**Recruitment and Ideology of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria**

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Islam 218

The rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, also known as ISIS, has instilled growing fear across the globe in recent years, especially in the western world. Though ISIS is a very new organization, their radicalism and extremist goals have not only evoked fear but resulted in brutal attacks on civilians. Despite their recent loss of territory in 2018, one of their key remaining strengths is their active and effective recruitment tactics. ISIS has successfully recruited large numbers of people, using extraordinary interpretations of the Qur’ān by means of unexpected platforms and methods. For a group that despises western culture and modern practices, their use of social media and video game chat rooms to draw people may come as a surprise, but is critical to their recruitment success. They even advertise their brand in weekly magazines, music and by word of mouth in prisons and schools. As a result, people from all different backgrounds have uprooted their lives to join the cause. While the Islamic State’s physical presence may be wavering, their ideological message remains prevalent and dangerously influential. This paper aims to analyze ISIS’s successful recruitment methods and identify trends among the new recruits based on their nationality, age and personal characteristics.

Unlike popular thought, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria is a fairly new organization formed in 2013. The history of Islamic extremism is incredibly complicated, stemming from Afghanistan in 1979 when the Soviet Union invaded and ruled much of the country. During that time, Osama Bin-Laden and Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi, two well-known extremists, began forming their own ideologies around the Qur’ān and the Islamic religion. This ideology depended on reading the scripture literally and applying those interpretations to modern day life. Osama Bin-Laden continued to establish what is known as Al Qaeda, with support from Afghani rebels who were motivated by their anger over the Soviet Union’s occupation. His growing organization broadened its mission from fighting the soviets to all “enemies of Islam” in order to recruit sympathizers. With growing numbers, Al Qaeda began carrying out attacks against western nations that embraced a culture that countered hard-line Islamic practices; Most famously, Al Qaeda’s September 11th attacks in the United States that killed a total of 2,996 people.

Meanwhile, in the entire Middle East, an ideological pressure cooker was forming, primarily as a result of three major situations. First, Muslims from the Shia sect ran the majority of powerful positions in Iraq, creating tensions with the Sunnis who felt underrepresented and disagreed with Shia traditions. More specifically, the Sunnis’ interpretation of the Qur’anic scripture differed from Shiite practices like self-flagellation and praising Imams. As a result, groups of Sunnis gravitated toward jihadist groups in order to destabilize Shiite rule. Secondly, in response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks, president George W. Bush declared a “war on terrorism,” and ordered the invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan, sending US troops directly into areas with existing Sunni-Shia tensions. Finally, in \_\_\_, the Syrian Civil war broke out. Rebel groups sought to oust their then-president, Bashir Al-Assad, and western countries were likely to send aid to help their campaign. In response, Al-Assad decided to release jihadist prisoners, hoping that their ideological extremism would spread among the rebels and deter potential foreign support. Though that plan was minimally successful, the majority of released jihadists began joining extremist groups, which only expanded their member base.

At the center of this pressure cooker, Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi created a separate branch of Al Qaeda called Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), which developed into the most ruthless and violent sect of the terrorist group. Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi was killed soon after in a 2006 US air strike, leaving his predecessor Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, in charge. As Al-Baghdadi’s power grew, so did AQI. Differences in ideology between Al Qaeda and Al Qaeda in Iraq caused a split between the two groups, as Al Qaeda felt AQI was too extreme to align with their mission. By 2013, Syria’s president Al-Assad encouraged AQI to expand into Syria in order to fight against the weakening Iraqi army.[[1]](#footnote-0) The organization’s expansion came with a rebranding campaign, naming itself the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

At its height, ISIS occupied territory larger than the state of Maine and had formed a very controlled and successful caliphate that was able to rule efficiently and evoke terror around the world.

In 2018, Donald Trump announced that “ISIS is 100% defeated,”[[2]](#footnote-1) but that is far from the end of ISIS and its terror that it has caused around the world. We may have seized their land, but we are far from destroying their ideology.

