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**FROM EUROPE TO JIHAD - MOTIVATIONS BEHIND JOINING  
EXTREMIST ORGANISATIONS & THE THREE LEVELS OF  
IDENTITY**

Master's Thesis

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## ABSTRACT

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A new type of extremist organisation recently emerged on the international scene: The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). The organisation announced the establishment of their own state - the Caliphate - on 29 June 2014. ISIS has been successful at attracting an unprecedented number of Western recruits to its territory in Iraq and Syria, both men and women. This thesis presents a qualitative analysis of ISIS and its recruitment machinery, with main focus on the motivations of foreign volunteers for joining the organisation as well as their paths to radicalisation. The main methods used are case study method and narrative inquiry, with the three levels of identity (Schwartz, Dunkel and Waterman) providing the theoretical framework for the study.

Recruits are often characterised as young, aimless, and lacking a sense of identity and belonging. The study proved that the formation of personal identity and its interaction with the other levels of identity is decisive in determining whether a person is prone to radicalisation. For people of immigrant backgrounds, the identity crisis often originates at the levels of cultural and social identity with religion and collectivism bringing additional dimensions to it. Two outcomes of identity formation proved to be of special relevance for extremist identity: authoritarian foreclosure and aimless diffusion. They lead to the adoption of commitments without systematic exploration of alternatives, and explains the readiness of young individuals to adopt the rhetoric of an extremist organisation. Also central to the phenomenon is the perceived oppression of the Muslim community by the West and will to defend one's community. Westerners are often drawn in by a sense of adventure and humanitarian reasons in addition to identity issues. The appeal of the Caliphate as the portrayed ideal form of society providing a concrete solution and a feeling of purpose for individuals is also key in attracting more recruits.

There is no single solution to tackling this phenomenon. Eliminating radical elements in societies requires community and government cooperation. Moreover, tolerance and dialogue is essential in overcoming the stereotypical perceptions among Western societies and minorities and defeating the rhetoric and appeal of the extremist organisations.

Keywords: Extremism, Radicalisation, ISIS, Jihadism, identity formation

## INTRODUCTION

Terrorism as a phenomenon is not new and it has taken many different forms in history. The latest form rose to the international arena after the attack on the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York City on 11 September 2001. Since then the international community's focus has been on Islamist terrorist - or rather extremist - organisations.

One of the most recent extremist organisations to emerge on the international scene is the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), which proclaimed itself an Islamic State on 29 June 2014 (Barrett 2014a, 13). This also marked the re-establishment of the Caliphate that has long been the ideal of the Muslim world. Little attention was paid to this organisation before 2014, as the world's attention had mainly been on al-Qaeda, the organisation claiming responsibility for most of the major terrorist attacks on the Western world since 9/11. Despite seeming to appear out of nowhere, the organisation in fact has long roots in Iraq. ISIS is examined in-depth in this thesis as a main point of reference and a more detailed view of the organisation and its background is provided in Chapter 3.1.

The prolonged civil war in Syria, as well as the widespread instability in the area, has facilitated ISIS's territorial gains, and the organisation has turned into the strongest opposition to Assad's regime. In the eyes of the people on the ground, it is the only instance to provide some stability and governance, as well as a concrete alternative to the dire conditions the people have witnessed for too long. This explains the tolerance for ISIS's brutal ways, as the people have no real alternative.

The organisation has retreated to early Islam with its practices of execution, beheadings and strict enforcement of Sharia law. Some assert that the organisation and its brutality have nothing to do with religion and that ISIS has hijacked Islam to further its own agenda, rather than having turned to the Quran's literal interpretation. The appeal of early Islam at the grass root level has more to do with life under the laws of Islam and the simplicity and unity of the early Muslim community that many wish to revive (Barrett 2014b, 9).

Motivations vary but there is an unprecedented number of Western recruits and volunteers that have left their home countries and travelled to Syria and Iraq. Some wish to join Jihad alongside an extremist group, others have a dream of a new life in the Caliphate and some have purely humanitarian motivations and wish to support Syria in its humanitarian crisis. The Caliphate and life under Islamic law are just as big of an attraction as Jihad and possible martyrdom, the former being especially alluring to women. While other extremist organisations in the area have mainly attracted fighters from the surrounding states, ISIS has managed to attract Muslims and Western converts from around the world - both men and women.

Many of the European recruits are so-called second or third generation immigrants, many of whom are confused with their identity and looking for meaning in their lives. But one cannot disregard the number of Western people who have converted to Islam only to be able to join an extremist group. This group of people often consists of the adventure seekers motivated by the ultimate adventure instead of more profound principles. Generally, the motivations behind the people joining extremist groups are as numerous as are the people joining these organisations. ISIS has been diligent at creating an alluring rhetoric as well as an efficient propaganda machinery that ensure a constant flow of foreign fighters to complete the organisation's goal of establishing an Islamic State while at the same time succeeding in creating ever increasing fear in the Western world.

## **Purpose of study**

The goal of this thesis is to identify the underlying factors driving radicalisation and attempt to draw some characteristics that are common to people prone to extremist behaviour. The paper explores the reasons and motivations of people to join extremist organisations as well as the paths leading to radicalisation. ISIS, as the most recent and current extremist organisation, is used as a primary example and main point of reference.

More specifically, this thesis will look for answers to the following questions: A) Is identity formation - or the lack of it - key to facilitating extremist behaviour (the three levels of identity)? B) Are there common characteristics that can be drawn or does each person who joins an extremist organisation present us with an individual case?, and C) What are the pulling and pushing factors that contribute to radicalisation?

## Methods of research

This thesis presents a qualitative analysis of ISIS and its recruitment machinery with the main focus on the motivations of foreign volunteers for joining the organisation. The main methods used are case study method and narrative inquiry. Real-life cases and experiences, as reported in the media and various publications, have been analysed to create a descriptive narrative on the motivations of people joining extremist organisations - and the phenomenon as a whole. As this study deals with a multifaceted and current phenomenon that involves people and their individual motivations, one must rely on studying experience to extend the knowledge that has been gathered through previous research - which due to the current nature of the issue is still quite limited.

Research is mainly based on open source data, consisting of reports and data provided by organisations countering and studying extremism but also articles published in various journals as well as newspaper articles and online interviews. The main literary sources are *Eurojihad* by Cheryl Benard and Angel Rabasa (2015) and *Radical* by Maajid Nawaz (2013).

Due to the current nature of this phenomenon and constant flow of new information, scientific research is bound to drag behind. This is why it has been necessary to rely on media sources for the most up-to-date information and the latest developments. As social media plays an important role in ISIS's propaganda machinery, information has also been gathered using Twitter and other newsfeeds. Moreover, statistical data by e.g. national immigration services has been analysed to provide background for the situation in the countries chosen for closer inspection.

The first part of the paper presents the theoretical framework for the thesis, mainly the three levels of identity as discussed by Schwartz, Dunkel and Waterman in their paper "Terrorism: An Identity Theory Perspective" (2009). Schwartz et. al.'s paper outlines the role of these levels in generating terrorist behaviour and thus provides a relevant framework for the discussion in this paper, offering relevant insight for our analysis of individual reasons for joining an extremist group. Other articles have also been referred to in this section to provide additional dimensions for discussion.

The second part introduces the organisation that is our main point of reference - the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) - and then goes on to explore the process of radicalisation, mirroring it to the theoretical implications that were introduced in the first part of the paper. The aim is to find out who these people are who leave their families behind to join an extremist group and what contributes to their decision-making process. The following chapters provide more detailed insight

into the phenomena with focus on certain geographical areas (the Nordic countries, the United Kingdom, and Belgium), as well as the women in Jihad as they play a special role in the context of ISIS. Finally the paper will touch upon the response to returning fighters and the possible threat they will pose on the continent.

The final part of the thesis ties all these aspects together and offers conclusions to our study and the questions the paper set out to explore. Recommendations for further study are also made in this section, as there surely are aspects of the phenomenon that still remain untouched as the world learns more about this ever-evolving movement. New information may also provide valuable information to states trying to counter and deal with this phenomenon.

The initial assumption is that there are as many reasons for joining extremist organisations as there are people, as each person has their own story and set of motivations. This would indicate that even though there are some common characteristics that can be identified, each person presents us with an individual case. Identity formation seems to be crucial in moulding a person who either is or is not prone to radicalisation. But in addition to identity, there are other factors that must play their part in completing the process of radicalisation.

## Terminology

As concepts related to extremism are so frequently discussed in different media, they get blurred and are mistakenly grouped together, causing misconceptions. The terminology used in this paper is explained below.

This paper refers to the organisation that has proclaimed itself “Islamic State” as *Islamic State of Iraq and Syria* or by the abbreviation *ISIS*<sup>1</sup>. This term is clear as to the geographical implications and foregoes all possibilities of granting legitimacy to its claims of being a state. The term used in the paper is the one perceived to be used by the mainstream and thus understood by most.

The European foreign fighters are referred to as *volunteers* or *recruits* in discussion to acknowledge the many motivations of people travelling to Iraq and Syria. The term *foreign fighter* is also used where specifically discussing the people immigrating to Syria to join Jihad. As for the geographical area currently controlled by ISIS, the terms *Caliphate* and *ISIS-held territory* are used.

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<sup>1</sup> Elsewhere the organisation is also widely referred to as Islamic State (IS), the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), as well as al-Dawlah (the State) and Da'ish, or Daesh (Saltman, Winter 2014, 12).



When discussing the Caliphate, it represents more than just territorial gain, encompassing also the ideal of the Muslim world and its significance in the recruitment process. ISIS-held territory refers more to the geographical area currently under ISIS's control in Syria and Iraq.

Words such as Islam, Islamism and Jihadism - not to mention terrorism - are sometimes used interchangeably and this leads to religious concepts being directly associated with acts of terrorism and extremism. It is important to make a clear distinction as grouping these terms together feeds prejudices and plays in the hands of the extremists albeit even scholars use these concepts in a confusing manner.

*Terrorism* as a term is avoided in this paper unless discussing acts that are clearly terroristic in nature. Instead, the word *extremism* is preferred and used throughout the discussion. *Islam* is the umbrella term to a religion that has many different branches and is not to be confused with its more extreme interpretations. For example *Islamism* and *Jihadism* are political concepts and ideologies that must be kept separate from the religious ones.

*Islamism* is a complex phenomenon with multiple dimensions and often seems to be interpreted in different ways. As Mozaffari (2007, 18-19) explains in his paper exploring the many faces of Islamism, the definition has varied a great deal across history. The concept has gone from being a parallel of *Christianism* to what we today perceive as political, radical, or fundamentalist Islam, i.e. Islam with political implications. The latter having become prominent after 9/11. In this paper we understand Islamism as Islam with political implications.

*Jihad* is an Islamic concept, meaning struggle, which refers to any kind of religiously inspired effort - be it spiritual, personal, political, or military in nature (Esposito 2002, 26-28). *Jihadism* is just one and definitely not the mainstream branch of *Salafism*, which is the most conservative wing of Sunni Islam, which both al-Qaeda and ISIS represent.

Peter Neumann (2014, 9), in his report for The International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence ICSR, identifies two characteristics that define Jihadists and the Jihadist movement more broadly:

- 1) Downplaying the more spiritual and peaceful connotations of the concept, seeing Jihad as primarily a fight, which all practicing and able Muslims have an obligation to participate in. Belief that all non-believers have conspired to suppress Islam and acts of violence are justified to defend Muslims and their faith.

2) Following a religious doctrine Salafism, which promotes a narrow and puritanical interpretation of Sunni Islam. It rejects all interpretation and hopes to imitate the perfect conditions that used to exist during the first generations that followed Prophet Mohammed.

The next chapter, through examining identity formation, will provide the theoretical framework for exploring the motivations of individuals who join extremist organisations.

## 1. THE THREE LEVELS OF IDENTITY

Confusion about and search for identity surfaces the most when examining the process of radicalisation and motivations behind it. Identity is also a common topic among most of the scholarly research conducted on the topic. Thus it is important to take a closer look at identity: how it is formed, its dimensions and how it affects our behaviour and future. The Identity Theory Perspective by Schwartz, Dunkel and Waterman (2009) is the primary source of reference but Triandis and Gelfand's article on Individualism and Collectivism (2012) and Lebow's article on Identity and International Relations (2008) also provide important insight for our discussion.

Identity, though a common concept, proves quite complex to define and can be observed from many different perspectives. In his article "Identity and International Relations", Richard Ned Lebow presents us with five different ways of understanding identity (2008, 474):

- 1) a ground or basis for social or political action,
- 2) a collective phenomenon denoting some degree of sameness among members of a group or category,
- 3) a core aspect of individual or collective "selfhood",
- 4) a product of social or political action, or
- 5) the product of multiple and competing discourses.

Schwartz et. al. (2009, 540) see this complex, theoretical construct involving elements originating at three levels: 1) *personal identity*, 2) *social identity*, and 3) *cultural identity*.

From Lebow's definitions of identity, it becomes clear that identity goes way beyond what we consider to be our personal identity, i.e. how we perceive ourselves. It also involves other people around us and how we position ourselves in relation to them - not to mention the social and political realities that surround us. Identity thus has many different levels.

In trying to explain the allure of extremist organisations, it is the interaction of all levels of identity that proves decisive. That is why it is important to explain what each of these levels entails before moving on to our discussion to see what role they play in the context of this thesis.

*Personal identity* often derives from the goals, values and beliefs one holds in decisive domains of life, such as vocation, family roles, gender and ethnicity. It is understood to have two dimensions: 1) one's chosen or ascribed goals, values, and beliefs, and 2) the personal perspectives a person uses to make sense of the world. (Schwarz et. al 2008, 540, 544)

This level of personality is an important starting point for our exploration of motivations. It is the formation of this identity that is most crucial, and whether or not this leads to a person prone to extremist behaviour, depends on the interaction with the other levels of identity. It is also the personal identity that easily disappears as the group dimensions come into play. This can be a level of confusion, which is alleviated by becoming a part of a group and adopting the identity of the group.

*Cultural identity* encompasses the cultural values that act as guiding principles of behaviour. Culture and the individual are thus intertwined, with almost every aspect of psychological functioning being influenced by culture. (Triandis, Gelfand 2012, 498)

Anthropologist Redfield defines culture as "shared understandings made manifest in act and artifact". This includes practices and values, i.e. how things are done and how they should be done. These are internalised perspectives that one derives from multiple sources throughout one's life - something one absorbs unknowingly through involvement in different communities and networks, and increasingly through media exposure. (Schwartz et. al. 2009, 540-542, Triandis, Gelfand 2012, 498)

Culture has a big influence on the behaviour of people, more so than we are aware of. This is something one usually realises only when in a culture different from one's own. When behaviour that is considered normal in one's own culture clashes with that of the other. This is when people usually become aware of the influence culture has on their lives and behaviour. This proves to be an important point when we discuss the experiences of immigrants in Western countries and the role of cultural identity in the radicalisation process.

