

ISIS and Recruitment: How Do Demographics Play a Role?

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Abstract

This thesis seeks to parse foreign fighters, individuals who travel abroad from their country of origin or residence to join armed non-state actors in conflict,¹ by demographics to analyze whether these characteristics play a role in why they join ISIS. Gender, geographical location, religious history, age, socioeconomic status, and education level are all examined to better understand how ISIS recruits from each group. It is found that individuals in each demographic group have diverse reasons for joining that ISIS exploits to be able to draw as many fighters as possible. Counter strategies should look at the underlying reasons that cause these individuals to join and minimize the distribution and interactions of recruiters and possible recruits.

Introduction

As of 2016, there are current estimates that ISIS has between 19,000 to 25,000 fighters, which is a decrease from previous years,² but many are still becoming radicalized and travelling from around the world to join the group. Foreign fighters are individuals who travel abroad from their country of origin or residence to join armed non-state actors in conflict.³ Increased military operations and restrictions of travel have led to a decrease in the number of foreign fighters.⁴ Despite the obstacles implemented such as counter narratives⁵ and blocking accounts,⁶ fighters of

¹ Kraehenmann, S. (2014). Foreign Fighters under International Law. Academy Briefing, 7.

² Martinez, L. (2016). Number of ISIS Fighters in Iraq and Syria Drops, Increases in Libya, US Official Says. *ABC News*.

³ Kraehenmann, S. (2014). Foreign Fighters under International Law.

⁴ Curtis, L. et al. (2016). Combatting the ISIS Foreign Fighter Pipeline: A Global Approach. Special Report #180 on Terrorism. *The Heritage Foundation*.

⁵ Aistrophe, T. (2015). Social media and counterterrorism strategy. *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 70(2), 121-138.

⁶ Stern, J., & Berger, J.M. (2015). *ISIS: The State of Terror*. London: Harper Collins Publishers.

different backgrounds and upbringings from all continents are still radicalized and willing to join the terrorist group. A large part is due to the various forms of media and propaganda, like magazines, Twitter accounts, and YouTube videos⁷ that the terrorist group uses for recruitment. It is harder to fight this aspect of the overall battle against the group when much of it takes place on the Internet where it is faceless and easier to hide behind a screen. Tracing the source back to the perpetrator becomes increasingly difficult as the information is spread. Their media center, Al Hayat, disseminates its information in a pyramid structure. They have a few main sources and rely on fighters and their supporters to spread it by sending it to others or uploading it to other sites on the Internet. Shutting down one source is such a minute part of the larger picture. ISIS has been highly scrutinized due to its sophisticated use of an increasingly number of media outlets and tactics. They are highly adaptive and able to use modern mechanisms to attract various individuals. They have been inclined to use a combination of social media, videos and magazines,⁸ tailoring their message to different groups. Over time, they have been more inclined to use more social media due to its possible reach across the world. Unlike their predecessor, Al-Qaeda, their presence on social media allows for supporters to voice their allegiance, giving the sense of a grand movement.⁹ There are various reasons to why a certain individual would join such an extreme group. There is no typical stereotype for fighters and profiles of individuals show that there are various reasons for joining the group.

This is crucial topic of research because ISIS is part of the crisis currently playing out in Syria and the surrounding region. The civil war in the region and fragility of the surrounding states have allowed ISIS to gain ground in the last two years, especially after its declaration of

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Zelin, A.Y. (2014). The War between ISIS and al-Qaeda for Supremacy of the Global Jihadist Movement. The Washington Institute for Near East Policy Research Notes, 20.

the establishment of a caliphate. Despite the attempts to mitigate the flow of fighters, some have managed to reach the region from other parts of the world. As ISIS spreads, the group needs more resources to control their territory. Branches, in Libya,¹⁰ Sinai Province, North Africa, and South Asia¹¹ have seen an increase in the number of fighters. The diversity of the demographics and reasons for joining are a concern for policy makers who have limited resources and cannot individualize counter strategies. Finding the different reasons for joining or those most susceptible will create an action plan that takes the factors into account. This can work to slow the process or thwart the radicalization of fighters and their intentions of travelling to the region to join the group.

