Why Are Young Westerners Drawn to Terrorist Organizations Like ISIS?

by Omar Sultan Haque, MD, PhD, MTS, Jihye Choi, Tim Phillips, and Harold Bursztajn, MD

The relatively sudden rise of the terrorist group ISIS in the Middle East has surprised many in the West. Equally surprising is that financially stable foreigners from the West are over-represented among ISIS fighters. As helpless observers of the inhumane and disproportionate violence that ISIS has exacted on the people of the Middle East and the rest of the world, it is easy to wonder: what could possibly be the appeal of such a murderous, intolerant, and authoritarian organization to so many young people in the West?

This question is easier to answer when imagining the motives and rationales of locals in Iraq and Syria. Perhaps these locals join in what they believe to be a righteous cause. They may want to fight their perceived enemy in a global war, just as many Americans join the US Armed Forces to fight ISIS and other perceived enemies. But what could possibly compel otherwise financially stable young Westerners (non-Muslim as well as Muslim) to leave their families, friends, and home culture, and take up an uncertain future by joining a terrorist organization like ISIS?

It's not about poverty or religion

Clearly, poverty is not causing people to join ISIS, neither is religion. The vast majority of the West’s 50 million Muslims do not join terrorist groups. Even among those with radical Islamic beliefs, only a very few act on those beliefs and join a terrorist organization. Background beliefs do not explain the motivation that compels people to join such groups—even as fundamentalist organizations go, ISIS is particularly extreme. It has been roundly condemned by many prominent Islamic institutions across the world as illegitimate, in violation of Islamic Law, and as not a part of Islam; it has even been rejected by the quite radical group Al-Qaeda.

The true answer is more disturbing and psychological, and has little to do with evil psychopaths finding their true home in ISIS, or of innocent youths being brainwashed into mindless soldiers. Rather, it involves the interaction of conscious and unconscious processes with unique features of ideologies like ISIS, and existential (but not material) vulnerabilities inherent in contemporary American life. One way to summarize our answer is that as an ideology, ISIS provides existential fast food, and for some of the most spiritually hungry young Westerners, ISIS is like a Big Mac amidst a barren wasteland of an existence.

ISSUE HIGHLIGHTS

The Link Between Sleep Disturbances and Suicide
W. Vaughn McCall, MD, MS
Clinical Care of the Suicidal College Student: When and How to Involve Parents
Marcia Morris, MD
Evolving Potential of Mobile Psychiatry: Current Barriers and Future Solutions
John Torous, MD and John A. Fromson, MD
Nonpharmacological ADHD Treatments for Youths
Gabriel Kaplan, MD

COMPLETE CONTENTS, PAGE 10
land of an existence. Much of the worldview of ISIS appears intellectually crude and silly, even when seriously considered as religious or philosophical propositions. Just as a person can get lost, a religious movement can also get lost in a forest of bad ideas. But most people do not get a PhD in philosophy of religion before deciding what to believe. The heart’s longings lead the mind, and the existential filler of ISIS nourishes the desperate and vulnerable soul, however much one is surrounded by material comfort.

Who actually joins ISIS? Not psychopaths or the brainwashed, but rather everyday young people in social transition, on the margins of society, or amidst a crisis of identity. According to anthropologist and psychologist Scott Atran who has studied the motivations and demographics of terrorists, it is mostly youth in transitional stages in their lives—immigrants, students, those between jobs or girlfriends, or those who left their homes and are looking for new families. For the most part they have no traditional religious education and are “born again” to religion. They are self-seekers who have found their way to jihad in myriad ways.1-5

Why join ISIS?

Have you ever purchased junk food when tired, irritable, and jet-lagged at an airport? For lonely young people in social transition, it is the perpetual problems of human life. Vulnerable people don’t tend to fact check when existential relief is easy and cheaply attained with little effort. Specifically, the relief in question concerns the human desire for identity, certainty, social connection, meaning, the optimal amount of freedom, and glory. At crucial developmental periods in adolescence and early adulthood, the formation of one’s identity is a primary concern, and a riddle to be solved. These years are a time for figuring out who one is, where one belongs, what one values and finds meaningful, and what one can become and prove to the world. These years are also a time of increasing awareness of an exciting yet frightening internal world with conscious and unconscious conflicts around envy, competition, self-control, and self-esteem. For youths on the margins of Western society, and in transition from one community to the next, this process of identity formation can become a hopeless task. When one has become a fringe member of one’s home community in America during crucial phases of identity formation, it is very tempting to join what appears to be a righteous struggle against one’s oppressive community. Even superficial Internet exposure (much less direct indoctrination) can convince the young that they too may participate in a world-historical narrative in which the enemy of America is a beacon of hope for solidifying their emerging self. This may evolve into a counterphobic attitude toward the society in which they feel helpless, with a full embrace of a cult of death such as ISIS.6

