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The Effect of Social Media Use on Foreign Fighter Recruitment for ISIS

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Abstract

In recent years the Islamic State has been gaining strength and followers from around the world. Individuals from other countries will leave their homes and families after contact through social media to travel to Syria and fight alongside the organization. These individuals, known as foreign fighters, are not being evaluated in terms of environmental factors and reasons behind their motivation to join ISIS. While limited in resources and scope, this study is an attempt to raise awareness about the issue of foreign fighter recruitment over social media and point out possible environmental risk factors that may compel someone to join. Using individual case studies based off of interviews and news articles I was able to compile and compare information about the lives of six ISIS foreign fighters. It was discovered that there are similar traumas in these individuals' lives that may contribute to their motivation to join the Islamic State. These results point to a problem that is not being evaluated in modern academics and suggests a possible cause and thus the potential for the development of a solution.

Introduction

The attack on the United States by Al-Qaeda on September 11th, 2001 was the instigation for the War on Terror. Even after the successful 2003 operation by the U.S. ended the reign of Saddam Hussein, the leader of Al-Qaeda, the Iraq war continued until December 2011. In 2013 a new Jihadist terror organization emerged, known as the Islamic State, or ISIS. Since then ISIS has claimed its place as the most successful terrorist organization in the modern world. Their main asset is their use of social media and the internet for recruitment of foreign fighters and the spread of propaganda messages. Due to the interconnected and anonymous nature of the internet, ISIS is able to release thousands of messages every day instantaneously across the world. In this

way ISIS is using psychological techniques in order to contact potential fighters and convince them to join their fight in Syria.

Recent trends in ISIS recruitment suggest the group is targeting young and impressionable individuals. These individuals are contacted through social media – Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr – and are being promised homes, families, glory, and eternal joy in the afterlife if they join. These young individuals are then being used to recruit other young individuals. Due to this targeted nature of social media use there may be a psychological component. The type of individual who may be predisposed to the media efforts of ISIS is not being evaluated. In order to address the psychological aspect of this conflict and the recent trend of foreign fighters to travel and join ISIS, research must be done on the effects of social media propaganda and on who may be at risk.

The type of individual who may be predisposed to be receptive to Islamic State social media propaganda is not being evaluated. The question this research will attempt to address is why individuals who are contacted by ISIS through social media choose to travel to Syria as foreign fighters. Further this paper will explore different environmental and social factors that may play a role in the decision to travel. I will first present a summary of the current information available on the formation and goals of ISIS, their social media use, the history of foreign fighters, and current governmental policies. There will then be an overview the methods used in order to answer the research question and a section summarizing the results. The discussion section will review the possible implications of the results found and the limitations to the study itself.

Literature Review

Definitions

The term *foreign fighter* is relatively new to the vernacular and the definition is a topic of great discussion and disagreement. Even into the early 2000's *foreign fighter* did not have an official definition and works focusing on the idea failed to provide definitive boundaries of who should be counted as foreign fighters (Malet, 2015). Within the past eight years more scholars are attempting to create a universal and cohesive definition for foreign fighter.

The term *foreign fighter* was defined by the University of Maryland's National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) as individuals compelled by ideological or other convictions to join insurgencies and military actions outside their nations of residence - in this study "foreign" will be defined as an individual who holds citizenship in another country (Jason et al. 2015, Mendelsohn, 2011). Cerwyn Moore and Paul Tumelty expanded on the definition providing more specific language. In their examination of jihadists in Chechnya they defined foreign fighter as "non-indigenous, non-territorialized combatants who, motivated by religion, kinship, and/or ideology rather than pecuniary reward, enter a conflict zone to participate in hostilities" (Malet, 2015 pg. 456; Moore & Tumelty, 2008 pg. 412). In 2015 Malet examined multiple definitions of the term and created a broad definition in hopes of encompassing all individuals who may fit the foreign fighter category and address the limited available data (Malet 2015). Malet warns that, due to the limited data on foreign fighters, making blanket categorizations in terms of linkage to local insurgents, proximity to home country, or support may exclude individuals who would be classified as foreign fighters (Malet, 2015). The definition he created was "a non-citizen of a state experiencing civil conflict who arrives from an external state to join an insurgency" (Malet, 2015). For the purposes of this paper the definition used for foreign fighter will be a combination of Moore and Tumelty's and Malet's. The purpose

of using this combination was to create a specific and consistent definition for foreign fighter while not excluding those individuals who are not only motivated by ideology. *Foreign fighter* will be defined as a non-indigenous combatant who motivated by religion or ideology enters a state experiencing civil conflict in order to participate in an insurgency.

Malet further made a distinction between foreign fighter and foreign terrorist – an important distinction that must be addressed. Foreign terrorist is a non-citizen who travels to a stable state or country in order to commit a terrorist action (Malet, 2015). This individual is not associated with any local insurgency (Malet, 2015). Foreign terrorists include the plane hijackers in the attack on September 11th.

Formation of ISIS

On September 11th, 2001, the terrorist organization known as al-Qaeda attacked the United States (Hoffman, 2015), an attack in which over 120 countries suffered losses (U.S. Department of State, 2009). On October 7, 2001, the United States officially declared the war on terrorism, a cause which was described by President George Bush as “. . . supported by the collective will of the world” (U.S. Department of State, 2009). A worldwide coalition formed including military assistance from over 136 countries, financial support from 196 countries, and multilateral support from 46 countries (US Department of State, 2009). Over the next 100 days the United States government and military worked with this coalition to overthrow al-Qaeda’s rule in Afghanistan. Further goals were to disrupt al-Qaeda’s financing, destroy training camps, help the civilians of Afghanistan, and to form a new government there (U.S. Department of State, 2009).

