

The psychological and political proponents of isis ideology



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

The gravitation toward extremist ideologies is a phenomenon that has long since confounded researchers. ISIS has attracted membership from individuals located all over the globe despite their approval rating within the Middle East being well below five percent (Greene 2015). Additionally, their conservative interpretation of Islam is at odds with the generally secular Muslim population within the Middle East. How is it, then, that they are able to gather the amount of support that they have? What factors may contribute to a region's strengthening of ISIS ideology?

Particularly, there are both psychological and political considerations for the possible motivations of individuals. Any terrorist group has primarily political motivations for their organization and the assumption that ISIS is a formally religious movement should be abandoned. ISIS uses religious violence to gain tangible political power. Additionally, the vulnerability of the regions in which it operates provides a ripe opportunity to influence others to support its political efforts. An already chaotic environment puts inhabitants under significant psychological stress. Other environmental factors, such as lack of outside communications or appropriation of community spaces, may also play a role.

Psychological and Political Conformity

Any discussion of the political impacts of an ideology should first establish where said ideology fits within political discourse. The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), or by its Arabic name Daesh, is a fundamentally Sunni Islamist movement, with the goal of creating one unified Islamic State or *caliphate*. As can be

extrapolated from its name, ISIS emerged primarily in the Levant region – which includes Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan, and has a larger population of Shi’a Muslims than elsewhere in the Middle East, along with Iran. It identifies with the ideological movement known as Jihadi-Salafism, which is “an extremist and minoritarian reading of Islamic scripture that is also textually rigorous, deeply rooted in a premodern theological tradition, and extensively elaborated by a recognized cadre of religious authorities (Bunzel 2015).” The Salafist portion of the ideology is concerned with “purifying the faith,” through eliminating idolatry and affirming God’s Oneness. Salafis consider themselves to be the only true Muslims and view those who practice “major idolatry” – those perceived to be worshipping stones, saints, or tombs, among others – as outside the bounds of Islamic faith (Bunzel 2015). This includes the Shi’a, and in many cases, democrats or those participating in a democratic system; democrats commit idolatry by considering legislation to be on par with God’s word, in the case of believing it to be something that should be adhered to. The most prominent of the Islamic State’s doctrine is that all Muslims must associate exclusively with “true” Muslims, and those who fail to do this are apostates deserving of death (Bunzel 2015).

The original intentions of ISIS at conception – at the time, known as al Qaeda in Iraq – was to overthrow the Western occupation of Iraq and replace it with a Sunni Islamist governance. It still identifies itself as seeking freedom from Western influence and imperialism. This is important because it illustrates that ISIS capitalizes on anti-Western sentiment and frustration and can take advantage of negative media press and the ongoing conflicts in the areas in

which they are primarily active. This also provides opportunity for the psychological phenomenons of *groupthink* and *groupshift* ^[1] .

Groupthink may occur when a desire for harmony in a group results in an incorrect or anomalous decision-making outcome. Individuals may originally ‘ come on board’ with ISIS because they share frustration with the actions that the West have been taking. Alternatively, in situations where individuals are directly under the threat or influence of ISIS, they may make a strategic decision to conform in order to protect themselves and their family. This decision in conjunction with the indoctrination techniques that ISIS employs under occupations may eventually lead to a genuine belief in their ideology. Such initial conformity may also lead to a *groupshift* where individual members of a group are exaggerated into a more extreme position. Cockburn (2015) discusses how in the case of the capture of Mosul, ISIS capitalized on the alienation that the Sunni population felt under a Shi’a government, as well as the presence of several Sunni uprisings there (47 – 49). It is not unreasonable to assume that the average Sunni did not support the extremist views of ISIS but may have been socially pressured to move farther politically in that direction under their influence. This can also be applied with the original example of conformity being a reaction to Western interference.

