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**Security and Counter-Terrorism Challenges
arising from the Syrian Conflict**



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Introduction

by Erika Brady



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The topic of this Special Issue is one which raises key security concerns, both throughout the globe and in the Middle Eastern region. The Syrian Conflict, now in its sixth year, has developed into one of the most impactful and complex conflicts of modern times. What has apparently become a proxy war for the Middle East's various powers has had tangible ramifications beyond the borders of the traditional conflict zone. Compounding this complexity is the involvement of a number of foreign powers and alliances, weighing in on the various sides.

The articles selected for this Special Issue of the Journal of Terrorism Research have stood out for their excellence and relevance to this important and current topic. The breadth of impact of this conflict is astonishing, and the scope for harm disheartening. Nonetheless, through important and engaging research, as presented by the authors in this Special Issue, we can at least ensure that potential resolutions to the multifarious challenges raised by the conflict, including understanding its complex and historical roots, are aired and disseminated.

The subject matter of these articles is wide-ranging and reflects both the impact of the Syrian Conflict as well as security challenges which can be seen as urgent in their own right. It is not surprising, then, to find a focus on the impact and issues surrounding ISIS throughout the papers. Ranging from cyber-terrorism, terrorism funding, security challenges, radicalisation and various analyses of ISIS as a group and its impact, these articles all place their unique and revealing perspectives on the table. The topic of the Special Issue is then addressed in an absorbing review of six insightful books on the range of issues relating to ISIS.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank Gillian Brunton and Joseph Easson for their support and assistance in putting this Special Issue together. I would also like to thank the reviewers who have taken time, on a voluntary basis, to review the many articles we received following the call for papers and provide their opinions and feedback. Finally, I would like to thank all of those who submitted articles, whether successful or unsuccessful. These enthusiastic contributions give me hope for the future that the brightest minds are being put to work to resolve some of the greatest challenges of our time.

Erika Brady

Guest Editor



Articles

‘Close enough’ – The link between the Syrian Electronic Army and the Bashar al-Assad regime, and implications for the future development of nation-state cyber counter-insurgency strategies

by **Stewart K Bertram**



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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to examine the formality of the relationship, or lack thereof, between the Bashar Al Assad regime in Syria and the Syrian Electronic Army (SEA). The paper uses a qualitative approach to the research, with an adapted form of Social Network Analysis used to analyse the connections within the data. The core conclusion of the research is that a relationship exists between Assad and the SEA, which is close enough to assist Assad in foreign policy goals, while distant enough to provide plausible deniability for the regime. The paper defines this relationship as ‘close enough.’

Keywords: *cyber counter-insurgency; Syria; Assad; proxy force; hacktivism; computer hacking*

In 2016 the United States (US) Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) added two alleged members of the Syrian Electronic Army (SEA) computer hacker group to its cyber ‘most wanted’ (FBI News, 2016) list. The FBI justified the listing by stating that the two individuals had, as part of their involvement in the SEA, through their actions “...provide[d] support to the Assad regime” and, in so doing, “sought to harm the economic and national security of the United States in the name of Syria”. This event was highly significant for a number of reasons; firstly, the two SEA members were the first politically motivated hackers (hacktivists) to be named on the most-wanted list, and secondly, the US legal charges and FBI manhunt signalled the tangible international and political impact that the SEA had achieved through its activities.

The actions of the SEA have doubtlessly been provocative; however, many questions remain unanswered. One concerns the formality of the relationship between the SEA and the Assad regime. Varying opinions have developed, ranging from labelling the group as an outright proxy force for Assad (Al-Rawi, *et al* 2014) to labelling its members as little more than amateurs and an adjunct to the wider Syrian conflict (Motherboard, 2013).

Although this paper deals directly with the evidence that attributes the SEA to the Assad regime, the research takes a perspective that is different from the usual ‘proxy or not?’ debate, rejecting this binary approach for a more suitable investigation of the data. The paper outlines the strategic logic behind the SEA as a group distant enough from the Assad regime to provide plausible deniability, but close enough to interpret and meaningfully pursue state political goals in cyberspace. This relationship is proposed as a ‘close enough’ relationship between a non-state cyber group and a state authority. From this base the paper considers the strategic advantage to both state and group when engaged in a cyber counter-insurgency (cyber-COIN) style



of conflict.

The remainder of the paper comprises a review of insurgency/COIN studies and US military thinking on aspects of cyber warfare, followed by a brief explanation of the qualitative research method. The core of the paper is an in-depth analysis of a previously overlooked aspect of the available data that illustrates the close enough nature of the relationship between the SEA and the Assad regime. The paper concludes with an analysis that fuses the conclusions of the previous sections with wider COIN theory.

Literature

Conflict-driven human interaction within cyberspace has been a growing focus of academic study for a number of years. Early investigations into cyber intrusions of such victims as the Office of His Holiness the Dalai Lama in 2007 (Information Warfare Monitor 2010), and theorization about cyber attacker methodologies, (Caltagiron *et al*, 2016 and Hutchins *et al*, 2016) paved the way for an entire sub-section of the cyber security industry. They also led to serious academic study into the phenomenon of computer hacking.

Contiguous to this development within the private sector and academic sphere, the US military, led predominantly by the US Air Force, theorized about the shape of military operations in cyberspace. A major output of this process was the recognition of cyberspace as the ‘the fifth domain’ (Robert, 1996) of military operations. This categorisation heralded the development of sub-categories of military operations in cyberspace, such as Computer Network Operations (CNO), Computer Network Attacks (CNA) and Computer Network Defence (CND). Each of these classifications has unique characteristics, and from this observation it is obvious that there are differing conceptualisations of the forms that state power projection into cyberspace can take. Operations range from high-tech, ultra-covert cyber espionage (the so-called Advanced Persistent Threat) to much less technical but much more public displays of power (Russia’s so-called web brigades, Веб-бригады, or the ‘Troll Armies’, for example (Polyanskaya *et al*, 2003)).

Within this scale of state capabilities, at the technical ‘softer’ social media enabled pole of the scale, there is often the observable social dynamic of two opposing groups competing to shape the behaviour and actions of a target audience. The classic actor relations thus emerge among insurgent, counter-insurgent and the target audience they are attempting to influence (Taber, 1965).

Within this actor tri-graph the idea of a *cyber insurgency* as a stand-alone concept is observable developing within the post-9/11 US military as early as 2011 (Hagestad, 2011 and 2013). The core idea seeming to underpin this concept is that COIN warfare in physical space did not just bare a passing resemblance to some emergent conflicts in cyberspace; instead, that COIN doctrine could be directly applied to the fifth domain because the doctrinal axioms underpinning cyber and physical insurgencies are one and the same.

Although still awaiting enshrinement in official military doctrine, the concept of ‘cyber-COIN’ was effectively recognised as a valid concept by the US military in 2015 with Duggan’s work (Duggan, 2015). He proposed the idea of ‘Counternetwork COIN’ and defined the tactic as employing “*nontechnical attacks against people to manipulate their perceptions, behaviors, and actions*” (Duggan, 2015: 50). The existence of such a thing as cyber-COIN is supported by scholars such as Rid, who commented: “...*the new Web, in an abstract but highly relevant way, resembles — and inadvertently mimics — the principles of subversion and irregular warfare*” (Rid *et al*, 2009: 2).

Turning to the Syrian conflict, a number of scholars have examined the cyber element through the insurgent/



COIN/target audience framework that underpins cyber-COIN, without explicit reference to the concept. Very few of these papers critically examine the nature of the relationship between the Assad regime and the SEA, thereby undermining much of their arguments with assumptions about the nature of the relationship. Shehabat's work (Shehabat, 2011) categorises all actors within the Syrian conflict into three broad categories: '[Syrian] State versus foreign organizations,' '[Syrian] State versus individual' and 'foreign organizations versus [Syrian] State.' However, this omits the 'non-state pro-Assad actor' category, within which the SEA may conceivably fit.

Other scholars are more deterministic; some have said the SEA is an Assad (Khamis *et al* 2014 and Zambelis, 2012)—or even Iranian (Duggan, 2015) state-backed group, and some have simply refused to address the nature of the relationship entirely. A case of this is in one of the few notable quantitative studies of the SEA. Callaghan, *et al* (2014) examines how the group sits within the wider context of the social network of all groups active in the conflict. This study confirms the presentation of the SEA as a leader within the pro-Assad faction of the cyber conflict, but carefully avoids developing an opinion on the relationship between the group and the state. Kan is one of the few to muse on the importance of the subject, commenting: "*Who exactly is the Syrian Electronic Army? Is it a group of a state-sponsored "patriotic hackers," an unaffiliated association, a loose assemblage of individuals sympathetic to the regime of Bashar Assad, or some combination of each?*" (Kan, 2013: 113)

To ignore the specific aspects of the Assad/ SEA relationship is dangerous, given both the rising importance that cyber conflict is playing in international relations, and the nuanced complexities of the relationship between a state authority and proxy force that have been shown to exist outside of a cyber context through studies of groups such as the US Minutemen movement (Shapira, 2013).

When attempting to understand the importance and complexity of the issues of the state/non-state proxy actor relationship an unusual but potentially useful case study has arisen with the context of the relationship between the famous US actor Steven Seagal and Russian Federation president Vladimir Putin. After an extended friendship, Putin recently bestowed Russian citizenship upon Seagal, commenting that the gesture "*might be a sign of the gradual normalization of relations between our countries*" (Roth, 2016). His comment shows that his relationship with Seagal can be seen (by Putin, at least) as having some influence on the relationship between the US and Russia. Although Seagal's actions may mirror the warmer sentiment and conciliatory air towards Russia coming from US President Donald Trump (Rozsa, 2016), it is a mistake to naturally assume that Seagal is, by default, a legitimised and official arm of US foreign policy. As curious as the case study is, the dynamics between state and proxy force that the case highlights are as applicable to the relationship between the SEA and the Assad regime. It is this dynamic, seated within a cyber-COIN framework, which the remainder of this paper examines.

Method

The core topic of study for this paper is the nature of the relationship between the SEA — as a group and as individual members — and the Assad regime. By necessity, addressing this issue has required an attempted attribution of SEA activity to the Assad regime. Although there are suggested frameworks for actor attribution within a cyber context (Rid *et al*, 2014), there is scant publically available information on the SEA of the type required to apply such models. Given that this data is unlikely to become available to researchers in the near future, a broad approach to gathering qualitative data from unconventional sources has been used for this research. Annex A of this document provides an overview of the main data source categories used.



The researcher acknowledges that most data presented in this paper is circumstantial and susceptible to error. The justification for the approach to data collection is that no single publically available data source provides a foundation to support the theoretical goals of the research. In defence of this position, most, if not all, academic and cyber security industry publications on the SEA are based on similar data sources, often without acknowledgment of the potential risks of using them.

Steps taken to mitigate these limitations include:

- The caveat that all source data included in the paper, although critically assessed to the best of the researcher's capabilities, was ultimately accepted in good faith; it is assumed that sources have not actively tried to deceive or present falsified data.
- All results are transparently presented, with extensive footnotes, to allow the reader to accurately source the data and reconstruct the analysis used within the report.
- In an attempt to manage analyst bias Heuer's *Analysis of Competing Hypotheses* (ACH) method (Heuer, 1999), along with the weighted scoring method implemented within the Parc ACH software (ACH2.0.5 Download Page, 2016) was used to analyse five separate hypotheses around the relationship between the Assad state and the SEA. These hypothesis and results are presented in Annex B, along with the source of each item of data.

The collected data has been analysed in several ways, including a timeline analysis of the SEA's activities (Annex C) and a modified form of Social Network Analysis used to assess the SEA's email links to the regime. The specific modification was for the graphs to show only communication from a single individual to a wider network, as opposed to direct communication within a network. Where necessary, a native bilingual Arabic/English speaker has been employed to verify translated text.

Attributing the SEA to the Assad regime

Although it is certain that the SEA is staunchly pro-Assad, the formality of its relationship to the regime remains deeply ambiguous. Even the SEA itself, in its early form, seemed unsure of its position on this issue; the group claimed to be an official arm of the pro-Assad Syrian state in the very first iteration of Syrian-es.com (IntelCrawler, 2014), only to retract the statement a short time later (IntelCrawler, 2014). This on-again/off-again nature of the SEA's approach to the relationship typified much of the group's early communications; however, in later years the group has adopted a policy of routinely denying any formal connection to the regime (Keys, 2013 and Katerji, 2013 and Ferran, 2013). Of course the SEA's public denial of a connection to the regime does not automatically separate state and group, especially given the SEA's involvement in activities that it defines as 'counter terrorism' (Cameron *et al*, 2013).

An inadvertent attempt to clarify the Assad/ SEA relationship lies within the within wording of the FBI's 'cyber most wanted' list and the varying ways relationships are described, when comparing the listing of the SEA members and a separate group of Iranian hackers. The carefully worded listing for the SEA describes its actions as '*in support of the Syrian regime*' (FBI, 2016a, 2016b,) rather than hacks *on behalf* of the Syrian regime (FBI, 2016c). This nuanced use of language by the FBI is deliberate, as demonstrated by the more explicit language it uses to link official organisations of the Iranian state to a separate group of cyber activists on the list (FBI, 2016c). The difference in wording strongly suggests that the US government has, at least, recognised the ambiguous nature of the relationship between the Assad regime and the SEA.

Even a cursory examination of both the way the group describes itself and the way it is described by third



parties, shows that a deeper examination of the available data is necessary when considering an attribution of the SEA to the Assad regime.

The Syrian Computer Society connection

Possibly the next most common port of call after the SEA's own statements regarding their relationship to the Assad regime, comes from Bashar al-Assad's former status as the head of the Syrian Computer Society (SCS). Although rarely explicitly stated, the intimation is that Assad is somehow naturally predicated to support groups like the SEA, due to his former post (Giles, 2012). Further examples of this logic comes from Noman, who, when asked about the relationship between the Assad regime and the SEA, stated:

"What we know is that [the SEA's former] domain name was registered by the Syrian Computer Society. We looked into the Syrian Computer Society and discovered that it was headed by [Bashar] al-Assad in the 1990s... It's hosted on the network of the Syrian government."(Bea quoting Noman, 2013)

Although the above statement is built from facts, the presentation of these facts is misleading. Noman relies on implication of their potential meaning over critical analysis of their actual meaning. Others seem content with the implications of a connection between the SEA and the SCS (Grohe, 2015) while others such as Shehabat, go further and conclude that the SEA is an arm of the "*embattled regime's intelligence service*" (Shehabat, 2011: 6), by incorrectly asserting that the "Mukhabarat" (Syrian military intelligence) owns the SCS (Shehabat, 2011) and that hence the SEA is in effect an adjunct government entity due to its connection to the SCS.

A possibly more meaningful analysis moves away from Assad's relationship to the SCS and what it may imply about the SEA, while still acknowledging the importance of the role of the SCS as the sole state-backed provider of Syrian web domain hosting services. Given that the SEA's main website (<http://www.syrian-es.com/> or "Syrian-es.com", which is currently offline) is hosted by SCS-NET, the arm of the SCS tasked with internet service provision (ISP) and all "es" domain name registration in Syria, the Syrian state appears to be providing, in effect, a cyber safe haven for the SEA.

The SCS is a pro-Assad arm of the Syrian government, and the group and all of its ISP infrastructure have been controlled by pro-Assad forces during the conflict. Given these facts, the uninterrupted presence of content on Syrian-es.com for at least three years suggests a relationship that goes beyond mere acquiescence of the state towards the SEA; it suggests material support of the SEA from the state. The most obvious counter argument to this assertion is that the regime is simply not aware of the existence of Syrian-es.com, or even of the SEA. This is unlikely, given the early exposure the SEA received in the domestic pro-Assad media (Noman, 2016) and a speech Assad gave in 2011 (O'Brien, 2011). In that speech he stressed the validity of cyberspace activity in the wider context of the Syrian conflict, and came close to directly name-checking the SEA.

A final observation that supports the theory that the Assad regime is deliberately choosing to allow the SEA to operate out of a digital safe harbour is that the regime, as a body, has been extremely successful in regulating internet content in Syria, periodically blocking access to such services as YouTube, Twitter and Facebook (Shehabat, 2011), and routinely removing opposition websites from the es space. This demonstrates a granular awareness of the content of the es space by the Assad regime, and in turn implies a deliberate decision to not remove the SEA content.

Where does this observation leave the Assad regime with regard to its accountability for the activities of the



SEA? Returning to the Steven Seagal-Vladimir Putin case study, while there is no evidence of a US authority actively endorsing Seagal's international relations efforts, there is equally no evidence of the US authority making attempts to prevent them. This highlights an important concept: that a nation state's lack of restraint of groups/individuals claiming to represent its interests is as important as positive reinforcement of them. In plain terms, in certain situations silence can speak volumes. What differentiates the Seagal-US and Assad-SEA cases is that the SEA is engaged in overtly criminal activities in the name of the state. Actions that when directed at the Assad regime, the regime is quick to stamp out. These factors further imply acquiescence on the part of the Assad regime towards the SEA

Although the persistence of Syrian-es.com does not go so far as to prove the SEA is, as some have claimed, a "*state-supervised*" (Gallagher, 2013) organisation, it does show that the Assad regime is, at the very least, adopting a highly biased 'blind-eye policy' towards the group.

Other connections

The insight that can be drawn from the Assad regime's approach to the SEA website is that the group is closer to the regime than the standard Internet user; however, there are other pieces of data available that may add clarity to this assessment.

A potentially useful example arose in July 2012 with the WikiLeaks release of the *Syria Files* (WikiLeaks, 2012), a trove of email messages stolen by hackers from multiple members of the pro-Assad regime. It contained more than two million messages spanning August 2006 to March 2012. Given the volume of communication, the date range, the representation of prominent regime figures in the files, and the Assad regime's previously demonstrated lack of discretion in regards to secure communication, this data is an obvious source to examine for evidence of a more tangible SEA connection to the regime.

One such connection within the Syria Files data set is apparent between the SEA's Tiger persona and elements of the Syrian authority (although the Tiger persona is not named within the FBI indictment but appears to conduct support functions, such as malware testing and infrastructure maintenance). With two occurrences of messages involving the tiger.tiger248@gmail.com ('tiger.tiger248'), being evident within the files. This is significant as the tiger.tiger248 email address has been linked to the Tiger persona and was left as part of the SEA's 'calling card' in previous website defacements claimed by the group (the most prominent of which was the 29 July 2013 defacement of the Thomson Reuters Twitter account.)

Various commentary on the SEA has identified the presence of the tiger.tiger248 address within the Syria Files, and speculated that it may link the SEA to the Assad regime (IntelCrawler, 2014). However, this assessment accepts, at face value, the WikiLeaks claim suggested by the data set's presentation: that all the email addresses in the Syria Files are directly related to the pro-Assad Syrian regime.

Upon deeper investigation, it becomes apparent that tiger.tiger248 was the addressee on two messages, both from gk005@hotmail.com ('gk005'). The first message commented on the mostly non-violent nature of anti-government protests (WikiLeaks, 2012a). The other detailed the Assad regime's attempts to find a non-violent solution to the conflict. Although the intended meaning of the messages is difficult to discern without further context, they appear to be relatively bland, propaganda-style press releases aimed at supporters of the Assad side of the conflict.

The gk005 address has been attributed by the researcher to an individual named Ghaleb Kandil (he cites it as his contact address on Facebook (Kandil, 2016)). Kandil is a Lebanese mainstream journalist (translated



career biography included in Annex D) who has been responsible for a number of pro-Assad news reports since the start of the conflict. The WikiLeaks Syria Files database revealed seven messages from or to gk005, including the two sent to tiger.tiger248. Of the fifteen addressees included within the seven emails, only two appear to be obvious Syrian government email addresses. The others are webmail accounts, such as Gmail and Hotmail, which reduces their diagnostic value for attribution to the Syrian regime. The two Syrian government email addresses that gk005 had communicated with are profiled as follows.

- n.kabibo@mopa.gov.sy — gk005 only sent one message to this address, which was actually defunct when the message was sent, on 16 April 2011 (shown by an email delivery failure message dated 18 February 2010 (WikiLeaks, 2012b)) (WikiLeaks, 2012c). From the analysis of other messages from and to this address, the account appears to have belonged to a junior Ministry of Presidential Affairs official named Nizar Kabibo. Kabibo's job seems to have been coordinating visits by foreign journalists to Syria, as assessed from messages sent by such organisations as Sky News, which informed the recipient of upcoming foreign coverage of Syria and Assad (WikiLeaks, 2012d).
- minister@moi.gov.sy — gk005 sent five messages containing pro-Assad content, in a similar thematic vein to the messages sent to tiger.tiger248. This is most likely a generic Syrian Ministry of Interior address (possibly harvested from the contact form on the Syrian government home page (Syrian Ministry of Interior Home Page, 2016)) to which gk005 may have been sending pro-Assad news articles for comment.

Useful in further defining Kandil/gk005's relationship to the Assad regime is the analysis of a separate 2012 dump of Assad's personal email account (Booth *et al*, 2012). From this trove two individuals (Sheherazad Jaafari and Hadeel al-Al), sharing one email address (sam@alshahba), were identified as key personal advisers to Assad on mainstream media management and the regime's approach to social media. Within the Syria Files there are no examples of communication between the sam@alshahba address and either gk005 or tiger.tiger248. This further distances gk005 and the SEA from the core inner circle of the Assad regime.

A graphical representation of the relationship between the tiger.tiger248 address and the Syrian government address is shown in Figure 1, for clarity.



Image 1

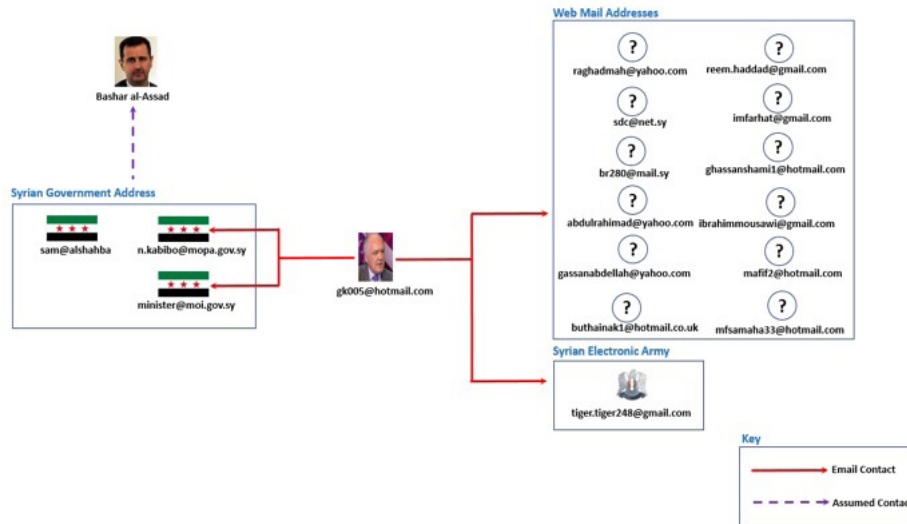


Figure 1: Communications from gk005@hotmail.com

The analysis presented in Figure 1 demonstrates that even a claim of loose association between the SEA and the Syrian authority is shaky, at best, if based solely on the presence of tiger.tiger248's email address in the Syrian Files. The most that can be claimed is a third degree of separation between the Tiger persona and a defined figure linked to the Assad regime, and even this is charitable — under some social network analysis frameworks, the fact that the n.kabibo@mopa.gov.sy address was defunct at the time of gk005's message would classify the relationship as having no connectivity value whatsoever (Figure 1 is intended to show communication attempts by gk500, rather than a bi-directional communication network).

Compounding the issue of the relevance of the gk005 persona is the very short date range the seven email messages cover; one was dated 16 April 2011 and the other six were sent from 5 to 14 July 2011. These observations regarding the tiger.tiger248 address, combined with the absence of any other address linked to the SEA in the Syria Files, are far from linking the SEA to the Assad regime. Instead, they place it on the very peripheries of the regime, and paint a partial picture of a group maintaining loose links to regime outliers.

This assessment stands in stark juxtaposition to the assessment around the Assad regime's indirect but overt support of the SEA through their inaction around the SEA's presence within the es web space, and paints the picture of a state backing a group but without apparently communicating with it. While it is possible that this communication between state and group is simply not observable, this is unlikely given how senior members of the Assad regime have shown to be communicating across the spectrum of the pro-Assad government apparatus in both the Syria Files and 2012 data leaks. Instead the researcher would propose that the evidence points to an alternative form of relationship between the SEA and the Assad regime.

Close Enough?

In the absence of a 'smoking gun' piece of evidence that conclusively links or fully separates the Assad regime and the SEA, a picture emerges of a loose connection between state and group, the 'close enough' relationship



proposed by this paper. Within this relationship are strategic incentives for both parties to keep the SEA at a distance from the regime, preserving deniability, while keeping them closer than the average Syrian to maintain the group's acquiescence to Assad policy. When viewing the available data through this lens a more satisfying picture of state and group relationship emerges.

Indirect contact with the regime through individuals, such as Ghaleb Kandil/gk005, and pro-Assad media organisations, such as <http://documents.sy/> (attributed by a 2014 data breach of the site), places the Tiger persona close enough to the regime to be cognisant of the desired direction of the pro-Assad media narrative. However, it maintains enough distance from core regime figures to preserve the regime's plausible deniability of SEA actions.