*Social identity* is always defined in relation to others. It has to do with the meaning one ascribes to the social groups one belongs to and interacts with as well as the feelings one associates with the participation. One thus in a way gains an identity through the group one belongs to; the person and the group become one. And in addition to one's own group, there is always "the others". (Schwartz et. al. 2009, 542-544)

It is important to note that a single person may hold several social identities, one for each group one belongs to. As for our following discussion on why people join extremist organisations, self-esteem proves to be an important motivator. Being part of a group perceived to be strong associates us with these same attributes. Scholars have even gone as far as saying that personal self-esteem can only be achieved through ingroup membership (Marranci 2009, 5). Social identities buffer anxiety and are central to building self-esteem by allowing individuals to bask in the reflected glory of the group's achievements. And the pride, loyalty and positive feelings about the ingroup correlate positively with contempt, hatred and hostility towards the outgroup. One thus perceives the people in the ingroup in a more positive light as those in the outgroup, leading to bias for "us" and prejudice against "them". (Lebow 2008, 478) And as Schwartz et. al. (2009, 540) point out, whereas the values associated with social identity may be abstract and even vague, the loyalties to the groups associated with this identity are very intense and specific. This ingroup - outgroup division proves decisive in our discussion on extremism, and it will most frequently be referred to as *us vs. them thinking*.

Social categories that we construct in our minds define the imaginary boundaries, which separate our own group (ingroup) from the others (outgroup). The ingroup is generally defined by similarity to kinship, tribe, religion, race etc., and it is the stereotypes associated with the outgroup that determine the relationship between the two groups. The internalised stereotypes and norms the ingroup holds about the outgroup are naturally developed in such a way that they favour the ingroup. (Schwartz et. al. 2009, 542; Hogg et. al. 1995, 159-260; Triandis, Gelfand 2012, 509)

As Lebow (2008, 474) points out, philosophy, political science and politics often assume that identity construction requires the creation of "others" - but not necessarily their demonization, which is central to our phenomenon. Carl Schmitt (1976) even asserted that political identities can best be formed in violent struggles against adversaries. The extremist organisations are quick to provide lost individuals with the identity they have failed to form, feeding on the idea of superiority over the group considered to be adversary to your own. The us vs. them thinking becomes central to one's identity, the ingroup (us) being the Muslim community and outgroup (them) the West.

The division between the ingroup and the outgroup is not something exclusively related to the rift between Muslims and the West - something, which is exploited and taken to the extreme by the extremist organisations - but can be seen all through history in different contexts and has been used effectively to drive political agendas. And as Immanuel Kant puts it, the "us" is maintained at the expense of "others". (Lebow 2008, 475)

William Connolly (1991, 64) finds power to be essential in maintaining and even imposing identity on others. This gives rise to hierarchies whose primary function is to safeguard and spread endorsed discourses of identity, while suppressing or marginalising those questioning these truths. When extended to religion, concepts of good and evil find expression in the demonization and exclusion of the other, rather than toleration and dialogue. (Lebow 2008, 476)

In the following discussion we will see how ISIS becomes the authority providing its followers with an identity. Something many of the recruits are lacking and confused about, which is central to why they are drawn to the organisation in the first place. Religion becomes an important unifying factor, demonising anything that is perceived as adversary. Tolerance and dialogue are non-existent, dividing the world into two separate camps fighting one another instead of recognising the common humanity underneath all the cultural and other differences. Lebow (2008, 477) considers this recognition a key element in trying to overcome this division between “us” and “them”.

In our discussion the Muslim world and the West are positioned against one another. There are stark stereotypes on both sides, contributing to the escalation of the situation - both on the political level as well as at the level of the individual. Many of the recruits are of immigrant backgrounds and these stereotypes affect the life on the grass root - both ways. It can be detrimental for a person of immigrant background living in a society that is filled with prejudice against the group one belongs to. Charles Taylor (1992, 25) sees it as a source of real damage and distortion if the people or society around a person mirrors back a confining or demeaning picture of the person himself or the group one belongs to. This is one key trigger we will discuss later on in the paper.

This juxtaposition is central in our context but it is not necessary. Many studies on prejudice, e.g. the pioneering study of Gordon Allport published in 1954, which Lebow refers to in his book, suggest that ingroup attachment does not necessarily require outgroup hostility. Allport suggests that the psychological primacy of ingroup develops before any conception of the outgroup. (Lebow 2008, 479) The following discussion however proves what a strong maintaining and enforcing function this hostility has.

When it comes to the different levels of identity, people can be thought of as having complex and differentiated selves that are expressed through different identities depending on the social context one finds oneself in. A person thus activates the identity that best serves him in any given context. This suggests that personal identity depends on the social identity of the outgroup, and the self-esteem of each member of the group depends on the self-esteem of the others in the

same in-group. (Marranci 2009, 5) This is a complex interdependence that does not really put either level of identity - individual or group - above the other. This would however explain why the ingroup and feelings associated with it are perceived so important and why the personal identity and group identity seem to be one and the same, us not really knowing where one ends and the other begins.

It has become clear that identity has many levels that interact in complex ways. To understand what interactions contribute to an individual prone to radicalisation, one must take a closer look at the formation of identity. James E. Marcia provides us with the tools to understanding the formation of identity and its significance for our future. He developed *the identity status paradigm* in his paper “Development and Validation of Ego Identity Status” (1966), which conceptualised identity formation in terms of two dimensions: *exploration* and *commitment*. The dimension of exploration refers to the active consideration of alternative identity possibilities. Commitment on the other hand has to do with the formation of strong, unwavering investment in particular identity elements. (Marcia 1966, 551-552)

When it comes to extremist behaviour, Schwartz et. al. identify two potential outcomes of identity formation as having particular relevance for the emergence of an extremist identity: *authoritarian foreclosure* and *aimless diffusion*. Foreclosure has to do with the adoption of commitments without considering the alternatives, diffusion represents being uncommitted and engaging in little or no systematic exploration. (Schwartz et. al. 2009, 544) This explains the readiness of young individuals to adopt the offered rhetoric and why they are such an easy target for an extremist organisation.

What provides an important additional dimension for our discussion and what could be considered the root from which we can start exploring the allure of extremism - especially in the case of those with immigrant backgrounds - is *Collectivism*, i.e. the prioritisation of the group over the individual. What makes collectivism so relevant for our discussion is that in collectivistic cultures the self is interdependent with the group, the goals of the group have priority over individual goals and it is the norms, obligations and duties that guide behaviour rather than individual rights or needs (Triandis, Gelfand 2012, 506). These are all characteristics that make it more natural for a person to adopt the agenda and rhetoric of the extremist groups.

Identity crisis often seems to originate at the levels of cultural and social identity, with religion and collectivism bringing additional dimensions to it in the case of immigrants. As we move on and start exploring the process of radicalisation, the role that each of the dimensions

discussed above plays in generating extremist behaviour becomes more evident. One must remember that no level of identity is likely to cause extremist behaviour on its own but they are interconnected in a complex way and some combinations may be crucial in facilitating extremism. The following section examines the process of radicalisation and mirrors it to the levels of identity that were introduced in this chapter. ISIS, the organisation acting as the main point of reference in this paper, is also briefly introduced.



## **2. THE ROAD TO EXTREMISM**

### **2.1. The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)**

When ISIS entered the world stage with force in June 2014, there seemed to be a common misconception that it appeared out of nowhere. In fact, the organisation was regarded as just one Jihadist group that posed no particular threat to the international community. With the capture of Mosul, ISIS became known to the world but it has existed long before its international discovery.

#### **2.1.1 The background of ISIS**

The organisation that we today know as ISIS was founded by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi around 1999. Zarqawi led a troubled life until he travelled to Afghanistan to join the fight in the wake of the Soviet withdrawal. In the training camps he met many influential figures, such as Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi who is considered to be the most significant figure in contemporary jihadist scholarship. Al-Zarqawi was later imprisoned in Jordan for terrorism, and he spent the time refining his ideological inclination. Al-Zarqawi started stressing piety in praxis over knowledge in theology, and this explains the shift in emphasis that can be seen in Jihadism today, placing more importance on literal and inflexible interpretation of Salafi-jihadi doctrine, which is characteristic of ISIS today. (Saltman, Winter 2014, 28)

Following his release, al-Zarqawi established his own training camp in Afghanistan, eventually affiliating a linkage with al-Qaeda in 2004 and naming the organisation al-Qaeda in Iraq (Barrett 2014a, 11). The relationship between the two organisations was one of convenience: association with al-Qaeda was believed to attract recruits and funding, bin Laden on the other hand needed a presence in Iraq. Following al-Zarqawi's death in a US-led airstrike in 2006, The Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) was formed as the local al-Qaeda affiliate. As Abu Bakr al Baghdadi became leader in 2010, he started rebuilding the organisation and expanded its operation to Syria following the Arab Spring and Syrian Civil War. The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) was formed in April of 2013 as Baghdadi sought to gain more influence and expanded ISI's operations into Syria. (Saltman, Winter 2014, 27)

Following the capture of Iraqi towns of Fallujah in February and Mosul in June 2014, the organisation became known to the world and announced the establishment of the Caliphate. The partnership of convenience between al-Qaeda and current ISIS came to an end in February 2014 when al-Qaeda officially severed its ties to the organisation. There were deep ideological differences behind this separation as ISIS was focused on fighting Shias in the area around Iraq and Syria while al-Qaeda's focus was on the West. (Barrett 2014a, 11-12, Saltman, Winter 2014, 29-30)

Despite the organisation's long history with other extremist groups in the area, its brutal nature differentiates it from the others. The organisation claims religious legitimacy for its actions and its strict Salafist interpretation of Islam puts anyone who opposes its rule in the apostate category (Barrett 2014a, 18). There is thus no tolerance for anyone outside the organisation, not in the region, nor on the international level.

Brutality towards those that ISIS considers apostates has been characteristic of the organisation right from its origins, and even bin Laden was known to criticise al-Zarqawi for encouraging such brutality. This eventually led to an ideological and strategic battle between the organisations (Saltman, Winter 2014, 30). Nevertheless, there are still clear ideological ties between ISIS and al-Qaeda as they share the same violent interpretation of Islam. There are however some crucial strategic differences between the two that are quite essential to understanding why ISIS presents such a special case.

Al-Qaeda has a clearly outward-looking strategy, with focus on destabilising the West before attempting the establishment of the Caliphate, which even long-time leader Osama bin Laden did not see taking place in the near future. ISIS on the other hand began on the inside, establishing the Caliphate first and counting on its pulling power to complete the rest of its strategy. (Ibid., 9) Other extremist groups in the area are known to have prioritised the overthrowing of current regimes e.g. in Afghanistan and Syria. ISIS however found its strength in offering the only strong opposition to Syria's current regime and at the same time offering the people in the area at least some structure that has been lacking for a long time. Instability in the area caused by the Civil War was thus crucial in facilitating ISIS's advances in the area.

Another clear distinction between the two is with regard to their mode of operation. As Saltman and Winter (2014, 43) point out, al-Qaeda's current mode of operation is decentralised and revolves around the multiplying number of affiliate groups across the world. This involves the promotion of so-called lone wolf attacks as a way of destabilising "the enemy", i.e. the West. ISIS on the other hand has relied on the Caliphate to draw Muslims from around the world as opposed to

trying to conduct terrorist operations in other countries. Expansion of the Caliphate is thus its main aim and this could be seen as a clear departure from the traditional idea of Jihad.

### **2.1.2 Goals and expansion**

Brutality, violence and increasing threats towards the Western community reflect the methods ISIS employs to reach its goals. In her article for the Telegraph, Joana Cook from King's College London finds extremist organisations to generally have two goals: short-term organisational objectives and long-term objectives that call for significant political change. The short-term focus of ISIS has been on growing their fighter base internationally, at the same time maximising territorial gains in Syria and Iraq and thus securing its presence in the area. The long-term goal is to complete the establishment of the functioning state and extending the model across the world. (The Telegraph 2015a)

ISIS has succeeded in expanding its influence in the area, as groups such as Boko Haram have started affiliating with it. ISIS has also extended its presence to Libya, Yemen, and Afghanistan (the Guardian 2015a). Also Barrett (2014a, 9) sees ISIS's immediate focus being on violent revolution in the Muslim majority countries rather than attacking the West - which is the aim of al-Qaeda.

This is not to say that the organisation will not conduct attacks on foreign soil as ISIS has made several threats to the Western world in late 2014 and early 2015. The Charlie Hebdo attacks in Paris exposed what could be interpreted as lone wolf attacks by people supporting the organisation. In early April 2015 ISIS launched a threat campaign aimed at the United States, threatening to repeat the 2001 attacks. The campaign saw the launch of a video compilation of ISIS's most notable brutalities, vowing that America is not safe despite its geographical location. (Newsweek 2015) There seems to be a shift in ISIS's strategy, probably prompted by its territorial losses and a need to flex its muscles to keep the Western world at its toes. Another contributing factor in explaining the organisation's more aggressive stance towards the United States can be the wounding of an ISIS leader in the coalition airstrikes in March 2015 (The Guardian 2015b).

Richard Barrett of the Soufan Group has identified some important factors that ensure the organisation's success as well as survival in the region. One important factor that has enabled its rise to the regional power are the alliances ISIS has managed to form with local actors in the area. These were - and are - key to facilitating its territorial gains. In addition, ISIS has acquired areas from weaker adversaries and areas rich with natural resources. (Barrett 2014a, 8) Despite the recent

territorial losses, ISIS still holds a large region and aims at further strengthening its control of the area, increasing its powers and maintaining its critical alliances.

When it comes to the organisation's future survival, there are some aspects that are likely to keep it in power. First, due to the sectarian fault line that has determined the politics in the Middle East since the Iranian revolution of 1979, ISIS continues to display itself as a lesser danger than the regional dominance of its rivals. For this reason, the organisation is not likely to face much regional opposition. Secondly, people in the surrounding states and Northern Africa are extremely unhappy with the governing elite, with no confidence in their rulers looking after the best of the people. The idea of government according to the teachings of the Quran is very appealing, and ISIS, with its Caliphate, meets these desires. Thirdly, the actions of the US-led coalition keep reaffirming the resentment towards the West as it makes the oppression of the Muslim world seem very concrete to the people in the area. (Barrett 2014a, 6)

ISIS is also quite a wealthy organisation that is far from the inferior image of al-Qaeda. ISIS employs thousands of people, the estimates of US intelligence ranging between 20,000 and 31,500, and has revenue from several sources, including oil sales, taxation of businesses in the area, tolls etc. Much of the revenue is derived from criminal activity such as kidnapping, ransom, and looting. (Ibid., 10)

ISIS's strong, geographical foothold in the Middle East is the basis for its successes. Furthermore, ISIS is not likely to find a strong enough opponent in the near future as any action to counter it only intensifies the grievances that are ultimately behind its success. Very little is done to counter the narrative of the organisation, which is the element that should be tackled. No military action is likely to make a difference. It is the story of Western oppression that ISIS keeps spreading that is attracting most of its Muslim followers, and any action the coalition takes only plays into the hands of the organisation.

### **2.1.3 Recruitment of followers**

This paper focuses on exploring the first of ISIS's short-term objectives: recruitment of foreign fighters, which is its most distinguishing aspect compared to other extremist groups. With ISIS the world has witnessed an unprecedented flow of foreign fighters that have gone to Syria and Iraq to volunteer in its ranks. Westerners joining Jihadist movements is not a new phenomenon as such, but the numbers and scope are larger than ever before. Furthermore, countries whose citizens

usually do not take part in such activity have witnessed many fighters leaving their home countries to join ISIS.

The numbers speak for themselves. It is estimated that nearly 3,000 people from Western Europe have left their home countries in the past couple of years to fight alongside extremist groups mainly in Syria and Iraq. One must note that the following numbers do not distinguish between the groups or the motivations behind their departure - be it fighting, humanitarian reasons, etc.

