



Fatal Attraction: The Lure of Islamic State

Greg Simons

16 September 2016

Islamic State is one of the most revolutionary and dangerous political movements of modern times, but its attraction it often highly misunderstood. How and why does Islamic State appeal to some?

The Islamic State (also known as ISIS and Daesh), seemingly enjoyed a meteoric rise to power and infamy. ISIS was simultaneously an entity that was admired and/or feared, as this new force attracted vast media attention and reporting. It appeared an unstoppable force, sweeping aside armed forces opposing them in Iraq, Syria and Libya. During 2015, 15 vast tracts of territory in Iraq and Syria were taken. But there was another side to ISIS, some kind of attraction that lured a wide variety of people, including those from the West, to their cause. It was something that many found difficult to understand, let alone adequately explain. When trying to analyse this from the point of view of competing norms and values, between the West and ISIS it may superficially seem to be an 'obvious' choice between the projection of freedom and liberty in the West, and oppression and violence by ISIS. However, the realities of this case, both actual and perceived, are more complex. Understanding the lure of ISIS requires some critical self-reflection from the West, and not only on what has been done by ISIS. How and why does ISIS appeal to some Western publics?

ISIS as a Brand

A brand is a psychological and emotional short-cut that creates immediate associations and expectations in an audience with a product, service, person or organisation. Although the brand aspect of ISIS is not totally ignored, it is still under rated by many. Viewing ISIS not simply as an illegal terrorist organisation

Latest

An Update on the Security Policy Change Programme

Chances for Peace in the Third Decade

A Story of ORG: Oliver Ramsbotham

A Story of ORG: Gabrielle Rifkind

Most read

The Role of Youth in Peacebuilding: Challenges and Opportunities

Making Bad Economies: The Poverty of Mexican Drug

that needs to be wiped out, or [extreme nihilists](#), but as something more than its tangible form and deeds is necessary. Otherwise, the task of understanding and ultimately countering ISIS becomes more problematic as it ignores the intangible and emotionally significant aspects of ISIS's appeal.

In a recent global brand rankings index, there was a great deal of surprise and shock expressed by those that had compiled the index. The 2016 rankings showed that ISIS was a more recognised brand than the Vatican! In 2016, ISIS stood at 107 on the Western Perception index, which was up 56 places from 2015. This does not mean that the ISIS brand has a better reputation than other country and organisation brands, but it does mean that it is more widely recognised. Even though ISIS is shown to be mostly hated in countries with [large Muslim populations](#), there are sufficient potential recruits there and in the West to lure with different grievances or causes. This process will be made easier if a backlash against Muslims in general is precipitated as a result of various terror attacks that have been occurring in Belgium, France and other countries. Some other polls seem to contradict the mentioned trends and show that there is support for the terror group, which was shown in an [Al Jazeera poll](#), where 80 per cent of respondents seemed to support them.

Signature atrocities and war crimes by ISIS are widely disseminated in video format by media outlets that are associated with or sympathetic to ISIS or by Western media covering a 'newsworthy' soundbite that is given in an [infotainment](#) format. The [ISIS logo](#) has been used widely to increase brand recognition and association. It is full of political and social (such as an equal and ideal society in the making) symbolism, which places and positions the organisation within an environment of competing jihadist organisations. Part of ISIS' means to project itself in terms of its brand and reputation, to attract

Cartels

ORG's Vision

Remote Warfare: Lessons Learned from Contemporary Theatres

attention, supporters and recruits is through one of its means of public relations, the [Internet-based magazine Dabiq](#). This magazine is produced in a very familiar glossy magazine format that is commonly found in the West, yet the content is extremist in nature, attempting to appeal to a variety of discontent or angry individuals and groups. Its message may not only appeal to Muslims, but those isolated and discontent individuals or groups that find the ISIS messages of revenge, building a new society or becoming socially significant appealing. This is the means of public outreach to turn its propaganda of the act into the propaganda of the word, to rhetorically publicise what it stands for and against, and to convert the idea of ISIS into some form of political movement.

ISIS as a Political Movement

Currently the nature of politics and political relationships is evolving. Traditionally politics has been measured by using a left-right political scale. This is a now somewhat obsolete way to accurately understand the events and processes that are currently taking place in global political environments. Politics in its current form is the result of a culmination of time periods of discontent and disconnection with mainstream political and public policy. Various people and groups have gradually become increasing discontent, frustrated and seek alternatives in political movements, something that breaks the status quo. Those political movements are able to offer something different and situate themselves as being opposed to the incumbent political elite that can resonate with some of those groups and individuals. This does not mean that ISIS is 'simply' a [political movement](#) (which is the basis for forming its political relationships), but it is also a revolutionary one that seeks to alter existing political, social and economic relationships through violent means.

