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## **ICSR Feature**

# Understanding the drivers of radicalization among Syrians

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## Introduction

Long considered a moderate Muslim country, Syria has become one of the world's most radicalized conflict zones. Despite its peaceful and political origins, the civil-war has allowed ISIS and likeminded violent radical groups to turn the country into a recruiting ground and operating base. The significant local and international security risks caused by this has triggered various campaigns to defeat ISIS. But those efforts have largely focused on conquering the group militarily; the various uncoordinated anti-ISIS campaigns – led by the US, Russia and Turkey – seem to have adopted the mistaken view that to eliminate ISIS militarily as an insurgency will automatically erase it as an ideology. However, neglecting to set out a clear post-ISIS strategy that successfully rehabilitates and re-integrates former ISIS members risks allowing the group to re-emerge with a vengeance, or at least to continue operating as an insurgency for the foreseeable future.

To overcome this potential strategic failure, Syrian experts and counter-radicalisation practitioners working on understanding and undercutting ISIS have been trying to identify the various recurring factors and dynamics that drove thousands of their fellow citizens to join, or at least cooperate,<sup>1</sup> with the group.<sup>2</sup> Through their work with former ISIS members, they have been able to identify four main drivers that pushed many Syrians towards ISIS. These motivations include financial benefits; protection; military capacity and ideology. While some of those motivations are similar to the ones that drove

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- 1 While joining ISIS means becoming a member of the group, cooperating with it does not always mean that the person is automatically a member of the group. For example, a local doctor can be working at a hospital run by ISIS without being a member of the group. The same applies to teachers and other administrative employees.
  - 2 al-Ashawi, K, and Dadouch, S. (2017), 'Turkey-backed rebels in Syria put IS jihadists through rehab', *Reuters*, 28 November 2017, <https://reut.rs/2BskxVU> (accessed 13 April 2018).

foreign fighters to join ISIS,<sup>3</sup> Syria's conflict has created special conditions that pressured many locals to join the group, which will be discussed in detail below.<sup>4</sup> Identifying and understanding such motives are not only important in countering ISIS' recruiting tactics, but also in rehabilitating and reintegrating the thousands of locals who were affiliated with ISIS physically, or influenced ideologically.

## Financial benefits

**T**he Syrian armed conflict, has made it more difficult for locals to provide for their families through administrative jobs. ISIS generated an income of nearly \$2 billion in 2014 alone, and was in control of all governance functions and public services provision.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, the group was able to provide much needed works in different functions and capacities, such as police, administrative employees etc. Moreover, ISIS was paying higher salaries than rebel groups and providing its members with additional incentives to fight for the group. For example, ISIS' members received welfare allowances for accommodation, utility bills, their spouses, children, parents etc. A local resident who lived in ISIS' controlled areas stated,

“ISIS was paying its members \$100 per month. The group was also given a monthly accommodation allowance of \$50. Those who are married were receiving an additional \$50 per month for the wife, \$35 for each kid, and \$50 for each parent living with them. On average ISIS members were making \$600 to \$700 per month which was way more tempting than

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3 Antunez, J. and Moreno, A. (2016), 'Daesh European Foreign Fighters: Ideology, Motivation and Profiling', GESI, January 2016, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/318393476\\_DAESH\\_EUROPEAN\\_FOREIGN\\_FIGHTERS\\_IDEOLOGY\\_MOTIVATION\\_AND\\_PROFILING\\_1](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/318393476_DAESH_EUROPEAN_FOREIGN_FIGHTERS_IDEOLOGY_MOTIVATION_AND_PROFILING_1) (accessed 3 February 2018).

4 Author interview via call with Ahmed, Syrian researchers who focuses on radical groups in Syria, March 2018.

5 Jose Pagliery (2015), 'Inside the \$2 Billion ISIS War Machine', *CNN*, 11 December 2015, <http://money.cnn.com/2015/12/06/news/isis-funding/index.html> (accessed 3 March 2018).

the \$50-100 that was paid by other groups. That's why many people were keen to join the group."<sup>6</sup>

ISIS members were also entitled to other services such as free medical treatment and pharmaceuticals. In contrast, people who weren't ISIS members suffered under a barely functioning economy with rapidly increasing prices.<sup>7</sup> In other words, joining ISIS was considered the only way to accumulate wealth and status in the areas controlled by it.

