



INTERN CORNER: UNDERSTANDING WHY PEOPLE FLOCK TO THE ISLAMIC STATE

By Ty Joplin



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Approaching the Islamic State

On August 12, [two teens](#) from Mississippi were apprehended on their way to join the Islamic State (IS). One, a student about to enter a graduate psychology program, and the other an honor student and daughter of a police officer. In a story that has become increasingly common, individuals who otherwise bear no connection to the radicalism of IS are leaving their countries by the [thousands](#) to join the terrorist group. In [Australia](#), a shy teenager who recently converted to Islam was apprehended for trying to join IS. In [Germany](#), a locally celebrated rapper suddenly uprooted his career to join IS, ultimately sacrificing his life. A common theme in such stories is the utter shock and confusion expressed by those who were close to the individuals; many are surprised to learn that these people had converted to Islam at all. There are thousands of stories like these; people from Western Europe and the US making an arduous trek to IS-controlled territory for mysterious reasons.

The most recent estimate is that over [20,000 foreigners](#) have flocked to Iraq and Syria, mostly to IS. Given this unprecedented surge in recruitment, never before seen in any terrorist organization in modern history, analysts and scholars are scrambling to develop theories behind IS's appeal. Many are asking why so many people are giving up their entire lives to fight for a destructive cause. Many news headlines attribute IS's appeal to youth to [exciting videos and "girl power."](#) But to really know why an individual joins a terrorist group and engages in atrocities is a notoriously difficult task.

There is no one-size-fits-all profile of a terrorist or someone susceptible to radicalization.¹ The common strain between those radicalized is that they are mostly young and relatively ignorant about Islam, rendering them vulnerable to theological justifications of violent extremism. Sometimes, they are socially isolated. Moreover, there seems to be countless pathways towards radicalization, so policymakers are stuck playing "whack-a-mole" to prevent citizens from joining IS.

¹ Jonathon Rae, ["Will it Ever be Possible to Profile the Terrorist?"](#) *Journal of Terrorism Research* (2012). Also see: Walter Laqueur, *End to War: Terrorism in the Twenty-First Century* (Continuum, 2003).

Scholars draw on a variety of analytical perspectives to help us fill in the picture. Current research on religious conversion, for example, offers promising insights into situational and inter-relational factors that affect individuals' decisions and pathways to conversion.² Arguably the most valuable addition this field provides is a sophisticated set of models that track the conditions and consequences of radicalization, like Lewis Rambo's 7-step model that details a personal crisis that leads to an encounter with a religion, and then a religious commitment as a way of reconciling one's disrupted identity.³

Social Movement Theory (SMT), which takes on terrorism from an organizational perspective, stresses the political opportunities available to terrorist groups to mobilize, and their deployment of a sense of collective identity to recruit.⁴ SMT also seeks to “de-orientalize” and “de-exceptionalize” the study of terrorist groups, arguing that they are constrained and motivated by similar structures that govern other social movements.⁵

Social psychological approaches to terrorism and radicalization hone in on the dynamics within groups, including terrorist groups and its recruits, identifying how group polarization, a depleted sense of individual responsibility, and in-group/out-group biases drive people towards engaging in radical beliefs and behavior.⁶

However, while these theories provide useful frameworks to analyze radicalization, they stop short of providing insight into what drives individuals to *commit acts of terror*, to commit atrocities, to take part in a genocide. As Fathali Moghaddam points out, the process of radicalization is multi-stepped and only culminates in an act of terror, but by no means is comprised solely of outward acts.⁷ Much of the process of radicalization occurs internally as subtle but significant shifts in one's worldview and one's self-identification (group identification). But most theoretical approaches, including the three I mentioned above, underestimate the autonomy of the individual, assuming they are radicalized by persuasive agents who coax displaced youth into violent extremism. Even Moghaddam's psychological analysis frames individual's gradual descent into terrorism as one that is, to a large extent, externally driven with the indoctrinated individual behaving more like a passive object of persuasion.

While external factors like persuasive agents are fundamental to the radicalization process, if we are to understand what creates terrorists, a closer look should be given to an emerging base of psychological literature. This literature challenges the notion that people passively obey authorities to commit evil and argues that people can be internally, actively, and autonomously driven to commit atrocities so as long as they believe themselves to be aiding a just cause. This theory, called the engaged followership model,⁸ provides a rigorous method to analyze and explain the gradual process of radicalization that leads to terrorism, differentiating itself from other prevailing theories about radicalization, since it assumes a higher level of individual agency and places one's internal ambitions and initial moral impulse as key drivers of radicalization and terrorist acts rather than simply crediting a persuasive recruiter, political opportunities, or inter-group dynamics.

