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Laura Turner
laura.turner@uconn.edu

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The Path to Terrorism:
The Islamic State and Its Recruitment Strategies

Laura Turner

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Advisor: Professor Jeremy Pressman

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Introduction

13,488 terrorist attacks occurred around the world in 2016.¹ 1,468 of these, or 10.9%, were perpetrated by the Islamic State.¹ The Islamic State (IS), also known as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) or the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), is an extremely violent Islamist terrorist organization that follows Salafism, a strict interpretation of Sunni Islam. The group's ultimate goal is to establish a worldwide caliphate, or a state governed by Islamic law. ISIS is rooted in Abu Musad al-Zarqawi's Al Qaeda in Iraq, a militant organization so extreme and violent that even Al Qaeda's leadership criticized its methods and eventually renounced connections with the group. When Zarqawi was killed by a U.S. airstrike in 2006, Abu Ayyub al Masri became the leader of the group and renamed it the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI). Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi succeeded Masri upon his death in 2010. As ISI began expanding into Syria, it took on the name the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, or ISIS. In 2014, Baghdadi announced the establishment of a worldwide caliphate with himself as the Caliph, or leader. With this declaration, the group adopted the name the Islamic State, viewing the name ISIS as too geographically limiting in its reference to Iraq and Syria, though the acronym ISIS is still commonly used globally.²

The Islamic State subscribes to a Salafist ideology, a brand of Sunni Islam that advocates a return to true Islam, a crucial condition of which is the purification of Islam of Western influence. Many Salafists also view other types of Muslims, including Shias and Sufis, as "deviant" and impure.³ Though a majority of the world's Salafists are nonviolent, ISIS has used

¹ Terrorism is defined by the Global Terrorism Database as "the intentional act of violence or threat of violence by a non-state actor to attain a political, economic, religious, or social goal through fear, coercion, or intimidation." The database includes international, transnational, and domestic terror attacks.

this theology to justify violence against other non-Salafi Muslims, particularly Shias, and the West.⁴ The group uses “unparalleled levels of violence and brutality” in an attempt to achieve its goal of purifying Islam and restoring an Islamic Caliphate.⁵ At its height, the group controlled vast amounts of Iraqi and Syrian territory, an area encompassing an estimated 10 million people, although in the past year it has experienced major losses.⁶ ISIS has been able to recruit large numbers of individuals to join its cause, many of whom are foreign fighters, or individuals recruited from other nations to join ISIS in Iraq and Syria. In 2015, the Soufan Group, a security intelligence services company, estimated that between 27,000-31,000 people travelled to Syria and Iraq to join ISIS and other violent extremist groups (including IS affiliates) in the region.⁷ A senior official in the FBI, Michael Steinbach has asserted that “no group has been as successful at drawing people into its message as ISIL”, and Matthew Olsen, director of the National Counterterrorism Center, agrees that ISIS “operates the most sophisticated propaganda machine of any terrorist organization.”⁸

The Islamic State has proven to be one of the most effective terrorist groups at recruiting new members that exists. Why is the Islamic State so appealing? What has made this group so effective at recruitment? What methods does it employ to recruit so many individuals? This paper answers these questions by examining three explanations of recruitment commonly referenced in the current literature: strategic targeting, online recruitment, and kinship recruitment. These were analyzed through case studies of ISIS fighters. This analysis revealed that both strategic targeting and kinship recruitment are strong explanations of the methods ISIS employs to recruit new fighters. 11 of the 12 individuals studied were particularly vulnerable in one way or another to radicalization and recruitment by the Islamic State, which supports the idea that strategic targeting is a strong explanation of how ISIS attracts new members. 10 of 12

of the individuals had kinship connections, which indicates that kinship recruitment is a valid explanation as well. Online recruitment applied to only 5 of the 12 individuals, suggesting that this is a moderately valid explanation of the Islamic State's strategies of recruitment.

This paper is comprised of several sections. The first describes the methodology used in this study and details each of the three explanations that were studied: strategic targeting, online recruitment, and kinship recruitment. A case-study design was used to analyze the ability of these methods to explain the Islamic State's recruitment strategies. The cases of 12 individuals are described and analyzed through the lens of each of the three explanations in the second section of the paper. In the third section, the findings from this analysis are detailed. In the final section, the conclusion provides a brief summary of the study and presents several policy implications of and potential solutions to the issue of the Islamic State's recruitment.