According to the estimates calculated by The International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (ICSR), around 500 people from the United Kingdom and more than 700 from France have joined the fight. When numbers are considered relative to a country's population, the largest numbers can be found in Belgium and Denmark: 350 and 100 individuals respectively. (ICSR 2013) What is interesting in this latest flow of foreign fighters is that we see high numbers from countries that usually do not take part on such a large scale, e.g. Finland and Switzerland. The Finnish Security Intelligence Service estimates the numbers of Finnish fighters being over 60, which is considered a modest estimate (YLE 2015a).

On a global scale, the numbers are significantly higher, estimated to be over 16,000 people from at least 81 countries. The largest number of recruits appears to come from Tunisia (3,000), Saudi Arabia (2,500), Morocco (1,500) and Russia (800). (ICSR 2013)

The number of recruits has escalated dramatically since 2012. Prior to 2012 most of the foreign fighters joining ISIS, totalling anywhere between 700 and 1,400, had originated from the neighbouring countries and North Africa (Zelin 2012). The share of Europeans tripled from 600 in April to 1,900 in December 2013. Currently Western Europeans represent around 18 per cent of the total foreign fighters in the area with most recruits originating from Belgium, Denmark, the Netherlands and Sweden. (ICSR 2013)

The questions then remains - who are these people and what motivates them to join an extremist group?

## **2.2. The image of the extremist**

There are some common characteristics and motivations that can be identified when trying to draw a picture of the typical person drawn to extremism and leaving their home to join an extremist organisation. However, one must remember that we are dealing with individuals and each person has their own mix of reasons and motivations why they make the decision.

The typical age range for an ISIS fighter is 18-29 years. Barrett (2014b, 16) concludes that people joining ISIS are younger than those who joined the so-called Afghan Jihad. Jihadists becoming younger is a trend witnessed since the mid 2000s. This proves that ISIS's rhetoric is especially appealing to young people who are yet to form their own identity or engage in truly critical thinking.

Due to young age and background, many who join from the Western countries have no previous connection with Syria. But as Benard and Rabasa (2015, 131) point out in their book, part of the allure is the fact that Syria is geographically easily accessible; not only are there direct flights to Turkey, there are ready networks specialised in assisting foreign fighters across the border. These networks were perfected during the war in Iraq and reactivated in the past couple of years. Syria is also currently the most prominent stage for radical conflict in the Muslim world.

Western recruits also usually have little or no military background. Those who comprise the skilled fighter base at the grass root level are hard-core senior fighters who have previous experience on other fronts, such as Iraq and Caucasus. For example, many of the regional commanders are known to have been members of Saddam Hussein's Ba'athist regime. (Barrett 2014b, 5, 16-17) Western recruits are thus not a ready and skilled addition to ISIS but they are made to go through training camps if they wish to join the battlefield along with the more senior fighters.

In the case of ISIS it is also important to note that it has managed to lure in a high number of women, couples and even entire families to join its ranks. Women are not allowed to take part in combat so their motivations to join lie elsewhere. These women and their stories will be discussed in more detail in later chapters.

If one looks beyond the general characteristics mentioned above, the recruits are often disaffected young males of immigrant background. Aimless, lacking a sense of identity, no sense of

belonging - these are some other characterisations that come up often. In short, many of these individuals have failed to form an identity that would affirm their sense of self and their place in the society. The reasons for this are as manifold as are the paths to radicalisation.

As the recruits of immigrant backgrounds and the Western recruits pose us with very different motivations, we will look at each of them separately.

### **2.2.1. Immigrant recruits**

Many of the European recruits are second or third generation immigrants (Barrett 2014b, 17). For them, the identity crisis that is often an underlying factor encouraging radicalisation is more manifold than for those of European backgrounds. For a person of immigrant background, the identity crisis often originates at the levels of both cultural and social identity, making the situation even more complex. The religious aspect is naturally also an important consideration and tied to all other dimensions.

When looking at the cultural dimension, a person's native culture with its collectivist features is still very dominant in the mind set of the people even after they have migrated to the new country. At the same time the culture that the person is surrounded with and lives in is very different from the native culture, which embraces collectivism rather than individualistic values. The paradox between these two cultures leads to conflict and confusion in the person's mind.

It was pointed out earlier how culture greatly affects people's behaviour as people unknowingly absorb practices and values from the surrounding culture. This is an unconscious process and one only becomes aware of the importance of culture in determining our behaviour when the practices in the surrounding culture clash with those of our own.

First generation immigrants are faced with this realisation quite quickly upon arrival in a new country but for second and third generation immigrants, whose families often uphold the features of the original culture, this is a more complex process. They experience a constant cross draught brought about by their native culture, with its ways and traditions that are central to one's identity, and the surrounding Western culture, which may seem very foreign.

This confusion extends to the level of social identity, as the Western society may feel cold and distant and is often difficult to penetrate. This often leads to a concentration of immigrants in certain towns and suburbs - a trend which can be seen all over Europe. And applies to immigrants from all backgrounds, not just Muslims.

From the collectivistic viewpoint, it is only natural to wish to retain the tight feel of community, which is often lacking in the West. There is also a big difference when it comes to the role of religion as Islam plays a much larger role in the lives of many Muslims as opposed to Western societies that are becoming more and more secular. Thus the concentration of immigrants in certain areas is natural and can be an attempt to hold on to the important values and principles in one's own culture. In many cases it is a natural progression as the Western society is not a welcoming one and the mainstream population tends to keep to themselves instead of mingling with the minorities. This creates a division between the different parts of society, a vacuum for the immigrant community, which can be dangerous and decisive in the spread of extremist thinking.

Central to the creation of an identity is the interaction and dialogue with others. This constructs and modifies our identity even further; people, groups of people and even nations constantly learning from one another, and becoming more human by understanding and appreciating the variety. (Lebow 2008, 477) This interaction is not possible in a vacuum where people only feed each other's prejudices. This only intensifies the division that further feeds negative stereotypes and widens the gap between groups of people. There is strong consensus among scholars about the negative consequences of exclusion and stereotyping for identity construction and self-esteem.

In the context of our discussion, little or no interaction with the mainstream society may lead to a feeling of inferiority among the immigrant population. And grievances towards the mainstream population or the society as a whole naturally deepen and intensify if these minority groups are subject to discrimination. Here Charles Taylor's (1992, 25) assertion of the damaging effect of a negative perception of oneself being mirrored back from the surrounding society is essential. Even if discrimination as such is not present, there is always a division between the mainstream and the immigrant group, which leads to a build-up of grievances, further fed inside the tight immigrant community.

This all may lead to a strong us vs. them thinking, which is widely exploited by the extremist organisations, such as ISIS, which have built much of their message and concept around this idea. "Us" is considered a collective, righteous group that shares values, including the religious realm. The Western society is considered "them", i.e. the outgroup that is foreign, corrupt and immoral. This is where we see the ingroup - outgroup division central in the context of social identity on a concrete level, feeding resentment at the grass root.



As was pointed out earlier, the social categories people create in their minds about the outgroup define the relationship between the two. Here we demonstrate how the negative personal experiences in the Western society feed these prejudices in the minds of the immigrants, thus widening the gap between the two. The stereotypes held of the outgroup are no longer abstract but become quite concrete in everyday life. And these feed each other as the mainstream society in return has a number of prejudices towards minorities. Interaction and close relationships between the two would be crucial in alleviating this division, and the lack of interaction is the reason the vacuum becomes dangerous. A report on tackling extremism in the United Kingdom sees this as a crucial point in confronting the phenomenon. The report states how extremism can flourish where different parts of a community remain isolated from each other. Communities, which are more highly integrated, would be more resilient to the influence of extremists. (Prime Minister's Task Force on Tackling Radicalisation and Extremism 2013)

Here we can conclude that in the case of the immigrant youth the main motivations driving radicalisation seem to be of cultural and social nature, which we touched upon above. Religion is closely related to both. Religious motivations can be categorised under three main aspects: 1) perceived oppression of Muslims around the world, 2) religious duty, and 3) the Caliphate as a home for all Muslims.

#### *2.2.1.1. Society and Islam*

Even though we must make a clear distinction between Islam and radical Islam, the corruption of Western society is widely resented by the Muslim community around the world. Strongly linked to this is the idea of the Western oppression of the Muslim community. This encompasses both the political interventions of the US-led Western coalition on regimes in the Middle East as well as the ongoing discrimination at the grass root level. As we will see later, ISIS feeds on this rhetoric in its propaganda, reminding all Muslims of their duty to act when "Ummah - i.e. the Muslims community - is under attack". Many find that it is their obligation to leave and travel to Syria to join the fight against the West.

This oppression becomes very concrete if one is exposed to discrimination or racism. Being subject of or a witness to racist behaviour intensifies the feeling of disaffection towards the host country and the sense of non-belonging. One that might have gone unnoticed even by the person him/herself until there is a concrete incident that forces the person to face the fact that they will never be seen as an equal member of the society they live in. The school of French sociology,

which centres around the effect of modernity and globalisation on identity formation and reformation, views this feeling of exclusion, added on by concrete discrimination, as reaffirming the feeling of “threatened self-identity” (Al Raffie 2013, 73).

In addition to feeding grievances, discrimination is also one very concrete trigger for radicalisation itself, one that is identified in many of the radicalisation stories. One example to illustrate the role of discrimination in the radicalisation process is the story of Hussein, an immigrant of Somali background who lived in Espoo, Finland.

Hussein was a typical teenager, showing no interest in religion until an isolated instance of a native Finn killing an immigrant boy triggered a strong reaction. Not only in Hussein but also more widely among the immigrant youth around the Capital area. For Hussein, the turn to religion was swift: the night following the incident he uploaded a picture of himself in a Mosque and turned his life around. (HS 2014a)

The elements of confusion with identity and trouble fitting into the mainstream society are not always evident. In the same group of Somali youth as Hussein was a girl called Aisha. On the outside she seemed to have settled well in the country she had lived in ever since she was eight years old. She spoke fluent Finnish, was doing well in school and had a lot of friends, even from the mainstream population. During the final year in high school she all of a sudden started wearing a burqa, covering her face except for the eyes. Also her turn to religion happened following the killing of the immigrant boy - the same incident that had driven Hussein to turn to extremism. Hussein and Aisha later met and got married. Months later they were in Syria. (HS 2014a)

When one is exposed to the more radical side of Islam where the West is perceived as an enemy, living in that Western society, which is against your values, is difficult and may become unbearable. Social and cultural confusion add to this feeling. As one female migrant to Syria posted in her social media account: ‘How can you live amongst people who desire to get rid of islam ... Wallahi [I swear to God] these Kuffar and Munafiqeen [hypocrites] will do anything to cause the Muslimeen [Muslims] harm.’ (Hoyle et. al. 2015, 12).

This feeling naturally triggers the desire to live in a society that runs according to Islamist values and Sharia law. This is where the allure of the Caliphate is triggered in a very concrete way. It is portrayed as an ideal society uniting Muslims around the world, living under the laws of Islam. As ISIS offers this concrete option for a different kind of life - a righteous life -, the cross draught

between religious and national identities, not to mention the Western way of life, brings a person to a crossroads. ISIS and radical Islam then attempt to offer a solution and a way out of this confusion.

### *2.2.1.2. Religion*

Many wonder why people with no previous interest in religion can be lured into accepting the strictest form of Islam there is. One important explaining factor is that second and third generation immigrants often have a very different relationship to religion as the earlier generations. As Al Raffie (2013, 73) points out in her paper, whereas first generation Muslims follow traditional Islam, second and third generation immigrants often have a more intellectual approach to it. In a way they pick and adopt certain cultural and religious elements and form their own version, making them feel distant from both the traditional views of their parents but also from the mainstream society. As Professor Dawson from Waterloo University points out, these people may feel like they are surrounded by hypocrites since neither their families nor the surrounding society “practices what they preach” (Canadian Charger 2015). This can be quite a stressful situation and accentuates the feeling of not fitting in.

Religion may become a unifying factor for people of immigrant backgrounds who do not seem to fit in. Maajid Nawaj discusses this in his book “Radical” (2013). Nawaz himself is of Pakistani background and grew up in Southend, England. He was drawn into an extremist group, and eventually jailed in Egypt. Currently he is Chairman of Quilliam Foundation, a counter-extremism think tank in the United Kingdom. In his book Nawaz describes how the immigrant youth in England stopped identifying themselves by their native background, instead unifying under Islam. This common faith released them from the cross draught of the two cultures, giving them strength. Islam provided a shield of protection against what is considered to be discrimination from the West.

We have now outlined some crucial elements in facilitating radicalisation among the immigrant youth. One must remember that these are only some of the preconditions and none of them cause radicalisation on their own. Neither does collectivism directly lead to extremist behaviour, as Schwartz (2009, 541) describes terrorism “a maximally collectivist position”. What makes collectivism so relevant to this phenomenon is how it sees the person as just one part of a larger collective. If this collective is threatened, it is the duty of every one to stand up and defend the community. If the ingroup (i.e. the Muslims) are threatened, it is an obligation and duty of every Muslim to step in. As the self is interdependent with the group, it is the norms, obligations and

duties of the group that guide behaviour. Furthermore, the achievements of the group become your own. This explains why collectivism is a good breeding ground for extremist thinking and why devotion to the cause comes so naturally to many when encouraged.

Similarly, not everyone who is confused with their identity turns into an extremist. In addition to identity issues originating at religious or cultural levels, one cannot overlook extremism as potentially just another manifestation of young people's rebellion. Something that can be witnessed all through history. In the case of young, second or third generation immigrants, one can draw a parallel to any young person becoming interested in their roots. The desire to explore ones roots and trying to establish identity is universal. This instinct is likely to be even stronger when the culture around you is not your own and a person's ethnic roots are elsewhere. In the case of Muslim youth, it is often the religion that is their closest reference point. Unfortunately in today's world, especially when this personal exploration of roots takes place online with exposure to the efficient propaganda machinery of a terrorist organisation, it can lead to an unfortunate outcome.

### **2.2.2. Western converts**

Immigrants are not the only ones prone to radicalisation as there are a number of converts of Western origin who have joined extremist groups. Richard Barrett (2014b, 16) estimates their share to be around six per cent of all recruits from Western countries.

Exploring the motivations of Western converts is at the same time much simpler as well as more complex as in the case of people with immigrant backgrounds. In their case no similar underlying resentment or confusion can be identified and motivations literally vary from person to person. For some, it is just another adventure providing meaning to one's life. Some perceive themselves to be lost individuals, others are merely hungry for adventure. Some even fail to articulate why they are joining. (Barrett 2014, 21) Another factor making the exploration of Western recruits even more difficult is the fact that there is very little coverage on them in the media as most stories are of people of immigrant backgrounds. Even officials are reluctant to give exact numbers of recruits of Western backgrounds. One must attempt to draw a picture of a Western convert from very scattered material.

In many of the cases there seem to be little or no deep-founded religious motivations or aspirations - at least not initially. Professor Bloom from the University of Massachusetts in fact tells of Western people travelling to Syria carrying the book "Islam for Dummies" with them (HS/Nyt 2014a.). Many have made the trip under a humanitarian banner, either to fight the Syrian

government or opposing the Western intervention in the area. For many, travelling to Syria might be a way of supporting the Muslim world.

It would be of crucial importance to distinguish between Western people travelling to Syria and Iraq to join Jihad and those who have a genuine will to help and have no connections to extremist groups. These people pose a real dilemma to their home governments in case they return home as it is impossible to know for sure who have been involved in extremist action. One must also remember that motivations may be mixed or subject to change; someone who has initially travelled to Syria to help in the humanitarian conflict may very well find themselves engaging in combat (Benard, Rabasa, 2015, 139).

