

ORSAM REVIEW OF REGIONAL AFFAIRS

No.59, FEBRUARY 2017



USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA BY TERROR ORGANIZATIONS: THE CASE OF ISIS

Akil N. Awan

*Dr. Akil N. Awan is Associate Professor/
Senior Lecturer in Modern History, Political
Violence and Terrorism at Royal Holloway.
His research interests are focused around
the history of terrorism, political violence,
and social movements and protest. Dr
Awan has served in an advisory capacity
and on numerous working groups for The
Home Office, the US Military (CTC), US
State department, the Office for Security
& Counter Terrorism, Joint Terrorism
Analysis Centre, the International Centre for
the Study of Radicalisation, International
Institute of Strategic Studies, the Royal
United Services Institute.
Most recently he served as special advisor
on Radicalisation to the UK Parliament.
He is Founder and Chair of the Political
Science Association's Specialist Group on
Political Violence & Terrorism.*

Since ISIS' narrative draws thousand of foreign fighter from numerous countries, it is important to make sense of what appeals to the crowds in its narrative. In order to do so, several main points from the very ideological basis of the narrative to the fertile ground it can find and from religious illiteracy to xenophobia and Islamophobia and marginalization need to be analysed. ISIS can utilise on all these points quite strategically in order to legitimise its stance as well as to recruit fresh manpower.

Since announcing its so-called caliphate in June 2014, ISIS managed to draw thousands of foreign fighters from every corner of the globe, willing to fight and even die for its so-called caliphate. A small minority of these have even brought back home violence with them, and the sirens of ISIS has also reached across the globe individuals to carry out domestic terror attacks in their own home countries despite having no tangible links to these groups and despite having received no training from these groups. So why does the narrative of ISIS appear to resonate with them?

One way of thinking about this is that the narrative, or the ideology is offering something. It is one of the important call factors, the appeal. But it is the individuals' context and their personal circumstances that are really essential to whether or not that ideology resonates with them, with the individual, which we can think of as the push factors. So, narratives need to intersect with personal circumstances in order to resonate and have any power and potency. And, of course, human agency is a part of that as well.

The easy part in all of this is the nature of the narrative. For Al-Qaeda, the narrative used to be that Muslims should view all contemporary conflicts, all modern conflicts through the prism of a wider historical global attack on Islam and Muslims, beginning with the Crusades all the way down to European colonialism, by a belligerent Zionist-Crusader alliance. In response, Al Qaeda claimed to have awakened the Muslim world to the reality of the situation and was now serving as the sole, the only crucial vanguard in the front-line, defending the community. ISIS took that narrative, but then they added to it their own, very unique addendum by claiming that the caliphate had now been established, thereby restoring glory and honor to the downtrodden Muslims

once again. It was therefore now an obligation for Muslims to migrate to this imagined utopia, and to help build and defend the state and community, ultimately restoring the Muslim world's long-lost glory.

But the message or narrative is almost irrelevant unless it finds fertile ground to take root. And the way it does that is by resonating with the individual on a personal level, resonating with their everyday lives, their experiences. Advising governments, I am often frustrated by the fact that they focus excessively on the message, saying "We have to have our own message, a counter-message or narrative." That may well be true, but messages only resonate when they intersect with real-world issues. So why do these messages and narratives resonate? What is that compels young people to buy into this narrative? That is a very complex question, but I want to touch on three aspects that I think are important: the role of religion; the role of identity crises, belonging and a quest for personal significance; and the role of socio-economic marginalisation. These three issues are interrelated and more than the sum of their parts.

Let me deal with the role of the religion first. One really inescapable and glaring inconsistency: when you look at the biographies of western Jihadists, is how religiously illiterate most of them actually are. Most are not particularly religious prior to their involvement in violence, often raised in secular households, and often have a very limited understanding of their parents' faith. Recent documents from Islamic State also show that a vast majority of Western recruits also have their religion classified as novices when they join ISIS. So they are classified as religious novices by the religious group itself. Nevertheless, one of the stubborn, enduring myths around jihadist terrorism has been this pre-eminence

Since announcing its so-called caliphate in June 2014, ISIS managed to draw thousands of foreign fighters from every corner of the globe, willing to fight and even die for its so-called caliphate.



of religious over other motivations. And it is easy to understand why, for religion is stated as being important to them, for their own rationale and why they do these things. But crucially, in many of these instances you have to be aware of the post-hoc attribution of the religious meaning and validation. What I mean by that is religion might not provide the initial motive, but it always provides a motif, or a stamp of approval afterwards.