Gender

Although many of the foreign fighters in the past have been male, ISIS has been able to recruit a portion of females as well. Gender divide is a component largely studied in marketing and media to understand how to capture each group's attention. The purpose of ISIS's media greatly varies to persuade the different groups. The distinction in the way ISIS appeals to the two genders is due to the organization's use of the recruits. ISIS, despite the atrocities frequently discussed in the news, has some propaganda showing a sense of normality. They want to portray a normal daily life filled with joyous activities. By creating an ideal lifestyle, many are compelled to leave their homes where they may be dealing with issues in order to be a part of something better. While on the other hand, there is also appeal to the darker side of individuals who are curious or looking for glory of battle and adventure. This media seeks to appeal through violence and a promise of martyrdom after death.

¹⁰ Martinez, L. (2016). Number of ISIS Fighters in Iraq and Syria Drops.

¹¹ Byman, D. (2016). ISIS Goes Global: Fight the Islamic State by Targeting Its Affiliates. *Foreign Affairs*, 95(2).

Men

Men can further be subdivided for various reasons that become push and pull factors towards ISIS. Push factors stem from problems they face currently in their daily lives and home while pull factors are the incentives proposed by ISIS that convince them to travel to the Middle East. Young men who do not find their calling or become lost on their path to adulthood due to negative life events may be seeking a sense of purpose and direction in their lives. ISIS fulfills this need with a promise of martyrdom and heaven.¹² They are convinced they are part of this grand movement to promote Islam and the caliphate. By joining the fight in Syria, the men believe they have found a purpose in life where they can achieve something of value quickly. They want adventure because their current lives are not exciting or daring enough. Loneliness and marginalization in their own society causes men to seek a sense of belonging and camaraderie. Social outcasts become frustrated and seek out outlets where they are part of an accepting group that they cannot find back at home. Lack of promise in their current lives through aspects like their careers, finances, and marriage creates gaps where ISIS can exploit their vulnerability and discontent. They promise foreigners a salary, house, and a wife.¹³ Foreigners are also sometimes given luxury items like fancy cars.¹⁴

These factors that draw men towards ISIS are carefully exploited by ISIS's use of social media to communicate with individuals around the world. It creates a sense of community even if not face-to-face that does not happen in their current lives. They post pictures on Twitter,

¹² Katz, J. (2015). Where do the women fit in? (Unpublished master's thesis). Swedish Defence University, Stockholm, Sweden.

¹³ Speckhard, A., & Yalya, A.S. (2015). Eyewitness Accounts from Recent Defectors from Islamic State: Why They Joined, What They Saw, Why They Quit. *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 9(6).

¹⁴ Ibid.

especially of daily activities that appeal to the sense of normality and brotherhood.¹⁵ Social media outlets also make it incredibly easy to upload real time battle tweets,¹⁶ updates, and videos of the frontlines of fighting. This is directed towards men with grievances against the West or just looking for excitement and adventure. With a generation of instant gratification and a “need it now attitude,” these pictures and videos create easy access to a new world like never before. The videos are gory and full of action to empower and appeal to the adventurous side.¹⁷ There is appeal to religious individuals where quotes and martyrs are honored and remembered.¹⁸ The magazine *Dabiq* is more widely used to recruit men where they incite anger and feature violent images.¹⁹ The traditional view of women is held in the magazines where they are viewed as second tier.

Women

When it comes to women, there is a different approach ISIS uses because of the reasons that women join. Though they only make up ten percent of the fighters,²⁰ it is still a significant portion of the fighters. In the beginning the women joined ISIS as a way to fight the atrocities committed by the Assad regime in Syria.²¹ They believed they were helping free a population from human rights violations. Along with men, women may be marginalized in society.

¹⁵ Klausen, J. (2014). Tweeting the Jihad: Social Media Networks of Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 38(1), 1-22.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Basit, A. (2014). Foreign Fighters in Iraq and Syria – Why so many?. *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analysis*, 6(9), 4-8.

¹⁸ Allendorfer, W., & Herring, S. (2015). ISIS vs. the U.S. government: A war of online video propaganda. *First Monday*, 20(12).