Doing “The Right Thing”

Baffled by how thousands of well-educated and seemingly rational German bureaucrats, including the infamous Adolf Eichmann, could happily work to ensure the systematic elimination of over 6 million people in the Holocaust, Stanley Milgram famously set up an experiment to test the conditions required to induce people to commit evil in 1961.⁹ The main experiment was simple enough: individuals were asked to shock someone if they answered a question incorrectly. The more questions they answered incorrectly, the higher voltages they were administered until

² Randy Borum, "Radicalization into Violent Extremism I: A Review of Social Science Theories," *Journal of Strategic Security* 4, No. 4 (2011): 25.

³ Lewis Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion* (Yale University Press, 1993).

⁴ Colin Beck, "The Contribution of Social Movement Theory to Understanding Terrorism." *Sociology Compass* 2, No. 6 (2008): 1576.

⁵ Jeoren Gunning, "Social Movement Theory and the Study of Terrorism," in R. Jackson, M. B. Smyth, & J. Gunning (eds.) *Critical Terrorism Studies: A New Research Agenda* (Routledge, 2009), Chapter 9.

⁶ Clark McCauley and M. E. Segal, "Social Psychology of Terrorist Groups," in C. Hendrick (ed.), *Group Processes and Intergroup Relations: Review of Personality and Social Psychology* (Sage, 1987). Also see Borum, 20-22.

⁷ Fathali M. Moghaddam, "The Staircase to Terror; a Psychological Exploration," *American Psychology* 60, No. 2 (2005).

⁸ Alexander Haslam et al., "Happy to Have Been of Service?: The Yale Archive as a Window into the Engaged Followership of Participants in Milgram's 'Obedience' Experiments," *British Journal of Social Psychology* 54, No. 1 (2015): 6.

⁹ Stanley Milgram, "Behavioral Study of Obedience," *The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 67, No. 4 (1963): 371.

a lethal shock was to be administered. An astounding majority of tested individuals knowingly administered what they believed to be lethal amounts of electricity. (Of course, no shocks were actually delivered but the participants in the study were unaware of that.)

The experiment sent blast waves across nearly every academic discipline. It was then and is still remains largely interpreted as an indication of the dark side of human nature – that seemingly normal or banal individuals passively obey authority figures to a damning extent.¹⁰ We see this lesson applied as a possible explanation for people metamorphosing into radical terrorists: the most common theory is that they were persuaded by authoritative figures that promised them adventure or significance within a group and thus were able to morally disengage themselves from the evil they were committing.¹¹ While current theories also cite individuals' drives to aid the cause of creating an Islamic State, the individuals' drive is assumed to be the product of recruitment efforts and other forces that don't speak to the agency the individual maintains in genuinely thinking the cause is a noble one.

However, psychologists Alex Haslam and Stephen Reicher dug into the archived files of Milgram's experiment, and found that rather than a passive obedience to authority, individuals were *actively* driven by the internal desire to contribute to a just cause.¹²

They noted that individuals actually stopped administering shocks when they were told they had no other choice but to do so. Alternatively, they reported that individuals were happy to be aiding the cause of scientific advancement by participating in a cutting-edge study and therefore were recorded administering shocks on their own accord.

In stark contrast to the popular thinking that those who commit acts of evil are either morally disengaged and obedient or irrationally minded, Haslam et al. found that those who commit such acts are “engaged followers,” meaning these individuals are keenly aware of what they are doing, but construe their actions as “virtuous rather than vicious,” because they are advancing what in their minds is a worthy cause.¹³

Here, identity politics becomes crucial to understanding what allows people to commit atrocities: if an individual identifies herself to be part of the in-group, like the in-groups of scientific innovators or ideological radicals, then she accepts the worldview and parameters that make up that group, including the potentially violent stance the group takes on those who do not belong to the group. In other words, the classic “us versus them” mentality takes hold. But simply identifying with a group is not enough: it is not just the desire for personal significance within an organization or the quest for adventure that motivates violent behavior, despite this being the prevalent theory explaining IS's success; it is also the active desire to *contribute* to the vision of the group because it is seen as a noble pursuit.

Individuals who commit evil are not passive conduits for the machinations of more powerful people. They are actively engaged with the process of committing evil acts because they are convinced they are part of a just cause.