## Protection

**F**ear of ISIS also played a significant role in persuading people to join the group for their own protection. The group was known for establishing a wider network of informants through which it was able to gather intelligence and thus better understand the local dynamics, identify key players, recruit supporters and eliminate potential threats. The widespread use of informants in the city created mistrust between people, who could not verify who could be spying on them, and pushed many of them to publicly show their loyalty to the group.<sup>8</sup> Locals who lived under ISIS have also consistently highlighted ISIS' use of violence and coercive measures, especially against its rivals, to enforce the group's dominance including detention, abduction, intimidation, assassination, and public execution. As such many people become members of the group to avoid being targeted by it.<sup>9</sup> A Syrian researcher who focuses on radical groups stated,

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6 Author interview via WhatsApp with Sarmad, a local resident from Raqqa, March 2018.

7 Natalie Ilsley (2015), 'ISIS is Facing a Cash Crunch in the Caliphate', *News Week*, 23 September 2015, <http://www.newsweek.com/isisislamic-stateiraqsyriacaliphateraqqaisis-599849> (accessed 9 April 2018).

8 Haid Haid (2018), 'Local Community Resistance to Extremist Groups in Syria: Lessons from Atarib', *Chatham House*, 1 June 2017, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publication/local-community-resistance-extremist-groups-syria-lessons-atarib> (accessed 6 March 2018).

9 Ibid

“People were really shocked by how brutal, and even evil, the group was. ISIS consciously executed, beheaded and physically punished people publicly to terrorise locals. Additionally, everyone knew how the group targeted those who did not support it. Therefore, many people felt that showing loyalty to ISIS is the easiest way to be safe of its atrocities.”<sup>10</sup>

Additionally, civil servants in the areas captured by ISIS often had no choice but to continue their work under ISIS’ flag. Likewise, captured enemy combatants were promised amnesty in exchange for pledging allegiance to ISIS.<sup>11</sup> As such, many people felt that the easiest way to avoid being perceived as a potential enemy, was to become a de-facto ISIS member by following its regulations and attending its activities.

## Military capacity

In times of conflict, being part of an armed group provides a degree of control and agency. As ISIS was for a long time better funded, disciplined and equipped than its competitors, the group became the most appealing option for would-be recruits.<sup>12</sup> Likewise, ISIS’ rapid victories in Syria and Iraq in the second half of 2014 portrayed the group as the most powerful in the region.<sup>13</sup> A local resident who lived in ISIS’ controlled areas stated,

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10 Author interview via WhatsApp with Ahmed, Syrian researchers who focuses on radical groups in Syria, March 2018.

11 Author interview via Skype with Abdullah, a local activist focusing on resisting radical groups, March 2018.

12 Author interview via Skype with Mustafa, a local civil society activists focusing on reconciliation and peace building, January 2018.

13 Author interview via WhatsApp with Omar, former rebel fighter who lives in Turkey, December 2017.

“When you live in a war zone, you need to feel protected by someone or some group. ISIS’ victories in Syria and Iraq and the way media portrayed it made it look unstoppable. Therefore, people started joining the group because it seemed that it was winning. No one wants to join a group that is losing or is expected to.”<sup>14</sup>

But although the war and chaos in Syria provided fertile ground for ISIS to establish itself, it was the atrocities committed by the Syrian regime – which has been killing with impunity its fellow citizens to stay in power – that allowed the group to flourish. The inability of the international community to prevent the regime from using conventional, but particularly unconventional, weapons against its citizens pushed many Syrians to ally themselves with any group fighting it. Consequently, ISIS – which presented itself as the greatest threat to Assad’s survival and the only group capable of toppling it – was able to recruit many of those who viewed the Assad regime as the ultimate enemy. A local activist focusing on resisting radical groups stated,

“Although ISIS was initially fighting other rebel groups, but not the regime, the group was portraying that as a necessary step to defeat the regime. As such, many of those who hated Assad and were not happy with the status of local rebel groups – which were usually perceived as corrupt or weak – viewed ISIS as an actor capable of defeating the regime. The brutality of the latter made them think that only ISIS, which is equally brutal, can make Assad pay for his crimes.”<sup>15</sup>

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14 Author interview via WhatsApp with Sarmad, a local resident from Raqqa, March 2018.

15 Author interview via Skype with Abdullah, a local activist focusing on resisting radical groups, March 2018.

Thus, until the root causes of the Syrian conflict have been addressed, and war criminals are held accountable, ISIS and like-minded groups will continue to benefit from the grievances and chaos caused by it.