Let me give you an example: Take a young man who goes to Syria, and wants to fight for any reason that is not explicitly religious. It is not enough to fight or die like a Jihadist, but to be accepted by the community and not to end up beheaded as a member of a rival group, you need to walk, talk and behave like one of them too. And the very stylized genre of video martyrdom testaments that suicide bombers sometimes record to their death is a very good example of this kind of conformity. They all look and sound pretty much the same. One telling and now quite famous example of this sort of religiosity added on at the end is these two British young men from Birmingham, who got jailed for traveling Syria to join and fight alongside Jihadist group in 2013. In response they said they saw it as part of their religious duty. Before they left, they bought amongst other texts, the Quran for Dummies and Islam for Dummies, probably the most rudimentary texts you can buy on Islam. These are not designed for Muslims; these are designed to explain Islam to non-Muslims. They prove quite revealing about the religious literacy and motivation involved here. Of course this does not characterize all of those people who go from the West to join these groups but it does appear to hold generally quite true in terms of their religious literacy.

This is not to exonerate religion in any sense. We know that religion has been responsible historically for a great deal of violence, religious texts have been used to legitimize violence, to eliminate dissent, mobilize people etc. But, unlike believers academics understand religion in a slightly different way. They understand religion often in epiphenomenal terms. What I mean by that is they understand religion as being a phenomenon associated with another, sometimes more important, phenomenon, as a political, social, economic,

One really inescapable and glaring inconsistency: when you look at the biographies of western Jihadists, is how religiously illiterate most of them actually are.



and other factors or as a solution to something. So the question we can pose is: what does religion offer a solution to in the case of Western Jihadists?

I think the first thing it offers a solution to is that it answers the need to belong. Many Jihadists commonly experience an intense form of identity crisis, which I call Dual Cultural Alterity. Essentially this is a double-alienation or a double sense of otherness both from ethnic or parental minority culture, and also an alienation from majority cultures, the main-stream or whole society culture, as a result of being unable or unwilling to fulfill either group's expectations. Consequently, in the absence of an appealing cultural example, religion becomes, by default, the principle anchor of identity. So, now religion is identity by default rather than being a spiritual or metaphysical question. Religion provides this emphatic rejoinder to the identity offered by the Western society which these individuals feel have rejected them. In some cases it is easy to understand why they might feel that way.

If we look at the example of France and the experience of French Muslims, we see that France is a particularly good

case study because it really reinforces some of the themes here. In the public discourse in France there is an ominous fear of Islam, of the immigrant, of the other. This leads to all sorts of things; amongst other things this leads to the desecration of gravestones of Muslim WWII veterans, it leads to restrictions on Muslim dress, but also most importantly the linkage of dress to violence and security. You saw, for example, the images of the burqini ban. In French towns we have armed French policemen asking a Muslim woman to undress on a public beach. Most significantly we have seen the rise of the far-right which became empowered in the European Parliament. IpsosMORI conducted a study that looked at the actual percentage of Muslims in any given country and compared that with the public's perception of the percentage of Muslims in their country. In France, for example, Muslims make up 7.5% of the population, but if you ask average French people on the street, they think Muslims make up 31% of the population. So the average French person on the street thinks one in three French people are Muslim. That's a staggering disparity between the two there. And this is true pretty much everywhere, every European country, particularly those having a problem with ISIS recruitments, radicalization etc.

