Online Jihad: ISIS’s Foreign Recruitment Strategies—Who, What, and How?

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Abstract

In a world run by the use of technology, ISIS has proven to be able to combine its radical interpretation of Islam with the modernity of the internet and social media to expand its sphere of influence to limits that have never been previously reached by other extremist groups. Its success in radicalizing and recruiting foreigners can only be explained by the way it presents itself online, giving potential recruits the impression that they will be able to provide them with anything that is missing from their lives. In this paper, I examine three components of this recruitment process: who ISIS targets, what they offer these people, and how they use the internet to expand their message and provide a convincing counter-narrative to that of Western media. I argue that ISIS directs its propaganda to a specific type of person—those who are weak, lonely, and find their lives purposeless. They proceed by offering them exactly what they are lacking in their lives, whether that is a sense of purpose, a supportive community, or some kind of religious awakening. Lastly, they use the internet to present a modern image of themselves, in order to normalize life in the caliphate, and gain a direct connection to the potential recruits. They then establish close relationships based on trust, which most times result in a successful recruitment.
Introduction

In June of 2014, Western media was flooded with news of the fall of Mosul, achieved by a brand new extremist group that very few had heard of before then: the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, or ISIS, as it became known. Its main goal was to establish a worldwide Caliphate, meant to create a unifying community for Muslims all around the world, living under Sharia law. Since the day the group declared itself a worldwide Caliphate after its victory in Mosul, it has continued to expand its territory and now claims control of extensive parts of Syria and Iraq. In its territory, ISIS implements a tremendously radical interpretation of Sharia law, and more and more horrific examples of the policies implemented by ISIS have been made public through their videos and official statements, such as beheadings and burning of prisoners, violent persecution of religious minorities, and the existence of sex slaves. These policies are defended by ISIS supporters as not only their right as Muslims, but their responsibility in the name of establishing a purely religious Caliphate, according to their interpretation of Islam.

To the majority of Westerners, and most people living outside of the Caliphate, these ideals are undeniably inhumane; however, up to 30,000 foreign recruits, from countries like France, Finland, Canada and the United Kingdom have managed to travel all the way to Syria and Iraq to join ISIS and its army of terror.¹ No other terrorist group has ever been so successful at attracting foreigners to join their ranks. Considering the magnitude of the commitment that one makes when deciding to join ISIS, this is not a number that should be taken lightly—those who decide to join ISIS know that changing their minds is not an option, as very few ever manage to come back to their homes; and those found to be trying to escape will be severely pun-
ished. What is it, therefore, that sets makes ISIS different to all other extremist groups, and attracts so many people living a “regular” life in a peaceful country to leave everything behind and join a terrorist group in war-ridden Syria? Many disregard these recruits as simply “crazy”, but there is a meticulous science behind the art of recruitment that ISIS uses, which has made it extremely successful in attracting people of all ages, widely different religious upbringings, and various educational and socio-economic backgrounds from all over the world.

In this paper, I will argue that what sets ISIS apart from other extremist groups are its recruitment methods. They have been the first extremist group to use the internet and social media as the most important part of their recruitment strategy, and this has clearly resonated with a population that is constantly online, all around the world. Their success is not necessarily based on their core beliefs, as, to the majority of people which they attract, they may not seem too different from other Sunni extremist groups like al-Qaeda or Boko Haram—they all use terrorism to achieve their goals, and they share their hatred of the Western world and their belief in the moral superiority of Islam. In fact, Boko Haram has pledged allegiance to ISIS, and up until February of 2014, ISIS was part of al-Qaeda—therefore, we can assume that ISIS is not offering a radically different perspective on jihadism that is making foreigners decide to join it over other groups. What sets is apart from other radical islamicist groups, therefore, is its ability to use the internet and social media to present itself in a way that can seem like an attractive option for many people, to an extent that has never been practiced before.
In this paper, I will examine the three aspects of the recruitment tactics that make ISIS so successful at recruiting foreign fighters through its use of online media. First, I will look at who ISIS targets. There is no specific socio-economic, religious or educational common background or upbringing found in foreign ISIS recruits; however, ISIS will target the weak, the lonely, and those who feel like they have nothing to lose in the life they are living, and provide them with a new life that promises to be better than anything they might have at home. This may be because they are lonely and they promise a tight-knit community; because they are unsuccessful and they promise a life of heroic victories, or perhaps because they see no purpose in their life and they find it in religious radicalism. This is an essential aspect of the recruitment process that is key to making the lifestyle they offer effective, as a person living a fulfilling life would be much more resistant to leaving everything behind to join an extremist group.

The second aspect of the recruitment tactics that I will explore is what they sell to the world, or in other words, the themes that they use to attract people. They portray themselves as religious utopia, a Caliphate that has brought traditional Sharia law back, but that still manages to be modern, as can be seen through its use of the internet. They present an image of a unified Ummah, or unified Muslim community, and believe that Muslims all over the world should come together to live in a true Islamic Caliphate, as opposed to in the land of the kuffar, or infidels, as they refer to Western countries. They tell potential recruits that a new family is waiting for them, one that will perhaps accept them as their real families don’t, creating a sense of belonging to a community—something that may be highly attractive to recent converts to Islam, whose families may not accept their new religions. They also offer different things depending on gender—for
men, they provide the opportunity to become a hero and to fight for something bigger than themselves (whether that is the Caliphate, the *Ummah*, or God), whereas for women, they offer a family, sisterhood, and a life away from the corrupt society of the West.