ISIS has also been successful at recruiting foreign individuals from various countries throughout the world. Perešin states that identification with the sufferings imposed on Muslims, a disapproval of their home country’s foreign policy toward Muslim countries, along with individual feelings of inequality

and experiences of racism or xenophobia “ often play a significant role in pushing young people toward violent extremism (2015).” As well, ISIS exploits the “ personal identity battles” that many young Western Muslim women find themselves in, where they may feel caught between traditional and liberal values imposed by both their families and friends (Perešin 2015). Some women see a chance to take part of the state-building process of the *caliphate* and participate in the “ creation of a new society that would be built in contrast to the ‘ decadent and morally corrupt Western society, which has no respect for women’ (Perešin 2015).” ISIS promotes this aim in online blogs, where female recruiters talk about the restrictions that Western society imposes on how they can practice Islam and criticize the political system. In a 2016 study, Benmelech and Klor found that the greatest number of foreign fighters come from ethnically and linguistically homogeneous countries in which Muslims immigrants find it difficult to assimilate.

Material and Recruitment Strategies

ISIS’s main strength in their efforts to propagate their ideology is their unprecedented use of social media. Their messages are seen in many different forms in an attempt to appeal to a wide variety of individuals. Their production companies are staffed by experienced filmmakers and technicians who have produced a mass, continual stream of videos for online distribution (Wilson 2017). However, the most effective avenue to incite recruitment are the personal photos and videos from daily life that ISIS’s vast network of supports post on social media (Wilson 2017). ISIS also hires recruiters to respond to situations such as people’s expressions of anger or <https://assignbuster.com/the-psychological-and-political-proponents-of-isis-ideology/>

frustration at the government, alienation from society, or desire for more Islamic governance, and reach out to them one-on-one to spread their ideological message (Wilson 2017). In fact, most radicalization and spread of extremist ideology now takes place through the means of the internet. A study by Behr et al. cites that “ violent radicalization in mosques or other religious institutions comprises no more than 1% or 2% of the total cases of radicalization” (2013).

While they use other social media sites including Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube, Twitter is considered to be the largest source of propaganda output by ISIS (Greene 2015). Retweeters of ISIS accounts generated 1.4 billion tweets, which accounted for 15% of all Arabic content in 2015 (Alfifi, Kaghazgaran, and Caverlee 2018). ISIS uses a methodology known as “ twitter bombing” or “ hashtag hijacking”, where it will add its tweets to the hashtag of whatever is currently trending; an example is a tweet that randomly included the tag #JustinBieber (Wilson 2017). Although Twitter has recently taken strides to remove extremist content, propagators of ISIS’s ideology have developed ways to navigate around filters and auto-reports. For example, the website Justpaste. it allows them to enter any material into a page and then generate a small, unsuspecting URL that does not reflect its content, which requires it then to be manually reported in order to be removed by Twitter. (Wilson 2017).

Propaganda is defined as a deliberate and systematic attempt to influence mass attitudes on controversial subjects by means of symbols rather than force (Oluwadeaduramilade 2016). However, it is important to note that an integral part of ISIS’s online media presence is meant to invoke fear. They <https://assignbuster.com/the-psychological-and-political-proponents-of-isis-ideology/>

use images of extreme violence to show that they are “ more daring, more extreme” than other organizations, and while most individuals are disgusted by their graphic videos, others are inspired by them (Greene 2015). Studies have shown that individuals often consider themselves less susceptible to propaganda than others. Golan and Lim (2016) found that Americans in particular will rate themselves as the least vulnerable to ISIS propaganda and young Muslim Americans as the most vulnerable. Individuals also tend to rationalize their own behavior while chastising the same actions in others; this could cause situations where individuals believe they have not succumbed to ISIS propaganda, but rather have made a decision to agree with them.