Methods and Explanations

This study is based on case studies of individual fighters. In these case studies, I look at three explanations that are common in the existing literature on ISIS' recruitment strategies: strategic targeting, online recruitment, and kinship recruitment. Strategic targeting involves capitalizing on individual's vulnerabilities. Angela Gendron, a Senior and Research Fellow at a variety of institutions including the Center for Intelligence and Security Studies, has written extensively on how ISIS targets specific individuals who fit certain categories, including youth, those who are socially isolated, and those experiencing a crisis of identity. Syed Mansoob Murshed, a Professor of the Economics of Conflict and Peace at the Institute of Social Studies in The Hague, and Sara Pavan, a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the University of British Columbia, discuss the role that politics and socio-economic inequality play in radicalizing

individuals. Online recruitment, on which much has been written by Imran Awan, Deputy Director of the Centre for Applied Criminology at Birmingham City University, involves the use of the internet by a terrorist organization to spread its propaganda to massive numbers of people across the world. Both of Shiraz University in Iran, Khalil Sardarnia and Rasoul Safizadeh's study of ISIS' use of the internet is a key work in this field as well. Finally, the role of kinship in the recruitment of people to join terrorist organizations has been expounded upon thoroughly in relation to a variety of terrorist groups. Rukmini Callimachi, a *New York Times* journalist, has investigated the influence of kinship on pairs of siblings who have joined Islamist terrorist organizations, including ISIS. Thomas Neer, a senior associate at the Soufan Group who focuses on violent extremism, and Mary Ellen O'Toole, the FBI's leading expert on psychopathy, have looked at how kinship influences foreign fighters, as well as at the use of the internet and exploitation of vulnerabilities to recruit individuals.

In the following section of the paper, these three explanations are detailed and then operationalized in order to determine how well they explain ISIS' recruitment methods. A set of yes-or-no questions was devised to more narrowly define each explanation and facilitate the analysis of nine case studies. This enables each explanation to be quantified and thus easily compared.

Methodology

This paper employs a case-study method to evaluate three explanations of the Islamic State's recruitment strategies through an examination of individuals who became members of the group. The lack of a public database of all foreign fighters necessitates a case-study analysis of a select number of individuals on whom information is available. These individual cases were chosen mainly from newspapers such as *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* due to

a lack of published scholarly articles on specific members of ISIS. After a review of the existing literature on the Islamic State's recruitment, three methods that are commonly used to explain ISIS' recruitment were chosen to be more deeply examined in this paper. The cases of six individuals and three pairs of siblings were analyzed using these methods to determine whether they are accurate explanations of the Islamic State's recruitment. It must be noted that these explanations are not mutually exclusive; each may relate to one another. For example, several individuals met their boyfriends or husbands online and were radicalized through these men, which constitutes both online and kinship recruitment. In addition, the second and third explanations, online and kinship recruitment, are tools through which the Islamic State exploits people's vulnerabilities detailed in the first explanation, strategic targeting.

Explanation 1: Strategic Targeting

The first common explanation of ISIS' recruitment methods is strategic targeting. The Islamic State carefully selects individuals who are susceptible to radicalization and exploits their vulnerabilities to recruit new members. A variety of factors make certain individuals prime targets for the Islamic State. Those vulnerable to radicalization include youth, individuals who are searching for some meaning or purpose in life, who feel a sense of anger and injustice at the discrimination and inequality they face and feel alienated from society, people who blame the West for problems in the Middle East, people who live in difficult circumstances, and either strongly religious individuals or recent converts to Islam.

Individuals under the age of 25 are prime targets of ISIS recruiters due to their impressionability and desire to find their place in the world, which means they can be easily swayed by the group's messages. In addition, the prefrontal cortex, the "rational" area of the brain that plays a crucial role in planning, decision-making and social behavior and judgement, is

not typically fully developed until the age of 25 or 26, making people younger than this more susceptible to manipulative messages from ISIS.⁹ Such messages include the portrayal of ISIS as a utopia, an image that distorts the reality of life in Iraq and Syria.¹⁰ By depicting itself in this way, ISIS appeals to youth who are seeking adventure or who want a chance to be a hero, as well as those who are searching for some meaning or purpose in life. Being unemployed or having a menial, degrading, trivial, or meaningless job can contribute to this sense of a lack of purpose. Grappling with one's identity, a rejection of parent's authority, and distance from one's religious roots are all common characteristics of adolescence that can be exploited by charismatic preachers and recruiters.¹¹ Youth are also main targets of recruiters as they make up a large proportion of internet and social media users, which is a technique ISIS relies upon heavily to spread its ideology.