Lastly, the third aspect of the recruitment tactics, which brings the first two together and makes them successful, is how they use the internet to deliver their message to the right people, in a way that convinces them that they can provide what they have been missing. With Western media providing intricate reports on the extremist lifestyle found in the Caliphate, ISIS has found a way to portray itself in a way that discredits the perspective provided by the West, but is at the same time unapologetic of its extremist methods. They use the internet for two main recruitment objectives: for marketing, through their use of social media as an informal way of promoting their lifestyle, and through their professionally made videos and magazine, for more formal propaganda; as well as for personal recruitment, which happens privately through Twitter, Facebook and Skype, and where recruiters take the last steps in persuading foreigners that joining ISIS is the right decision.

It is therefore through targeting the right people, saying the right things, and depicting them in the right way that ISIS has become the most successful extremist group at recruiting foreign fighters. Their use of the internet to achieve these goals, therefore, is what has set them apart from other similar groups, and what continues to attract foreigners to join their ranks. In this paper, I will examine and analyze the effectiveness of each of the three aspects previously mentioned by studying examples of how ISIS has used these in real social media posts, videos
released by al-Hayat Media Center (ISIS’s media department), ISIS’s official magazine, Dabiq, and private conversations with potential recruits. Through a deeper understanding of ISIS’s methods and strategies, I will be able to conclude by offering a policy recommendation on how to counter ISIS’s presence online, in the long and short term.

**What is ISIS?**

To understand why ISIS owes its success to its strategies of recruitment, it is important to first understand what it stands for—why it has proclaimed itself a caliphate, what policies it fights for and what life is like in its territory. Once we know what they truly have to offer to the recruits coming in from all over the world, we can gain a better understanding of how they present their reality in a way that creates the religious utopia that attracts individuals from all over the world to join their ranks.

Although ISIS was established in 1999, under the name Jama’at al-Tawhid wal-Jihad, it proclaimed itself as an official caliphate in various territories of Iraq and Syria in June of 2014, during the month of Ramadan. A caliphate is an islamic state under the rule of a caliph, an absolute religious, political and moral ruler. Historically, not all caliphates have been as violent as ISIS—for example, the Golden Age of Jewish Culture in Spain is said to have happened from the beginning of the Muslim rule in Spain in 711 until the end of the Caliphate of Cordoba in 1031. This age was characterized by the religious, cultural and philosophical blossoming of the Jewish community, as well as by peaceful coexistence, as Jews and Christians lived under the dhimmi status that Islam granted them as People of the Book, which excluded them from certain political
rights reserved for Muslims, but allowed them to be accepted and respected in the community. The caliphate that ISIS promotes, however, is known all around the world for its barbaric beheadings, destruction of historic cultural sites like the ancient city of Palmyra, and many kinds of human rights abuses and war crimes. We therefore see that caliphates are not inherently violent or discriminatory, as many in the past have stood in favor of cultural coexistence while at the same time promoting a purely Islamic state. ISIS, however, is known to have directed violence against Shia Muslims, Christians, Yazidis, and many other religious minorities in the area, as well as having been charged with “ethnic cleansing on a historic scale” by Amnesty International. They strive to create a caliphate populated and dominated exclusively by Sunni Muslims, which they use in their propaganda to create a sense of religious superiority in those considering joining their ranks.

What, then, is ISIS? It walks a thin line between the tradition of the Islamic caliphates and the modernity that is necessary to attract recruits to its ranks. It holds very similar beliefs to other extremist Sunni groups, like al-Qaeda or Boko Haram, yet has been able to achieve something that neither of those groups had before: conquering territory and establishing a functioning (although not internationally recognized) state. In order to establish this state, it has required the support of the thousands of soldiers that make up its army and the supporters that run the institutions that make it a relatively well-functioning state. What sets it apart from other groups, and what has granted its success, is the fact that it has become the first extremist group to have a strong social media presence, and to use the internet as an essential part of its recruitment strategies. In a world where attention spans are becoming shorter every day, and people live a good
portion of their lives online, ISIS has found a way to navigate itself into people’s hearts and minds, providing them with something they are passionate enough about to leave everything behind and become a part of it. No one forced these recruits to join an army of terror, but many of them would never have been expected to make such a dramatic change in their lives. The key to ISIS’s revolutionary success relies in its portrayal of itself, of its victories, and of its enemies; but without the internet, this portrayal would never have the scope that has brought ISIS to the lives of thousands all around the world. I will now explore how they use this tool to maximize their recruitment potential, starting by examining the people they target, and how they choose the appropriate candidates.

Who?

When it comes to discussing the origins of the Westerners who travel to Syria to join ISIS, many will be tempted to dismiss them as uneducated, poor, or as having a radical Islamic background. And while this is the reality for some of ISIS’s recruits, there seems to be no single socio-economic, educational or religious common background for ISIS recruits. Many have not even been brought up Muslim, having converted relatively recently before traveling to join ISIS. Others have been brought up with Muslim backgrounds, but their families are still surprised, and most times horrified, when they hear about the decision their children or their siblings made. This ability to attract recruits from all different kinds of backgrounds only gives ISIS a sense of legitimacy, as it gives the impression that the *Ummah* they are creating is a multicultural space where any Muslim will be accepted. However, the recruitment process that ISIS uses has surprisingly little to do with Islam—in fact, it is about targeting the right profile, and offering them ex-
actly what they are lacking in their current lives, while blaming the Western country they come from and its corrupt society for their misfortune.