There are however also individuals who travel to the area with the sole purpose of joining Jihad. For many the driving force is the will for adventure. This could be placed in a wider context of young people joining movements all through history, e.g. the hippie movement or Communism just to give a few examples. Going even further back, a similar adventurous spirit led the crusaders. For some joining Jihad is just another exciting experience, something that this particular generation finds tempting and rebellious.

Professor Lawson from Waterloo University has mapped out motivations of Canadian youth who have travelled to Syria. He finds that many have an ingrown drive for extreme identities as they feel like they are nobody; they wish to be and do something big. Also a strong desire for action is present. (Canadian Charger 2015) This would be in line with the assumption that people are driven to Jihad because of an adventurous spirit.

A sense of adventure however does not seem like a strong enough reason for a person to convert to Islam and join an organisation that is against everything the Western society this person originates from represents. If there is no deep religious conviction, it is difficult to understand why a person would agree with the brutal ways of the organisation, which are being justified by literal interpretation of the Quran and Islam's early leaders. Something even devout Muslims find difficult to understand and accept. This brings us back to a longing for identity and sense of belonging.

One can thus say that motivations related to failed identity formation do not distinguish between people of different backgrounds. Here it does not matter if one has an immigrant past or is born and raised in Europe. Also Westerners experience confusion about identity and their place in the society. If one feels lost, the extremist organisation is an alluring alternative, which provides meaning and sense into the individual's life.

But why would a fundamental Islamist group be interested in recruiting people with no religious convictions, no prior experience of a warzone let alone the geographical area or its language. Max Abrahms, a professor at Northeastern University, points out how the majority of Westerners joining ISIS are extraordinarily ignorant when it comes to religion (International Business Times 2014a). But quite interestingly, from the point of view of ISIS, a lack of knowledge on Islam is seen as an advantage as it also means that Western converts will not challenge the distortions of Islam that are preached to justify the brutal actions of the organisation and its absolutist style of government (Barrett 2014b, 9). When it comes to Western recruits, it seems to be enough if a person is willing to obey and has some skill that is of advantage to the organisation. As we will see in the next section, ISIS is an advanced machine willing to utilise any Western knowledge that is likely to help the organisation reach its goals.

Mubin Shaikh, a former Taliban recruiter operating from Toronto, sheds some light into what the recruiters are looking for in Western converts in an interview he gave to International Business Times. In addition to poorer knowledge on religion, converts are also perceived as more likely to stay with the group as many have problems with their families and have no special ties to their home countries. (International Business Times 2014a) This also suggests that many Western recruits tend to have little allegiance to their home countries, which in part also explains their willingness to perform atrocities against them. These people are thus considered rootless and willing to totally commit themselves to the organisation, willing to jump at any command. Ironically, no personal conviction to the cause that is central to ISIS's rhetoric is in fact considered an advantage by the organisation.

Breaking away from the division between people of immigrant background and Western converts, it would be easy to generalise and say that most of the recruits are uneducated or have troubled pasts. But as far as educational background goes, there is no clear correlation. We can see both highly educated individuals and people with more modest backgrounds leaving for Syria. Rabasa and Benard (2014, 101) identify the decisive factor rather being the gap between educational level and employment. The frustration over inability to find work and pull one's weight in the society is one important cause of grievances and applies to immigrants and Westerners alike. Society seems to play a big role in paving the way towards extremist behaviour in all cases. Also in the case of people who are considered to be a part of the mainstream population.

One advantage of recruits from Western countries - be they of immigrant background or so-called natives - is often also their higher level of education as opposed to recruits from the

neighbouring countries. Even if an individual does not have a university degree, they are likely to have completed a higher level of education and have skills that ISIS is quick to utilise in its modern machinery. On the other hand people from the surrounding states are more likely to have more experience in combat. It is important to note that also the recruits from Muslim countries often come from poor conditions and slums where the extremist group is sometimes the only hope for a better future (Goldstein, Pevehouse 2014, 204). And as Barrett (2014b, 6) points out, as long as the governance in many countries fails to meet the expectations of the people, hopeful recruits will continue to flow to Syria. This colourful combination of fighters from the area itself and Western Europe provides ISIS with an impressive array of skill that the organisation is utilising to its greatest potential.

People of both backgrounds also seem to have a strong and genuine will to do good, no matter how distorted that may sound given the brutality of the organisation. As was pointed out earlier, even the individuals who travel to Syria to join Jihad, have an underlying will to defend their fellow Muslims, a community that is under oppression in much of the world. As Professor Lawson from Waterloo University sums it up: many of the Jihadists have an overbearing will to do the right thing, accompanied by a strong desire to lead a meaningful life. (Canadian Charger 2015) This may be an underlying motivation but at the same time it gives a noble justification to the brutality that is an integral part of ISIS's tactics. But a noble motivation does not justify the means. On the other hand, some Westerners see themselves as travelling to Syria for humanitarian reasons. They join ISIS as they see fighting Assad's regime as the only way to end the civil war that has been tearing the area for too long. ISIS has a great advantage in the fact that it is the only credible opposition to the regime. Motivations are many and more and more people keep flooding to the border every day.

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What has amazed the world is the large number of youngsters that on the surface seem to live quite normal lives until radicalisation takes place, taking a full turn as they take on the identity of a Jihadist. But how does a person who potentially only a few weeks earlier lived and studied in a Northern European country end up performing these atrocities in a foreign land? Clearly here the adoption of the group identity as your own has gone to its extreme, and as the group you belong to performs these acts, you will take part in these activities - without questioning.

Collectivism is one explaining factor that cannot be ignored. As we saw earlier, collectivism places the group over the individual, and the differences between collectivistic and individualistic societies offer us valuable insight in our attempt to outline the prerequisites for radicalisation.

Schwartz et. al. (2009, 544) identified two possible outcomes of identity formation that are more likely to drive a person towards extremism: foreclosure and diffusion, i.e. adoption and internalisation of group rhetoric without questioning with no consideration of alternatives. This explains why these young people seem to accept the message of extremist organisations without any filter and adopt it as their own. Foreclosed and diffused people also often seem to be less religiously mature and fail to understand their faith on a deeper level - as opposed to active exploration and weighing of alternatives. As explained previously, people with no religious aspirations - also of Western background - are quick to embrace the radical side of Islam as they have no previous knowledge of Islam. In the case of the converts, the extreme version of Islam is often the only version they know so there is no need to question it. The religious aspect is also often less important for the converts - it is the means to an end rather than the end itself.

Due to lack of identity, these people cling on to the message of the extremist group. As Islam is a religion of law and has clear codes of conduct, it attracts people that are hoping for some higher authority to steer their lives. In their eyes the message of an extremist group comes from a religious authority and is backed up by religious texts. ISIS is all about the literal interpretation of Hadith and this is appealing to people with a less open-minded approach to identity issues. (Schwartz et. al. 2009, 544)

Another aspect strongly linked with foreclosure is the adoption of the normative standards and expectations held within one's community, in this case the extremist group. These standards are held on to in the most rigid fashion. (Ibid., 544) The fighters' devotion to the cause is usually manifested by their willingness to perform brutal acts against the "outgroup" in the name of the extremist organisation, i.e. the ingroup. This division is central to social identity.

The inner categorisation process gives further insight into the willingness to perform brutal acts in the name of ISIS. According to Hogg, Terry and White (1995, 262), people are dehumanised in this categorisation process: "the others" are perceived as, reacted to and act as embodiments of the group prototype rather than as individuals. When the us vs. them thinking goes to its extreme, the West is viewed as a collective, impersonal mass that is seen as opponent to one's own, i.e. the enemy. And this justifies any brutal action against them and eliminates any feeling of compassion.



The following chapter will explore the effective machinery that is behind the recruiting success of ISIS and which makes it stand out from the other extremist organisations.

### **2.3. Propaganda machinery**

A report by the Quilliam foundation sees ISIS's propaganda as serving mainly two purposes: 1) Recruitment, based on the utopian ideal of the Caliphate, and 2) Intimidation and dissemination of threats to anyone hostile to ISIS (Saltman and Winter 2014, 38). What forms the basis of ISIS's recruitment success is a strong, consistent and persuasive message, backed up by effective propaganda machinery. And the latter also serves the second purpose, which is intimidation.

As we saw earlier, ISIS relies on the establishment of the Caliphate and its appeal in pulling power to complete the rest of its strategy, i.e. growing its fighter base internationally. As the spokesperson for ISIS announced the establishment of the Caliphate in June 2014, he called on all Muslims to come home, not just to fight but also to live and work there. (Saltman, Winter 2014, 42) This underscores the luring factor that there are roles for everyone in the new state, including women. The first alluring factor can therefore be considered the promise of the Caliphate.

The idea of the Caliphate transcends the narrow niche of extremists as it has a strong support at the grass root level. ISIS has managed to realise the historical ideal of the Muslim world, which has been the goal of many extremist organisations, including al-Qaeda. The establishment of a de facto state gives ISIS legitimacy in the eyes of the Muslim community. Those frustrated with the Western form of society find the Caliphate to be the ideal form of society and they want to contribute to this new social order. This appeals to all Muslims, not only extremists.

The Caliphate has been key in attracting Muslim women as they see themselves as having an important role to play in the new society. To the Muslim immigrants around the world who have a sense of non-belonging, this is a very concrete way to contribute and belong somewhere. Jihad provides them with a purpose as they see themselves as fighting for a greater purpose. Taking part in a war that was prophesised hundreds of years ago. Syria is referred to as "land of Jihad" in numerous hadith. Syria is where an epic battle between Muslim armies will take place and eventually lead to the end of times. To many, the opportunity to take part in this battle is a very strong motivator in itself. (Barrett 2014a, 18)

The desire to die a martyr is strongly linked to this. The focus of radical Muslims is in the afterlife and the awards that wait there. “Becoming Mulan”, a report by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (2015) that explores women’s migration to Syria, discusses this when pointing out the women’s desire to find a “brave and noble” husband. It highlights the importance of fulfilling your obligation as a Muslim and how this fight is seen as a test of endurance - to see whether one is worthy of the afterlife that is promised to a noble Muslim dying for their faith. In a way it is a privilege not granted to many.

To many, the opportunity to live under the rules and teachings of Islam is a relief, and the Caliphate to them is the ideal society. Especially following the confusion the immigrants may have experienced in the West, the Caliphate offers a concrete solution and purpose. Barrett (2014b, 20) estimates the allure for the Western recruits being a set of strict rules to follow and their consistent application. As many of the recruits from Europe are young men with troubled pasts, the Caliphate and Jihad offers structure in their lives and a clearly defined role in it. This is where the lack of knowledge about Islam also plays in the hands of ISIS, as the Westerners do not question the authority or the message.

What ISIS is building its message on is the idea of the corrupted West and righteous Muslim world. We already established that this rhetoric is very alluring to people whose origins are in collectivist cultures and who make a clear distinction between the ingroup and the outgroup. ISIS builds all its actions on the idea of Western oppression on the Muslim world. This we have seen in e.g. the execution videos of Westerners that revolve around stories about Western atrocities and how the actions of ISIS are justified. Here the dehumanisation of the opponent that was discussed earlier comes into play. The Westerners that are being executed do not deserve mercy, as they are members of the enemy camp. It is the obligation of all Muslims to help the Muslim community that is under attack (Barrett 2014b, 18).

Another dimension of the message are the early leaders of Islam and their successful spreading of their faith. The message built on this idea is constructed in a way that is most likely to affect and reach fundamental Muslims around the world – and also to attract new individuals. The period referred to in the rhetoric is the “golden age of Islam”, and Salafis – who represent the conservative Islam and with who a majority of ISIS fighters identify themselves as – are of the opinion that the military and political practices of the past, which today would be considered quite barbaric, should be revived. This is where the brutal nature of ISIS derives from, and is the reason why these practices are accepted by fellow extremists. (New Republic 2014)

Both al-Qaeda and ISIS are part of a form of Salafi-jihadism, which is loosely based on the following concepts (Saltman, Winter 2014, 13):

- 1) Allah's ultimate sovereignty over political, social and economic affairs (*hakmiyyah*),
- 2) Urgent justification of radical and violent change to the existing order as Muslim community has been extinct for a number of centuries and has reverted to a pre-Islam state of affairs in the absence of a global leadership (*jahiliyyah*), and
- 3) Global Jihad, referring to an obligation of all Muslims to fight defensive Jihad against any enemy invading a Muslim land that cannot defend itself.

These concepts were combined into an ideology that would justify violence against what the extremists consider to be the apostate regimes and all that support them. These concepts are common to most Jihadist groups. (Saltman, Winter 2014, 14)

A mistake that people often make is linking brutality directly with Islam. As Piers Morgan stated in his article following the brutal execution video showing Lieutenant Moaz al-Kasabeh burned to death: "these people are not real Muslims. They're terrorists who have hijacked Islam for their own nefarious gain. And like all terrorists, their sole currency is violence." (The Daily Mail 2015a). The brutal punishments that ISIS is employing are mentioned in the Quran, but as many other religions, Islam has evolved. What the organisation is doing is reverting back to early days of Islam with no adjustment to current realities. This is what is so appealing to people drawn to literal interpretation of religion and strict codes of conduct.

ISIS thus sees itself as fighting the prophesised war. But one cannot help but wonder how much the hadith have directed ISIS' actions instead of ISIS fulfilling history, as e.g. many of the towns they have captured are mentioned in hadith discussing the final battle. One must consider the possibility of ISIS following a master script it has drafted to make its actions seem like part of Allah's plan for the mankind. And this script is ever evolving and the message is closely intertwined with strategy.

### **2.3.1. Recruitment tactics**

ISIS has taken a unique approach to recruitment, one that the world has not seen before with any other extremist organisation, even al-Qaeda. In addition to the pulling power of the Caliphate, ISIS is employing quite modern tactics for a conservative Islamist organisation.

ISIS is utilising the Internet to its fullest potential to spread its propaganda and disseminate its threats to the West. The social media also provides a new edge for both the organisation itself and the supporters that hope to spread the message and recruit new fighters. This has brought a whole new dimension to the phenomenon with ISIS introducing a new concept “Social Jihad”.

If exposed to ISIS’s recruitment machinery - often just one click away - when at most vulnerable, a person is likely to adopt the extremist view. Sociologists call this a cognitive opening; a period when a vulnerable young person meets a charismatic proponent online or in person (Canadian Charger 2015). As Al Raffie (2013, 74) states, “extremists cease on the confusion and offer up their ideologies as alternative value systems on which individuals can build a more definitive identity”. So if a person is receptive and either one’s own social networks or online encouragement fuel this process further, the threshold for embracing radical Islam is lower. ISIS is there to provide a concrete mode of action backed up by religious authority. This is all based on a level of deception.

The image of the reality on the ground portrayed by ISIS supporters and recruiters online and via other media is welcoming and reassuring, offering camaraderie that many of the targeted individuals are longing for (Barrett 2014b, 17). Boost of self-esteem mixed in with a sense of heroism is designed to be alluring. As we saw earlier, wanting to belong to the ingroup has a lot to do with self-esteem and some scholars find ingroup membership to be the only way to achieve it, as pointed out by Marranci (2009, 5) in his book. These young people are fed a very unrealistic image of the Caliphate and the reality on the ground. But to them it may be the only group that is willing to accept them as they are.