¹⁹ Huey, L. (2015). No Sandwiches Here: Representations of Women in Dabiq and Inspire Magazines. *The TSAS Working Paper Series*, 15-04.

²⁰ Charai, A., & Braude, J. (2014). Ten Percent of Western Recruits to ISIS are Women. *The National Interest*.

²¹ Bradford, A. (2015). Western Women who Join the Islamic State. *Terrorism Monitor*, 13(9), 3-5.

Especially with the stigma due US involvement in the Middle East, Muslim Americans can find themselves cast out by some members of society. In countries such as France, not being able to follow traditional customs like being able to wear a hijab and forced assimilation²² creates a divide that ISIS can slowly work to pull apart. Girls and women become interested in the Muslim religion given the prominence in the news. There is great debate surrounding it and ISIS capitalizes on the anger to incite individuals with extreme teachings. Additionally, this marginalization leads ISIS to promote a sisterhood surrounding the caliphate where everyone is tight knit.²³ Even with the news coverage of the human rights abuses and atrocities against minority groups many are just uneducated about the true reality of the organization and its intentions towards women.²⁴ Women are deceived by the propaganda they seek released by ISIS.

ISIS romanticizes the idea of the caliphate tying it in with a normal lifestyle. They voice a need for women to help run a caliphate.²⁵ They are less used as fighters except for the Al-Khansaa Brigade who has reported to fight in battle.²⁶ Instead they mainly are used as domestic workers²⁷ and used to help run the households of the fighters. Being married to fighters means free housing and covered expenses for their family.²⁸ They are used to keep the households running by cleaning it and feeding the fighters. On social media, women in the caliphate convince other girls from other countries that the lifestyle is normal and appealing despite the limited freedoms due to Sharia law. One famous recruiter, Umm Layth, a British women,

²² Perešin, A. (2015). Fatal Attraction: Western Muslimas and ISIS. *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 9(3), 21- 38.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Katz, J. (2015). Where do the women fit in?.

²⁵ Allison, J., & Barnes, L. (2015). The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant's Strategic Treatment and Use of Women (master's thesis). *IMES Capstone Paper Series*.

²⁶ Perešin, A. (2015). Fatal Attraction.

²⁷ Allison, J., & Barnes, L. (2015). Strategic Treatment and Use of Women.

²⁸ Perešin, A. (2015). Fatal Attraction.

manages a Twitter account, discusses the role of women in the caliphate and how to overcome possible difficulties in leaving their home country.²⁹ They talk of the benefits and joy of living in the caliphate³⁰ and how they can become a part of a larger movement. There are posts of the beautiful landscape and weapons so girls still feel empowered and drawn to the region. While heavily distributed among men, magazines and videos are less used for female recruitment due to the graphic imagery.³¹

Conclusion

Although many people join for the same reasons such as marginalization, adventure, and marriage prospects, ISIS finds different ways to appeal to the different genders. It is softer approach for women as opposed to males who are drawn by the brutality and violence. Daily life images are displayed on Twitter to appeal to both groups but contain different aspects of daily operations.³² Some have voiced concern upon return from disillusionment that it becomes too much when it is reality instead of fantasizing through video and photographs. The women and men are restricted in freedom due to the strict Sharia law. It is extremely different than the personal freedom experienced in their home countries. Additionally, many of the women are subject to sexual violence³³ as they are married off to fighters as a reward.³⁴ These atrocities and human rights violations show the brutality of the organization. The views portrayed in media are only the façade that ISIS wants to show in order to convince as many individuals as they can to migrate to their caliphate.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Huey, L. (2015). No Sandwiches Here.

³² Klausen, J. (2014). Tweeting the Jihad.

³³ Sherwood, H. et al. (2014). Schoolgirl jihadis: the female Islamists leaving home to join Isis fighters. *The Guardian*.

³⁴ Stern, J., & Berger, J.M. (2015). ISIS and the Foreign-Fighter Phenomenon. *The Atlantic*.

Geography

Another major divide in foreign fighters stems from the home country origins between westernized and Middle Eastern countries. Due to the cultural divide within the countries, ISIS has to market its organization differently to everyone in order to appeal to various groups. There are differences in religion so ISIS needs to figure out how to relate Islam to converts and religious individuals. There is also the issue of state strength and how internal living conditions and grievances can lead to a push to find an alternative in ISIS.