The trend set by the loose connection of the Tiger persona to the pro-Assad media appears not to be an anomaly and continues within examples of other SEA-attributed emails and their context in the Syria Files leaks. For example, the SaQeR.SyRia@gmail.com address left by the SEA on a defaced page of the French embassy in Damascus in 2011 (Information Warfare Monitor/OpenNet Initiative, 2016) appears in the Syria Files as a recipient of further media-style state communication (WikiLeaks, 2012e). When analysing the data collectively within the ACH methodology framework (Annex B), of the five hypothesis tested, the least disproved hypothesis with a score of -11.0 (the hypothesis closest to 0 is considered the least disproved) is that the SEA is *informally connected to the Assad regime through inadvertently generated connections*.

When an alternative to the concept of one-to-one relationships representing power is abandoned, then the SEA's status within a 'close enough' network becomes far more significant. The 'strength of weak ties' (Granovetter, 1973) theory would appear to underlie this 'close enough' nature of the SEA, as even loosely connected networks can be extremely powerful under certain circumstances. This is practically illustrated through the expansion of the gk005 network shown in Figure 1, with further data drawn from the Syria Files and a previously insignificant email address (new data shown in green in Figure 2 below).

Image 2

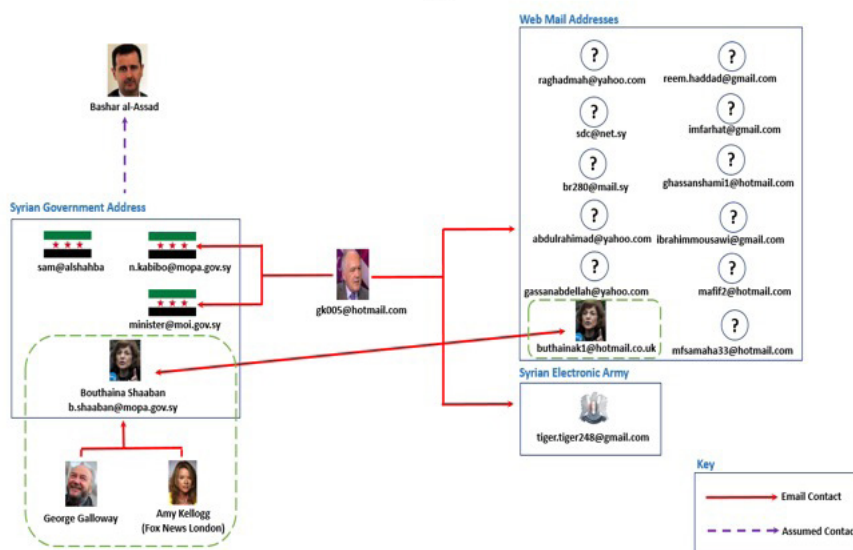


Figure 2: Expanded communication network of gk005@gmail.com (new elements highlighted in green)



The previously unattributed buthainak1@hotmail.co.uk address tracks back to Bouthaina Shaaban (via b.shaaban@mopa.gov.sy). Shaaban is the current most-senior media advisor to Assad and a senior political figure in her own right within the regime. Closer analysis of Shaaban's emails shows direct contact with senior Western media personalities and political figures, such as Amy Kellogg from Fox News London (WikiLeaks, 2012f) and former UK member of parliament George Galloway (Ravid, 2012).

This new data still separates the SEA from Assad and the regime; however, the incorporation of an individual like Shaaban now places members of the SEA in direct contact with a significant regime interlocutor, two degrees of separation from a major regime figure and three degrees from a major, internationally recognised Western political figure. While there is still no evidence of direct contact between Shaaban or Galloway and the SEA, the network fragment depicted in Figure 2 hints at a potentially powerful social network that could be easily leveraged by the Syrian State.

The strategic appeal of 'close enough' for a cyber-COIN force

It is unknown whether the creation of a 'close enough' relationship between the SEA and the Assad state is the result of a deliberate choices by either party, or even whether either group is aware of the dynamics of the relationship. What can be assessed, however, are the benefits the relationship bring for both parties within the SEA-adopted role as a cyber-COIN force for the Assad regime.

The distance between the Assad regime and the SEA is obviously appealing from Assad's perspective, through the classic benefits brought by a state utilizing a proxy force (Mumford, 2013), but the relationship also benefits the SEA. As the group is not technically an official organ of the Assad state, it can engage in activities that would be prohibited were the relationship more formal. An example of this power is the group's mobilisation of a pan-Arabic diaspora (the most prominent example being the close correlation of the target set pursued by both the SEA and various Iranian hacking groups circa 2011 (Information Warfare Monitor/OpenNet Initiative, 2016). Another example is found in temporary alliances with hacker groups that have vehemently opposed the Assad regime (e.g. the SEA-Anonymous 'team up' in 2013 and the joint targeting of the Turkish government networks (Russia Today, 2013)).

Additionally, ideological flexibility allows the SEA to present messages with an air of quasi-legitimacy that would appeal to the core Assad opposition — something official organs of the Assad regime could not credibly do. This allows the SEA (and, by default, the Assad regime) to challenge what Rid terms the 'taboo' (Rid, 2009) of the COIN force: appearing to give ground on the core issue of the insurgency. The SEA is left free to intimate changes and concessions that could rob the Assad opposition of online support, while the Assad regime retains the ability to later deny any concessions intimated by the SEA due to that lack of a formalised relationship.

Through the wider lens of COIN theory, the SEA's 'close enough' nature gives the group the powerful ability to invert aspects of the insurgent/COIN dynamic, such as Rid's 'taboo' factor and a number of the asymmetries between insurgency and COIN observed by Galula (Galula, 1964). Such factors as the COIN force being bound by truth, and anonymity harming the COIN cause, become flexible in the hands of the SEA. Moreover, most importantly for the Assad cause, the SEA inverts Rid's third summation of Galula's asymmetries — that "*traditionally within the media sphere, the insurgent has the initiative while the counterinsurgent reacts*" (Rid *et al.*, 2009; introduction Xi). This is hugely important in a conflict with a significant cyberspace component, owing to the naturally weaker position the state finds itself in within a cyber-insurgency context. As Rid comments, "*on balance, the new media environment tends to favour the*



irregular forces within an insurgency-style conflict." (Rid *et al*, 2009: 2) He adds, "*the unintended consequences for armed conflict is that non-state insurgencies benefit far more from the new media than do government and counter insurgencies.*" (Rid *et al*, 2009: 14). The 'close enough' relationship allows the SEA to challenge these imbalances, regardless of the formality of the relationship it has with the state.

Conclusion

Whether the creation of the SEA is the result of a deliberate covert operation on the part of a state organisation or merely a happy coincidence for the regime, the latitude that the Assad regime has undoubtedly given to the SEA has allowed the group to deliver what some have assessed as "*the most sophisticated response [from a state] to [the] online activism of the Arab Spring*" (Fisher *et al*, 2011).

With such heady praise for the SEA's achievements, the lack of definition of the true nature of the relationship between the Assad regime and the group is unsatisfactory. This paper has examined the available data on the SEA and the wider digital aspect of the Syrian conflict in an effort to fill this gap.

What the researcher found was that the available data neither conclusively connected the Assad regime to the SEA, nor did it equivocally separate them. The final conclusion of the research is that a deterministic piece of data that would resolve this impasse was not found because it does not exist. Moreover, the true nature of the relationship between state and group lies somewhere between the poles of state-backed and autonomous activist group. Other researchers have observed that the Assad state created an environment for the SEA to succeed (Syrian Freedom, 2012), but it is this paper's unique contention that this 'close enough' connection creates a virtuous circle between state and group irrespective of the formality of the relationship. Additionally, the paper highlights the strategic advantages to both parties of a 'close enough' relationship within a cyber-COIN context, thus adding much-needed animation to the often theoretically thin concept of cyber-COIN.

The future implications for this research are significant, given the pivotal role that cyberspace appears to have played not just in the Syrian conflict and the wider Arab Spring, but in conflicts such as the one currently ongoing in the Ukraine. While researchers are now understanding the role of the cyber insurgent, an examination of the nation state's response to cyber insurgency is hugely under-addressed within the literature. The need for this study comes from an observation made by Galula (1964) eruditely pointing out, that there is not a single rule set for revolutionary warfare. Instead there is the set of rules and principles that guides the revolutionary, and a separate set that guides the counter-revolutionary and only through understanding both can we hope to understand the details of a conflict.

About the author

Stewart Bertram is a talented and experienced intelligence and security professional who combines nearly a decade of expertise with relevant academic qualifications. Grounded solidly in a background of computing and social science, Stewart presents a professional customer facing offering, that mixes technical skill with a transparent and easily accessible research methodology.

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Annexes

[Annex A](#)

[Annex B](#)

[Annex C](#)



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[Annex D](#)



Does ISIS satisfy the criteria of an apocalyptic Islamic cult? An evidence-based historical qualitative meta-analysis

by Bruce A. Barron and Diane L. Maye



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Abstract

The U.S. has been battling ISIS and its forerunners for over two decades; however, ISIS continues to endure and expand. While described as a death cult by some political leaders and other key stakeholders, this assertion received little consideration in the scholarly literature. The purpose of this study was to ascertain whether ISIS satisfied the criteria of an apocalyptic Islamic cult through the application of a historical qualitative research design and meta-analysis. Based on the results, the null hypothesis that ISIS does not satisfy the criteria of an apocalyptic Islamic cult was rejected, and the hypothesis that ISIS satisfies the criteria of an apocalyptic Islamic cult was accepted. This outcome has significant implications regarding U.S. policy and how practitioners develop effective strategies to neutralize the threat.

Keywords: *ISIS; Islam; typology; sect; cult; apocalyptic*

Introduction

The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS or ISIL) is recognized as one of the most violent terrorist organizations in the world. Their persistence is well demonstrated by the fact the United States (U.S.) has been combatting ISIS and its forerunners for over two decades. ISIS continues to expand its influence despite the allocation of increasing counterterrorism resources. For example, the U.S. reportedly spent more than \$5.53 billion in the fight against ISIS and currently spends almost \$11 million per day (U.S. Department of Defense, 2015).

The reasons for ISIS' continued success despite the vast amount of resources invested by the U.S. are uncertain. Regardless of this lack of understanding, U.S. military strategy to dismantle ISIS recently changed from a hybrid model to a conventional boots-on-the-ground model (Durden, 2016; Tilghman, 2016). The current strategy is based on the assumption that ISIS is first and foremost a terrorist organization.

Although ISIS employs terrorist tactics, some political leaders and other key stakeholders characterize ISIS as a death cult (ABC News, 2015; World News, 2015). However, the cult-like aspects of ISIS receive little consideration in the scholarly literature. The significance of identifying and countering an apocalyptic cult should not be underestimated. For example, several post mortem analyses of the U.S. federal assault on the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Texas concluded the tragedy was directly related to the misinformed application of aggressive tactics that were misinterpreted by the cult leader as the beginning of the apocalypse (Pitts, 1998, p. 209).

Considering the lessons learned from the Waco tragedy and unsuccessful efforts to degrade and dismantle ISIS, it is important to determine ISIS' status as an apocalyptic Islamic cult versus a religious terrorist organization or other entity. Identifying ISIS as a cult has important strategic security implications



regarding the development of effective counter measures in defeating this organization while concomitantly minimizing costs in terms of lives and resources. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to ascertain whether ISIS satisfies the criteria of an apocalyptic Islamic cult.

Literature Review

The continued expansion of ISIS presents significant challenges to U.S. national security. Expectedly, strategies and tactics are based on the assumption ISIS is a brutal terrorist organization; however, this approach in neutralizing the threat is achieving marginal results. The idea ISIS might be an apocalyptic Islamic cult and its implications in thwarting their expansion led to a comprehensive search of scholarly and quasi-scholarly literature. The outcomes of the literature search are stratified across two domains; namely, research that concludes ISIS is a religious group and research that concludes ISIS is something other than religious group. The literature search did not include ISIS as a terrorist organization because this group is already a recognized terrorist group.

The literature review within the first domain is organized using the typological continuum influenced by Niebuhr (1929), Troeltsch (1931), Weber (1964), and Nelson (1968).

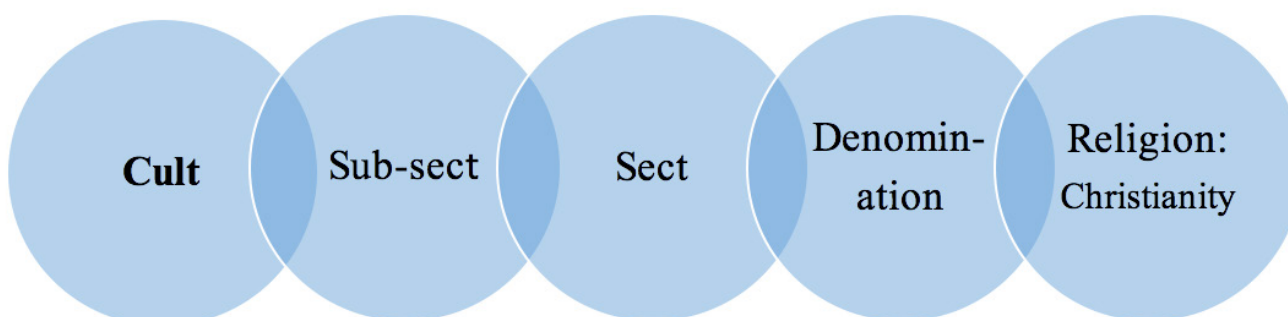


Figure 1: Christian-based typological continuum from cult to religion

It is important to realize this continuum is Christian-based and the boundaries between cults, sects, and religions are frequently blurred. The literature supporting ISIS as a religious entity is presented in order from left to right (i.e. cult – sect – religion).

A comprehensive literature search yielded three articles supporting the hypothesis that ISIS is cult (Berger, 2015; LaPalm, 2014; Schmid, 2015). Of these three sources, only LaPalm (2014, p. 7) concluded ISIS is a cult, stating “while many Islamist extremist organizations have cult-like features, ISIL is perhaps the most cultish in history.” LaPalm uses Lifton’s (1961) criteria as a basis for her analysis. She asserts ISIS satisfies all of Lifton’s criteria except for that of confession. This research has several limitations: (1) thresholds for satisfying Lifton’s criteria are not delineated, (2) the number of criteria required to satisfy Lifton’s criteria is not specified, and (3) the paper is published in a non-refereed journal. As such, LaPalm’s research is considered theoretical and hypothesis generating. Conversely, Berger’s publication is considered both credible and reliable; however, this paper focuses on ISIS’ use of social media rather than their religious ideology. Nevertheless, he proffers a definition for the word *apocalyptic* that is applied in this study. Lastly, Schmid’s



research does not assess ISIS as a cult; rather, he provides counter arguments to ISIS' propaganda suggesting their ideology is cult-like as compared to modern Islam.

Sliding slightly to the right on the continuum, Barker (2014, p. 10) implies ISIS is a sub-sect because of their extreme Salafi-Jihadist ideology. Similarly, Souaiaia's (2015) historical review of the genealogy of ISIS provides great insight regarding their religious beliefs. He argues through an analysis of Islamic Traditionalism that ISIS is an Islamic legal denomination, which is comparable to that of a Christian sub-sect. Lastly, Fromson and Simon (2015) characterize ISIS as *both* a sect and cult; terms that are not clearly defined in their paper.

The second domain of the literature review consists of research concluding ISIS is neither a religion-based group nor a terrorist organization. In addition to being a cult and sect, Fromson and Simon (2015, p. 8) argue ISIS is also a guerilla army and territorial administrator. Other publications assert ISIS is a hybrid terrorist organization (Ganor, 2015), revolutionary armed group (Kalyvas, 2015), revolutionary state (Walt, 2015), and pseudo-state (Cronin, 2015). While these studies fail to support the hypothesis that ISIS is an apocalyptic cult, it is clear there is no consensus regarding the true nature of ISIS.

In summary the literature search identified one quasi-scholarly paper (LaPalm, 2014). LaPalm studied ISIS' cult-like attributes and concluded ISIS was a cult; however, her research was regarded as theoretical, not scientific. Other published research has characterized ISIS as an entity ranging from a cult to a pseudo-state as summarized in Table 1.

Religion-based organization	Not a religion-based organization
Sect	Pseudo-state
Sub-sect	Revolutionary state
Cult	Revolutionary armed group
	Guerilla army
	Hybrid terrorist organization

Table 1: Characterization of ISIS

There was no consensus in the academic literature regarding the true essence of ISIS. According to Sun Tzu (trans. 2000), "[i]f you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles." In this situation, it appears policy officials as well as scholars and academics do not understand the true essence of ISIS, which may be contributing to their inability to neutralize this threat. Therefore, the outcome of the literature review substantiated the necessity for this research.

Methodology

This research used an evidence-based historical qualitative research design combined with a meta-analysis of unclassified literature. The search strategy included key words and phrases followed by the use of Boolean operators to narrow search results. The meta-analysis involved the systematic collection of information from the following sources: (1) library sources, (2) commercial online services, (3) gray literature, (4) Internet sources, (5) searchable databases, (6) social media, and (7) subject matter experts. Information assessed as credible and reliable were entered into a Microsoft Word document while valid sources were entered into the Microsoft Word Reference Manager.



The hypothesis and null hypothesis for the study are:

H_1 : ISIS satisfies the criteria of an apocalyptic Islamic cult.

H_0 : ISIS does not satisfy the criteria of an apocalyptic Islamic cult.

The research started with defining the word *cult* and identifying a valid list of cult characteristics. The term *apocalyptic* was also defined. Pertinent information regarding the actions of ISIS was collected and analyzed.

Due to the study design, structured analytic techniques (Heuer & Pherson, 2011; Jones, 1998) were used to analyze the data. Key references for important differentiators were annotated. A comparative analysis was used to assess the degree of concordance across Islam (religion), Sunni Islam (sect), Salafist movement (movement), and ISIS ideology to approximate ISIS' location on the Islamic typological continuum depicted in Figure 2 (Barron, 2016, p. 20).

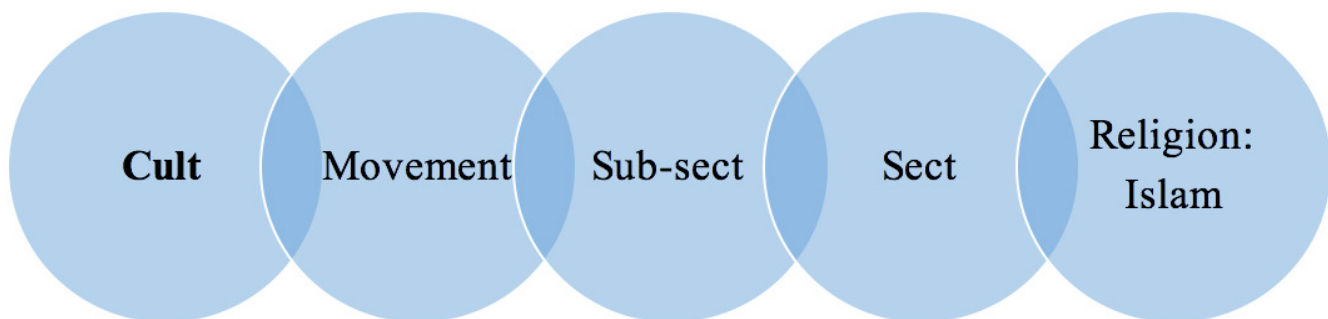


Figure 2: Islamic-based typological continuum from cult to religion

The second analysis applied Lifton's (1961) criteria to test the hypothesis. There were two reasons to use Lifton's criteria: (1) Lifton's publication is both credible and reliable, and (2) LaPalm (2014) applied Lifton's criteria to argue ISIS is a cult. Lastly, an Analysis of Competing Hypotheses (ACH) was performed to systematically evaluate alternative hypotheses and reduce the risk of researcher bias. The hypotheses tested included the following:

H1: ISIS is not a religion-based organization

H2: ISIS is a cult.

H3: ISIS is a movement.

H4: ISIS is a sub-sect

H5: ISIS is a sect.

H6: ISIS is an accepted religion.

The basic hypothesis (**H2**) was tested using three different analytic methods. The outcomes of the analyses were used to generate a probabilistic conclusion. It was required ISIS meet the definition of a cult and all three analyses must support the hypothesis to conclude with any reasonable degree of certainty that ISIS is a cult. Additionally, ISIS must also satisfy the definitions of *apocalyptic* and *Islamic*.

Analysis

The analysis begins with characterizing key terms such as religion, sect, movement, and cult. The word *religion* is "reserved for solutions to questions of ultimate meaning which postulate the existence of a



supernatural being, world, or force, and which further postulate that this force is active, that events and conditions here on earth are influenced by the supernatural” (Stark & Bainbridge, 1979, p. 119). The supernatural aspect of religion differentiates it from other organizations such as governments and terrorists organizations. Furthermore, established religions accept and are accepted by the dominant society (Stark & Bainbridge, 1979, p. 123).

Whereas a *sect* is created by a split within an established religion, a *religious movement* attempts to cause or prevent change in a religion while striving to become the dominant faith (Stark & Bainbridge, 1979; p. 124). Conversely, cults are groups that split from mainstream society espousing very different worldviews. Cults add “to that culture a new revelation or insight justifying the claim that it is different, new, more advanced” (Stark & Bainbridge, 1979, p. 125).

Based on religious and sociological descriptions of cults, the working definition of cult for this study is: “A cult is a group of people whose religious beliefs represent a radical split from other mainstream religions and sects. The organization’s ideology and practices places them at odds with and creates tension in their dominant society. Its members usually display excessive devotion to the leader or ideology, and the leader or ideology is unquestioningly followed by its believers” (Barron, 2016, p. 26). A synthesis of the scholarly literature identified 10 key traits that characterize cults (Table 2).

Cult characteristic	References
1. Charismatic leader	Alami, 2015; American Family Foundation, 2002; Cult Information Centre, 2016; Dawson, 2006, p. 28; Giambalvo, 2016; John, 2015; Lalich & Langone, 2015; Langone, 2015; Tinaz, 2005, p. 88; Yinger, 1970
2. Authoritarian leadership	Alami, 2015; American Family Foundation, 2002; Dawson, 2006, p. 28; Giambalvo, 2008; John, 2015; Lalich & Langone, 2015; Langone, 2015; Richardson, 1993; Rhodes, 2011; Tinaz, 2005
3. Exclusivism	American Family Foundation, 2002; Dawson, 2006; Giambalvo, 2008; John, 2015; Lalich & Langone, 2015; Langone, 2015; Rhodes, 2001; Stark & Bainbridge, 1985; Wilson, 1982
4. Nonconformists	Dawson, 2006; Giambalvo, 2008; John, 2015; Lalich & Langone, 2015; Langone, 2015; Yinger, 1970
5. Totalistic organization	American Family Foundation, 2002; Cult Information Centre, 2016; Lifton, 1961; Richardson, 1993; Stark & Bainbridge, 1985; Tinaz, 2005



6. Systematic indoctrination	Cult Information Centre, 2016; John, 2015; Lalich & Langone, 2015; Langone, 2015; Rhodes, 2001; Richardson, 1993; Stark & Bainbridge, 1985
7. Us-versus-them mindset	American Family Foundation, 2002; Lalich & Langone, 2015; Langone, 2015; Stark & Bainbridge, 1985
8. The ends justify the means	American Family Foundation, 2002; Cult Information Centre, 2016; Lalich & Langone, 2015; Langone, 2015
9. Aggressive proselytizing	American Family Foundation, 2002; Lalich & Langone, 2015; Langone, 2015; Richardson, 1993; Stark & Bainbridge, 1995
10. Money driven	American Family Foundation, 2002; John, 2015; Lalich & Langone, 2015; Langone, 2015

Table 2: Cult characteristics

The typological comparative analysis is designed to ascertain ISIS' relative position on the Islamic-based continuum shown in Figure 2. In particular ISIS ideology is compared to Islam (religion), Sunni Islam (sect), and Salafist movement (movement). These entities are studied because ISIS' theology is based on Salafi-Jihadism, which links ISIS ideology with Islam (i.e. Salafi-Jihadism – Salafi Islam – Hanbali Islam – Sunni Islam – Islam). The characteristics used to differentiate these religious entities are a product of previously unpublished research (Barron, 2015, p. 15). The outcome of the comparative analysis is summarized in Table 3.

Characteristics	Islam	Sunni Islam	Salafist movement	ISIS theology
Apocalyptic beliefs, strong	No	No	No	Yes (Berger, 2015; Festinger, Fromson & Simon, 2015; Inbari, 2015; McCants, 2015; Schmid, 2015; Socolovsky & Winston, 2015; Wood, 2015)
Beliefs / ideology, conventional	Yes	Yes	Yes / No	No (Barker, 2014; Bunzel, 2015; Schmid, 2015; Wood, 2015)
Born into religion	Yes	Yes	Yes / No	No



Culturally accepted	Yes	Yes	Yes / No	No
Exalted status	No	No	Yes	Yes (Essam, 2014; Lister, 2015; Schmid, 2015)
Islamic based	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes (Barker, 2014; Eckman, 2015; Schmid, 2015; Wood, 2015)
Living leader centric	No	No	No	Yes (Chulov, 2014; Edwards, 2015; Speckhard & Yayla, 2015)
Lifestyle fosters isolationism	No	No	Yes	Yes (Alami, 2015; Shubert, Haddad, & Jones, 2016; Peresin, 2015; Speckhard & Yayla, 2015; Walli, 2015)
Membership exclusive	No	No	Yes	Yes (Masi, 2014; Speckhard & Yayla, 2015; Walli, 2015)
Membership inclusive	Yes	Yes	No	No
Preoccupied with expanding membership	Yes / No	Yes / No	Yes / No	Yes (Bean, 2016; Herrmann, 2014; Lewis, 2015; Peresin, 2015; Schmid, 2015; Speckhard & Yayla, 2015; Walli, 2015)
Preoccupied with making money	No	No	No	Yes (Alsodani, 2015; Cronin, 2015; Speckhard & Yayla, 2015)
Salvation, direct	No	No	Yes	Yes (Speckhard & Yayla, 2015; Walli, 2015)



Symbolism extensive	No	No	No	Yes (Inbari, 2015; McCants, 2015; Walli, 2015; West Point, 2007)
Theology dogmatic	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Theology ritualistic	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Table 3: Comparison of ISIS to Islam (religion), Sunni Islam (sect), and Salafist movement (movement)

The results of the comparative analysis suggest ISIS is situated before Salafist movement on the Islamic continuum (Figure 3).

