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As a recruitment tactic, ISIS uses several social media platforms to address minor or local grievances in order to gain a following and incite anger and violence and, ultimately, convince someone to commit domestic terrorism. Social media accounts are very hard for law enforcement to monitor, and even harder to determine, psychologically, who may be motivated by the pro-ISIS material. Law enforcement must understand the impact of ISIS social media recruiting if they want to counter violent extremism online.

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MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES


Addressing ISIS Recruitment on Social Media

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Executive Summary

Title: Addressing ISIS Recruitment on Social Media

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Thesis:

As a recruitment tactic, ISIS uses several social media platforms to address minor or local grievances in order to gain a following and incite anger and violence and, ultimately, convince someone to commit domestic terrorism. Social media accounts are very hard for law enforcement to monitor, and even harder to determine, psychologically, who may be motivated by the pro-ISIS material. Law enforcement and CVE analysts must understand the impact of ISIS social media recruiting if they truly want to counter violent extremism online.

Discussion:

Since 2014, ISIS has taken to very popular social media platforms to enhance recruitment and encourage domestic terrorism in the United States on their behalf. United States citizens that feel vulnerable and marginalized due to social, political, or economic inequality may take to social media to organize around an opportunity structure that is based in global jihadism, and ultimately join an extremist organization and commit domestic terrorism. The goal of law enforcement is to discourage these citizens from ISIS recruitment.

There are currently no properly controlled empirical studies found in open literature that characterize or help law enforcement predict who may become a terrorist, so it is nearly impossible to predict who may become a victim of social media recruitment into ISIS, and furthermore, who will commit domestic terrorism and is willing to die on their behalf. Several US Government-funded combating violent extremism (CVE) programs have been launched to study the psychological motives and socio-cultural implications of joining ISIS, but because ISIS emphasizes martyrdom as part of the Muslim religion, the vast majority of radicalized Americans die in the commitment of their terror attacks, and are unavailable for psychological studies and questioning following their attack, making it impossible for psychologists to study their motives. Furthermore, because of the ease in establishing social media accounts, the majority of ISIS sympathizers have several accounts each that share pro-ISIS material and collect user data for recruitment into the terrorist organization.

Conclusion:

If psychologists and law enforcement know the psychological factors that may encourage one to join ISIS, they can target these individuals early by providing training and education, and potentially prevent a domestic terrorist attack from occurring in the United States and eventually cause ISIS to cease altogether.

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Preface

The purpose of this research is to highlight social media recruitment by ISIS in the United States, and how hard it is to identify and stop. I will categorize the psychological factors that ISIS recruiters use to target individuals over social media, and the psychological traits that some prospective recruits may possess. I chose this research topic because I have always been intrigued with the vast array of people, to include some military members, that ISIS has been able to convince to join their terrorist organization at home and abroad, and kill other Americans. In this report, I attempt to identify and understand the psychological thought process of those individuals.

I want to thank my husband, Mike, for the constant encouragement over the past eight months, as I sacrificed countless hours completing research for this project. I would also like to thank Dr. Linda Di Desidero for mentoring me through this process. I absolutely appreciate your patience and assistance during the development of this project; your encouragement helped me to see it through to the end.

1. Background

On April 15, 2013, brothers Dzhokhar and Tamerlan Tsarnaev killed three people and severely injured and maimed sixteen others when they set up two homemade bombs made of pressure cookers that detonated close to the finish line of the Boston Marathon. Police killed Tamerlan in a shootout, but Dzhokhar was captured alive days later. Dzhokhar and his brother, both radicalized online, had several online paid and free subscriptions to ISIS materials, such as *Inspire*, an al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)-published English language magazine, and an internet search history rife with ideas to commit domestic terrorism. Dzhokhar admitted that he and his brother were motivated to carry out the attack by their extremist Islamist beliefs and by the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.¹

The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, commonly referred to as ISIL or ISIS (*Islamic State of Iraq and Syria*), is officially titled the *Islamic State* (IS) or *Daesh* (an Arabic acronym) and is a militant group that follows the doctrine of Sunni Islam. Within this paper, this group is called *ISIS*. ISIS gained global recognition in late 2014 when its rogue soldiers, led by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, forced the Iraqi government out of western Iraq, captured Mosul, and declared itself a worldwide caliphate. As a caliphate, Baghdadi declared himself the authority of the world's estimated 1.5 billion Muslims and ordered beheadings and executions of soldiers and civilians that were recorded and posted online to bolster the organization's legitimacy. These online videos were posted primarily to social media sites such as Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and Twitter, and captured global attention from men, women, and children of all ages. Social media mediators and law enforcement attempted to intervene in force, and shut down thousands of accounts that had initially posted the videos, but they could not keep up with the hundreds of thousands of

shares and re-tweets, which quickly made ISIS a household name. With these accounts trending, ISIS began very sophisticated marketing and recruiting campaigns in the Western world, to include Europe, Canada, and the United States, proving that terrorism can be used as a tactic to achieve goals, politically, criminally, and psychologically. By using enticing new technology that appeals to Americans, such as Go Pro wearable cameras and drones recording videos featuring handsome, Western-looking military men dancing to hip hop music and wearing baseball hats backward for appeal, they were able to identify with their target audience and encouraged joining the terrorist organization at home or abroad. Curious Westerners began to dole out personal information, captured via internet cookies, while signing up for online streaming videos to follow their favorite ISIS soldier on social media. ISIS also released its first English language digital magazine, *Al Queda in the Arabian Peninsula* (AQAP), and an encrypted instant messaging service, Telegram, in several languages including English, Pashto, Persian, and Turkish.

