Chapter 67
Why Is ISIS so Psychologically Attractive?

Loo Seng Neo
Home Team Behavioural Sciences Centre, Ministry of Home Affairs, Singapore

Priscilla Shi
Home Team Behavioural Sciences Centre, Ministry of Home Affairs, Singapore

Leevia Dillon
Home Team Behavioural Sciences Centre, Ministry of Home Affairs, Singapore

Jethro Tan
Home Team Behavioural Sciences Centre, Ministry of Home Affairs, Singapore

Yingmin Wang
Home Team Behavioural Sciences Centre, Ministry of Home Affairs, Singapore

Danielle Gomes
Home Team Behavioural Sciences Centre, Ministry of Home Affairs, Singapore

ABSTRACT

Since the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) became prominent after the release of beheading videos of its prisoners, many have been confused over how to describe this development in relation to the way the Internet is exploited by violent extremists. While the element of surprise and horror lingered on the minds of many observers, a more pressing question facing the law enforcement is: how does ISIS attract foreign fighters using such videos and online propaganda? As countries around the globe grapple with the security threat posed by their nationals travelling to join ISIS, the need to be au fait with the appeal of ISIS and its ability to use the Internet to recruit new members and sympathisers becomes even more apparent. This chapter uses a behavioural sciences lens to explicate how individual and organisational motivational factors may contribute to the overall appeal of joining ISIS.

INTRODUCTION

Much has been said and written about the influx of foreign fighters to Iraq and Syria, particularly about the scale of jihadist volunteerism to join violent extremist groups such as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and Jabhat al-Nusra. As of 2015, approximately 20,000 individuals from 90 countries have travelled to join the fight in Iraq and Syria (van Ginkel, 2015).

Notably, these groups have attracted much attention not only due to the huge influx of foreign fighters, but more importantly, through their sophisticated use of social media to convey messages about the jihad that they are fighting for. As Shiraz Maher from the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation had put it, this can be considered the "most socially-mediated conflict in history" (Casciani, 2014, para. 14).

While violent extremist groups in general have exploited the Internet, it is noteworthy that ISIS, in particular, has been using the Internet very effectively both to lure foreign fighters as well as sow terror through its polished online propaganda (e.g., Altman, 2014; Carter, Maher, & Neumann, 2014; Hegghammer, 2013; Rose, 2014). For instance, in terms of attracting foreign supporters and fighters, a German fighter was featured in a series of short videos titled 'Muhatweets' describing his wonderful experience of living in the Islamic Caliphate established by ISIS (Reuter, Salloum, & Shafy, 2014).

Such videos, which are uploaded by ISIS fighters, are targeted at Muslims living beyond the conflict zone. By presenting themselves as "defenders of Syria's Sunni majority against the tyrannical Shiite regime", these foreign fighters serve as an essential source of information and inspiration to jihadist wannabes (Carter et al., 2014, p. 7). It appears that ISIS had effectively leveraged on the benefits of the Internet to create online platforms and propaganda content to encourage potential supporters to adopt its views and participate in the conflict (Shi et al., 2014).

Furthermore, ISIS has propagated extreme forms of content (e.g., beheading of prisoners and rebels videos) and yet is able to attract and recruit new followers (Kruglanski, 2014). While the modus operandi shown in these propaganda materials may be brutal, the messages inherent in these materials do capture the attention of the world – as evidenced by the re-circulation of these materials on various social media platforms including mainstream news channels.

Thus, the dissemination of propaganda online has become one of its most important recruiting tools to enlist new members to its rank. ISIS has succeeded in not merely intimidating people, but also attracting foreign fighters to their strongholds in Iraq and Syria, and even inspiring established violent extremist groups across the world to pledge their alliance to the group (Neo, Shi et al., 2014). From a counter violent extremism perspective, the appeal of ISIS and its online propaganda campaign reflects a set of interests and priorities, which needs to be explained and understood. This concern will be the overriding focus of this chapter.

By utilising a psychological and behavioural sciences approach, this chapter seeks to examine how (1) individual motivational factors and (2) organisational motivational factors may contribute to the overall appeal and attractiveness of joining ISIS as a foreign fighter. Specifically, this chapter makes the case that it is important for the law enforcement to be aware of these factors in order to better inform and develop effective countermeasures. However, it must be emphasised that this chapter is not an attempt to discover or construct a profile of an individual susceptible to joining ISIS, and that the list of factors identified in this chapter is not an exhaustive one.

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