ISIS is known for its radical ideology, from its interpretations of the Qur’ān to its goals and actions. As a whole, ISIS’s main goal is to create a worldwide caliphate that simulates 7th century Arabia at the time of the prophet Muhammad. With the control of such territory, the Islamic State predicts that they will live out the prophecy that is depicted in the Qur’ān, where they come to an ultimate battle against “Rome,” or the westerners, which will provoke the end of the world, and thus proceed to the day of Judgment where believers will return to the land of Milk and Honey, and nonbelievers will suffer for their sins. In order to obtain these goals, the Islamic State has very strict rules that come directly from hadith and the Qur’ān. As Graeme Wood, a journalist for the Atlantic, states, “But Muslims who call the Islamic State un-Islamic are typically, as the Princeton scholar Bernard Haykel… told me, ‘embarrassed and politically correct, with a cotton-candy view of their own religion’ that neglects ‘what their religion has historically and legally required’.”[[3]](#footnote-2) Though the majority of Muslims don’t see extremists as true Muslims, the reality is that ISIS strictly follows the Qur’ān and Hadith closely in order to make judgements and laws among their own organization. For example, the laws such as never shaving the beard and wearing pants that are above the ankle, and punishments such as “destroying one’s crops” translated to running over people with a van, are all deeply contextual.[[4]](#footnote-3) Many of these theories can be brought back to several main theorists that have helped form what ISIS believes today. Writers such as Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, a Jordanian author, influenced an incredible number of Jordanians to join ISIS through his published works.[[5]](#footnote-4) Sayyid Qutb, an Egyptian writer, poet and theorist, offered critical perspectives of Islam in its religious and political opinions, and was notorious through the Islamic State for his harsh criticism of the United States, and advocated for violence against it.[[6]](#footnote-5) Ibn Taymiyyah, an ancient theorist who has long been controversial for his radical thoughts on Islam and the way to practice.[[7]](#footnote-6) One person who had a huge effect on modern jihadists is Anwar al-Awlaki, a United States citizen who became emphatic with islamophobia in the western world and completely altered his ideas to complete extremism.[[8]](#footnote-7) His lectures and written pieces are easily accessible on the internet and have become a main source of referral that ISIS recruiters use.

Within recruitment, there are three main ideologies that are used which have been specifically taken from al-Awlaki. The first is “Al Tawhid Wal Hakamina,” meaning Allah is the law giver and Sharia law in its totality is the true law given by God. Though this tends to be a basic belief among Muslims, ISIS sharpens this belief to consider that if the law is not being followed to its totality, one is not a true Muslim. They even go a step further saying that Sharia law is the *only* law one should follow. This implies that any type of other law, such as the law of one’s own country, is not the proper law, and therefore, by following that country’s law, you are disobeying your religion. For example, a Muslim who votes or pays taxes in Germany is considered to be breaking this rule. Recruiters use this in order to cut people off from their previous responsibilities to their homelands and begin a psychological tie to extremist rules. The second, “Kufr Bit Taghut,” or the rebellion against false idols is the next rule. This comes directly from the tales told about Muhammad going to the Kaaba and destroying the idols that were stored inside. Extremists take this to mean that not only should one reject the existing laws in their country if they are not proper Sharia law, but they must destroy false idols that the country worships. For example, anything in which one’s culture views as important such as the ballot box, money, sex, materialism, should be not only looked down upon, but also deconstructed and ultimately destroyed. The third and final rule is “Al Wala Wal Bara,” translated literally to “loyalty and hatred,” but can be expressed as one’s loyalty should be to Muslims and true Muslims only, everyone else should be hated. This is the ultimate “us versus them” theory in which there is one way of living and everyone else are apostates. For example, if one’s Muslim mother does not wear a head covering, one must abandon their family, or if they have any friends of a different religion. With this final step, most people who are being recruited have distanced themselves so far from their current lives, and indoctrinated themselves so deeply into extremist ideology, that the recruiters are capable of any type of manipulation.[[9]](#footnote-8)