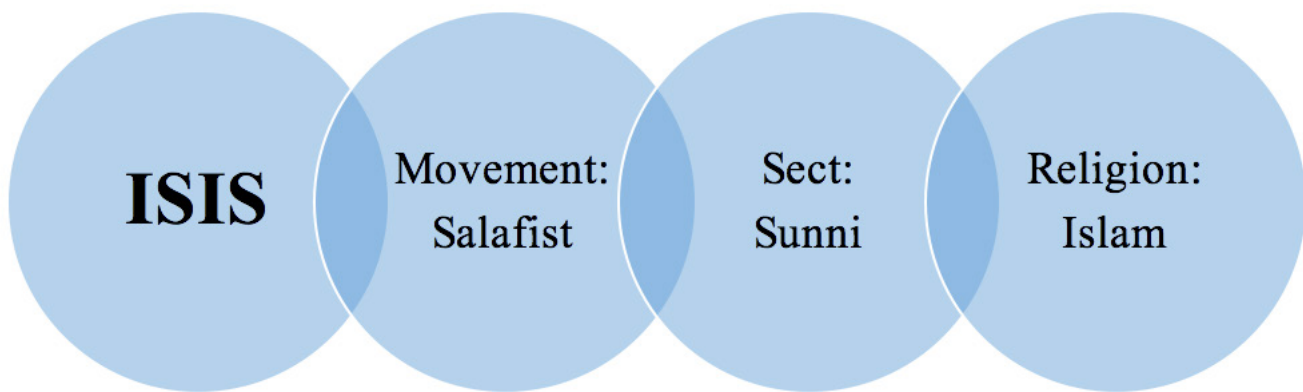


Figure 3: The relative location of ISIS on the continuum from cult to religion (Barron, 2016, p. 71)

The next analysis applies Lifton's criteria for totalism. According to Lifton (1961, p. 419), "[a]ny set of emotionally-charged convictions about man and his relationship to the natural or supernatural world – may be carried by its adherents in a totalistic direction. But this is most likely to occur with those ideologies which are most sweeping in their content and most ambitious – or messianic – in their claims, whether religious, political, or scientific. And where totalism exists, a religion, a political movement, or even a scientific organization becomes little more than a cult." Along these lines Lifton identified eight criteria common to totalistic organizations; however, not all criteria must be satisfied to classify a totalistic group as a cult (Lifton, 1961, p. 420). The results of this analysis are summarized in Table 4.

Lifton criteria	ISIS methods	References
Milieu control	Criterion satisfied	Alami, 2015; Al Arabiya, 2014; LaPalm, 2014; Peresin, 2015; Speckhard & Yayla, 2015; Wood, 2015; Zech & Kelly, 2015



Mystical manipulation	Criterion satisfied	Berger, 2015; Fromson & Simon, 2015; Inbari, 2015; LaPalm, 2014; McCants, 2015; Schmid, 2015; Socolovsky & Winston, 2015; Wood, 2015
Demand for purity	Criterion satisfied	Bunzel, 2015; Deikman, 2003; LaPalm, 2014; McCants, 2015; Speckhard & Yayla, 2015
Cult of confession	Criterion not satisfied	LaPalm, 2014
Sacred science	Criterion satisfied	Bunzel, 2015; LaPalm, 2014; McCants, 2015; Wood, 2015
Loaded language	Criterion satisfied	Bunzel, 2015; LaPalm, 2014; McCants, 2015; Wood, 2015
Humans subordinate to doctrine	Criterion satisfied	Bunzel, 2015; LaPalm, 2014; McCants, 2015; Speckhard & Yayla, 2015
Dispensing of existence	Criterion satisfied	Alami, 2015; Barker, 2014; Hoyle, Bradford, & Frenett, 2015; LaPalm, 2014; Speckhard & Yayla, 2015; Walli, 2015

Table 4: Analysis of Lifton's criteria

The evidence reveals ISIS satisfies Lifton's criteria with one exception (i.e. confession). This outcome is consistent with LaPalm (2014). Since ISIS ideology is based on medieval Islam that did not recognize confession, this criterion does not apply. Lifton (1961, p. 435) contends "[t]he more clearly an environment expresses these eight psychological themes, the greater its resemblance to ideological totalism . . . No milieu ever achieves complete totalism." Therefore, this analysis supports the hypothesis.

The ACH is performed to ensure alternative hypotheses are adequately explored because of the importance of the final determination. The hypotheses tested are summarized in the methods section and the evidence (i.e., cult characteristics) selected for the analysis are summarized in Table 2

Evidence	H1	H2*	H3	H4	H5	H6
Charismatic leader (living)	I	C	I	I	I	I
Authoritarian leadership	I	C	I	I	I	I
Exclusivism	I	C	C	I	I	I
Nonconformists	I	C	C	I	I	I
Totalistic organization	I	C	I	I	I	I
Systematic indoctrination	I	C	I	I	I	I



Us-versus-them mindset	I	C	I	I	I	I
Ends justify the means	I	C	I	I	I	I
Aggressive proselytizing	I	C	I	I	I	I
Money driven	I	C	I	I	I	I

Legend: C = Consistent; I = Inconsistent

* See applicable references listed in Table 3 and Table 4

Table 5: Analysis of Competing Hypotheses

This analysis fails to identify any singular evidence that is consistent (C) or inconsistent (I) across all of the hypotheses. Conversely, evidence abounds that is inconsistent with the hypotheses that ISIS is not a religion-based organization (H1), ISIS is a sub-sect (H4), ISIS is a sect (H5), and ISIS is an accepted religion (H6). Of the two remaining hypotheses, the evidence is minimal for ISIS being a movement (H3) whereas the evidence is entirely consistent with ISIS being a cult (H2). Therefore, the ACH supports the hypothesis.

The results of the analyses suggest ISIS falls far to the left on the Islamic typological continuum and supports the hypothesis ISIS is a cult. Although the analyses support the hypothesis rather than the null hypothesis, the terms *apocalyptic* and *Islamic* must still be explored.

Discussion

The assertion ISIS is an apocalyptic Islamic cult requires ISIS to satisfy each term (i.e. *apocalyptic*, *Islamic*, and *cult*). The word *apocalyptic* is defined as being concerned with the imminent end or radical transformation of the world (Berger, 2015, p. 61). There is little doubt ISIS is committed to returning to a seventh-century puritanical Islamic society whose ultimate goal is bringing about the apocalypse. Eschatology is an essential component of ISIS ideology, which is based on numerous apocalyptic references in the Islamic *hadith* (Socolovsky & Winston, 2015).

There is some controversy regarding whether or not ISIS is truly Islamic (Cole, 2015; Volsky & Jenkins, 2015). In fact, there are multiple arguments against ISIS practicing a true religion of Islam or being consistent with any mainstream Islamic sects, sub-sects, or movements. Schmid (2015, pp. 4) opines that “ISIS claims that it stands for pure and unadulterated Islam as practiced during the first three generations of successors of the Prophet. However, their claim is unsubstantiated and in the absence of theological proof.” However, ISIS ideology is based on the *Qur'an* and *hadith*. Their organization, operations, and tactics are driven by these beliefs. Additionally, the aforementioned results demonstrate the link between ISIS and Islam. Indeed, if the religion of Islam, Islamic scriptures, and *hadiths* were removed from ISIS ideology, then it is highly unlikely this group would have ever emerged.

The analyses also strongly support the idea that ISIS is a cult. In particular, ISIS is trying to resurrect a medieval Islamic society under the rule of a caliph (Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi) whose word is unquestioned and final. Similar to other cults, ISIS has little tolerance for outsiders and believe they should be conquered, forced to convert, or killed. Not surprisingly, ISIS is in a high degree of tension with the dominant society



as opposed to other religions and sects, a trait that is consistent with cultic behavior. Lastly, ISIS' long-term goal is "nothing short of world domination" (Friedland, 2015, p. 16). Unattainable goals, such as world domination, are also consistent with cultic mindsets.

The results of this study fail to support the null hypothesis that there is no relationship between ISIS and an apocalyptic Islamic cult; therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected and the hypothesis is accepted. More specifically, ISIS satisfies the criteria of an apocalyptic Islamic cult with a high degree of probability because ISIS meets the definition and criteria of a cult, meets the definition of apocalyptic, and maintains Islamic roots.

Limitations

Despite these outcomes, this study has several important limitations. First, there are no universally accepted definitions or criteria for terms such as *cult* and *apocalyptic*. Second, since quantitative statistics cannot be calculated, determining the degree of concordance between ISIS and other religious entities (e.g., Islamic movements and sub-sects) necessarily involves professional judgement. Third, determining the outcome of hypothesis testing through the application of Lifton's criteria also requires professional judgment because the number of criteria needed to define a cult was never established. Fourth, since most of the data are extracted from Western sources, there is the inherent risk of Western bias. Lastly, the circumscribed scope of this study is another limitation. Even though the analysis supports the hypothesis, the literature search yields other scholarly works suggesting ISIS is a sub-sect, sect, hybrid terrorist organization, guerilla army, revolutionary group, revolutionary state, and a pseudo-state.

Areas for Future Research

The research conducted in this study supports the assertion ISIS is first and foremost an apocalyptic Islamic cult. This observation offers some predictive value in developing counter measures to impede their current ability to survive and expand. Furthermore, the finding that ISIS is an apocalyptic cult has significant implications for U.S. policy and national security practitioners because the countermeasures needed to effectively neutralize this threat diverge from those used to defeat violent extremist groups. ISIS' multidimensional qualities can lead investigators to differing conclusions regarding the true nature of this organization. Therefore, further research is needed to assess these other dimensions and corroborate the primary outcome of this research: ISIS is a violent cult versus another type of organization. In addition, it will be important to assess the implications of this finding, especially with regard to how practitioners develop strategies to counter the group.

Conclusion

The results of this study support the hypothesis that ISIS is an apocalyptic Islamic cult. While there is little controversy regarding their apocalyptic nature, the literature lacks a consensus regarding their Islamic connection. To be sure there are experts who argue ISIS is not Islamic (Chapman, 2016; Unruh, 2016) and that its leaders are using religion to advance a political rather than a religious agenda (Hasan, 2015). While many Muslim scholars and clerics denounce ISIS, others argue that "when the ideologues of ISIS spell out in great detail their scriptures, tradition and history, they find the Islamic justification for what they are doing, it's simply nonsense to go on claiming that ISIS has nothing to do with Islam" (Chapman, 2016). This study



found compelling evidence to support the argument ISIS ideology is based on Islam and the goal of ISIS is to recreate a medieval Islamic society. Indeed, it is highly unlikely ISIS would have emerged, endured, and expanded in the absence of its Islamic roots. This research also supports the claims of political figures and other key stakeholders that ISIS is a death cult. ISIS not only meets the definition of *cult*, this organization also manifests the characteristics of an apocalyptic cult.

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The Dark Side of the Economy: A Comparative Analysis of the Islamic State's Revenue Streams

by Wes H Cooper



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Abstract

The Islamic State's ambitious goals have led to the organization obtaining a large amount of costs. However, the Islamic State does not have adequate revenue streams to maintain these expenditures. This paper compares the Islamic State's costs and revenue streams with two similar organizations, Hizballah and Al Qaeda. The comparison will explain that the Islamic State's revenue streams are not as efficient and diversified as Hizballah and Al Qaeda's revenue streams have historically been. As a result of inefficient and unvaried revenue streams, the Islamic State will be forced to structurally change.

Keywords: *Islamic State; ISIS; terrorism; crime; Al Qaeda; Hizballah; terrorist financing*

Economic Inefficiencies of the Islamic State

This paper will explain that the Islamic State (IS) will not be able to sustain itself with its current revenue streams by comparing IS' costs and revenue streams to other similar organizations. The first part of the paper will provide a brief overview of the expenditures of terrorist organizations. The second part will examine al-Qaeda, Hizballah, and IS' expenses and sources of funding. The third part will explain the problems in IS' revenue streams. The paper will conclude by describing how finances may force IS to change as an organization.

Organizations that conduct terror operations must fund several overheads, including the living costs of the organization's members, reliable communication channels, training for new recruits, travel expenses, propaganda (Gomez, 2010), military activities, religious institutions, social services, and charities (Rudner, 2010). Although organizations that conduct terror operations have similar costs, these are not exactly the same. IS actually has more costs than other terrorist organizations, over \$5 million USD per month. This is because IS incurs state-like costs such as administering territory and paying civilian and law enforcement personnel (Zelin, 2015).

Terrorist organizations finance themselves in a variety of ways, including the sale of oil, extortion, human trafficking, arms trafficking, drug trafficking, money laundering, hawala (an informal system of moving cash), kidnapping ransoms, and offshore companies (Gomez, 2010). A single terrorist organization may not use all of these methods of funding. For example, IS mostly uses local sources of funding (United States Department of Treasury, 2014), including taxes and local criminal activities (ibid). As a result, IS does not gain much funds from global activities, such as global trafficking, off-shore banking, and money laundering. In fact, previous research has shown that IS' current integration in the international financial system is inefficient. Two other organizations similar to IS have been more involved in global financing activities: Hizballah and Al Qaeda.



Overview of Organizations

Al-Qaeda and its Affiliates

Osama Bin Laden founded Al Qaeda (AQ) in 1988 with three primary goals: to rid Muslim areas of western influence, to drive out the governments of Islamic countries that did not follow Osama Bin Laden's interpretation of sharia law, and to establish a caliphate. After the September 2001 attacks, the US and UK launched a military operation that caused AQ members to flee from Afghanistan to Pakistan. This resulted in AQ transforming from an organization with a strict military hierarchy to an organization with a loose skeleton structure. Later, in 2011 Osama Bin Laden was killed by US Navy Seals in Pakistan after which Ayman al-Zawahiri began to lead AQ. Since Osama Bin Laden's death, AQ has been challenged by AQ's offshoot organization, IS (National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, 2015).

Before the September 2001 attacks, a CIA report estimated that AQ required around US \$30 million annually (Gomez, 2010). This money was used for several activities, including carrying out terrorist attacks, training members, and for donations to associated organizations and the Taliban. Due to AQ's restructuring, it is difficult to know the organization's current costs. However, estimates of the costs of the organization's terrorist attacks since 2001 total over US \$500,000. In addition to terrorist attacks, AQ must fund several other activities, including salaries of members, communication equipment, training members, travel costs, propaganda, and charitable activities (ibid). The funds to finance these activities come from several sources, including oil (Warde, 2007), donors, trafficking (human trafficking and drug trafficking), money laundering, hawala, kidnapping for ransom, and offshore companies (Gomez, 2010).

AQ has received donations from a range of different donors, including charities and people in the Gulf region. AQ has also diverted funds from legitimate charitable organizations to AQ's illicit activities and has created fake charity organizations to obtain funds. With regard to drug trafficking, the Spanish police found that drug trafficking groups active in the North African enclaves gave a percentage of their profits to AQ. AQ has also used financial companies to fund itself. Barakaat is one such organization. Barakaat was a network of companies that performed various services, including telecommunications, construction, and cash exchange services. The company's owners transferred millions of dollars from the US to AQ and its associates. Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) also used inactive companies and liquidating companies in the Bahamas and Delaware to receive funds (Gomez, 2010). Hawala, a supposedly paperless financial system that is based on trust (Geode, 2003), has also been used by AQ to receive financing (Gomez, 2010). Additionally, AQ has received money from the sale of oil. It is estimated that the organization received billions of dollars from the sale of oil between 2000 and 2003 (Warde, 2007).

Hizballah

Hizballah formed in 1982 when independent Shiite militant groups united to fight off the Israeli invasion of Lebanon. The organization has undergone several transformations over the years, including a change in goals. When first created, Hizballah's main goal was to remove foreign forces from Lebanon. However, due to the signature of the Taif Agreement of 1989 and Israel's removal of troops from Lebanon in 2000, this is no longer a goal of Hizballah. Currently, Hizballah's main goals are to spread Shiite Islam, destroy Israel, and provide liberation and freedom to Palestinians (National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, 2015).



Hizballah has several expenses, including wages, communication costs, military activities and equipment, propaganda activities, religious institutions, social services and charities, and training members. It is estimated that it costs Hizballah approximately US \$500 million per year to fund these expenditures. The organization uses several sources of funding, including state sponsors, commercial profits, donations and charitable contributions, and a variety of criminal activities (Rudner, 2010).

A considerable amount of Hizballah's funding comes from the Iranian government. It is estimated that the Iranian government provides the organization with around \$100 to \$200 million annually (ibid). Iran has been able to donate so much money because of the significant income Iran makes from oil sales (Schott, n.d.). Allegedly, Hizballah also uses the organizations Bayt al-Mal and the Yousser Company to manage assets and mediate with the formal banking system. Bayt al-Mal is reportedly used for investing, banking, and crediting. Bayt al-Mal uses the Yousser Company to secure loans and make business deals that support Hizballah's operations. Much like AQ, Hizballah also uses hawala to finance operations. The organization has also diverted donations from legitimate charities to fund Hizballah's activities. Additionally, Hizballah has gained profits from charitable front organizations, such as Bonyad-e Shahid (the Martyrs Foundation). In 2002, A branch of Bonyad-e Shahid was shut down in Germany. It is believed that the Paraguayan branch of Bonyad-e Shahid sent at least \$50 million USD to Hezbollah (Levitt, 2005). The German organization, the al-Shahid Social Relief Institution, was also found to be raising money for Hizballah. Criminal activities Hizballah has used to obtain funding include human, drugs, and arms trafficking, and fraud. It has also been reported that Hizballah has performed these activities in North America. For example, Canadian reports have documented Hizballah's role in the theft and re-export of automobiles and financial fraud in Canada (Rudner, 2010). It is estimated that Hizballah and other Middle Eastern terrorist groups receive around US \$20 to US \$30 million from fraudulent activities in North America. Hizbullah also receives around US \$10 million from illicit activities in South America (Levitt, 2005).

The Islamic State

The Islamic State (IS) first started as an affiliate of al-Qaeda when Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's organization, Jama'at al Twawhid w'al-Jihad, became an affiliate of al-Qaeda. At this time IS was known as al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). Zarqawi was later killed in a US air strike (Laub & Masters, 2016), which led to Abu Omar Baghdadi becoming the new leader of AQI. During Omar Baghdadi's tenure as leader, he changed AQI's name to the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). Later, Omar Baghdadi and Au Ayyub al Masri, another ISI leader, were killed in a US air strike. After these two leaders were killed, Abu Bakr al Baghdadi was declared the new leader. Under Bakr al Baghdadi's leadership, ISI set its eyes on expanding into Syria. ISI later expanded into Syria and changed its name to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria/Sham (ISIS). The following year, the organization announced that the Caliphate had been re-established and changed its name once again. This time the name was changed to the Islamic State (IS) (Barrett, 2014).

Leaked documents reveal that IS' costs are higher than other groups at US \$5,587,000, for just the month of March 2014. If expenditures were similar for other months in the year of 2014 then IS expenditures totaled around US \$67,044,000 for the year of 2014 (Zelin, 2015). IS' costs include wages for its members, communication, training, travel, propaganda, and military activities (United States Department of Treasury, 2014). Total accounting income for the organization was recorded at \$8,438,000 USD for the month of March 2014. The leaked document cited oil wells (27.7% of income), electricity (3.9% of income), taxes (23.7% of income), and confiscations (47.7% of income) as revenue streams (Zelin, 2015). Most of IS' income is illegal,



including kidnapping, selling oil and ancient artifacts on the black market, extortion, and other criminal activities (United States Department of Treasury, 2014). These illegal activities are likely to be categorized under oil wells, taxes and confiscations (Zelin, 2015).

IS sells its oil at substantially discounted prices (Woertz, 2014). There is evidence that oil from IS controlled areas has been sold to Kurds who then resell the oil to Turkey. Additionally, the Syrian government has made an agreement with IS to purchase oil. Estimates say that IS receives US \$1 million per day from selling oil. However, IS' oil industry has suffered from airstrikes (ibid). Increased security at the borders of Turkey and Kurdistan have also lowered IS' oil revenue, but IS has still been able to obtain a large amount of revenue from oil sales (United States Department of Treasury, 2014).

Kidnapping also generates millions of dollars for IS. The organization kidnaps individuals and offers to release them for large ransoms. If the ransom is not paid, then IS threatens to kill the individual. In the spring of 2014, IS released hostages after receiving payments from several European states. It is estimated that in one year, IS received US \$20 million to US \$45 million from kidnappings (FATF Report, 2015). IS also gains funds from kidnapping and trafficking people from the Yezidi minority group, which make up the majority of people in IS' human trafficking ring. Yezidi women and girls are sold, forcibly married, or given as gifts (Amnesty International, 2014).

US \$200 million of IS' funds are estimated to be attributed to cultural looting (Singer 2015), likely categorized under taxes in the organization's accounting system (Zelin, 2015). Cultural looting involves stealing valuables from museums and ancient sites. IS encourages people in IS controlled areas to pillage archaeological sites by issuing them permits. Once permit holders in IS controlled areas obtain artifacts, IS takes a percentage of the revenue permit holders receive from selling artifacts (Singer, 2015).

IS also profits from a variety of other criminal activities, including robbing banks, stealing livestock and crops, and extortion. In fact, several accounts have risen of IS extorting money from Iraqis. The organization has also demanded a percentage of money from cash bank withdrawals and has targeted minorities with increased amounts of extortion (United States Department of Treasury, 2014). Additionally, IS has received funds from several donors. However, by mid-2014, donations were no longer a significant percentage of IS' revenue (Barrett, 2014).

Inefficiency in the Islamic State

IS, Hizballah, and AQ are all very similar organizations. All three organizations have extreme political goals, work toward obtaining goals through terrorist activities, and fund their organizations through the use of criminal and terrorist activities. However, IS is the only organization that has been quickly carrying out an ambitious goal to establish a state (Institute for the Study of War, n.d.). This ambition has increased IS' expenditures. While IS has more expenditures than Hizballah and AQ, IS also has several problems in its revenue streams.

The oil fields IS uses to raise revenue suffer from several problems. For example, oil fields in Syria are mature and need water injection to maintain production (Woertz, 2014). Water injection involves the disposing of water produced by exploited oil reservoirs. This must be done because, as exploited oil reservoirs mature, more water is produced in place of oil which makes the oil fields inefficient. This water injection process can be complex (International Association of Oil and Gas Producers, 2000) and requires considerable expertise. Syria's rate of oil production has also been falling. The last year Syria's oil fields operated normally, in 2011, oil



production was at 327,000 bpd. Since the unrest in Syria, oil production fell to 56,000 bpd in 2013 (Woertz, 2014).

Iraq has more lucrative oil fields, but most of these oil fields are out of IS' control. Iraq also has energy problems of its own. For example, Iraq does not have much capacity for domestic refining and power generation and much of Iraq's natural gas is being flared. Additionally, the price for which IS sells oil must be competitive against competing oil producers. As a result, a decrease in world gas prices could lead to IS receiving less profit from the sale of oil. Also, the amount of money IS currently receives from oil may be a substantial amount of money for a terrorist organization, but it is a small amount of money for an organization, such as IS, with state-like costs (ibid).

In comparison to IS, both AQ and Hizballah have more complex revenue streams than IS. This is largely due to AQ and Hizballah's deeper involvement in the international financial system. For example, AQ and Hizballah have both used front companies and charities to generate revenue. These two organizations have also engaged in international criminal activities, including financial fraud (Rudner, 2010) and international drug trafficking (Gomez, 2010). While AQ and Hizballah have more complex revenue streams than IS, both organizations are not acquiring and maintaining territory. Instead of ruling territory like IS, AQ and Hizballah function within states. As a result, AQ and Hizballah do not have to finance state-like overheads.

Unlike AQ and Hizballah, IS is not heavily involved in the international financial system. Most of IS's funds come from local criminal and terrorist activities (United States Department of Treasury, 2014). This dependence on local criminal and terrorist activities means the organization must maintain the revenue it receives from these activities. However, local criminal and terrorist activities are declining revenue streams. In other words, the value of these revenue streams will decline as IS continues to use them. For example, IS will not be able to continue selling artifacts because there is a finite amount of archaeological sites in Iraq and Syria. As IS excavates more archaeological sites, the amount of income that could potentially be generated from this activity will decrease.

Additionally, if IS continues to steal from local areas, then the organization will start to run out of goods to steal. The only way for IS to continue to get revenue from these activities would be to expand its territory. However, expansion could be a big problem for IS because as the organization expands its costs will increase. With expansion, the organization will have to maintain and protect more territory and will have to pay for more members. Even if IS expanded and obtained more revenue from local criminal and terrorist activities, the increase in revenue may not be enough to cover increased costs.