Al-Qaeda was known to make video messages and send them to Al Jazeera for distribution. Over time the network became uncomfortable with its role as the organisation’s communication channel, and today no network is willing to take on such a role. At the same time advances in cyber security have left ISIS dependent on mainstream social media. ISIS has proven this to be an advantage rather than a hindrance, as most of its propaganda material is being spread online with the Internet functioning as its main recruitment channel.

Twitter has ended up as one key pillar of ISIS’s strategy and one of the main recruiting channels for the organisation. It has proven to be an efficient way to impact the way the world perceives ISIS as well as to recruit new fighters. The organisation is said to control as many as 90,000 Twitter accounts. This social media platform naturally does not wish to be involved in the spreading of ISIS’s message. As soon as one Twitter account is deleted, ISIS sets a new one up.

(The Daily Mail 2015b) ISIS clearly acknowledges the importance of Twitter as it has gone as far as issuing death threats to Twitter staff as well as its founder in an attempt to deter the shutting down of accounts (The Telegraph 2015b).

Quilliam has researched the organisation's use of Twitter and has broken down the types of accounts into four distinct categories (Saltman, Winter 2014, 41):

- 1) Official news accounts, which are centralised propaganda streams, streaming coordinated ISIS news and propaganda,
- 2) Unofficial news accounts, which are informal news feeds aimed at informing wider audiences,
- 3) Regional accounts, which are official information streams linked to a particular IS-run territory, and
- 4) Individual accounts, which run commentary of events in Syria and Iraq by individual supporters and fighters.

When it comes to luring people to the ISIS cause, it is the accounts of ISIS supporters as well as those who have travelled to Syria, either as fighters, "jihadi brides" etc., which are most effective. These people are extremely active on the social media and are an important part of the propaganda machinery. They are an inspiration to many people in Western Europe and are often the final encouragement needed in making the final decision to leave. The women in the Caliphate are the most active as they also seem to have more time to spend on social media.

Foreign fighters have also proven to be a recruitment advantage. As ISIS encompasses fighters of many different nationalities, it is able to appeal to people in a way that is most alluring; e.g. posting videos of recruits, speaking their own languages and emphasising aspects that are likely to lure in individuals from a particular region. ISIS has thus been able to customise its propaganda to meet the needs of people around the world.

When it comes to the propaganda material produced by ISIS, there is no denying that the videos published on the Internet are extremely professional, technically of high quality and often resemble music videos or trailers for action movies. Every detail is thought through carefully and specifically designed to attract the youth of today. At the same time the videos are skilfully designed to highlight the claimed atrocities of the West against the Muslim community.

The attention to detail has amazed the international community. In the execution videos the prisoners wear orange clothing to resemble clothing worn by prisoners in Guantanamo. Lieutenant Moaz al-Kasabeh was burned alive following the Jordanian airstrikes to reflect the agonising death the people experienced as a result of the bombings this pilot was involved in. Every detail is designed in a way that it creates a consistent narrative, showing captions of the burned victims, and thus backs up ISIS's story of Western oppression. This is again justified as action in response to the claimed atrocities performed by the West.

This creates a vicious circle, as provocation is the main tool used by ISIS to intimidate the West. At the same time the international community is blamed for inaction to counter ISIS. Undoubtedly there is no action from the international community that ISIS would not attempt to use as a propaganda tool with the aim of fuelling the hatred on both sides - widening the gap between the West and the Muslim world even further. One could thus say that brutality plays into the hands of the organisation.

One important part of this tactic is the glorification of ISIS in the media. It should be acknowledged that constant coverage in the media is exactly what ISIS desires and media coverage has an important part to play in the propaganda machinery. In the eyes of those prone to radical views, the stories spread by media unfold as heroic and as further proof on Western oppression. In addition to traditional media, social media plays an important part enabling open discussion and shared posts. Constant coverage is important for ISIS as this keeps attracting new members. Avoiding online engagement on the subject could be a way for people to counter the problem by not glorifying it any further. One example of this glorification in the media is the case of "Jihadi John". A normal but troubled person from England was covered in the media in a way, which induced young Muslims around the world towards his views and case.

Another example of this skilful branding is a special version of the PlayStation game Grand Theft Auto in which the players engage in play as ISIS fighters (Saltman, Winter 2014, 40). This has led to a subculture referred to in the media as "Jihadi cool" (The Wall Street Journal 2014). This demonstrates that ISIS is far from a primitive extremist group but highly skilled and effective propaganda machinery that is capable of challenging the Western world.

### 2.3.2 Recruitment audiences and locations

We have now explored the prerequisites for radicalisation as well as the main components of ISIS's recruitment machinery - but how do these two come together? How does the machinery find its target audience?

Again there is no clear pattern that can be established, as there are as many stories as there are people. This has baffled the Western world as it has tried to understand and find ways to tackle this phenomenon.

The role of the Internet and the social media in the recruitment process is something that is unprecedented in the case of extremist groups. As the Internet plays such a big role in the case of ISIS, there has been a lot of discussion on the so-called lone wolf theory according to which disaffected youth radicalise on their own through the use of Internet. A report by the Quilliam foundation however concludes that no radicalisation takes place online without any outside inspiration. The Internet rather acts as a catalyst to the process but the initial spark must be found elsewhere. (Saltman, Winter 2014, 42) This spark is usually provided by a personal contact. Also Professor Lawson from Waterloo University states that people join movements because of personal connections (Canadian Charger 2015).

What seem to be of vital importance in the process of radicalisation are networks, and one cannot underestimate the power of peer pressure in the recruitment process. It has proven even more effective than the "official" propaganda machinery. Benard and Rabasa (2015, 135) find these grass root networks to have many advantages as they have autonomy, allowing them to operate quite freely without direct control from the umbrella organisation. It is also quite difficult to link them with the extremist organisation. But in the case of ISIS, these networks have found no reason to keep their agenda hidden, many of them quite openly supporting ISIS. There are also some reports indicating that the facilitation networks, that were initially established to send foreign fighters to Iraq, have been reactivated to assist in the recruitment to Syria.

The International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (ICSR) released a study concluding that peer groups and kinships play a crucial role in luring young fighters, rather than the videos and the message spread on the Internet. As ICSR's director Peter Neumann puts it: "When you look at what actually made them go...being angry is one thing, but actually packing your bags and going, it was always the friends that prompted that decision, never

any piece of video on the Internet". (Business Insider UK 2015) Therefore peer pressure obviously reinforces the process and is often the final encouraging factor leading to action.

ISIS has a widespread network of recruiters whose sole purpose is to convince people to join the organisation. Initial contact is thus usually not accidental or coincidental. This professional recruitment approach takes place mostly in larger European countries. However there is an element of coercion even in smaller states where authorities are not aware of more professional tactics. For example in Finland, the radicalised are known to threaten their friends if they show no interest in following their example (Salon Seudun Sanomat 2014).

One important thing to note here is that the families of the recruits are seldom aware of their child's plans to join ISIS. The radicalisation itself may even have gone unnoticed. In most of the cases the departure for Syria comes as a complete surprise. In cases where the change in behaviour has been noticed, the families have been worried and have made attempts to prevent the person from leaving, by e.g. hiding their passport. Families are seldom - if ever - the encouraging factor. (Hoyle et. al. 2015, 18) And as we indicated earlier, the families may actually act as an indirect pushing factor in cases where the recruits have a hard time balancing between the traditional view of their families and the society surrounding them. Furthermore, the extreme form of Islam they encounter when coming in contact with extremist organisations is far from the views of the families.

In addition to an effective recruitment channel, the social media also offers the world an unprecedented opportunity to follow life in the Caliphate in "real time". Especially the women that have left for Syria are very active on the social media, describing their life and acting as a very efficient part of the propaganda machinery. Women have played a part in enticing a number of other women - and men - to leave for Syria.

Even though a great deal of the recruitment activity seems to be based on working networks, rather than particular locations, there are some locations and communities that can be directly connected to radicalisation. Rabasa and Benard (2014) identify the main sites to be radical Mosques, prayer groups, and - to an increasing extent - prisons.

Mosques have largely lost their significance as places of recruitment, but they do still act as enablers of radicalisation. Mosques are important gathering places for like-minded Muslims who end up forming smaller groups that will gather outside the Mosque in prayer rooms and even private homes. In most cases the moderate Muslims in the community complain about the radical



views of some, and a large portion of the radicalised youth has run into trouble in their home Mosques due to their extreme views. This demonstrates that Mosques may act as a gathering force where the extremists find each other but are very seldom the encouraging factor. Rather it is in the Mosques where the radically prone individuals find each other and form their own exclusive groups.

According to Rabasa and Benard (2014, 108), open recruitment did take place in Mosques prior to 9/11. Material published by extremist organisations was distributed openly and recruits were channelled to Afghanistan through these radical Mosques. The elders were undoubtedly aware of this, but the threat was largely disregarded since it was not assumed to threaten European terrain. This naturally changed after 9/11. Instead of taking action against this recruitment method, the Western surveillance forces pushed these activities underground. Today some mosques in radicalised towns may preach a more radical Islam but recruitment as such does not take place openly.

Prisons are identified as one ideal breeding ground for extremism. These conversions often do not happen for ideological reasons but rather Islam is seen as a way of coping with personal problems. In addition to providing a sense of brotherhood, the Islamist groups provide protection and services. They are quick to approach a newcomer, offering them help and protection. New prisoners are often lost and impressionable and are easy prey for these Islamist groups. Prisons also tend to produce individuals with the skills required by terrorist organisations. These people are often uneducated but streetwise and this makes them ideal for extremist groups. (Rabasa and Benard 2014, 109) It was reported in early 2015 that French officials are now targeting prisons to tackle the problem since they have been identified as one breeding ground for extremism in the country. 60 per cent of prisoners in France have Muslim origins, and given their vulnerable situation and low social status, they are very prone to extremism. (BBC 2015)

In addition to the above-mentioned recruitment locations, schools and universities have played an important part especially in the United Kingdom. Extremist thinking was tolerated in British universities for a long time and extremist groups were quite open about their views. Nawaz (2013) discusses this extensively in his book as much of his radicalisation took place in a London university.

Generally, the important factors and predominant reasons behind a successful extremist recruitment process seem to be close-knit friendships, peer pressure and the sense of obligation.

Understanding the locations and settings for recruiting extremists is also important in tackling the radicalisation process. Responses to the phenomena are discussed later in the thesis.

### **3. A SPECIAL LOOK AT CERTAIN COUNTRIES**

In the following chapter the path to extremism and numbers of ISIS recruits are explored from a country perspective, including some narrative cases around individuals and their recruitment stories. These four countries are considered to be indicative examples within the European states, and each provides a unique perspective into the phenomenon.

#### **3.1. The Nordic Countries**

The Nordic Countries are often viewed as cradles of democracy, equality and neutrality. Despite strong welfare policies and efforts to integrate incoming immigrants, the Nordics score high on the number of foreign fighters joining extremist organisations. Estimates of several hundred fighters are quite remarkable given the population of the Nordic Countries as well as the size of the Muslim diaspora in the area. In comparison, the United Kingdom with double the population of the Nordics and a high concentration of high profile radicals, is reporting numbers lower than the entirety of the Nordics. (Hate Speech International 2014)

Next we will take a look at Finland and Sweden, both of which are unlikely cradles of Islamist extremism. Despite their geographical proximity, they present us with quite different cases.

##### **3.1.1. Finland**

According to the of Finnish Security Intelligence Service about 60 people, all confirmed cases, have left Finland and travelled to ISIS-held territories. Unofficial estimates are much higher, and according to Antti Pentikäinen from Finn Church Aid, who works closely with Muslim communities, as many as 100 people may have travelled to Syria and Iraq. Of the 60 recruits, around 20 have returned and 6-8 have been killed. (YLE 2015a, b)

According to Finnish Police, 20 of the recruits have parents of Finnish ethnicity but the Finnish Security Intelligence Service has downplayed these numbers. The share of ethnic Finns is lower but no exact numbers have been published. We do know that the volunteers represent 18

ethnicities, and 76 per cent of them hold a Finnish passport. Most of the recruits are of Somali background. (YLE 2015b, c)

These numbers can be considered quite high for a country with a population of slightly above five million. The Somali community in Finland is one of the largest in the world in proportion to the number of Muslims in the country and this can explain why Somalis constitute the largest share of recruits from Finland. By 2012, the Somalis represented the largest foreign ethnicity after Estonians, Russians and Swedes, and were the second largest asylum-seeking group in 2014. (Ministry of the Interior 2012, the Finnish Immigration Service 2014)

Finland seems to follow the same trend as other European countries with most of the recruits being young men between an average age of 21-24 years. Recruits however seem to be slightly younger than the international average of 29 years. Finland is witnessing an increase in the number of women travelling to Syria and Iraq with an estimate in late 2014 of every fifth person leaving Finland being a female. Not surprisingly most of the recruits are from the Helsinki Capital area where the concentration of immigrants is generally the highest. (HS 2014a) This is also where the extremist networks are most likely to reach the mainstream population.

Motives vary but the Finnish Security Intelligence Service identifies similar motivations that have surfaced throughout this study: the Holy War and desire to participate as well as sense of adventure. Reasons also include the desire to help Syrians, armed or unarmed. (YLE 2015a) According to estimations approximately half of the recruits have left to join the armed fighting while the other half for other reasons (e.g. humanitarian aid). (YLE 2015a, HS 2014a)

As was mentioned, most of the Finnish recruits are of Somali background. Somalis are especially prone to radicalisation as they are having major difficulties in adjusting to the local society with little opportunities for work and a high level of resentment for the mainstream population. Islam is a rather new religion in Finland, and people still have numerous stereotypical conceptions about immigrants of Muslim background as a whole. As people of Somali background have little work opportunities - unemployment rate steadily over 50 per cent (Tilastokeskus 2008) -, they also seem to tend to get involved in criminal activities therefore fuelling further resentment from local Finns. This results in a vicious circle, which can explain why this fraction of society is most prone to extremism.

This trend of Somalis becoming involved with extremist organisations has caused worry within the community itself. Nur Mohamed is an activist of immigrant background who reached out

to the Finnish authorities via his blog to inform of the alarming trend among the Somali youth. He reports active and professional recruitment taking place at the grass root level with youth aged between 16-25 being lured to join ISIS. According to Mohamed, these attempts have been successful on several occasions and the community needs assistance from officials to tackle this phenomenon. (Mohamed 2014)

According to the Finnish broadcasting company YLE (2015b), The Finnish Security Intelligence Services have consistently denied the presence of any systematic recruitment in Finland. However, based on actual information from the communities themselves, the reality is different. Also Finn Church Aid believes that active recruitment is taking place in Finland. This assertion is based on their cooperation with immigrant communities and what they have observed.

In a small country such as Finland there is no requirement for an extensive professional recruitment network as recruitment can be carried out with small group of activists and word-of-mouth. Most recruits reside in the Capital area where immigrant communities are closely connected and information spreads quickly. ISIS supporters are likely to have close networks to the sources required for arranging the trip to the target region.

As discussed earlier, ISIS is quick to utilise the people who have made the trip to Syria, using them in the videos posted online to lure their countrymen in their own native language. For instance we know of a son of a Somali politician in Finland who appeared on an ISIS recruitment video just shortly after leaving for Syria, speaking Finnish and encouraging others to join him in the Caliphate (Aamulehti 2014). This is another example of the customised propaganda utilised by ISIS.