Some pieces of their propaganda use the popularity of video games to reach out to younger audiences. For example, one image from the Islamist group Mujahidin Indonesia Timur (MIT) co-opts the franchise of Call of Duty, replacing the text on a box-art cover with Call of Jihad (Wilson 2017). Another image with the title Grand Theft Auto shows an armed militant and the added subtext Saleel as-Sawarim, or Clash of Swords – a phrase which ISIS commonly uses within its chants (Wilson 2017). More Western media than just video games are referenced; Javier Lesaca has analyzed 845 videos authored by ISIS and identified images from *Saw*, *The Matrix*, *American Sniper*, and *V for Vendetta* , along with many others (Wilson 2017). Many young ISIS sympathizers are dazzled by the images of a ‘ justified’ war, including the torture and executions; such individuals talk about “ five-star jihad” to describe the fun they are having fighting in Syria instead of being “ bored” in their home countries (Perešin 2015).

Mainstream news media is often drawn to extremist violence, and they tend to both directly and indirectly ‘feed off’ of one another (Greene 2015), as terror groups, including ISIS, often rely on news coverage to spread their ideology to a wider audience and incite further political violence. There are two models that attempt to classify the nature of this relationship. The “culpable-media model” gives media part of the fault for terrorism, as “terrorists would have less motivation to go to such drastic measures if they knew it would be less consequential to the public’s eye” (Greene 2015). The “vulnerable media model” acknowledges that news media is often in a difficult position, where choosing not to cover terrorist acts could mean they lose potential readers to other outlets, and journalists may have to make a choice between giving terrorists a voice or appearing to ‘cover up’ a piece of news. (Greene 2015).

Implications

Most individuals do not join ISIS based primarily on religious belief. Although it may be a factor, the underlying causes for a shift to extremism tend to be political or social pressures. Muslims who feel alienated or marginalized in their communities may see an appeal in the creation of the *caliphate*. Conformity may also be encouraged in areas which ISIS maintains political control, in some cases through genuine fear.

Western reactions to the growth of Islamic terrorism may have only strengthened it further. ISIS gains political clout in regions that are fraught with frustrations toward Western intervention. The rise of Islamophobia and xenophobia in Western countries as a result of ongoing conflicts in the

Middle East also encourages further radicalization of Muslims as a survival response. These trends have arisen because many Muslims feel as if their way of life is being threatened. The *Clash of Civilizations* may not be innate, but rather a self-fulfilled prophecy; as one civilization tries to impose its own will on the other, it will be met with a forceful response.

References

- Alfifi, Majid, Kaghazagaran, Parisa, and Caverlee, James. 2018. “ Measuring the Impact of ISIS Social Media Strategy.”
- Behr, Ines Von, Reding, Anaïs, Edwards, Charlie, and Gribbon, Luke. 2013. “ Radicalization in the digital era: The use of the internet in 15 cases of terrorism and extremism.” *RAND Corporation*.
- Benmelech, Efraim, and Klor, Esteban F. 2016. “ What Explains the Flow of Foreign Fighters to ISIS?” Northwestern University.
- Bunzel, Cole. 2015. “ From Paper State to Caliphate: The Ideology of the Islamic State.” *The Brookings Project on U. S. Relations with the Islamic World* 19.
- Golan, Guy J. and Lim, Joon Soo. 2016. “ Third Person Effect of ISIS’s Recruitment Propaganda: Online Political Self-Efficacy and Social Media Activism.” *International Journal of Communication* 10: 4681 – 4701.
- Greene, Kyle J. 2015. “ ISIS: Trends in Terrorist Media and Propaganda.” *International Studies Capstone Research Papers* 3.
- Oluwadeaduramilade, Tawak. 2016. “ The Psychology of Political Persuasion and Propaganda.”
- Perešin, Anita. 2015. “ Fatal Attraction: Western Muslimas and ISIS.” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9 (3): 21 – 38. Terrorism Research Initiative.

- Wilson, Lydia. 2017. “ Understanding the Appeal of ISIS.” *New England Journal of Public Policy* 29.
-

[1]For more definitions and discussion on social influence and group behavior, see <https://courses.lumenlearning.com/boundless-psychology/chapter/social-influence/>.