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Rhetoric II

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Culture Wars: Why Islamism is Winning and How to Fight Back

[**Play ISIS recruitment video targeting Westerners:** <https://news.vice.com/article/pro-isis-recruitment-video-encourages-foreign-fighters-to-join-jihad>] Two years ago, this ISIS recruitment video was shown to me at a lecture series. The video shocked me not because of the content-I was well aware of ISIS' malicious and deceptive message- but the intended audience. Besides the obvious that the video was in English, the direct call for Westerners to join the Islamist cause stunned me. I had always believed that the only people who joined groups like Al-Qaeda or ISIS were Middle-Eastern Muslims. **This video, however, shook every stereotype of what I thought a radical looked like. This video was meant for American and European youth. This video was meant for me. (Allusion).** I simply could not comprehend why people from my background would willingly hand themselves over to such an infamous menace like ISIS.

This led me on a two-year journey of seeking answers on this issue. Over the course of my research, I have undergone the occasionally uncomfortable process of having my preconceived notions of how the world worked ripped off and replaced with a deeper understanding of the threat that radical Islamic terrorism, otherwise known as Islamism, poses to both the West and the East. I came to realize that for far too long, we have fought our war against Islamist-driven terror without taking the time to understand our enemy. Now, we are paying the cost. New terror groups are rising up to replace the old and our youth are betraying us to join the enemy. Recently, mass shootings in the name of ISIS have tragically become monthly

occurrences. Through my research, the driving forces behind these cultural movements and a strategy to finally and permanently end Islamism has emerged. Ultimately, I discovered that the masterful manipulation of the cultural weaknesses of both the West and Middle East on the part of the Islamist movement has been the key to deceiving and seducing youth to join their cause- a situation that demands a root solution. Instead of attacking the symptom of terror which leads to temporary results, we need to remedy the cultural and ideological basis. It is high time we slay the hydra at its heart instead of simply cutting off another of its heads. I will address this issue by first defining Islamism then moving on to develop a profile of a typical Western and Muslim recruit. Afterwards, I will identify the single characteristic that immediately puts a candidate at far greater risk of radicalization and the ways in which Islamism spreads its toxic ideology. Lastly, I will outline strategies for taking down Islamism at the root once and for all.

Before tackling some of the deeper issues, it is first essential to clearly define what I mean by an “Islamist.” (definition) I can think of no one better to clarify this issue than former Islamist Maajid Nawaz, who now works as a social activist against Islamism (testimony). Nawaz explains, **“It’s important to grasp how Islamism differs of Islam...Simply defined, Islamism is the desire to impose any given interpretation of Islam over society as law...Whereas disputes within Islam deal with a person’s approach to religion, Islamism seeks to deal with a person’s approach to society”**(45). **“That’s crucial to understanding what Islamism is all about: it isn’t a religious movement with political consequences, it is a political movement with religious consequences”**(49). Simply put, the Islamist movement is not just another division within Islam. Instead, it is Islam viewed in an entirely new light- one that takes spiritual realities and makes them tangible physical ones.

Allow me to illustrate. Many argue that Islam is an inherently violent religion. This view, however, fails to discriminate between an Islamist understanding of the Koran and interpretation of mainstream Islam. *Within the Koran, believers are called to fight against evil, corruption, and worldliness. The large majority of Muslims interpret this as a war against the sin self, similarly to how the Bible commands believers to “put on the armor of God” to fight against sin. This holy war against transgression, also known as jihad, is peaceful and beneficial to society. Islamists, however, interpret this passage differently. They see the war against evil as a physical war against the unbelieving world. As a result, they believe it is their duty to convert or kill those who do not worship Allah.* It has taken the spiritual command and made it physical, leading to violence.

This principle also applies to the Islamist’s view of the future. For example, most Muslims do not believe that it is their duty to physically bring about the apocalypse by fulfilling prophecy. ISIS, however, has made it its goal to intentionally fulfill prophecy by establishing the Muslim caliphate and bringing about the apocalypse. Once again, the Islamists are applying to the physical world what mainstream Islam limits to the spiritual realm.