The United States invaded Iraq in 2003 and through a coordinated effort of the CIA and Navy Seals, ended the reign of Saddam Hussein, Iraq's ruler for over three decades (Yaphe, 2003). In 2004 al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden allowed Jordanian jihadist Abu Musad al-Zarqawi to establish a branch of the organization in Iraq (Melhem, 2015). This organization was known as al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) (Melhem, 2015, Stratfor Global Intelligence, 2014). Under al-Zarqawi AQI became more radicalized, believing that all Shiite Muslims should be killed and implementing the policy of filmed beheadings (Melhem, 2015). Zarqawi was killed in a United States air strike in 2006, and the organization renamed itself the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) (Blanchard & Humud, 2016; Melhem, 2015). Under the new rule of Abu Ayyub al-Masri, ISI became more and more active until the United States acted in 2007 during what is known as the Arab Spring, or Sunni Awakening (Melhem, 2015, Stratfor Global Intelligence, 2014). The Sunni Awakening was a time when the Sunni Arab communities in Iraq turned against extremist militants and successfully weakened their control (Melhem, 2015). Due to the death of al-Masri in 2010 Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (the current leader of the ISIS) took control (Blanchard & Humud, 2016; Stratfor Global Intelligence, 2014). In 2011 ISI began to reemerge as the outbreak of civil war in Syria allowed for ISI to expand across the borders (Melhem, 2015; Stratfor Global Intelligence, 2014). A few months later in December 2011 the United States pulled out of Iraq (Stratfor Global Intelligence, 2014). After the end of the war ISI changed its name again to the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) (Melhem, 2015).

Between 2013 and January of 2014 ISIS gained control over Raqqa in Syria and Fallujah and Ramadi in Iraq (Blanchard & Humud, 2016; Stratfor Global Intelligence, 2014). In June 2014 ISIS split from Al-Qaeda and continued their movement across Iraq taking Mosul, Tikrit, Tal Afar, Al Quan, Rawa, Ana, and Husaybah (Stratfor Global Intelligence, 2014). At the end of

June 2014 ISIS declared their establishment of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as the Caliphate, or the new Islamic leader (BBC World News, 2014; Blanchard & Humud, 2016; Bradley, M, 2014; Collard, 2015; Hobbs, 2010; Melhem, 2015; Stratfor Global Intelligence, 2014). At this time ISIS changed their name again, becoming the Islamic State (IS) (Blanchard & Humud, 2016).

The declaration of the Caliphate allows the group to claim the grounds for religious legitimacy of its actions and leads to the last step in al-Qaeda's seven step plan (Blanchard & Humud, 2016; Hobbs, 2010; Metz, 2015). This plan is now used by ISIS, adopted from their AQI roots (Metz, 2015).

The Seven Step Plan

- The Awakening Stage (2000). Described by Al-Qaeda's propaganda as "reawakening the nation by dealing a powerful blow to the head of the snake in the U.S.". This stage coincided with the terrorist attack on September 11, 2001.
- The Eye-Opening Stage (2003-2006). This stage occurred after the United States invasion of Iraq. Described as designed to engage the United States and the West in prolonged overseas endeavors.
- The Rising Up and Standing on the Feet Stage (2007-2010). This stage occurred when Al-Qaeda began in proactive expansion into the Levant and West Africa.
- The Expansion Stage (2010-2013). al-Qaeda exploited the new opportunities to topple apostate regimes that presented themselves after the Arab Spring. These exploits mainly occurred in Syria.

- The Declaration of the Caliphate Stage (2013-2016). This is the stage in which al-Qaeda planned to establish an international Islamic rule over a large area of the Muslim world. This was supposed to be Al-Qaeda's doing, but recently ISIS has been taking more action towards this goal.
- The Total Confrontation Stage (2016-2020). After the creation of an Islamic army the "fight between the believers and non-believers" will occur.
- The final, Definitive Victory State (2020-2022). This is the final stage when the Caliphate will triumph.

The Islamic State's goal is to purify the Islamic religion and to protect who they define as true Muslim believers from the threats of apostates and non-believers, also known as *kuffar* (Blanchard & Humud, 2016). IS leaders argue that many who say they are devoted Islamic believers have actually strayed from the path laid out by the Prophet Muhammad (Blanchard & Humud, 2016). The organization has laid out many rules that, if broken, nullify their faith (Blanchard & Humud, 2016). These rules include the participation in any democratic processes such as elections, claiming that these systems elevate man-made laws above those of God (Blanchard & Humud, 2016). These systems are widely practiced in Sunni Islamist groups and puts IS at odds with other violent Jihadist organizations including al-Qaeda (Blanchard & Humud, 2016).

Foreign Fighter Background

Possibly the first ever recording of a foreign fighter was in 1793 when United States citizen Gideon Henfeld served on a French privateer ship (Malet, 2015). He was prosecuted

under American common law making the U.S. the first country to criminalize foreign military service. This policy was adapted by most other countries by World War II (Malet, 2015). Still by the twentieth century foreign fighters did not receive harsh punishments for their actions, and in some instances were actually treated better as prisoners of war than captured locals (Malet, 2015).