ISIS uses several online platforms, including social media, to address minor or local grievances via globalization, which can be very difficult for law enforcement to track, and even harder to determine, psychologically, who may be motivated by the pro-ISIS material, and ultimately be persuaded to commit domestic terrorism and kill fellow Americans. We must understand the impact of ISIS social media recruiting if we want to counter violent extremism online.

This study will gain insight into ISIS's use of social media to enhance recruitment alongside the psychological motives and socio-cultural implications of joining ISIS, and the challenges of shutting down extremist group recruitment, via funded CVE programs, on social media. While the majority of successful ISIS recruits travel to Iraq and Syria to engage in physical fighting, this paper will focus on what motivated those personnel recruited via social

media from the United States that participate in domestic terrorism, and why it is so difficult for law enforcement to intervene and shut down ISIS altogether.

2. Vulnerabilities: Who Joins ISIS via Social Media

Jaelyn Young, a female Mississippi State University student, was influenced to join ISIS after watching online videos and feeling a sense of commitment to the organization and its Muslim religion.² An ISIS recruiter in the United States reached out to Young via Instant Messenger, and they sent thousands of messages back and forth, without hesitation. Once recruited, Young also urged her boyfriend, Muhammed Dakhalla, to join the extremist group. While still in the United States, completing college courses and earning a spot on the Dean's List, Young began wearing a burqa and slowly distanced herself from family members and friends due to her belief that non-Muslims were now a negative influence.³ Young continued to communicate with whom she believed were ISIS leaders but were instead undercover FBI agents, gathering information. Young and the undercover agents devised a plan to travel to Syria to join ISIS alongside her boyfriend in the near future. Young and Dakhalla both agreed, and police arrested them before they boarded a plane traveling to Syria.⁴

As of Fall 2015, the average age of an ISIS sympathizer was 26 years old. Approximately 86% were male and 40% were Muslim converts, but this is where the definitive statistics end. There are currently no properly controlled empirical studies found in open literature that characterize who may become a terrorist.⁵ Based on past *uncontrolled* research, however, there is no majority race, social class, education or family history of those recruited. Psychologist Dr. John Pearce ran an independent study in 1977 in which his undocumented research claims terrorists are sociopaths who act anti-socially due to "superego lacunae," meaning they have gaps in self-monitoring; he supported his conclusion partly on the basis of tattoos found on one

terrorist.⁶ Based on one study, conducted in 1979, of forty suspected terrorists (and verified by subsequent studies), there were no mental illness diagnoses.⁷ The aforementioned research demonstrates it is incredibly difficult to claim whether terrorism is an antisocial or prosocial behavior. While most will claim that previous domestic terrorists within the United States were typically regarded as anti-social by their families and friends, ISIS regards them as heroes, freedom fighters, and leaders within their organization: all staunch opposites of an anti-social being. These martyrs earn popular support amongst their followers for committing altruistic suicide.

Children as young as six years old, adolescents, and full-grown adults have been recruited to join ISIS. Until recently, psychologists severely underestimated the numbers of women and minors being recruited. ISIS has created a transnational network of support that promises prospective members a sense of belonging through religion and politics, while others join due to kinship and family ties, and some for conventional curiosity- those are the easiest to influence. The internet alone, however, does not radicalize a person; it is merely a tool, a catalyst. The internet has, however, made terrorists *human*. We have been invited into their homes and watch them interact with their families, play soccer with their children, and eat dinner with loved ones. This sense of idealism is sometimes enough to convince a recruit who does not have a meaningful alternative.

3. Why People Join ISIS via Social Media

Multiple theories on the psychological basis of terrorism have been published, and what may motivate a US citizen to join such a group, but the field, as a whole, is primarily characterized by theoretical speculation. Results are currently on observation and subjective

interpretation, and the population of confirmed sympathizers is so vast, it is nearly impossible to determine who may be a victim of recruitment via social media.