This is why most Muslims actually condemn ISIS. **In fact, just recently, a group of three-hundred Muslim imams signed a declaration condemning ISIS for its violence and terrorism. (ethos)** Following suit, traditional Muslims actually see ISIS as a threat competing for the hearts and minds of their youth. In fact, **there are multiple examples of Muslim parents turning their own children in for converting to ISIS.** This is why it is so imperative for us to clarify exactly who our enemy is. It is not Muslims as a whole. In fact, the majority of Muslims are fighting the same enemy as we are. It is Islamism that we should be attacking, not the religion as a whole.

For clarity's sake, ISIS is only one group of multiple groups that fall under the category of Islamism. Other groups such as HT or Al Queda also fall under that label. However, I will refer to ISIS most often due to its relevancy and consistency with the Islamist message.

(distinctio)

So who would join such a violent movement, condemned by Muslims and non-Muslims alike? Apparently, a lot of people. (hypophora) According to U.S. intelligence, **upwards of 20,000 foreign fighters have joined the Islamist cause in Syria. 11,000 of these foreign fighters hail from the Middle East; 4,000 belong to Western Europe; 3,000 are attributed to former Soviet Union nations, and 150 from the United States.** And these are just the recruits that made it to Syria. As I will discuss more in depth later, many recruits are radicalized over the internet and commit acts of violence in the name of Allah against their own countrymen.

Who are these recruits and what characteristics make them vulnerable to radicalization?
To answer this question, we must divide up the two major categories of radicals- Muslim recruits and West recruits. (hypophora) The motivations and methods of each group are completely different so it is helpful to profile them separately.

We will begin with Muslim recruits. As I mentioned earlier, many traditional Muslims are growing increasingly concerned with the number of youth joining Islamist organizations. For the majority of Muslim recruits, anger and discontent over their situation fuels their desire to join ISIS. There is a difference, however, between the grievances of Muslims living in Islamic nations and those of displaced Muslims.

In the case of Muslims living in Islamic nations, typically the widespread destabilization and violence found in Middle Eastern nations engenders a bitterness and frustration in its youth. Sociologists also point to the increasing global connectedness as a factor in this discontent as

members of impoverished nations are growing increasingly aware of the prosperity of others. All they have to do is turn on the television or scroll through Instagram to see the prosperity, peace, and social mobility enjoyed by many Western nations. Foreign policy expert Ömer Taşpınar describes this phenomenon well. **“Globalization creates an acute awareness about opportunities available elsewhere. This leads to frustration, victimization, and humiliation among growing cohorts of urbanized, undereducated, and unemployed Muslim youth who are able to make comparisons across countries. The scale of youth frustration is compounded by a demographic explosion, growing expectations, weak state capacity, and diminishing opportunities for upward mobility in most parts of the Muslim world. Globalization further exacerbates this situation because restive Muslim masses of both genders are caught in the growing tension between religious tradition and western modernity.”** (pathos) Taşpınar goes on to highlight a desire for a return to the golden age of Islam as another reason for the discontent before urging policy makers to consider a more holistic solution to the problem of radicalization. **“An effective strategic campaign against radicalism in the Arab and Islamic world at large should take the socio-economic dimension of this collective frustration very seriously. Little can be done in the short-term about deeply rooted cultural and psychological grievances. But quite a lot can be done in the social and economic sphere.”** Contrary to popular belief, many Muslims who join ISIS are not ideologically driven. Instead, they are seeking an outlet for the anger and frustration they experience as an impoverished Muslim with little to no opportunities.

This brings me to the second characteristic of Muslim radical- little understanding of the Quran. Because Islamist fighters are not ideologically driven, many of them have a juvenile knowledge of the Muslim faith. **Studies have shown that the overwhelming majority of**

Muslim ISIS fighters cannot even recite the pillars of Islam by memory (ethos). Journalist and religious expert Lisette Thoofth expounds upon this, **“There have been surveys done by forensic psychiaters who interviewed people convicted of terrorism since 9/11. They interviewed hundreds of people in Guantanamo and other prisons. And one forensic psychiatrist who is also an officer of the CIA ...concluded that Islam had nothing to do with it. The problem was rather ignorance of... Islam. Had they had a proper Muslim education they wouldn't be doing this. Only 20% of them has had a regular Muslim upbringing. The rest are either new converts – like the gunmen who recently attacked the Canadian Parliament; or non-observant, which means they don't go to the mosque – like the bombers in the Boston marathon; or self-taught. Two young men who left Britain to join the Jihad in Syria ordered from Amazon a book called Islam for Dummies. That says it, you see”** (16). Quite frankly, the idea circulated by the media that Islamist fighters are religious zealots surrendering their lives to Allah is a farce. Nothing screams religious zealot quite like Islam for Dummies.(pathos-humor) These radicals are lost, angry, and giving up their very lives to a god whom they do not know.