People who face social and economic inequality due to race or religion are also susceptible to radicalization and recruitment by the Islamic State. Muslims and individuals of Middle Eastern heritage are largely discriminated against by "Western" nations including the United States and many countries in Europe. President Donald Trump has banned immigrants from several Muslim-majority nations from entering the United States, and in France approximately "70 percent of the prison population is Muslim," though Muslims comprise only "7-8 percent of [the country's] population."¹² Political rhetoric and the media have created a stereotypical image of Muslims as terrorists; this perception fosters prejudice, hatred, and misjudgment and mistreatment of Muslims. Anger at and frustration with this discrimination and inequality are often factors that lead to an individual's radicalization. Discrimination also perpetuates an "'us' vs 'them' mentality", dividing people into distinct groups.¹³ These divisions make it easier for individuals to legitimize prejudicial and discriminatory acts against these

“others”, creating a cycle that fosters hate that radical groups like ISIS can exploit.

Discrimination can also result in feelings of alienation, rejection, and isolation among Muslims and individuals of Middle Eastern descent living in the West. ISIS appeals to these individuals by portraying the group as a close-knit society in which everyone can play an important role, a community unlike their home in the West.

These feelings of anger at the West are magnified by ISIS’ claim that the West is to blame for various conflicts and issues in the Middle East. ISIS often explains to recruits that social and economic inequality are a result of Western influence. The British-French Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916 arbitrarily carved the Middle East into separate spheres of influence during the collapse of the Ottoman Empire with no regard for local communities, and is widely viewed as a source of contemporary issues. Other interventions such as the American invasion and subsequent occupation of Iraq in 2003 foster anti-Western and particularly anti-American sentiment in the region. Many Western foreign policies and alliances, such as the United States’ strong alliance with Israel, are viewed as anti-Islamic and contribute to the belief that the West is prejudiced against Islam.¹⁴ ISIS capitalizes on these sentiments to recruit followers, for example by claiming it is waging a “war against evil, morally corrupt Western forces that are trying to destroy Islam.”¹⁵ This resentment for various injustices of the West make individuals susceptible to radicalization by the Islamic State.

Certain circumstances also make individuals vulnerable to radicalization. These include a poor home environment, limited work or employment opportunities, poverty, and other similar conditions. Turbulent, unstable home situations can lead individuals to turn their back on their family, to search for a supportive community with more coherent rules.¹⁶ The Islamic State offers individuals this support and clarity. Growing up economically poor or being currently

unemployed, particularly in countries where job opportunities may be limited because of discrimination, can make individuals desperate for work, which leaves them susceptible to recruitment. Certain jobs, such as those that are low-paying, inconsequential, or unskilled can make people desire something more. ISIS offers individuals in these types of jobs a clear purpose, an opportunity to do something more important and meaningful.

Finally, strongly religious people are vulnerable to radicalization as well, particularly if they hold conservative, purist beliefs that align with the radical views that ISIS espouses. However, recent converts to Islam are also targets because they are less knowledgeable of the religion and thus more malleable.¹⁷ When educating new Muslims, ISIS can indoctrinate them with their radical beliefs and emphasize the aspects of Islam that line up with their views and deemphasize or hide those aspects that do not. ISIS does this by presenting selective interpretations of the Quran. For example, the group has emphasized the line, “When you meet the unbelievers, smite their necks”, while ignoring the phrase “it is time for generosity” that appear just words after.¹⁸

There are many factors that can make individuals susceptible to radicalization. Being young, lacking a sense of meaning or purpose in life, facing social and economic inequality and discrimination, feeling anger at a certain government or region or system, living in difficult circumstances, and having a strong traditional faith in Islam or little knowledge of the religion are all characteristics that can be exploited by radical terrorist groups such as the Islamic State. Though there may be other factors that also make people vulnerable to recruitment, the existing literature asserts that these factors play the most vital role in the process of radicalization and are thus the ones studied in this paper.

Explanation 2: Online Recruitment

The second strategy that the current literature claims ISIS relies on to gain individuals is online radicalization and recruitment. The internet and social media such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and KIK are essential to ISIS' great ability to recruit.¹⁹ Much of the organization's contact with potential recruits is through the internet, which enables ISIS to expand its reach worldwide. The internet facilitates communication with people living in the West, who as previously described can be very vulnerable to radicalization. The ability to recruit individuals from abroad makes ISIS a dangerous organization; some of these individuals travel to Syria or Iraq to join the group, but others remain in their home countries to aid ISIS in carrying out attacks on its foreign enemies, including the United States and various European nations. Encrypted messaging services such as Telegram can make it difficult for law enforcement and counter-terrorism agencies to identify these individuals who are in the process of being recruited.²⁰ Other messaging services commonly used by recruiters include KIK and WhatsApp.