Psychologically, all people come to a point in their lives when they search for their religious, political, occupational, cultural, relationship, and gender identities. At this point in one's life, one is most susceptible to recruitment. This vulnerable population often browses through social media for common interests and may come upon an opportunity structure created by ISIS, such as anti-government, sovereign citizen groups, or Muslim religious groups, meant to bring sympathizers together. ISIS's tactic is to constantly remind these individuals about their own alienation, to force them to fight defensively about who they are and whom they want to be. All of a sudden, an opportunity structure has been put in place, and one of the aforementioned issues is emphasized producing a movement for change. Today's tense political culture lends itself to another recruiting tactic. ISIS recruiters have recently begun reaching out to those individuals whose political grievances cannot be channeled into our existing American political system, to promise them a voice within the Caliphate. Political movements are especially popular in the right-wing terrorist groups that include the KKK, Neo-Nazis, Branch Davidians, anti-abortion bombers, sovereign citizens, and most recently, the Charlottesville protesters. Left-wing terrorist groups may contain Marxist, Maoist, anarchist, or ecological agenda groups.

By using Albert Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory and Erving Goffman's Theory of Frame Analysis, we can understand psychologically how recruitment efforts utilize a person's psyche to guide them into joining ISIS. Leaders of ISIS frame world crises as legitimate reasons for engaging in socially and politically deviant behaviors, by promising to provide safety and security on one end, and encouraging domestic terrorism on the other. In exchange for ensured safety and security, individuals join ISIS and partake in political and socially deviant behaviors

such as barbaric acts of violence, assault, and murder, all of which shape public discourse within the United States. By using social media, ISIS leaders apply manipulative rhetorical maneuvers to prospective members in a desperate effort to resolve issues within the region, depicting a heightened state of idealism. ISIS leaders utilize violent social and political actions such as barbaric violence and death to promote recruitment and support the extremist group's agenda, showcasing their legitimacy and encouraging Westerners to embark on a new daunting journey.

Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory posits that the causes of human behaviors associated with joining terrorist organizations like ISIS are psychological and environmental.⁸ Following an episode of domestic terrorism, ISIS encourages individuals on social media to seek refuge and join the organization of like-minded individuals to safeguard themselves and their families in a meaningful refuge. Such violently barbaric strategies have proven to be effective as they foster, develop, and sustain a heightened level of fear that perpetuates ISIS recruitment for protection purposes, and also instills a sense of identity they had been seeking all along. The Social Cognitive Theory also states that humans learn through environmental, behavioral and personal influences, and people tend to imitate actions of those they admire, based on the positive reinforcement they believe is the outcome. Therefore, individuals who can be convinced to join ISIS can be persuaded to imitate deviant behaviors, such as domestic terrorism, as long as they receive positive reinforcement by someone they deem a leader.⁹

Deviant behaviors, such as beheadings and mass murders are encouraged to be posted on social media. By doing this, the terrorist confirms ISIS's power and strength through violent actions and gives the individual a verified identity. In one particular case, an ISIS extremist used the hashtag "#WorldCup" with the accompanying words: "This is our ball...it has skin on it."¹⁰ ISIS leaders praise recruits who engage in and commit violent attacks by placing their act on

social media and other electronic forums to facilitate recruitment to the group and future attacks. Following a domestic terrorist attack, this positive reinforcement can be in the form of a primetime news story, a YouTube video, or even a promotion within the terrorist group. Positive reinforcements inclusive of praise, social attention, and promotions are psychologically valuable to ISIS recruits and play an integral role in expanding the organization's influence.

Research literature indicates that new members recruited into ISIS may "learn [...] new skills" associated with committing violent acts to achieve larger political goals¹¹ Some of these skills may include murdering Muslims who deviate from the principles espoused and required by ISIS leaders. Here, the digitally-oriented tools used for recruiting prospective members into ISIS reflect an intent of "assuaging [the] cognitive dissonance" associated with using Western cultural ideals to dismantle them entirely.¹² ISIS members must, therefore, internalize an extrinsic need to advance a religiously-based political cause as an overarching rationale for committing political violence. Assuaging cognitive dissonance in newly recruited ISIS members entails even further that the use of social media to distribute messages fostering political violence will spur more individuals into engaging in deviant behaviors.

Goffman's Theory of Frame Analysis is characterized by an organization's or group's underlying principles that govern the occurrence of events and engagement within such events.¹³ When used in the context of a political grievance, as mentioned above, Goffman's theory states that mass movements can be very effective when the wants of one (individual or group) line up with the needs of another and produce "*resonance*." In this context, the media reverberates the message of ISIS, and the extremist receives the recognition he desires. This theory provides a further explanation of the communication media including news, websites, and social media platforms used to both define and construct the controversy associated with ISIS-based

extremism and terrorism. When a terrorist dies in their own attack, ISIS emphasizes martyrdom, and the heroism that is celebrated and publicly recognized; this convinces all other followers that their cause is worth suffering and dying.

We can also use Goffman's Theory of Frame Analysis to understand how ISIS recruits prospective members. ISIS leaders frame major events and attempt to depict the US government as an illegitimate organization, with societal and political fragmentation, and other significant economic issues as absolute world crises. This tactic, when delivered properly to a victim seeking idealism, reinforces their desire to restore a failing state and mitigate existential crises through violence¹⁴ According to ISIS, resolving world crises entails violent political action that will restore a larger geopolitical social order in the Middle East and effectively remove cultural threats indicated by perceptions of deviance connected to Western culture. As a result, adolescents, or easily persuaded individuals in the United States will view non-Muslims within the Western world as deviant and associate more with Muslim ISIS members using online communication mediums. The application of Goffman's theory indicates that the mitigation of existential threats defined as world crises present opportunities for prospective members to respond by joining and taking appropriate action. ISIS leaders may still resort to cyberbullying practices or support vulnerable recruits when attempting to align the behaviors of prospective members to strategic organizational objectives to use the Internet for fundraising, planning, publicity, propaganda, and psychological warfare.