Now how do you explain that disparity? Partly it is a reflection of the popular and media discourse on Muslims, which is overwhelmingly about terrorism and security and negative. But it also represents Muslims as an unwelcome minority, an unwelcome presence in their communities. And of course, this is not restricted to France; We could consider any number of images and stories from the last few years from European publications and newspapers that reinforce this trend. Consider, for example, the image from a Polish

Before they left, they bought amongst other texts, the Quran for Dummies and Islam for Dummies, probably the most rudimentary texts you can buy on Islam.



magazine showing a white woman dressed in an EU flag, with brown hands pulling away her clothes, entitled “The Islamic Rape of Europe.” A second image from a mainstream UK newspaper shows Muslim immigrants coming into Europe alongside rats and other vermin. What is actually interesting is that both of these images have precursors in the anti-Semitic imagery seen in 1930s Germany. In that context it is not difficult to see how for some Muslims feeling under siege and alienated to their own countries, an attractive religious identity might appear more appealing than a tainted national one. And of course groups that prey on this kind of alienation end up benefiting enormously. ISIS, for example, issues new passports for those who travel there, and many of the people who travel there burn their original identity documents in response. So ISIS is acting as a welcoming utopia, and the idea of a welcoming utopia is actually quite important. When we think of ISIS propaganda, the first thing we think of is the brutal violence. We think of the beheadings, we think of the crucifixion, we think of the burnings, we think of what you might call the pornography of violence. But actually that is deliberately targeting Western

sensibilities and Western audiences. The overwhelming majority of ISIS media content, 70% or so, is in fact focused on depictions of blissful civilian life in this new, wonderful utopian caliphate, representing messages of state-building, identity, welcoming, joining a community, escaping religious persecution, enjoying religious freedoms.

Take for example images from ISIS' flagship English language magazine, *Dabiq*, which present this very positive utopian narrative of belonging, of new beginnings and state building, which has really prove so important to ISIS' success. Issue 11 of *Dabiq*, for example, shows happy, multinational brothers in arms alongside to the concept of loyalty to the believers and disloyalty to the disbelievers. And it is contrasted against what it claims as its opposite, namely American racism. What is really interesting is that this issue came out when #blacklivesmatter was trending in the US. So there is keen awareness to play on current events.

Now ISIS has very shrewdly sought not just to capitalize on these feelings of alienation but actually hopes to build and nurture them as well by creating conditions in Western societies that work towards these outcomes. After the Charlie Hebdo attacks in Paris, the February issue of *Dabiq* wrote of polarizing the world by destroying its greatest threat, and the greatest threat to *Dabiq* was the gray zone. The gray zone is this space in which young Frenchman can be both good Muslims but also good citizens of the French republic, without any inherent contradiction; they can be both things at the same time. ISIS anticipated the terrorist attacks like the one in Paris would goad or prompt the French towards overreaction and create a climate of fear and hostility further alienating French Muslims from wider society. Western Muslims would then be forced to make a choice between apostasy and a bastardized version of belief.

Many Jihadists commonly experience an intense form of identity crisis, which I call Dual Cultural Alterity.



The final issue worth focusing on here is the role played by socio-economic marginalisation. Many of the individuals from France and Belgium, are from French banlieues or other ghetto-like areas that are characterized by violence and a heavy mixture of unemployment, crime, drugs, institutional racism and endemic cycles of poverty and disenfranchisement. In these sorts of scenarios radical groups might potentially offer an escape from a bleak future or a criminal past. If you consider France, Muslims make up a staggeringly disproportionate size of the French prison population – around 70%, despite only making up 7.5% of the total population. Any explanation of why ISIS is the biggest exporter of militants to ISIS that does not take into account this disparity is fundamentally flawed.

ISIS offers these individuals, perhaps for the first time, a sense of being part of an elite group that compensates for the shortcomings of their own trivial existence and insignificance, and it allows these individuals to think of themselves as warriors, as heroes, as champions of a community.

ISIS also, very cleverly uses pop-culture references to sell these identities too, playing on the words and themes

that young people are familiar with, such as videogames like Call of Duty and Grand Theft Auto.

So, in direct contrast to these feelings of boredom, purposelessness and insignificance, the Jihadists offer redemption through the image of this kind of a chivalrous warrior, and give them significance and meaning in their lives, and the individuals re-class as some sort of avenging hero for the community. Following the Charlie Hebdo attack, the Islamic State's official radio station praised the Jihadist heroes who have avenged the prophet, validating the transformation of the attackers of the Charlie Hebdo attack from petty criminals and nobodies suddenly into heroes. And this appeal to the holy warrior or the chivalrous hero is really a recurring theme in Jihadist literature and the Islamic State's propaganda machine has been busy pumping out material that really seeks to exploit these tensions. Recent social media posts include telling phrases such as "Sometimes people with the worst pasts create the best futures" and "Why be a loser when you can be a martyr?"