Previous research also shows that the funds IS receives from all other resources of its territory, including the taxation on trade and services, does not efficiently offset the cost of running a state, in the long run. This is because IS' taxation mechanism will likely create a decline in aggregate demand and could potentially hurt the labor market and the ability of people to save parts of their income. For example, the tax that IS places on Iraqi and Syrian government workers living in IS controlled areas reduces incentives for citizens to spend cash and interact with IS' financial system (Hansen-Lewis & Shapiro, 2015). Additionally, IS' taxes on education, fuel and vehicles, and bank cash withdrawals are regressive. This regressive tax policy leads to people with less money having to pay more taxes. Since lower income people have to spend such a large amount of money paying taxes they have less discretionary income. As a result, there are less incentives for saving money (ibid), seeing as money must be spent on necessities (Burman, 2012). IS' other taxes could potentially lead to barriers in the growth of businesses, since their inconsistent imposition can create uncertainties in IS' regulatory environment. IS also runs into the problem of having to leave citizens with



surplus income to invest in future production, which is essential to growing the economy of a new state. This problem is based on historical evidence that extractive states—states that receive a significant amount of funds from natural resources (Oxford Dictionaries, n.d.)—lasted a long time when they left their citizens with enough production surplus to invest in future production. In other words, for IS to continue as an extractive state, the organization must leave people under their control with more income. In order for IS to do this the organization needs to reduce taxes. However, this reduction in taxes would cause a loss in revenue. If IS decided to promote economic growth and reduce taxes, then the loss in tax revenue could be recouped by engaging further in the international financial system. Further engagement in the international system would also lead to people in IS occupied areas having more discretionary income and more incentives to buy goods. As a result, aggregate demand in the economy would increase and further economic growth would be created (Hansen-Lewis & Shapiro, 2015).

The Future of the Islamic State

In light of IS' high costs, revenue problems and inefficiency, the organization will be forced to make one of six decisions. These decisions include increasing territory, decreasing territory, or maintaining current territorial size while either seeking more international and efficient revenue streams or while maintaining current revenue streams. These six decisions are based on past research that shows revenue generation is an important form of support for terrorist organizations (Brown, 2010). Figure 1 shows a list of the six decisions.

(1) Increasing territory while seeking more international and efficient revenue streams	(4) Increasing territory while maintaining current revenue streams
(2) Decreasing territory while seeking more international and efficient revenue streams	(5) Decreasing territory while maintaining current revenue streams
(3) Maintaining territorial size while seeking more international and efficient revenue streams	(6) Maintaining territorial size while maintaining current revenue streams

Figure 1

Decision 1 would lead to IS having more total revenue. Under this decision, IS' revenue would equal current revenue streams and new more efficient revenue streams. Current revenue streams would include the inefficient revenue streams that IS currently uses. New revenue streams would include more engagement in international financial activities. Under decision 2, IS could run more efficiently depending on how much territory IS gives up and how integrated IS becomes in the international financial system. If IS decreases territory and increases international and efficient revenue streams to a level where revenue from these new revenue streams is greater than total costs, then IS would operate more efficiently in the long run.

The third decision would lead to the organization not being dependent on declining revenue streams and could lead to increased income. This is because maintaining current territory while gaining more efficient revenue streams would cause IS' revenue to equal current revenue and new more efficient revenue streams. As a result, in the long run, IS would have more discretionary income that could potentially be used for terrorist activity.

Decision 4 could lead to IS collapsing as a state entity since decision 4 involves only increasing inefficient territorial holding revenue sources. The outcomes of decision 5 depends on how much territory IS gives up, as giving up too much territory would cause IS to lose a lot of income from its territorial holding revenue



streams and giving up a smaller amount of territory would not cause as much of a decrease in revenue. Since decision 6 involves maintaining current declining revenue streams and not seeking out other revenue streams, the organization could cease to exist as a state entity if IS follows decision 6.

It would be in the US' and other states' best interest if IS weakened from overextending itself or collapsed from a decline in revenue. These scenarios are most likely to happen under decision 4 and decision 6. Since decision 4 entails increasing in territorial size but not seeking out efficient and international revenue streams, IS would continue to be dependent on inefficient revenue streams. As a result, decision 4 would lead to IS not being able to cover costs in the long run. This inability to cover expenses while striving to gain new territory would cause IS to continue to lose territory. In other words, the organization would be spreading itself too thin. Decision 6, which involves keeping revenue sources and territorial holdings at their current values, would lead to IS experiencing a decline in revenue in the long run due to the inefficiency in IS' revenue streams.

If IS actually weakened from overextending itself or collapsed from a decline in revenue, then it will likely result in IS trying to become a non-territory holding actor. The reason for this is it would be easier to find funds to cover the costs of funding a terrorist attack than funding a state since it is cheaper to fund terrorist attacks (Zelin, 2015). This shift to becoming a non-territorial holding terrorist organization like AQ could be highly problematic if it were not for the fact that IS relies on declining revenue streams from local areas. In order for IS to be a long lasting and formidable non-state actor, IS would have to become more engaged in the international financial system. This means that IS would likely be a weaker organization if it became a non-territory holding actor, assuming that it does not become further integrated in the international financial system. On the other hand, if IS is able to further engage in the international financial system while becoming a non-territory holding actor, it may become a stronger organization that is capable of carrying out more expensive terrorist operations. This would be the worst case scenario. It is important to remember that these decisions and scenarios are *ceteris paribus*. They do not take into account changes, such as increased military intervention in IS controlled areas. If military intervention in IS controlled areas is increased, then this could create a bigger burden on IS' costs and the organization as a whole.

About the author

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Striking at their Core – De-funding the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria

by Alessio Shostak



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Abstract

The fundraising efforts of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) have impressed academics, journalists, and government officials alike. The literature has thus far explored the methods via which ISIS acquire funds and transfer their proceeds across international borders. This article aims to expand upon these entries by analysing the failures of EU and US policy to counter terrorist financing since the 9/11 attacks, particularly with regards to the inability of both entities to adjust to digital transfer methods. The value of military operations will also be discussed within the context of halting the Islamic State's fundraising capabilities.

Keywords: *ISIS; Terrorist Financing; Transfer Methods; CFT; War on Terror; Iraq; Syria*

Introduction

Recent terrorist attacks across the Western world have placed the spotlight on the threat of terrorism as a whole, and the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in particular. ISIS has been described by David Cohen (2014), a leading official in the US Department of the Treasury, as “the best funded terrorist organisation we have come across”. Indeed, in 2015 their estimated asset pool was valued at \$2 billion; greater than the GDP of many small nations (Fowler, 2015). Media outlets have dedicated countless hours to covering the ongoing military struggle waged by the international community against ISIS. However, to date there has been relatively scant coverage of the group's ability to raise and move funds in order to finance their terrorist activities and maintain an infrastructure necessary to sustain their caliphate. Terrorist financing has been coined by Raphaeli (2003) as “an octopus with tentacles spreading across vast territories” (p.59), and a key portion of this paper will be dedicated to analysing ISIS's sources of revenue. It will also discuss ISIS's methods of transferring funds, with an emphasis placed on what the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) refer to as “emerging terrorist financing risks” such as virtual currencies and prepaid cards (FATF 2015: 4). The bulk of this paper will then be reserved for addressing (a) the measures the international community – particularly the EU and the United States – has taken to counter the financing of terrorism (CFT) since the 9/11 terrorist attacks, (b) whether these measures have been successful, and (c) what measures and approaches should be taken in the future. Finally, this paper will adopt a broader focus by outlining the indispensable role of private-public sector cooperation to combatting terrorist financing while stressing the interconnectedness of military and non-military measures in the fight against ISIS.

Expenditures

Terrorists require funds for a myriad of purposes. The most evident use of funding is for ‘operational costs’ in order to directly plan and carry out terrorist attacks; this includes the potential costs associated with the falsification of documents, the purchasing of weapons, and the use of vehicles for transportation. However,



Biersteker and Eckert (2008) note that only approximately 10% of funds are allocated to operational costs (p.8). Indeed, the direct expenses of conducting terrorist attacks tend to be quite low; for instance, the cost of the 2004 Madrid bombings for Al Qaeda was approximately \$100,000 (Gomez, 2010: 4). The vast majority of funds are allocated by terrorist groups towards what Biersteker and Eckert (2008) describe as “infrastructure” (p.8) in order to sustain and expand the organisation. These include paying members’ salaries, providing ideological and military training, and recruitment and propaganda costs. ISIS additionally fund social welfare programs in their occupied territories in order to create the perception that their rule is legitimate. This involves the creation of police forces, the subsidizing of schools and the provisioning of basic necessities such as food and electricity. ISIS have also overseen numerous “state-building activities” such as the establishment of a “court of grievances”, a body empowered to process civilian complaints against ISIS officials (Stergiou, 2016: 198). Overall, terrorist organisations must incur substantial costs in order to function, irrespective of their vast network of fundraising sources.

Sources of Funding

ISIS have utilized their territorial control to develop self-sufficient fundraising methods which would be, in Cronin’s (2015) words, “unthinkable for most terrorist groups”. Chief among these is revenue from the sale of ‘domestic’ petroleum and refined petroleum products to individuals in ISIS-held territory and several entities abroad, ranging from the Syrian government to criminal elements in Turkey. The US Treasury (2015) estimates that ISIS accrued \$100 million in revenue from petroleum and petroleum-related products in 2014. Despite this, numerous sources indicate that the rate of oil extraction has declined precipitously in recent years, dropping from 80,000 barrels per day (bpd) in August 2014 to 20,000 bpd in November 2014 (Levitt, 2014). This has mainly been attributed to the persistent effects of US-led coalition airstrikes on mobile oil refineries. Most significantly, revenues from petroleum and petroleum products have also plummeted, with some positing as much as an 80% decrease between October 2014 and April 2015 (Bahney and Johnston, 2014). This has largely been due to (a) the aforementioned airstrikes, (b) Turkey’s enhanced border security measures, and (c) the recent fall in oil prices. Several authors have suggested that these revenues have reached a peak, and that from now on ISIS will rely more heavily on other sources of funding.

One such base of funds is the extortion racket run by the Islamic State within their territory. Involuntary taxation is derived from all manner of sources, some of which include a 5-10% tax on all cash withdrawals, customs taxes on vehicles entering and exiting ISIS territory, and so-called ‘jizya’ taxes on religious minorities. Another key fundraising source is the sale of cultural artefacts on the black market. ISIS have occupied over 4,500 archaeological sites, and some sources estimate that sales of artefacts have garnered “tens of millions of USD” from Syria alone (FATF, 2015: 16). Despite only contributing to 5% of ISIS’s total revenue, Stergiou (2016) projects that external contributions from wealthy patrons – particularly from Gulf States such as Qatar and Kuwait—are projected to increase in importance given the dwindling fundraising potential of oil reserves in ISIS-held territory (p.204).

Transfer Methods

Traditional Methods

The use of standard wire transfers via the formal financial system has become troublesome for terrorists—and



particularly for ISIS—due to the policies enacted by the international community in order to identify and freeze suspicious transactions. Consequently, terrorist groups have shifted to unconventional methods to transfer funds across their vast networks. Chief among these is the use of informal value transfer systems (IVTS), most notably of ‘hawala’ networks. These networks are characterized by their ability to transfer funds across borders without the physical movement of these funds via a complex process involving several intermediaries. Hawalas play a key role in the economy, having traditionally served as remittance systems for migrants to transfer money back to their families residing in developing nations without a reliable banking system. However, as Berti (2008) claims, “the very characteristics that account for hawala’s success have made it an impenetrable haven for illicit and criminal transactions” (17). Chief among these is the lack of a transparent audit trail, as hawala operators are unlikely to keep extensive transaction records or to verify customer identity. The key policy challenge for lawmakers and regulators has been to strike a balance between mitigating TF risks while also preventing excessive compliance regulation. However, the severe lack of recent documented cases involving hawalas suggests that terrorist organisations such as ISIS have transitioned away from these traditional transfer methods towards novel, ‘emerging’ methods in order to globally transfer their funds.

Emerging Methods

Financial innovation has produced a wide variety of payment methods and services. Although it is indisputable that each of these advances has had positive ramifications on society as a whole, they have unfortunately raised numerous potential anti-money laundering (AML)/CFT vulnerabilities which policymakers ought to address. At the outset, it is important to note that concrete examples of these systems being used to finance terrorist activities are few and far between; indeed, in a recent report the FATF (2015) claimed that “the actual prevalence and level of exploitation of these technologies by terrorist groups and their supporters is not clear at this time and remains an ongoing information gap to be explored” (p.6). However, the FATF also stressed the probability of terrorists having adapted to using these services after heightened AML/CFT regulations elsewhere. The subsequently outlined threats should therefore be placed highly on any nation’s counter-terrorism agenda.

Cryptocurrencies are one of the novel methods of transferring funds that are subject to TF risks. Cryptocurrencies are virtual currencies, which are defined as “digital sources of value that can be digitally traded” (FATF, 2014: 4). On one hand, virtual currencies such as Bitcoin have various legitimate uses; for instance, experts claim that bitcoin could reduce transaction costs and facilitate micro-transactions (FATF, 2014). However, the TF risks associated with these currencies are substantial, not least among which is the greater anonymity offered by cryptocurrencies relative to other non-cash methods of money transfer; browser extensions such as Dark Wallet obscure the source of Bitcoin transactions, while Bitcoin accounts do not require identity verification. The decentralized nature of cryptocurrencies implies the lack of a central administrator to monitor transactions – this increases the difficulty of any potential enforcement efforts by eliminating the focal point of any asset seizing measures that might be implemented. Policy solutions must counterweigh the benefits and drawbacks of these cryptocurrencies. In the absence of a central administrator, the IMF have advocated for the imposition of AML/CFT regulations (such as customer due diligence requirements) on the institutions – known as ‘covered entities’—facilitating the exchange of Bitcoin into fiat currency (IMF, 2016). However, legislation to this effect is in its infancy in most jurisdictions; indeed, the EU has no regulations in place whatsoever with respect to virtual currencies.



Prepaid cards – cards “preloaded with a fixed amount of electronic value” – are another ‘emerging’ method of money transfer among terrorists (Kim-Kwang, 2008: 12). As cryptocurrencies, the positive aspects of prepaid cards are not in doubt; they are an essential component of the distribution of disaster assistance, in addition to providing an invaluable method for disadvantaged individuals to purchase goods online. However, prepaid cards pose serious TF risks; for instance, the lack of reporting requirements on international transfers of prepaid cards is a key loophole that could be used by terrorists to avoid restrictions on cash smuggling (FATF, 2015). On a broader note, a key barrier in the fight against the use of prepaid cards for nefarious purposes is the vast differences in legislation across jurisdictions, particularly with regard to regulations applied to small to medium sized card providers. This gives terrorists the freedom to purchase prepaid cards in areas where AML/CFT legislation is weakest before freely transferring these cards across international borders (FATF, 2015). The use of prepaid cards by terrorist organisations is less abstract than other methods that have hitherto been discussed; indeed, they were most notably found in the apartments of the perpetrators of the Charlie Hebdo attacks in Paris. Some legislative proposals have been brought forward to tackle the vulnerabilities associated with these cards; for instance, one recent EU Communication (2016) called for amending the 4th EU AML Directive to introduce regulations on pre-paid card issuers. However, significantly more progress must be made in order to overcome the TF risks posed by this emerging method of transferring funds.

Policy Responses

International Measures

Prior to 9/11, international CFT regulations have been widely viewed as having been insufficient; by 9/11 the ‘International Convention on the Suppressing of the Financing of Terrorism’ – the first ever UN resolution explicitly prohibiting the financial or material support of terrorist groups – had only been ratified by four nations (Biersteker and Eckert, 2008). Despite its creation in 1989, the FATF’s sole focus prior to 9/11 was on AML legislation. Following the attacks, the FATF expanded its mandate to include the battle against terrorist financing, releasing eight ‘Special CFT Recommendations’. These recommendations highlighted several key issues, including the mandatory issuance of suspicious transaction reports (STRs) to “competent authorities” in suspected TF cases (FATF, 2001: 2). These eight guidelines – expanded to nine in 2004 – also endorsed UN Resolutions 1267 and 1373, two crucial CFT measures advocating for the freezing of assets belonging to designated terrorists and terrorist affiliates. These Recommendations, and all subsequent work by the FATF, have been adopted by the international community as the “international standards in the fight against terrorist finances” (Bures, 2012: 715). It is important to note, however that the success of these standards is – and will continue to be – incumbent upon the ability of legislative bodies such as the EU and US to implement these standards into law, and of regulatory agencies to enforce these laws.

The European Union

The European Union’s two-pronged AML/CFT approach has been viewed by many as being strongly “in parallel with international developments in the field, in particular initiatives by the FATF” (Gilmore and Mitsilegas, 2007: 120). One aspect of this effort is the ‘smart sanctions model’, which calls for the full implementation of UNSCRs 1267 and 1373 (Bures, 2015). This resulted in the transposition of the terrorist blacklist developed by the 1267 Sanctions Committee into EU law. The second strand of the Union’s CFT



efforts has been the 'AML FATF Model', whereby EU legislation – in the form of 'AML Directives' – has adapted over time in order to match FATF AML/CFT Recommendations (Ibid). The Third AML Directive (2005) was the first to explicitly prohibit the financing of terrorist organisations, aiming to adopt the nine Special FATF Recommendations into law. Among other measures, this Directive gave Financial Intelligence Units (FIUs) – the key CFT regulators on a national scale – full access to various nationwide databases including police records, while also expanding customer identity verification requirements via the banning of anonymous bank accounts (Gilmore and Mitsilegas, 2007). In 2015, the Fourth Directive was adopted in order to align with the revised 2012 FATF AML/CFT Recommendations. This was done primarily by increasing the flexibility of FI due diligence obligations depending on the 'risk' posed by the client.

Despite the success of the directives at transposing UN resolutions and FATF Recommendations into EU legislation, evidence suggests that the implementation of these laws has occurred slowly and is, as yet, incomplete. This slow implementation has primarily been linked to the differences in the perceived threats of a terrorist attack among member states, as nations who view an attack as unlikely are susceptible to become 'free-riders' in order to avoid bearing the costs of implementation (Clunan, 2006). One instance of this is the lack of asset freezing arrangements within certain EU member states. Moreover, a recent EU Communication (2016) outlined the necessity of amending the 4th EU AML Directive to monitor virtual exchanges and increase regulations on pre-paid card issuers; in my view, the slow speed at which this issue is being addressed could potentially be due to the 'free-rider' problem, particularly because of the high suspected costs of implementing these high-tech solutions. Overall, a key issue for the EU to consider should be the uniform implementation across all member states of the global CFT standards endorsed by the international community; as the aforementioned discussion regarding prepaid cards indicates, the success of terrorists in financing their operations is likely to be determined by "the weakest link in the international cooperation frameworks" (Bures, 2015: 209).

The effectiveness of the EU's efforts has been historically difficult to measure; indeed, the EU Commission has itself claimed that "it is rather difficult to establish whether the aforementioned measures have had 'a significant impact on terrorists' ability to carry out attacks'" (Ibid: 224). The reasoning behind this is that each of the candidates which could be used as the criteria for success are imperfect measurements. Firstly, the amount of terrorist funds frozen cannot be used as a proxy for success; on one hand, a high value of frozen assets could nevertheless coexist with the fact that several terrorist attacks – such as the 2004 Madrid bombings – have been carried out using small sums of money which would not have been frozen under existing legislation. Inversely, a lack of frozen funds might imply that terrorists have shifted their focus away from formal financial institutions towards transferring their proceeds using informal channels. The quantity of STRs filed by financial and non-financial institutions is another misleading barometer of success. One of the key themes of the recent literature is the lack of public-private sector communication regarding the exact AML/CFT measures that private institutions must follow. Due to their lack of knowledge regarding the exact measures they must implement, and because of the heavy penalties they face for non-compliance, private actors tend to file an excessive amount of STRs. Therefore, a high amount of STRs does not necessarily indicate any sort of success; on the contrary, the dilution of legitimate and frivolous reports increases the difficulties faced by FIUs in determining which transactions pose a serious threat (Bures, 2012). Indeed, evidence suggests that the number of STRs resulting in TF prosecutions are negligible at best, and that most terrorist financing investigations come to light during unrelated investigations.



The United States

A key branch of US CFT regulations stems from the pre-9/11 US sanctions regime. The 1977 International Emergency Economic Powers Act enabled the Treasury to place financial sanctions on nations which threatened US national interests, freezing their assets and thus impeding them from using the international financial system. The 1996 'Anti-terrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act' expanded the targets of these sanctions to include terrorist groups and their financial supporters. However, Eckert claims that until the 9/11 attacks, these asset freezing measures were a "little known and understood tool of policy-makers" which had effectively "done little or nothing against terrorist financing" due to the low priority placed upon financial intelligence gathering by the US government (Eckert, 2008: 214). This changed after 9/11 with the issuance of Executive Order 13224, which greatly expanded the US Treasury's ability to strategically freeze the assets of terrorist organisations and their financiers, whilst prohibiting US individuals from transacting with these designated parties. Ryder (2015) estimates that \$135m worth of assets have been frozen from the bank accounts of approximately 1439 suspected terrorists as a result of this order (Ryder, 2015: 82). Despite this, several authors question the effectiveness of the US sanctions regime in combatting TF; firstly, evidence shows that the rate of asset freezes greatly diminished following the first months after 9/11 (Ibid). Furthermore, Eckert (2008) notes that the "evidentiary foundations" (p.215) for several designations were "quite weak" (p.215), and that many terrorism charges were dismissed due to a lack of evidence. Most crucially, terrorists have perfected other means of transferring funds without the use of the formal financial system.

Another regulation that has garnered much attention is the 2001 USA PATRIOT Act, which greatly enhanced the administrative CFT burden placed on both formal and informal financial institutions. This act required them to enact know your customer mechanisms and establish minimum due diligence procedures, while empowering the Treasury to sanction foreign FIs if they are suspected of having participated in ML/TF. The PATRIOT Act also facilitated increased sharing of financial intelligence between the public and private sectors regarding suspicious individuals. Despite these overarching measures, however, there are several reasons to doubt the effectiveness of the PATRIOT Act in curbing the transfer of terrorist funds. Primary among these is the difficulties of AML measures such as the PATRIOT Act to take into account the differences between the mechanisms involved in money laundering versus terrorist financing. As a result, several authors have called for alternative measures for focusing on CFT apart from the AML extensions which have hitherto been adopted (Ibid). One potential flaw is the high minimum requirement for currency transaction report (CTR) filings, which has led many to suggest that terrorists could simply break up their transactions into several smaller increments in order to evade these measures (Ibid). Moreover, –similarly to the European situation outlined above – various authors point to the failed communication between the private and public sectors as a key factor in the failure of CFT efforts (Ibid). Revealingly, Ryder (2015) and Bures (2012) both claim that 9/11 would not have been prevented even if these new regulations had been in place, while Ryder (2015) notes that these measures did not prevent the 2013 Boston Marathon terrorist attacks from occurring. Finally, new technologies such as cryptocurrencies and prepaid cards also threaten to allow terrorists to circumvent many of the existing AML/CFT provisions.

As per Cohen (2014), the US is implementing a three-pronged strategy to counter ISIS's financial network. Firstly, the Islamic State's access to the international financial system has been slowed due to a ban on wire transfers to and from bank branches within ISIS-held territory in Iraq, while banks in Syria have been subject to harsh reporting requirements. This tactic possesses several limitations; firstly – as Bahney and Johnston (2014) state – the weakness of the current Iraqi government potentially precludes the effective enforcement



of this ban. Furthermore, this strategy does not take into account alternative, 'emerging' transfer methods that ISIS could employ which are more difficult for authorities to monitor and regulate. Secondly, the US are working with Kurdish and Iraqi forces to proverbially strike ISIS at their core and disrupt the revenue gained from their sources of funding. This has involved coalition airstrikes against ISIS oil refineries, which have already proved successful in reducing oil extraction rates and revenues, particularly in Syria (Humud, Pirog, and Rosen, 2015). However, the impact of these airstrikes in Iraq has been tempered by the necessity of retaining vital oil infrastructure in order to repower the region once the government regains control (Bahney and Johnston, 2014). On a broader note, US efforts to tackle ISIS's sources of funding will never succeed without military intervention given the inescapable link between ISIS's territorial possessions and their fundraising capabilities. The US Treasury (2014) has indeed claimed that their methods are "not particularly suited to this task", and that military engagement is a necessity if the international community wishes to scale back ISIS's fundraising operations. The final weapon in America's arsenal is targeted sanctions against ISIS operators and foreign financiers. Although these donations currently constitute only 5% of ISIS revenues, the following hypothesis suggests that in the long run, these donations will grow in importance as the economic and military capacity of ISIS both decline precipitously.

The Importance of Military Action in CFT Efforts

Military force is crucial to financially crippling ISIS in the long run. The core of ISIS revenues have been derived from the selling of petroleum-based products. However, numerous factors are contributing to the decreased revenues ISIS have been able to glean from this funding source; firstly, ISIS have been unable to repair extraction infrastructure due to a lack of skilled technicians within ISIS territory. Indeed, data has shown that the productivity of oil extraction has been markedly decreasing since March 2012 (Lewis and Shapiro, 2015: 144). Rapidly declining oil prices along with coalition airstrikes have also reduced potential revenue streams. All in all, oil revenues and production possibilities are low in the long run. Moreover, ISIS's economic policies – or lack thereof – have been criticized as not being conducive to long-run growth; the excessive taxes on cash withdrawals, agriculture machinery, and fuel are typically modelled as reducing consumer incentives to save and invest, imperilling long-run growth. The lack of access to credit and private insurance markets is likely to discourage entrepreneurship, while ISIS's lack of human capital investment in the form of education and healthcare will also reduce long-term labour productivity and growth (Ibid). ISIS's long-run military prospects are also expected to be bleak. Luminosity data indicates that ISIS GDP equalled approximately \$30bn in 2014 (Ibid: 148). However, Iraqi and Saudi defence spending in 2014 totalled \$80bn and \$9.5bn respectively – far beyond what ISIS can realistically afford (Ibid: 148). This disparity is likely to increase given ISIS's aforementioned economic difficulties. ISIS will therefore be unable to territorially expand, trapping the organisation in an area with diminishing resources. This will increase its reliance on foreign donors, enabling the international community – and especially the US Treasury – to use its sanctions regime to thwart the transfer of these funds and proverbially starve ISIS out. This long-run outlook crystallises the inextricable link between financial and military measures necessary for defunding ISIS. Evidence suggests that military action is already depleting ISIS's financial portfolio; in January 2016 it was widely reported by news outlets that ISIS had reduced their fighters' salaries by 50% as a result of coalition airstrikes (Pagliery, 2016). It is therefore essential that nations continue to coordinate military manoeuvres and share military intelligence in order to "degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL" (Obama, 2014).