In spite of not having a common upbringing, there is a certain type of person that ISIS finds most recruitable. These are people who are looking for their place in the world, who feel like their current lives are not offering them enough, who perhaps feel lonely and don’t have a strong social circle to make them feel supported. Even though most potential recruits might enjoy a seemingly good life, in terms of their socio-economic status, most do not feel committed to the life they have here, and look for something bigger to devote their life to. This is the point where jihadism steps in, to fill the void that their life is causing. As Middle East expert and activist Nasser Weddady states, “All of us have a natural firewall in our brain that keeps us from bad ideas. They look for weaknesses in the wall, and then they attack.” Whatever the particular weakness in the wall may be, what all of the recruits have in common is that what they are promised to find in their life in the caliphate is better than what they may leave behind, and this is many times enough to convince them to take the final step and travel to Syria.

Loneliness can be one of the most important factors that can get a person to leave everything behind to join ISIS. This was the case for Alex, a 23 year old woman living with her grandparents in a small town in the US. She has not left to join ISIS, but gave an interview to The New York Times, explaining her close relationship to members of the ISIS community online. Her life consisted of a babysitting job that paid $300 a month, and teaching Sunday school. The rest of the time, she would watch movies online or update her social media accounts, as
most of her friends from high school had left the town, and she found herself with nothing to do. When she found the community of jihadists online, as a result of her curiosity about how they justified the beheadings she had heard about on the news, “she felt as if she finally had something to do.” They provided her with hours of deep conversations about religion, spirituality, and politics; but were also always there for her when she needed a friend, or was feeling demoralized about her life. When she officially converted to Islam, she tweeted “I actually have brothers and sisters. I’m crying.”

She felt like she had a family who cared about her and who would be supportive of her religion. However, as she converted, those in the online community who had supported her through her conversion process began to isolate her more and more. They told her that in order to be a good Muslim, she would have to stop following kuffar, or infidels, on social media. They also constantly tried to convince her to do hijra, or to emigrate to the land of the caliphate, as they claimed it was a sin to not do so if one was able to do it. At the same time, however, they would send her books on Islam, letters, and even candy and chocolate, offering to educate her more on how to be a good Muslim. They used the criticism of the kuffar as a stick and their support of her newfound lifestyle as a carrot, and by taking advantage of what was lacking in her life—a strong social network, as well as a sense of purpose—they gave her a utopia offering exactly what she needed.

Loneliness is not the only reason why a person can decide to join ISIS. In 2014, Asher Abid Khan, 19 at the time of his recruitment, made the trip to Turkey before deciding to go back
home. He was persuaded by the propaganda that ISIS continuously posted online, and, according to his lawyer, “decided he should do something to help his brothers and sisters in Islam. [...] The ideas being sent out are sophisticated in the sense that they portray a romantic ideal of something, in the nature of a religious obligation or duty in jihad.” Young people who do not have a clear sense of what they want to do in life may be attracted to the idea of wanting to fight for something that is bigger than anything they could encounter in a regular job or their life as a student—such as fighting for the greater good of the Muslim community. This concept is many times reinforced with references to the Iraq and Afghanistan wars waged by the US, as a way to create a greater sense of victimization of Muslims around the world, as well as a vilified image of the West.

In a similar way to those who are recruited because of the loneliness and emptiness they feel in their lives, these young potential fighters may feel attracted by the tight-knit community that is presented to them online, as well as to the idea that they can make something of themselves that will serve a purpose to said community, or even God. In a way, they are made to believe that they will become heroes, and that even if they die, thanks to their sacrifice, they will be greeted as martyrs in heaven. To a young man who sees nothing better in his life, this can be the decisive notion that will make him travel to Syria. Again, we see that many times, the one thing in common that these potential recruits have is that they are promised something better or more meaningful than they ever hope to find at home.
In spite of the thousands of foreigners fleeing their homes for Syria, many would still argue that while it can be understandable for young men to pursue the dream of becoming a jihadi hero, the girls leaving must know that they will become second class citizens once they get to the caliphate. Why would they leave a life of equal rights to become the wife of a potential martyr? Many girls can be fed the idea that leaving to Syria is the right thing to do in religious terms, but few will actually leave everything behind to spend the rest of their lives completely veiled and hidden from society. However, ISIS recruiters have become experts in targeting girls that will be attracted to a life of submission. Anna Erelle, a French journalist, passed as a teenager online who she based on girls that had left to join ISIS, which she had previously studied. She let herself be recruited by one of ISIS’s top members, under the pseudonym Mélodie, and from her research, she declared that for an “extremely sensitive girl”\(^8\), like she portrayed her avatar Mélodie to be, “being dominated would give her life a sense of purpose.”\(^9\) Mélodie was promised “true love, marriage, and an idyllic life” less than 48 hours after first establishing personal online contact with ISIS—“Her life was a desert and he was an oasis […] Mélodie already saw him as a king. And she had always dreamed of being a queen”\(^10\).

Having a husband that will provide for them, and to a certain extent, control their life, might seem like an appealing life option for many of the girls that ISIS targets, as many times, they have never had a sense of stability before in their life. A controlling husband may seem like the figure of authority that they may have never found in their families, and this can provide a sense of comfort that can be the first step to really consider traveling to Syria. Again, we see that ISIS targets those who they can make believe will find more in Syria than they ever could in
their current lives. It doesn’t matter if they leave looking for a community, an adventure, or religious enlightening—if there is someone out there that is looking for something, ISIS will be there to provide it. What they claim to provide is what I will explore next, as it is not enough to target those who are looking for something, but to promise them exactly what they need.

**What?**

As we have seen from the examples of recruits who joined ISIS, the extremist group is formed by experts in providing their potential recruits with promises of exactly what they need in their life. They can guarantee a tight-knit community for those who feel alone; a religious utopia for those looking for their purpose in life; a sense of moral superiority for those who are not completely convinced that they want to leave their life in the West; a promise of a heroic life full of victories for the greater good of the *Ummah*; and even simple attention and popularity online, which is so greatly coveted in today’s society and which they may never find in their home countries.