If we are faced with a young man who is marginalized economically, socially, politically and he is buying into this sort of propaganda, how do we respond to that question: "Why be a loser when you can be a martyr?"

Let me turn finally to what we might say about ISIS messaging in the post-territorial era. A colleague once told me "The secret of ISIS's success is its success." When ISIS is gaining territory, resources, oil revenues, money, and even slaves, when it shows that it is on the winning side of history, it can claim that this is the inevitable will of God. When its story makes sense, when its eschatology, its predictions about the future about the end times, the apocalypse, when all those are working in ISIS' favor, then it seems to be on

The overwhelming majority of ISIS media content, 70% or so, is in fact focused on depictions of blissful civilian life in this new, wonderful utopian caliphate, representing messages of state-building, identity, welcoming, joining a community, escaping religious persecution, enjoying religious freedoms.



the right side of history- as if all of this is fulfilling a prophecy. But when it is losing, its narrative and grand plan begins to fall apart. We have seen the loss of territory, we have seen the loss of towns like *Dabiq*, which was an important part of its eschatology. We have seen reduction in the media outputs, and their media resources by up to 70%, we have seen reduction in foreign fighters up to 90% from the West. Now when all of these tangible losses are taking place, it is hard to convince people that you are still winning and on the right side of history. No one wants to join a losing team. So one consequence that we might see as ISIS continues to weaken is it might lash out terrorist attacks abroad as a kind of compensatory mechanism. So if you cannot continue to win in your land you try to win outside. One of the problems for the rest of us is that ISIS, compared to say Al-Qaeda, has a very low bar for entry. All you need to do really is to print out an ISIS flag from the internet, and lo and behold you are a member of ISIS, that's it. Consequently, we have seen all sorts of people with very idiosyncratic reasons, mental health issues, personal grievances and all sorts of other issues who might in another life, have turn out to be a lone shooter or a mass shooter suddenly latch onto the

grand project of ISIS in order to gain infamy, notoriety or personal significance.

Finally, for some countries it does not even matter what happens to ISIS. If ISIS ended tomorrow, France would still have deep problems. In 2005, for example, France experiences serious riots around Paris and in its banlieues, leading France to declare a state of emergency at the time. There was no Islamism or Jihadism present at the time, but the individuals involved were marginalised young Frenchmen of North African heritage, and so hailed from the same demographic that has been receptive to ISIS's propaganda. Ten years earlier, the French film *La Haine*, also focused on marginalized youth in the banlieues and their fight against the system, the police, what is particularly surprising is how little that film has aged. So even if ISIS ended tomorrow, we have not dealt with the structural problems of France that allow the narratives of these groups to resonate, and something else would likely come along to replace it.

ORSAM is an independent think-tank specializing on Middle Eastern affairs. ORSAM seeks to diversify sources of knowledge on the region and establish a channel of communication between the local experts and Turkish academic and policy circles. Toward that end, ORSAM facilitates the exchanges of officials, academics, strategists, journalists, businesspeople and members of civil society from the region with their Turkish counterparts. ORSAM conducts studies on the regional developments and disseminates their results to the policy and academic circles as well as the wider public through various publication outlets. ORSAM publications include books, reports, bulletins, newsletters, policy briefs, conference minutes and two journals *Ortadoğu Analiz* and *Ortadoğu Etütleri*.

© Content of this report is copyrighted to ORSAM. Except reasonable and partial quotation and use under the Act No. 5846, Law on Intellectual and Artistic Works, via proper citation, the content may not be used or re-published without prior permission by ORSAM. The views expressed in this report reflect only the opinions of its authors and do not represent the institutional opinion of ORSAM.



Ortadoğu Stratejik Araştırmalar Merkezi (ORSAM)

Süleyman Nazif Sokak No: 12-B Çankaya / Ankara

Tel: 0 (312) 430 26 09 Fax: 0 (312) 430 39 48

www.orsam.org.tr