

A New Way to Rebel: A Case Study on the Methods of Radicalisation and Religious Justifications used by the Islamic State

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'On June 29 [2014], ISIS made a move in the world of ideas that was as bold as its military blitzkrieg... ISIS declared that it was reconstituting the caliphate...'

– Jessica Stern and J.M. Berger, ISIS: The State of Terror

In the June of 2014, the global jihadist group known today as the Islamic State¹ broke onto the global stage with its unanticipated capture of the Syrian border town of Mosul. Known for their strong belief in the Islamic concept of lesser-jihad and their unabashed brutality (for which al-Qaeda denounced them) (Stern and Berger, 2015) the Islamic State has made Jihad a household term. This quick rise to power brought the questions of what exactly caused the radicalisation of those who sought to join the group, and where the Islamic State drew their religious legitimacy from, to the forefront of the public mind.

The Islamic State justifies their extreme violence as being a derivative of the Islamic concept of Jihad. When literally translated, Jihad means 'to strive', which, by most Muslims, is taken to mean a spiritual struggle against personal temptation (often referred to as greater jihad) (Ismail, 2016). However, groups like the Islamic State follow jihad in the context of fighting for the protection of

¹ The Islamic State hereafter refers to ISIS, ISIL, IS, Daesh or any other variation on that name.

their religion (sometimes referred to as lesser jihad) (Ismail, 2016) which is argued by scholars as being a 'primary mediator of sacred violence' (Muluk et al., 2013).

With the increased threat of violent jihad in recent times, there has been much research conducted into what factors cause people to become radicalized as well as how jihadist groups can religiously justify their actions. Across the world there have been parliamentary resource papers written, providing answers to what causes radicalisation, and how best to combat it. The Australian government defines radicalisation as what 'happens when a person's thinking... become[s] significantly different from how most members of their society... view social issues' (Angus, 2016). This is further supported by the United Kingdom's explanation that radicalisation 'is best viewed as a process of change, a personal and political transformation' (Christmann, 2012). It is crucial, at this point, to understand that someone who is radicalized will not necessarily participate in violent acts (Angus, 2016), though this has not prevented those who have been radicalized by the Islamic State from committing such acts.

The research into the religious justification claimed by groups such as the Islamic State has shown the obvious, that such groups are centered around a Salafi interpretation of the concept of jihad (Ismail, 2016a). In fact, the violent interpretation of jihad practiced by the Islamic State did not appear until the latter half of the eighth century (Ismail, 2016). Violent Salafism itself, is described as being a very conservative interpretation of how Islam should be practiced (Sweid, 2016) and focuses on the eradication of non-believers (Ismail,

2016a). With this in mind, it becomes important to understand how, and why the Islamic State draws in followers.

Causes of Radicalisation

In the existing literature on this topic there seems to be a common consensus that radicalisation particularly occurs within 'young, male, Muslims', often 'second and third-generation immigrants, born in Western countries' (Lynch, 2013; King and Taylor, 2011). It has also been discussed that radicalisation tends to target vulnerable youth (Fierravanti-Wells, 2016).

Understanding what causes people to become violently radicalized is crucial to being able to solve the global crisis that The Islamic State has caused. Hafez and Mullins argue that there are three major catalysts that could cause an individual to become radicalized: grievances, networks, and ideology (Hafez and Mullins, 2015). Out of these, grievances are particularly important as they are concerning for policy-makers and law enforcers insofar as they stem from 'disenchantment with... their host societies' (Hafez and Mullins, 2015). This 'disenchantment' does not only come from immigrants, however, it has also been seen in those who have been born and raised in their home country. The case of Australian teenager, Jake Bilardi (aka Abu Abdullah al-Australi) is an applicable example of this. In news articles, he was quoted as speaking about the media depictions of violent terrorist groups (such as al-Qaeda and the Taliban) as 'a government sponsored distortion of the reality' (ABC News Online, 2015) which hinted at a deeper dissatisfaction with how the government was interacting with the Islamic

State. Just by looking at the example of Jake Bilardi, we could infer that disenfranchisement with the government was a key factor in his radicalisation by the Islamic State.