The term has been used to describe South Africans and Americans fighting during the Israeli War of Independence and international Brigade volunteers during the Spanish Civil War (Malet, 2015). While the occurrences of foreign fighters have, arguably, been noted since 1793 the term had not come into the vernacular until 2001 (Malet, 2015). The widespread use and the common link between foreign fighters and jihadists was due to the American decision to release Taliban fighters but continuing to detain foreign fighters (Malet, 2015). Subsequently the actions of the foreign fighters in Iraq sparked an explosion of media attention. The high levels of violence of these actors in Iraq only fueled the media focus (Malet, 2015).

Over 30 years ago British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher discussed media and publicity and threat it posed for those combating extremist groups. She argued that publicity gave the oxygen that terrorists required to breathe (Hoffman, 2015). Media has been a tool used by terrorist organizations since the West declared the War on Terror. Al-Qaeda member Mohammad Atta used information available through the media in order to research which flights would be most effective in the attack on 9/11. Additionally, terrorist organizations use media outlets to recruit members as well as for fundraising and communication (Ogun, 2012).

Terrorist organizations use social media to recruit individuals from countries across the world. Over the past 30 years foreign fighters from America have attempted to travel and join various groups. Approximately 200 Americans have traveled to become foreign fighters for more

than 35 different organizations. The most influential group, the group responsible for recruiting the most Americans to their cause is ISIS. Using public information and open sources, a study found a total of 56 individuals in America alone have expressed interest on these open media sources or attempted to travel (James et al., 2015).

Aside from their success in recruiting foreign fighters, ISIS has also been successful in carrying out Jihadist goals. In 2014 ISIS was one of the most active known terrorist organizations alongside al-Shabaab, Boko Haram, and Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). Activity showed an increase in frequency and lethality as ISIS was responsible for 1263 attacks and 9596 fatalities, a total increase of 411% in one year (Miller, 2015).

Foreign fighters play a wide variety of roles in terrorist organizations (Mendelsohn, 2011). Some serve as foot soldiers, or "cannon fodder", for example becoming suicide bombers (Mendelsohn, 2011). These individuals serve as martyrs and are willing to kill themselves for the cause. Experienced individuals, such as veterans, may be used in planning and coordinating attacks (Mendelsohn, 2011). Other fighters act as trainers for new volunteers, while others act as recruiters of new volunteers (Mendelsohn, 2011). Individuals are used in the output of media propaganda, releasing statements, videos, and are especially utilized in translations (Mendelsohn, 2011). Foreign fighters present a wide range of skills that are valuable to extremist organizations with goals such as that of IS. Their significance in the Islamic State's effort relies less on numbers and more on their capabilities, and thus the problem of foreign fighters should not be underestimated (Mendelsohn, 2011).

Use of social media

The Islamic State is not the first terror organization to realize the power of the internet. In a study performed by Klausen in 2014 discusses content of Jihadist internet forums that were used to spread information about the Quran. Social media was used by extremist groups as far back as 2004 when a thumb drive was recovered after a Madrid train bombing that revealed doctrinal entreaties (Klausen, 2014). In 2002 al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden was quoted writing "It is obvious that the media war in this century is one of the strongest methods; in fact its ratio may reach 90 percent of the total preparation for the battles" (Klausen, 2014 pg. 3).

One of the advantages of the internet is its ease of access to web pages and the ability to spread information quickly (Ogun, 2012), and this places extremist organizations in an oddly dependent state (Klausen, 2014). The internet is interconnected, has open accessibility, and provides extremely limited regulation, and thus is resistant to policing (Duarte et al., 2007; Klausen, 2014) Online media also provides multiple avenues for communication such as chat rooms, social media websites, and the ability to create websites, blogs and forums, and utilize instant messaging (Malatesta, 2007). Chat rooms allow for real time communication between individuals on an online bulletin board in order to discuss specific topics (Malatesta, 2007). A blog usually consists of articles in reverse chronological order, sometimes taking the form of a personal story or diary. Instant messaging is the instant communication between individuals through the internet in real time. (Malatesta, 2007). In a sense this type of social media has freed Jihadist organizations from their dependency on main stream media, increasing their reach and output (Klausen, 2014).

These avenues provide a cover and anonymity and breaks down geographic constraints while providing instantaneous contact (Ogun, 2012). The internet has become the main source for terrorist organizations propaganda strategies, communication, recruitment, training, and

fundraising (Ogun, 2012). Terrorism over the internet is realistically characterized as a psychological war as the internet provides a unique opportunity to target specific audiences with specific messages, to all around the world. Terrorist organizations have no legal barrier in communication and propaganda and (Ogun, 2012) due to the novelty of the internet, few countries have effective laws against the messages and images on militant websites (Duarte et al., 2007). The internet allows the groups to mold their messages based on culture in order to elicit specific behaviors (Duarte, Ganor, Von Knop, 2007). Further, the internet provides the opportunity for the creation of websites in multiple different languages. Most of these websites have common features of color, design, and graphic content. (Ogun, 2012). The internet provides an ease of access and anonymity. It allows an inexpensive way for content to be instantly viewable in multimedia platforms (i.e. video, audio, text) without any time restriction (Ogun, 2012).

Target audiences of terrorist media propaganda have four main types: supporters, the followers of the organization, the enemy, and the international public (Ogun, 2012). Using various software such as anti-malware, authentication software, email, identity and access management, mobile data security, network firewalls, security remote access, security information management, keyword tracking, translation software, and link analysis software terrorists are able capture information about those individuals who browse their websites. Users whose activity suggests interest in the organization will then be contacted. (Ogun, 2012). Online message boards, forums, or messaging services are techniques used by recruiters to contact aspiring foreign fighters as they allow the recruiter and the new volunteer meet online and can allow messages to be sent by video in conference groups (Ogun, 2012). Research has found that many individuals interested in joining an insurgency express this interest online. One study

found approximately 73% of potential foreign fighters express interest openly online and interact with radical groups through social media, while 26% of the remaining sample exhibited behavioral changes, but did not communicate with recruiters online (James et al., 2015).