Final Thoughts

The 9/11 attacks moved terrorist financing to the forefront of global counter-terrorism efforts, as has been reflected by the innumerable strides that have made on both the national and international stages to combat TF. The FATF and the UN have been the key standard-setters with regards to CFT legislation, and the EU and the US have diligently attempted to transpose these standards into law in addition to crafting their own unique legislation to deal with this perilous threat. Despite this, several factors have conspired to thwart significant progress; for instance, the lack of communication between the private and public sectors with regards to compliance requirements has inhibited the effectiveness of increased financial sector regulations in halting the transfer of terrorist funds. Moreover, the efficacy of current regulations has been notoriously difficult to gauge due to the inadequacies of several potential proxies for success. Most importantly, tools that have hitherto been indispensable in the fight against terrorist financing are unlikely to feature as prominently against the Islamic State due to (a) the unique nature of ISIS's fundraising streams and (b) ISIS's recent shift away from traditional transfer methods in favour of 'emerging' technologies such as cryptocurrencies. It is therefore essential that nations enact legislative measures to ensure that these novel technologies are not exploited for nefarious purposes. It is also paramount that the US and EU continue to share financial and military intelligence with local forces on the ground in order to continue choking off the Islamic State's fundraising potential, in addition to cooperating on military ventures to accelerate the group's long-run decline. Overall, although CFT measures have rapidly advanced since 2001, more must be done to effectively drain the financial resources of terrorist organisations and limit their ability to wage war on their victims.

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About the author

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An analysis of security challenges arising from the Syrian Conflict: Islamic Terrorism, Refugee Flows and Political and Social Impacts in Europe

by Erika Brady



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Abstract

This research set out to explore whether the Syrian Conflict has impacted on security and political issues outside its borders, with a particular focus on Europe, through three case studies: Islamic Terrorism, Refugee Flows and Political and Social Impacts. With a wide range of challenges related to the conflict, now in its sixth year, issues such as the rise of ISIS and the refugee crisis in Europe have been linked to political and social destabilization on the continent and within the EU. By looking at data presented by the Global Terrorism Database, the United Nations Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCR) and the UK's Home Office, this study set out to explore what connections, if any, can be discerned between the Syrian Conflict and Europe's security challenges. Academic reports based on empirical studies as well as media reports were also analyzed to further the research and allow for in-depth assessment of the issue as a whole.

Keywords: *ISIS; terrorism; counter-terrorism; refugee crisis; immigration; Brexit; political destabilization; radicalization; extremism; hate crimes*

Introduction

Since the outset of the Syrian Conflict, Europe has been impacted by an unprecedented surge in refugees entering the region from beyond its borders, sparking a crisis in the European Union (EU), and has led to an increase in associated problems. In the first two months of 2016, 135,711 people reached Europe by sea and more than a million migrants are reported to have travelled to Europe in 2015 alone, by both sea and land. (BBC, 4 March 2016) The media would have us believe that racism and hate crimes are on the rise, with extremist views dominating all discourse. Political destabilization within the various countries of the EU and a push towards far right political parties has also begun to expose fractured societies and nationalist tendencies, showing a lack of confidence in existing political mechanisms to resolve 21st Century problems. Evidence of this lack of confidence can be most clearly seen in the UK's recent Brexit referendum, held on 23 June 2016. Adding to this issue is an increased threat, or perception of an increased threat, of terrorism spreading from the war-torn region. The Syrian Conflict appears to have contributed, at least on the surface, to immense security challenges on a global scale.

While every indication points to this conclusion, it is important to assess whether the available data supports this theory. In its Report Highlights, the Global Peace Index 2016 stated "Terrorism is at historical levels, battle deaths are at a 25-year high, and the number of refugees is at a level not seen in sixty years... The increase in terrorism across regions highlights the ability of terrorist groups to 'export' violence beyond national boundaries, as demonstrated by the increase in terrorist attacks in OECD countries in the past year. Similarly, the entanglement of more nations into the Syrian conflict, coupled with the enormous outflow of



displaced people, shows that even internal conflicts cannot be quarantined and their repercussions can be felt across borders and even continents.” (Global Peace Index, 2016).

The total number of deaths from terrorism globally is reported to have reached 32,685 in 2014 alone. (Global Terrorism Index, 2015) While not all of these fatalities have been as a result of *Islamic* terrorism, it is generally accepted that the high level of activity of Jihadi groups in recent years points to a significant portion of these fatalities resulting from ‘Islamic’ or ‘Jihadist’ terrorism. However, does the available data support this assumption? Can the Syrian Conflict be connected to this high death toll, particularly when looking at Europe? One of the purposes of this study was to explore this in more detail.

Another aim of the study was to assess the impact of the Syrian Conflict on refugee flows into Europe, and to explore whether there are any connections to political issues on the European continent. Extreme views and a new wave of nationalism is clearly on the rise in several European states and on the surface, the surge in refugees has exacerbated these political challenges. An example of this can be seen in the UK, where various media outlets reported an increase in hate crimes following the Brexit referendum on 23 June 2016 in which the country voted to leave the EU with 52% of the electorate making this decision (Travis, *The Guardian*, 2016). High profile terrorist attacks in Europe since the outbreak of the Syrian Conflict have led people to believe that the movement of refugees from the Middle East is increasing security challenges. One of the most commonly cited reasons for the outcome of the Brexit referendum was the issue of immigration, but is there a ‘cause and effect’ event taking place here? The fear that immigrants and refugees will put undue strain on the existing resources of the various nations of the EU is augmented by the fear that terrorists are flowing into the continent amongst the Syrian and Iraqi refugees seeking asylum from the war-torn region. This is not a UK-centric issue, but has been taken up by far-right political groups and leaders across the continent.

Premise of the Paper

The research conducted for this paper focused on exploring the impact of the Syrian Conflict on Europe, a continent acutely feeling the strain of perceived security threats seen to arise out of the conflict. To carry out this research, a qualitative approach was taken, and I looked at three case studies reflecting the three areas identified above: terrorism, refugee flows and political and social challenges. First, a descriptive overview was provided for each case, along with the presentation of various media and expert analysis through reviews of the literature. Following this, I carried out an analysis of data contained in three data sources in particular: the Global Terrorism Database (GTD)[1] and its associated reports; the United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees (UNHCR) global trends reports (2005 – 2015); and the Home Office report titled ‘Hate Crime, England and Wales, 2015/16’.

While the focus of this study was Europe, some contextual oversight was necessary and some of the data reported in this study reflect global trends as well as those of Europe. Europe does not exist in a vacuum, and throughout the research for this paper it became clear that global trends were also telling in regard to European security issues. However, an in-depth analysis of the entire global implications of this prolonged conflict is beyond the purview of this paper.

With regard to the issues of terrorism in particular, the scope of the study was narrowed to span the years 2006 to 2015. This allowed for an analysis of a five-year range both before and after the outbreak of the Syrian Conflict, enabling comparisons in timeline. This also ensured that data had been published as, at the time of the research, the GTD had not yet published 2016 data. The reports of the UNHCR were also only published up to 2015 at the time of writing, although the Home Office report on Hate Crimes quite obviously addressed



data in 2016. However, as these issues were dealt with separately, this shift in timeframe did not adversely impact the research conducted in the other areas. [2]

Several sources were included in the research phase, and provided useful insights and a broad scope for framing the premise of this paper, although they were not included in the paper directly. These included the research of: Ali Fakhri and Walid Marrouh (2015); Sertif Demir and Carmen Rijnoveanu (2013); and Francois Heisbourg (2015-2016).

Section 1: Islamic Terrorism - The Rise and Impact of ISIS [3]

Context

One of the biggest security challenges of recent years has been the increase in terrorism, specifically Islamic terrorism related to ISIS. While the origins of the organization extend further back than the Syrian Conflict itself, 2011 was a pivotal point in ISIS's developmental timeline. With US troops withdrawing from Iraq and creating massive instability there, and the spread of Arab uprisings throughout the North Africa and Middle East region, there were clear opportunities to take advantage of political and violent upheavals, sparked by the people's increasing frustration and dissatisfaction with the regimes of these countries. ISIS was able to attract recruits in light of both of these situations, and was also able to inspire and unite would-be fighters from around the globe through an astute and sophisticated social media presence. The power of ISIS increased, to such a point that, in 2014, it officially declared the Caliphate, and al-Baghdadi, its Caliph. As well as making sweeping gains territorially, ISIS began to increase terrorist attacks, initially regionally, but as time went on at a global level. From May 2013 through the end of the year, ISIL carried out an average of 46 attacks per month. In 2014, the frequency of attacks more than doubled to 106 attacks per month, and in 2015, ISIL carried out 102 terrorist attacks per month. (START Background Report, 2016)

The conflict in Syria in particular allowed ISIS's recruits to gain valuable experience in conflict situations and obtain prestige upon their return to their home countries, thus enabling the radicalization of a new generation of potential terrorists throughout the world. Additionally, foreign involvement in Syria has provided ISIS with an opportunity to allege that the West is at war with Islam, and it is justified in fighting the 'Western infidels', even in their home countries. This has been represented in a series of 'calls to arms' issued by the group. The Syrian jihad became the main focal point for extremists in Europe and scores of them travelled via Turkey to join the struggle in the ranks of al-Qaida-affiliated groups or IS. The situation was ideal for European extremists in need of a new cause, and a new place to train and fight. (Nesser, 2015)

Untold numbers of individuals act independently of ISIS but use it as inspiration, sometimes pledging allegiance to the group online (eg through Facebook) but receiving no formal training or instruction. In the UK, counter-terrorism forces have allegedly prevented numerous jihadi-inspired terrorist attacks from taking place, although information on these is usually not publically available. Whether or not an actual relationship exists between these individuals and ISIS, the inspiration to fight on behalf of the Caliphate seems to have had a noticeable impact on the number of people willing to carry out terrorist attacks worldwide. In many ways, these individuals, classified as 'lone wolves', are far more problematic than organized cells under instruction from ISIS, as they are often not known to authorities for their terrorist affiliations, although sometimes they are known to local police forces for criminal activities. An example of this can be seen in the case of Mohamed Lahouaiej-Bouhlel, the perpetrator of the attacks in Nice on Bastille Day, 14 July 2016.



He was known to local police for various criminal acts, but had no known religious affiliations prior to the attack. Although Lahouaiej-Bouhlel was shot and killed by the police, ISIS, following a delay, did claim responsibility for the attack. This information has been verified across media sources, but as this attack took place relatively recently, it is challenging to verify any of this information independently, and care must be taken in these circumstances.

Is there an increase in terrorist activity? The Global Peace Index 2016 reported “Increases in terrorist activity occurred across a number of regions, with prominent attacks occurring in France, Belgium, Turkey and Pakistan in the last six months alone. In total, 77 countries recorded a deterioration in the impact of terrorism, and of the 25 largest increases, nine occurred in OECD countries.” (Global Peace Index, 2016) Further, The Global Terrorism Index 2015 reported “Terrorist activity increased by 80 per cent in 2014 to its highest recorded level...Almost 60 per cent of the countries covered in the GTI experienced no terrorist deaths in 2014...However, a majority of countries did experience a terrorist incident of some kind...More countries than ever have high levels of terrorism.” (Global Terrorism Index, 2015) This report was based on data for 2014, the year that al-Baghdadi declared the Caliphate. It would not be until 2015 that ISIS would begin to seriously look beyond the immediate territory it had gained in Syria and Iraq to conduct attacks on an international level. Nonetheless, the data explored in the Global Terrorism Index 2015 shows the beginning of what seems to have become a growing trend in terrorist activity, primarily associated with ISIS.

The START report of August 2016 revealed that, between 2002 and 2015, “more than 4,900 terrorist attacks were carried out by groups or organizations affiliated with the organization now known as the Islamic State. These attacks caused more than 33,000 deaths and 41,000 injuries (including perpetrator casualties), and involved more than 11,000 individuals held hostage or kidnapped” (START Background Report, 2016) The report goes on to say “A total of 26 attacks... were carried out in 2014 and 2015 by individuals inspired by ISIL. These attacks killed 50 people, including 13 perpetrators, and took place primarily in the United States (8 attacks), France (6), Australia (4), Denmark (2), and Canada (2).” (START Background Report, 2016)

Analysis

Looking at the chart in Figure 1, taken from data provided by the GTD for the period 2005 to 2015, we can see that a clear escalating pattern has taken shape. This data relates specifically to terrorist attacks conducted by ISIS (given its alternative name of ISIL in the GTD) or inspired by the group or its affiliates. The emergence of ISIS/ISIL in the guise we now recognize it is represented by the yellow line (starting in April 2013). Prior to this, various predecessors (Al Qaeda in Iraq etc) were in operation, represented by the grey line.

Despite these organisational developments, it is clear to see that an increase in activity occurred from 2012 onwards, with the most significant ISIS/ISIL ‘spike’ taking place in 2014 (the highest point represents the month of September 2014 with 156 incidents). The blue line, indicating affiliate groups of ISIS, is represented predominantly by Boko Haram, the deadliest terrorist group in the world with 6,644 deaths attributed to the group in 2014 (ISIS is responsible for the deaths of 6,073 in 2014). The ‘spike’ on this line represents 179 attacks which occurred in July 2015. While the data indicate a drop in attacks for all groups towards the end of 2015, we are aware of several ISIS-inspired or directed attacks having taken place throughout 2016, for example the attacks in Brussels and Nice.

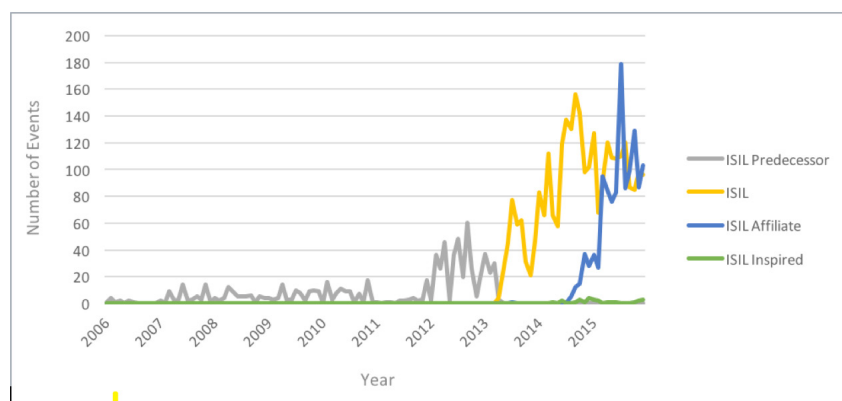


Figure 1. Attacks carried out by ISIS/ISIL, its predecessors and affiliates between the years 2006 and 2015. (data taken from the Global Terrorism Database).

The number of terrorist incidents in Europe have been low when compared to countries such as Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and Nigeria. Indeed, the Global Terrorism Index 2015 states “The majority of deaths from terrorism do not occur in the West. Excluding September 11, only 0.5 per cent of all deaths have occurred in Western countries in the last 15 years. The West is designated as the countries where ISIL has advocated for attacks. They include the United States, Canada, Australia, and European countries.” (Global Terrorism Index, 2015) Nonetheless, media coverage on Western terrorist attacks magnifies the effects of what is, comparatively speaking, a relatively small number of successful incidents. This is not to say that terrorist *plots* are not a daily security challenge in Europe, and certainly the fact that security forces across the continent are on alert supports this. In the UK, for example, MI5 has set the terror alert level at SEVERE, the second highest level on the scale.

A useful way to investigate whether ISIS, facilitated by the Syrian Conflict, has had a security impact in Europe is to look at the number of fatalities as a result of terrorism in the timeframe of the research. While this is not an infallible method of studying this issue, it does provide some scope for analysis, and the data, presented in Figure 2 below, is revealing. There are two obvious ‘spikes’ in the data, one in 2011, and the other in 2015. The 95 fatalities in 2011 were largely as a result of the two terror attacks carried out by Anders Breivik in Norway. While Breivik was a ‘lone wolf’ and in fact was fervently opposed to Islam, it was this opposition that helped to fuel his drive to commit the attacks and place his militant ideology on the world stage. In Raffaello Pantucci’s article, he found “Breivik sees himself as a crusader warrior fighting for Christendom...In this medieval light, Breivik’s concerns are focused around the growing Islamicisation of Europe and the ‘cultural Marxism’ that is allowing Europe to let itself get taken over by Islam.” (Pantucci, 2011) I therefore believe that it is not illogical to include Breivik’s data in this research. In 2015, 179 fatalities were the result, largely, of the attacks in Paris on 13 November 2015 in which 130 people died.

When one looks at the data described in Figure 2, no clear pattern emerges. Two years out of a time span of ten years display significantly high fatalities, predominately from specific incidents, which are essentially outliers. There is no indication from this data of a growing trend of terrorist-related deaths over time. However, it remains telling that in 2015, the year when ISIS became more active in the international domain, a high fatality rate for a relatively small number of attacks occurred. As there is currently only data available in the GTD covering the time period to the end of 2015, it is difficult to observe a true pattern of ISIS-related



attacks in Europe in one year alone. However, the clearly large number of fatalities in 2015 when ISIS was highly active internationally indicates that the group has had some impact on Europe, although a causal relationship remains elusive.

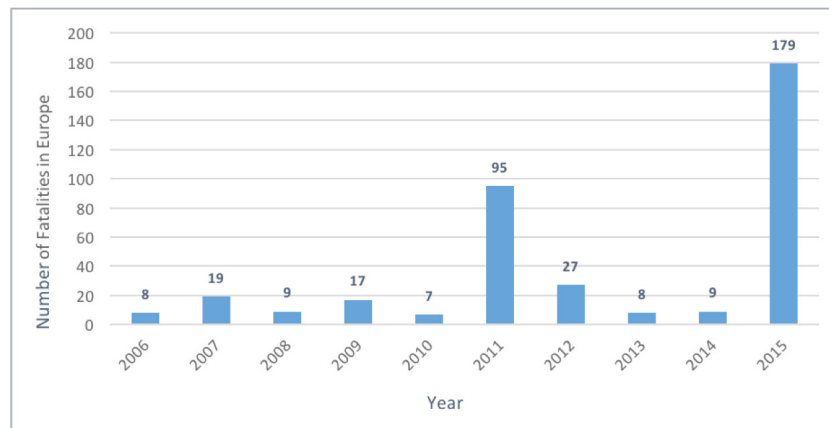


Figure 2. Number of fatalities arising from ISIS-related attacks in Europe between 2006 and 2015. (data taken from the Global Terrorism Database).

Whether or not this pattern of increased attacks globally (as evidenced in the GTD), and the high number of fatalities in Europe in 2015 specifically (in comparison to previous years), is a direct result of the Syrian Conflict is more difficult to ascertain. However, while a causal relationship cannot be confirmed from the data explored in this research, a clear connection can be construed from the sudden increase of impact following 2011. Whether the terrorist attacks conducted in Europe since 2011 were the result of ISIS itself, inspired by ISIS or were an opposing response to the Islamism understood to be espoused by ISIS, 2011 indicates a clear marker for terrorist activity. In addition, while there is an increase in attacks globally from 2011, and a higher fatality rate in Europe of 318 following 2011 (60 fatalities occurred in Europe in the same range of years before 2011), a relatively sudden rise in impact takes place in 2014. This was the year in which ISIS reinvented itself and established a Caliphate. If we are content to connect the rise of ISIS to the opportunities provided by the Syrian Conflict, and the rise in global terror attacks and an increased death toll in Europe to the increased influence of ISIS as a terrorist organization, it is clear that the Syrian Conflict has on some level contributed to a significant international terrorism crisis which looks set to continue for some time. This is not statistically sound, but it is an accurate description of what the data above presents. “The world is now less peaceful than it was in 2008 . . . with year-on-year levels of peacefulness having declined in five out of the last eight years. Given the increasing levels of terrorism and large population displacement caused by internal conflict, this trend is likely to continue into at least the near future.” (Global Peace Index, 2016)

The interconnected challenges that have been compounded by the rise in terrorist attacks are multifarious, but in particular, terrorism’s perceived connection with refugees and the movement of populations is glaring. Indeed, the Global Terrorism Index 2015, in looking at the impact of terrorism in Western Countries, noted that “Terrorist activity is a significant driver of refugee activity and internal displacement. The countries which are the greatest source of refugees and internally displaced people also suffer the most deaths from terrorism.” (Global Terrorism Index, 2015) The next section will address the issues arising from the refugee crisis in Europe and will explore whether the Syrian Conflict impacted trends in the movement of refugees.



Section 2: Refugee Flows - The European Refugee Crisis

Context

In 2015, a total of 1,321,560 people claimed asylum in Europe, with more than 476,000 applying for asylum in Germany alone. Hungary had the next highest number of applications at 177,310 by the end of 2015. Although Germany has had the most applications for asylum, Hungary has had the highest in proportion to its population, with nearly 1,800 refugees per 100,000 of Hungary's population claiming asylum in 2015. (BBC, 4 March 2016)

Attempts have been made by the EU to address the crisis, with limited success. A quota system was implemented in September 2015, which aimed to move refugees landing in countries such as Italy and Greece to other countries in Europe, but not all states agreed to adhere to it. In particular, the UK opted out of the quota system. (BBC, 4 March 2016) In March 2016, Turkey made a deal with the EU in an attempt to address the refugee crisis. However, following the failed attempted coup in Turkey on 15 July 2016, the number of refugees increased dramatically, with reports of almost double the number previously seen arriving on the Greek islands in the Aegean.

By all accounts, it seems clear that the Syrian Conflict has had an impact on the number of refugees entering Europe. This surge in refugees has created significant stress on an economic system that has experienced its own crises over the past decade. "The EU's current institutional and legislative arrangements were clearly not up to dealing with the huge influx of migrants, and the crisis laid bare deep divisions among the member states. Depending on the extent to which the EU can overcome these divisions and improve its policies, the refugee crisis could lead to either more Europe, less Europe, or the emergence of a new core of committed member states." (Lehne, Carnegie Europe, 4 February 2016)

While European governments struggle to manage the refugee crisis, this situation in the refugee camps is abysmal. Without the opportunity to gain employment, or integrate in any way with the society in which they are based, it is not difficult to envisage bitterness, and potentially animosity, towards countries who cannot decide on how best to deal with them. "The existing literature on radicalization in crisis situations typically identifies three drivers of radicalization: the existence or pervasiveness of an Islamic education; the ability to find gainful employment; and the ability to have freedom of movement (encampment vs. open camp policies)." (Martin-Rayo, 2011) With the pressures and frustrations this can espouse, the scene is set for a new generation of young disenfranchised people who have grown up in refugee camps and completely alienated from the societies in which they are based. However, does this necessarily mean that these people will resort to terrorism or violence?

Huma Haider stated the following "Over time, refugees can develop into a highly organized and militant states-in-exile. In addition, protracted situations result in reduced expectations for the future, increasing feelings of hopelessness, and desperation among refugees/displaced person. Further, host societies are likely to become less hospitable the longer a refugee/IDP crisis lasts." (Haider, 2014) While not an inevitable outcome, the situation in refugee camps, and isolation from host societies, could potentially add to the risk of radicalization, where youths feel no connection to communities in which they find themselves. Haider said the following in an attempt to show both sides of the ongoing debate: "In some circumstances, poor socioeconomic conditions (e.g. impoverishment, unemployment, lack of access to services and infrastructure, over-crowded living conditions) may make it more likely for refugees/IDPs to become radicalised. However, Lischer (2005) finds instead that there is generally little evidence to support the connection between



particular socioeconomic conditions and refugee violence.” (Haider, 2014)

In fact, more often than not, the research into this phenomenon has shown that the risk of refugees engaging in terrorism is no higher than the risk of any other disenfranchised group doing so. While the risk of radicalization is a real one, particularly following recent reports that ISIS is recruiting from refugee camps in Europe (The Guardian, 2 December 2016), many of the perpetrators of the terrorist attacks in Europe have had roots in the continent, and initially travelled to Syria as ‘foreign fighters’ (Funk & Parkes, January 2016). While radicalization within refugee camps in Europe is a possibility, ISIS need not necessarily go to such lengths to achieve its goals. Funk and Parkes discuss ISIS’ goal as wanting to provoke certain “political and social reactions”, doing this through the spread of misinformation and, as a result, provoking fear in the populace. They go on to say that it is not newcomers, but second and third generation immigrants who seem most prone to radicalization (Funk & Parkes, January 2016).

In September 2016, Special Rapporteur on counter-terrorism and human rights Ben Emmerson, presented a report to the UN General Assembly in New York. This report noted that there is little evidence that terrorists take advantage of refugee flows to carry out acts of terrorism or that refugees are somehow more prone to radicalization than others. Further, research has shown very few refugees have carried out acts of terrorism (UN Report, September 2016). The report goes on to say that state reactions to the flows of refugees have been focusing on security perspectives. “However, asylum and migration policies that are restrictive or that violate human rights can have a counterproductive effect on the efforts of States to counter terrorism by creating more irregular immigration and increasing violations of the human rights of migrants and refugees, marginalizing particular communities and reducing prospects for migrants, all of which could become conditions conducive to terrorism... It is also possible that the stigmatization of certain communities is precisely what terrorist groups seek and may lead to an increase in support among migrant communities.” (UN Report, September 2016).