The biggest hidden pieces of information that people are not aware of are the platforms and ways in which ISIS is capable of recruiting their members. The biggest and most accessible place is through the internet. Surprisingly, there is an extensive amount of information on the internet about the Islamic State’s ideology and ways to get in contact with them. One of the biggest platforms that ISIS and Islamic State sympathizers use to share their doctrine and bring more people to their organization is Twitter. Though the social media platform has attempted to take as many posts that relate to extremism as possible, the social media and the rapid speed in which information is spread over the internet is practically unstoppable. For example, in 2014, the #AllEyesOnISIS hashtag as part of the Billion Muslim campaign generated 30,000 tweets alone. ISIS and sympathizers used this platform to spread propaganda and “create an ideological stance that aims to intimidate and cause fear.”[[10]](#footnote-9) In addition, they were spreading their word but posting with other popular hashtags such as #worldcup in order to display their message to many different audiences. By using this platform, people from a younger demographic, such as ages twelve to twenty, can be exposed to ISIS ideology and propaganda, allowing them to delve deeper into ISIS out of curiosity. Similar activity can be seen on Facebook, where ideology, propaganda and fear tactics have been shared across the site in order to not only provoke curiosity but bring people to their sight. One way in which they “promote their brand” is through videos, which have been notoriously affective, especially on YouTube. Propaganda videos attempt to display young Muslim men who are easily relatable to the viewer, and display them as kindhearted fighters, helping civilians and offering children sweets. One video entitled ‘*There’s No Life Without Jihad’* uses men from all over the world speaking all different languages to speak about commonly used ideology such as “the Muslim community is an entire body. If one part of it is sick, the rest of the body is sick, and you can’t just sit back and watch the world burn.”[[11]](#footnote-10) Even recruiters will reference videos that have contain ISIS ideology with majestic, almost heavenly, music in the background. These are all tactics that are used to not only attract support but keep the support of potential recruits. While curious internet searchers are watching these tweets, posts and videos unfold, recruiting trolls are capable of watching and tracking one’s patterns in the internet usage regarding their sights, and have easy ways of connecting the users to chatrooms, in which they can speak with someone directly about their curiosity and interest in Islamic extremism. By this point, recruiters are able to indoctrination with the three rules spelled out by Anwar al-Awlaki.

Though social media has been the largest platform in which recruitment for ISIS has thrived, other platforms have also been used by ISIS as well as other Jihadist groups such as video games and music. Both sources have been surprisingly popular with extremists and their attempt to recruit the younger generations. Regarding video games, studies have shown that virtually participating in an imaginary life of a game has been significantly more influential of violence and inherent bias than watching regular television programs. For example, a game called “Special Force” launched in 2003 by the Hizballah, was a virtual interaction with recreated battles in Lebanon using Israel and their prime minister as an objective target. By the end of 2003, over 10,000 copies had been sold around the United States, Australia, Lebanon, Syria, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates.[[12]](#footnote-11) Through video games, extremists attempted to dehumanize virtual victims and lessen the weight of killing which is a crucial aspect of participating in ISIS’s frontline fighters or religious police. Radical Islamic groups used music to spread their propaganda. Many musical groups associated with extremist organizations use hip hop style music with radical lyrics to do anything from selling Jihad bandanas, to promoting violence. For example, in one song by an anonymous British group, called “Dirty Kuffar,” has lyrics that are promoting extremism saying, “Peace to the Hamas and the Hizballah/ OBL [bin-Laden] pulled me like a shiny star/ Like the. Way we destroyed them two twin towers ha-ha/ The minister Tony Blair, there my dirty Kuffar/ The one Mr. Bush, there my dirty Kuffar/ Throw them on the fire.”[[13]](#footnote-12) On YouTube, this song alone got 98,000 views. Not only would this type of music appeal to some people but it promotes the propaganda and ideology that extremists want to provide to the public.

Another major way in which ISIS translates its ideology is through its own magazines. The magazine series *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* are self-written, designed and published forms of propaganda that contain extensive amounts of ideology, imagery and advertisements for more information about the Islamic State. These pieces of work are incredibly interesting from a design perspective, as they are promoting fear and violence through a news-letter format where ISIS is casually updating the reader on their recent terror attacks. For example, this this juxtaposition is shown in a *Rumiyah Issue 2* magazine where, “Raising one’s children in the Khilafah is a great blessing,” underlines a picture of an ISIS soldier assisting his two-year son hold an automatic assault rifle, proudly wearing the Islamic State bandana.[[14]](#footnote-13) By devaluing the weight of killing and brutality performed by the Islamic State, and adding positive and reassuring sayings, ISIS aims to psychologically unify their horrific deeds with positive affirmations. Not only does this allow outsiders to see a perspective of what ISIS wants them to see about the inside, but it also keeps the members settled if they were having doubts about the amount of violence or the harm that ISIS has done to so many people around the world.