Goffman's frontstage behavior reflects the world as a stage in which people act and behave in such a way when they know other people are watching, such as a domestic terrorist attack. Behaviors conducted when no one is watching characterize Goffman's backstage behavior, such as a user perusing an ISIS social media page. Goffman's concepts of the

“frontstage” and “backstage” are applicable in ISIS recruiting and illustrate how social media usage by ISIS leaders represent activities visibly observed by prospective members but remain hidden behind a technologically-oriented veil of anonymity.¹⁵ The frontstage implies that social media represents conventional platforms, and normalizes participation in deviant behaviors, and the backstage suggests that most individuals who join the terrorist organization must exercise total discretion in discussing their intentions to join, and encourage others to join as well.¹⁶

Overall, Goffman’s Theory of Frame Analysis, as well as the backstage and frontstage, illustrate how ISIS recruitment activities through social media reflect perceptions of the entire world in a crisis state, and that all members must act aggressively toward restoring the social balance to create a utopian society. Instilling a sense of fear and lack of safety exacerbates recruitment and enhances the importance of ISIS.

The literature on the Marxist Economic Theory addresses how ISIS may use social media to recruit prospective members and effectively lower the costs associated with managing organizational operations. Whereas political violence and the destruction of Western culture symbolize the commodities fetishized by ISIS leaders, the organizational division of labor indicates that recruitment must involve targeting specific groups and excluding individuals who may constitute infidels.¹⁷ In economic terms, investments into the political activities of ISIS by newly recruited members are extractive to such an extent that any benefits incurred are symbolic in not having any significant monetary value within a globalized system.¹⁸ Still, the division of labor in ISIS appears forced even as members recruited into the organization through social media enter by assuming that complete social equality rooted in political violence is the overarching goal. Accordingly, the media attention given to economic issues addressed by ISIS remains minimal with only a few exceptions. Despite how ISIS leaders aim to recruit prospective

members by arguing that the current political economy represents a clear deviation from moral integrity, the minimal attention to economic issues by media outlets indicates that discussions of recruitment strategies in news reports lack a comprehensive overview. As the research literature suggests even further, the attempts of media outlets to discuss economic issues that inspire recruitment efforts by ISIS through social media have few useful implications for identifying which political strategies will mitigate extreme violence.¹⁹ Insofar as the division of labor in ISIS is economic, the distribution of social media messages to recruit prospective members entails that all organizational activities defining political strategies must remain as covert as possible. The messages and images that attract prospective members into the terrorist organization indicate even further how cooptness is necessary for marketing political campaigns designed to eliminate the enemies of radical Islam.

4. The Allure of ISIS on Social Media

The allure of ISIS is primarily its power and strength, which increases as the group continues to invest in social services including schools, Muslim churches, and hospitals at home and abroad. Due to Iraq and Syria's governmental gap in power and lack of social services, ISIS facilitates the provision of social services and socioeconomic aid for its members.²⁰ Exploiting this aid and addressing local grievances bolsters the legitimacy of the organization, and has also proven to help to recruit women, who tend to see the organization as warm and inviting. Online support for ISIS is fostered through digital magazines, websites, and social media accounts. ISIS has created several digital magazines, such as *Inspire*, to disseminate propaganda-related tactics to increase the number of female online supporters.²¹ Although social media and videos push for Muslim men and young boys to join and fight for ISIS, women are also bribed to join the organization.²²

5. The ISIS Recruitment Process on Social Media

Most potential recruits first become interested in ISIS through the media (most notably, terrorist attacks on the evening news), then seek them out on social media to learn more.

According to a Rand study, ISIS has a four-part recruitment process, involving an exchange between the victim and ISIS recruiter:

1. **Discovery.** This is when a potential recruit reaches out to ISIS, via traditional social media at first, and then eventually on the Dark Web for more secret communication (see step four). It is also not uncommon for follow-up meetings to occur at US mosques with groups of newly recruited individuals, as they move into step two.
2. **Create a Micro-Community.** ISIS recruiters surround the potential recruit with support, creating an opportunity structure that allows the recruit to vent his/her frustration around a unified message, such as politics or economic and social inequality. At this point, recruiters attempt to amplify the message and encourage violence in order to correct the inequality.
3. **Isolation.** Since 2014, ISIS has built a transnational network of terrorist support and encourages recruits to get rid of any outside influencers in their lives-family, friends, church, and school support systems. This makes it easier to polarize the terrorist population and amplify the necessity for violence.
4. **Shift to Private Communication.** As the recruiter/recruit conversation intensifies, the public conversation on conventional social media moves to an encrypted chat

room or the Dark Web that law enforcement is likely not able to track, even with current CVE programs, and step five takes place.

