

FOUR REASONS, ONE SOLUTION

Why are European youth attracted to organisations like IS?

Fear has a very subtle way of blurring reality. The fear of Islamic State (IS) fighters entering Europe, disguised as refugees, has blurred the real issue of European nationals travelling to Iraq and Syria to be trained as IS fighters. Probably one of the most critical questions of our generation is not “*How many refugees are IS fighters?*”, but rather “*Why do European youth join terror organisations like IS?*”

NEEDLES IN A HAYSTACK

Even though there are indications that IS is smuggling fighters across European borders, there is more substantial evidence that it is far easier and more effective for IS to use European nationals to perform acts of terror.

It is not impossible, but highly unlikely, that IS will try to infiltrate a region in a disorganised way (such as smuggled among refugees) when they already have access to underground extremist cells, local facilities, resources and the necessary support systems within these regions. Refugees have to follow a process, which may involve being placed in camps where they will be carefully scrutinised by local authorities. European nationals, on the other hand, have freedom of movement and association.

“We are talking about needles in haystacks,” said Bill Frelick, the director of the refugee rights programme for **Human Rights Watch**. “It’s not to say that there aren’t dangerous needles in those haystacks, but overwhelmingly we’re talking about people [refugees] who are seeking protection and bear no ill will, and I would say in fact bear gratitude to anyone who’s willing to help them.”

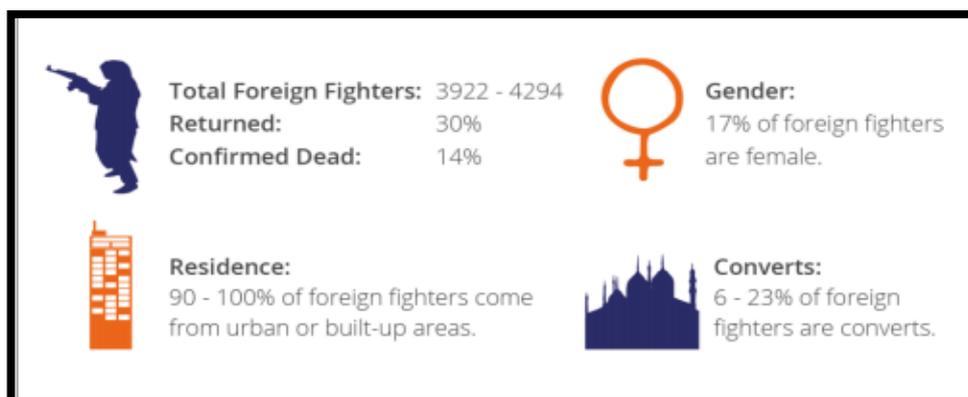
“It’s important that none of us dismiss security concerns,” he said, “but pushing people back into the fire can create a domino effect, like closed borders in Hungary, Greece, Turkey, that’s potentially every bit as destabilising as the kinds of fears (many are) talking about.”

Amnesty International has similarly called for governments not to exacerbate the crisis by blocking refugees. “Giving in to fear in the wake of the atrocious attacks on Paris will not protect anyone,” Amnesty director John Dalhuisen said in the aftermath of the attacks. A failure to give shelter “would be a cowardly abdication of responsibility and a tragic victory for terror over humanity”, he added.

Counter-terror experts have agreed that although wars in the Middle East and North Africa have increased the flow of weapons into Europe, most terror suspects and perpetrators have been ‘home-grown’ radicals and sympathisers.

FOREIGN FIGHTERS FROM THE EU

Research conducted by the **International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT)** published on 1 April 2016 found that French, German and British citizens constitute the majority of the European foreign fighters that joined the ranks of the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. The report revealed the following:



- **France** is the primary country of origin for people who left to fight for IS in the Middle East, as more than 900 of its citizens travelled to Syria and Iraq to join the extremists.
- The overall number of **radicalised French nationals or residents** involved in jihadist networks within their home country borders are estimated to be around 2000.
- France is followed closely by **Germany and the UK**, both of which also contributed large numbers of IS foreign fighters. According to different estimates presented in the ICCT research, **720-760 Germans** and **700-760 British**, left their countries to join the ranks of extremists.
- **Belgium** contributed the highest number of European IS fighters per capita, as the proportion of people that left the country for Syria and Iraq amounts to some 41 fighters per million, while the total number of IS fighters of Belgian origin has reached 516.
- In per capita terms, it is followed by **Austria and Sweden**, which contributed 300 foreign fighters each.

But the one statistic that most ignore is the fact that up to 23% of all foreign fighters (depending on the country of origin) are converts to Islam, and not Muslim-born nationals.