When recruiting, members of ISIS repeat their convincing statements again and again. One of the most important parts of the recruitment process and one of the most generic reasons for persuading someone to come join ISIS is the fact that they strive to build a caliphate where Sharia law will be imposed and “pure” Islam can become a part of every day life. While they praise the lifestyle found in their territories, they heavily criticize that of Western countries, classifying them as corrupt, and their leaders as the cause for the conflicts in the Middle East. They argue that “women in Europe are treated badly and used like objects. Men show (women) off like
trophies”¹¹, while assuring the potential recruits that “if (they) continue to live among kafirs, (they) will burn in hell.”¹² In videos released by al-Hayat Media Center, such as “No Respite”, one of ISIS’s strongest examples of propaganda, we see this concept of religious and moral superiority being used to attract potential recruits who will be enticed by the prospect of living a more spiritually fulfilling life, in addition to the use of the “us vs. them” concept which will turn them away from their life in the West. They boast about the fact that the caliphate follows Sharia law, the law of God, as opposed to being “a secular state built on manmade laws whose soldiers fight for the interests of legislators, liars, fornicators (referring to Bill Clinton), corporations, and for the freedoms of sodomites.”¹³

When portraying life in the caliphate, they show a religious paradise formed exclusively by those who have been brave and committed enough to their religion. Throughout the video, they constantly reference the glory of being part of this multicultural Muslim state, where nationalism has been abolished and all exist under one religion. This is an incredibly strong propaganda video and a perfect example of the use of the concept of religious and moral superiority, employed many times in the recruitment process, and useful both to create a glorified image of the Islamic State and an image of moral, political and economic crisis in the West. Many will be attracted to the presentation of the caliphate as a God-given right solely destined to Muslims, while at the same time speaking of the unity and brotherhood found within its borders, and the sense of fighting along those brothers for a common cause.
Directly related to this concept of religious superiority, we find the concept of jihad, which is one of the main reasons why men join the extremist group. Jihad implies fighting for the *Ummah*, for the rights of Muslims around the world and for those who have suffered under the many wars in the Middle East. The rise of Islamophobia and the catastrophic civilian deaths in Iraq and Afghanistan are constantly exploited by ISIS to wage war against the West, and jihad is seen as the opportunity to fight for a greater cause than oneself, and to do something with your life that is incomparable to anything that can be done in the West. They sell lives in the West as futile, with statements like “While we’re out risking our lives, you’re spending your days doing meaningless activities. Being religious means imposing your values.” They accuse those Muslims who choose not to join ISIS of being allied with the enemy, and claim that “True Muslims are those who devote their lives to (the establishment of a caliphate). Everyone else is a nonbeliever.”

Similarly, in al-Hayat’s video “Join the Ranks”, a jihadist asks potential recruits “Are your homes, businesses, and wealth, more beloved to you than Allah, His Messenger, and jihad in His path?” The concept of jihad appeals to the sense of religious responsibility in the viewers. It strikes the sense that others have made the decision to travel to Syria and have been able to leave everything behind to do what is right, and therefore, they should be able to do it too. It also creates the feeling that they could be living a better, fully religious life in the Caliphate, and since it is what God would want them to do, they should do it. In the third issue of Dabiq magazine, “A Call to *Hijrah*”, a martyr speaks in a sentimental way about the feeling of love for jihad, and of needing to help his Muslim brotherhood in the fight for Islam. He mentions that you can die two
different deaths: a death that will “kill you with sorrow if you decide to sit and abandon jihad”\textsuperscript{17}, or the death that you may encounter if you pursue jihad an become a martyr, which would immediately take you to Heaven. Jihad encompasses a sense of purposefulness, and an adventure that also contains a deep commitment to religion and to love of the worldwide \textit{Ummah}—something bigger, stronger and deeper than any possible life experience they could have in the West. An opportunity to become the hero of a movement that, in theory, fights for the freedom of Muslims against their enemies—something that will certainly attract those who feel like they have nothing to lose in their current lives.

Stemming from the concept of jihad, we find that many will also be offered a sense of community that can be very attractive to those who perhaps come from unstable families, or have always felt like outsiders, maybe because of their religion, or their inherent personality. Online, recruiters form real, strong relationships with potential recruits—they are available 24/7, and show enthusiasm when talking to them, offering them not only religious propaganda, but advice and support like any friend would. Many become part of a wide net of online communities that advertise their support for the caliphate through images with inspirational Islamic phrases, while at the same time devote hours to talking to recruiters who sell them an image of a religious utopia where they will be accepted and loved.

While the process of recruitment is ongoing, these potential jihadis (or jihadi wives) are promised a Muslim community that will never judge them for following their religion. Men are promised brothers who will fight alongside them for the same cause, while women are promised
A sisterhood. A jihadist promised Mélodie “You’ll have a little group of girlfriends, and you’ll do
girl stuff together”\textsuperscript{18}, while at the same time telling her “you’re my jewel, you’re pure. […] You’ll be really well taken care of here. You’ll be important. And if you agree to marry me, I’ll
treat you like a queen.”\textsuperscript{19} From the outside, it is easy to distinguish the cheap persuasion, and
how easy it is to sell an image of an idyllic life as a Muslim princess. However, for a person who
perhaps has never felt valued or loved in the community, these words can be life-changing. For
someone who feels truly lonely, the prospect of having a husband and a group of friends waiting
for you can be the decisive fact when thinking about joining ISIS.