As the phenomenon started to get more attention in Finland in late 2014, the leading Finnish newspaper Helsingin Sanomat published a spread called “From Espoo to the Holy War”, covering the stories of three young people of Somali background who left Finland to join ISIS. In all of the stories, the young people had lived what appeared to be normal lives, going to school and socialising with their friends until there was a concrete incident that acted as trigger, e.g. violence directed at immigrants. This act of violence intensifies the feeling of non-belonging, widening the gap between “us” and “them” thus increasing their probability of joining a radical cause such as ISIS.

There are also cases of failed recruitment. For example, Sagr Hamdan, a 25-year-old young man who moved to Finland from Iraq at the age of five, has reported being target by recruitment

activities for two years. He has been evading threats and demands, as well as subjected to physical abuse, to take part in terrorist activity in Iraq and Syria. The threats even being carried out by his former friends. “I do not want to fight. I have seen enough of that, I only want peace” is his explanation for not wanting to have anything to do with extremist activity. (Länsiväylä 2015)

In Hamdan’s case one cannot disregard the recruitment efforts as a single incident. He has been forced to move away from his hometown (Espoo) and stop his social media activity as threats were transmitted through WhatsApp and Facebook. There is even an ISIS WhatsApp group with over a hundred members being used for recruitment. This is another example of the very contemporary and modern recruitment channels that ISIS supporters use. (Ibid.)

An interesting point in Hamdan’s case is the similarity of the trigger point between three other recruits who left to join ISIS all of whom knew an immigrant boy killed in an incident in the city of Espoo. However, the reaction of Hamid to the incident was very different even though Hamdan was even closer to the victim. He describes being depressed for a long time but nevertheless feeling no need for revenge and not wanting to fuel the hatred any further. In some other cases, individuals of the same background did turn to extremism for their own personal reasons. (Ibid.)

The above examples present the many factors simultaneously at play including not only individual value systems but also the level of integration into society. Hamdan was very young when his family moved to Finland, he has an educational degree in Information Technology and he also works. This all points to a high level of integration but he has not lost his connection to other immigrant youth. This demonstrates that successful adjustment to society can prevent one from being drawn into extremist activity – as it is simply not alluring enough. Furthermore, Hamdan sees no distinction between people based on religion and therefore feels no need to categorise people.

The case of Finland reveals that ISIS has its grip on young people all over Europe - even the most Northern countries. The following chapter will provide an insight into another Nordic country with quite a different experience.

### **3.1.2. Sweden**

Unlike Finland, Sweden is a target of systematic recruitment and has a concentration of extremists in various towns. Relative to the size of population, Sweden has the third highest number of foreign fighters in Europe. Only Belgium and Denmark have more (Göteborgs-Posten 2014). The

city of Gothenburg alone has seen more ISIS fighters than the entire United States (Sweden Report 2015).

The phenomenon of foreign fighters joining extremist movements is not new as Sweden has seen fighters take part in conflicts in e.g. Somalia and Afghanistan. However, ISIS presents a special case with its fighters of various nationalities and due to the nature of the organisation these people are joining.

The fighters leaving from Sweden are generally 20-25 years old, but otherwise the group is very fragmented, as is the case in most countries (Göteborgs-Posten 2014). According to official estimations at least 130 people have left Sweden, 20 Swedes have died in battle and a fraction of them have returned. According to news reports, 6-7 Swedes are estimated to leave the country each week (the Local, 2014). Like in other cases, the actual number of recruits is likely to be much higher -, even double the official figure according to Peder Hyllengren, a researcher at the University of Defence (Göteborgs-Posten 2014).

Gothenburg is the hotbed of terrorist recruitment with one third of all Swedish fighters originating from its suburbs Angered, Hammarkullen and Biskopsgården (SvD 2014). Fighters are known to have also left from Stockholm and Malmö as well as some smaller towns in the Eastern and even Northern parts of the country (The Local 2014). The large share of people leaving from Gothenburg's suburbs is explained by the high concentration of immigrants from various backgrounds living in e.g. Angered. Extremist ideas are likely to spread quickly in such a tight community.

Motivations seem similar as in other counties but in the case of Sweden, social factors seem to be more crucial in facilitating extremism. Magnus Ranstorp, from the Swedish National Defense College, finds that problems with housing and difficulties finding a job are critical factors as well as gang membership (The Local 2014). Furthermore, the poor housing conditions as well as limited work opportunities are a reality in the suburbs of bigger cities in Sweden, especially Gothenburg.

With extensive extremist networks in the country, ISIS has managed to employ quite unique tactics in recruiting new members. In February 2015 it was reported that Sweden's national job agency dismissed its whole network of immigrant resettlement assistants as they were suspected of recruiting newly arrived immigrants to extremist groups. (The Local 2015). This is an example of ISIS targeting an agency that is thought to be crucial in tackling extremism; an agency ensured with

the task of helping immigrants settle in the new country and find work. It is another testament to the organisation's ability to learn, evolve and adjust to the specific conditions in a certain country.

A returned fighter, Ahmed from Sweden, is able to shed light on the sentiments of ISIS fighters. In an interview with Vice magazine he describes how the brutal videotaped killings of hostages are a welcome and necessary weapon of war against America and its coalition allies as they launch airstrikes on the extremist organisation. "It's good. They [the Islamic State] are doing the same things the US and the UK are doing - - America is killing civilians, not just mujahideen... When they take one American, the whole world riots, but we [Muslims] are cheap." (Vice 2015). This is likely to reflect the sentiments of many people supporting the organisation, and a good example of the grievances that drive radicalisation.

When considering media coverage on ISIS, one cannot help but wonder if Sweden has taken a conscious decision to restrict, or keep at minimum, media discussion on ISIS in order not to glorify the organisation and inspire people. There is very little discussion on ISIS except for official news reports, e.g. the dismissal of the job centre employees and the interview of a Jihadist that has returned to Sweden. There are no extensive reports on fighters who have left the country and reporting is restricted to facts. As was pointed out earlier, media coverage plays directly into the hands of ISIS as it glorifies the organisation, its actions and makes Jihadism seem "cool" in the eyes of young people. It is likely that Sweden has taken this course of action in order to tackle this problem.

## **3.2. Western Europe**

The United Kingdom, France and Belgium are often mentioned in news coverage on foreign fighters in Europe; the UK due to its high concentration of high profile Jihadists and Belgium and France as hotbeds of Jihadist recruitment. This section will explore United Kingdom and Belgium in more detail.

### **3.2.1. The United Kingdom**

The United Kingdom is a very special case when it comes to extremism. The country is known to draw large numbers of immigrants from all around the world and subsequently there is a high concentration of extremists in the country. Most of the news coverage on young people travelling to Syria in spring 2015 was from the UK. Furthermore, the well-known case of "Jihadi



John” brought the British problem to the forefront of the country’s media. Extremism has brought a whole new dimension to the hot topic of immigration taking place in the country today.

As many as 500 people are estimated to have left the UK to join extremist groups. According to Peter Neumann, director of the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (ICSR), around 80 per cent of the British foreign fighters have joined ISIS. The Independent also reports that around one in four of all European fighters fighting for ISIS are from the UK. They are said to be some of the most vicious and vociferous fighters in the area, truly in the forefront of this conflict. The number of deaths stood at 19 in early March 2015. (The Independent 2015)

What is striking in the case of Britain is that a large number of recruits have become radicalised at university. For example Mohammed Emwazi, i.e. Jihadi John, was a student at the University of Westminster. Similarly people associated with terrorist activities in the past have university level education: Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, who tried to blow up a Detroit-bound jet in 2009 was a student at University College London; Asif Hanif and Omar Khan Sharif associated with bombing a bar in Tel Aviv in 2003 were students at King’s College London, and Omar Sheikh, responsible for the murder of journalist Daniel Pearl in Pakistan in 2002 briefly attended the London School of Economics. (The Economist 2015) This differs from the background of individuals from other countries as recruits usually have troubled pasts, a lower level of education and very bleak future prospects.

British universities are said to have been quite naïve when it comes to the threat posed by radicalism. Maajid Nawaz describes in his book “Radical” (2013) how his road to extremism took place to a large extent in university. He and his fellow extremists were quite openly able to preach their message and even organise events at the university premises. Nobody saw the need to intervene. (Nawaz 2013) Anthony Glees, Professor at the Centre for Security and Intelligence Studies at the University of Buckingham, finds that Islamist extremist ideologies have been able to spread with ease under the cover of religion, free speech and multiculturalism. (The Independent 2015) Religion is usually considered a somewhat taboo subject when it comes to intervening in people’s rights to practice their faith. This is true especially in a multicultural country such as the United Kingdom - not to mention London with a high share of immigrants.

Events organised by Islamic societies are now being cancelled as their role in spreading extremism in Britain is recognised. These societies have a long history in British society as they first emerged in the 1960s and have links to conservative and political forms of Islam with a flavour

of Salafism. The umbrella organisation, the Federation of Student Islamic Societies, even had close ties to Muslim Brotherhood in the past, and Saudis are known to have lavished money on university groups in the past decades, bringing even deeper fundamentalism into play. (The Economist 2015)

London seems to be facing the biggest problem with students being disoriented and non-integrated (Ibid.). Nawaz (2013) also confesses in his book to opting for London in order to be away from his family and to make sure his family was not aware of the direction his life was taking. His family thought he was progressing well in his studies when in fact he was more concentrated on spreading his ideology and connecting with his brothers of faith.

Britain seems to present us with a unique case in that most recruits are not necessarily those with a low level of education and troubled backgrounds. This may be due to Britain being quite successful at integrating its immigrants to its society. It is also important to note that in some cases these families have been in the UK for generations. People have versatile backgrounds, in some cases with wealth and appreciation for higher education. The UK receives many immigrants, not only as asylum seekers, but also from the former Commonwealth countries as well as all over Europe - and the world. London especially is truly a melting pot with people representing a colourful variety of backgrounds and the term immigrant has a very different connotation than elsewhere in Europe.

MI5 - Britain's Security Service - has identified different pathways to extremism in its report (The Guardian 2015c). The experience of migrating to Britain and facing marginalisation and racism stand out as very important. Furthermore, the inability for those holding university degrees to achieve nothing but low-grade jobs. This is in line with what Rabasa and Benard (2014, 101) found to be decisive in generating grievances towards the society: the gap between expectations and reality. Even higher education does not guarantee a good job and this leads to disappointment.

The report also found that in the case of Britain, people with criminal pasts and contacts with extremist networks - either at home or abroad - and those who are naïve when it comes to religion, are more likely to be drawn into extremism. The trigger can be anything from personal experience of inequality and marginalisation to victimisation of both physical and verbal kind. This is all intensified by Western media coverage underlining negative stereotypes and the extremist groups themselves at the other end of the spectrum. This was discussed earlier as the vicious circle that keeps feeding prejudices on both sides. An important point is made as the report highlights that not everyone having these experiences ends up being radicalised: "What is different about those

who ended up involved in terrorism is that they came into contact with existing extremists who recognised their vulnerabilities." (The Guardian 2015c)

Baroness Warsi, Britain's first female Muslim Cabinet Minister who resigned last year over the Government's "morally indefensible" policy on Gaza, compares tackling extremism to looking for needles in a haystack (Huffington Post 2015). Targeting Mosques and Muslim communities is not sufficient as ISIS has a hold of the Internet that young people are spending so much time on. In a multicultural country such as Britain, weeding out the radical element is demanding to say the least and requires the cooperation of the entire community from the government to individual families.

The current situation with more and more young people leaving Britain for Syria has forced the government to rethink its approach to extremism. The current government has changed its plans to cut the counter-radicalisation programme "Prevent", which has already seen substantial cuts (Ibid.). It remains to be seen how the next government will handle the situation. And action on the policy level naturally takes time. The work being done at the grass root level seems more crucial in this situation but has proven the hardest. Cooperation at all levels is needed, as Warsi pointed out.

The polls show a worrying trend of negative sentiments. Sky News commissioned a survey that found 44 per cent of non-Muslims women and 49 per cent of non-Muslim men to be more suspicious of Muslims than before. The experience was the same for Muslims as they felt to be under more suspicion than a few years earlier. (The Telegraph 2015c) Furthermore, more than a quarter of British Muslims have sympathy for those who have left for Syria with six in ten Muslims condemning those that have left. Among women and Muslims under the age of 35, the share of sympathisers rises to a third. Quite surprisingly one in seven non-Muslims also sympathised with those that have travelled to Syria to join Jihad. (Ibid.)

When it comes to perceptions of what is causing radicalisation, four in ten British Muslims blame the police and MI5 for the radicalisation of young people (Ibid.). This also surfaces in connection with Jihadi John where it was claimed that the harassment by the security services contributed to his radicalisation. This notion has largely come from pressure group Cage, which first revealed Jihadi John's real name However; this claim doesn't seem to be true as Maajid Nawaz points out that Mohammed Emwazi tried to join al-Shabaab already before he was first questioned by MI5. According to Nawaz the officials do play a role in failing to tackle extremism in the correct way and thus feeding extremism as opposed to starving it. As Nawaz explains, extremism breeds

extremism and sensible counter-narratives are needed to break this vicious circle. (The Guardian 2015d)

The poll results demonstrate the growing suspicion of Muslims. In a multicultural society such as in Britain it should be fairly easy to integrate. Nevertheless, it is also a class society with a lot of competition - even among the Britons themselves. If one fails to succeed in this society, there are few alternatives but menial jobs, and this lack of future prospects is crucial in determining an individual's path to radicalisation.

### **3.2.2. Belgium**

Belgium is a relatively small country of 11 million inhabitants, which has experienced at least 350 recruits leaving to Syria to join ISIS. Unofficial estimates range as high as 450 recruits. Even the official number is one of the highest per capita in Europe. (The New York Times 2015)

Belgium itself is quite a divided country with rivalries between the Dutch-speaking North and French-speaking South. In addition to internal problems, Belgium - like most other European countries - has experienced difficulties in integrating immigrants into its society. The internal division is thought to have affected the coherence of government response and intensified the difficulties immigrants are having in fitting in. Muslims currently make up six per cent of the Belgian society, and even after generations in the country they have problems integrating in the mainly Catholic country. (The Washington Post 2015)

The Belgian officials have identified some common elements leading to extremism that are similar on the European level: a clustering of radicals in a small area, the blurred boundary between petty criminality and jihadist violence, and prison as an incubator for extremism (The New York Times 2015). Belgium is the only country examined in this paper where prison plays a big role in fuelling extremism.

Most of the people that have left for Syria from Belgium derive from Dutch-speaking Flanders where a right-wing Flemish nationalist party has been gaining popularity for years. This may be seen as one explanation why there is little tolerance for Muslim minorities in the area. Another factor fuelling the problem is that few Imams speak Dutch - only 10 Imams among 165 mosques in Flanders speak Dutch. This implies that Muslims whose first language is Dutch must turn to the Internet if they have questions about their faith - where the likelihood of running into extreme views is high. The fact of not being able to discuss and practice religion in one's native

language plays its part in intensifying the feeling of seclusion. As Montasser AlDe'emeh of the University of Antwerp, who is researching Belgian fighters in Syria, puts it: "The Islamic State is giving them what the Belgian government can't give them - identity, structure". (The Washington Post 2015)

One area that is identified as a hotbed for extremism is the borough of Molenbeek near Brussels. In Molenbeek there are 22 known mosques - four times the number of churches. Not surprisingly, this particular area is the second poorest in Belgium with youth employment of 40 per cent. (The New York Times 2015) This area combines two crucial elements for encouraging extremism: high concentration of immigrants in one area and poor conditions of life. People living under such conditions are likely to look elsewhere to find something sensible to do.

