

As the number of fighters heading to Syria to join ISIS continues to grow, **John Chisholm** explores the group's allure and asks whether their success is a sign that liberal democracy is failing

THE POWER

What is it that makes people in liberal democracies want to move to become part of ISIS? What is so wrong with liberal democracy that schoolchildren and entire families will leave everything behind and move to an Islamic theocracy renowned for its brutality? What, in short, is going wrong?

One big pull for young men is clearly the ability to fight, and be rewarded for fighting, in an Islamic context. The peripatetic fighters that have spent the last two decades or more travelling from one war to another are clearly drawn to what ISIS has to offer. For Sunni militants, ISIS is not simply the overthrow of a non-Islamic regime, or fighting in defence of fellow Muslims. Instead, this is state-building – battering out the boundaries of an Islamic caliphate, often portrayed as merely a jumping off point for a spreading jihad to create a caliphate that covers the Muslim world and brings other religious groups to their knees. It sounds like a fantasy, but many believe in it.

But for young men there are also other rewards. The ability to make war in the 21st Century, but in a medieval context, means loot: cash, goods and even slaves. So, while ISIS continues to make advances, while the coffers remain buoyant, whilst sex slaves remain available, ISIS will continue to attract many foreign fighters. What happens when this all runs dry is another matter. ISIS is, militarily, going backwards. It was always going to run into problems to the north in the form of the Turks and Kurds, and southwards lies a lot of desert offering few pickings to dangle in front of the Jihadists. All that is left is to try and claw more out of a crumbling Syria, or go east into the shaky Iraqi Republic. But even then this is not as easy as it was; Iran has been instrumental in mobilising and training Shia militias to fight ISIS successfully, and have been pushing back the jihadists. So how long will ISIS continue to look attractive to young Sunni fighters? Will Libya offer better opportunities? And without the promise of a reward on Earth, how many will be left to fight for a reward in heaven?

The surge of young men going to fight for ISIS is hardly a surprise. After all, this has been a feature of Islamic wars since Chechnya in the 1990s. What has shocked observers has been the willingness of schoolchildren and families to leave behind their life in the West and pack up to move to ISIS. But for many Muslims, the ISIS claim of moral purity – compared to the West's moral degradation – is a powerful pull. ISIS has no industry or technology, disdains art and destroys cultural icons, while the people live in fear of a rigid Sharia code. There is little to make a claim for any form of superiority over the West. But morals and "social values" are not dependent on anything other personal opinions. And ISIS has been ruthless in exploiting social media to pump out the message of moral superiority

and a route to heaven that they allegedly offer and the West does not.

Take one young woman: 24-year-old Asiya Ummi Abdullah, originally from Kyrgyzstan and – significantly – a convert to Islam. She left her Turkish husband and took their only child over the border to live under ISIS. When asked why she had done so, her response was revealing: "The children of that country [Turkey] see all this and become either murderers or delinquents or homosexuals or thieves... [Under ISIS her son] will know God and live under His rules." Ummi Abdullah's experience illustrates the pull of the Islamic State group, the self-styled caliphate straddling Iraq and Syria. It also shows how, even in modern Turkey, entire families are dropping everything to find salvation. It is estimated that up to 50 families a month are moving over the border to live under ISIS from Turkey alone.

Through social media, ISIS has encouraged doctors, nurses, lawyers, engineers and accountants to join them in building the institutions of a new holy land. This is central to their aim of trying to make the Islamic State a lasting institution, with the societal structures needed to survive as something other than a state in permanent revolution and warfare. To create the Islamist society it envisions, the group has gone to great lengths to take over existing schools, hospitals and playgrounds, or to build these and other institutions of daily family life.

In the Syrian city of Raqqa, the group's main stronghold, the extremists have established a clinic for pregnant women run by a female gynaecologist trained in Britain. Boys attend school, studying almost exclusively religion, until they are 14, when they are expected to start fighting. Girls stay in school until they are 18; their instruction is about the Koran and Sharia law, as well as learning how to dress, keep house, cook, clean and care for men, all according to a strict Islamic code. ISIS can support this and more because of the vast quantities of loot it has accumulated.

Families are attracted by ISIS, which is providing electricity, food and a salary of up to \$1,100 per month – a huge sum in Syria – for each fighter's family. The largesse is also funded with money looted from banks, oil smuggling, kidnappings for ransom, and the extortion of truckers and others who cross Islamic State territory. The other jihadi groups promise you wonderful things in the afterlife. The Islamic State promises to give you stuff in the current life and the afterlife, so you don't have to wait to enjoy all your rewards. There is a substantial economic and social pull for people who have grown up in poor surroundings to move and start a new life under ISIS. But what about those from the financially comfortable and "safe" liberal democracies?