Again, we encounter ISIS’s key to success: providing those who are lacking something in
their lives with exactly what they need. They can sell an adventure to those who are bored, reli-
gion to those who are lost, and love to those who are lonely. Targeting the right people and offer-
ing them the right things, therefore, are essential for the recruitment process to be successful.
However, it is how ISIS portrays itself to its worldwide online audience, and how it then mobi-
lizes people through its technique of personal recruitment, that finalizes the process and succeeds
in providing these recruits with what they are looking for, as they provide ISIS with what it
needs the most: fighters for its cause.

How?

As previously mentioned, we can directly relate a big part of ISIS’s successful strategy of
foreign recruitment to its presence online. Being the first extremist group to use the internet as
the most essential part of its recruitment process, it has served as an example of the wide net that
can be casted through social media and online diffusion of propaganda. Targeting the right people and offering them what they want in life is not enough, as there are many people in the world who are lacking something in their lives, and extremist groups have always been present. However, the world has never previously seen thousands of foreigners leave their homes to join al-Qaeda, or Boko Haram. We can therefore establish a strong connection between ISIS’s recruitment success and its use of the internet, which has never been used for this type of purpose before. ISIS uses the online world to publicize its message in exactly the way it wants to. Even though this propaganda is constantly countered by reports of ISIS’s brutality in Western media, the group will dismiss these news as inaccurate, providing their own version of events, and justifying their acts as a fight for justice and the freedom of the Ummah. Their personal recruitment strategies, where fighters in the caliphate persuade those with even a minimal level of interest in jihad to join them in Syria and Iraq, have proven to be extremely effective.

As we can see, the internet brings to ISIS an opportunity to reach people all over the world, something that was simply not possible before. Through their representation of the group, they have been able to provide a counter-narrative to the image that is usually given in Western media outlets, modifying it to their own accord to please a population that looks for the tradition of a very strict interpretation of Islam, while at the same time lives in a world where modernity and the use of technology are inherent to their every day lives. It is through the use of the internet that they have been able to combine these two worlds—tradition and modernity—to provide a religious utopia where Western lifestyles are heavily demonized, yet still pursued through social media.
ISIS uses the internet in two main ways. The first one, which is the one that serves to initially attract potential recruits, is for marketing purposes. This includes formal marketing, such as their official magazine, Dabiq, as well as the videos released by al-Hayat Media Center; but also more informal marketing, usually spread through social media sites like Twitter and Tumblr, which include strategies that any 21st century company uses nowadays, like the use of hashtags and memes, as well as photos with verses from the Quran, demonizing the West, or promoting an image of victimization of Muslims around the world. These are widely shared by their online correspondents, and can be the first real encounter that any potential recruit has with ISIS. These formal and informal marketing strategies are easily accessible by any user and spread all over the internet, in hopes of providing a different narrative to that of Western media, as well as to spread their message of religious radicalism.

After this first encounter with a different perspective of ISIS and its beliefs, we step into the second way in which ISIS uses the internet to recruit its foreign fighters, which is the most intensive and important part of the process: personal recruitment. This is the point where potential recruits establish a personal connection with a recruiter already living in Syria, which will take care of the finishing touches of the radicalization process. They will sell them an idyllic image of the caliphate that will be tailored exactly to what they are looking for in life, by establishing real and extremely close relationships with the potential recruits. This part of the process, therefore, is extremely personal and does develop seemingly real friendships, and sometimes even engagements. People will many times live double lives online, to hide these relationships
and newfound beliefs away from their families, until they decide to take the final step and leave for Syria. The people persuading them to do so all the way from the Syria are experts in portraying this paradise-like image of the land of the caliphate, and once they establish these close relationships, they can be very influential in the decisions these potential recruits may make. If we combine this leverage with the constant promise of exactly what they are missing, and a guarantee of absolute religious fulfillment, we can start to understand why ISIS has been so successful at using the internet as its most essential recruitment tool.

*Formal Marketing*

ISIS’s formal marketing, through Dabiq magazine and the many videos published by al-Hayat, are the first steps to catch the attention of those who may be questioning the narrative of the West. Although personal recruitment is much more intense and finalizes the recruitment process, this step is essential to get potential recruits to question what they believe to know about ISIS. In Dabiq, they write articles made expressly to incite potential recruits all over the world to come join them—not only criticizing the enemy and writing about religion, but portraying their victories, the way they are “helping” the towns they “liberate” by providing all kinds of social services, and even by examining how the West sees them in a section named “In the Words of the Enemy”, which only exacerbates its legitimacy, as they usually choose quotes that express a view of ISIS as a real threat.

Each issue of the magazine has a certain component that will attract different kinds of people, who may be looking for something in their lives that ISIS will convince them it can pro-
vide. They do not shy away from including bloody pictures of martyrs and descriptions of their attacks, and yet they present the war-ridden Caliphate as the ideal place for all Muslims to live in. For example, in their first issue, “The Return of the Khilafah”, they don’t try to cover up the fact that war is present in the Caliphate, but, on the contrary, they try to advertise it as a just war for the prevalence of the Caliphate and the Ummah—it is what has gotten them to establish a Caliphate and what will enable them to expand. From this issue and the way that ISIS presents the establishment of its state, it is obvious that they choose to and are proud of portray themselves as extremely violent—and this is done as a conscious attempt to attract only those who would like to and are capable of withstanding this type of life.

