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## **Islamic State and its Online Recruitment Formula**

*By Omer Ali Saifudeen*

### **Synopsis**

*Why is Islamic State (IS) so effective at recruitment, especially in the online realm? Recent discussions glean some insights for the Singapore and Southeast Asia context.*

### **Commentary**

ISLAMIC STATE's demonstrable results - military achievements, territorial conquest and implementation of Sharia-based governance in conquered territories - have set it apart from jihadi groups that claim much but achieve little. Added to this is its ability to offer better organisational capabilities to would-be fighters in terms of money, training and equipment.

IS on its part goes all out to tout and prove that it is able to provide effective social welfare and public goods. It is essentially moving into areas where the legitimate state has retreated or has existed only in name to begin with. Inadequate economic opportunities, weak social welfare structures and poor governance contributing to a feeling of injustice have been cited as key reasons for those in the Arab world to turn to groups such as IS.

### **IS recruits' common profile and IS message framing**

While the profile of IS recruits can be quite varied, there are common threads that help explain the psychology behind the group's attraction. One psychological explanation of IS' appeal is in terms of 'pull factors' at both the individual and organisational levels. Individual level pulls can be in the form of a strong moral drive, the need for affiliation and/or specific individual needs that people with an inclination towards extreme violence might have.

At the organisational level, this can be in the portrayed ability to offer effective governance and an ideal Islamic state. Ideology (religious or otherwise), while important, may not always be the primary factor in the decision to pursue violence. Hence, it is worth exploring if social factors that feed these ideologies might be an overarching reason for radicalisation despite variations in individual motivations.

It has been observed that IS is persistently seeking to bring its portrayal of jihadi experience and perspectives closer to its sympathisers. Malaysian recruits have been influenced primarily in the course of chatting with Malaysian foreign fighters over social media. The Malaysian phenomenon

illustrates how IS is able to add credibility to its portrayal of life in Islamic State by using actual fighters from similar demographics to be part of their propaganda strategy.

IS is appealing to a wide range of audiences through its vast repertoire of narrative frames. IS is also mass-targeting online in the knowledge that all they need is a few susceptible individuals among the masses. It is also getting adept at using fans/sympathisers to produce 'evidence' to refute any criticism about IS from its detractors and mainstream media.

IS' online tactics are not new and are fundamentally opportunistic. Its members essentially leverage on new developments and innovations on the Internet that are popular or offer a degree of anonymity. Technical capabilities, coupled with creative persuasion and propagation techniques, have resulted in slick videos and magazines that meet professional standards. IS outsourcing its propaganda to 'fanboys' and armchair jihadists is also not a new innovation as there had been jihadi 'fanboys' in the past.

### **Attraction to audacity and challenge of countering IS**

IS may be especially attractive to those who are readily impressed by acts of audacity and violence. This could be inferred from some of the forum comments given by IS supporters. Many of IS' narrative frames, besides talking about life outside of the fighting, focus on the glory of battle and the sensationalism of being part of an actual military outfit.

IS also produces narratives aimed to appeal to a particular profile that has sociopathic tendencies and a criminal/gang past. This deliberate targeting of those with criminal tendencies can be evidenced by how IS was even capitalising on the protests in Ferguson, USA, to reach out via social media to disenfranchised youths with a criminal past who were anti-government to begin with.

A number of prominent IS recruits from Europe have had criminal or gang pasts. Furthermore, some jihadi narratives emphasise 'redemption' and that the jihadi world would welcome and accept Muslims regardless of their past; they proffer the idea that jihad is a chance for them to expunge their past sins and start life anew.

Counter-narratives should focus on delegitimising IS. This can be done through propagating narratives of disillusionment and highlighting the internal dissent among jihadists. One challenge is that efforts to delegitimise extremists using state-sponsored efforts might fail simply due to the label of being associated with government messaging. Online efforts for counter-narratives might also be less effective than similar efforts in the real world.

Given the traction of IS narratives, there might be a need to look beyond traditional means of communication and engagement. Efforts to engage branding experts and PR consultants with expertise in creating narratives of persuasion may be worth exploring. Those best placed to conduct such messaging might also have to be trusted community intermediaries not associated with the government.

### **Implications for Singapore and Southeast Asia**

For the Singapore context, it is imperative to determine if Southeast Asian IS fighters are motivated differently. Many studies on the appeal of IS are based on Western and Middle Eastern fighters and little open source research has been done on Southeast Asian fighters.

Questions such as whether religion and ideology present a bigger draw in Southeast Asia and whether opportunities for mobilisation in Southeast Asia are different from the Western model have to be asked as well. For instance, the availability of activist organisational groups, charismatic preachers and local/regional foreign fighter recruiters in Indonesia suggest that organised groups are the centre of gravity for recruitment in the country. Countries where such groups are not able to mobilise people might see more self-radicalised individuals.

In summary, tangible achievements and an adaptable social media strategy that targets varied profiles at both the individual and group levels but is still able to drill down towards select 'talents' - such as those with a penchant for violence or anti-establishment convictions - have accounted for

much of IS' recruitment successes. More needs to be done to understand variations in profiles across regions as any overarching strategy to delegitimise or discredit IS would ultimately need to be adapted to cater to these differences especially in Southeast Asia.

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