They are attracted to messages that offer an alternative, pledge resistance to the current political environment, and offer a new and inclusive society. These messages and visions of a promised utopia attract many, and these groups and individuals create what they believe to be mutually reinforcing and 'beneficial' political relationships with the likes of ISIS. The realisation of the ISIS Caliphate gave tangible visualisation to a previously intangible set of ideas and ideals. Underlying reasons can be found in human needs for self-actualisation, esteem and a sense of belonging that is explained in [Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs](#).

Events and Processes that Influence the ISIS Appeal



isis-again

Image by [Wikimedia](#).

There are a mixture of internal and external influences – processes and events – that combine to influence the level of appeal of ISIS to different individuals and groups. These form a mixture of push and pull factors that can make an organisation with such a brutal track record as ISIS appealing. In the sum of things, it is not only a matter of what ISIS says and does that makes it attractive to some individuals or groups, but also what the West says and does. This is an example of negative politics and political interaction at its worst. ISIS has made very effective use of the [Internet and social media](#) to spread its message and influence around the globe, rendering the old geopolitical constraints of time and space ineffective. This has enabled them to bypass the traditional gatekeepers of the information space. It has also enabled them to enact three significant geopolitical shifts: 1) from states to individuals/organisations; 2) real world to virtual world mobilisation and power; 3) old media to new media.

In the West

Politics and policy in the West has had profound, and often negative, effects on the issue of equality of its citizens. There is a growing disparity of economic and political opportunity in many countries, which is problematic when there is a growing sense of alienation and outrage in society, and those higher human needs that Maslow discussed remain unfulfilled. The United Kingdom received a shock on 7 July 2005 when domestic terrorists attacked. It was not the first time the UK had been attacked by terrorism, the IRA ran a long campaign. Within the Global War On Terrorism that the UK joined the United States after the September 11, 2001 attacks, it was assumed that any kind of Islamic-based terrorism was simply happening somewhere else.

However, the New Public Management policies had created an ideal environment. Social services (such as health, education and policing) were gradually withdrawn from marginalised communities. The British state withdrew its presence and care of these people in the name of budget cuts. This political and social vacuum was soon filled by non-state actors, including some radical ones, which offered basic health and 'policing' services, educated children in madrassas. This is not to say there is necessarily a link between madrassas and violent extremism, but when one form of government vacates territory the resulting vacuum is soon filled by other forms and sources of social and political order that move in to occupy that space. The social and political relationships were created, which can also form mutually reinforcing trends, such as the rise of right-wing populism that feeds sets of radicalisation (in the Muslim and right-wing groups). Thus the different forces try to politically mobilise their constituent audiences through fear of the other. However, some research shows that there has been little impact so far.

In a similar tone to the Western understanding of the practice of **Hearts and Minds**, there are the **five aspects of Jihad**. There is Jihad of the sword, hand, tongue, knowledge and heart. Jihad of the Sword (combat) carries the least weight, of more importance are Jihad of the Tongue (including propaganda) and Hand (humanitarian operations).

When looking at recruits that have fought and died for ISIS, it has included some 'surprising' individuals, drawn from very **non-Islamic backgrounds**. There are those that have been recruited to fight for the ISIS cause. From 2011 onwards, an estimated **27, 000 – 31, 000 foreign recruits** have gone to Syria and Iraq. There are those that have gone for a sense of 'adventure', because they feel there are personal opportunities for them or to be part of a community and to build something significant and special. In their home communities they felt left out, isolated, marginalised, held back or somehow insignificant. Audiences from Western countries have followed the news in disbelief as various stories of young men and women have been leaving, what they believe is a comfortable life, straight to the dangers of joining ISIS in Syria and Iraq.

ISIS makes a sustained and deliberate effort to **attract youth** to its cause. The **attraction** has not been only about destruction and death, but the promise or hope to build a special community. This has been spread by some very slick advertising and public relations, such as the example provided by someone claiming to be an **Australian doctor** recruiting professionals to join him.

When one thinks of Islamic-based terrorism, immediate associations normally revolve around concepts of brutality and violence as being the key elements. However, this is not the case. In terms of how information is used by these organisations, military operations are subordinate to information operations. The importance is found in the value of the information that is derived from an

action. This differs from most Western governments, where information operations are secondary to military operations, information is used to try and legitimise those military ventures.