This is also seen in their film “Flames of War”, which is one of its best examples of propaganda directed at justifying the use of violence that is constantly criticized—for obvious reasons—in Western media. The video begins with images of President Bush and President Obama, talking about the war in Iraq. A quote by President Bush, “You are either with us or with the terrorists”\textsuperscript{20}, is used to create an even bigger divide between the two “camps”. By using the image of President Bush as being the creator of this divide, ISIS is able to present itself not as the cause of this war, but as a reactor to a war that was initiated by the West and that has caused the suffering of millions of Muslims. They use this concept to justify their violence, and this leads to the dozens of minutes of footage of war for the rest of the video, proving not only their commitment to the cause, but also their effectiveness—as they abstain, obviously, from mentioning their losses in battle. The battle scenes and their glorification of war are definitely useful tools in the process of recruitment, as this excitement, paired with the greater sense of accomplishment and
of fighting for a greater cause, can be very strong motivators for young men thinking about joining the ranks.

While men may be very attracted to the concept of fighting for jihad, whether this may be for purely religious reasons, or for a lack of real purpose in their life, ISIS also makes sure to promote its image of a Muslim utopia where the *Ummah* is meant to come together as a single unified community. This may be more useful to attract women, since they can’t take part in the fighting and may be more inclined to join in order to follow a pious, strictly religious lifestyle; as well as men who are looking to better themselves in a religious manner and fall in the hands of religious radicalism. To promote its image of Islamic righteousness, for example, ISIS uses the story of Noah’s ark in its issue of Dabiq Magazine called “The Flood”, to establish a very clear image of “us vs. them”—the faithful Muslims vs. the infidels and those who stand by their side. The title of the main article itself, “It’s Either the Islamic State or the Flood”\(^{21}\), couldn’t make it any clearer. They tell the story of how people made fun of Noah as he built the ark, instead of believing that God had sent a flood that was soon to kill all the non-believers. The parallel of this story to the ideology that ISIS is trying to put forward is obvious: those who question the will of God (or, what ISIS believes to be the will of God) will be killed. It is taking away the choice to join the Islamic State by implementing fear into the minds of its readers. Perhaps to a non-religious person, this has no particular effect. But to a very religious person, even if they don’t have a radical interpretation of Islam, fear of not doing what God truly wants them to do can become a legitimate reason to consider joining ISIS. Fear of disobeying God, in this way, can be much greater than the fear of being attacked by ISIS if one doesn't join them, while at the same time, it
creates a greater divide between those who can be “saved” and those who refuse to see “the truth”.

Through this sense of religious superiority, they once again create an “us vs. them” concept of the world that demonizes the West and its values, while at the same time makes those considering joining ISIS believe that they are doing what God wants them to do. We see more examples of this notion in the Dabiq issue “A Call to Hijrah”, where by constantly quoting both the Quran and various ISIS jihadists, they provide well-crafted religious arguments pushing Muslims around the world to join their ranks. They also criticize the lifestyle that people choose to have in the West, calling it “modern day slavery” that “leaves the Muslim in a constant feeling of subjugation to a kafir (infidel) master.” With this argument, they appeal to the desire of people around the world to be a part of something greater. Many people, whether they are Muslims or not, may at one point in their life feel bored or unmotivated with their life. ISIS presents these people with an opportunity to join not only an exciting movement, but also one that they consider to be the right path for any Muslim. They present jihad as an adventure, but also as a deep commitment to religion and to love of the worldwide Muslim Ummah—something bigger, stronger and deeper than any possible life experience they could have in the West. An opportunity to be a part of a movement that, in theory, fights for the freedom of Muslims against their enemies—something that will certainly attract those who feel like they have nothing to lose in their current lives.
Informal Marketing

On the other side of ISIS’s propaganda, we have informal marketing. This is comprised of propaganda that is not necessarily produced and distributed officially by ISIS, but by its supporters online, mainly through social media sites. Examples of this are tweets, hashtags and memes relating to jihad, blog posts about life in the caliphate, questions answered by jihadis on their blog, and inspirational images pertaining to subjects like how to be a good Muslim, or supporting the sacrifice that jihadists make for the Ummah. It is in this type of informal marketing strategies that we can see ISIS making the best use of the internet, as those who are most likely to be successfully recruited—young people—are likely to be attracted to this type of internet language that speaks to their generation. They use these posts on social media not only to promote religion and war, but also to normalize life in the caliphate by showing what a regular day is like in Syria. Furthermore, they combine images of aspects of modern life, such as video games or even Disney movies, and edit them to promote their beliefs in a way that combines the tradition of Sharia and jihad with the modernity of things that are more approachable to a young audience than simply a dry verse from the Quran. Again, we see ISIS (and its supporters) adapting its propaganda to provide exactly what each potential recruit may be looking for—and for this generation, that may be a spiritual awakening that does not prevent them from enjoying the latest internet trend.

A perfect example of how ISIS uses the internet to attract potential recruiters is through its use of self-created memes. Memes are, according to Urban Dictionary, “Popular quotes, images, and real people, which are copied, imitated, and spread all over the internet.”

24 By using
them, ISIS can create an online movement that is likely to resonate with the younger generation, which is used to this type of online humor that has taken over social media in the past couple of years. It is a way to normalize their beliefs, making themselves less intimidating, as well as to establish an image of modernity while leaving the extremist beliefs aside for just a moment. This is a language that young people like and understand, and therefore these simple memes can easily be one of the factors that may push a young person to think that maybe ISIS is not as bad as Western media is making them appear. The hashtag #CatsofJihad is one example of these memes, and it simply consists of pictures of cats with guns, grenades, and other weapons. These try to appeal to the internet’s general obsession with cats, which are used in many memes, and add the component of jihad, which makes the pictures a seemingly casual example of ISIS propaganda. They don’t include verses from the Quran, and they don’t necessarily call for bloody war against the infidels—they promote ISIS in a much more subtle way, by creating something that seems so bizarre for a terrorist group that they know it will inevitably catch the attention of any internet user.

