Why Are Young Westerners Drawn to Terrorist Organizations Like ISIS?

September 10, 2015 | Trauma And Violence [1], Cultural Psychiatry [2]
By Omar Sultan Haque, MD, PhD, MTS [3], Jihye Choi [4], Tim Phillips [5], and Harold Bursztajn, MD [6]

The authors explore possible reasons why young people in the West leave their families, friends, and home culture to join terrorist organizations.

The relatively sudden rise of the terrorist group ISIS in the Middle East has surprised many in the West. Equally surprising is that financially stable foreigners from the West are over-represented among ISIS fighters. As helpless observers of the inhumane and disproportionate violence that ISIS has exacted on the people of the Middle East and the rest of the world, it is easy to wonder: what could possibly be the appeal of such a murderous, intolerant, and authoritarian organization to so many young people in the West?

This question is easier to answer when imagining the motives and rationales of locals in Iraq and Syria. Perhaps these locals join in what they believe to be a righteous cause. They may want to fight their perceived enemy in a global war, just as many Americans join the US Armed Forces to fight ISIS and other perceived enemies. But what could possibly compel otherwise financially stable young Westerners (non-Muslim as well as Muslim) to leave their families, friends, and home culture, and take up an uncertain future by joining a terrorist organization like ISIS?

It's not about poverty or religion
Clearly, poverty is not causing people to join ISIS, neither is religion. The vast majority of the West’s 50 million Muslims do not join terrorist groups. Even among those with radical Islamic beliefs, only a very few act on those beliefs and join a terrorist organization. Background beliefs do not explain the motivation that compels people to join such groups—even as fundamentalist organizations go, ISIS is particularly extreme. It has been roundly condemned by many prominent Islamic institutions across the world as illegitimate, in violation of Islamic Law, and as not a part of Islam; it has even been rejected by the quite radical group Al-Qaeda.

The true answer is more disturbing and psychological, and has little to do with evil psychopaths finding their true home in ISIS, or of innocent youths being brainwashed into mindless soldiers. Rather, it involves the interaction of conscious and unconscious processes with unique features of ideologies like ISIS, and existential (but not material) vulnerabilities inherent in contemporary American life. One way to summarize our answer is that as an ideology, ISIS provides existential fast food, and for some of the most spiritually hungry young Westerners, ISIS is like a Big Mac amidst a barren wasteland of an existence. Much of the worldview of ISIS appears intellectually vapid and brittle, even silly when seriously considered as religious or philosophical propositions. Just as a person can get lost, a religious movement can also get lost in a forest of bad ideas. But most people do not get a PhD in philosophy of religion before deciding what to believe. The heart’s longings lead...
the mind, and the existential filler of ISIS nourishes the desperate and vulnerable soul, however much one is surrounded by material comfort.

Who actually joins ISIS? Not psychopaths or the brainwashed, but rather everyday young people in social transition, on the margins of society, or amidst a crisis of identity. According to anthropologist and psychologist Scott Atran who has studied the motivations and demographics of terrorists, it is mostly youth in transitional stages in their lives—immigrants, students, those between jobs or girlfriends, or those who left their homes and are looking for new families. For the most part they have no traditional religious education and are “born again” to religion. They are self-seekers who have found their way to jihad in myriad ways.5

Why join ISIS?

Have you ever purchased junk food when tired, irritable, and jet-lagged at an airport? For lonely young people in transition, ISIS provides a quick fix to the perennial problems of human life. Vulnerable people don’t tend to fact check when existential relief is easily and cheaply attained with little effort. Specifically, the relief in question concerns the human desire for identity, certainty, social connection, meaning, the optimal amount of freedom, and glory.