The Islamic State presence online has increased over the recent past and can be seen on social media apps and file sharing platforms such as Ask.fm, Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, PalTalk, Kik, Viper, JustPaste.it, and Tumblr (Klausen, 2015). They use encryption software such as TOR to hide their locations, making it difficult to track the users and authors of posts (Klausen, 2014). Arguably the most well-known social media presence by ISIS is through Twitter (Klausen, 2014), due to the main advantage that Twitter can be used in the absence of both 3G and Wi-Fi connections (Klausen, 2014). ISIS has been known to use an app known as the “The Dawn of Glad Tidings” which allows users to bypass Twitter's spam detection filters (Farwell, 2014; Weyers, 2015). This app was used to build a firestorm of twitter support for ISIS. Using the app thousands of activists, supporters, and fighters were able to produce up to 44,000 tweets a day (Farwell, 2014, Weyers, 2015).

Social media institutions such as Facebook and Twitter connect thoughts, ideas, and events through a tagging system known as hashtags. A hashtag can be searched and all posts with that hashtag will be shown. Using this system to their advantage ISIS has appropriated hashtags from other events such as the World Cup in 2014. Specific hashtags for the event such as #Brazil2014, #ENG, #France, and #WC2014 were used to gain access to the millions of viewers watching the World Cup (Farwell, 2014). Further hashtags can “trend”. If a large number of people use a certain hashtags that hashtag will be "trending" and thus presented on the website's home page. ISIS's hashtag #theFridayofSupportingISIS asked supporters around the

world to wave the group's flag in public, film themselves, and upload clips (Farwell, 2014). This trend drew over 20,000 mentions a day (Farwell, 2014).

The interconnected characteristic of the internet allows for different messages to be sent to different audiences. ISIS will display themselves as fearsome warriors to build support and recruit new members (Farwell, 2014). Often when it comes to terrorism, the public and the media have a tendency to focus on the extreme, focus on the deaths, and the kidnappings. These messages are put out, especially in 2014 when the Islamic State's Twitter presence was at a high (Klausen, 2014). During this time Jihadists were posting videos and images of beheadings and crucifixions carried out by the organization (Klausen, 2014) Violence, however, is not the only image that terrorist organizations employ (Duarte et al., 2007; Klausen, 2014). A study performed in 2014 looked at images/videos posted to Twitter accounts of 59 Westerner fighters in Syria and broke down the messages into the most common categories (Klausen, 2014). These categories included prominent Jihadist figures, enemy pictures, innocent victims, martyrdom, graphic images of retribution, combat, and lifestyle/brotherhood among their fighters (Klausen, 2014). IS wants to prove that they can protect the Islamic people (Farwell, 2014). They attempt to gain trust of those they call believers by showing members playing with cats; a relatable image as the prophet Muhammad was notably fond of cats (Farwell, 2014; Klausen, 2014). Other images include a French foreign fighter who was excited to find Nutella at a supermarket in al-Bab, Syria (Klausen, 2014). These images are meant to project their fighters as regular people who have answered to a higher calling, not violent members of a terrorist organization (Klausen, 2014).

There is a downside to the Islamic State's media approach. Smartphones and easy access to publications have left some posts out of their direct control. These posts include videos of

beheadings that were banned by the organization from being filmed but were still posted on Twitter (Farwell, 2014). The Islamic State worried that these videos would provide fodder for their opponents. Their worries were founded as the U.S. State Department has used these videos to create propaganda mocking ISIS's efforts by showing, in graphic detail the group's brutality and suggesting that the glory promised by ISIS ends in an inglorious death (Farwell, 2014)

Government responses

Governments are able to use the internet to track possible foreign fighter actions and determine their risk for traveling. A study performed in 2015 analyzing the pre-travel decision making (using web-traffic data) of individuals discovered that there is an average of 19 months between when the first interest is expressed and an individual attempts to travel (James et al., 2015). The United States Government and law enforcement have arrested 28 people attempting to join ISIS before they traveled, and 13 traveling successfully (James et al., 2015). Software is currently available to track the terrorist webpages gathering intelligence on the actions of the targeted group and possibly even members and sympathizers. This purposed software includes anti-malware, application software, authentication software, email, identity and access management, intrusion detection/prevention, mobile data security, network firewall, security remote access, security information management, unified threat management, vulnerability management, keyword tracking, translation software, link analysis software, and wireless security (Ogun, 2012). This type of technology could be used to cut off the terrorist finances and internet fund raising. This not only will affect their ability to operate but also may reveal networks and identify specific ISIS members. Al-Qaeda specifically used chat rooms to raise

money (Ogun, 2012) and this presents a possibility of shutting down chatrooms to cut off ties to financial backers (Duarte et al., 2007).

The Iraqi government has attempted to shut down at least one third of the internet in June 2014, specifically targeting areas where it is known that ISIS has gained territory to limited success (Farwell, 2014; Klausen, 2014). Turkey attempted to ban the use of social media websites like Facebook and Twitter, but there are websites that allow individuals to bypass those restrictions and still allow access to those pages (Farwell, 2014; Klausen 2014). Additionally, IS insurgents have overcome these attempted impediments by creating their own satellite linked networks to create hotspots and Wi-Fi networks in areas where internet access has been disabled (Klausen, 2014).