5. Identify and Encourage Action. Recruiters encourage the willing participant to carry out domestic terrorism via strict guidelines.²³ The Dark Web is likely where the conversation about domestic terrorism is amplified, and violence is encouraged in order to complete the cycle of martyrdom.

In the Fall of 2015, the University of George Washington reported there were approximately 900 active investigations against ISIS sympathizers in all fifty states.²⁴ Newly radicalized individuals are very dangerous in society because they do not just agree with the ISIS mission and authority, but they embrace the idea of violence for fame and recognition.

Recruitment messages vary by US region, population, and the individual's desire to join ISIS, but the tactics remain the same- social media fishing through internet cookies. The majority of the population that was intercepted prior to full recruitment expressed a curiosity of the Muslim religion after reading about or seeing stories on the news, had subscribed to YouTube channels online, or friend-requested an unknown extremist site, and were contacted first by ISIS recruiters. Often, users indicated they "liked" a post on social media just because they found it aesthetically pleasing, found the hashtag funny, or because it had something to do with their particular region of the country, and had no prior knowledge of the extremist organization.²⁵

The most at-risk population for recruitment is the adolescent (ages 13-19). Adolescents, and very often young adults, face unique challenges and social changes, have an underdeveloped psyche and are easily influenced by peer pressure; this all creates a very dangerous cocktail. Adolescents have a very immature decision-making process and tend to think hypothetically

about the world, and are typically very emotional, so their ideal view of the world can certainly get away from reality. ISIS recruiters use these disenfranchised youth for early radicalization.

Because social media has the potential to transform how users of online platforms judge the world and behave in it, the recruitment activities of ISIS leaders exploit the intrinsic motivational factors gathered from partaking in acts of violence for their own pleasure and satisfaction; some of these include the feeling of safety, security, and protection that allow ISIS members and prospective recruits to construct reasons for joining the terrorist organization. The Social Cognitive Theory indicates that ISIS leaders may also resort to cyberbullying techniques by using social media.²⁶ In this case, ISIS recruiters may exploit vulnerabilities ranging from personal shortcomings to limited literacy to socioeconomic issues of prospective members and then promise change after joining the terrorist organization.

6. ISIS: A Legitimate Global Security Threat on Social Media

In 2014, Jane's reports ISIS controlled more than 34,000 square miles in Iraq and Syria, but by the end of 2016, they had lost nearly 10,000 square miles of ISIS-owned territory. In order to keep from losing legitimacy, ISIS encouraged extreme terrorist attacks be carried out in countries around the world, with the ISIS label attached, via social media.

On June 12, 2016, Omar Mateen, a 29-year-old security guard, opened fire and killed 49 people inside an Orlando, Florida, night club, after verbally pledging allegiance to ISIS shortly before the attack. Mateen was a US citizen who had been on an FBI watch list and twice interviewed for possible connections to terrorism since 2013.²⁷ In his own 9-1-1 call during the night club attack, Mateen identified himself as "Mujahideen," an Islamic soldier, and pledged his allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. After an extensive investigation at the local and national

level, James Comey, the director of the FBI in 2016, confirmed Mateen was radicalized online and had previously written about his inspiration for foreign terrorist organization websites.²⁸

Nearly all literature on ISIS recruitment illustrates how social media reinforces the status of this terrorist organization as a global security threat that begins online. Accordingly, ISIS represents a convergence of radical political activities born out of a need to achieve personal and collective significance, the need to depict political violence as necessary for achieving social significance, and the need to construct social networks in a technologically-oriented digital reality.²⁹ Achieving personal and collective significance indicates that recruitment through social media will preserve tradition by encouraging prospective members to consider the future of Islam as representing a clear difference from Western Judeo-Christian values. The necessity of political violence illustrates how prospective members who join ISIS must not only convert to Islam but also distinguish themselves within their online societies as wholly different along sectarian lines from Sunni and Shi'ite Muslims.³⁰ The construction of social networks in a digital age reinforces how leaders recruit members to help restore social balance. Each type of radical political activity promises that psychological fulfillment is possible only by maintaining commitments to ideological arguments postulating deviance from Western dominance as paving the road toward freedom. It is clear that we must use law enforcement to diminish the appeal of terrorism and undermine their propaganda in order to stop ISIS from recruiting in the United States.

7. The Difficulty of Stopping ISIS Recruitment on Social Media

There is no established program that has an equal emotional affect or resonance to that of ISIS that can counter their US recruitment campaign. Furthermore, when a president denounces ISIS, sympathizers with political grievances tend to get even more frustrated.³¹ This sentiment

makes it incredibly difficult for counter-terrorist programs to target victims yearning for faith, identity, or self-actualization that join ISIS.