Westerners

A majority of the fighters from Western countries from the Americas and Europe tend to be on the younger side.³⁵ They are marginalized in society and looking for an outlet for their frustration and anger about their lives. Many tend to be dealing with a lack of satisfaction with their current lives. They are convinced about a grand Islamic movement where their participation will make a difference. The brutality of the destroying religious targets and beheadings has incited fighters to join.³⁶ Others are also minor criminals who become radicalized in prison. They exchange contact information with other inmates where bonds continue after release.³⁷ This makes it incredibly easy for travel later on since a network will help them reach Syria. Some are army recruits who are disillusioned by the US involvement in the Middle East and end up switching to the side their country is fighting. Others are looking for a change in landscape. The marginalized have also been second generation Muslims. The stigma associated post 9/11 make it hard for individuals to feel welcome in their own country where they are citizens.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Zelin, A.Y. (2014). *The War between ISIS and al-Qaeda*.

³⁷ Stern, J., & Berger, J.M. (2015). *ISIS: The State of Terror*.

ISIS targets these individuals through the use of Twitter,³⁸ chat rooms, and social media applications, or apps. The original content is translated to major languages such as English, French, German, Russian, and Urdu³⁹ to specially cater to Westerners. They post videos and quotes inciting anger to join a religious cause. Individuals unhappy with the Western governments and laws use this as the reason for joining the terrorist group. Especially in second generation Muslims where they are subject to stigmatization, this is the final push they need to join. Westerners arrive to join a community with a sense of law and order they may be lacking. This definitely attracts the isolationists or even small groups looking to be part of a larger cause. Additionally many of the videos portray Western fighters conducting acts of brutality like beheadings and killings, so the ideology seems to be more ingrained in the individuals.⁴⁰ With non-Muslims in the video, it seems that the group is accepting and applicable to everyone.

Non-westerners

As for non-westerners, many are drawn due the horrid conditions or oppression and violence in Syria. The strict order within the caliphate is more preferable to the chaos and fighting.⁴¹ This speaks to the disaster and conditions right now in Syria that a terrorist group can provide a better alternative. Additionally ISIS has been able to recruit from refugee camps.⁴² The cramped conditions and lack of purpose provide the ripe conditions for ISIS to gain fighters. There is financial stability for joining since fighters are provided a salary. It might sometimes be an act of desperation to save their families and provide a chance for their families to get basic needs like food and shelter. The promise of material goods and basic needs draws many

³⁸ Blaker, L. (2015). The Islamic State's Use of Online Social Media. *Military Cyber Affairs*, 1(1).

³⁹ Stern, J., & Berger, J.M. (2015). ISIS and the Foreign-Fighter Phenomenon.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Speckhard, A., & Yalya, A.S. (2015). Eyewitness Accounts from Recent Defectors.

⁴² Ibid.

individuals from the region since the conditions are dire at home. Order is provided while ISIS has the capability to feed their fighters, which becomes a huge incentive to join.

Conclusion

Though some of the reasons differ based on region of the world, there is an appeal to those marginalized in society or individuals looking for a new identity. When they are the minority or the minority is in power, they feel their voice is suppressed leading them to find different outlets. The strict laws in the caliphate also provide for order, which some young individuals and refugees are seeking. ISIS markets itself as a viable alternative to the current conditions and is able to fulfill the promises guaranteed to possible recruits.

Religion

ISIS is a Sunni Salafist Islam based organization that holds grievances against Christians and Shiite populations. They have been cited in the news committing mass murders and slaughters of these groups in the surrounding regions of their territory as they gain more land throughout the Middle East. Many within the region and Western Muslims have travelled over to defend their faith. They view Western countries being in opposition of their religion when interacting with them in international affairs involving countries with a high percentage of Muslims in the region. They feel the caliphate will allow them to practice their traditional views more openly since there is a lot stigmatization of Islamic traditions in Western countries.⁴³ There is a sense of being in the in-group of society when everyone around is practicing the same faith.⁴⁴

Natural born

Much of the ISIS rhetoric demonstrates an extreme sense of Sunni Islam. It is a twisted

⁴³ Bradford, A. (2015). Western Women who Join the Islamic State.