ISIS supporters also use the internet to spread all kinds of inspirational messages through edited pictures that they supplement with verses from the Quran, or simply religious or spiritual phrases. “Bird of Jannah”, a 26 year old female doctor who traveled to Syria, was known for her constant description of life as a woman in the caliphate through her social media accounts, until all of them got suspended as she gained popularity. She was prone to posting these types of images, most of them pertaining to marriage and the lives of women. For example, one of her edited pictures shows a Muslim couple photographed from the back, with the words “And in the land
of the Jihad I found you… O my dear Mujahid.” Another similar one shows a different couple, this time with the words “The love of Jihad, Till martyrdom do us part.” ISIS doesn’t hide the fact that women who join the group will not be allowed to participate in the fighting, and will mostly be expected to get married as soon as possible and take care of the house, their husband, and their children. The ideas of jihad, and of fighting for a greater good, may therefore not have a big effect on them. These images, however, sell a utopian and romanticized image of what life will be like when they marry who they may believe will be the love of their life—a jihadi hero that will sweep them off their feet. The prospect of finding a life partner that will uphold the values that they believe in is one of the things ISIS is trying to sell to young women through these images, as it is more likely that they will be attracted to this lifestyle than to the images of violence, even if they support ISIS and their reasons for waging war.

Images directed at men, however, do show heroic jihadi fighters, usually in the middle of battle or posing with their weapons against a beautiful landscape. To attract the younger recruits, ISIS supporters have even created images that parody popular war video games. For example, an image of two soldiers with the words “This is our Call of Duty, and we Respawn in Jannah (Heaven)”, referring to the popular video game Call of Duty, where to respawn means to be brought back to life. In a way, this creates the image of an alternative reality where the brutalities carried out in war video games can come to life—something that can be attractive to younger men—while still giving it a deeper religious meaning. Another image, simply presenting a gun, reads “YODO: You Only Die Once. Why not make it martyrdom?”, a parody of the popular saying “YOLO: You Only Live Once”, which surfaced online. These images are examples of very
casual propaganda, made to seem accessible to a younger population which is attracted to popular online trends, but at the same time is searching for a meaning in life which ISIS believes it can provide.

ISIS supporters bring one last critical source of informal propaganda that is crucial to the recruitment process, and that is the numerous blog posts, tweets, and pictures which show what daily life is like in the land of the caliphate. Potential recruits that are thinking about taking the step will want a first-hand account of what a regular day is like in Syria, and whether it is all constant bombings and violence. ISIS supporters make sure to also portray the caliphate as a completely regular place to live, where women can have fun with their “sisters”, while men can enjoy coming home to their families after a day of fighting. Tumblr user chechelear, who’s account has been deleted, posted pictures of his heavily veiled wife shooting a large gun, and captioned it “Who said girls can’t shoot? Training day with the wifey.” Similarly, Tumblr user khilafahway, whose account was also deleted, posted a picture of a man holding two ice cream cones, with a quote by ISIS member Abu Zakariya al-Amriki: “We gave up the luxuries of this world to fight for Allah’s sake. But when there’s ice cream, we’ll have some ice cream.” These posts are ISIS’s clear effort to normalize life in the caliphate and the people that inhabit it, as if to say that although jihad, and Sharia law, and a strict interpretation Islam is essential to ISIS, the people who live there also lead normal lives.

The jihadis and the women who share their lives on social media post about what they do every day, and that provides potential recruits with a sense of security—that although they are chang-
ing their lives in a radical way, they will still be able to lead relatively normal lives like they would in the West, that will allow them to have a family, to have friends, and to enjoy themselves. Once again, ISIS’s propaganda covers every single need that potential recruits may have—whether that is the need for the biggest adventure of their lives, or the need to lead a completely normal life in an environment that supports their choices and beliefs.

In reality, ISIS’s formal and informal propaganda strategies do not differ radically from any other political or religious propaganda. Any reader of Dabiq, anyone who sees pictures shared in favor of the Islamic State, or anyone who watches the videos by al-Hayat, can tell that what is being told is just one side of the story, and that hundreds of arguments can be made against the ideas that ISIS promotes in its formal marketing outlets trying to justify their brutally violent methods. What makes their propaganda particularly effective is that they have chosen their ideas carefully and have used the internet to reach those who will be influenced by them. They constantly offer reasons to join specifically to those who they know are looking for something more in their lives, and they don’t bother with those who they know will resist. As previously mentioned, the marketing step is only the first step of the recruitment process—the personalized recruitment comes afterwards. What Dabiq, al-Hayat videos, and the hundreds of idyllic, religious, and even funny pictures shared on social media are doing is simply narrowing the pool of potential recruits for ISIS—distinguishing between those who will read the magazines to end up bewildered by the things they read, and those who will perhaps feel like it is worth it to consider the other side of the story. Once a person has crossed the threshold of ISIS’s marketing, they will actively seek to be recruited, or at least, to learn more about the viewpoint that the
group is trying to sell—and the way ISIS uses social media and online communication to finalize the radicalization process is what truly sets them apart.

*Personal recruitment*

As previously mentioned, the marketing strategies are only the first step in the recruitment process used by ISIS. Through formal and informal propaganda, they can set apart those who are simply interested in the ISIS phenomenon, and those who may be thinking about the possibility of joining the group. This is where the last step of the recruitment process starts: personal recruitment. The part where potential recruits come in contact with people living in Syria and potentially fighting for ISIS, and begin to learn more about what ISIS stands for (from the point of view that they have already seen in the propaganda) while at the same time truly asking themselves if joining the group is something they may actually consider. The recruiters at this stage are expertly trained to establish very personal relationships with those they are trying to recruit, to come to understand what in their life is pushing them to consider joining ISIS, and make sure that they can make them believe that living in the caliphate will provide exactly what they are looking for.

