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Global Female Jihadism: Far from the Paradise

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I. Introduction

The preamble of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) recognizes "the equal rights of men and women." However, this proclamation is not yet a reality, as most women failed to reach important social positions. There is a gender gap, and the male element is usually prominent thanks to cultural patterns among the believers hat God formed the woman from the rib of man. This essay argues that gender inequality can still be found not only in daily routines but also in some social and political phenomena like terrorism.

The first problem concerning terrorism is the meaning of the word. In fact, there are many definitions. Dupuy (2004) collected more than a hundred definitions even though the real essence of the word did not change much. Gus Martin (2017) came to the same conclusion when comparing the USA case because the Department of Defence (DoD), the US Code, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the Department of State have different definitions for terrorism.

Besides, an event can be considered as terrorist by the community that has suffered harm and as glorious by the group that has conducted it. The September 11th attacks represent an example of this dual view, as it happens when a State refuses to assume its action as a terrorist, even if it does not observe the law, but considers itself victim of terrorism supported or conducted by other countries.

Terrorism is an ancient word, although «terror» is associated with a period of the French Revolution of the 18th century. It goes back to the Zealots of the 1st century. However, global terrorism is a recent phenomenon. Rapoport (2001) affirms that it had its origin in the late decades of the 19th century and that we can distinguish four waves of global terrorism. The actual wave, the fourth one, is religious and it started in 1979 when Ayatollah Khomeini declared the Islamic Republic in Iran.

This designation may be wrong because all the religions allow and justify the use of violence. According to Moreira (2001), there is a big difference between the cultural conflict caused by religious divergences and the political struggle that uses religious elements in the ideology of the State or other political forces. Nowadays, the expression «religious terrorism» does not match the reality. For several reasons, it would be better to use another designation expressing for terrorism related to Islamic religion with political goals.

In fact, according to the Global Terrorism Index 2017[1], in the five countries most impacted by terrorism – Iraq, Syria, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Nigeria – which accounted for about 75 percent of deaths from terrorism in 2016, many of those deaths were of Islamic people. So, the goals and motivations do not come from religion but political interests. Terrorists do not mind killing people belonging to the same religion whenever they do not accept the ideas of the ruling group, as ISIS[2] proved in the caliphate. ISIS is Sunni but attacked Shia and Sunni villages in Syria and Iraq when they refused to follow ISIS law, in clear disrespect for the Quran.

Concerning the role of women is terrorism, Ness (2008, p. 1) affirms that "the female terrorist had not been treated as a legitimate subject for serious inquiry before Wafa Idris, the Palestinian Red Crescent paramedic, blew herself up on Jaffa Road in downtown Jerusalem on January 27, 2002." She was not the first

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[1] Available at https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/ resources/ Global%20Terrorism%20Index%202017%20%284%29.pdf

[2] Blanca Palacián de Inza (2014, pp.1-2) explains that since its origin in 2006, the name of the terrorist group has changed several times. So, after 2011, the designation was Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), and in 2013 it replaced it by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) or the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). Finally, the group announced that it must be identified only as Islamic State (IS). Some countries did not accept the latest designation, and they call it Daesh or Da'ish.

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female suicide bomber, but she was treated like that by the western media and, due to the media coverage, the public opinion realized that the traditional image of the woman was no more realistic.

It was also a new reality for Idris' group, the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, because, according to Ponzanesi (2014, p. 84), it only changed its initial position of refusing the responsibility of the attack after the enthusiastic supportive reaction coming from the Arab world. Till then, many terrorist groups refused the female participation in the attacks, or, as Cook (2005) says, the woman must stay at home and obey her husband aspiring to share the male reward. Besides, when women started to participate in the terrorist attacks, their action had little symbolic value (Pearson, 2015). That was why female suicide bombers had no right to make a movie before the attacks. That honor belonged to men, and women were not "pure enough [...] to be offered up as suicide bombers in Islam" (Ness, 2005, p. 359).

In most cases, terrorist groups accepted and kept the social hierarchy and the most important targets – army barracks for example – were primarily reserved to men folk. That was one of the factors for female involvement in terrorism: to change the *status quo* and unfavourable position of women. However, the list of motivations is long as we will see next.