⁴⁴ Ingram, H. J. (2014). Three Traits of the Islamic State's Information Warfare. *The RUSI Journal*, 159(6), 4-11.

interpretation of the Quran and not the normal interpretation that most Muslims use in the rest of the world. The establishment of the caliphate creates a Muslim state and sense of pride. It creates a territory where they can exert their beliefs. ISIS also generates a grander fight between good and evil.⁴⁵ Many view other countries as antagonistic and less understanding of the Muslim faith.⁴⁶ There is a sense that they have to defend it from the Westerners encroaching on their sovereignty and internal affairs. There is an aspect of victimization, which is greatly magnified and easily twisted by ISIS with the US involvement in the region. ISIS is able to spin the policies and portray it as an encroachment on sovereignty and persecution of Muslims. They add to the fuel where those same foreign countries also stigmatize or reject Muslims from society. Especially after 9/11 and increased involvement of the United States in countering Islamic terrorist groups, there was growing feeling of Islamophobia.⁴⁷ There was an increase in discrimination and an underlying fear that all Muslims were terrorists. Countries like France, that have a large percentage of Muslims, passed laws in direct conflict with their customs such as the ban on veils. It prevents assimilation and integration, fueling a sense of segregation and anger.⁴⁸ ISIS energizes these feelings and provides an outlet to practice the religion freely. Living in a caliphate means the marginalization is minimized.⁴⁹ They are living among similar individuals who share more similar characteristics and beliefs than in their home countries. With the strict laws and sense of order, there is a sense of protection offered by ISIS.⁵⁰ ISIS seeks fighters to

⁴⁵ Basit, A. (2014). Foreign Fighters in Iraq and Syria.

⁴⁶ Azzam, C. (2014). Australian Foreign Fighters: The Long Reach of the Syrian Conflict. *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analysis*, 6(9), 9-13.

⁴⁷ Basit, A. (2014). Foreign Fighters in Iraq and Syria.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Kollárová, M. (2015). Good or Bad Agents? Western Fascination with Women and the Construction of Female Objects during the ISIS Crisis (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Central European University, Budapest, Hungary.

⁵⁰ Ingram, H. J. (2014). Three Traits of the Islamic State's Information Warfare.

travel over to defend the caliphate from the West and populate the region.⁵¹

The videos call for Muslims from around the world to join in the cause. They fighters incite the need to defend the territory from outsiders.⁵² Individuals marginalized can live in a community where people protect each other. The media calls for individuals to make hijra, defined as taking up jihad to create an Islamic state.⁵³ There is a promise of heaven for individuals who give their lives to fighting to keep the caliphate alive.⁵⁴ These messages provide a sense of solidarity and common thread with the fighters through religion. Watching the videos, reading social media posts provides these cast out individuals a chance to contribute to defending Islam and the caliphate. Unlike their predecessor AQI, they claim to provide territory to for Muslims to come together.⁵⁵

Converts

Most converts are found to be Westerners as well who become radicalized and convert to Islam.⁵⁶ Individuals dealing with issues such as isolation and frustration with life find themselves looking for outlets or purpose. ISIS seeks to insert itself to provide teachings to fill this gap. Feeling like they could be part of a profitable cause is reason enough to cause many to convert.⁵⁷ They want to find a purpose since they cannot find it elsewhere. Additionally, young individuals, curious about the religion, may come across the ISIS teachings and end up subscribing from the twisted ideals. Unlike previous groups such as its predecessor Al Qaeda, this group is more welcoming of all individuals who subscribe to their ideals with many foreigners and Westerners

⁵¹ Basit, A. (2014). Foreign Fighters in Iraq and Syria.

⁵² Stern, J., & Berger, J.M. (2015). ISIS and the Foreign-Fighter Phenomenon.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Zelin, A.Y. (2014). The War between ISIS and al-Qaeda

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

holding high ranks of power.⁵⁸

The media is especially appealing to individuals looking to learn more about the group. ISIS is able to capitalize on the naivety of the individuals,⁵⁹ providing propaganda through videos and social media posts that they will believe. The messages are convincing enough because of the delivery and imagery that makes it attractive to join the movement.