ISIS leaders may initiate first contact with a prospective recruit on social network sites like Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram, or Twitter while encouraging them to like or share a video or post to their own, or a friend's, page, thus amplifying ISIS's message.³² The research highlighting online radicalization establishes that the use of social media by ISIS leaders to recruit prospective members creates numerous opportunities for resolving new and emerging existential challenges to social order in one's life. Social media accounts are not able to be continuously monitored by law enforcement for illegal activity, extremist messages, and foreign recruitment because there is not a task force large enough to tackle the issue.

In February 2018, forty-year-old Missouri resident, Safya Yassin pleaded guilty in federal court to using Twitter to transmit threatening messages to two FBI employees and two members of the military and their families on behalf of ISIS. Yassin went under the name "Muslimah" online and maintained ninety-six known Twitter accounts in which she posted and re-tweeted ISIS messages and personally identifying information of the aforementioned persons. From her Muslimah account, Yassin stated she "wanted to kill" the victims and listed their home addresses and photos of the families. Her messages were re-tweeted over one-thousand times each, before being investigated by the FBI in 2015.

Since 2014, ISIS has worked very hard to decrease its law enforcement visibility on social media by using ISIS sympathizers that are able to create legitimate seed accounts that share information from ISIS-originated accounts. These seed accounts use "hashtag hijacking," much like Yassin did, or trending and heavily used hashtags to reach a larger audience. Twitter users, specifically, are able to see these tweets while browsing the hashtag, and are more

susceptible to re-tweet (Twitter) or re-post (Facebook) the ISIS message, thus blindly recruiting for the ISIS organization. Additionally, many recruiters are able to stay under law enforcement radar by not posting excessively on social media, an alarm that would otherwise cause an investigation. A study conducted by the Department of Computer Science and Engineering at Texas A&M University found that ISIS recruiters posted “just as much” as a legitimate social media user throughout 2015, and they mimic normal users, limiting their spread of URLs.³³ In this study, three million tweets (in Arabic and English) were found referring to ISIS. These accounts were classified based on how they referred to ISIS. Using the phrase “Islamic State” is an indicator of support by a social media user, while “ISIS” or “Daesh” indicate opposition. Those users that tweeted the term “Islamic State” were subject to further investigation by law enforcement and CVE programs.

Because it must be determined that a user is involved in malicious activities before shutting the account down, the vast majority (an estimated 80%) of these accounts are not reported, investigated, suspended, or shut down. Furthermore, the use of social networking sites by ISIS leaders to recruit prospective members can blur the lines between public and private space when individuals are told to post status updates and communicate to users through chat and group features. Conversations between prospective recruits and ISIS militant recruiters usually start out on the major social networking site, all sites that can be highly regulated by law enforcement, then jump to a smaller, less regulated and more encrypted platform, such as Telegram, that is much harder to track, where they then discuss their potentially illegal activities.

Blogging sites encourage members to distribute messages in forums available publicly or privately, while video sharing sites allow users to distribute graphic visual depictions of ISIS activities depicting the consequences of deviating from organizational norms.³⁴ According to this

strand of the research literature, ISIS recruitment through social media entails that technological innovation is *de rigueur* for distributing messages describing major events as representing world crises. Regardless of which online platforms ISIS leaders choose to emphasize, the intent underlying each message illustrates how important technological tools are for targeting a predominantly Western audience.³⁵ Despite how ISIS leaders may draw from propaganda techniques to frame messages describing world events as major political and economic crises, the main purpose of distributing recruitment messages remains the same, and the sheer volume of content makes it incredibly difficult for the US Government or law enforcement to intervene.

8. Combating Violent Extremism (CVE) on Social Media

In summer 2015, twenty-five-year-old Terrence McNeil professed his support for ISIS on social media and then shared several files containing the names and home addresses of several military personnel within the United States. In several other social media messages, McNeil solicited the murder of military members within the homes and communities, in a lone offender attack in Akron, Ohio. His account was suspended, but he continued to open approximately eight new accounts under several variations of the user name “Lone_Wolf,” in which he bragged about having to create several new accounts due to being intercepted and shut down in previous accounts.³⁶

In an effort to combat online recruitment, the Global Counterterrorism Forum launched a working group to counter violent extremism (CVE) online in 2014. CVE programs, such as this, are committed to mitigating the impact of extremism and terrorism, preventing recruiters from targeting certain locations or executing attacks, averting recruits from radicalization, and developing both individual as well as community resistance to extremist-related violence. Despite the proposed benefits associated with the CVE agenda, the effectiveness of CVE

programs is questionable. CVE programs are not nearly as effective in preventing the occurrence of extremism and terrorism while alleviating the impact of extremist and terrorist events, as initially intended. The US government is using counter-propaganda strategies, but they are often criticized as ineffectual. According to the Rand Corporation, deradicalization programs have had mixed results.³⁷ One example of a government-launched CVE program is a graphics campaign led by the US State Department that uses images produced by ISIS to disrupt the dominant narrative framework used to recruit prospective members into the terrorist organization. This type of CVE campaign aims to reach individuals interested in joining ISIS by encouraging them to learn new skills and internalize the full consequences of political radicalization.³⁸ However, findings suggest that CVE programs achieve only limited effects against the recruitment tactics of ISIS leaders insofar as the United States' government support of counterterrorism strategies in the Middle East.³⁹ CVE programs are only effective when government leaders institute policies that not only target social media and other online behaviors but also include strategies for establishing political stability.⁴⁰

More intriguingly, the research findings indicate that CVE programs aim to solve Wicked Problems illustrating how some issues lack clear-cut resolutions. Since mid-2015, Twitter claims to have shut down approximately 360,000 accounts for tweets related to the promotion of terrorism, but more refined communication efforts, such as password-protected and encrypted forums, such as Telegram and Tor, used by Omar Mateen and Jaelynn Young, are now in use by ISIS.