II. The Motivations for Female Religious Terrorism

According to Sanmartín (2004), nobody is born terrorist. It is a statement that Crenshaw (2004, p. 414) and Weatherston & Moran (2003, p. 698) confirm when they do not recognize a specific terrorist personality. Hence, it is essential to identify the reasons for the involvement in terrorism.

Some social scientists agree that there are no specific female motivations. Nacos (2005, p. 436) says that there is no evidence that male and female terrorists differ regarding recruitment, motivation, and brutality. However, this position is not consensual. For example, talking about jihadists, Katherine Brown (2017) believes that "for men it's an opportunity to display their prowess, to defend their women, and to have a life that's more fun than the Call of Duty computer game", while for women "the journey is presented as cleansing and exciting, an opportunity to help those suffering, and a chance to have a shape history."[3]

Between these two opposite positions there are some intermediary levels. It is the case of Trisha Scott (2016, p. 290), as she defended that most of the motivations were common to both sexes, but "in countries with a history of oppression and gender inequality" there were motivating factors which are "unique to women", as a way of recognizing the female desire to upgrade women' s *status quo*.

Mia Bloom (2011) created the *The Four R:s Theory* – revenge, redemption, relationship and respect – to explain the female participation in terrorism. Later she added another «r» - rape. This list goes back to Scott's statement because it seems more appropriate to women living in Islamic countries where the cultural traditions are unquestioningly followed by the community and where it is easier to convince women to become terrorists as a way of expiation of their sins and to recover community respect or to improve their social and familiar position.

The family plays a significant role in female terrorist option, mainly in Islamic communities. Indeed when a woman joins a religious terrorist group, there is a considerable probability of a member of her family belonging to that group or to have been persecuted, imprisoned, tortured or killed by those fighting against it. The motivations concerning jihadist women from western countries joining ISIS were systematized by Saltman & Smith (2015) as push and pull factors. The authors considered three pull factors: feeling isolated within the western culture; seeing the Muslim Community as persecuted worldwide; and anger and frustration over international inaction. The push factors were also three: religious duty and building utopia; sisterhood and belonging; and romanticising the adventure of joining ISIS.

The analysis of these factors proves that women did not feel comfortable in western countries and they wanted to find a new life. The caliphate sounded as the paradise for someone who led a dull and meaningless life in a cultural environment of anomy and indifference. It was an image also promoted by the IS campaign through the net.

Stern & Berger (2015) explained that ISIS wanted foreign fighters to take their families with them when they joined the group. Jean-Paul Laborde (2015) confirmed that appeal mentioning a 12 member English family from Bradford which travelled to Syria for joining ISIS or any other terrorist group[4]. That was the result of ISIS propaganda, with videos showing a beautiful world. The videos presented the new land as a paradise on the earth. It was a false image meant for women in a fragile and confused position – the jihadist bridges – despite marrying a male jihadist not to be the only reason for leaving the western world.

Indeed, considering that each case has its specificities, we cannot forget the psychological

[3] Available at https://www.thedailybeast.com/why-do-women-become-terrorists.

[4] Available at http://www.globalcenter.org/wp-content/ uploads/ 2015/ 10/Laborde_CTED.pdf.

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reasons, as shown by Fethi Benslama (2016)[5]. In fact, only the psychological element can explain the choice made by some western women who do not fit the official profile of a jihadist, even considering that some authors concluded that it was impossible to draw a correct portrait of the female jihadists as a whole. At best, it would be possible to identify a minimum profile of the female jihadists of a country as it was done by Eric Mietz (2016) concerning ISIS Balkan female jihadists.

That research showed that they belonged to two different groups. The first group was composed of young teenagers who travelled to the caliphate aiming to marry a male warrior. The second one was formed by married women who travelled together with their husbands.