Conclusion

It is clear to see that the ISIS interpretation is specific to a small portion of Muslims, where the majority finds their practices and beliefs extreme and twisted. This apocalyptic fight of good and evil appeals to individuals who are looking for purpose and direction. This is easy to tie into religion, which can provide structure and a way of life for these individuals. Marginalized in their society, these extreme teachings can provide justification or fuel their frustration, which causes them to commit atrocities against other populations.

Age (Young)

ISIS fighter demographics have showed that many are young and impressionable, between the ages of 15 to 30.⁶⁰ Many of the young individuals become indoctrinated when they are looking for an identity. Adolescence and early adulthood are stages when individuals can greatly be affected by their surroundings. They are given a sense of purpose and the opportunity to become part of history as ISIS claims. It is a new movement that the younger generation can help to build.⁶¹ Many who are lost within their societies are given a sense of direction within the caliphate. There is a strict governing presence where a tax system, police force, court system,

⁵⁸ Basit, A. (2014). Foreign Fighters in Iraq and Syria.

⁵⁹ Stern, J., & Berger, J.M. (2015). ISIS and the Foreign-Fighter Phenomenon.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Perešin, A. (2015). Fatal Attraction.

education, and trade have been established.⁶² Those feeling lost can find a sense of identity and be part of a community of acceptance. Especially for young Muslim immigrants, there is a sense of a barrier within society that can lead to frustration and anger.⁶³ ISIS will exploit those and convince them there is a need to defend their faith. There is also frustration against foreign policy in the region that has led many to flee to ISIS.⁶⁴ While some are looking for identity, young individuals are also thrill seekers. ISIS provides an outlet for violence and adventure on the battlefield.⁶⁵ The lives they live at home may be mundane or not ideal so travelling to the caliphate can provide a new surrounding.

A huge part of the young demographic is due to the increased use of social media, which has more prevalent use among the younger generation. ISIS favors using social media and video to attract young individuals who are so connected to the Internet nowadays. It is more appealing because it is more interactive.⁶⁶ Young individuals become entrenched in the ideals by talking to members of ISIS who capitalize on this insecurity and provide a solution to their problems at home. There is a new environment in the caliphate where laws and daily life are different.⁶⁷ Online chat rooms and messaging make it extremely easy for young adults to find a community while still remaining isolated from reality. They start to shut themselves out from other viewpoints, getting absorbed into this extremism. In addition, Twitter and chat rooms make it extremely easy to talk to current fighters about the preparation and travelling process.⁶⁸ This

⁶² Ingram, H. J. (2014). Three Traits of the Islamic State's Information Warfare.

⁶³ Ganor, B. (2015). Four Questions on ISIS: A "Trend" Analysis of the Islamic State. *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 9(3), 56-64.

⁶⁴ Perešin, A. (2015). Fatal Attraction.

⁶⁵ Stern, J., & Berger, J.M. (2015). ISIS and the Foreign-Fighter Phenomenon.

⁶⁶ Bowyer, C.E. (2015). Twitter and the Islamic State: What is the Government's Role? (Master's thesis). *Digital Commons@APUS*.

⁶⁷ Ganor, B. (2015). Four Questions on ISIS.

⁶⁸ Klausen, J. (2014). Tweeting the Jihad.

support, combined with other forms of media, provides a comprehensive way of recruitment. The videos play to the curious nature of young individuals who are looking for information about the group and get hooked to the violence and thrill.⁶⁹ Unlike joining for identity, seeing the videos appeals to the adventurous aspect that they could be right in the middle of the battle. These videos gain popularity with the quick pyramid structure ISIS uses to disseminate media.

Socioeconomic Status & Education

There is a stereotype that all fighters are poor and join to fight because of the financial incentives, which is untrue since there are external environmental as well as internal personal reasons for an individual to join ISIS.⁷⁰ Many join because it is an alternative route with opportunity while some are persuaded by the ideology. These two demographic groups were combined due to their correlational status where low income can be related to low education and high income means more opportunities for schooling.