Demographically, the majority of these platforms have mainly attracted people from ages thirteen to twenty-three, based on the ages of people that are using social media, video game and modern music platforms as influential aspects of their indoctrination. Despite popular thought, a large part of those recruits are coming from western cultures such as Belgium, the UK, the United States, Australia and other European countries.[[15]](#footnote-14) One young man named Abu Huzaifa, from Canada joined ISIS right before they declared the Califate, after he had been searching for further information about ISIS. After engaging with recruiters in chat rooms, Huzaifa quickly took interest in the organization and said that the logistics of going to Syria were completely simple, “they had everything planned out, all you had to do was take the first step.”[[16]](#footnote-15) Another aspect about recruiting demographics is the personality and tendencies of that person. The popular opinion is that ISIS members were previously sociopathic monsters needing an outlet for their rage, and while occasionally that is true, the statistics show that the majority of people being recruited are usually thrill seekers, moral crusaders, and outcasts looking to form a strong identity.[[17]](#footnote-16) It is also important to take into consideration places in which extremism is bred such as in prisons and schooling systems. Within prisons, many people pick up extremist views easily based on the demographic of people that are being put into jail. With a sense of hopelessness and frustration, being influenced by that ideology is quite simple. The simplicity of indoctrination can be seen in schooling systems, where they are aware that children are the most venerable to indoctrination, and when constantly surrounded by a certain ideology, that is the one that sticks. On top of all of these recruitment pieces, at the height of ISIS’s territorial reign, many Syrian and Iraqi citizens under ISIS rule felt it extremely difficult to find well-paying jobs or felt that it would be safer being part of the organization, and out of resource, many people joined ISIS. Continuing into the small details for reasons and demographics of ISIS members are very particular difficult know to know fully mainly because of the lack of information that is able to be taken, but what is known for sure is a plethora of effective methodology that is bringing in large amounts of people from all over the world.

The Islamic state of Iraq and Syria is such a complex and multilayered organization that has continued to create success for themselves out of nothing but pure will and extreme forms of ideology. ISIS has been by far the most radical Islamic group that has been successful in seizing and maintaining power over a period of time. Through their ideology of strict and literal interpretations of the Qur’ān, ISIS members have had the goal to take control of the entire world, which will invoke the end of the world and proceed to the judgment day as referred to in scripture. Cutting themselves off from anyone who doesn’t follow their definition of being a proper Muslim, and attacking the disbelievers, is seen to be the route to their end goal. Through its short-lived reign over much of Iraq and Syria, ISIS has been able to promote and recruit thousands of people in so many different ways, and still successful inflict terror on specifically western societies. Using their ideology, ISIS successfully indoctrinated people from all around the world and from different platforms, in order to recruit them for their organization. This can be seen through social media platforms such as Twitter, YouTube, Facebook and other online chat rooms. Radicalism can also be found within propaganda promotions in their magazines, video games and music that is shared across the world. Extremism is also capable of growing within prisons and can be taught in schooling systems, all of which allow for the recruitment process to be much easier. There is a misconception that ISIS is defeated because they no longer hold territory, but looking at them historically, they have done their “best” work in the shadows. The most terrifying aspect about all of this is the minimal information that we truly know about the group now. For example, the demographics of people who have been proven to participate in the Caliphate or be recruited for ISIS are obtainable, but there is still a lack of information about their current success rates of recruitment, their numbers or where they are. In fact, the world has now put itself in the dark, as ISIS continues to run from the shadows, carrying out terror attacks while we still come to more questions than answers. In this day and age of technology, cyber-connectivity and radicalism within governments around the world, there is a foreseeable future for ISIS and that should certainly not be undermined.

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2. Rogers, *The New York Times* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
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4. Ibid, 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
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6. El-Kadi [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
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9. “Caliphate,” *The New York Times* [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
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11. “Caliphate,” *The New York Times* [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
12. Forest, Vol. I pg. 21-22. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
13. Forest, Vol. I pg. 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
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