Another way that the Islamic State radicalize potential followers is through the creation of religious continuity. Whether it be through their continued use of Islamic chants in the background of their videos, or the symbolism of the 'one fingered salute'; the Islamic State attempts to 'sell' their perverted interpretation of Islam, to the mainstream population. This is done to create a sense of familiarity for new recruits, encouraging further exploration into their ideology, but is typically frustrating for mainstream Muslims (Ismail, 2016). The use of the 'one fingered salute' has become synonymous with the Islamic State. Assumed to mean number one across the world, in an Islamic context, raising the fore-finger to the sky is said to represent the core belief that there is only one God, Allah (Zelinsky, 2016).

This creation of religious continuity often comes with an attempted destruction of authoritative figures in vulnerable persons' worlds by replacing them with leaders from 'within the circle' (so-to-speak) (Dawson, 2009). 'Religious' leaders such as Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (the previous leader of The Islamic State) receive no formal religious training, but can, however, speak as plausible authorities on their religion (Ismail, 2016) To paraphrase Dr James Piscatori of The Australian National University, jihadist groups promote the authority of their self-appointed spokesperson (Piscatori, 2016). The false claim to authority made by 'religious' leaders in these organisations mean that the vulnerable find a sense of security

within the group and thus, seek to follow their ways, regardless of how radical they originally intended their belief to be (Ismail, 2016).

On the other hand, for some people, the idea of joining an extremist group is simply 'a new way to rebel' (Fierravanti-Wells, 2016). Through the social-media storm run by the group over multiple different platforms (especially Twitter) (Stern and Berger, 2015), The Islamic State has created an aura of adventure, promising access to weapons and women that is designed to especially appeal to young men (Fierravanti-Wells, 2016). This attraction works particularly with those who are disenfranchised, so as to give them a sense of purpose and a sense of belonging.

Religious Justifications

In a religious context, the Islamic State adhere to a strict, conservative branch of Islam called 'Jihadi-Salafism, or jihadism for short' (Bunzel, 2015). Salafism, derived from the phrase Salaf al-Salih means 'followers of the pious ancestors', and a core value of this interpretation is that it seeks to purify the religion by rejecting blind imitation of rulers, and instead espousing the concept of *ijtihad* (independent reasoning) (Ismail, 2016). In fact, as part of their creed, the Islamic State openly advertises their support of the purification of religion (Bunzel, 2015).

The concept of jihad is greatly valued by the Islamic State and they have made great use of the many traditions created from within the jihadi movement

(including that of suicide bombing which is an institution created solely for the purposes of violent jihadism) (Ismail, 2016). The Islamic State genuinely believe that their enacting of jihad is their godly obligation, saying; 'We believe that jihad in God's path is an individual obligation ... and [that it is an individual obligation] in the presence of a pious person or an impious person' (Bunzel, 2015).

Conclusion

To conclude; it is clear that the factors that lead to violent radicalisation are many and varied, and whilst this paper has touched on a few of them, it has in no way touched on them all. It was concluded that the Islamic State has manipulated its recruitment in a way to target young, disenfranchised men, with promises of adventure and women. The paper also concluded that the religious justification for the actions of the Islamic State stems from the highly conservative, Jihadi-Salafi interpretation of Islam, with their actions being attributed to the Islamic concept of lesser (violent) jihad. Whilst this essay has in no way covered the vast array of research regarding this topic, it is recommended that more research be conducted, particularly into the causes of radicalisation amongst different social groups, as well as clearer research into the religious justifications found within Islam.

Authors' Note:

This paper was written in late 2016 during the arguable height of the Islamic States' power. On the date of submission, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) was reporting that the Islamic State had finally lost control of the last major center of their territorial power, the Syrian city of Raqqa (Brown, 2017). It still remains to be seen whether the Islamic State will continue despite this final loss in territory, or whether this will signify their end.

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