Humans tend to live with a quest for certainty in their hearts, and uncertainty is experienced as aversive.7 Whatsoever its factual merits, a pluralistic worldview denies its adherents the delights of absolute certainty, and it takes much cognitive effort to maintain. ISIS provides an ideology in which the world is divided into absolute good and evil, with no compromises possible, radical Islam is the solution to all human problems, and any other interpretation of Islam is unthinkible. Why settle for shades of grey in a messy world when “The Truth” is packaged and delivered in under 30 seconds via Internet sound bites? This black and white picture of truth may seem simplistic for the critically minded, but it can provide epistemological crème brûlée for drifting and unanchored Western youths. These youths are looking for answers to existential questions within a home culture perceived to be permissive and relativistic. In the midst of all this, an ideology that does not compromise the quest for certainty can be very appealing to the most vulnerable.

The underside of individualism

Americans pride themselves on their individualism, but the underside of individualism is loneliness.8 The desire for social connection is a human need as basic as food and sex, and the most obvious source of terrorist seduction is the loneliness of the heart.9 Social networks construct the web by which individuals are drawn to action, and social connection is a common attraction for everyday whole-some clubs as well as nefarious cults of all persuasions. Terrorist organizations are no exception, and most people join due to the influence of friends, kin, and others in a social network.10

Although joining based on the influence of one’s friends and kin is a primary factor, recruitment from ISIS also occurs. ISIS has initiated a number of systematic online efforts to target and respond effectively to young Westerners in transition at the margins of society, who can be easily tempted by the false allure of quick and easy social connections amidst an individualistic society from which they feel alienated.11 Rather than contemplating and deciding whether the ideas within the ideology of ISIS are rational and worthy of assent, the young are more likely to be drawn in by attachments to those already embedded in ISIS as a way to thwart loneliness. By most accounts, Americans are happy people, and the pursuit of happiness is enshrined in the American Declaration of Independence. But Western definitions of happiness tend toward happiness as present pleasure and self-expression, rather than happiness as meaning, moral struggle and sacrifice, and aligning oneself with sacred purposes beyond the self.12,13 The latter meaning-oriented definition of happiness is more crucial for the society in which they feel helpless, with a full embrace of a cult of death such as ISIS.6

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However, maximal freedom may also not be ideal, and humans vary in the degree to which additional freedom is experienced as beneficial. For some, who is socially integrated and stable, and more willful by nature, more autonomy can be a liberating means to self-create a life amidst hospitable institutions. In contrast, young adults in transition or on the margins of society may experience freedom as oppressive, since they lack the personal or social means for actually using a high degree of freedom to improve their lives. A totalitarian cult such as ISIS, which promises a strict ideology, rules, and a social order to which one can bind and submerge oneself, appeals to youths, especially those on the fringes of Western society for whom high amounts of freedom do not feel liberating but instead, oppressive.

Finally, these many vulnerabilities to joining terrorist organizations are combined with a deep but selective empathy. For example, an Iraqi-American youngster who perceives that Iraqis are persecuted by Americans might expand his empathy for suffering Iraqis over Americans and decide to join ISIS. Alternatively, a 5th-generation Italian-American

By Peter Barglow, MD

Immigration and Post-Adolescent Psychology of Young Terrorists

The author applies psychodynamic psychology to understand and recognize so-called “homegrown” terrorists—individuals who are familiar with American culture and thus more difficult to detect. 


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The Making of a Homegrown Terrorist

By Peter A. Olsson, MD

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Immigration and Post-Adolescent Psychology of Young Terrorists

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Radicalization by Norwegian converts to the Prophet’s Ummah produced massive and terrible social consequences. The explanations offered here are pertinent to the current attraction that ISIS offers for too many young persons in many Western countries.

youngster could find himself on the fringe of American society and start suffering of America’s perceived enemies. Empathy is indeed a source of those in our group.