The first thing this personal recruitment strategy provides is the first glimpse into the community that ISIS claims recruits will encounter if they make *hijra* to Syria. If perhaps a person interested in ISIS is not part of a tight-knit community, is having family problems, or even recently went through a romantic breakup, the ISIS online community will be there to listen—constantly. Alex, the 19 year old who was on the process of being recruited, said “I was on my
own a lot, and they were online all the time.”

Mubin Shaikh, a former recruiter of an extremist Islamist group, says it clearly: “We look for people who are isolated. And if they are not isolated already, then we isolated them.” They present both an idyllic image of the caliphate, and a hellish image of the West, even criticizing the recruits’ families in an attempt to separate them even more—“(Having insurance) makes your mother an enemy. She doesn’t respect our laws, which means she doesn’t respect Islam.”

The recruiter in Erelle’s experience with ISIS used even the fact that her mother had insurance to declare her an infidel, prompting Mélodie to join the land of the good, faithful Muslims. At the same time, by always being readily available, ISIS is always able to provide their version of the story, making sure that potential recruits are driven away from the Western interpretation of ISIS’s barbaric methods. Once they have established close relationships with recruits, while at the same time trying to isolate them from their real-life communities, they can make them trust their perspective and find less and less reasons not to move to Syria.

At the same time as the isolation process is ongoing, recruiters answer questions, always making sure to present the Islamic State as the right place for all Muslims. “Bilel met Mélodie’s questions with the most basic doublespeak: all the answers could be found in Islam—the medieval version of Islam promoted by ISIS.” When there is always a religious answer to a question, it is hard to come up with a reasonable counterargument. Since religion can only be argued from a moral perspective, everything is subjective, and therefore weak-minded or confused people are very prone to falling into the narrative of those who are trained to convince people that ISIS is the answer to all their questions.
What makes the last part of the recruitment process so important is that it is personalized, that it establishes relationships of trust (whether this is between “sisters”, “brothers”, or future married couples), and that therefore is able to offer each interested person exactly what they are looking for, through displaying a utopian perspective of the caliphate. If they are lonely or feel like they don’t belong, they will demonize their families and will talk about the community of people that will support them if they join ISIS. If they are looking for a change in their lives, they will criticize the 9-to-5 schedule of the West and will ensure them that jihad will change their lives for the better. Once a person has gone through the process of actively seeking to find recruiters who can give them answers to their questions, these recruiters will do everything in their power to make sure that person ends up in the caliphate. Judging by the number of foreigners who have fled their countries towards war-ridden Syria and Iraq, we can confidently determine ISIS’s success in their recruitment strategies, and their use of the internet to further these.

**Conclusion**

After analyzing this enormous amount of information, there is only one question to be asked: what can be done to prevent this? What can international institutions, national governments, and families do to stop more people from becoming indoctrinated by ISIS, and to stop ISIS from reaching these people? It is incredibly difficult to find effective short-term solutions, as the internet is extremely hard to be controlled, and new accounts promoting jihadism will keep appearing even as hundreds are closed down every day. Additionally, even though social media sites like Twitter, Facebook and Tumblr continuously try to shut down these propaganda-spread-
ing accounts, the most influential part of the recruitment process, the personal recruitment, is incredibility difficult to control, as it is completely private. There is no good way to distinguish a jihadist Skype or Whatsapp account from any other normal account, unless someone reports it. Therefore, if any potential recruit is able to get access to a recruiter’s contact information, they are at a point of no return, where it is extremely difficult for the police or the government to infiltrate the conversations. At this point, it is completely up to the individual to choose whether they want to believe ISIS’s version of the story, and they are at a exceedingly high risk of being recruited. As I have discussed in this paper, whether they give joining ISIS some serious consideration depends on their personality and situation, but there seems to be little that governments can do at this point to avoid this from happening. Besides continuing to monitor online activity as much as possible, through strict collaboration with social media sites; making sure that Western media outlets continue to provide a strong counter-narrative to what ISIS claims life is like in the caliphate; and continuing to restrict the flow of people into Syria and Iraq, not much else can be done to stop the ISIS phenomenon in the short-term.

In the long-term, solutions also appear to be very complex— theoretically, governments should aim to provide what ISIS is offering, to make sure that people don’t feel the need to look for them elsewhere. Whereas commenting on the need for governments to provide better economic opportunities seems unproductive, as a detailed economic analysis of every country is needed to make these kinds of arguments, it is reasonable to say that governments should invest their efforts into making societies more inclusive for Muslims. Rates of islamophobia have increased as a result of terror attacks, which is exactly what ISIS wants, as islamophobia creates
an even greater divide between Muslims and the rest of the population, making them more prone to be recruited. Governments, therefore, should focus on educating the future generations both about the dangers of extremism, and the implications of living in globalized societies, in order to create more accepting generations, which will lead to more inclusive societies and lower rates of discrimination towards Muslims. Other policies to combat the marginalization of Muslim communities, like providing better economic, educational and employment opportunities, can make Muslims living in Western countries feel more integrated into those societies. These policies, although very focused on long-term improvement of the situation, must be implemented in order to provide a permanent solution to the problem of extremism. Combined with the previously discussed short-term solutions, which are more focused on combatting the spread of jihadism online, they can lead to more accepting Western societies, more integrated Muslim communities, and therefore, a lessening of the attractive elements that ISIS claims to provide.
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