In exploring these numbers, important questions need to be asked: *“Why do European youth join terror organisations like IS? Is it religious devotion? Psychological imbalance? A tendency toward radical movements and anarchy?”*

Consideration of a multitude of scenarios reveals four main areas of motivation:

1. ISOLATION
2. VALIDATION
3. ASSOCIATION
4. RADICALISATION

1. ISOLATION



Ken Chitwood, in a blog article published on the *Houston Chronicle* website, (blog.chron.com, 25 September 2014) argues that the main reason why young men and women leave their Western homes for the “dunes of terror” is because they are **lonely**.

In his article, Chitwood refers to Olivier Roy’s book *Globalized Islam: The Search for a New Ummah*, and summarised some of Roy’s beliefs as follows:

“In the passage to the West, Islam as a religion (and its practitioners) undergo a deterritorializing, deculturalizing, and destabilizing process that leaves individuals in search of a new *ummah* (global Islamic community, on the macro level) and a new community (on the micro level).

As Islam becomes less associated with a specific nation, tribe, or territory (*deterritorialization*), the lines between Islam and the West become blurred.

This whole process is quite *destabilizing*, as it continues to isolate the individual from their former identity markers — family, culture, nation. Everything that used to define them — their culture, their dress, their economic standing, their political affiliation — breaks down in the West and they are left with Islam alone, to rebuild themselves. In this process, what is offered, is what Roy calls, ‘the realization of the self’. Islam becomes the way that the marginalized and lonely Muslim in the West can reconstruct their identity.

Fighting, and to a greater degree, giving one’s life to the cause, becomes the ‘*ultimate proof*’ not only of one’s religious devotion, but also of one’s ‘*reform of the self*’. All the while, in search of a new community, the jihadi remains alone, isolated, and solitary — especially in suicide attacks.

Unfortunately, where **integration** into Western societies is **[opposed]**, the neofundamentalist’s path towards isolation, both externally and internally imposed, begins. Not all marginalized Muslims in the West join jihadi groups. Some of them simply choose to live in ‘Islamized territories’ (Islamic ghettos, per se) shut off from Western influence,

even though they live in the West. However, for those that do not find that such closed communities meet their needs, radical Islamic terror groups call out ever stronger.”

2. VALIDATION



A second, compelling reason is explored in *Newsweek* of 23 March 2016, following the Brussels attack:

“The world should hesitate before crediting the attack in Brussels to IS, because doing so tends to infuse the group with power that it does not have.

These European attackers are not like the Al-Qaeda members of old — the radicalized adherents to fundamentalist Islam. Many of these new-age killers were only small children when the World Trade Centre fell in 2001 and have spent

much of their lives watching major wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and now Syria. Their knowledge of Islam is quite limited; they are more like jihadi hipsters than dedicated Islamists, or what some experts in the intelligence community call ‘jihadist cool’. They celebrate what the Dutch coordinator for security and counterterrorism called ‘pop-jihad as a lifestyle’.

These are youths who gather in groups, such as the recently dismantled Sharia4Belgium. They have their own rap music, hip clothes popular with young Muslims that are sold by companies like Urban Ummah and slogans akin to what might be found on a bumper sticker (“Work Hard, Pray Hard”). Their tweets often end with terms like #BeardLife and #HijabLife. While in Syria, they send ‘selfies’ to their friends showing themselves wearing kohl, a traditional Middle Eastern eye shadow. In other words, these are not intellectual Muslims, with long beards and Qurans in hand.”

In other words, European extremists are generally young people who seek an identity within their isolated communities and IS offers validation and a sense of belonging, which they so desperately seek. *Newsweek* further describes them as being “as shallow as they are deadly”.

The *Newsweek* article explains that European countries that continue to make use of “traditional de-radicalization [programmes] for Muslims lured into the world of radical fundamentalists” have found that it is “hard to re-educate people about Islam when they knew almost nothing to begin with”. The complexity of the situation was made apparent in an August 2014 incident where two British Muslims (both 22 years old) bought copies of *Islam for Dummies* and *The Koran for Dummies* just before they boarded a plane to join IS fighters in Syria.

3. ASSOCIATION

Another contributing factor that lures youths into the brutal culture of radical Islam is the fact that the vast majority of them come from urban neighbourhoods, torn apart by economic hardship.

The same *Newsweek* article carries on:

“Rik Coolsaet, a professor of international relations at Ghent University in Belgium and a senior associate fellow at the Royal Institute of International Relations, recently wrote about the environment that has caused the development of this youth subculture in his country. Young Belgians, faced with a bleak job market, have higher suicide rates and more high school dropouts than most member states of the European Union.