Al-Hayat Media Center, *Dabiq* magazine, and various websites such as *Revolution Muslim* are crucial tools to ISIS' ability to spread its ideology. It also has a mobile app called the *Dawn of Glad Tidings* to keep users up to date and computer games that contain images attractive to young people.²¹ High-quality films such as *Flames of War* and videos posted on *YouTube* serve as compelling propaganda for the group. These include violent videos of beheadings and executions, which have multiple functions. They appeal to those seeking excitement and adventure, display the group's strength, portray ISIS as an "agent of positive change and champion of social justice", as well as inspire fear among their enemies.²² These videos normalize brutality, lessening people's possible moral objections to the group's actions, as well as glamorize extremism and jihadism and project an image of itself that is very different

from the reality. ISIS also creates videos that are community-oriented. These include videos of ISIS fighters “eating candy and playing with kittens” to assure potential recruits that the group “promot[es] the welfare of people” and to demonstrate a “lifestyle of happiness, structure, and support.”²³ This makes the group especially appealing to impressionable people, namely youth; by making it and its aims appear utopian, ISIS attracts people looking for adventure, a community, a purpose.

Propaganda, spread primarily online, can be used to gain sympathy and recruit members. Use of the internet and social media enables ISIS to reach individuals thousands of miles away and is an effective method to contact and influence a large number of individuals.

Explanation 3: Kinship Recruitment

Finally, a third common explanation for how ISIS gains members is kinship recruitment, of which there are two main types. In the first type of kinship recruitment, individuals may be radicalized and recruited by a family member or close friend who is already a member of ISIS. A second type of kinship recruitment involves close friends or family members being recruited at the same time by an ISIS recruiter. People feel more comfortable becoming a member of a group if they are joined by someone with whom they have a close relationship. The “strong bonds of friendship and kinship” can lead people to follow their friends and family into radicalism.²⁴ Siblings often radicalize each other and assure each other that any violent actions they undertake are not morally reprehensible and wrong but rather meaningful and justifiable. They feel a strong sense of trust, and feel more secure in their choice to join a radical group such as ISIS. In addition, family members or friends sent on missions together can help each other put aside last-minute doubts and convince each other to carry out their assignment. Having family members as part of the group also poses a challenge for law enforcement, as it is easy for individuals living

together to communicate without being detected by surveillance, and the strong bonds among family members lessen the chance of betrayal to authorities.²⁵

The recruitment of family members and friends is a tool that has been used by many extremist groups, as it offers terrorist groups a variety of benefits.

Operationalization

Each of these explanations seek to describe how ISIS recruits. To determine if they do this, 12 individuals were analyzed to see whether these strategies played a role in their recruitment process. Questions were developed that more narrowly define each explanation, making them more measurable and concrete in order to better understand if they apply to the individuals studied. If the explanation applies to two-thirds or more of the cases, it is considered a strong, valid explanation of ISIS' recruitment methods. If the explanation applies to between one-third and two-thirds of cases, it can be considered a moderately strong explanation. Finally, if the explanation applies to fewer than a third of the cases studied, it is a weak explanation of ISIS' recruitment process.

Explanation 1: Strategic Targeting

The Islamic State strategically targets vulnerable individuals. Vulnerabilities can be divided into several categories:

1. Was the individual 25 or younger at his or her time of radicalization?
 - a. The age 25 was chosen as this is a commonly-accepted age in the United States as a cognitive landmark. It is the age at which the prefrontal cortex, or the "rational brain," which plays a role in planning, decision-making and judgement, develops.
2. Did the individual lack a sense of purpose or direction in life?

- a. This was determined by individuals self-reported feelings as well as the reports of individuals who knew them well and interacted with them often, including family members, friends, schoolmates, teachers, and employers.
3. Did the individual experience discrimination based on their religion or ethnic background?
 - a. Muslims and individuals of Middle Eastern descent are likely to have experienced discrimination if they live in Western nations. If the individuals or people living in and around their community reported prevalent discrimination, then the answer to this question is “yes”.
4. Did the individual feel isolated or alienated from society?
 - a. An individual who had few friends in school or work, or individuals who described themselves or were described as spending a great amount of time alone by those close to them, constitutes a “yes” to this question.
5. Did the individual grow up in difficult circumstances?
 - a. Such circumstances include a turbulent home situation when growing up (a lack of coherent rules, a non-supportive or warm environment, abuse), living in poverty or homelessness, having limited work or education opportunities, and other similar conditions.
6. Was the individual a recent convert to Islam, or strongly religious with conservative views?
 - a. A recent convert is defined as an individual who converted to Islam within a year of his or her radicalization and recruitment.