In their paper, Milton, Spencer and Findley conduct an empirical analysis of the connection between refugees and terrorism. They argue “that refugees find themselves in terrible living conditions in which the states hosting the refugees treat them poorly. These two factors can lead to transnational terrorism as some smaller subset of the refugee population responds against the host state. The empirical analysis in this paper offers substantial support for the argument.” (Milton, Spencer & Findley, 2013)

The immigration crisis in Europe continues apace, and analysis has shown that, by not addressing the crisis, prolonged security issues will continue into the future and should be considered on a generational time frame rather than one of mere years. It seems clear that the situation in Syria has increased the number of displaced peoples, and so terrorist activity as well as civil conflict have had an impact on refugee flows. However, the connection between refugees and terrorism is elusive and more complicated. While there is much debate on the propensity of refugees to become radicalized, it seems that the current research supports the notion that state policies directed at the crisis are not necessarily reducing related security challenges, but are potentially more likely to increase them.

Analysis

In looking at Figure 3, based on data from the UNHCR’s Global Trends Reports from 2006 until 2015, a clear and sudden increase in the number of refugees recorded as entering Europe can be observed in 2014. The increase coincides with the declaration of the Caliphate by ISIS. Vast amounts of territory in Iraq and Syria were captured by the group at that time, and it seems likely that this was one of the contributing factors to



the sudden and dramatic increase in population displacement from 2014. Between the beginning of 2014 and the end of that same year, the number of refugees recorded in Europe increased by 74.3%. The next highest increase in yearly intake was in 2015, with an increase of 43% in that year alone.

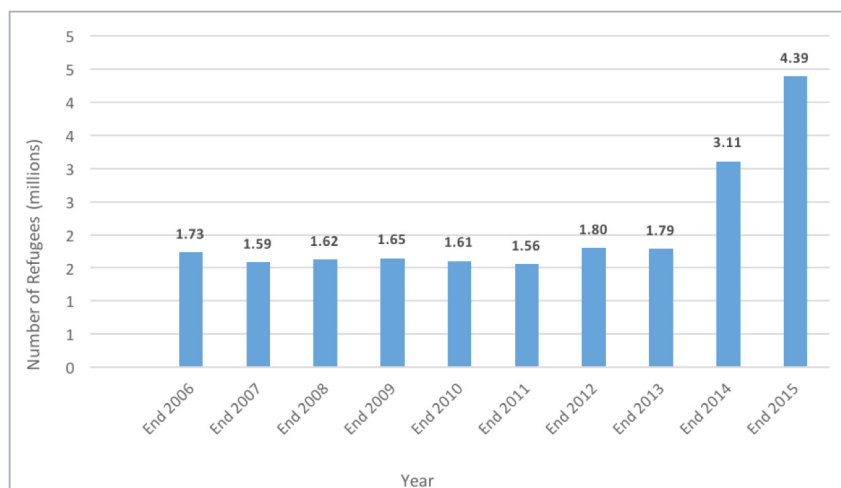


Figure 3. Number of refugees in Europe between 2006 and 2015. (data taken from UNHCR Global Trends Reports)

This data shows that there was an initial small increase in refugees arriving in Europe coinciding with the outbreak of the Syrian Conflict in 2011. Following the rise of ISIS and its seizure of territory in Iraq and Syria, there was a significant increase, as can be seen in the recorded numbers of refugees in Europe in 2014 and 2015. Conflict, as well as a desire to live in a free society as opposed to living under Sharia Law in ISIS-controlled territory, can be seen to have driven increasing numbers of people from their homes. While the vast majority of these people have been displaced within Syria or in the countries neighboring the war-torn state such as Jordan and Lebanon, those who feel it is necessary to risk the dangerous journey to Europe have clearly increased in numbers since 2014. While the connections are not causal, the empirical data certainly supports the supposition that Europe has experienced a large increase in refugees coming from Syria and Iraq. Whether the Syrian Conflict itself has directly impacted this movement of people, or whether the conflict created a climate in which ISIS was able to thrive and from which people felt forced to flee, is nuanced and unresolved in this research. However, the likely combination of both factors has undoubtedly driven people from the war-torn region, and for this reason, it can be concluded that the Syrian Conflict has had some impact on the immigration challenges facing Europe.

The apparent increase in terrorist acts or the threat of terrorist acts carried out by or inspired by ISIS, and the rise in numbers of refugees from that region coming into Europe, combined to create a potent climate of fear and anger in the already fragile EU region. These two security challenges, terrorism and refugee flows, have created the most significant political de-stabilization on the continent since the end of World War II. Both at EU and national level, governments are struggling to address the concerns of their populations, and the political fallout is continuing apace. The next section will address the social and political issues arising from the terror attacks and the refugee crisis in Europe and will explore whether the Syrian Conflict has impacted issues such as hate crimes.



Section 3: Political and Social Impacts – Hate Crimes

Context

Right wing politicians and a resurging nationalist movement, have used the issues of terrorism and immigration to promote an atmosphere of fear and uncertainty among the populations of Europe. Nowhere has this been more clear, or indeed successful, than in the UK. This climate of uncertainty and frustration resulted in a vote to leave the EU in the Brexit referendum on 23 June 2016. The decision to leave the EU continues to have ramifications for both the country and Europe as a whole. Within hours of the decision, the political backlash in the UK became evident: David Cameron resigned his position as Prime Minister; Nigel Farage, the leader of the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) also resigned; the Labour Party, the opposition party in the UK, began what has become an extended crisis of faith in its controversial leader, Jeremy Corbyn (following Brexit, the party lost over 20 members of its shadow cabinet); and Scotland, which voted overwhelmingly to remain in the EU, raised yet again the specter of separating from the rest of the UK. Economic impacts have also been felt, as markets struggle to predict how this impending separation will take place and what role the UK, separate from the EU, will have in the global context.

The fear of immigrants coming to Europe is not limited to the UK. In particular, Hungary's Prime Minister, Viktor Orban, has lambasted the EU for not addressing the issue of immigration in Europe. He linked terrorism with immigration in a speech on 23 July 2016 calling “uncontrolled migration” as the root cause of the increased terrorist threat” and stating the British vote to leave the EU was a failure of Europe's political elite. (Orban, 23 July 2016)

While some of the many concerns Orban raised may be dismissed out of hand as rhetoric, the perception or belief that this is the situation is sufficient to impact the political systems throughout the continent. The narratives in France's upcoming presidential elections appear to support the strong possibility that Marine Le Pen of the National Front (a right wing political party) will become the next French president, and populations are polarizing within most states. With issues such as the ‘burkini ban’ in France and attacks on Mosques throughout the continent, the fear of Islamic terrorism has never been more prevalent, and there is a clear impact on society and how safe populations perceive themselves to be.

The rise of nationalist movements and far-right extremist views across Europe has become a significant concern for those who support centrist notions and liberalist views, including human rights. The dissatisfaction with the status quo has become a wide-reaching topic, affecting all levels of society. The UK's wish to return to an independent state, closing its borders against both refugees and other migrants, is a symptom of an era of uncertainty and change. Right-wing parties have been gaining ground in Europe, as the electorate seek parties outside of the mainstream, with notable examples being the UK, France, Austria, Hungary, the Netherlands and Poland.

Additionally, we can see a rise in radicalism across the continent. As of December 2015, it is reported that 27,000 people from 86 countries have travelled to Syria and Iraq, ostensibly to join ISIS. Of that number, 5,000 are estimated to be from Europe. (The Guardian, 8 December 2015) In particular, the conflict in Syria is considered to have become the most significant “mobilizer for Islamists and jihadists in the last 10 or 20 years with more people from Europe being mobilized than in all the other foreign conflicts that have happened for the past 20 years combined. (Lister, 2015) What motivates these individuals to travel to a conflict zone to protect people who have little or no connection to them, is unclear, and again the subject of much debate. Undoubtedly, the inhospitable climate in Western countries where many of these ‘foreign fighters’ originate



is a contributing factor. Frustration with the political and social systems and an apparent relish among media outlets to highlight stories which undermine migrant communities cannot help. These disenfranchised people are being trained and combat-hardened in Syria, and when the conflict does eventually end, or when ISIS is militarily defeated, they will have limited opportunity to use their combat skills, other than to perpetrate harm back in their home countries. Returning foreign fighters could have an impact on Europe for decades to come. Governments are struggling to off-set this threat, to varying levels of success.

One of the more negative impacts of these fears has been an increase in hate crimes, particularly those which are motivated by race or religion. However, while the media has highlighted these acts, is there data to support the alleged rise in hate crimes in the UK around and following the Brexit referendum? Below is a brief analysis of the data on this issue.

Analysis

With European states failing to appropriately address the issues of terrorism and refugee flows, and no end in sight to the Syrian conflict which appears to have aggravated European populations' concerns, a significant loss in confidence has been experienced by several governments throughout the continent, as well as the EU as a body. The UK population expressed this dissatisfaction in the Brexit referendum vote. The negative rhetoric towards foreigners and migrants expressed throughout the 'Vote Leave' campaign leading up to the vote was compounded by the result of the vote itself. Between 16 and 30 June 2016, about 3,198 hate crimes were reported, a 42 per cent rise from 2015. "Abuse apparently peaked on 25 June 2016, two days after the referendum, when 289 hate crimes and incidents were reported across England, Wales and Northern Ireland. A further 3,001 reports of hate crimes were made to police between 1 and 14 July 2016, roughly equivalent to 200 every day." (BBC, 26 August 2016)

Was this simply fear-mongering, or was this an actual issue in the UK? Further, with regard to the research carried out for this paper, can it be linked to the Syrian Conflict? The Home Office published a statistical bulletin in October 2016. (Corcoran & Smith, 13 October 2016) In this document, five strands of hate crime were identified: race or ethnicity, religion or beliefs, sexual orientation, disability, and transgender identity. "There were increases in offences recorded for all five of the monitored hate crime strands between 2014/15 and 2015/16." For the period 2015/16, the police recorded 62,518 hate crimes, of which the majority (49,419 or 79%) were race hate crimes. The third highest category of hate crime was religious in motivation, with 4,400 incidents (7%). This paper focuses specifically on these two strands as being particularly related to Brexit and population concerns with terrorism and immigration.

An appendix to the report dealt specifically with data surrounding the Brexit referendum. Following the vote, information released by the National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) showed that there had been an increase in the level of reported and recorded hate crime. The NPCC published a series of reports which stated that, following a sharp increase in July, the level of hate crime reports per week in England and Wales and Northern Ireland had declined in August "to a level seen in earlier 2016 (although levels were higher than seen in 2015)." (Corcoran & Smith, 13 October 2016)

The report describes a chart which provides the following information in this regard "There is an increase in these offences recorded in June 2016, followed by an even sharper increase in July 2016. The number of aggravated offences recorded then declined in August, but remained at a higher level than prior to the EU Referendum. These increases fit the widely reported pattern of an increase in hate crime following the EU referendum. Whilst January to May 2016 follows a similar level of hate crime to 2015, the number of racially



or religiously aggravated offences recorded by the police in July 2016 was 41% higher than in July 2015. The sharp increase in offences is not replicated in the non-racially or religiously aggravated equivalent offences” (Corcoran & Smith, 13 October 2016)

This data shows that there was a clear increase in hate crimes relating to race and religion following the Brexit vote. This increase has now leveled off, although the numbers remain higher than in 2015. This data potentially indicates a pattern of increased violence in this area, although the impact of Brexit which was used as a political platform to drive support, is an obvious outlier and not necessarily indicative of a steady increase. Nonetheless, even a cursory analysis of media reporting shows that issues such as the threat of a terrorist attack or the large numbers of Syrian and Iraqi refugees fleeing conflict and ISIS had a tangible impact on how people voted. The hope that the UK would be safer and more prosperous out of the EU resulted in a win for the ‘Vote Leave’ camp. Connecting the result directly to the Syrian Conflict is difficult, and has not been achieved in this research. However, as issues related to the conflict continue to play an important role in policy-making and electoral platforms, it can be concluded that some relationship does in fact exist.

Conclusion

Sam Mullins provides an insightful and relevant empirical study into Jihadism in the US and the UK. He observes “the occurrence of conflicts involving Muslims creates such a widespread sense of grievance, empathy, and desire to help that it creates fertile ground for terrorist recruitment. This is very clearly demonstrated by the fact that rates of mobilization consistently spike when conflict breaks out and has never been more obvious than with the current situation in Syria/Iraq... (Mullins, 2016)

The research carried out for this paper provided an overview of the impact of the Syrian Conflict on international security challenges, with a particular focus on Europe. The displacement of millions of people in fear of their lives, the destabilization resulting from this mass mobilization of populations and the apparent increase in global terrorist activities as indicated above can all be seen to coincide with the outbreak of the violent and prolonged conflict taking place in that country. Further, both of these factors appear to have impacted on population concerns and political instability throughout the continent.

Through this research, I was able to draw reasonable conclusions and address the questions posed by this paper. By observing the data of the GTD, the UNHCR and the Home Office, it was made clear that there was an overall increase in terrorist attacks worldwide (as well as the OSCT countries) since the outset of the Syrian Conflict and there has been an exponential increase in refugees from the area of the conflict entering Europe. Whether there was an increase in terrorist attacks and fatalities in Europe in light of the conflict was not discernable within the parameters of this study. However, with a high death toll in Europe in 2015 as a result of ISIS-inspired or directed terrorist attacks, some impact was implied and will be an interesting subject for future research. While it cannot be irrevocably stated that these security challenges would not exist at all without the Syrian Conflict, the research conducted for this paper shows a clear relationship between the situation taking place in Syria and a number of security challenges occurring in Europe.

Academics such as Jonah Schulhofer-Wohl have found in their research that the conflict in Syria, while adapting with the changing political landscape, will continue to shape the Middle East region and continue to see a rise in extremism (Schulhofer-Wohl, 2013). This is a very bleak picture and one that indicates the patterns of increased destabilization and crisis arising from the bitter conflict taking place in Syria are set to continue for some time.



Notes

[1] Much of the data in this article was obtained from the Global Terrorism Database (GTD) and its various reports. I chose to do this because, currently, the GTD is the most comprehensive database for terrorist events in the world, having incorporated the data of several other datasets when they closed such as the Pinkerton Global Intelligence Services (PGIS). Nonetheless, the GTD is not perfect, and is based largely on open-source media information. Additionally, some data which has been obtained from other databases has been lost in transfer, resulting in gaps in the information, particularly when looking at historical data. While systematic collection of data in as unbiased a format as possible is undertaken by the GTD, the data is always open to interpretation. Nonetheless, the GTD provides a generally high standard of data which assisted the research carried out for this paper. Details on the GTD's data collection methodology can be found on its website at <https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/using-gtd/>

[2] While the data analysed in relation to terrorist attacks in Europe ends in December 2015, several significant attacks took place throughout 2016. In particular, high-profile attacks such as the coordinated attacks in Brussels and the attack on Bastille Day celebrations in Nice resulted in high death tolls. A number of other smaller attacks took place, particularly in Germany with either low or no fatalities, although in most cases people were injured. Overall, 11 significant attacks took place in Europe in 2016, with at least 129 deaths and hundreds injured (figures include the deaths of perpetrators). While this shows a decrease in fatalities in 2016 over 2015, as the second highest death toll since 2005, it nonetheless indicates a pattern of high impact terrorist attacks, primarily related to ISIS.

[3] The organization known as the Islamic State has progressed through a variety of names as it has developed, and these are used without consensus by different experts and organisations. Initially set up as the branch of Al Qaeda in Iraq, it broke ties with that organization and first named itself Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). This was followed by the name the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). It has also become commonly known as simply the Islamic State, thought to be a propagandist move to indicate the Caliphate as applying beyond the Middle East. More recently, it has become widely known as Daesh, which is an acronym for the Arabic phrase “al-Dawla al-Islamiya fil Iraq wa’al Sham” (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant). Apparently, this title is not viewed favorably by the organization because it is similar to the Arabic words ‘Daes’, ‘one who crushes something underfoot’ and ‘Dahes’, translated as ‘one who sows discord’. For the purposes of this paper, I use the term ‘ISIS’. The Global Terrorism Database, on which this research relies, uses the term ‘ISIL’.

About the Author

Erika Brady is a PhD student at the Handa Centre for Terrorism and Political Violence at the University of St Andrews. Erika's current research looks at the UK's CONTEST strategy through a mixed-method approach. Erika is a tutor at the School of International Relations at the University of St Andrews, and has acted as Guest Editor on the Special Issue of the Journal of Terrorism Research “Security and Counter-Terrorism Challenges arising from the Syrian Conflict.” Erika has also published articles for the St Andrews Economist and Sicherheitspolitik-blog, an academic blog hosted by the University of Frankfurt.



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Explaining violent radicalization in Western Muslims: A four factor model

by Khouwaga Yusoufzai and Franziska Emmerling



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Abstract

Despite being raised in Western countries, experiencing Western culture and freedom, some Muslims radicalize and choose to join terrorist organizations. The question remains why some Western Muslims choose this path, and others do not. The current paper identifies four factors. Firstly, identity crisis is discussed; the focus lies on the struggle of a Western Muslim to maintain a balance between different cultural aspects of identity. Second, relative deprivation is discussed; it is emphasized that the national as well as international levels of deprivation experienced by Muslim populations play a major role in the creation of the narrative that the religion of Islam and the Muslim community are under attack. Third, the focus is shifted towards more individual factors; personal characteristics such as narcissistic and sensation-seeking traits possibly push some Western Muslims to resort to violence and terrorism. Fourth, empathy is discussed; while Western Muslims reverting to terror seem to strongly empathize with the Muslim population, which is considered to be their in-group, they simultaneously seem to display a complete lack of empathy towards the innocent civilians affected by terrorist attacks.

Keywords: home-grown; terrorism; behavior; Islamism; factors; radicalization

Introduction

Islamic violent radicalization and terrorism has been a global issue for the past three decades, and its manifestations in the Western world (including Europe, the United States, and Canada) have led to extensive and distorted media coverage (Nesser, 2015). Although the number of victims in Western countries is very low compared to the rest of the world (Global Terrorism Index, 2015), terrorist attacks in the Western world seem to have the largest impact on the pursuit of counterterrorism efforts by Western policymakers. The growing number of fatalities and frequency of these Islamist terrorist attacks in the past few years have led to an increased sense of urgency among the general population as well as Western authorities. The recent tragedies that took place in France, Belgium, and Germany are grim reminders of the pressing security concern and the need for extensive research on the topic of home-grown terrorism in order to prevent further loss of innocent civilian lives.

Aside from radicalized Western Islamists who are first-time militants and engage in domestic terrorism, there is another threat: foreign fighters. Loosely defined, foreign fighters are 'non-citizens of a state experiencing civil conflict who arrive from an external state to join an insurgency' (Malet, 2015, p. 459). The number of Western residents leaving to join the fight in Syria, or to train and come back for domestic operations, has risen ever since the civil war broke out in 2011 (The Soufan Group, 2015). This has led Western policymakers to debate the treatment of these foreign fighters upon return to their home countries. With the Serious Crime Act 2015, passed in March 2015 in the UK, the Criminal Justice (Terrorist Offences) Amendment Act 2015, passed in Ireland, and a new law in 2014 under France's Criminal Code, making it illegal to incite



and publicly justify terrorism, multiple Western countries have introduced measures to counter the flow of foreign fighters (Wheelans, 2016). Although only a minority of foreign fighters tend to return, these numbers have increased significantly especially in the year of 2015 (The Soufan Group, 2015), although concrete statistics are not available at the current time of writing. The reason why returnees may be seen as possible threats to Western society, is the experience they may have obtained in militant fighting during their time abroad. If foreign fighters return with the intention to carry on their violent *Jihad* (holy war; see also Silke, 2008; Nesser, 2004) in the Western world, their experience can lead to more lethal domestic attacks than those of first-time militants engaging in domestic terrorism (e.g., Sageman, 2010; Cruickshank, 2010; Clarke & Soria, 2010). For instance, when Hegghammer (2013) built a data set of Islamist attack plots in Western countries between 1990 and 2010, he found evidence for a 'veteran effect'; the data set showed that the presence of a veteran (a domestic fighter with prior foreign fighting experience) increased the probability that an attack was executed by a factor of about 1.5. With a total of 106 plots of which 24 were executed, 14 were in the presence of a veteran. Hegghammer's data set also showed that the presence of a veteran doubled the chance that an attack would kill: 8 out of 12 lethal attacks were in the presence of a veteran.

The rising number of Western-born and/or -raised individuals attracted to militant Islamism calls for further research in the field. Undeniably, the destruction of Muslim-majority countries, in part due to Western foreign policies, lies at the root of modern day Islamist terrorism. However, this does not explain why only a minority of the worldwide Muslim population turns to militant Islamism. The question, thus, still remains: Why do some individuals become radicalized and engage in violent behaviours in the name of Islam, justifying the killings of innocent civilians? In order to answer this question, the factors contributing to the change in mindset of radicalized individuals and the resulting violent behaviours need to be elucidated. Investigation of terrorist behaviour and its causes will be a step towards finding solutions and possible preventative measures for this worldwide phenomenon. The present paper focuses on cases of Western Islamists who have engaged in domestic terrorism. Based on existing literature, this work attempts to determine whether we can identify factors that contribute to Western Muslims joining Islamic extremist organizations and engaging in terrorist violence in the West (including Europe, the United States, and Canada). Four factors are discussed, namely identity crisis, relative deprivation, personal characteristics, and empathy (for a summary, see figure 1).

Identity Crisis

Identity is a dynamic and constantly changing phenomenon that can be derived from multiple aspects of one's existence (Sen, 2008): religion, gender, marital status, economic status, occupation, race, political beliefs, et cetera. It is possible for an individual to simultaneously be a Muslim, a European citizen, a believer in democracy, and someone who respects cultural differences and human rights (Murshed, 2011), thus to incorporate different beliefs and convictions into one's identity. However, Maalouf (2011) suggests that in times of stress or uncertainty, individuals have a tendency to primarily identify with the aspect of their existence that is under the fiercest threat or attack. Identity issues are prominent within the Western Muslim community. Second and third generation Muslim immigrants have to manage a Western identity, while simultaneously inheriting an ethnic identity from their family. The effort of finding a balance in between two completely different cultures and belief systems is continuously challenged by social as well as political factors. Within this group, adolescents with a lack of self-certainty are highly prevalent (Meeus, 2015).

Maalouf's theory implies that among other things, the ongoing culture of Islamophobia and anti-immigrant



sentiment that is growing in Western society (Murshed & Pavan, 2011) as well as the foreign policies of Western countries are leading uncertain Muslim adolescents to attach more salience to the Islamic part of their existence, thus making 'Muslim' their primary identity (Abbas & Siddique, 2012). This is in accordance with an empirical study conducted by McGregor and colleagues (2001), showing that individuals react to uncertainty by hardening their attitudes and increasing their convictions. As beliefs are strengthened (which in itself is not necessarily negative; Tausch, Spears, & Christ, 2010), and the individual immerses in religious exploration, he or she will inevitably be exposed to violent and radical interpretations of Islam through the Internet, sometimes their social environment, and through media reports (King & Taylor, 2011). When an individual is in an uncertain period in their life, he or she will be susceptible to extreme ideas and groups (Hogg, Sherman, Dierselhuis, Maitner, & Moffitt, 2007; Hogg, Meehan, & Farquharson, 2010). The reason for this being the allure of clarity within these extreme ideas, due to a complete lack of ambiguity. The rigidly defined, simplistic rules associated with extremism provide a promise of certainty for the uncertain individual. Since violent interpretations of Islam provide well-defined and clearly prescriptive rules with a black-and-white worldview, joining violent radical groups is an easy means of reducing uncertainty in Western Muslims battling with an identity crisis (Hogg, 2000).

Perceiving Islam as being under attack contributes to not only an enhanced salience of the religion itself, but also to development of resentment towards mainstream society in a number of Western Muslims (Murshed & Pavan, 2011; Abbas & Siddique, 2012; McCauley, Leuprecht, Hataley, Winn, & Biswas, 2011). The latter seems to be one of the crucial 'ingredients' of violent radicalization, and an 'us versus them' mentality. The term 'violent radicalization' is used, since 'to radicalize' means to reject the status quo, but not necessarily in a violent or problematic manner (Bartlett, Birdwell, & King, 2010). What differentiates violent radicals from non-violent radicals, is that the latter are able to balance their negative views (on foreign policy, the media, and security related measures) with a genuine appreciation of Western society and its values, whereas violent radicals show a hatred for Western society and culture in general (Bartlett, Birdwell, & King, 2010), with foreign policies and Western power building in Muslim-majority countries at the root of this hatred. Although personal experiences can lead to this shift in self-identity, wrongdoings towards other Muslims can have an equally strong or even stronger influence. Namely, different experiences of Islam being under attack generally tend to be interpreted within the context of the collective Muslim identity (Mythen, Walklate, & Khan, 2009). For instance, in one study, a poll of 430 Ottawa Muslims showed that political grievances (disapproval of Canadian foreign policy) are better predictors of attitude toward Western powers than personal experiences of discrimination (McCauley et al., 2011).

Identity crises are common amongst second generation Muslims in the West, because they have to simultaneously manage different cultural aspects of their lives. When the religion of Islam is perceived as being under attack, the uncertainty of identity leads second generation Muslims to be more susceptible to strengthening the Islamic part of their identity. The current growing culture of Islamophobia and anti-immigrant sentiment in the West not only leads to the strengthening of Islamic identity, but also to the development of resentment towards mainstream Western society. Wrongdoings towards Muslims are interpreted within the context of the collective Muslim identity, contributing to the engagement in Islamist terrorist behaviours.