At the beginning of this speech, I mentioned that the reason I investigated in this topic was the burning question of why a Western person would wish to join ISIS. I just explained what socio economic and psychological factors drive Muslims to join this terror group but what reason would a twenty-three year old Sunday school teacher and babysitter from Washington state have for joining this heinous organization? I will answer this question now by profiling a typical Western recruit.

One characteristic common to Western radicals is a search for purpose and meaning. Ever since the Enlightenment, our culture has been trending towards an atheistic, relativistic self-

determinism which urges its adherents to choose their own meaning and purpose in life. This message saturates our **movies, music, and now, our minds (alliteration)**. As a result, the identity crisis faced by many teenagers has been exacerbated as their questions of “Who am I?” and “How should I live?” are answered with simply more questions. “What do *you* want to be?” “How do *you* feel your life should be lived?” In trying to free youth by removing objective truth and morality, society has merely managed to imprison them in lies. As a result, Western youth are starving for something bigger than themselves to offer them identity, significance, and direction. In steps ISIS. As an article published in the *The Atlantic* entitled “Why Are Westerners Attracted to ISIS?” explains, **“ISIS’s caliphate project, because it offers a bracing utopian alternative to Western secular society, speaks directly to those who feel their lives are worthless, spiritually corrupted, empty, boring, or devoid of purpose and significance, and who see no value in their own societies. It promises, in short, salvation and ultimate meaning through total commitment to a sacred cause...This may also explain how, despite all the evidence, Western migrants to the caliphate can ignore or discount the mountain of incriminating evidence against ISIS, and risk everything to join it.”** Ross Douthat of the *New York Times* concurs. The **“features [of ISIS that appeal to Westerners] include not only the lust for violence and the will to power, but also a yearning for a transcendent cause that liberal societies can have trouble satisfying...liberalism’s “all-too-human order” — which privileges the sober, industrious and slightly boring — is simply “not for everyone.” Nor, most likely, will it ever be: in this century, the 22nd, or beyond”** (4-6). The West has brought this enemy upon herself. She has failed to give her children heroes to look up to and a cause to live and die for. Now, her children are leaving her for lie that falsely promises these soul-deep needs.

Westerners are not only attracted to ISIS out of idealism. For some, it is sickeningly a desire for adventure that entices them to violent jihad. “Counterterrorism expert Richard Barrett wrote last year in a report called ‘Foreign fighters in Syria,’ **‘ISIS recruits are often young -- sometimes disillusioned teenagers trying to find purpose and make their mark. The general picture provided by foreign fighters of their lives in Syria suggests camaraderie, good morale and purposeful activity, all mixed in with a sense of understated heroism, designed to attract their friends as well as to boost their own self-esteem.’** “Fawaz Gerges, professor of Middle East studies at The London School of Economics, put it more bluntly: **“ISIS provides these deluded young men and women with an adventurous trip.”** Beyond the deeper desire to live for something greater than themselves, some Western youth simply desire a life beyond the hum drum of their homes.

If there is anything that I want you to take away from this profile of a radical, it is a greater understanding of the man behind the turban or the lonely, disillusioned teenager. The West, especially America, has been deeply wounded by the violence of the Islamist movement. The horrors of 9/11, the Brussels bombing, and numerous other attacks are forever seared into our collective memory. Despite this pain, however, let us never allow our bitterness to blind us. Let us never lash out in anger. Justice? Yes. Revenge. Never. These people who have wounded us so deeply are deeply wounded themselves. The mere fact that they are willing to give up their lives for a god whom they do not know should move us to empathy and compassion. Hate Islamism but never hate the Islamist. I speak specifically to my brothers and sisters in Christ when I say that hating these people is, quite frankly, a non-option. Jesus called us to love our enemies just as he loved us. If we are dehumanizing and hating our enemies, what does that say of the God we serve? (RQ) (pause)

