashar al-Assad did to his people. He wanted to help all these people.”

So he blew himself up in “an enemy village”—most helpful. Never was feeble ratiocination so completely mixed with moral grandiosity. Here is the *reductio ad absurdum* of May 1968.

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