The main goals of governments combatting terrorist threats is to prevent attacks, neutralize the key players, and to stop the spread of terrorist ideology. Western civilization goals include preserving the strength of democratic values (Duarte et al., 2007). The United States approaches terrorism through a lens of hesitant militaristic goals. Governments view it as yet another political conflict to be dealt with in the same way when in reality the threat is more psychological than political (Duarte et al., 2007). The Islamic State is targeting the youth of the world by using the medium of the internet which is the most effective at influencing this audience (Duarte et al., 2007). It can be and has been argued that continuing to respond in the same ways as the past to a new threat discourages innovative thinking, which will put those responding to the new age terrorist threat at a disadvantage (Duarte et al., 2007).

Government, specifically the United States, believe that the use of the truth will prevail in propaganda warfare, but are not using any new methods. Instead they rely on techniques from past wars (Duarte et al., 2007). The United States media policy has been conducted under the

idea that presentation of truthful powerful messages is stronger than messages distributed by the Islamic State. Their policy states that peaceful and truthful promotions will counteract terrorist activities and will ultimately deny the terrorist organizations the safe haven of the internet (Metz, 2015; Ogun, 2012). With the technological lives of Western youths, in order to help prevent the effectiveness of Jihadist recruiting techniques governments need to respond in a more directed way than the current passive policies.

In order to create more directed policies a higher understanding of the problem must be achieved. Understanding the type of individual who may be predisposed to be receptive to the social media techniques used by ISIS allows for more efficient policies to be created. Prevention or combative policies can be created by require a basis in understanding the threat that is posed. This study was performed to address the question of why some individuals were affected by the social media messages put out by ISIS and others were not and what possible factors may play a role in the development of this predisposition.

Methods

The present study was conducted using a case study comparison of subjects with a focus on the most different systems analysis technique. Subjects were chosen based on multiple factors- similar and dissimilar. Similar factors included contact with ISIS before joining through social media, and travelling to Syria to join and fight with the group. Dissimilar factors included requirements for the most different systems design (Samuels, 2012). In a most different systems design a comparison is done between very different cases that have the same dependent variable (Samuels, 2012). Subjects were chosen from different countries, were different ages, were

different in personality or social life, and had different academic interests. Other factors were used as comparison points in order to determine possible factors for extremism. These factors include past trauma, and peers that joined. The subjects were specifically chosen based on similar outcomes and the differences in their past in order to compare variables that may have led to their eventual choice to join the Islamic State.

Data Collection

Due to the immediacy of this topic there is very little scientific data or academic research on the effect of social media on foreign fighter recruitment on an individual level. A limitation of this study is that most data was collected using news articles due to limited resources to perform this study and the lack of established case study research on foreign fighters for ISIS. Cases were limited to Western societies for multiple reasons. There is more information available for western society cases. Cases researched from Korea and China had very little information released, not enough to base any conclusions or enough to provide a valid analysis of that information. For each subject, information from each news article was cross-referenced to multiple others in order to assure the most accurate data possible by this method. Only cases with a multitude of articles were chosen.

In order to ensure the most accurate information possible from this method outside scientific research on the psychological and environmental risk factors for extremist involvement were used as supplemental information during this process. Further research was done based on the Islamic States recruitment strategies and audience targeting methods. The conclusions and information gathered by these scholarly articles were then applied to the case studies chosen.

Comparative Analysis

Within-case analysis was done using single case summaries that were created based on the sources given. The cross-referenced information within each case was then analyzed and compared to each other case to determine similarities and differences. These similarities and differences were then also compared to outside research based on psychological and environmental risk factors for extremist participation.

The aforementioned START coalitions performed a study in which they found that trauma may be a precursor to violent extremism. This study focused on the life histories of violent white supremacists and focused on non-ideological issues (Simi et al., 2015). Interviews were conducted with 44 former members of white supremacist groups that lived in 15 different states about their life history (Simi et al., 2015). This study found that childhood trauma, mental health issues, and a propensity for high risk behaviors were positively correlated with joining an extremist group (Simi et al., 2015). Childhood trauma included physical abuse, sexual abuse, parental incarceration, parental abandonment, and family substance abuse (Simi et al., 2015). Mental health issues were reported on an individual level and included suicide attempts or thoughts, self-mutilation, and diagnosis by a medical practitioner as well as a history of familial mental health problems (Simi et al., 2015). High risk behaviors included drug/alcohol problems, truancy, and other academic failures including being expelled from school or dropping out (Simi et al., 2015). This study was used as a basis for my methods and a comparison point for my results.

Results

Six case studies were chosen based on similar and dissimilar factors. These case studies included three male and three female foreign fighters. The difference in gender was specific in order to determine possible different recruiting strategies or roles the two genders would play as foreign fighters for ISIS. While all six case studies were living in western societies when they attempted to join ISIS, all were from different areas of the world. Other dissimilar factors included age, though all were younger than 35 years old. Each case study had a different social life and family situation. Some cases chosen had families with children, others had siblings, while others still were only children. They had different social lives. Some were popular in high school, some loved learning and went on to college, while others were high school drop outs. The purpose of selecting individuals with these differences was to address possible factors that could contribute to their interest in joining ISIS.