Relative Deprivation

Another aspect which contributes to Western Muslims perceiving their religion as being under attack,



besides social stigma, is economic deprivation; numerous studies have reported that Western Muslims have lower labour force participation, employment, and occupational attainment (Cheung, 2014; Bisin, Patacchini, Verdier, & Zenou, 2011; Connor & Koenig, 2013; Luthra, 2013; Heath & Martin, 2013). Economic deprivation is a component of Ted Gurr's relative deprivation theory (Gurr, 1968; Gurr, 1970). Gurr defines relative deprivation as a person's belief to receive less than deserved, and the term furthermore entails the perception that one's group is being treated less well than other groups (Feddes, Mann, & Doosje, 2015). He theorizes that this collective discrepancy creates frustration and, in turn, contributes to the use of violence. Freytag and colleagues (2011) tested the hypothesis that poor socio-economic development is conducive to terrorism, by running a series of regression analyses for 110 countries between 1971 and 2007. Their findings imply that socio-economic factors indeed play a role in terrorism. Considering the levels of disadvantage many Western Muslims experience, it is not surprising that many Muslim communities find themselves treated unfairly (Silke, 2008). These feelings of marginalization also contribute to the 'us versus them' mentality and may reinforce distancing of oneself from society and becoming attracted to violent radicalization (Feddes et al., 2015). When individuals feel triggered by the existing social order that they perceive as 'unfair', it is easier for terrorist organizations to recruit these individuals by building on related grievances, whether these grievances are national or global (Krieger & Meierrieks, 2011).

An exploratory study, examining individuals and networks involved in terrorist activity in Europe in the period of September 2001 to September 2006, showed that very few jihadi terrorists were of higher socioeconomic class; many of the first, second, or third generation immigrants had in common that they came from the lower strata of society (Bakker, 2006). Although at first glance this seems to strengthen the typical image of the Islamist terrorist being from a 'poor' background, these findings as well as the unemployment rate in the sample were no different from general European averages within immigrant Muslim communities. This implies that those who are unemployed are not necessarily more likely to engage in terrorist activity than those who are not. As mentioned before, an experience can be interpreted within the context of the wider Muslim community, whether or not it is a personal first-hand experience (Silke, 2008). Thus, it is proposed that, among other forms of relative deprivation, the higher unemployment rate among Western Muslims as opposed to the mainstream population contributes to feelings of injustice in both the employed and the unemployed, and can therefore contribute to engagement in violent behaviour. It is the collective relative deprivation, rather than the personal relative deprivation that will motivate a person to act (King & Taylor, 2011). Again, the sense of a collective identity seems to be the driving force behind feelings of injustice (e.g., Awan, 2008). Besides relative deprivation in terms of employment and lower income, the Western Muslim community is under-represented in public life (Murshed & Pavan, 2011), has a disproportionately high prison population (Awan, 2008), and poor housing facilities (Awan, 2008).

Apart from the disadvantages experienced by Muslims in the Western world, the injustice experienced by Muslims in the rest of the world is another (most likely more crucial) contributing factor to the resentment of Western society and the resort to violence among Western Muslims. Not only is this deprivation much more severe than that experienced by Muslims living in the West, but the use of it in terrorist propaganda makes it an extremely potent inciting factor (Silke, 2008). Through use of death-related imagery, potential recruits are exposed to the idea of Western destruction in 'Islamic lands' (e.g., Carey, 2012; The Bureau of Investigative Journalism; Devereaux, 2015; Afghan Paper, 2013; Afghan Paper, 2014), increasing identification with the Islamic community and support for the use of terrorist violence (Farwell, 2010; Finsnes, 2010). Findings from a study conducted by Pyszczynski and colleagues (2006) provide evidence for this 'mortality salience' effect; when reminded of death, both Iranian and American participants are more likely to show support for



extreme violent solutions to global conflicts. Furthermore, perpetrators of terrorist acts have often mentioned target countries' foreign policy as motivation for their crimes (e.g., Bartlett et al., 2010; Abbas & Siddique, 2012; O'Callaghan, 1999). Moreover, in multiple studies Western Muslims showed a general understanding and sympathy for political grievances that lead to some individuals resorting to violent extremism (Abbas & Siddique, 2012; Hamm, 2009; McCauley & Scheckter, 2008; Mythen et al., 2009). This again emphasizes the crucial role of foreign policy in the justification and motivation of terrorist acts by Western Muslims.

The systematic disadvantages experienced by Western Muslims lead to feelings of frustration and injustice, regardless of whether experienced first-hand or not, and contribute to the 'us versus them' mentality and the use of violence. The injustice done to the world-wide Muslim community as a result of Western foreign policies seems to be a large source of these feelings of frustration and resentment.

Personal Characteristics

Whereas the initial focus in the psychology of terrorism seemed to be solely on individual personality—the mentally abnormal terrorist—the current focus seems to be (almost too strongly) solely on environmental factors, such as systematic discrimination, relative deprivation, and foreign policy (King & Taylor, 2011). Although the stereotype of the Islamist terrorist as a mentally ill individual has rightly been discounted (Silke, 2008), this does not mean that personal characteristics should be dismissed as factors possibly contributing to violent radicalization. So far, the exact role of personal characteristics in contributing to violent radicalization has not been delineated, thus, its further examination is needed. Personal characteristics can provide a plausible explanation for why only a small minority of Western Muslims radicalize. Many Western Muslims are exposed to the same terrorist propaganda, systematic disadvantages, and identity crises, but relatively few of them revert to terrorism. Personal characteristics can help to determine whether exposure leads to violent radicalization, explain why not all vulnerable individuals take the violent route, and inform counterterrorism programs.

Psychology of terrorism focused recurrently on thrill-seeking and adventurousness, traits often associated with Western terrorists (e.g., Bartlett et al., 2010). This characteristic seems not unique to Muslim terrorists, as terrorists and violent radicals from different organizations have equally referred to the thrilling and exciting attraction of joining their particular cause (Cottee & Hayward, 2011). Sensation-seeking is strongly intertwined with the facts that i) most individuals who join terrorist groups and execute attacks are young and male (Silke, 2008) and ii) about a quarter of all European jihadists have a criminal record (Bakker et al., 2006). Sensation-seeking as a trait is robustly correlated with delinquency in adolescence (Mann, Kretch, Tackett, Harden, & Tucker-Drob, 2015). Unfortunately, literature regarding the role of sensation-seeking in potential Western Islamist terrorists is scarce, and more research on the topic is required to determine the prevalence of this trait in Western Islamists and whether any causal link between the trait and the execution of terrorist acts can be established.

Another characteristic relevant to violent radicalization is narcissism (Victoroff, 2005; Alderdice, 2009). Narcissism is characterized by a sense of grandiosity, combined with a strong need to obtain attention and admiration from others (Thomaes, Brummelman, Reijntjes, & Bushman, 2013). In a study examining determinants of susceptibility for adopting radical belief systems in Dutch Muslim youth, Doosje and colleagues (2013) state that individuals from radical groups are inclined to use violence when their ego is threatened. The results of the study show that perceived in-group superiority is the best predictor of attitudes towards violence displayed by other group members, and was significantly related to violent intentions. This



is in line with an earlier proposed narcissism-aggression link formulated by Baumeister and colleagues (1996; see also Thomaes et al., 2013). These findings imply that the presence of narcissistic traits in individuals is predictive of whether the individuals express their grievances in a violent manner. However, Bakker (2006) did not find any proof that the terrorists in his sample suffered from pathological narcissism. The emphasis in Bakker's study is on psychopathology, which reflects the initial bias in terrorism research. Although in the context of lone wolf terrorism the contribution of individual character traits and psychopathology to violent radicalization has been discussed extensively, this focus is not justified especially when it comes to group-based terrorism (Corner & Gill, 2015). A more balanced approach to conceptualizing the determining factors of violent radicalization should include examination of 'normal' psychological variables, such as personality traits. Narcissism does not necessarily need to be seen as a form of psychopathology; indeed, many approaches cast narcissism as a dimensional trait which is expressed to a certain extent in everyone (Thomaes et al., 2013). It seems plausible that feelings of collective humiliation (due to foreign policy, unequal opportunities, etc.) contribute to engagement in violent behaviours by individuals who show higher levels of narcissistic traits. The literature on narcissistic traits in violent Western radicals is scarce; so far, research seems to have mainly been focused on Middle Eastern terrorists (Merari, Diamant, Bibi, Broshi, & Zakin, 2009; Miliora, 2004).

Research on personal characteristics contributing to violent radicalization is scarce. The contributing role of thrill-seeking in the engagement in terrorist behaviours seems plausible, as it is a recurrent theme in motivations mentioned by terrorists. The possible contributing role of narcissistic personality traits also seems tenable, considering the empirical evidence for a link between narcissistic traits and aggression in individuals. However, future research is needed in order to determine the extent to which these personality characteristics contribute specifically to violent radicalization in Western Muslims. Furthermore, research into other possible traits is required in order to fully elucidate which individuals are at a higher risk of joining terrorist organizations.

Empathy

Another possible factor contributing to Western Muslims joining extremist Islamist organizations may be empathy (Awan, 2008). The exact role of empathy, however, is not completely clear based on current evidence. On one hand, the execution of violent attacks on innocent civilians seems to imply an *absence* of empathy. On the other hand, the fact that the suffering of Muslims abroad plays a major role in violent radicalization (see above) emphasizes the *presence* of empathy in terrorists. Indeed, it seems that empathy for the *Ummah* (the world wide Muslim community) acts as a primary motivation for the holy war waged by Muslim extremists (Nilsson, 2015). The deprivation experienced by Muslims worldwide, thus, not only leads to feelings of anger, frustration, and injustice, as mentioned before, but also to empathy among Muslims who are not experiencing these sufferings themselves (Awan, 2008; Van San, 2015). It is crucial to mention that the current paper focuses exclusively on Western Muslim terrorists attacking in the West. This focus is very different from investigating Muslim terrorists attacking in Muslim-majority countries, where the majority of victims are Muslim.

One way in which empathy for the suffering Muslim populations could be expressed is through suicide terrorism. Although this comparison might almost seem immoral, suicide terrorism can be seen as a form of altruism. Individuals committing the act put the goals of the collective before their own wellbeing (Awan, 2008). When studying Palestinian suicide terrorists, Pedahzur and colleagues (2003) found altruistic



characteristics in these individuals and emphasized the strong component in the individuals' perception of the relationship between them and their society. Similar signs of altruism are apparent in Western terrorists, as the plight of Muslim populations abroad is mentioned countless times by violent radicals (e.g., Bartlett et al., 2010; Abbas & Siddique, 2012; O'Callaghan, 1999). Perhaps altruistic characteristics or motivations are more prevalent in Western home-grown terrorists, as these individuals often haven't even experienced poor living conditions the way, for instance, many of the Palestinian terrorists have. Yet, Western terrorists seem to be just as ready to endanger or even end their own life for the sake of their fellow Muslims. Further research is needed to confirm this hypothesis.

One aspect of terrorist organizations that is often overlooked and seems to be polar opposite to the stereotype of the coldblooded terrorist, is the strong sense of brotherhood that many individuals experience in these organizations (Nasiri, 2007; Nilsson, 2015). Indeed, friendship and kinship are recurrent influences in the path towards violent radicalization and terrorism (Hamm, 2009; Bakker, 2006). To demonstrate the extent to which the friendship between members of terrorist organizations plays a role in their engagement in violent behaviour, Cottee and Hayward (2011) draw a comparison with combat soldiers. In both groups (combat soldiers and terrorists), the permanent threat of capture or death strengthens the bonds within the group and creates a powerful sense of identity and in-group love among members (Cottee & Hayward, 2011). With this comparison, they emphasize that no matter the cause of one's engagement in any type of war, eventually, 'Individuals don't simply kill and die for a cause - they kill and die for each other' (Cottee & Hayward, 2011, p. 973).

The strengthening of in-group ties and the resentment towards the out-group have been discussed, but how can these processes contribute to the engagement in violence against innocent civilians? Doosje and colleagues (2013) emphasized the role of perceived distance between oneself and individuals from the out-group. They showed that perceived distance predicts both the support for Muslim violence committed by others as well as the own intention to use violence. Perceived distance was defined as a psychological detachment from out-group members, which could be rooted in a general resentment towards Western society. One aspect of terrorist ideologies that could have an effect on this dehumanization of the out-group is the Manichean worldview that is often represented by violent radicals and terrorists (Miller, 2013). Such a worldview essentially separates reality into good and evil. Perhaps this point of view enables the terrorist to justify the killing of innocents by using the label 'evil' on anyone and everyone who does not conform to their particular belief system.

There seems to be a presence of empathy in Islamist terrorists when it comes to in-group members, as shown by the presence of friendship and kinship in terrorist organizations, and the willingness to endanger the own life for the sake of the collective. On the other hand, the killings of innocent civilians points to an absence of empathy when it comes to out-group members. The increasing distance between oneself and the individuals of the out-group, as well as the black-and-white worldview often depicted by extremist ideologies, explain the contrast of altruistic tendencies towards the in-group versus extremely violent propensities towards the out-group. Future research is needed to clarify the exact role of empathy as a contributing factor to violent radicalization in Western Muslims.

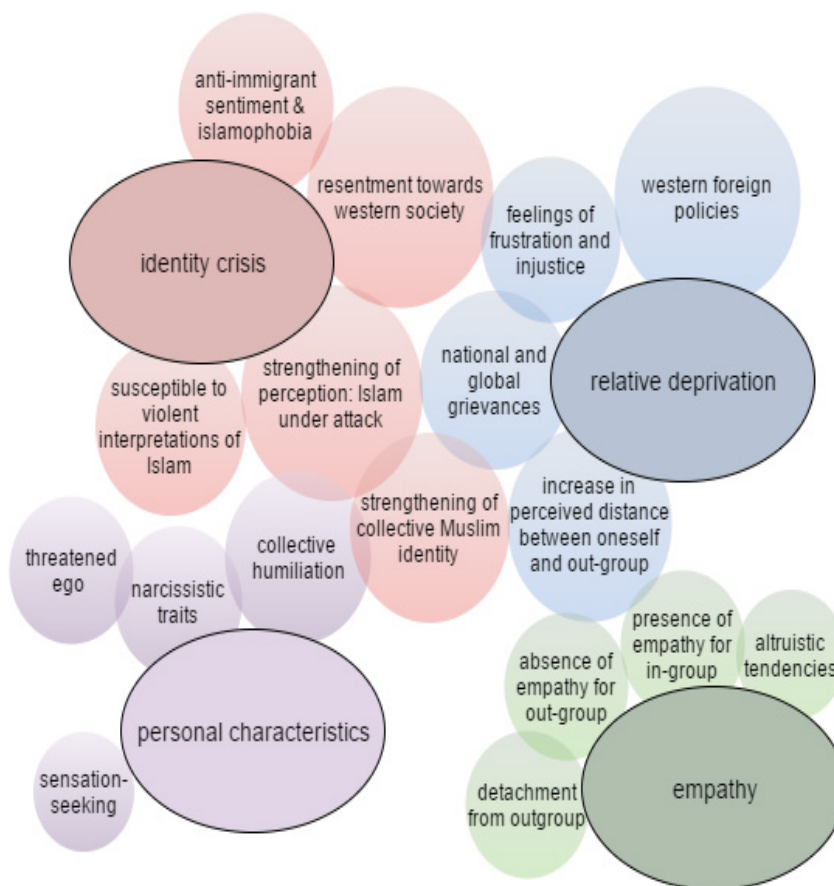


Figure. Factors contributing to Western individuals joining Islamic extremist organizations and engaging in terrorist behavior in the West. The overlapping and touching circles represent the interconnectedness of the different factors and their workings. The figure serves as a starting point for a more exhaustive explanation of Western home-grown Islamist terrorist behavior.

Conclusion

With the rising numbers of Western Muslims joining insurgencies abroad and a, therefore, possibly greater threat of returnees planning to engage in domestic terrorism, research in this area is crucial to the wellbeing of the Western population. The current paper attempted to provide insight into the factors contributing to Western Muslims joining terrorist organizations and engaging in terrorist violence in the West (for a summary, see figure 1). Strong evidence emphasizes the role of some factors, such as identity crises and relative deprivation. For instance, Bartlett and colleagues (2010) found that terrorists, radicals, and young Muslims had all experienced some degree of societal exclusion, had a distrust of government, a hatred for foreign policy, many felt a disconnection from their local community, and many have had an identity crisis of some sort. The influence of these factors can be altered, for instance by nation-wide programs encouraging multiculturalism, and by providing assistance to minorities (in this case Western Muslims) struggling to find their place in the occupational world. The solution for societal problems related to relative deprivation and identity crises should be implemented on a large scale. The damage done by Western foreign policies in Muslim-majority countries needs to be not only acknowledged, but also further prevented if any more Western Muslims are to be steered away from militant Islamism. If it weren't for Western involvement in these countries, there is no doubt that the narrative of militant Islam and its hostility towards the Western



world would be weakened significantly.

There is a lack of research into the more individual and personal factors contributing to the violent radicalization of Western Muslims. Because these factors should not be neglected, this paper proposes multiple ways in which personal factors could have an influence on violent radicalization, in an attempt to encourage future research in academic counter-terrorism. The possibility of narcissistic and/or sensation-seeking traits playing a role in violent radicalization seems plausible and requires further examination. The role of empathy seems to depend on group-dynamics: on the one hand, terrorist individuals are willing to put the wellbeing of the collective before their own life, showing a sense of empathy, possibly even love, towards their in-group. On the other hand, however, the distance between the individual and out-group members seems to be so grave that the individual is able to justify the killing of innocent civilians. Delineating personal characteristics and empathy as contributing factors can help inform intelligence agencies about individuals at risk of joining violent radical groups.

The current paper emphasizes the variety of factors that contribute to violent radicalization. Future research should focus on clarifying the role of personal characteristics and empathy, as well as on exploring other factors possibly contributing to violent radicalization in Western Muslims. As was iterated before (Bakker, 2006), there is no single Islamist terrorist profile. It will be futile to try and predict terrorism in individuals who may have joined terrorist organizations. That does, however, not mean that there is no way to prevent terrorism and to reduce risk factors. Especially situations, in which the Muslim population in the West is systematically disadvantaged, can be altered to reduce the sense of threat many Muslim communities experience. Weakening the idea that the Muslim population, or Islam in general, is under attack will reduce the strength of the Jihadi narrative and contribute to the prevention of violent radicalization in Western Muslims. By working towards a comprehensive account of terrorist behaviour, the different factors found to be relevant can help guide international prevention programs and inform intelligence agencies about individuals who are at a higher risk of joining terrorist organizations.

About the Authors

Khouwaga Yusoufzai is currently a graduate student with a Bachelor's degree in Psychology, obtained at Maastricht University, the Netherlands. Having fled the war in her native country Afghanistan at the age of two with only part of her family, the phenomenon of political violence and Islamist terrorism has continued to impact her throughout her life, sparking an interest in the dissection and explanation of terrorist behaviour.

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What to Expect Following a Military Defeat of ISIS in Syria and Iraq?

by Anne Speckhard, Ardian Shajkovci and Ahmet S. Yayla



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Abstract

In the struggle against ISIS and the so-called Islamic State, the United States and its allies continue to achieve significant military victories, as evidenced by the ongoing efforts to liberate the city of Mosul in Iraq. What happens next with the returning or migrating foreign fighters and with whatever remains of ISIS' influence in the digital battle space where up to this point it has been winning? Evidence of the group inspiring, remotely recruiting and directing attacks in Europe and elsewhere, and its continued ability to attract foreign fighters to the actual battlefield, makes it clear that ISIS may be losing the ground war in Syria and Iraq but winning in the other areas, especially in the digital battle space. The authors highlight the importance of creating compelling counter-narratives and products that compete with the prolific ISIS online campaigns.

Keywords: ISIS; Syria; Iraq; Caliphate; Counterterrorism; Foreign Fighters.

Introduction

It is estimated that the so-called Islamic State has lost about 45 percent of its territory in Iraq and 10 percent in Syria (Chia & Xeuling, 2016). Such major gains in military campaigns, in particular, are instrumental in diminishing ISIS' ability to exercise full control over its membership base and its ability to freely finance itself through the sale of oil, antiquities, slaves, and through taxing and extorting monetary payments from its civilian population (Speckhard & Yayla, 2016a). Recently, U.S. officials have reported a significant drop in the monthly number of foreign fighters travelling to Iraq and Syria from 2000 to 500, and some estimates are even down to 200 (Gibbons-Neff, 2016; "Are Airstrikes Successfully Weakening ISIS?" 2016).

Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, Islamic State's spokesperson and the person believed to be responsible for plotting and directing the recent terrorist attacks in Brussels, Istanbul, and Paris, as well as laying the ground work for future attacks (through the *Emni*—the ISIS' external operations), was recently killed in Aleppo, Syria (Lister, 2016; Speckhard & Yayla, 2016b). This was on the heels of the July 2016 killing of Abu Omar al-Shishani, a top Islamic State commander and a veteran of the Chechen jihadi war, south of Mosul, Iraq (Worley, 2016). The killings of these two battle-hardened and charismatic leaders also represents a significant blow to Islamic State's core leadership, especially important given the string of recent military setbacks that the group continues to experience in Iraq and Syria.

The available data suggest gradual, but likely, victory against ISIS on the military battlefield, although locals in Iraq have been expressing concerns over Shia militias already and potentially enacting revenge in liberated areas (An international aid worker in Iraq working in liberated areas, Speckhard personal communication, October 30, 2016). Despite the significant setbacks in the battlefield, ISIS continues to attract followers



because its online narratives remain alluring. Evidence of the group inspiring, remotely recruiting and directing attacks in Europe and elsewhere, and its continued ability to attract foreign fighters to the actual battlefield make it clear that ISIS may be losing the ground war in Syria and Iraq but winning in the other areas, especially in the digital battle space.

The recent case of three French women arrested in France for their role in a failed, ISIS-guided terrorist attack near Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris; the recent case of a 16-year-old teenager charged with supporting ISIS and plotting to carry out a terrorist attack in France; the case of Elton Simpson and Nadir Soofi who opened fire at a Garland, Texas, event and shot a security guard; and the case of the Bastille Day terrorist, Mohamed Lahouaiej Bouhlel, who killed 84 and injured more than 300 all serve as testament to the growing threat and the ability of ISIS to both inspire and direct attacks in the West (Connelly, 2016; Moore, 2016; Shoichet & Pearson, 2015; Verdier, Visser & Haddad, 2016). With the military defeat of ISIS in Syria and Iraq, foreign fighters are likely to migrate elsewhere, and many of them will choose to return home. These will be profoundly ideologically-indoctrinated, weapons-trained, battle-hardened, and possibly explosives-skilled cadres moving home—some above, and others below the radar of government and safety and security services. Law enforcement officials in Kosovo, for instance, shared that some ISIS cadres are having themselves falsely declared killed on social media and then returned, illegally crossing the borders to bypass security. Whether all returnees from ISIS constitute a danger to their homelands remains to be seen, although those who left ISIS but still believe in building a utopian Islamic “Caliphate” are more easily manipulated to attack at home or to return to service.

Methodology

Over the past year, in their *ISIS Defector Interview Project*, the authors have been interviewing ISIS defectors (n=40) and the family members of those who have gone to fight in Syria and Iraq (n=10). The authors had the opportunity to also interview law enforcement, intelligence, and representatives from non-governmental and civil society institutions in the countries they leave from, specifically in Jordan, Kosovo, Kyrgyzstan, Turkey, and Western Europe. The main goal was to learn first-hand how they were recruited, what motivations and vulnerabilities led to their joining, what they experienced, what caused them to defect, and how they kept in touch with affected family members left behind. More importantly, interviews were conducted to capture their stories on video to be used to denounce ISIS’ online recruiting efforts.

The interviews followed a semi-structured format to allow defectors and/or family members to voice stories in their own words. The authors videotaped most of the interviews and gained permission to use them for their project of fighting ISIS’ online recruiting. The defector sample included 35 males and five females. Four of the defectors were minors at the time of joining ISIS. The youngest was only thirteen. The ages ranged from thirteen up to forty-five. Most of the defectors in the sample were Syrians interviewed in southern Turkey (32), with four interviews taking place in the Balkans, two in Kyrgyzstan, and two in Western Europe [1].

Results and Discussion

During our interviews with those who had served in ISIS-controlled territories in Syria and Iraq, we found the dream of the “Caliphate” to be a compelling and powerful one, and while many understood that ISIS would never be able to deliver, it nevertheless remained as a hoped-for ideal (Speckhard & Yayla, 2016c).



We also found that a vast majority of those interviewed were true defectors and no longer support or ever intend to go back to the ranks of ISIS in Syria and Iraq, or to serve them at home. However, we also found that a minority, particularly those in Europe and the Balkans, were more accurately viewed as Islamic State returnees, but not defectors, having only temporarily disengaged from the battlefield—sometimes even being allowed to temporarily return home by the group, or more chillingly, sent home to recruit, or otherwise serve the group's goals in the West (Speckhard, Yayla & Shajkovci, 2017). Recent evidence also suggests that ISIS has long been preparing to attract, further indoctrinate, and weapons train European and Western cadres who could train quickly inside ISIS and then return to the West undetected to attack in the future (Callimachi, 2016; Gude & Wiedmann-Schmidt, 2015). These directed attacks were plotted by the ISIS *Emni* (Speckhard & Yayla, 2016d). Additionally, defectors are not always psychologically stable and may return their previous allegiance to the group.