Belgium was in the news in 2011 after it became the first country in Europe to ban the full-face veil for security reasons. With the law, any clothing that obscures the identity of the wearer in public places is banned. What caused most controversy were claims that the country had now liberated women by "breaking through the chains that have kept countless women enslaved". This law was condemned by organisations such as Amnesty International, which called the move "an attack on religious freedom". Others viewed it as move to defend liberal values. (The Independent 2010) Here we see a clash between two cultures. What to some is a part of their culture and tradition, others find to be degrading to women. And what the Western culture finds to be liberation and an end to oppression of women, the other side considers as an offence to their customs. This is an example of forced integration, something that is counterproductive and causes further resentment instead of making the process of adjustment easier. Also the Islamic community has called for improved efforts to integrate vulnerable immigrant groups instead of imposing more security measures that do just the opposite (Ibid.).

The situation in Belgium escalated after the Charlie Hebdo shootings in Paris in early 2015 when dozens of people were arrested for plotting terror acts in Belgium, France and Germany. Tensions were already high as the country was witnessing the largest terrorism trial against Sharia4Belgium, which is a terror organisation funnelling fighters to Syria. This organisation is key to making Belgium the hotbed for extremism it is today.

Sharia4Belgium is responsible for an underground Jihadist pipeline, which is an important reason why Belgium has become the largest contributor of foreign fighters to Syria. The organisation has also inspired many to join extremist organisations as it has promoted Jihadism

almost like a travel agency. Sharia4Belgium has been especially active in the above-mentioned Molenbeek. (The Washington Post 2015)

The above demonstrates that Belgium has the networks and channels to send fighters to Syria and Iraq. Further encouragement is provided by Abou Omar el-Belgiki “the Belgian”, who has appeared in video messages urging his fellow Belgians to join him. He appeals to feelings of exclusion and the poor treatment of Muslims minorities, asking “Are you satisfied with this life - - this life of humiliation?”. In his opinion violent Jihad is the only way to restore pride and honor. (The New York Times 2015)

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All the countries explored previously have their own characteristics and emphasis when it comes to extremism in Europe – despite being geographically close to one another.

Finland, Sweden and Belgium are all small countries that find themselves at the forefront of the Jihadist phenomenon. When considering the numbers of Islamic fighters proportionately to the total population, Sweden has the third highest number of foreign fighters in Europe with Belgium and Denmark having the largest shares. When only examining absolute figures, Britain is the second largest contributor after France with about one in four foreign fighters originating from Britain. The share of fighters from Finland can be considered quite alarming when considering the small population and scarcely populated area of the country.

The United Kingdom is in a league of its own when it comes to the number of immigrants as well as the number of people attempting to leave the country to join ISIS. The UK has also been host to many high profile Jihadists including “Jihadi John”, with the British press doing its part in fuelling the phenomenon. This is contrary to Sweden, which has attempted to keep the media reporting at a minimum in order not to inspire others.

When it comes to patterns of radicalisation, all countries share features that have been discussed in this paper: problems integrating in the society, unemployment, confusion with identity, and resentment towards the society. Britain along with Belgium witnesses more systematic recruitment than their Nordic neighbours. British universities have acted as main places of radicalisation as Islamic societies have been allowed to flourish in the campuses. In the case of Belgium, prisons act as similar hotbeds of recruitment with high shares of inmates being Muslims and radical groups acting as the only instances providing assistance to lost inmates. Belgium also

has its own underground Jihadist pipeline facilitating trips to Syria. These countries are thus more advanced than the two Nordics where radicalisation and recruitment to a large extent still takes place through unofficial networks, groups of friends and word-of-mouth. What is common to all four is the role of the Internet and online encouragement. Where they differ is the location where the initial spark for radicalisation is found.

## **4. WOMEN IN JIHAD - THEIR SPECIAL ROLE**

Women play a special role in the context of ISIS and therefore the topic deserves a section of its own. ISIS itself highlights the women's role in the Caliphate, and women have also proven to be key players in attracting new members for the organisation.

The Institute for Strategic Dialogue provided an unprecedented look at female migrants to ISIS in its report "Becoming Mulan?", which was published in early 2015. This report is the main source of reference for this exploration of women in the Caliphate. All findings are based on the information the women themselves have provided on their social media accounts. As was mentioned earlier, women are especially active on the social media and this has offered the world a unique insight into life in the Caliphate and the mind set of the people that support and join ISIS.

When compared to other extremist organisations, ISIS is unique in the way it has managed to attract a large number of women. According to EU estimations approximately 18 per cent of the 3,000 recruits are women (Barrett 2014b, 16). Some of these women make the trip with their husband, some in a group of other women and some make the decision to leave alone.

This is no new phenomenon as women have also joined extremist and terrorist organisations in the past. Joana Cook from King's College London points out how women have taken part in both nationalistic and Islamic extremist groups all through history. The women joining ISIS are not allowed to take part in combat, and it is normal for the organisations to keep the women in the background, e.g. in taking care of logistics or other support functions. Nevertheless, Hamas used women as suicide bombers in 2004 as women were not viewed as potential bombers and were able to carry out missions more effectively than men who were closely monitored. (HS 2015)

Hoyle, Bradford and Frenett (2015, 10) identify three main reasons for women joining ISIS: grievances, solutions and personal motivations. Women thus tend to have the same motivations to join as men with some difference in emphasis; men are drawn in by Jihad, women by the idea of the Caliphate.

Despite their different roles in extremist organisations, there is in fact little difference between women and men when it comes to brutality and ideology (HS 2015). Many women



actually hope to take part in battle and support the brutal acts performed against the perceived enemy (Hoyle et. al 2015, 26, 31). It is clear that women's role in these organisations has been underestimated. They are just as devoted and committed to the cause - and willing to act to further the organisation's goals.

Even so women do bring their unique qualities to the cause. Women tend to have more of sympathy for the Muslim victims of violence, and therefore ISIS's rhetoric concerning the oppression of Muslims is especially effective to the female audience. Hoyle et. al. (2015, 11) find the portrayed oppression of the Muslim community and the sympathy the women feel for the victims to be one key motivator for women joining ISIS.

Once these women join ISIS this oppression becomes very concrete as they live in a warzone and witness the coalition airstrikes and ISIS's battles on the ground first hand. ISIS supporters are known to discuss at length the atrocities performed against the Muslim world on the social media, intensifying ISIS's message and acting as an important part of the propaganda machinery. In addition to discussion, there is a lot of sharing of graphic material and defending their "Ummah", i.e. the Muslim community. The Internet enables the quick spreading of the message - spiced up with graphic material - around the world. (Hoyle et. al. 2015, 26-27)

Another important motivation is the Caliphate. The establishment of the Caliphate has been central to alluring the women to join ISIS as they embrace the new vision for society and see themselves as having an important role to play in contributing to the establishment of the new society. In this case, ISIS has succeeded in using its territorial gains and establishment of a de facto state as a pulling force.

Many of these women are likely to have left for Syria due to feeling foreign and confused as an immigrant in a Western country. Ironically it becomes clear from the stories of the women that they still feel foreign in the new land, as there is little interaction with the native Syrians and Iraqis, they are having difficulties learning Arabic, and are even denied access to certain goods and services (Hoyle et. al. 2015, 25). So these women have failed to escape some of the problems that may have been key contributors to their decision to leave in the first place. But from the collectivist point of view, they are surrounded by something they have been missing: sisterhood and a close-knit network of ISIS supporters. This is likely to make up for the feelings of seclusion.

The decisive factor - also in the case of women - is religious duty. As Hoyle et. al (2015, 13) point out, building the Caliphate is not only an ideal to them, it is their duty to take part in building

it. One could thus say that whereas taking part in Jihad is the religious duty of the men, for the women it is their contribution to the new society. For men, dying a martyr is a way to secure their place in heaven, for women it is all about the Caliphate and their contribution to it. And as the report states, for the women the greatest reward in this life is to find a brave and noble husband.

It is important to keep in mind that for both men and women, aspirations are in the afterlife. The Caliphate is not expected to be a perfect place but the hardships and the patience needed for building efforts are all about preparation, a test of endurance to see if one is worthy of the afterlife. Despite the sporadic electricity and poor internet access, the women are generally well provided for. Unmarried women get to stay in *maqgar*, a women's hostel, and married couples are given a house. In addition to free housing the women receive monthly food supplies and a monthly allowance. The role of the woman is predominantly a domestic one, and as one woman herself states: the best thing for a woman is to be a righteous wife and to raise righteous children. (Hoyle et. al. 2015, 21-22)

When looking at the radicalisation stories of men, sadness about or difficulty in leaving one's family behind to join Jihad comes up very seldom. It is all about duty and resentment for the Western society. The element of human emotions and is often forgotten as these men are often made out to be "machines of Jihad" with duty and new identity overpowering all humane emotions. One cannot help but wonder if all human emotions disappear as men take on the identity of a Jihadist. It seems extreme that people would lose all emotions and consider their own families an enemy without any regrets. Is the tight community of ISIS supporters and will to fight enough to wipe everything else away? Does the sense of belonging compensate for all these losses? Again the women provide us the more humane insight into the phenomenon and the feelings of sadness that go with it.

According to the data gathered by Hoyle et. al. (2015, 15-16) it seems the women have more difficulty leaving their families, as many describe longing for their families and the difficulty of spending the final night with their families - the families in most cases being totally unaware of their plans. These sentiments on the social media prove that human feelings are no stranger to women despite their devotion to the cause. People joining ISIS thus do not turn into machines once they join the organisation and move to ISIS-held territory, as one seems to assume in the case of male Jihadists. They are still people with feelings, people who have their own doubts and contemplations.

What is common to both men and women making the trip to Syria is determination and perseverance. Both of these attributes are required for making the trip itself and crossing the borders

in ISIS territory. The little that is known about these concrete journeys is through women's accounts of their experiences.

Women travelling from different parts of the world are often gathered together in Turkey to cross the border together. Groups are often detained at the border and interrogated over their connections to ISIS. In some cases ISIS has even sent a lawyer to help women cross the border after being held in prison. (Hoyle et. al. 2015, 19-20) This proves that ISIS is an influential power in the region with strong underground connections that facilitate its operations in the area.

One aspect already mentioned is the women's role in recruitment and the propaganda machinery. Many act as online motivators and mentors, some knowingly, but some probably are merely young women who are active on the social media and eager to share their lives. These stories are likely to be an inspiration to many who are contemplating joining ISIS. These women share the victories and the atrocities, but also their everyday life. Despite all the stories of ISIS treating women poorly, the mundane stories of the women in the ranks of ISIS build a picture of normal and enjoyable life filled with sisterhood and pulling together, one that many in the West idolise and see as an alternative to their current confusion.

There are many reports of women being involved in very concrete recruitment, often providing the final encouragement to recruits as well as assistance in making the travel arrangements. Women are known to maintain exceptionally good networks, which is an advantage in ISIS recruitment activities. This fulfils both the women's desire to form and upkeep complex networks as well as ISIS's aspirations for effective recruitment machinery.

As people tend to view female extremists in a different way from men, these women can be seen to make extremism more accessible. There is a tendency to think that if women join the organisation and seem to be enjoying their life, it cannot be that bad. They bring the realities of the Caliphate closer to a Western viewpoint and lower the threshold for joining ISIS. This is a dangerous trend. The role of the women in this phenomenon has been largely underestimated by the West and this is now slowly being recognised. Women are not as innocent as often perceived but are very much pulling their weight in the favour of SIS. As a piece in the New York Times (2015) following the Paris attacks states: "the West's inability to appreciate the role the women play in terror should come under the highest scrutiny".

## **5. WHAT COMES AFTER - POSSIBLE THREAT AND THE RESPONSE TO RETURNING FIGHTERS**

The possible threat of returning fighters is one reason the European states are putting so much effort into understanding and tackling the phenomenon of radicalisation. It is feared that people will become even more radicalised during their time with ISIS and conduct terrorist attacks on domestic soil after returning home. As British Foreign Secretary said in a speech in 2013, the longer the conflict in Syria goes on, the greater the risk of an attack by ideologically hardened Jihadists with battle experience (The Telegraph 2013). These comments were made two years ago and there is still no end to the conflict in sight.

ISIS has also brought a whole new dimension to the discussion on Islamist extremism. Terrorism is often perceived as something the Western countries are fighting against, something that for many states seems to exist “out there” and something one hopes to never pose a threat at home. This trend of Westerners joining a terrorist organisation on such a scale has brought the problem to the home soil and turned terrorism into something one must fight within.

The numbers of returnees are quite high; for example out of the 60 fighters that have left Finland, around 20 have returned. In Belgium 100 out of the 350 have returned. It is difficult to identify the returnees but all the confirmed cases are known to officials. Some countries do not publish records on returnees, possibly because this might frighten people due to the increased discussion around the potential security threat these individuals can pose.

Naturally there are various reasons why so many have returned home. For some it is purely due to disillusionment with Jihad that turned out to be less glamorous than anticipated. The Economic Times reports how foreign fighters are begging to be allowed to return home as they have been forced to do menial tasks. The fighters have been writing home complaining of iPods no longer working and how the weather is getting cold. (The Economic Times 2014)

As much of the allure used for recruitment focuses around building a picture of a noble, prophesised fight against the Western world and living in the paradise-like Caliphate, the harsh realities are sure to come as a surprise for the disillusioned young men. Many surely imagined themselves fighting alongside Jihadi John, appearing on the execution videos and being in the

forefront of the glamorous Jihad portrayed by ISIS. The reality however is quite different. ISIS's promise of a glamorous fight against the infidels does include the other duties often involved with the position. Barrett (2014b, 20) expresses it well when he states that only the more mature realize that the reality of life under an extremist group falls far short of the religious ideal.

Many of the recruits originate from modern European countries where they are used to a comfortable quality of life and modern luxuries (cell phones, iPads, iPods, Internet etc.). Living in the Caliphate with sporadic electricity and the less than perfect conditions of a warzone is far from what these young men and women are used to – and something that they did not expect. This can lead to contempt and a feeling of being “cheated” into joining ISIS.

Despite deep-rooted hatred for the West, these foreign fighters have attempted to bring a part of the West with them as the selection in the stores in the Caliphate now include Western products (such as Red Bull, Snickers chocolate bars and Pringles) - something never heard of in the region until ISIS with its colourful array of Jihadists arrived. (HS/Nyt 2014b) This could be considered quite hypocritical with these young men and women swearing deep-rooted hatred for the West and yet wanting to retain the parts of the culture they find appealing and convenient.

There are suspicions that ISIS is sending recruits back home to conduct terrorist activity on European soil or to work in recruitment. Certainly there are cases like this that are not known to the public and something that worries the Western world. However, returning home because Jihad turned out to be different from what one expected, is no simple thing to do. ISIS recruits are made to swear allegiance to the Islamic State and the Caliph, which means that any disobedience may result in disciplinary measures and even death. The Guardian reported in late 2014 how Jihadi fighters wanting to return home have been issued with death threats by the ISIS leadership. In late 2014 as many as 30 Britons were reported as being kept in Syria and Iraq against their will. (The Guardian 2014)

Nevertheless, there is a surprisingly large number of returnees, which has prompted the European countries to prepare for the possible threat these returnees pose. Naturally another factor to consider is how these people should be dealt with as many may have committed atrocities that should not go unpunished. The difficulty lies in identifying the individuals that have been involved in criminal activity and distinguishing them from those who have been in the area for other, e.g. humanitarian, reasons.

