

The Cult-Terrorism Recruiting Nexus

by William Schwensen

Executive Summary

The United States and its allies need to incorporate a counter-cult dimension to their respective counterterrorism (CT) strategies, particularly in light of the recent influx of Westerners traveling to Syria and Iraq to join the ranks of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). U.S. CT policy against ISIL since August of 2014 has consisted of kinetic military airstrikes against strategic ISIL strongholds and high value targets within western Iraq and northern Syria. While this strategy may succeed tactically, it neglects to address the psychological influence ISIL has developed over numerous Muslims throughout the world, particularly over those residing within the West. Through the medium of social media, it has become increasingly easier for ISIL recruiters to target, assess, and persuade disaffected and susceptible Westerners to join their cause. The U.S. needs to recognize that this new kind of terrorist recruitment tool, which can transcend national borders and languages, mirrors the recruitment practices of cults. I propose within this memo a set of policy objectives that can provide the U.S. with a better understanding of this cult-terrorism recruiting nexus and how to potentially defuse it.

The Cult-Terrorism Recruiting Nexus: Targets and Tactics

With the recent influx of foreign fighters joining groups like ISIL, numerous academic and intelligence experts are attempting to answer the question of how individuals are targeted and persuaded to join these groups. Richard Barrett of the Soufan research group estimates that the number of foreign fighters that have traveled to Syria within the last year is as much as 3,000 (Barrett, 2014). Barrett's report also found that these fighters hail from 81 different countries, including the European Union, the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand (Barrett, 2014). Since October, the FBI has publicly investigated three separate cases of young Americans who have attempted to travel to Syria and receive training from ISIL recruiters.

The recruitment targets and processes of both terror and cult groups share numerous similarities. First, both types of groups tend to prey on a recruit's sense of identity. The foreign recruits highlighted in Barrett's report and those investigated by the FBI are often young and disillusioned teenagers who "lack a sense of belonging and identity" (Barrett, 2014). Renowned cult expert Steven Hassan has observed a similar pattern with respect to cult recruitment: "Cult recruiters approach prospects when they are most vulnerable: after the death of a loved one, during an illness, after a graduation, at a loss of employment - in short, during any transitional life change" (Hassan, 2011). Aki Pertiz, a former CIA officer, stated that these ISIL recruits are searching for an identity within the group's specific narrative and that it is this narrative that empowers them with a sense of purpose (Brumfield, 2014). ISIL's narrative of being the only entity willing to counter the oppression of Muslims within Iraq and Syria provides a motivation to these recruits to join a community of like-minded individuals and fight against the perceived injustices incurred by that group.

Secondly, cults and jihadist terrorist groups such as ISIL provide an opportunity for recruits to contribute to a cause that transcends the needs of the individual. This aspect of the cult-terrorism recruiting nexus builds upon the need of potential recruits to develop a sense of purpose. In the

case of ISIL's recruits, the cause is communicated to them as purely religious in nature. While Westerners waging jihad is not a new phenomenon, the presence of ISIL on social media exposes the message of "religious duty" to a wider audience (McCoy, 2014). Steven Hassan speaks to the danger of a recruit being fed a primarily religious motivation during their recruitment, "Abu Bakr al-Baghadi, the current head of [ISIL], is a shadowy figure, which makes his edicts - and his pronouncements that he speaks for Allah - even more compelling and dangerous" (Hassan, 2014). In fact, according to Hassan and other intelligence officials, al-Baghadi is known to be extremely tactful in his operations and to be motivated personally by power and vengeance. Despite this individual assessment of al-Baghadi, ISIL propaganda such as the film *Flames of War* and numerous Twitter entries communicate a strictly jihadist message (McCoy, 2014). Using this religious motivation as a front, al-Baghadi is free to prey on the piety of his recruits and utilize their devotion in his personal quest for power.

Finally, cults and terrorist groups both take advantage of what social scientist Robert Cialdini calls the Six Principles of Persuasion. The principles seen most prominently during the ISIL recruitment process are reciprocation, social proof, and liking (Cialdini, 2006). The principle of reciprocity recognizes that people feel indebted to those who do something for them (Cialdini, 2006). By providing recruits with a positive sense of purpose and calling, these ISIL recruits are primed to lay devote their lives and, possibly, lay down their lives for the group. The principles of social proof and liking involve recruits not only looking to others around them for direction, but also responding positively to recruiters who give them compliments or make them feel mentally and physically secure. In the case of the American Tarek Mahana, both of these principles were in play during his recruitment. Recorded phone conversations between Mahana and his ISIL recruiter in Somalia convey a warm, personal relationship with the recruiter calling Mahana "brother" and offering him monetary support, lodging, a visa, and even a potential wife (Yan, 2014).

Defusing the Nexus

In light of this convergence of tactics between ISIL and cult groups, a number of policy recommendations are warranted:

- Abandon the notion that kinetic military strikes against ISIL will singlehandedly defeat the group's worldwide message of jihad and establishment of a caliphate. ISIL's sophisticated use of social media and Internet platforms expand their recruitment operations beyond the battlefield and into the heart of Western society. U.S. CT strategy should accept this fact and not rely solely on its military prowess to confront ISIL.
- Wage an ideological war with a limited U.S. government face. The U.S. State Department's Center for Strategic Terrorism Communications is attempting counter propaganda by ISIL. However, an ideological campaign will have a greater chance of success if it is done without the direct funding of the U.S. government. Until 2011, the Quilliam Foundation in Britain received as much as £ 1 million from the British government. Such funding brought the ideology the foundation was advocating into question among Britain's Muslim community. To avoid this outcome, the U.S. government should rely on NGO and private sector groups to communicate the true message of Islam.
- In addition to tapping NGO or private organizations to sponsor these ideological campaigns, the U.S. should focus on utilizing de-radicalized Americans as the face of their message. Placing a fellow Muslim and former terrorist at the forefront of these campaigns will increase the legitimacy of these programs to those targeted by ISIL recruiters.
- In addition to a domestic ideological campaign, the U.S. should explore the possibility of persuading its ISIL coalition allies to establish similar campaigns within their own countries. While countries like Saudi Arabia and Yemen have "de-radicalization" programs in place, they only target a terrorist who has already been disengaged from terrorist activities and is seeking

rehabilitation. Future foreign government campaigns should focus on preempting radicalization, rather than merely reacting to it.

- To hedge against the possibility of recidivism, law enforcement officials should communicate with individuals like Tarek Mahana and discover what motivated him to communicate with ISIL. Research by intelligence experts, while valuable, can only be refined and supported by these first-hand accounts from a former ISIL recruit.

Endnotes

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