The moral dimension has already been touched on. But many relatives of individuals and families who have moved



Propaganda pose: British citizen and Islamic convert Siddhartha Dhar has appeared in videos and photographs promoting ISIS

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to ISIS still say they are baffled. They often describe a change in personality and behaviour which seems sudden and inexplicable. When Siddhartha Dhar, his wife and four children appeared in Syria, his sister Konika Dhar said she still thought of her brother as “Sid” the stylish British kid who gelled his hair, dated girls, listened to Nirvana and Linkin Park and loved to watch American action movies. The Islamic State uses family imagery in its aggressive and highly polished online recruiting on social media, including videos showing fighters pushing children on swings and passing out toys, and children playing on bouncy castles. But recent reports from Syria and Iraq suggest that their propaganda about its public services does not match the reality on the ground, and that people are enduring painful shortages of electricity, food, medicine and clean water. Once they have arrived, of course, it is too late; getting in is far easier than getting out.

A celebrated case in the UK was that of Kadiza Sultana, Amira Abase and Shamima Begum, three schoolgirls who stole from their families in order to raise money to

move to Syria. Starting in East London, the girls made their way to Turkey then slipped over the border and are, as far as anyone knows, married to Islamic fighters and leading a life of extreme Islam under a theocratic state. After taking a beating in the press, the British government quickly moved to tighten its borders and a group of boys attempting the same thing were detained in Turkey.

It was alleged that the girls were radicalised online by a Scottish jihadist living in Syria, although through her family she has denied involvement. What matters is that they got the idea and advice as to how to go about it from social media, along with all the theocratic goodies and denunciations of Western society that went along with it. The idea may have come via the online “manual” called “Hijrah to the Islamic State”. This has since been taken down by the Metropolitan Police, but the guide offers an insight into how ISIS has successfully twisted a creation of Western liberals to its own ends. The manual advises potential recruits on gender-specific travel options, the packing of “vital belongings” to take, and suitable

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ISIS has used social media to spread its message of hate for the West by showing the murder of hostages such as British aid worker David Haines

clothing. It denies reports of co-operation between Turkish authorities and ISIS militants, claiming instead that Ankara has only been turning a blind eye to some ISIS activities out of security concerns.

One significant element in the schoolgirl case was that, two months before they ran off, a school friend had already made their way to join ISIS, and this had stimulated police enquiries. Police had twice spoken to the girls at their school, Bethnal Green Academy, without their parents' knowledge. On the second occasion, on 2 February – just over two weeks before they disappeared – officers gave the teenagers letters for their parents requesting permission to take written statements. But the girls did not pass the letters on – something the families say should have been predictable. This questioning may have stimulated a “now or never” attitude in the girls who then seemed to have stepped up their thefts of jewellery from relatives to finance their travel plans.

So, does the fact that more than 5,000 people are estimated to have travelled to join ISIS from the West indicate that somehow liberal democracy is failing? The answer has to be a resounding no. Thousands risk their lives each month to cross from North Africa into Europe, attracted by hope for the future and escape from fighting and instability. We must also not overlook the probability that far more people want to leave ISIS than go join it, and are prevented from doing so. The group is exploiting the freedom offered by the West in order to imprison those deluded by its propaganda and immersed in religious dogma. It has to attract doctors, teachers and accountants from the West primarily because it is incapable of training its own; knowledge of the Koran is not much help with brain surgery or repairing a hydroelectric plant. So it has to rely on attracting people from outside.

It certainly could not risk creating an educated class internally, as they may turn their education on ISIS and its institutions. It needs people who are both intelligent and delusional. Because ISIS will implode. No society like it can survive for any length of time. Permanent warfare and conflict is never a possibility; people are exhausted

by it and rarely want to see their children become needless cannon fodder. Leaders become corrupt and lazy in a society where the questioning of authority is severely punished. And when the money does eventually run out, those seeking temporal rewards may wish they were back in Bethnal Green, rather than Raqqa.

But should we then be concerned about these people returning? They voluntarily left to join a political movement hostile to the West in virtually every way. The leader of ISIS is hoping for US intervention so Americans can be killed by his jihadis because he does not have the ability to strike at the West directly. If the organisation implodes, and trained fighters return, that could pose a severe threat to the societies they originally deserted. One, populist suggestion in the UK is to take their passports away. This has been dismissed by the security services as making the potential returnees less easy to track – assuming they would be dim enough to use their issued passports in the first place – and it also comes dangerously close to breaching international law by making people stateless. Given the nature of ISIS, an industry creating fake passports is bound to be an element of the system.

But would they want to return to the “corrupt West” with its homosexuals that cannot be thrown from buildings and other religious groups that cannot be enslaved? The fighters probably will go to the next conflict as it seems likely that the Middle East will continue tearing itself apart for some time. But the families, the women with children, what about them? The Islamic State is popular as it is presented as “not a conflict zone”. Unless there is something equally alluring in the future, they will either become refugees in some UN camp, or want to go back to their countries of origin. And once they return, what punishment should there be? ISIS is hostile, and sees itself at war with the West and the very concept of democracy. These people chose to go and join that movement. We, collectively, need to decide if there should be some form of punishment, or a sense of forgiveness and compassion for people who were clearly duped in a miasma of religion.

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