

Ending the Islamic State's Siren Song

Written by Jamsheed K. Choksy

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JAMSHEED K. CHOKSY, MAY 14 2015

The Garland, Texas, gunmen pledged bay'ah or allegiance to the Islamic State (IS), previously known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), after Twitter exchanges with its members who suggested the target. Their subsequent violence, like that of the Paris grocery store and Copenhagen café attackers, demonstrated yet again IS's deadly lure.

Previous controversial efforts—such as the US State Department's irony-laden "Welcome to ISIS Land" YouTube video—notwithstanding, the US, EU, and Middle East countries must redouble efforts to effectively and comprehensively counter IS recruitment. After all, the conflict is far from confined to geographical terrains—the real battle is for minds, loyalties, and lives. So all the bombs in the world will not prevent more jihadis from arising unless the message luring them is not merely silenced by force but completely delegitimized in religious, societal, and cyber settings.

The Call

IS recruitment has been dangerously successful so far. It now has 32 partner organizations around the globe from Indonesia to Nigeria. More than 20,000 foreigner fighters have travelled to Iraq and Syria—half the organization's terror force there—from approximately 90 of the world's 196 countries. Not all are Muslim by birth or immigrant heritage. Increasingly they are recent converts, many even adopting the organization's fundamentalist Wahhabi or Salafi interpretation of Sunni Islam prior to signing up for jihad.

IS recruiters tap into feelings of despondency, alienation, and isolation. They exploit idealism, zeal, faith, and even romance. Whether one is going through the throes of teenage angst or midlife crisis does not matter. Irrespective of the particular disenchantment, IS offers an allegedly divinely-dictated solution involving direction and purpose. It presents a utopian vision of an umma or community of believers allegedly practicing their faith freely and devotedly.

Effective Responses

IS thus recycles the age-old siren song of deliverance. Yet it does so with the disseminating power of modern technology, especially the connectivity of social media. Melodious nashids or devotional tunes, slick yet forbidding videos, and glossy e-magazines make IS, its caliphate, ideology, and violence appealing via the internet. IS affiliates designating themselves the Cybercaliphate have hacked television networks, websites, and email accounts of European and American media outlets to post exultant conscription propaganda. At least 26,000 Twitter accounts have been linked to IS activists. So it is important not only to sever IS's electronic feeds but to prevent new ones from being activated and to replace IS information streams with ones revealing the organization's atrocities and hypocrisies—like Jordan is doing.

IS does not expect recruits to have knowledge of Arabic or even be experienced with practicing Islam. Complete acceptance of prescribed behaviors and absolute loyalty to commands are the main requirements for obtaining an IS-issued identity card conferring citizenship within caliphal borders. So another counteroffensive must be directed at showing that IS functions as a totalitarian organization rather than a Muslim umma.

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IS targets citizens of western nations, in particular, due to the propaganda value of such recruits plus their potential utility in returning home to spread jihad. Male recruits with little other than rage and bloodlust are quickly turned into cannon fodder on battlefronts—like the Australian teenage suicide bomber at Ramadi. Their deaths are used to buttress the message of martyrdom in the struggle between Islam and other faiths and between Salafis and other Muslims. Not surprisingly those few who can escape being consigned to certain death do so instead of accepting their assigned duties. To dissuade wannabe joiners, IS's cold-blooded tactics against its own adherents must be revealed widely.

IS collects American and European manufactured weapons from captured Iraqi and Syrian troops. Due to their technological superiority and relative rarity, those munitions are generally reserved for use by the organization's upper echelons. But rarely do non-Arabs, especially non-Iraqis and non-Syrians, rise into the IS elite. Those who do, like a handful of Chechens, come from other jihadist movements rather than through populist enlistment drives. As a result, foreign recruits are beginning to feel less valued and realizing they are being taken advantage of, rather than being treated as equals, within the caliphate. Again, countering IS recruitment drives necessitates conveying its hierarchical structure is at odds with Islam's egalitarianism.

IS deploys extreme brutality—hanging, beheading, mutilation, slavery, and rape—to terrorize captured populations into subservience. Their victims include not only defenseless civilians of other faiths such as Assyrian or Nestorian Christians and Yezidis, but also Alawites, Shiites, and, with increasing frequency, Sunnis. Increasingly disillusioned, moderate Muslims are consequently providing less of their funds and selves. Demonstrating that IS's brutality violates the basic notion of Islam as a religion of peace, toward other Muslims and non-Muslims, is an essential aspect of dimming its appeal.

Reintegration

IS makes much of parents birthing and raising children within the so-called caliphate. Yet those children don't really have choices available to them, for their IS-mandated *raison d'être* seems to be hatred and violence symbolized by handguns and grenades in baby pictures. Nothing in Islamic teaching mandates breeding an army of killers, another important point that must be repeated to those seeking to raise families there. Those parents must be shown their offspring and they can leave the deadly pseudo-Muslim society and find safe haven among Muslim and secular ones.

Most detrimental to IS recruitment and retention has become the caliphate's unwillingness to permit de-affiliation. Leaving while alive is rarely possible and anyone who reneges is punished with death if caught. For all intents and purposes, those who voluntarily turn to IS seeking the freedom to be themselves end up as captives of a totalitarian, ruthless, pseudo-state. Instead of retaining their zeal, they become desperate to leave and reclaim their former lives. Their safe return should be facilitated by the nations combating IS. Their horror stories must then be broadcast utilizing the same media through which IS spreads its entreaty.

Defections would rise sharply if those seeking to return from IS did not face automatic classification as a threat to society and punishment. While not a surefire solution, de-radicalization programs do exist with varying degrees of success in countries as diverse as Denmark and Saudi Arabia. Honing the core aspects of such programs to provide social rehabilitation and economic opportunities to returnees will further foil retention by IS. Only those who become deeply involved in IS's killing-machine need be taken to task.

Offering Civilization over Terrorism

Rather than blaming or fearing Islam and its followers, the focus must be on impugning IS for distorting Muslim tenets to mislead recruits. Persons lured by IS and similar violence-prone Islamist sects need to truly understand that the basic definition of jihad is not terrorizing people nor engaging in war but peacefully expending effort to enhance faith, lives, and societies. In stark contrast to IS's militaristic demeanor, reaching out to those who are exploring IS's call and doing so via intervention and mediation rather than with law enforcement, could redirect prospective wrongdoers before they ruin their lives and those of others.

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So terminating IS requires shutting down the jihadists' message streams while decisively communicating to prospective acolytes that the caliphate does not offer inclusiveness and equality, especially not religiously-oriented, individually and communally, meaningful lives. Essentially IS needs to be unambiguously exposed as just another injudicious terrorist group acting contrary to both divine and human tenets.

About the author:

Jamsheed K. Choksy is Distinguished Professor of Global and International Studies and Chairman of the Department of Central Eurasian Studies at Indiana University. He is also a Member of the US government's National Council on the Humanities.