In order to originally choose the case studies I also looked for similarities between the groups. These similarities mostly were centered around the outcomes. The individuals had to have actually joined ISIS as the question I am asking is why some travel and join ISIS once contacted. Further I ensured that all individuals were contacted by ISIS recruiters online, or had interaction with social media propaganda messages put out by ISIS. The purpose of this similarity was to attempt to find out why the social media messages had an impact on these individuals. Further, all cases were from western societies. There are multiple reasons for this including the fact that there is more information available about these cases than cases out of, for example, eastern societies. This qualification further acts as a control for differences in societal factors. Using only western society's attempts to control for the confounding factors of differences in societal norms.

*Case Studies**Maxime Hauchard – Bosc-Roger, France*

In August of 2013 a 22 year old man by the name of Maxime Hauchard travelled to fight alongside the Islamic State (Penketh, 2014 Nov 17; Penketh, 2014 Nov 29). On November 16th, 2014 a video was released of the execution of 18 Syrian captives and American aid worker Peter Kassig (Ladepeche, 2015; Penketh, 2014 Nov 17; Penketh, 2014 Nov 29,). In that video Hauchard was positively identified as one of the men executing the beheadings (Ladepeche, 2015; Penketh, 2014 Nov 17; Penketh, 2014 Nov 29,).

Hauchard grew up in a very small French town known as Bosc-Roger (Behrakis-Reuters, 2014; Glum, 2014; Ladepeche, 2015; Penketh, 2014 Nov 17; Penketh, 2014 Nov 29). His family was well integrated into society according to the mayor though the town itself was very isolated (Penketh, 2014 Nov 29). It has been described as a place that you will be outside with your neighbors but no one will talk to each other. It is a quiet town, where people keep to themselves (Penketh, 2014 Nov 29). Hauchard grew up Christian but converted to Islam after watching videos on You Tube when he was 17 (Behrakis-Reuters, 2014; Glum, 2014; Ladepeche, 2015; Penketh, 2014 Nov 17; Penketh, 2014 Nov 29). His friends weren't surprised of his conversion, describing him as "weak and easily influenced" (Penketh, 2014 Nov 29). He attend a local mosque in Elbeuf and changed his name to Abu Abdallah el-Faransi (Penketh, 2014 Nov 29). Recruiters began to contact him through Facebook and Hauchard became more radicalized (Glum, 2014; Ladepeche, 2015; Penketh, 2014 Nov 29).

Kahled Sharrouf – Sydney, Australia

Kahled Sharrouf had a troubled past. Australian born, he was kicked out of high school for attacking another student (Collins, 2015). He was a victim of abuse from his father and a user of LSD, ecstasy, and amphetamines (Collins, 2015). The early trauma in his life may have led to his suffering from schizophrenia (Collins, 2015). He later was arrested in 2009 for his involvement in terror plots against the cities of Sydney and Melbourne (Collins, 2015). While in prison he became close with Mohammad Elomar, another extremist (The Guardian, 2016). Sharrouf was known to be interested in violent terrorist media, specifically television programs on the subject (Collins, 2015). In December of 2013 Sharrouf left Australia using his brother's passport in order to travel to Syria to fight with the Islamic State. In 2014 his wife Tara Nettleton and his five kids joined him (The Guardian, 2016).

While in Syria Sharrouf Tweeted images of his and his family's actions to support ISIS. These pictures include his young son holding the severed head of a Syrian soldier (The Guardian, 2016). His oldest daughter, now 14, married Elomar and gave birth to a baby girl while in Syria. In June of 2015 both Sharrouf and Elomar were believed to have been killed while fighting for the Islamic State (Collins, 2015; The Guardian, 2016).

Damian Clairmont – Calgary, Canada

Damian Clairmont, 22, was raised Acadian French-Canadian Catholic in Calgary, Canada (Bell, 2014; Huffington Post, 2014; Newton, 2015). He dropped out of high school and was consistently suffering from depression and suicidal tendencies (Bell, 2014; Huffington Post, 2014; Newton, 2015). His mother reported a familial home life filled with trauma, describing it

as a “desperate black hole” that they didn’t know how to heal from (Newton, 2015). Before he dropped out of high school he was experiencing many problems with his peers, withdrawing into himself (Newton, 2015). He attempted to suicide after his 17th birthday (Newton, 2015). After recovery Clairmont had finally found peace when he converted to Islam and was peaceful, grounded, and sober for the first time (Newton, 2015). He found himself confident enough to move out of his home.

Moving also meant leaving the mosques that he had been attending, and Clairmont began to search more radical content online (Newton, 2015). He left home to join President Bashar al-Assad, a regime of Jihadists known to send fighters overseas (Huffington Post, 2014). In November of 2013 he travelled to Syria where it was first reported that he had sided with Al-Nursa (Huffington Post, 2014). He later sided with ISIS, who, in Clairmont’s opinion, was a more powerful group with which he was more likely to survive (Newton, 2015). He was killed in January of 2014 fighting the Free Syrian Army in Aleppo (Newton, 2015). Clairmont’s mother is now speaking up and discussing what happened to her son, how easy it is for ISIS recruiters to contact young individuals online, and how they reinforce their ideology through the contacts these individuals are introduced to (Newton, 2015).

Aqsa Mahmood – Glasgow, Scotland

Aqsa Mahmood loved The Hunger Games, Coldplay, Harry Potter and Cricket (Fantz, 2015; Randall, 2014). She went to a private school by the name of Craigholme and began reading the Quran and talking with online recruiters for the Islamic State (Fantz, 2015). She was

told she would be rewarded, that she would be given a home with free electricity, water, and no rent (Fantz, 2015). She was told she would be rewarded even more in the afterlife (Fantz, 2015).