At crucial developmental periods in adolescence and early adulthood, the formation of one’s identity is a primary concern, and a riddle to be solved. These years are a time for figuring out who one is, where one belongs, what one values and finds meaningful, and what one can become and prove to the world.6 These years are also a time of increasing awareness of an exciting yet frightening internal world with conscious and unconscious conflicts around envy, competition, self-control, and self-esteem.7 For youths on the margins of Western society, and in transition from one community to the next, this process of identity formation can become a hopeless task. When one has become a fringe member of one’s home community in America during crucial phases of identity formation, it is very tempting to join what appears to be a righteous struggle against one’s oppressive community. Even superficial Internet exposure (much less direct marketing) can convince the young that they too may participate in a world-historical narrative in which the enemy of America is a beacon of hope for solidifying their emerging self. This may evolve into a counterphobic attitude toward the society in which they feel helpless, with a full embrace of a cult of death such as ISIS.8

Humans tend to live with a quest for certainty in their hearts, and uncertainty is experienced as aversive.9,10 Whatever its factual merits, a pluralistic worldview denies its adherents the delights of absolute certainty, and it takes much cognitive effort to maintain. ISIS provides an ideology in which the world is divided into absolute good and evil, no compromises are possible, radical Islam is the solution to all human problems, and any other interpretation of Islam is unthinkable. Why settle for shades of grey in a messy world when “The Truth” is packaged and delivered in under 30 seconds via Internet sound bites? This black and white picture of truth may seem simplistic for the critically minded, but it can provide epistemological crème brûlée for drifting and unanchored Western youths. These youths are looking for answers to existential questions within a home culture perceived to be permissive and relativistic. In the midst of all this, an ideology that does not compromise the quest for certainty can be very appealing to the most vulnerable.

The underside of individualism

Americans pride themselves on their individualism, but the underside of individualism is loneliness.11 The desire for social connection is a human need as basic as food and sex, and the most obvious source of terrorist seduction for the lonely hearted.12 Social networks construct the web by which individuals are drawn to action, and social connection is a common attraction for everyday wholesome clubs as well as nefarious cults of all persuasions. Terrorist organizations are no exception, and most people join due to the influence of friends, kin, and others in a social network.13,14

Although joining based on the influence of one’s friends and kin is a primary factor, recruitment from ISIS also occurs. ISIS has initiated a number of systematic online efforts to target and respond effectively to young Westerners in transition at the margins of society, who can be easily tempted by the false allure of quick and easy social connections amidst an individualistic society from which they feel alienated.15 Rather than contemplating and deciding whether the ideas within the ideology of ISIS are rational and worthy of assent, the young are more likely to be drawn in by attachments to those already embedded in ISIS as a way to thwart loneliness.