What makes the response even more of a sensitive issue is the fact that many of the recruits are of immigrant background and Islam is a religion that many people hold stereotypical perceptions of. This complicates the way governments can tackle the issue. There may be accusations of Islamophobia and as Al Raffie (2013, 67) points out, this makes governments more hesitant to confront sub-governmental actors that may be key in deterring the spread of the ISIS message. This includes e.g. the Islamic societies we see in the United Kingdom. Many governments are halting cooperation with Islamist organisations as they often uphold many of the narratives of the violent counterparts while condemning the violence. This is another important distinction to make that is key in alleviating the prejudices worldwide. The lines between Islam and extreme political Islam have blurred, and people are having a hard time separating the two. This is a substantial factor driving radicalisation, as Muslim people become frustrated over the false perceptions that people in the Western world hold about them and their religion. Simultaneously it is also an important reason for governments failing to confront the real issue - the radical branch of Islam. It is a case of one bad apple spoiling the bunch.

Countries have quite varied approaches to returning fighters ranging from reintegration into the society to banning entrance to the country. For example, Finland is developing an exit programme to help people de-radicalise. Finland is aiming to blend models and approaches from different countries, trying to apply both tighter legislation and softer tools. Tarja Mankkinen from the Finnish Ministry of the Interior points out that action by independent organisations has proven more effective than that maintained by official authorities (HS 2014b) People may find these associations and organisations more approachable than official authorities towards which many have grievances to begin with. Also youth groups and sports associations are key to reaching young people and give them an alternative. They are all crucial also in prevention, not only in trying to integrate these people back into the society - something that in most cases failed to begin with.

Denmark is known to apply the most advanced model. The principle driving the Danish approach is that of inclusion: offering the returning fighters therapy and assisting in reintegration into the society with the help of the families. The returnees are also offered a job or something sensible to do to minimise the potential threat they pose to the society. This approach aims at not stigmatizing or excluding these people. Even “exit centres” have been established for those wishing to leave the extremist groups. Naturally the returning people are screened and the ones that have committed crimes are dealt with in the courts while the rest are supported through reintegration into the society. A substantial part of this process is finding out the underlying motivations for joining an extremist organisation and becoming radicalised in order to ensure that these returnees do not get

involved in recruiting new fighters or pose other threats to the society. (International Business Times 2014b, YLE 2014)

Some countries have taken on a more strict approach, such as the United Kingdom. The country is determined to block the entrance of returning fighters to the country, by e.g. freezing their passports. Suspected fighters who travel to Syria will be prevented from returning to Britain for two years and only allowed to re-enter if they consent to persecution, home detention, regular police monitoring or participate in a de-radicalisation course. (HS 2014c)

The approaches in different European countries vary but as mentioned, it is impossible to distinguish what works best between both prevention and reintegration in the society. For instance, the exit programmes are more likely to work in cases where the individual is already willing to give up radical thinking. In the case of Finland, local Muslim communities are closely involved in the prevention and rehabilitation. They have been key in informing the authorities about departures and returns of these fighters. (HS 2014a) We also see European countries working together to tackle the problem. For example, the Nordic countries signed an agreement in early 2015 to tighten and organise further cooperation when it comes to preventing radicalisation and helping people break free from extremist organisations (YLE 2015d).

The future will show which approach is the most effective. It is understandable that some countries are determined to keep the radicalised out of the country. However, if the individual has the will to return home, it is important to support the rehabilitation process and not intensify feelings of exclusion that these people felt to begin with. However, it is a fact that these people are returning from a warzone having witnessed the horrors of war and most likely committed atrocities hard to imagine. These individuals are either hardened by their experiences or traumatised. Either way - they need help and support.

## CONCLUSION

This thesis explored the reasons and motivations behind people joining extremist organisations as well as the paths leading to radicalisation. It also presented a qualitative analysis of ISIS and its recruitment machinery with main focus on trying to shed more light on the motivations of foreign volunteers for joining the organisation.

More specifically the thesis attempted to answer the following research questions:

- A) Is identity formation - or the lack of it - key to facilitating extremist behaviour?,
- B) Are there common characteristics that can be drawn or does each person present us with an individual case?, and
- C) What are the pulling and pushing factors that contribute to radicalisation?.

Our study proved that there are many elements that contribute to radicalisation in the Western world, the three levels of identity playing their part but not causing radicalisation on their own. The different levels are interconnected and when outside factors add to the mix, some combinations may be crucial in facilitating extremism.

### **Is identity formation key to facilitating extremist behaviour?**

Confusion about and search for identity surfaces the most when examining the process of radicalisation and motivations behind it. The study proved that identity formation is crucial when it comes to potential future radicalisation of individuals - be they of immigrant backgrounds or of Western origin. In addition to identity issues, extremism may also be considered in part as another manifestation of young people's rebellion.

The formation of personal identity and its interaction with the other levels of identity seem to determine whether a person becomes prone to radicalisation. We found that identity crisis often originates at the levels of both cultural and social identity, with religion and collectivism bringing additional dimensions to it in the case of immigrants.

Culture proved to be a big influence on the behaviour of people, more so than we are aware of. Recruits of immigrant background are often caught in the cross draught between two cultures:



their native culture with its collectivist features and the individualistic culture they are surrounded by. As neither culture feels like one's own, this paradox leads to a strong feeling of non-belonging and confusion about one's identity. This is often made worse by little interaction with the mainstream population, as dialogue with others is central to the creation of an identity - it constructs and modifies our identity even further. This does not happen in a vacuum where people only feed each other's prejudices.

As our social identity is always defined in relation to others, belonging to an ingroup (sense of belonging) is generally considered as important in forming an identity and a healthy self-esteem. Low self-esteem proved to be an important driving force to joining extremist organisations as belonging to an organisation perceived as strong associates the person with the same positive attributes. One thus gains an identity - and sense of belonging - through the group one belongs to. In this case, the extremist organisation.

As the individual adopts the normative standards and expectations held by the extremist group, *us vs. them thinking* becomes central to one's identity, the ingroup (us) being the Muslim community and outgroup (them) the West. This is strengthened further by the inner categorisation process whereby the outgroup is dehumanised and seen as a collective enemy, increasing the person's willingness to perform brutal acts against the outgroup and eliminating any feeling of compassion. This is widely exploited by extremist organisations, which have built their message around the idea of Western oppression of Muslims.

Not every individual confused about identity ends up joining an extremist organisation. Two outcomes of identity formation proved to be of particular relevance for extremist identity: authoritarian foreclosure and aimless diffusion. Foreclosure has to do with the adoption of commitments without considering the alternatives and diffusion represents being uncommitted and engaging in little or no systematic exploration. In the case of ISIS, individuals who exhibit these traits of identity formation adopt the values fed to them by the organisation without considering or seriously exploring alternative options. This explains the readiness of young individuals to adopt the offered rhetoric and why they are such an easy target for the organisation.

### **Are there common characteristics that can be drawn or does each person present us with an individual case?**

Certain characteristics are revealed frequently and seem to be common to most people joining an extremist organisation. Nevertheless, it ultimately comes down to individual mix of

reasons and motivations. In the case of immigrants we can identify common, underlying resentment and confusion but when it comes to people of Western origin, motivations literally vary from person to person.

Most recruits are male and relatively young, the average age range being 18-29 years. The rhetoric of an extremist organisation is especially appealing to young people who have yet to form their own identity or engage in truly critical thinking. If a foreclosed or diffused person is exposed to the efficient propaganda machinery of a terrorist organisation, it can lead to an unfortunate outcome. What is also typical of a person of young age is the will to explore one's roots and establish an identity, which also proved to be an important motivator. Adaptation of group identity and collectivism are also strong among these individuals.

Many individuals are characterised as having failed to form an identity that would affirm their sense of self and their place in the society. In addition to the cross draught between two cultures, that is common to most recruits of immigrant backgrounds, many are confused and ignorant when it comes to religion. Second and third generation immigrants often have a very different relationship to religion as the earlier generations: they tend to pick certain cultural and religious elements, forming their own version. This makes them feel even more distant from both the traditional views of their parents as well as the surrounding society. Moreover, religion often becomes the unifying factor among the immigrant youth, as the levels of cultural and social identities are those of confusion.

When it comes to the Western recruits, they seldom have deep-rooted religious aspirations but are rather rootless individuals, looking for a higher authority to steer their lives. This is why ISIS's clear codes of conduct are so appealing to them. From the point of view of the organisation, the Westerners' lack of knowledge on Islam is considered an advantage as it facilitates the manipulation of expectations. Westerners do not seem to question the authority or the message of the organisation.

The educational level of the recruits does not seem to be a decisive factor, and one cannot conclude that all recruits are uneducated and have troubled pasts. When compared to the more local fighters, the Westerners supply ISIS with quite an educated - yet inexperienced when it comes to fighting - array of skills. What seems to be common to most recruits is an underlying and genuine will to do good: either to defend fellow Muslims or humanitarian motivations.

Even though many seem to be characterised as aimless, lacking a sense of identity and belonging, the reasons for and paths to this confusion are individual. One cannot thus generalise too much since this would also lead us to make false conclusions and draw stereotypes.

### **What are the pulling and pushing factors that contribute to radicalisation?**

When it comes to the pushing and pulling factors that play a decisive role in the radicalisation process, there are various aspects that can be identified.

The society plays a part in causing feelings of seclusion and grievances that often trigger the process of radicalisation. Many of the recruits of immigrant backgrounds originate from collectivist cultures and the individualistic Western society may feel cold and unwelcoming to them. The mainstream society also often holds very stereotypical perceptions of the immigrant groups. Concrete discrimination is the most extreme manifestation of this. If one does not feel accepted by the surrounding society, and this feeling is intensified by discrimination, it intensifies the feeling of disaffection towards the host country and the sense of non-belonging. Also unemployment and other social problems (e.g. housing) drive towards radicalisation. The gap between educational level and employment being one of the most crucial in the build up of grievances.

The perceived oppression of the Muslim community by the West is the ultimate manifestation of the us vs. them thinking, and encompasses both the political interventions of the US-led Western coalition on regimes in the Middle East as well as the discrimination at the grass root level. ISIS feeds on this in its propaganda and is quite successful since these are sentiments shared by Muslims around the world and not only extremists. It is the obligation of all Muslims to defend their community that is under attack. This is one of the major reasons we see people joining ISIS.

When it comes to the pulling factors, ISIS has relied on the establishment of the Caliphate and its appeal to complete its strategy of growing its fighter base internationally. The organisation has highlighted that there are roles for everyone in the new society and this has been key in attracting not only men but also women to its ranks.

Whereas women see themselves as playing an important part in the new society, men have a desire to take part in the prophesised war. Jihad provides lost individuals with a purpose as they see themselves as fighting for a greater purpose, with Syria often being referred to as the “land of

Jihad” where the epic battle leading to the end of times will take place. Dying a martyr is strongly linked to this.

For Western recruits the biggest pull seems to be that of adventure. For some joining Jihad is just another exciting experience, something that this particular generation finds tempting and rebellious. Other motivations for people of Western origin are of humanitarian nature, either opposing the Western intervention or supporting the Syrian people suffering from the Civil War.

On a more concrete level, an important factor facilitating the flow of recruits to Syria is its geographical accessibility and the ready networks specialised in assisting foreign fighters across the border. Not to mention the close-knit friendships and peer pressure, enforced by an element of coercion what is dominant at the grass root level and encourages people to join.

### **Other factors leading to extremist group prevalence**

When considering other factors that have contributed to the phenomenon as well as the rise of ISIS, the political instability in Iraq and Syria has been key to facilitating ISIS’s territorial gains and influence in the area. The organisation has turned into the strongest opposition to Assad’s regime and the only instance to provide some stability and governance. This explains why the people tolerate its brutal ways and absolutist style of government.

By establishing the Caliphate, ISIS has managed to lure even people not fully supportive of the organisation’s brutality and message. Those frustrated with the Western form of society find the Caliphate to be the ideal form of society and they want to contribute to this new social order. This appeals to all Muslims, not only extremists, and is also key in attracting female followers as they see themselves having an important role to play in the new society. The Caliphate offers a concrete solution and purpose to people who feel lost in a Western society. Also the women’s determination is likely to root the organisation to the area even further, as we see Jihadists starting their families and truly establishing themselves in the Caliphate.

When it comes to countering the organisation, the action must start within the area itself. ISIS is not likely to find a strong enough opponent in the near future as any action to counter it only intensifies the grievances that are ultimately behind its success, i.e. the Western oppression on the Muslim world. Very little is done to counter the narrative of the organisation, which is one that must be tackled. No military action is likely to make a difference. It is the story of Western

oppression that ISIS keeps spreading that is attracting most of its Muslim followers, and any action the coalition takes only plays in the hands of the organisations.

## **Viewpoints to possible solutions**

Tackling extremism is not easy, as the various countries as well as the international community have come to experience. It can be compared to looking for needles in a haystack, as collective action is required. Targeting mosques and Muslim communities may only intensify the problem and is nevertheless not sufficient. The Internet also plays a prominent role in the process of radicalisation. However, it is important to identify the common places of recruitment, such as prisons, and subtly work towards solutions. Weeding out the radical element in societies requires the cooperation of the entire community from the top of the government to individual families.

Western countries have taken on quite varied approaches towards returning fighters ranging from reintegration into the society to banning entrance to the country. Unofficial non-government organisation and associations are found to be important in this counter-action, as they are more approachable than official authorities towards which many have grievances to begin with. Also youth groups and sports associations are key to reaching young people and giving them an alluring alternative.

It is difficult to say which approach is most effective. If an individual has the will to return home it is important that they are at least given an opportunity of rehabilitation. These individuals are returning from war and are either hardened by their experiences or traumatised. Either way - they need help and support. Also the stories of these returnees - often disillusioned with the idea of Jihad - are key to countering this phenomenon.

Another important factor to consider is the role of media in glorifying the extremist organisation and Jihadism, as constant coverage keeps inspiring and attracting new members and plays in the hands of the extremist organisation. This is where everyone can play their part in countering the trend of radicalisation.

At the level of the individual, tolerance and dialogue are crucial in overcoming the division between “us” and “them”. It is only through personal interaction that one can overcome the stereotypical perceptions that both the mainstream society as well as the minorities hold of one another. Only then does the rhetoric of the extremist organisation lose its appeal in the eyes of the

people. Recognition of this can be key in finding a solution and an effective counter force to extremist propaganda.

### **Looking ahead and possible areas of further study**

What is needed is more precise study on ways to counter the radicalisation of Westerners as we start to better understand the motivations behind the trend. Studies on the subject should not only be based on stereotypical perceptions of people of immigrant background, as also people of Western origin are prone to radicalisation. Officials seem reluctant to provide open access to the data, numbers and motivations of radicalised native Europeans, and this needs to change to get a comprehensive picture of the phenomenon. Otherwise it is easy to write off the trend as an immigrant problem - and that is not the entire truth. To gain perspective it would be interesting to look at the total number of immigrants in a given country and the number of people joining ISIS by nationality. This would naturally require more detailed information from the officials. Also the role of economy in facilitating extremism would be an interesting topic of research, as social problems were found to be one driver of radicalisation.

Despite the territorial losses of the recent months, ISIS continues to be a force that threatens international security. And the number of Western recruits travelling to ISIS-held territory shows no signs of slowing down. The world has only witnessed the first chapter of ISIS and the organisation is likely to offer interesting topics of research in the future as more information becomes available and the world learns more about the organisation.

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