In what concerns motivations, Mietz also pointed to pull and push factors, but he presented a complete list identifying nine[6] push and seven[7] pull elements, admitting that they were shared by the citizens of other countries but explaining that three of them were more responsible for female jihadists in Balkan countries: high youth unemployment, weak institutions, and Wahhabi 'charities' and radical mosques

If we analyze the situation in other European countries, especially in France, the United Kingdom and Belgium, we will arrive at a similar conclusion. In west, jihadism is primarily a localized suburban phenomenon, involving members of traditional Islamic families, and new Islam converted.

Returning to Sanmartín's opinion, it seems possible to state that nobody is born terrorist, but the social and cultural environment drives persons into terrorism as the right way of living. Gilles Kepel's researches about the issue in France, a county where 10 percent of the population is Islamic, have proved that there exists a conflict of identity that must be overcome. Otherwise, the Muslims of second and third generations will be easy prey for jihadist recruitment, as daily life proves that, in their case, nationality is not synonymous with citizenship.

Jean-Paul Laborde, the Executive Director of the UN Counter-terrorism Committee, said, in New York in September 2015, that about 550 European women had travelled to territories ruled by ISIS and that in some countries women represented 10 to 20 percent of the western fighters[8]. The numbers can vary depending upon the source and the moment of collecting data, but it is not possible to ignore the strong dimension of the problem.

Both in western and Islamic countries, women get radicalized because they want to run away from an unpleasant life and they are prone to accept a new beginning. They desire to reach a higher level of existence because they are not happy with their daily life and they have no hope in the future. Such dreams rapidly turn into nightmare, as we describe in the next section.

III. The Roles of Women in Religious Terrorism

The roles of women in religious terrorism depend upon the groups they belong to, even taking into account that the roles change over time. That evolution depends not only on the group circumstances or the internal reality but also on the external conjuncture. For instance, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), a group formed in 1976, only in 1994 started to use female terrorist bombers, and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) waited about 18 years to accept this strategy (Nolen, 2016, p. 31).

However, the best case-study for this issue is the Islamic State because this terrorist group succeeded in creating a new reality, as its military victories allowed it to rule over a caliphate for almost three years. Due to the rise and the fall of the caliphate, the analysis of the roles played by women in religious terrorism must be done in three phases.

The first moment is before the establishment of the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq and during the months following that establishment. In that phase, women did not take part in the fight. It was a time mentioned in the answer given by the Prophet to His third wife, Aïcha when she wanted to know if there was a compulsory jihad for women. Mahomet answered that there was a mandatory jihad, but it did not oblige women to fight. The pilgrimage to Mecca – hadj or omra[9] – represented female jihad (Hamza, 2016).

In this first phase, women living under ISIS flag were seen as housewives. They lived to satisfy their husbands and to take care and educate their children in the religious principles.

In the second phase, when the life in the caliphate required more skills, female roles changed and, despite the document *Women of the Islamic State: Manifesto and case study* prove that they were obliged to obey *sharia,* they could leave home to work, no more

[5] In the article «Le djihadisme transnational, entre l'Orient et l'Occident». Institut Montaigne. Available at http://www.fmsh.fr/sites/default/files/Livret%20Colloque.pdf.

[6] Questioning identity, boredom unsatisfying life, looking for adventure, high youth unemployment, restriction of free movement, feelings of not belonging, limited skills to make good judgements, Islam phobia, and slow political and economic growth.

[7] Help create a new state, the romanticism of marrying a jihadist, sisterhood belonging, jihadi 'cool' subculture, seek revenge against the 'unbelievers,' practice 'pure' Islam freely, and 'religious duty' to migrate to Islamic State.

[8] Available at http://www.globalcenter.org/wp-content/ uploads/ 2015/10/Laborde_CTED.pdf.

[9] The difference between «hadj» and «omra» is that the «hadj» must be done between the eighth and the thirteen days of the last month of the Islamic calendar.

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than three days a week, if they were doctors, nurses or teachers. These three jobs were allowed because they were necessary for a more complex life. The war was taking its toll.

Both in the first phase and in the second it was necessary to attract people, mainly young women, to the caliphate, and this required new female roles. Some authors have already systematized the several roles.