In the Middle East and North Africa

One of the now seemingly defunct stereotypes of ISIS recruits from the Middle East and North Africa was that they were poorly educated and highly religious. However, field research conducted by Dr [Noha Bakr](#) from Cairo, reveals that they are in fact well educated and from well-to-do families in the Middle East/North Africa region. [Research](#) also confirms this trend among Western recruits. Those factors that motivated them to join ISIS included a deep rooted sense of different injustices (political, social and economic inequalities) experienced in the Middle East and North Africa. It should be noted that ISIS attempt to project themselves as fighting a defensive war, in the defence of Islam and Muslims, which more likely appeals to those dispossessed and disconnected individuals and groups. This narrative differs greatly from the Western narrative of an aggressive and offensive ISIS.

Those senses of injustice have been further compounded by decades of self-destructive US-led foreign policy in the region. Regime changes that were nominally fought in the name of peace and freedom have brought anything but these qualities. Some of those dictators, as brutal as they were, kept terrorism in check and generally people enjoyed a greater level of collective human security, with Iraq and Libya providing good examples. A lot of [anger](#) has also been generated in the Muslim world concerning the [occupation of Muslim lands](#) by Western armies. To some extent, the damage done by Western foreign policy and its long-term effects have been privately spoken about, but rarely publicly acknowledged. An example of this was found in the [August 2012](#)

report by the US Defence Intelligence Agency that gave a confidential assessment of the security situation in Iraq and Syria that was (and still is) very much at odds with what key political and military officials publicly stated. The regime changes have also unleashed massive waves of refugees and ethnic cleansing and persecution in those newly 'liberated' areas. This in turn is likely to create fertile grounds for further disconnected and vulnerable groups that are susceptible to the subversive propaganda of groups, such as ISIS. Not to mention the gradually escalating counter-reactions from citizens in the West.

What Does the Future Hold?

When ISIS transformed itself and its way of waging war, moving from irregular warfare to regular warfare and declaring a Caliphate after the capture of Mosul, it was both a tangible and intangible symbolic change. It was likely intended to signal itself as an emerging power with a physical state-like structure. In the long-run this seems to have been a strategic miscalculation as the tangible military power of the multiple military forces arrayed against ISIS is much stronger.

Since the Russian military began their direct involvement in Syria from September 2015, ISIS has become increasingly pressured and their territory held is shrinking. It is likely that they may very well be defeated in this regular style of warfare, however, it is unlikely to be the finish of ISIS. There seems to be a move back towards irregular forms of warfare and an increasing reliance on the use of terrorism in core Western countries as a means to offset their tangible disadvantage, and to try and create a political demand among Western publics to cease military action against them.

ISIS's strength is found in its intangible qualities and abilities and not in the tangible world where it is challenging a much stronger opponent, and where it is very likely to lose an openly fought military-style of conflict. Thus reverting to an intangible basis in order to create doubts in the publics concerning their confidence in their political and military leadership, and degrading the will to fight seems to be a logical path to follow. They are also likely to continue exploiting any forms of existing weaknesses or divisions that are to be found in Western society or even to create new ones in order to attract the next generations of recruits, supporters and sympathisers.

Currently, the number of **foreign recruits** to ISIS seems to be declining. This may well be a reaction to the military setbacks that ISIS has been experiencing recently. The territory it had previously gained is now shrinking under **increasing military pressure** from different forces arrayed against them which has shattered their reputation as an unstoppable force. Success breeds greater operational possibilities and popularity, and the reverse seems to have an opposite effect. Assad's fall in Syria would have rapid and significantly negative consequences for political and security developments in the region, Europe and the wider world. It is too early to say if the soft strategies employed by the coalitions against ISIS have been successful as these means usually are medium to long-term enterprises. The military defeats inflicted upon ISIS, which have shaken the brand and reputation of the group, have also made it more physically difficult to join them. Therefore, a continued combination of hard and soft strategies need to be maintained.

Image by [Wikimedia](#).

Associate Professor Greg Simons is a researcher at the Centre for Asymmetric Threat Studies (CATS) at the Swedish Defence University. He

specialises in research on Information Operations and hybrid warfare.

Share this page



Contact

Unit 503
101 Clerkenwell Road London
EC1R 5BX
Charity no. 299436
Company no. 2260840

Email us

020 3559 6745

Follow us



Useful links

- [Login](#)
- [Contact us](#)
- [Sitemap](#)
- [Accessibility](#)
- [Terms & Conditions](#)
- [Privacy policy](#)