Starting in 2013 Mahmood's Tumblr became radicalized and she began calling for attacks on the west (Fantz, 2015; Randall, 2014). Later that year, in November, the 19 year old travelled to join the fight for ISIS (Fantz, 2015; Randall, 2014). She became a recruiter through her Twitter page and is suspected of recruiting many young girls to travel to Syria (Fantz, 2015; Randall 2014). These young recruits include three British girls: Amira Abase, Shamima Begum and Khadiza Sultana (Fantz, 2015).

Khadiza Sultana – London, England

Khadiza Sultana was a devoted daughter, living alone with her mother since her father died (Bennhold, 2015; Hun Yu & Haque, 2015). She was a promising student, praised by her peers and teachers alike (Bennhold, 2015; Iqbal, 2015). She tutored others in her spare time, and was one of the popular girls that everyone else wanted to be like (Bennhold, 2015). She and her friends were well liked and promising girls, and they decided to join ISIS together (Bennhold, 2015; Hun Yu & Haque, 2015; Iqbal, 2015).

The three girls were contacted over Twitter through Shamima Begum's account by ISIS recruiters, including another young female foreign fighter Aqsa Mahmood (Bennhold, 2015; Iqbal, 2015). They were exposed to propaganda ads by ISIS such as pictures of an Islamic girl in a head scarf with the caption "COVERed Girl, because I'm worth it" (Bennhold, 2015). Sultana began to slowly pack, keeping her travel plans a secret from her mom (Bennhold, 2015). She told her family that she was going to the library and would be back (Bennhold, 2015; Iqbal,

2015). When she never came back her mother discovered that her clothes were missing and so were suitcases from the house (Bennhold, 2015). The counterterrorism team called in to investigate believe that Sultana had traveled to Turkey with her two friends in order to join ISIS (Bennhold, 2015; Iqbal, 2015).

Hoda Muthana – Hoover, Alabama

Hoda Muthana grew up in Hoover Alabama, a southern town with a significant Muslim population (Hall, 2015). She was raised Muslim, but conservatively, with no extremist views present in her family's practice (Corcoran, 2015; Hall, 2015; Hoda Muthana, 2016). She was described by her classmates as a quiet girl, shy, with no real friends, but not someone they would ever expect to one day travel to Syria and join the Islamic State (Corcoran, 2015; Hall, 2015). She graduated from Hoover High School in 2013 when she received a phone for graduation (Hall, 2015). Her family was known in her town as being incredibly strict and her father would regularly check the device, forbidding her from using social media to communicate with anyone who wasn't family (Hall, 2015; Hoda Muthana, 2016).

Muthana set up a secret twitter page through which she learned about ISIS. Her twitter posts became more radical, a classmate described them as almost being written by an entirely different person (Corcoran, 2015; Hall, 2015). Through her account she connected with ISIS recruiters and began to call for American Muslims to "Terrorize the kuffar at home" (Corcoran, 2015; Hall, 2015). In November of 2014 Muthana told her parents she was leaving on a college trip and travelled to Turkey to join ISIS in Syria (Corcoran, 2015; Hoda Muthana, 2016). Muthana took on a supporting role, marrying an ISIS fighter (Corcoran, 2015; Hall, 2015).

Comparison Results

When comparing these six case studies a common theme appeared in the backgrounds of four of these individuals. In four of the cases, the public information that was available explicitly outlined trauma in their past. In the case of Khadiza Sultana her father died while she was young (interestingly so did the mother of one of her friends who travelled with her). Damian Clairmont had a history of drug use, alcohol abuse, depression, and suicidal tendencies. Hoda Muthana grew up in a strict household where her social connections, conversations, and actions were watched and monitored by her family. Kahled Sharrouf was abused as a child and abandoned by his father, which later lead to issues with drugs and mental health problems such as schizophrenia. Although not necessarily significant the isolation the Maxime Hauchard grew up in is worth mentioning. His neighbors noted that Bosc-Roger is not a nurturing town for a child to grow up in.

These results are very similar to the results found by the START researchers in their study of individuals who joined a violent white supremacist organization. In their research they found significant non-ideological factors that may affect an individual's decision to join a violent extremist group (Simi et al., 2015). These factors include childhood trauma, mental health issues, and high risk behaviors (Simi et al., 2015). While the sample in the present study is significantly less than the sample used in the study performed by START, there are common ties which further bolsters the argument for a correlation.

Psychological research also corroborates the results found, though these did not include social media as a variable. This research points to the vulnerability young western adolescents

face when attempting to form their own identity (Haque et al., 2015; Hun Yu & Haque, 2015). During this time young individuals face a hard challenge of conscious and unconscious conflicts and are surrounded by envy, competition, self-control, and are fighting with self-esteem (Haque et al., 2015; Hun Yu & Haque, 2015). If these children are isolated from society they can feel oppressed and alone (Haque et al., 2015; Hun Yu & Haque, 2015). I would argue that during this time the directed strategies of ISIS propaganda would be particularly effective on these impressionable and vulnerable individuals.

There is one theory of criminology that brings together all of the ideas discussed in the presented results; Sampson and Laub's developmental theory of age-graded informal social control. According to their research criminal behaviors in youths is directly correlated with "family context" factors (Bernard et al., 2010). There are many factors that influence a child's entry into crime and allows for change over the entire life course (Bernard et al., 2010). Sampson and Laub's theory directly addresses the effects of influential life events (Bernard et al., 2010). They argue that there are points of transition in an individual's life and these points are effected by your "social capital" or ties (Bernard et al., 2010). These ties are what an individual relies on to get them through the transition and if the ties are weak there is a decreased chance of getting through the transition successfully (Bernard et al., 2010).