Poor & Dropouts

Some fighters drop out of school and give up future prospects when their current options are limited. Less wealth tends to translate to less opportunities and prosperity, which ISIS can provide. They promise wives, luxury items, and financial stability. There is an incentive of a monthly salary,⁷¹ food, and shelter that are basic needs individuals seek to survive. Similar to individuals from a lower socioeconomic status, they tend to have fewer prospects and ISIS is able to provide for them. This is more appealing than the petty crime committed by some in desperate times. They are radicalized in prison and build a network, making it easy to travel to Syria. Money is an extremely motivating external factor along with the ability to train and learn

⁶⁹ Ganor, B. (2015). Four Questions on ISIS.

⁷⁰ Stern, J., & Berger, J.M. (2015). ISIS and the Foreign-Fighter Phenomenon.

⁷¹ Basit, A. (2014). Foreign Fighters in Iraq and Syria.

new skills.⁷²

Wealthy & Educated

Wealthy individuals find themselves joining for adventure and purpose, like the groups before. The fighter salary does not draw them since they could be making more. It is the other appealing factors of the organization that draw these individuals. They tend to make connections through the Internet. Women of middle class or well off families will give up their Western lifestyles for the opposite in the caliphate.⁷³ Many of the educated look for a sense of adventure compared to the boring routine they are living at home. Many of the women from Western countries have come from educated backgrounds⁷⁴ and proceed to travel without notice.

Conclusion

There are many similarities and a correlation between socioeconomic status and education. Despite the education and opportunities for one group, both groups may still lack a sense of direction especially in adolescent years when identity discovery is a significant component. ISIS creates a sense of order and identity with the close-knit portrayal of the fighters in the caliphate. With the younger generation, it is the appeal of becoming part of a large movement and adventure that may drive both groups into the recruiters of ISIS.

Discussion

After dissecting the demographics of foreign fighters who have joined ISIS in the last couple of years, there is no outstanding factor that drives an individual to travel to Syria. Many of the reasons overlap along with the tactics or choice of media along demographics. The different tactics and reasons still result in the same effect for ISIS, which is more fighters, but

⁷² Stern, J., & Berger, J.M. (2015). ISIS and the Foreign-Fighter Phenomenon.

⁷³ Bradford, A. (2015). Western Women who Join the Islamic State.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

there are differences in portrayal. This analysis shows that the Internet is a powerful tool for ISIS who uses it regularly to reach a wide range of audiences. Many become radicalized by the posted teachings and spread of the ideology, which spreads like wildfire once there is one upload or one tweet.

Seeing the success of ISIS in its ability to recruit from all parts of the world has been a topic of analysis in understanding why ISIS has been able to gain so much ground. ISIS media and propaganda is diverse in message and appeals to many different groups of individuals. It is evident that there is no singular mold for a foreign fighter or one particular reason for travelling abroad to help the terrorist organization. The Internet has been instrumental in the distribution of propaganda along with the increased chance of interaction between recruiters and possible recruits. Media can be seen in different countries in a matter of a few seconds and individuals can interact in real time even with an ocean of separation. Various demographic groups can be reached and ISIS has been able to diversify its messages to attract individuals from all of those groups.

Within each demographic group, there are still various individual differences for why someone would join ISIS. There is commonality in some of the reasons between groups and they can be organized into several main reasons. A major reason for joining ISIS is marginalization within their community. When individuals feel lost and rejected, they seek acceptance through other means. ISIS provides a sense of community that they cannot find in their home country. It is the sense of purpose and order provided by the mission of ISIS to create a caliphate with strict Sharia law. They can feel a part of something great and set their mark by martyrdom. The sense of adventure provides a change from their lives back home with the feeling that they have a chance to make history. Another reason is financial and appeal of luxury items. ISIS frames its

ideology strategically for each group by excluding specifics or emphasizing certain aspects that will bring the most appeal.