Karen Jacques & Paul Taylor (2008, p. 19) followed the typology proposed by Pamela Griest & Susan Mahon (2003) and identified these female roles: sympathizers[10], spies[11], warriors[12], and females at the top of the organisation and actively involved in the leadership. Jacques and Taylor's main innovation is the fact of including suicide bombers in the list.

Inch (2017, p. 10) analysed 100.000 tweets from female ISIS supporters and found eight roles: Fan-Girls[13], Baqiya Members[14], Propagandists, Recruiters, The Muhijrat[15], Widows[16], Terrorists, and Leavers.

As the footnote referring to the most unusual designations suggests, each of these types had its own task, depending upon the involvement level. It was a hierarchy allowing some women a higher internal position. However, the existence of «leavers» pointed to the third phase. In fact, the conditions in the caliphate were far from the dreamt and promised paradise. The lodgement was small, dirty and infested with worms and the food was scarce. The wealth conditions were worse than those of western countries and the situation was dramatic for pregnant women and newborns. An aspect to be highlighted is the discrepancy between the quality of ISIS videos to promote the caliphate and the fact of women being obliged to climb a tree to get internet signal.

In the second phase the caliphate needed money to support the war, and women played an essential role. Al-Khansaa Brigade controlled brothels of Yazidi women and patrolled the hills of the cities and the villages watching clothes and behaviours, and charging fines that were never contested because everybody knew the power of the brigade. Women were active also outside the caliphate and, for example, when a radical cell operating in two French cities (Nimes and Toulouse) was caught, a woman, Fatima el Kahyari, was sentenced to prison for remitting money to jihadists in Syria. Nolen (2016, p. 32) assures that a cell of sisters and martyrs' wives and detainees transferred money from Damascus to the West Bank, and the authorities had detected fund raising activities by women belonging to Middle East terrorist groups.

The third phase completed the circle. Scott Atran & Nafees Hamid (2016)[17] outlined that female jihadists had been persuaded to go to the caliphate with humanitarian and romantic motivations, and wishing to become warriors. The decreasing number of male warriors led the group to accept female participation in the fight. The time had arrived for a new role, despite the story told by Sedeño (2012, p. 239), according to which, in the times of the Prophet, many women had fought and one of them, Nusayaba bint K'ab, had been hurt 11 times and lost an arm.

In brieft and including the three phases, Spencer (2016, p. 75) says that women in the caliphate performed "a myriad of activities in moral and logistical support, state-building, and tactical operations," but they also participated "in leadership, domestic affairs, and acts of violence." It does not seem abusive to conclude that all those roles were decided by the males taking into account the needs of the caliphate at different times.

After the fall of the caliphate, we see the actual phase. In the West, it is a period to receive back those – male and female – who went to Syria and Iraq to join a terrorist group. It is a process that will not depend exclusively upon the western countries. It is necessary to talk to the countries where many of these jihadists have been imprisoned. Anne Speckhard, Grace Wakim & Ardian Shajkovc (2017) affirm that Peshmerga leadership told ICSVE researchers that the group had a list of about 20.000 ISIS cadres and "ISIS affiliates and supporters," a number that highlights the real dimension of the problem.

Some of these jihadists will choose a new place to fight in the name of religion, but others will return to their countries of origin or other countries in the west. This is one of the most important reasons why populism is increasing in Europe. The population is afraid of immigrants because of the likely terrorists among them. Mezzetti (2017, p. 1) defends that this possibility is the cause of worry and so the authorities must pay attention not only to "home-grown terrorists" but also to "foreign fighters," since they represent the two faces of the same coin as a threat to the western life style.

[10] "followers who perform duties such as cooking, cleaning and first aid in extremist camps."
[11] "when they play a more active role by acting as decoys, messengers or intelligence gatherers."
[12] "those arguably more active again, fighting in battles on an equal status with men."
[13] According to Inch (2017, p. 12), this first level included "women and girls who identify with the IS subculture but who are not considered devoted members (Huey & Witmer, 2016)". So, they were "the least radicalized group."
[14] Those who "view themselves as a member of the IS online community, refer to themselves as belonging to the Baqiya 'family', and demonstrate support and encouragement for the Baqiya" (Inch, 2017, p. 14).
[15] "extremely religiously and ideologically committed" (Inch, 2017, p. 19).
[16] Still according to the previous source, widows were "considered to be very radicalized and extremely ideologically committed to IS ideology" (Inch, 2017, p. 22)

[17] Available at http://www.telerama.fr/monde/comment-devient-on-djihadiste-1-2-par-scott-atran-anthropologue,140496.php.

