Paula Mathers examines how ISIS recruits its members and what leads young, impressionable people to wage jihad

RECRUITMENT AND RADICALISATION:
THE PSYCHOLOGY OF ISIS

Jihadi John, 7/7, 9/11 and the Boston Bombings are phrases that have become so common that even our children are aware of the meanings and the terror these events can inflict in the minds of the public. They have created Islamophobia; a word without meaning before September 2001, and further segregation within communities that were once close knit and friendly. The increase in the availability and popularity of the internet and how we access it has enabled groups to spread their message and propaganda far and wide in order to make recruitment and the carrying out of attacks easier

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> ❝ **Approximately 75 percent of ISIS and al-Qaeda members from these regions join the groups through family, friends or fellow travellers in search of a meaningful path in life.** ❞

A sense of alienation can make young people more vulnerable to being recruited

than it's ever been. Meanwhile, with net migration into the United Kingdom quoted at 333,000 in 2015 by the BBC, it's becoming increasingly difficult to keep track of who is entering the UK, and what their motives are.

Over the past few years, it is estimated that at least 500 young British Asian men have travelled to Iraq or Syria to become jihadis in extremist. Young women are similarly following to become jihadi brides, to live in what they are led to believe to be an Islamic Utopia, and many are taking their children along with them. The result is that they are increasingly leaving families behind who are perplexed at their reasoning, distraught with the feeling of betrayal for not just the country which has supported and housed them, but their parents and siblings. That number is staggering, considering that Islam was always believed to be the religion of peace, which means that somewhere, someone is recruiting these young people out of the control of their families and friends – in person, in mosques and online. But what is it that makes this group of people more susceptible to radicalisation than any other?

Radicalisation is an extremely complex phenomenon; there are many factors that can contribute to the process: feelings of alienation that can make young people more vulnerable; extreme interpretations of Islam that pave the way to violence, terrorism and death and the online and real-world grooming techniques in which ISIS recruiters have become expert. Making things incredibly difficult for psychologists and the Intelligence Agencies alike, there doesn't seem to be any typical type of person that's susceptible to these 'charms' – some radicalised young people have been intelligent, well integrated in society and engaged with their education while others have not.

According to journalist Joshua Krisch there are two kinds of ISIS recruits: the first comprises terrorists born in Iraq, Syria and the Levant, and who fight for their cause locally in these countries as their home. These terrorists are inspired less by their religious beliefs and more by the wave of endless violence that plagues their religion and home country of which they have been witness to from their birth.

The second kind is a different breed altogether. They are born outside of warzones, in places like the UK, USA, Australia or Europe, and join ISIS for the camaraderie. Typically they are educated and emotionally stable with no extremist background and with grounded lives and families. These young people seem to be students looking to find their way in life, searching for significance and acceptance with new family and friends.

In places such as Syria and Iraq the experience of violence can propel young ISIS recruits towards the group, whereas in areas outside of this, such as Europe and the US, it seems to be an entirely different story altogether. Approximately 75 percent of ISIS and al-Qaeda members from these regions join the groups through family, friends or fellow travellers in search of a meaningful path in life.

Many Muslim parents are reluctant to discuss the failings of foreign policy and ISIS with their family, maybe due to feelings of embarrassment brought upon their culture as a result of extremist actions. Meanwhile, their children desperately want to understand and to make sense of what is happening, and why. They have the need to find out if what is being claimed in the media is true, or propaganda created to undermine their belief system and the religion they have known since birth. This need for understanding leads to Muslim children – the same as children of all other faiths who have unanswered questions about the world they live in – to look elsewhere for answers; often resulting in them using internet forums to which their parents have far less influence or control over. As a result, they are open to uncensored propaganda and radical, which can lead them onto an entirely different path.

In the last 10 to 15 years, terrorism has emerged as one of the most critical issues with which governments must contend, topping most Western nations' agendas in terms of resource allocation. As a result of terror attacks, awareness (which is defined as knowing a threat exists, watching for its signs and doing something about it) around the subject has grown significantly. This awareness can influence all of our daily activities, ranging from decisions about employment and who to socialise with, to the use of public transportation, congregating in public or crowded places and our travel. This awareness also impacts on our feelings towards terrorism; possibly

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increasing the levels of fear we have around the issue.

Terrorism has similarly had a major impact on the physical security market in terms of the demand for protection rising. Protection of military bases, for example, has been greatly enhanced over the last decade or so with newer video surveillance systems, more sophisticated access control and a more streamlined approach in the processing of alarms. Another factor is enhanced security at public events such as the football World Cup, the Olympics, concerts and protests as well as critical national infrastructure facilities such as British Telecom, water reservoirs and historic landmarks *etc*.

The requirement for improved emergency management has led to greater coordination and collaboration among the agencies responsible for security. These agencies are in the unique position to answer the questions that end users have about how best to protect their assets as well as the ability to provide products that can fit in with the existing infrastructure without the expense of having to retrofit systems. Private security firms also provide peace of mind for security departments, even down to providing relief staff where necessary, and helping to give emergency services the most accurate and up to date information possible in the event of an attack.

Clearly, there is no shortage of resources available to provide protection against possible targets, while advances in technology have made it easier to identify groups that provide a potential threat to national security and to – in theory at least – track and keep abreast of their movements. But unfortunately there is no 'magic pill' that can be employed to solve the problem over night. And while it's important to focus

on protection and prevention, the significance of slowing down and ultimately stopping recruitment of potential terrorists cannot be over stated. Across Europe where immigrants achieve average socio-economic status and are between five and 19 times more likely to be poor or less well educated, they are increasingly easy to radicalise. ISIS and groups like it are able to actively exploit the growing tension between the rise of radical Islam and the unease in the East, particularly in Europe, towards migrants and immigration in ways that both the communists and fascists did in the 1920s and 30s. If anything the growing tension surrounding immigration in Europe has been a Godsend for ISIS, allowing it to exploit tension towards vulnerable groups and provide them with the promise of a thrilling cause that gives a sense of belonging in a society where they are feeling increasingly stigmatised.

In 2014, an ICM poll suggested that one in four French youths aged between 18 and 24 have a favourable opinion of ISIS – this is in a country where only seven to eight percent of the population is Muslim. Considering that it is understood that three out of four people that join ISIS from abroad do so with friends or family and are invariably young, serious work needs to be done to help identify and engage these people in some form of conversation. Keen to turn their heads, recruiters will spend hundreds of hours learning about their personal problems and grievances in an effort to fit this into a universal theme of persecution and to provide a positive and empowering solution. Failure of our security services to not take such considerations seriously could be highly costly and potentially could hold the key to success.

ISIS and groups like it is able to attract recruits with the promise of a thrilling cause and a sense of camaraderie

Paula Mathers worked for six years as a cross-cultural psychologist for the British Government. She joined Coverguard Security in February 2016 as the company manager and was promoted to assistant director in September 2016.