The reasons that youths join terrorist organizations such as ISIS have little to do with being poor, brainwashed, a Muslim, or a psychopath, and more to do with vulnerabilities in human nature exacerbated by aspects of Western societies. This diagnosis is echoed by journalists who have interviewed many ISIS fighters; a recent analysis of ISIS fighters remarks that “what draws people to ISIS could easily bring them to any number of cults or totalitarian movements, even those ideologically contradictory to Salafist Jihadism.”

If we Westerners are lucky, we have identities, certainties, social connections, meanings, generalized empathies, freedoms, and individual pursuits of glory that can be taken for granted. However, for those Westerners in transition, marginalized, lonely, lost, bored, uncertain, spiritually or existentially dispossessed, burdened by too much freedom, and empathetically selective, ISIS and other...
er shallow but contagious ideologies will remain tempting as quick fixes for the deep predilections inherent to the human condition.

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References


(Please see Drawn to Terrorism, page 37)
Drawn to Terrorism
Continued from page 15

nostic taxonomy does not facilitate an empathic under-
standing of what can be helpfully understood as a counterphobic response to the trauma of adolescence (see: Baruch-Nachmias F, First MB, PTSD diagnoses can avoid

Use of a Nasal Naloxone-Containing Kit in the Transition From Regional Psychiatric Hospital to Community Care: A 1-Year Follow-Up Study

by Justin J. Trevino, MD
and James Raia, PhD

TABLE 1
Survey findings of the 343 eligible OSAMI patients: reasons for accepting or declining the Project DAWN kit

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reasons for participating</th>
<th>n (%)</th>
<th>Reasons for declining to participate</th>
<th>n (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The DAWN kit will save my life if I overdose</td>
<td>69 (34)</td>
<td>The DAWN kit and its process are too complicated for me to understand and use</td>
<td>51 (37)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The DAWN kit will save the life of a friend if he or she overdoses</td>
<td>55 (27)</td>
<td>I won’t be able to remember how to put the DAWN kit together if I need it</td>
<td>36 (26)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The DAWN kit will be my safeguard in case I relapse</td>
<td>41 (20)</td>
<td>If the police stop me and see the DAWN kit, I will be identified as a drug user</td>
<td>27 (20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I will keep the DAWN kit as a reminder not to use opioids again</td>
<td>20 (10)</td>
<td>I don’t have a serious enough problem to need a DAWN kit</td>
<td>13 (9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It makes sense to carry the DAWN kit with me just in case I need it</td>
<td>19 (9)</td>
<td>My problems are mental and not drug abuse; I don’t need a DAWN kit</td>
<td>12 (8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total OSAMI patient participants</td>
<td>204 (59.4)</td>
<td>Total OSAMI patient non-participants</td>
<td>139 (40.6)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

DAWN, Deaths Avoided With Naloxone; OSAMI, opioid substance abuse and mental illness.

Project DAWN protocol

In March of 2014, the Twin Valley Behavioral Healthcare regional psychiatry hospital developed a protocol for the distribution of Project DAWN kits upon hospital discharge to pa-
tients identified with opioid substance abuse and mental illness (OSAMI). The protocol consists of 7 steps:

Step 1: All admitted patients are screened for substance use issues; those with patterns of regular opioid use are designated as OSAMI pa-
tients and the information is communi-
cated to related treatment teams.

Step 2: An individualized treat-
ment plan that integrates opioid and
other substance use problems into the
overall plan of care is completed.

Step 3: The Screening, Brief Inter-
vention, and Referral to Treatment (SBIRT) evidence-based practice model offers OSAMI patients partic-
ipation in specific substance abuse treatment interventions, including individual and/or group therapy and on-site recovery group participation, and scheduling them to meet with li-
censed independent chemical depen-
dency counselors. The counselors subsequently collaborate with the patient and his or her treatment team to identify resources that can promote recovery and provide referral to com-
munity treatment and recovery re-
sources for those patients desiring such services.

Step 4: All OSAMI patients are

invited to participate in an education-

nal session covering the general goals of Project DAWN and specific infor-
mation about the Project DAWN kit.

Step 5: Completion of overdose risk assessment and a more detailed substance use assessment by the chemical dependency counselor as-
signed to the case for those patients participating in the educational ses-

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Step 5: Completion of overdose risk assessment and a more detailed substance use assessment by the chemical dependency counselor assigned to the case for those patients participating in the educational session (Step 4).

Step 6: Patients sign a consent acknowledging their willingness to participate in the Project DAWN program and receive additional education and training on overdose situations and naloxone storage/se-