The individuals in this study experienced trauma at some point in their pasts. Research performed by START found that past trauma was a possible precursor to violent extremism. Additionally, the psychological research analyzed discussed the vulnerabilities among young western individuals, especially those isolated from society. Foreign fighters, such as the ones described, may be vulnerable to the messages and social media output of the IS due to their isolation and psychological vulnerabilities created by Western culture. In compliance with

Sampson and Laub these already vulnerable individuals then experience a trauma, which may disrupt their life trajectory without reliable support, or with detrimental support from the wrong sources (for example IS recruiters). The results from the comparative analysis suggests a significant correlation between the discovered commonalities of trauma and isolation.

Discussion

The original question this study was attempting to answer was why some individuals were receptive to the social media messages put out by ISIS. Once beginning my research it soon became clear that due to the limited resources I was unable to actually perform the study. Instead I decided to look at the research that is being done and use the public knowledge on the foreign fighters in order to discuss an important topic that is lacking in the academic community. The purpose of this study became to suggest future research and propose a framework to start that research.

The restricted resources available to me also narrowed my ability to gain the information needed. Therefore a further limitation of this study is the fact that the data gained from each case study was through news media sources and public information interviews. The information I used based on these sources I attempted to verify by comparing the information given in many such articles. However, it must be noted that the facts contained in the case studies are not based on academic research but public news media.

A further limitation of this study is that the cases presented are limited to western societies. There are multiple reasons for this limitation. First, when attempting to study cases from Eastern societies, specifically cases from South Korea and China, I was unable to find

adequate public information to create case studies about these individuals. The second reason for limiting this paper to western societies is that this limitation in and of itself provides a control. The differences between how culture and society is structured created confounding variables that were difficult to control for. Therefore, based on the information I was able to obtain and the natural control provided, I decided to limit my study to western societies.

While there are limitations to the research presented, there are valuable implications of this study. Social media use by ISIS is giving them access to people across the world, access they may not have had otherwise. While beyond the scope of this paper it should be noted that governments are struggling to combat this spread of extremist ideology. Especially in Western Societies where freedom of information is so valued, controlling the messages that individuals are exposed to is complicated. However the research being done currently on the effect of the propaganda put out through social media is inadequate in comparison to the scope of the issue.

The results point to a possible correlation between childhood and past trauma and an interest in joining extreme insurgencies. The START Coalition began to look at this idea with their study on trauma and violent extremism, however their research was not focused on social media. Their information combined with the implications of my findings suggests that individuals who may be predisposed to joining an insurgent group due to their trauma are now gaining access to do so through the social media efforts of groups like ISIS. These correlations together with presented psychological research and predominant theories in criminological research such as Sampson and Laub's theory suggest implications in policy adjustment of how we combat violent extremism. Joining an extremist group provides a stability and social cohesiveness that, due to these individuals' pasts, some may lack in their own lives (Haque et al.,

2015; Simi et al., 2015) A number of family, community, and individual approaches can be used to assist with past trauma may also address foreign fighter involvement.

Further research needs to be done in order to verify these results. However, the implications of these correlations, if proven to be accurate, are numerous. First, counterterrorism efforts can be enhanced if agencies are better able to determine who may be at risk for travelling. Parents, if aware, may be able to intervene if they suspect their children may be likely to travel before it is too late. Possible research implications are numerous as well. The idea that there is a psychological component to individuals joining a violent extremist group opens avenues of psychological studies. Criminal Justice studies can be performed in the context of Sampson and Laub's Turning Point Theory, which the results of this study appear to support. Political science research implications include tactics ISIS may be using to recruit these individuals specifically.

In gathering the information for this study I did notice, though beyond the scope of this paper, that men and women were promised different things by foreign fighter recruiters. Women were promised free rent, electric, water, and a husband to raise a family with. Men were promised glory and martyrdom. This idea, while briefly mentioned in the case studies, will open up other avenues of research. This research includes the question of if ISIS uses their media messages to target men and women differently and if past trauma effects men and women differently in terms of predisposition to being responsive to these messages.

Conclusion

Social media use by groups like ISIS increases the contact that individuals who may be predisposed to violent extremism have with recruiters. Therefore the social media is increasing the chances that individuals will travel and join insurgencies by allowing potentially vulnerable

people who may not have had contact to directly interact with recruiters and fighters. Further, due to the trauma in a person's past, social media may be particularly effective as these individuals may be isolated from conventional social groups. Therefore they may find comfort and a sense of belonging in an extremist group that promotes a specific way of life and specific ideals. The conclusions of this study are corroborated by outlined psychological research as well as terrorism research and criminological theories.

This study highlights a problem that academic research is failing to address. Previous studies have found that trauma is a precursor to extremism and that isolation may increase and individuals risk for joining insurgent groups. These facts combined with the idea of "Turning Points" in individuals lives may cause a vulnerability to the social media propaganda put out by ISIS. Using social media the Islamic State is able to release messages to all countries immediately. The internet is the perfect gateway for this as it is a highly interconnected system characterized by anonymity and ease of access. However the effect of increased contact with the Islamic State has on individuals in western societies is not being evaluated. Further, the type of individual who may be drawn to seek out these online messages and respond to them is also not being evaluated. Research needs to be done in order to assist in addressing the increasing issue of foreign fighters for extremist groups such as ISIS.

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