## Ideology

**S**yrrian researchers have also found that some recruits were ideologically committed to ISIS' goal of establishing a caliphate that was governed according to their radical interpretation of the Sharia. ISIS' ideology has a very simplistic, black and white view of the world, and therefore provide people with an easy equation for resolving political conflict, solving social problems and creating a just society. The absence of successful, alternative ideological formations, whether they are more moderate expressions of Islam or secular democratic expressions, made ISIS' ideology more appealing for some.

However, within this category, Syrian counter-radicalisation practitioners differentiate between two types of ideological supporters. First, there are those who already shared a similar ideology before joining the group, the majority of whom were members of other groups such as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (previously called the Nusra Front), whose defected members created the primary core of ISIS in Syria.<sup>16</sup> Second are those who became ideologically motivated after being exposed to ISIS' ideology and propaganda. While the group aimed to spread its ideology to all generations, through its different Sharia institutions and educational

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<sup>16</sup> Author interview via Skype with Mustafa, a local civil society activists focusing on reconciliation and peace building, January 2018.



courses, ISIS seems to give a special priority to recruiting youth. The group specifically tailored its propaganda to appeal to young people and manipulated them into placing their trust in ISIS' ideology above all else.<sup>17</sup> The “cubs of the caliphate,” as ISIS calls them, are cheaper and more ideologically malleable than adults. It was also easier to target them on a large scale at ISIS-sponsored schools, which were the only option available to local residents. The result was that ISIS was able to mobilize a large number of young people for its own causes by providing them with one of the clearest ways to achieve personal fulfilment, often through avenging personal grievances. This category is considered the most dangerous one as it potentially lays the groundwork for the group's resurgence as well as an inter-generational problem.<sup>18</sup>

## Conclusion

**W**hile it is not clear how many people fit each of these profiles, Syrian analysts downplay the number of those who joined ISIS for ideological reasons, which they estimate to be less than 20%.<sup>19</sup> This view, however, is not limited to Syrians alone. International Alert conducted a qualitative study examining the reasons that make young Syrians vulnerable to recruitment by violent extremist groups in Syria. Their research concluded that

“Radicalisation is not an explanation for joining a violent extremist group per se. For Syrians, belief in extreme ideologies appears to be – at most – a secondary factor in

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17 Author interview via WhatsApp with Omar, a local teacher from Raqqa, February 2018.

18 Author interview via Skype with Abdullah, a local activist focusing on resisting radical groups, March 2018.

19 Author interview via WhatsApp with Ahmed, Syrian researchers who focuses on radical groups in Syria, March 2018.

the decision to join an extremist group. Religion is providing a moral medium for coping and justification for fighting, rather than a basis for rigid and extreme ideologies.”<sup>20</sup>

Building on that understanding, Syrian counter-radicalisation practitioners believe that the majority of Syrians who are affiliated with ISIS are pragmatists who joined the group to help navigate themselves and their families through the troubled social conditions they were living in. While the ability to rehabilitate such individuals depends largely on their role inside ISIS and the crimes they committed during that time, they are considered easier to re-integrate into society if they are provided with the necessary support. Contrarily, those ISIS members who are ideologically motivated are considered more dangerous and require more extensive and advanced rehabilitation efforts.<sup>21</sup> Additionally, the rehabilitation failure rate among the latter is higher.

Using the knowledge that Syrian practitioners have been able to gain through years of working with former ISIS members is key to set out a comprehensive post-ISIS strategy that addresses the root causes of its emergence, and will be the only way to ensure the defeat of the group in Syria. Otherwise, the anti-ISIS campaigns risk allowing the group to benefit from their mistakes to re-emerge even stronger than before.

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20 Aubrey, M. Aubrey, R. Brodrick, F. and Brooks, C. (2016), 'Why Young Syrians Choose to Fight', International Alert, May 2016, [http://www.international-alert.org/sites/default/files/Syria\\_YouthRecruitmentExtremistGroups\\_EN\\_2016.pdf](http://www.international-alert.org/sites/default/files/Syria_YouthRecruitmentExtremistGroups_EN_2016.pdf) (accessed 11 April 2018).

21 Author interview via WhatsApp with Hussien, the director of the Syrian Counter Extremism Centre, April 2018.





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