Though difficult to define in precise terms, Wicked Problems also indicate the limitations of CVE programs by which conventional solutions offered by governments and members of the international community lack definitive answers.⁴¹ Mostly because ISIS relies on propaganda to

distribute messages and recruit prospective members into the organization, the capacity of governments and members of the international community to solve Wicked Problems depends largely on their capacity to interpret rhetorical messages as galvanizing violent extremism. CVE programs such as Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) may play some role in determining which online activities are synonymous with recruitment efforts by ISIS leaders, but typically take a long time to get established. COPS can be established in a community by establishing outreach and engagement units that address public safety and other concerns of the community. This enables the community to trust their law enforcement personnel, and brings them forward when more sensitive issues arise, such as addressing online extremism. Due to COPS social impact at a micro-level, local law enforcement officers have been slightly successful in identifying online users attempting to join global terrorist organizations, but this system also requires constant monitoring, and manpower of this program is not available. COPS has proven to prevent some prospective recruits from allowing ISIS leaders and members to exploit their psychological vulnerabilities and yearning for acceptance and a sense of belonging, protection, or emotional support.

Additionally, the impact of COPS is meso-level (investigated at the group interaction level) by which prospective members should consider sharing personal information only with trusted parties.⁴² While online users should recognize that the sharing of personal information on social media should remain private, ISIS leaders and members insist on exploiting psychological vulnerabilities by threatening severe punishment up to and including death for not complying with demands. Accordingly, the limited impacts of CVE programs illustrate how psychological tactics associated with inducing fear in vulnerable online users should receive closer attention by

researchers in social psychology, national governments, and members of the international community.

Most of the findings presented in the research literature demonstrated the significance of government-based defense programs established to combat violent extremism, some of which includes conceptual frameworks considered practical for advancing national and homeland security objectives. The findings also revealed the role that legislation plays in dismantling ISIS and targeting the activities of organizational leaders and members responsible for using social media to recruit prospective members.

Primarily, CVE programs emphasize the need for governments to introduce counterterrorism measures anchored in theories of social and political psychology.⁴³ CVE programs also entail systematic evaluations by government agents intent on deterring the potential threats caused by political radicalization.⁴⁴ Here, the use of social media by ISIS leaders who recruit new members into the terrorist organization entails that the intentional disruption of online platforms is necessary for advancing Homeland Security policy objectives including enhancing security and preventing terrorist and safeguarding and securing cyberspace, both of which will help examine how social media influences ISIS recruitment and its psychological implications.⁴⁵ CVE programs would, therefore, need to emphasize the hierarchical and strictly regulated production of recruitment media by leaders of all other terrorist organizations.

As suggested by some policy experts, the recruitment efforts of ISIS through social media are of little consequence when governments mobilize forces to engage in CVE activities transcending socio-cultural boundaries.⁴⁶ According to Richard LeBaron, former director of the Center for Strategic Counterterrorism, the impact of CVE on ISIS recruitment efforts entails that social media platforms are not entirely responsible for mobilizing prospective recruits into

action. Rather, the underlying psychological motives for joining ISIS reflect the tendency of organizational leaders to exploit the emotional vulnerabilities of online users who may lack proficient critical thinking skills.⁴⁷ Likewise, the limited impact of CVE programs indicates that the motives underlying decisions to join ISIS and, by extension, participate in recruitment efforts, reflect the degree of participation in online social networks. A major reason recruitment efforts are, thus, successful only insofar as the decision to join ISIS indicates a desire for belonging and to establish tight-knit connections with individuals who have similar ideological persuasions.

Ultimately, the strategic concern with CVE programs is that it is very hard to prove the negative. It is nearly impossible to prove how many people CVE programs have *prevented* from joining ISIS, thus measuring the effectiveness of the program itself.