‘Youth representatives in Belgium recently warned that many young people are depressed and feel hopeless,’ Coolsaet wrote.

The result, intelligence analysts say, is those European Muslims that become fan-boys for IS are taking not a rational stand but an emotional one. ‘Areas where there are close-knit groups of susceptible youth, often lacking a sense of purpose or belonging outside their own circle, have proved to generate a momentum of recruitment that spreads through personal contacts from group to group,’ says a December 2015 report by the Soufan Group, a private intelligence analysis and security company.

In other words, attraction to the IS philosophy among European Muslims is like a virus, where proximity to the infected is the most common cause. And the locations where the beliefs are spreading can be just as easy to find as the sites where a disease emerges; in November 2015, Belgian Interior Minister Jan Jambon identified Molenbeek, a poor immigrant quarter of Brussels, as a hotbed for young Muslims traveling to Syria and back. So it should come as no surprise that the investigation into the Brussels attack immediately tracked suspects to Molenbeek.”

4. RADICALIZATION

A process of ISOLATION, VALIDATION and ASSOCIATION inevitably leads to RADICALISATION. The **ICCT research** emphasised the following: “The radicalisation process of foreign fighters is reported to be short and often involves circles of friends radicalizing as a group and deciding to leave jointly for Syria and Iraq.”

A FUTURE SOLUTION: IMPROVED INTEGRATION

In light of the process mentioned above, programmes for integration and assimilation for the current masses of refugees and migrants — at the national, local, and personal levels — are the only way to ‘fight’ IS and restrict the future flow of European citizens (second and third generation migrants) joining their ranks. Integration, as complex as the process might be, should happen for immigrants/refugees immediately on arrival and should be pursued until they have settled into local communities.

The **UNHCR**, in their article “*Local Integration of Refugees*”, explains integration and its benefits:

“Integration is the interactive process involving both refugees and nationals of the host country, as well as its institutions. It makes a society both diverse and open, where people can form a community, regardless of differences.

Integration requires preparedness on the part of refugees to adapt to the host society, without having to forego their own cultural identity. From the host society, it requires communities that are welcoming and responsive to refugees, and public institutions that are able to meet the needs of a diverse population.

Local integration is:

- First, a legal process, whereby refugees are granted rights and entitlements by the host country equal with those enjoyed by its nationals.
- Second, an economic process, as refugees become financially independent and contribute to the economic development of the host country.
- Third, a social and cultural process that enables refugees to live among the host population, without discrimination or exploitation and contribute actively to the life of their country of asylum.

Integration of refugees is beneficial for both the host and the migrant. Refugees bring their skills, knowledge and entrepreneurial innovation that can contribute to the economic prosperity of [Europe]. They pay taxes and create employment for nationals of [the respective nations]. Furthermore, they arrive with a wealth of experience and cultural diversity, including languages, music, art and intellectual curiosity that can enrich [European] society.

Integration of refugees is important, not only because refugees deserve to be treated with respect, but also because a truly democratic society is open and intercultural without space for racism and intolerance.”

FROM A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE



It is important to understand that refugees will continue to enter Europe, regardless of restrictive policies or not. Protests and aggression towards them will result in further polarisation, an increase in radicalisation and ultimately more attacks. The future thus becomes a never-ending cycle of violence, resulting in more animosity, suspicion and violence.

Christians can provide a moral and spiritual platform for peace, by accepting strangers as Christ commanded. If the Church

neglects this responsibility, there will be no foundation for lasting peace, only temporary security.

If one considers that up to 23% of all foreign fighters are converts to Islam, the local church needs to place a greater emphasis on integrating Christian refugees into Christian activities in Europe, while reaching the non-Christian migrant communities with the Gospel of Christ.

SOURCES:

- http://europe.newsweek.com/belgium-new-extremists-jihadi-cool-brussels-attacks-439640?utm_source=email&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=rss
- <http://blog.chron.com/sacredduty/2014/09/the-lonely-jihadi-why-westerners-join-groups-like-isis/>
- <https://www.rt.com/news/338080-europe-isis-foreign-fighters/>
- http://icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/ICCT-Report_Foreign-Fighters-Phenomenon-in-the-EU_1-April-2016_including-AnnexesLinks.pdf
- <http://unhcr.org.ua/en/2011-08-26-06-58-56/news-archive/2-uncategorised/276-local-integration-of-refugees>
- <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/01/refugees-isis-nato-commander-terrorists>



There is no copyright on this document but please acknowledge the source:

www.incontextministries.org
mike@incontextministries.org