Arguably, many of the thousands of foreign fighters ISIS has managed to attract to Syria and Iraq will return home. Some will return truly disaffected and as actual defectors from the group, while others will only be disillusioned but still longing to build an “Islamic Caliphate.” Others will be sent back to recruit and attack at home. Already Western consulates in Turkey reported instances of their citizens appearing at consulates to report “lost passports” and wishing to return home (Abi-Habib, 2016). Likewise, Huthaifa Azzam, a Jordan-based Palestinian and son of Osama bin Laden's mentor in Afghanistan, Abdullah Azzam, told the authors in Jordan of the Free Syrian Army's base in Syria where over one hundred ISIS defectors from all over the world have been gathered, as they were caught fleeing the group (Huthaifa Azzam, Speckhard & Shajkovci interview, Jordan, November 2016). Some security experts predict that as ISIS continues to lose its territory in Iraq and Syria, it will grow its presence in other territories, such as Southeast Asia (Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia), Libya, and possibly even the Balkans (Chia & Xeuling, 2016; Mayr, 2016; “Why is ISIS Heading to Libya?” 2016).

Many ISIS defectors shared that in the event of losing their territory in Syria and Iraq, ISIS cadres plan to shave their beards and blend into normal society in Syria and elsewhere to mount guerilla warfare attacks (Speckhard & Yayla, 2016c; Speckhard, Yayla & Shajkovci, 2017). Given the open and generous support of Turkey to Syrians fleeing the war, and illicit Turkish support of ISIS, Turkey in its present state may be one of the places many of them settle. As President Erdogan of Turkey continues to consolidate state powers to himself, he has also long been giving ISIS hidden and open support to keep the Kurds at bay, and may continue to find that to his advantage to remain in power and to keep the Kurds in Syria at bay (Yayla & Speckhard, 2016a, 2016b & 2016c). However, with recent ISIS attacks inside Turkey, this may be likened to dining with “cannibals,” as the authors recently wrote in an assessment of this policy (Yayla & Speckhard, 2016d) [2]. Despite assurances to actively pursue ISIS, no major sweeps or arrests of the countless ISIS terror cells and cadres inside Turkey have yet occurred.

As mentioned above, in the Balkans, law enforcement representatives shared that there were instances where ISIS fighters had falsely declared themselves killed in action over social media but were in fact alive and had returned home crossing borders illegally to live under the radar of government and security services (Law enforcement and intelligence officials, Speckhard & Shajkovci personal communication, October 2016). In Belgium, a security professional shared that a claimed defector came to the consulate asking to return home repentant. On further investigation, however, he was found to be plotting an ISIS attack with contacts back home (Speckhard personal communication, March 2016). There are many foreign fighters married or who have taken their wives, and even children, with them to Syria and Iraq. Females and wives of foreign fighters who did not play violent roles in ISIS may avoid prison sentences upon their return home while their



spouses are imprisoned or dead, and thus may be vulnerable to being manipulated by the group, or even worse remain powerful radicalizing forces once back home. In the Balkans and Western Europe, the authors found a number of them who regularly keep in touch with cadres still active in ISIS. Children of ISIS cadres returning home will also have to be rehabilitated after witnessing violence, and many may not even know local languages.

As ISIS continues to lose most, or all, of its territory and fighters begin to return, it is important to note that the problems facing foreign fighters in their home countries, specifically factors that had influenced their decisions to join in the first place such as high unemployment, underemployment, discrimination, marginalization, difficulty living a conservative Salafi lifestyle in the West, disordered and unsatisfying family relationships, and so forth, will all likely still exist upon return, and may be even more frustrating to a traumatized returnee. The problems that initially motivated them to leave will also likely continue unabated, without new or satisfying solutions, having mystically rematerialized upon their return from the ISIS battlefield.

Moreover, many returned ISIS cadres, having lived in conflict zones and having witnessed and taken part in extreme brutality, are likely to suffer from symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Their increased emotional arousal resulting from the battlefield experiences will not match the calm, bored ennui of being back home—without a clear purpose and cause. Having become accustomed to the adrenal rush of being in a conflict zone may cause some to once again seek that energized state of being. Most will not be able to procure good psychological treatment nor be able to safely admit to what they took part in, while some will be stressed by possible or actual prosecution and imprisonment. Thus, many returnees are likely to long again for the clarity of purpose and experiences of the battleground with the potential rewards of being a warrior and ultimate rewards of death by “martyrdom.” Likewise, frustrated returnee wives of those who are or end up imprisoned may become hopeless of living while having already accepted the “martyrdom” ideology, making them also at risk for returning to terrorism [3]. Prior research with cornered and nearly defeated terrorist groups teaches us the lesson that they often turn to women as suicide cadres at that point (Speckhard, 2008). A respondent from the Balkans shared about being treated in France for his posttraumatic responses to his time in ISIS and expressed gratitude for receiving care versus punishment after his time on the ISIS battlefield, although he remained cagey and less than honest about what he had actually participated in.

Despite the significant victories against ISIS and the Islamic State, defeating ISIS remains a daunting task. While face-to-face recruitment is still active in Europe, the Balkans, Turkey, and the Middle East, in the U.S. most recruitment occurs over the Internet. Even with face-to-face recruitment, the authors found that except among the Syrians, online ISIS materials played a significant role in terrorist recruitment around the world.

The use of social media tools and social media campaigns to mobilize individuals into an extremist cause is not limited to ISIS. Other terrorist groups, such as al-Qaeda, have long used the Internet to attract and recruit followers. What differentiates ISIS from other extremist groups, however, is its ability to utilize its online campaign to both attract and recruit potential followers and promote its brand as a serious, powerful, and ruthless organization. Unlike other jihadist terrorist organizations, its online campaign does not operate in the shadows; on the contrary, its content is outsourced and distributed to everyone willing to embrace it. Equally important, the group’s online propaganda has permeated almost every sphere of our digital space. A study conducted by the Brookings Institution revealed a total of 46,000 Twitter accounts created in support of ISIS, though not all active at once, between September and December 2014 (Walker, 2015). As the group



continues to lose its territory, it is highly likely that it will continue to strengthen its online propaganda to project the false sense of its continuing control of territories in Syria and Iraq. Such online campaigns will be crucial for groups like ISIS to not only attract followers, but to also showcase manifestations of its material power in Iraq and Syria.

ISIS has managed to master the use of social media unlike any other terrorist group. First, they are known to flood the Internet with slick recruitment and propaganda materials. Next, they watch to learn who is liking, retweeting, or otherwise endorsing their materials. Once communications are established, often by swarming in, ISIS recruits then do their best to find out about the needs of their potential recruits and meet them to seduce, ultimately taking over their lives, either by inviting them to the battlefield or to mount terrorist attacks at home (Speckhard, Shajkovci & Yayla, 2016). In this manner, ISIS, like no other terrorist group, has been able to personally contact and groom new recruits, often using the intimacy of communication and encryption provided by social media apps such as Skype, Telegram, and Whatsapp.

In the Balkans, ISIS defectors shared that they were attracted to groups like ISIS and were moved to help Assad's victims and their Syrian "brothers" simply because they could easily identify with the group and the conflict, specifically remembering the time when they had been the victims of the Serbian regime during the Kosovo conflict of 1999. Videos from Syria of Assad's atrocities, alongside videos instructing how to go to Syria, were instrumental in getting them involved, although recruitment networks also functioned to finance their travel, encourage them to go, and help them with the logistics of entering Syria. The same was true in Europe, Jordan, and Kyrgyzstan.

ISIS videos and propaganda materials have a profoundly moving effect in the recruitment process. Consider the answer of an ISIS defector when asked to elaborate on what had reinforced his decision to join the conflict in Syria:

"I started following the videos of Lavdrim Muhaxheri [notorious Albanian Islamic State leader and recruiter of ethnic Albanians in Syria] and the videos of Albanians in Syria saying that people of Syria need other Muslims to come and fulfill God's will. I became interested and started to look for the ways to go to Syria—how to join other Albanians in Syria against Bashar." (F.L, Speckhard interview, June 2016, Kosovo)

When asked to discuss the nature of social media sources (e.g. YouTube, web browsing, etc.) that attracted him, he added:

"[YouTube?] Initially it was YouTube that inspired me about the war in Syria. However, I then started browsing the Internet, and each time I would see something with an Arabic flag on Facebook, or anything with Arabic subtitles/names, I would immediately befriend them. Then I would follow them. They would post their videos on Facebook. I also got inspired from videos posted on Facebook. YouTube videos were often getting removed, but most people didn't know that you would get reposted on Facebook" (Ibid.).

Conclusion

The available data suggest likely victory against ISIS in the military battle space. The war, however, is not won simply because we have defeated ISIS on the battleground. Although groups like ISIS will continue to utilize technology to lure its recruits and followers and promote a medieval ideology that condones beheadings, rape, and enslavement, among others, efforts are needed to broach a counter-narrative to defeat the idea



of utopian “Caliphate” that can be brought into being through ruthless brutality and through terrorism extended over the globe. This is not to say that defeating ISIS narratives and propaganda on the Internet and social media will be easy. Such efforts are often complicated by the fact that governments lack adequate policy and legal frameworks on how to incorporate effectively the narratives of those who have disengaged from terrorist groups like ISIS into their counter-narrative messaging. Put differently, much emphasis is placed on criminalizing the efforts of such individuals as opposed to finding creative ways to incorporate both. Even when the voices of ISIS defectors are raised, issues can arise when they do not remain true to their message and flip back and forth. Equally problematic is the fact that government efforts are mostly focused on removing online propaganda and mounting counter messaging campaigns that are limited to rational and logical arguments while groups like ISIS use visuals and emotional arguments and material to attract followers (Speckhard, Shajkovci & Yayla, 2016).

The most credible voices to raise against ISIS are those of insiders—ISIS defectors—who have seen the cruel reality of life under the Islamic State and the ISIS-controlled territories [4]. In the *ISIS Defectors Interviews Project*, the authors have begun to use the voices of actual defectors telling their stories of time inside ISIS to denounce the group and its ideology. By capturing the voices of ISIS defectors as they denounce the group, and by creating from their stories compelling counter-narratives and products that compete with the prolific and persuasive ISIS online campaigns, we can begin to break the ISIS brand. There is yet the digital battleground to consider. This is just as important as defeating the ISIS narrative of building a utopian Caliphate, defeating its “martyrdom” ideology, and defeating its idea that Islam, Islamic lands, and Muslims themselves are under attack by the West, and that all Muslims have a duty to fight back.

Notes

[1] First and the second author also interviewed the family members of two foreign fighters, one killed in Syria and the other arrested on terrorism charges, in Jordan, November 12, 2016.

[2] Thanks to Arthur Kassebaum for this pithy saying applied to Erdogan.

[3] Similar scenario was carried out in Turkey as well. Turkish cadres who had fought “jihad” against the Russians in Afghanistan returned to Turkey and lived peacefully, although they spent their efforts spreading their Salafi- jihadi ideology. They remained peaceful, operating under the radar, for a period of ten years, after which they again reactivated and started carrying out terrorist attacks (Third author personal accounts when serving as the head of Counterterrorism for the Turkish National Police).

[4] For that reason, at the International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism (ICSVE), we decided in our *ISIS Defectors Interviews Project* to video record all the defectors we interviewed (given permission to do so) in order to be able to create short video clips to load on the internet raising defectors voices against ISIS’ online recruitment. We have also sub-titled them in the 20+ languages ISIS recruits in. As we have collected our interviews, most of them captured on video, we have been producing short and powerful edited video clips and Internet memes (posters) to amplify these voices of disaffected ISIS defectors speaking out against the group with the goal of breaking the ISIS brand. See: <http://www.icsve.org/projects/> and <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCumpEsozixbl-PyKw12hmnw>

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Book Review

The ISIS Crisis: Reviews

by Richard English



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- Daniel Byman, *Al-Qaida, The Islamic State, and the Global Jihadist Movement: What Everyone Needs to Know* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015)
- Patrick Cockburn, *The Jihadis return: ISIS and the New Sunni Uprising* (New York: Or Books, a2014)
- Jessica Stern and J. M. Berger, *ISIS: The State of Terror* (London: William Collins, 2015)
- Fawaz A. Gerges, *ISIS: A History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016)
- William McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State* (New York: St Martin's Press, 2015)
- Michael Weiss and Hassan Hassan, *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror* (New York: Regan Arts, 2015)

One of the enduring challenges involved in analysing terrorism is to avoid an over-obsession with the present. In the period after the 9/11 atrocity, an explosion of academic and other studies focused on al-Qaida; many of these treated the movement as though little that we knew from previous terrorist groups was now relevant or helpful. As I write this current essay, everybody is absorbed with ISIS. This is understandable, but it has its dangers. Knowing what is unique about an organization is only possible if one engages in proper comparison, the latter allowing for recognition of continuities and echoes as well as differences. If we really want to explain and adequately respond to the ISIS crisis, then we need to think more historically than has been fashionable in recent years.

The books under consideration in this essay all have strong merits and, between them, they provide a basis for some helpful understanding of the Islamic State phenomenon in its historical context and origins. Daniel Byman's *Al-Qaida, The Islamic State, and the Global Jihadist Movement*, traces the roots and origins of ISIS very well. This involves some admirable honesty about how far US-led responses to al-Qaida helped to provide the context within which ISIS made appealing sense to so many people, to such an extent that the Islamic State 'now rivals al-Qaida for leadership of the global jihadist community'(2). This reflects one deeper historical pattern, of course: the mutually shaping interaction of non-state terrorists and their state adversaries represents an often ugly, antiphonal process (English, 2015). Yet here it is again: the War on Terror had as one of its component parts the invasion of Iraq, and the fractured aftermath of that endeavour created part of the space within which ISIS offered disaffected Sunnis a sense of purpose, revenge, direction, and leadership.

Byman's book is calm and informative about the well-known al-Qaida narrative, and also about the complex effects of the American response to the group's worst atrocity in 2001. Al-Qaida suffered huge damage from the War on Terror, but global jihadism also gained ground through the creation in parts of Iraq of a theatre of anti-Western mobilization. From that crucible, through complex routes, emerged ISIS.

Byman notes that 'The Islamic State focuses on consolidating and expanding its position in Iraq and Syria'



(49) and I think that this is correct. But as that position becomes increasingly eroded by enemy assaults and the degrading effects of ISIS's own actions upon its population, the logic of expanding its branded attacks in the West surely grows. We have seen some of this in the attacks in France, Belgium, and the United States. Others, tragically, will follow. As they do so, will Western leaders and societies act proportionately and effectively? Perhaps. If they are to do so then they must be prepared to acknowledge the ways in which hubristic foreign policy in the past fifteen years has made many aspects of the terrorism crisis worse, rather than better. The War on Terror witnessed an increase, not a diminution, in the levels of terrorist attack and terrorist-generated fatality (English, 2016). It undoubtedly also helped to produce the Islamic State. As Byman coldly states it: 'The Islamic State is al-Qaida's most important progeny' (163). He notes that millenarianism plays a part in the group's appeal, and also identifies the importance of sectarianism in motivating and sustaining its activities.

If Byman offers a valuable scholarly reading of ISIS, then Patrick Cockburn complements this with an example of high-grade journalism. *The Jihadis return: ISIS and the New Sunni Uprising* offers rather a bleak analysis: 'Iraq has disintegrated. Little is exchanged between its three great communities – Shia, Sunni, and Kurds – except gunfire' (9); 'At best, Syria and Iraq face years of intermittent civil war; at worst, the division of these countries will be like the partition of India in 1947 when massacre and fear of massacre establishes new demographic frontiers' (15).

Like Byman, Cockburn is blunt about the role that the US-led invasion and transformation of Iraq from 2003 onwards played in the narrative which generated ISIS. He stresses the twin foundations of the Islamic State's emergence ('the Sunni revolt in ... Syria, and the alienation of the Iraqi Sunni by a Shia-led government in Baghdad' (31)). And he makes a strong case for there having been, over the past fifteen years, a Western myopia about the importance of Saudi Arabia and Pakistan in the sustenance of violent jihadism.

In Iraq itself, Cockburn emphasizes the issue of sectarianism as being crucially significant; regarding Syria, he rightly criticizes those in the West who assumed that President Assad would disappear from power. And Cockburn is relentlessly critical of Western interventions: 'The four wars fought in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and Syria over the past twelve years have all involved overt or covert foreign intervention in deeply divided countries. In each case the involvement of the West exacerbated existing differences and pushed hostile parties towards civil war' (99). The causes of the ISIS crisis lie in very complex events, and clearly much of this has little to do with the United States, the UK, and its allies. But the evidence adduced by one of the most astute of journalists here makes grim reading none the less.

No more encouraging is the analysis offered in Jessica Stern and J. M. Berger's fascinating study, *ISIS: The State of Terror*. Indeed, these authors are arguably the gloomiest in their reading of recent events. ISIS, in their view, 'is rewriting the playbook for extremism ... it has instituted transformative changes in strategy, messaging, and recruitment that will linger long after its so-called caliphate has crumbled to dust' (6-7).

Again, there is a haunting clarity about the group's origins in the 2003 Iraq invasion. (How many times in the history of terrorism has an over-militarized response worsened the situation rather than improved it?) Again, there is good detail on the enmity between al-Qaida and the Islamic State. (How many times in the long history of terrorism has violent competition *within* one's own community and constituency helped to determine tactics and even strategy?)

Stern and Berger describe ISIS as having become 'the richest terrorist organization in the world' (46). It has also been one which has appealed to thousands of foreign fighters, to whom the Islamic State has devoted much attention: 'ISIS propaganda and messaging is disproportionately slanted toward foreign fighters,' Stern



and Berger observe, 'both in its content and its target audience' (77). Attracting foreign recruits (through a mixture of ideological and personal motives, and a combination of push and pull factors) is not in itself new, of course; but the scale here seems greater than what has been previously seen. The reasons for people becoming involved are heterogeneous and complex; the effects of their involvement have often been starkly brutal for the victims of their ISIS violence.

Stern and Berger attribute much skill and innovation to the Islamic State: 'ISIS was rewriting the rules of jihadist extremism using sophisticated tactics of manipulation and distribution' (99). It is important not to overplay this, I think. Much of the ISIS argument is demonstrably crass in its readings of local, national, and international politics, and this will increasingly be the judgment of most observers. Moreover, the very public celebrations of brutality by the group secure for them ambiguous publicity: some are attracted by such vicious and merciless acts, but most are clearly repelled by them. Again, the echoes of earlier terrorist campaigns (from ETA to the West European leftists of the 1970s and 1980s to the Provisional IRA to al-Qaida) are clear to hear: violence, especially against defenceless civilians, tends often to be counter-productive in the longer term for terrorist organizations in terms of public support.

Stern and Berger devote appropriate attention to the ISIS-al-Qaida rivalry, and are clear about al-Qaida's ongoing capacity for violence too. They are emphatic that ISIS's headline goals are 'impossible, ludicrous' (235), but that this does mean that the group will disappear speedily. (Again, echoes of earlier terrorist experience shout out clearly enough.) And they wisely clarify that, despite what some have claimed, ISIS 'does not represent an existential threat to any Western country' (236).

The group does, however, pose an existential threat to its victims, and most of these are Muslim. One of the many merits of Fawaz Gerges's *ISIS: A History* is that it firmly locates the Islamic State's emergence and appeal within the specific regional context in which it mainly operates. 'It is easy to dismiss the Salafi-jihadists of the so-called Islamic State' – Gerges suggests – 'as monsters, savages, and killers'; but such condemnation 'overlooks a painful truth: that an important Sunni constituency believes in the group's utopian and romantic vision of building an Islamic state' (ix). ISIS has offered a response to a crisis of Sunni identity in Syria, Iraq, and elsewhere; the chaotic politics of Iraq and Syria, and the illegitimacy of their regimes in the eyes of many Sunnis, have meant that ISIS has been able for some Sunnis to fill 'an ideational and institutional void': 'Since 2003 Iraq has descended into a sustained crisis, inflaming the grievances of the Sunni population over their disempowerment under the new Shia ascendancy and preponderant Iranian influence' (12).

Gerges is right to stress that the group's appeal is not entirely ideological or religious: resistance against despised authority plays its part also, as does the Islamic State's seeming capacity to offer a well-resourced order. Gerges's book is also strong in its recognition of the role played in ISIS's rise by Saudi Arabian tensions with Iran. The battles may have been fought out in Syria and Iraq, but the background struggle had much to do with Saudi-Iranian enmity.

Not that Professor Gerges dismisses ISIS's Salafi-jihadist ideas as of negligible importance. Nor does he ignore the ruthless implications of the group's philosophy: 'ISIS possesses a totalitarian, millenarian worldview that eschews political pluralism, competition, and diversity of thought' (27). Ultimately, he sees their trajectory as likely to end in self-destruction ('the group has monstrously miscalculated by overextending itself and turning the entire world against it' (43)), but he pays close attention to the thinking of their key theorists, and the way in which such ideas have appealed to people trying to regain influence over their countries and their lives.

As noted already, the ISIS story is very much an intra-Muslim tale. This has involved sharp rivalry with



al-Qaida (whose 'hegemony and monopoly on transnational jihadism' (235) Gerges now considers to have ended). And it also involves some complex theological roots, deftly scrutinized in William McCants's book, *The ISIS Apocalypse*. 'Like all fundamentalist attempts to revive the early days of their faith, the Islamic State's leaders had to choose among contrasting scriptures and histories from their religion's past to paint a portrait of what they aspired to in the present and future' (21). ISIS's choices included the apocalyptic option now so famous. Focusing on this distinguished them from al-Qaida, as did their attitude towards the declaration of a caliphate. Does the heralding of a supposedly apocalyptic battleground in Dabiq in Syria help with recruiting? 'The apocalyptic pitch "always works"' (100), McCants quotes one ISIS fighter as having claimed. The Dabiq prophecy is centuries old and – while political historians such as myself should generally avoid predictions—the prophecy seems unlikely to come to fruition. Dr McCants gives admirable detail of the ideas involved, and of their appeal to ISIS, as he does of the establishment of the caliphate in 2014. He suggests that the 2013-14 successes of the Islamic State were partly caused by its being 'left alone' (153). That condition has not, of course, endured, and the erosion of ISIS will jaggedly define the politics of those parts of Syria and Iraq where it has flourished for a time.

What will that erosion leave behind, though? Michael Weiss and Hassan Hassan's *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror* offers vivid, first-hand detail which hints at elements of that future. In their view, 'ISIS has destroyed the boundaries of contemporary nation-states' (xvi), and certainly it is hard to see Iraq or Syria enduring after the ISIS crisis has abated. The Islamic State is not the only cause of this fracturing, of course. But it has played a major role in redrawing regional boundaries. Those borders are unlikely to match popular opinion and preference in any neat way. (Again, the echoes of previous terrorist conflicts are loud.)

Weiss and Hassan are also clear-sighted about just how brutal ISIS's violence has been, and the legacies of the sectarian and other kinds of killing will mean that intra-Muslim enmities have been renewed in blood-stained form. The long history of terrorism again and again shows groups being more effective at producing revenge and polarization than at achieving their headline goals. So also with ISIS. Weiss and Hassan's book draws well on interviews, and these show the role played by contingent, small-scale, and even individual initiative in determining the journey that the Islamic State has pursued. So again in the future: the capacity for new battle lines of violence will be locally decided in many cases, and the potential for new fire-centres of killing is undoubtedly evident.

The accounts valuably offered in these six books ably demonstrate the contextual uniqueness of ISIS, and the novelty of some of its endeavours. The foreign fighter phenomenon has, as suggested, exceeded what previous groups managed to generate. And, ultimately, every terrorist group is unique and deserves to be understood as such.

That said, the echoes with earlier experience in terrorism and counter-terrorism are unavoidable. We have here a case of an over-militarized state counter-terrorist project (after 9/11) actually generating new waves of anti-state terrorism; we have an episode in which terrorists have exaggerated what their violence would produce, and in which revenge and polarization have been brought about far more than have headline objectives; we see intra-communal conflict and inter-terrorist tensions playing a decisive role in the trajectory and actions of a terrorist organization; we note the crucial role played by small-scale, even individual, initiative and planning and determination; we have multi-causal routes into recruitment, drawing on a complex mixture of the personal, political, and religious, on the instrumental as well as the emotional; we see the creation through violence of ultimately ambiguous publicity; and we see the part played by regional neighbours in sustaining painful conflict. In all of this, the ISIS crisis turns out not to be as new as many



observers seem to think.

About the author

Richard English is Professor of Politics at Queen's University Belfast, where he is also Distinguished Professorial Fellow in the Senator George J. Mitchell Institute for Global Peace, Security and Justice, and the University's Pro-Vice Chancellor for Internationalization and Engagement. Between 2011 and 2016 he was Wardlaw Professor of Politics in the School of International Relations, and Director of the Handa Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence (CSTPV), at the University of St Andrews. He is the author of eight books, including the award-winning studies *Armed Struggle: The History of the IRA* (2003) and *Irish Freedom: The History of Nationalism in Ireland* (2006). His most recent book, *Does Terrorism Work? A History*, was published in 2016 by Oxford University Press. He is also the co-editor/editor of a further six books and has published more than fifty journal articles and book chapters. He is a frequent media commentator on terrorism and political violence, and on Irish politics and history, including work for the BBC, CNN, ITN, SKY NEWS, NPR, RTE, the *Irish Times*, the *Times Literary Supplement*, *Newsweek*, the *Guardian*, and the *Financial Times*. He is a Fellow of the British Academy (FBA), a Member of the Royal Irish Academy (MRIA), a Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh (FRSE), a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society (FRHistS), an Honorary Fellow of Keble College Oxford, and an Honorary Professor at the University of St Andrews. He has delivered invited Lectures about his research in over twenty countries.

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About JTR

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