9. Intervention in Online Social Media Recruitment

The Counter Violent Extremism Online Task Force provides reintegration programs for previously recruited ISIS victims, providing them with counseling while collecting data and intelligence of their recruitment process. This CVE methodology requires former extremists and survivors of extremist acts to provide their subjective lived experience of what they went through for the ISIS recruitment process. Such narratives may provide first-hand accounts of the psychological motives underpinning the personal decision to join ISIS and submit to a radical Islamist ideology, and helps psychologists gather demographic, life, historical and psychological factors that may have helped the victim become a recruit.⁴⁸ Moreover, these narratives may account for the links between experiential and political knowledge produced in social media contexts. Especially considering the impact of ISIS recruitment activities on women who join the terrorist organization, the inclusion of first-hand narratives in future studies entails that

researchers have several opportunities to counteract the practical impact of dominant paradigms implying that governments and members of the international community are exclusively responsible for rescuing vulnerable populations.⁴⁹

10. **Determining Future Vulnerable Populations on Social Media**

Since ISIS became a recognized organization in 2014, psychologists have attempted to identify who can become a victim of online recruitment. Thus far, law enforcement and CVE programs have obtained detailed information of micro-level impacts suggesting the employment of Big Data techniques, such as Cookies, to collect online data from users who navigate social media websites regularly.⁵⁰ Analyses of micro-level interaction, such as the individual browsing the internet, have meso- and macro-level implications for ensuring that local law enforcement officers, national governments, and members of the international community have sufficient resources to mine information from impressionable social media users who submit personal information to ISIS or affiliated terrorist organizations. Law enforcement officers who have access to hidden online portals including the Dark Web can track ISIS activities accordingly. Similarly, as they did in the Jaelynn Young case, law enforcement officers can utilize their access to the Dark Web by posing as prospective ISIS members targeting victims for the terrorist organization.

In 2015, law enforcement launched a nationwide campaign encouraging social media users to report accounts they believe are illicit. In 2016, Twitter shut down 360,000 ISIS accounts, relying heavily on user-reports.⁵¹ Once an account is reported or alerts for extreme verbiage, pictures or video surface, law enforcement officers are able to collect data from anyone that has had activity with this user's profile page (friends, followers, re-tweets, re-posts, likes, or shares), and is able to then collect data on possible "seed" accounts, leading to potentially

thousands of other ISIS propaganda and recruitment social media accounts on the internet. From here, law enforcement and CVE program analysts can build a statistical model that allows for an optimized search of extremist behavior to better target ISIS accounts, and identify a duplicate email address, user name, screen name, profile and banner image.

On the flip side, law enforcement, CVE analysts, and psychologists are also aware of thousands of confirmed ISIS social media recruiting accounts that they have allowed to remain open. These accounts are continuously traced and monitored for extremist activity and future violent plans, and psychologists can apply direct psychological examination of the ISIS recruitment process on the public forum that will help build methodology for the future in determining not only who is vulnerable to recruitment in the United States, but who is recruiting for ISIS.

11. **Conclusion**

Clearly, a lack of scholarly research on online terrorism recruitment has created a lack of counterterrorism strategies for the US government and substandard CVE programs to stop online terrorist recruitment. Investigating the mind of the terrorist would seem a logical first step towards modernizing psychological research of who is susceptible to online terrorist recruitment. Unfortunately, psychologists cannot agree whether there is a way to determine whether a particular type of mind or cognitive capacity is more apt to associate with terrorism, so predictability over who may be susceptible to join an extremist group, such as ISIS, is impossible.⁵² Also, because online recruitment is just one of potentially dozens of recruiting efforts, psychologists have been unable to determine whether online victims have profoundly different predispositions or psychological factors than any other recruited victims.

While vulnerable and marginalized populations seek to find a group to which they belong, ISIS leaders begin to prey on their vulnerabilities. These “True Believers” are indeed a very dangerous kind of opponent because their moral beliefs immunize them against normal threats such as death, and they are able to impart this on US recruits. Their psychological tactics have allowed them to target a vulnerable population, and convince them to commit domestic terrorism. The ISIS recruiters’ play on the victim’s emotions can range from fear to other psychological vulnerabilities that hamper recruits from thinking critically about their prospective yet violent role in extremism and terrorism. Recruits who are economically disadvantaged, younger and more prone to persuasion, seek security and protection, or yearning for a sense of belonging may feel the inherent need to join ISIS.

ISIS leaders utilize the internet, particularly social media such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube, to disseminate videos of beheadings and other violent acts. Some prospective recruits are cyberbullied and threatened into joining and complying with the demands of ISIS leaders. The psychological tactics used by ISIS predisposes recruits to depression and PTSD, both of which enhance recruitment and retention in the extremist group until they pledge their life and partake in terrorist attacks, becoming “true believers” themselves.

Unfortunately, because there are currently no properly controlled empirical studies found in open literature that categorize who may become a terrorist, it is nearly impossible to determine who may become a victim of social media recruitment into ISIS, and furthermore, who would commit domestic terrorism and would be willing to die on their behalf. Countering violent extremism programs cannot be proven effective, and because ISIS emphasizes martyrdom as part of the Muslim religion, the vast majority of radicalized Americans die in the commitment of their terror attacks and are unavailable for psychological studies and questioning

following their attack, making it impossible for psychologists to study their motives. Because of the aforementioned issues, intervention of ISIS recruitment is incredibly important for psychologists and law enforcement, so that we can understand the impact of ISIS and counter violent extremism online, to put an end to ISIS altogether.

Endnotes

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