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It is a real threat also due to the high number of jihadists leaving the caliphate. The dimension of the problem increases when we think about a large number of children born in the Islamic State. They were born abroad, but they have the right to the nationality of their returning mother. François Molins, the French prosecutor responsible for the terrorist affair, interviewed by *L´Express* on November 10th 2017, said that there were still 690 French jihadists in Syria or Iraq, and 295 of them were women and 28 children above the age of 15. This is a crucial challenge for many western European countries. In Belgium, for example, a parliamentary member requested the vice-prime minister and the minister of security and interior about the measures taken by Government about 18 of the 72 Belgian jihadists who had returned home[18]. He wished to know if they had been interrogated by the police and if they are being monitored efficiently. Besides, the PM wanted to know the governmental decision about their access to sensitive jobs. It was a way to show that they could be dangerous, even considering the failure of their outside experience.

The answers did not allow knowing if the Government was hiding data or if it was not sure about the issue, as the word «seem» appeared several times.

Authorities must pay attention to the testimonials of those women who left the caliphate because some of them did not lose their motivation. Umm Rashid, an ancient member of the al-Khansaa Brigade, the ISIS female militia, told that, after escaping from ISIS caliphate to give birth to her son, she wanted to return to ISIS. She is just waiting for her child to attain ten years old, the required age to become a suicide bomber, according to an emir. She is in a Turkish camp, but she wishes to die in combat, and she is trying to persuade other refugees to return with her[19]. This testimony proves that western authorities must pay attention to some sensitive places – refugee camps and prisons, for example – because they can become ideal places for radicalization against the western cultural pattern. On one hand, it is essential not to repeat errors like that of allowing prisoners to read books written by Abu al-A`la Mawdudi and Sayyid Qutb, as well as "more violent Saudi translations of the Qur'an" (Brandon, 2009, p. 4). On another hand, it is important to create a "specialized de-radicalization centre," as Brandon advised the British Government.

As the Belgian PM also asked about the governmental measures aiming at fighting against radicalization, the next point will reflect upon the female role in that thematic.

IV. Female Role in the Counterterrorism

Anti-terrorism and counter-terrorism are not synonymous, but there is a close relationship between the two concepts, as anti-terrorism services collect the maximum of information and make it available to counter-terrorism strategies. This explains the importance given to jihadists' testimonies, despite complaints about the methods used to collect those data, mostly because some organizations accuse authorities of not respecting human rights.

As mentioned earlier, the authorities failed to prevent female terrorism because they made a mistake concerning women image. They looked at women as mothers and wives, and they did not believe that a terrorist could be hidden behind that traditional image.

Many female suicide bombers took advantage of that misunderstanding, and that explains the increasing number of attacks carried out by women. In fact, according to a report by Aviad Mendelboim & Yoram Schweitzer, in January 7th 2018, for the Institute for Israeli National Security Studies (INSS), in 2017 there were 348 suicide attacks, involving 623 terrorists, including 137 women, the highest number ever. In fact, this misperception led, according to Laura Sjoberg & Caron Gentry (2011), seventeen terrorist groups use female suicide bombers.

Now, it is time to make use of the motherly image of women, but in the right sense for peace interests, that is to say, in a way targeted to the control of terrorism. It must be said that UN has already recognized the importance of investing in female participation as a counter-terrorism agent because nobody can deny the influence of the mother as someone with a special linkage to her children.