Applying the Engaged Followership Model

Haslam and Reicher's engaged followership model should be used more widely to understanding the global appeal of IS and other radical groups.

Interviews of thousands of terrorists indicate that they actively sought out al-Qaeda recruiters rather than being passively approached by them.¹⁴ Moreover, firsthand accounts of IS fighters detail a [positive drive](#) to [contribute](#) to what they see as the [just cause](#) of establishing a caliphate. Identification with terrorist groups begin within the

¹⁰ Thomas Blass, *Obedience to Authority: Current Perspectives on the Milgram Paradigm* (Psychology Press, 1999). Also see its second edition, published in 2009.

¹¹ John M. “Matt” Venhaus, “Why Youth Join al-Qaeda,” *US Institute of Peace Special Report* 216 (May 2010). Also see Albert Bandura, “The Origins and Consequences of Moral Disengagement: A Social Learning Perspective,” in F. M. Moghaddam and A. J. Marsella eds., *Understanding Terrorism: Psychosocial Roots, Consequences, and Interventions* (Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association, 2004), 121.

¹² Haslam et al., 6.

¹³ Alex Haslam and Stephen Reicher, “Contesting the “Nature” of Conformity: What Milgram and Zimbardo’s Studies Really Show,” *PLoS Biology* 10 (2010).

¹⁴ Venhaus.

individual and her drive to do good as she sees herself more and more as part of the imagined community of concerned Muslims who lack outlets to express their grievances. From there, she seeks out and is guided by terrorist recruiters online to align herself with a specific group and cause as an outlet, where she thinks she is joining the just cause of protecting Islam and its adherents. To her, she has found the right cause and vision to invest herself in and express her outrage or aspirations. To others, she has become irrationally convinced that joining a terrorist group was in her interest.

This explanation of terrorism also explains its converse: people engage in humanitarian efforts, community organizing, social justice causes, or charity efforts not simply because they are persuaded to do so by an authority figure or identify with a group that believes in the good of such acts, but because they are internally driven to contribute to these as just causes, and surround themselves with an in-group that similarly views these causes to be virtuous. In both cases, the terrorist and the humanitarian are just doing what they believe is right, and letting specific modes of action be dictated by organizations they identify with. Nevertheless, they retain agency over the moral impulse that leads them to the organization in the first place. This is why analysts emphasize the development of counter-narratives so much, since they guide one's moral impulse and drive to contribute to a "just cause" towards one that conforms with mainstream values.¹⁵

Haslam and Platow conducted two experiments that revealed that once an individual identifies with a group, they respond to leaders who embody the values of that group and possess a vision to frame the purpose of the group, making them much more likely to act on behalf of that leader.¹⁶ Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's declaration that he is now the *caliph* of a true Islamic state can thus be seen as a pivotal moment through which a definite in-group was established and an avenue for identifying with and acting for that group was made official, leading to the unparalleled wave of recruits coming into the Iraq and Syria. Committing genocide against religious minorities, like the Yazidis, is then an instrumental part of the vision to be faithfully enacted if the Caliphate calls for it.

Recently, [Baghdadi banned](#) the broadcast of violent videos that depicted the group's brutality. If viewed with the analytical tools the engaged followership model provides, this move is likely an attempt to prevent the alienation of individuals who would otherwise identify with the cause of IS, and hone its message towards state-building. For IS to remain, it must be perceived as a valid outlet to express grievances and combat supposed injustices with a unifying cause.

Conclusion

Integrating the model of engaged followership into the conversation about terrorism and extremism will help analysts understand the appeal of IS and other radical groups. We must begin to think of IS' successful recruitment efforts not merely as a highly sophisticated and persuasive machine but also one that manipulates individuals' earnest desires to contribute to a worthy cause. In approaching the question of why *so many* people are opting to join terrorist groups, we should start with the individual's desire to help with a cause, their self-perceived lack of outlets, and subsequent self-identification with IS and the "just cause" narrative that purports to solve her grievances. Understanding the mystery in these terms, it becomes much easier to see why IS fighters commit such atrocities: because they are actively engaged in the task as part of the larger cause they believe in, even though their actions offer only destruction.

¹⁵ See Alex Shmidt, "Challenging the Narrative of the "Islamic State," *International Center for Counter-Terrorism-The Hague, ICCT Research Paper*, June 2015.

¹⁶ Alex Haslam and Michael Platow, "The Link Between Leadership and Followership: How Affirming Social Identity Translates Vision Into Action" *PSPB* 27, No. 11 (November 2001).