By most accounts, Americans are happy people, and the pursuit of happiness is enshrined in the American Declaration of Independence. But Western definitions of happiness tend toward happiness as present pleasure and self-expression, rather than happiness as meaning, moral struggle and sacrifice, and aligning oneself with sacred purposes beyond the self.16,17 The latter meaning-oriented definition of happiness is more crucial for mental and physical health, but it is more common in
non-secular cultures (and in the religious traditions within secular societies).18 For Western youths
drifting between communities and belief systems amidst pluralistic America, the allure of a powerful,
simple ideology with a crystal-clear elaboration of the transcendent meaning for their lives and
struggles would be akin to an ice cream cone on a hot July afternoon. This desire for meaning—to be
a part of something much larger than oneself, especially if it is transcendent—is a very deep wish in
human nature, and not the same as routine motivations concerning status or in-group preferences
(ethnicity, race, or religion).19,20 Thus the same need for meaning that propels a youngster to want to
join ISIS can also lead an American businessman who achieves financial success to yearn for
something beyond the accumulation of wealth, to something more meaningful and significant such as
philanthropy, political office, or supporting a war.21
Relatedly, as Atran notes, people join ISIS because they seek adventure and want glory. ISIS
presents to the bored, secure, and the uninspired in Western liberal democracies a “thrilling cause
and call to action that promises glory and esteem in the eyes of friends. Jihad is an egalitarian,
equal-opportunity employer: fraternal, fast-breaking, glorious and cool. . . Many are just ‘vacationers’
for jihad, going to Syria over school breaks or holidays for the thrill of adventure and a semblance of
glory.”5
A seemingly paradoxical reason some Westerners join ISIS and other totalitarian organizations is that
too much freedom can be experienced as burdensome. In 1941, the psychologist Erich Fromm in
Escape From Freedom22 explained why so many were attracted to the Nazi ideology in Germany by
pointing to a feature of human nature that is afraid of being free and thus would rather submit to
authority than be responsible for creating a life of one’s own. As in 1941 for Nazism, so also in 2015
for ISIS. Clearly, being a slave is no fun. But maximal freedom may also not be ideal, and humans
vary in the degree to which additional freedom is experienced as beneficial. For someone who is
socially integrated and stable, and more willful by nature, more autonomy can be a liberating means
to self-create a life amidst hospitable institutions. In contrast, young adults in transition or on the
margins of society may experience freedom as oppressive, since they lack the personal or social
means for actually using a high degree of freedom to improve their lives. A totalitarian cult such as
ISIS, which promises a strict ideology, rules, and a social order to which one can bind and submerge
oneself, appeals to youths, especially those on the fringes of Western society for whom high
amounts of freedom do not feel liberating but instead, oppressive.
Finally, these many vulnerabilities to joining terrorist organizations are combined with a deep but
selective empathy. For example, an Iraqi-American youngster who perceives that Iraqis are
persecuted by Americans might expand his empathy for suffering Iraqis over Americans and decide
to join ISIS. Alternatively, a 5th-generation Italian-American youngster could find himself on the
fringe of American society and start to develop deep empathy with the sufferings of America’s
perceived enemies. Empathy is indeed a source of joining terrorist groups. The same empathy we
may feel for the cherished victims of our favorite causes, others may feel for non-Americans.
Empathy can be free of this paradoxical effect and fulfill its ethical possibilities only when empathy is
generalized to all humans who suffer, not just to those in our in-group.
The reasons that youths join terrorist organizations such as ISIS have little to do with being poor,
brainwashed, a Muslim, or a psychopath, and more to do with vulnerabilities in human nature
exacerbated by aspects of Western societies. This diagnosis is echoed by journalists who have
interviewed many ISIS fighters; a recent analysis of ISIS fighters remarks that “what draws people to
ISIS could easily bring them to any number of cults or totalitarian movements, even those
ideologically contradictory to Salafist Jihadism.”23
If we Westerners are lucky, we have identities, certainties, social connections, meanings, generalized
empathies, freedoms, and individual pursuits of glory that can be taken for granted. However, for
those Westerners in transition, marginalized, lonely, lost, bored, uncertain, spiritually or existentially
dispossessed, burdened by too much freedom, and empathically selective, ISIS and other shallow but
contagious ideologies will remain tempting as quick fixes for the deep predicaments inherent to the
human condition.

Acknowledgment—We would like to thank Dan Jones for helping us find some of the sources
quoted in this article.

Disclosures:
Dr Haque is Co-Director, UNESCO Chair in Bioethics, American Unit; Department of Psychiatry and
Human Behavior, Brown University, Providence, RI; Program in Psychiatry and the Law and
Department of Psychology, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA. Ms Choi is Associate at Nonprofit
Finance Fund, Boston; Harvard Mediation Program, Harvard Law School. Mr Phillips is Co-Founder of
Why Are Young Westerners Drawn to Terrorist Organizations Like ISIS?

Beyond Conflict, Cambridge, MA. Dr Bursztajn is President, UNESCO Chair in Bioethics, American Unit; Associate Clinical Professor of Psychiatry and Co-Founder of the Program in Psychiatry and the Law, Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center, Harvard Medical School, Boston. The authors report no conflicts of interest concerning the subject matter of this article.

References:


**Source URL:**

**Links:**