Before I address how we can respond the Islamist threat, it is helpful to study their strategies first. One of the most powerful techniques that jihadist recruiters use is isolation. “Mr. Shaikh, who spent years recruiting for extremist groups before recanting, says the isolation is intentional. **“We look for people who are isolated,” he said. “And if they are not isolated already, then we isolated them”** (85-86). Even becoming involved in a Mosque is discouraged by recruiters lest someone teach them traditional non-violent Muslim beliefs. The numbers show that this strategy is working. Individuals statistically are at a much higher risk of radicalization when they are socially or emotionally detached. Recruiters know this and take advantage of it. When an individual is isolated, the “brotherhood” offered by Islamist community becomes especially attractive. Additionally, people who have severed themselves off from friends and family become unmoored from reality and no longer have outside perspectives or competing values. They are more readily accepting of strange and extremist views because they have no accountability. (logos) This method serves as one of Islamism’s most valuable tool.

Perhaps the greatest key to Islamism’s success, however, lies in its remarkably advanced propaganda. The video I showed you in the beginning is just one example of ISIS’ rhetorical prowess. **Former director of the National Counterterrorism Center, Matthew Olsen argues, “ISIS now has the most sophisticated propaganda machine of any terrorist organization...It turns out timely, high-quality media, and it uses social media to secure a widespread following’... Even the U.S. State Department admits ISIS’ propaganda prowess “is something we have not seen before” (20-22).** The overwhelming majority of experts attribute ISIS’ incredible success to their remarkable mastery of technology and propaganda. Their major platforms consist of YouTube videos, Twitter accounts, and magazines. YouTube has started to take their videos down but they still remain accessible on certain sites. Jihadist also

reach potential recruits through Twitter, Tweeting out calls to “holy war” and answering questions of what life is like in ISIS. Finally, magazine like *Dabiq*, *Inspire*, and *Rumiyah* have had enormous success in encouraging terrorism. In fact, it was *Inspire* which “inspired” the Boston Bombings of 2013. These media platforms have allowed Islamist groups like ISIS to recruit candidates from all corners of the globe, making it a far more powerful and fearsome enemy.

We have fought our war on terror for long enough without any lasting solutions. The only way we will truly snuff out this movement is to address its ideological and sociological root. Bruce Hoffman, a renowned terrorism expert explains our current cat-and-mouse strategy only serves to “**eliminate individuals who pose an immediate threat; however, those individuals are soon replaced by other like-minded individuals intent on causing harm—creating a continuous cycle of threats. Instead, by viewing radicalization through a social psychological lens, we may be able to effectively change the conditions that contribute to radicalization. If we change the conditions that contribute to radicalization, we may be able to stop the cycle**”. This solution will have to be large scale and will take time but, ultimately, it is the only way to completely dissolve Islamism. Both the East and the West have their part to play. For Muslims, this means better education on the true teachings of the Koran. Those who are well-educated about Muslim faith will be less like to be taken in by a twisted version of it. In fact, jihadi rehab programs have been founded based off this exact principle that education about true Islam will prevent and convert radicals. As for the West, we must stop fostering the environment of isolation in which radicalization thrives through Islamophobia. As we discussed earlier, isolation is one of the key causes of radicalization. When Muslims are isolated from a community out of baseless fear, it simply exacerbates the problem rather than helping it.

Recognize the difference between a Muslim and an Islamist and act accordingly. Secondly, the West needs to end the culture of meaninglessness and give youth purpose- something truly worth living and dying for. Stop telling kids that whatever works for you is fine and truth does not matter. You are hurting them- not helping. Eliminate culture of meaningless with bold truth

Lastly, to my brother and sister in Christ, we have an essential role and responsibility in this fight. As believers, we are in a unique position to minister to both of these groups. Jesus called his followers to love our enemies and live without fear of man or evil. If we were truly to live like this, it would dispel the Islamophobic culture that isolates Muslim youth and makes them vulnerable to radicalization. Western culture also is in desperate need of the influence of faithful Christians in the fight against radicalization. In our culture that denies meaning and higher calling, it is the sacred duty of believers to proclaim the hard truths of Christianity. This would provide Western youth with the sense of purpose and worth and prevent them from turning to Islamism. Ultimately, Christianity has the potential to be our most deadly weapon against the threat of Islamism.