In 2017, Georgia Holmer and Adrian Shtuni produced a report for the United States Institute of Peace[20] analyzing the first generation de-radicalization programs. It was an experiment carried out in several countries: Indonesia, Singapore, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen. Those programs were known by the acronym DDR: D for demobilization and disarmament, and R for reintegration. The evaluation of those programs proved that they represent a necessary, but a hard way to rehabilitate seasoned jihadists. DDR programs require a multilateral approach involving experts from several sciences. The family support is a strategic pillar, because if there is no specific terrorist personality, we must accept that terrorism participation can change jihadists' personality. The de-radicalization process is more arduous than the radicalization one.

We must also keep in mind that in the western counties live many thousands of Islamic followers and the majority of them does not agree with the so-called

[18] *Bulletin n.º B077 - Question et réponse écrite n.º 1259 - Législature: 54.*

[19] This testimony makes part of «Horror stories 2», collected by Anne Speckard and Ahmet Yala on January 9th, 2017.

[20] Available at https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2017-03/sr402-returning-foreign-fighters-and-the-reintegration-imperative.pdf.

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religious terrorism. In fact, jihadism and Islamism are far from being synonymous, and Duarte (2015) identifies three forms of Islamism and only the third one appeals to violence. The Muslim women can become a very powerful counter-terrorism tool, as they are more open-minded than the male part.

According to a study conducted in the USA among the Islamic community, in 2017, only 42 percent of men accepted homosexuality while the female level of acceptance reached 63 percent[21]. It is a way to say that women are less conservative than men, mainly if they are young and educated in western countries. Certainly, for the terrorist groups, this behaviour is not acceptable. After all, Boko Haram means «western education is a sin», and *sharia* is the only right law.

V. Conclusion

Terrorism is a global problem. So, its solution lies in international cooperation aiming at controlling the phenomenon. In that strategy, the role of women is crucial. Western countries need to acknowledge that importance. They must not underestimate the past mistake, but learn from it.

The challenge is at two levels: to rehabilitate ancient female jihadists and to create right conditions to prevent new radicalizations. It is a hard task because western public opinion seems more interested in building walls, believing that a country can succeed as a castle, a new mistake in a global world. In a situation when western citizens face unemployment and labour precariousness and feel their culture threatened by the arrival of foreign people, they tend to condemn all the politics of reception and integration.

Money is always seen as the real motivation because, as Pinto (2018, p.140) denounces, quoting data from Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), war is also an industry, and three of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, an organ created to keep peace, are the leaders of the arms-exporting countries. This is a clear example of political hypocrisy revealing the incoherence between the words and the actions.

In the actual conjuncture of fear and insecurity, it is worth noting that two populist parties of different generations[22] won the recent parliamentary elections in Italy, and, despite their differences, they made a governmental coalition, and their Government plan was designed in keeping with the slogan «Italians first». It is a return to a strategy that is no more feasible in a globalized world.

In the absence of a correct strategy, jihadists, as a whole and female in special, represent an enormous threat for west countries. Changing mentalities and prejudices requires time. It is enough to recall that when the US Department of Internal Security delineated the profile of the terrorist, it made a portrait of a male from 16 to 45 years old, and in many of the Islamic countries remains the idea that the west, as a whole, is in war against Islam.

The persistence on a mistake is never a good strategy. As Adriano Moreira teaches, the lack of strategy is also a strategy. However, it is a bad strategy because when men leave everything in the hands of destiny, they cannot expect good results.

In western democratic societies, the separation between State and religion gave birth to secular civilizations in which everyone is free to choose the religious option. However, concerning women rights, there is still a long road ahead. Western jihadists, mostly women converted to Islam, believe that paradise is outside. They run after a dream, but they only find hell, even when they refuse to recognize it and insist on blaming the west as the axis of evil, according to alleged religious terrorism.

After all, terrorism does not respect anyone or anything, including Allah and the religion.

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[21] Available at http://www.pewforum.org/2017/07/26/political-and-social-views/.

[22] The *Lega*, once *Lega of North,* is a populist party which started its fight as a regionalist and a nationalist party, as it intended the independence of an Italian region, Padânia, whose history the *Lega* invented. The Five Stars Movement is a populist party but of the second generation. It was born in the net and it is a digital populist party, and when M5S refers to the people is only means net people. That is why M5S defends a digital citizenship.

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