Due to the overlap of tactics by ISIS, there needs to be counterstrategies focused on counter narratives and capitalizing on disillusionment. To start, it is necessary to involve the Muslim communities abroad to foster an understanding that the Islam promoted by ISIS is extremism.⁷⁵ A majority follows a non-violent form of the religion. It is not enough for just the state department to release statements countering the propaganda. There is a sense of skepticism when the government releases media countering ISIS⁷⁶ because it seems to come from a higher up standpoint. Individuals may have a hard time relating or believing the content. Additionally, it is difficult to counter the passion of ISIS since the government's media is not as flashy. Involving individuals will bring a sense of community in our own country.

There has also been push to use defectors to expose the intentions and reality behind the reality.⁷⁷ Much of the propaganda released masks the brutality so individuals are not aware of the extent before joining the caliphate. Many accounts have detailed the experiences of life within the region and it has not matched expectations. These accounts from disillusioned individuals can help to thwart interested individuals if they were to learn about the true realities of the brutality within the caliphate and on the battlefield.

Conclusion

With the constant stream of foreign fighters from around the world travelling to the Middle East to join ISIS, there is a need for research on the underlying causes. Counter

⁷⁵ Ganor, B. (2015). Four Questions on ISIS.

⁷⁶ Aistrophe, T. (2015). Social media and counterterrorism strategy.

⁷⁷ Speckhard, A., & Yalya, A.S. (2015). Eyewitness Accounts from Recent Defectors.

narratives⁷⁸ and termination of accounts⁷⁹ have not easily combatted the propaganda on social media, magazines, and videos,⁸⁰ disseminated by the group. ISIS is able to morph their message to appeal to as many people as possible. Counterstrategies need to first understand the reasons why their message is so enticing to so many individuals. Examining the demographics of the fighters who join would help us to better understand these reasons. Analysis of the propaganda tactics of ISIS has shown that there are many factors that convince foreign individuals to join the terrorist group. There are social, economic, and personal issues that vary within groups of recruits.

Parsing the fighters into groups by demographic characteristics has shown that reasons for joining overlap and ISIS frames the message to appeal to each group differently. Marginalization within their community, camaraderie, acceptance, adventure, and financial stability are some common reasons found in each group. Despite the commonalities, it is shown that there are contrasting reasons within groups. Between genders, there is major difference in the content of the media. Women are lured through romantic promises of marriage while men are convinced by the brutal violence. Both men and women are lured by Twitter messages from recruiters that promote the caliphate, show daily life, and provide advice on travelling to join that individuals can follow. There is great need for counterstrategies that expose the hardships and violence fighters may face that recruiters like Umm Layth⁸¹ attempt to mask. Westerners tend to be those who are marginalized, especially Muslims looking for a community, while non-Westerners are those looking for better conditions as compared to their home country. Natural born Muslims see the hostility in Western countries so they look towards ISIS for an alternative.

⁷⁸ Aistrophe, T. (2015). Social media and counterterrorism strategy.

⁷⁹ Stern, J., & Berger, J.M. (2015). ISIS: The State of Terror.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Perešin, A. (2015). Fatal Attraction.

They see a group who is fighting for their religion and the territory to express it. Converts, on the other hand, see Islam as a purpose or path worth defending. Both are enticed by the grandeur of the movement and promise of martyrdom for dying for the cause. The Muslim community is needed in these instances to counter the extreme message of the group. The portrayed Islamophobia that they face in Western countries is the driving force behind the messages. There is a need for greater integration of moderate Muslims in order to keep them from turning to extremism due to frustration. Additionally, the counter narratives of defectors would help to deter individuals by exposing the truths of living the caliphate and ideology of ISIS. The propaganda skews reality and only shows the parts that appeal to the marginalized and the adventurous. The social media aspect, most appealing to young recruits, also needs to be countered. The real time updates make it easy for possible recruits to interact with recruiters and see current information about battles and life in the caliphate. The last group differs on the financial incentives while still looking for direction and identity. Again, exposing the truth with defectors will a possible deterrent for why ISIS is not the solution.

Dividing the foreign fighters of ISIS by demographics is another way to analyze the reasons for joining. By finding similar and differentiating reasons between the groups, counter measures can be taken to against the media to prevent individuals from being convinced to join. It is important to have different approaches for the various reasons since one overarching message may not appeal to the underlying root. This may be more demanding and require more resources for states and companies to specialize their tactics but with this individualized method, it can lead a reduction in the number that join ISIS.

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