- b. An individual can be considered strongly religious if he or she regularly attended a mosque, were knowledgeable of the Quran, and spent a great amount of time reading about or discussing Islam. Conservative views are defined as those that profess a more traditional, strict, literal interpretation of Islam. These include but are not limited to Salafism and Wahhabism.

To measure this method an additive scale was created. An answer of “yes” on each question receives a score of 1, and “no” of 0. Each category signifies a significant vulnerability, therefore, if an individual received a score of 1 or higher the explanation of strategic targeting applies to him or her. The more of these categories apply to the individual, the higher the score, and the more vulnerable the person was to radicalization and recruitment. Possible scores range from 0, meaning the individual was not at all vulnerable to recruitment by ISIS, to 6, meaning the individual is highly susceptible to radicalization and recruitment.

Explanation 2: Online Recruitment

To determine whether individuals were recruited online, several questions were asked about each person:

1. Was the individual active on social media sites commonly used by ISIS, such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and Tumblr?
 - a. “Active” is defined as having accounts on one or more of these social media sites that the individual used at least weekly at the time of his or her radicalization, or as determined by the individual him or herself.
 - b. “Yes” suggests that there was an opportunity for the individual to have been radicalized online.

2. Did the individual access radical ISIS propaganda through various platforms, including *YouTube*, *Dabiq* magazine, *Flames of War*, and websites such as *Revolution Muslim*?
 - a. “Yes” suggests that there was an opportunity for the individual to have been radicalized online.
3. Did the individual have contact with radical Islamists online?
 - a. “Yes” suggests that the individual was recruited online.
4. Was the individual contacted by or put in contact with a member of ISIS through the internet? Did they exchange online messages with a recruiter?
 - a. “Yes” suggests that the individual was recruited online.

An answer of “yes” to two or more of these questions suggests that an individual was likely to have been radicalized and recruited online. A score of 2 is required as merely being active on social media, accessing propaganda, or having contact with radical individuals through the internet does not mean an individual was recruited online. However, when two or more of these questions apply to an individual, this signifies that he or she was often online and it is likely that the internet did play a role in their radicalization and that they were recruited online.

Explanation 3: Kinship Recruitment

Kinship recruitment is measured with two questions:

1. Did the individual have contact with a close family member or friend who was already a member of ISIS?
2. Was the individual recruited with, or at the same time as, a close family member or friend?

If the answer to either one of these questions is “yes”, then kinship recruitment played a role in the radicalization of the individual, as both questions involve kinship connections.

Challenges

In this study, I have created standards for testing whether the aforementioned methods explain ISIS' recruitment. In measuring the first method, strategic targeting, there is ambiguity in several of the questions used to determine whether someone was vulnerable to radicalization and recruitment, which leaves room for varying interpretations. Although this issue cannot be completely mitigated, the questions were defined as definitively as possible in attempt to limit this ambiguity. In addition, the inability to obtain information directly from the individuals examined in this paper opens the study to the possibility of inaccurate and/or incomplete information. In an attempt to mitigate this issue, information was gathered from multiple sources when possible; sources that gathered information from either the individuals or those who had known them were preferred. However, for some of the individuals, information to answer some of the questions was still lacking. Individuals were not given a score of 0 or 1 on these questions, but were instead denoted as "unknown." When adding the scores for each explanation for the cases, "unknown" was treated as 0. This affects the total score of the specific explanation for a particular individual: the score may be lower than if information was available, which impacts the overall results of the study.

In addition, there is a lack of consistency in the scales used in the operationalization of each method. In the first, an additive scale is used to determine how vulnerable an individual is. Ideally the same scale would be used for each of the three methods, however, the second and third methods do not lend themselves to an additive scale. This is a limitation of this study that could be addressed in future projects to push the study further.

Finally, there are limitations inherent in a case-study analysis. There is the question of how generalizable the results are to ISIS recruits at large. It is impossible to interview each

member of ISIS and understand what drove them to join the group and how they were recruited. Information like this was publicly available for only a small number of individuals. Though this limits how much the results can be generalized to the broader population, ultimately a case-study analysis still provides important insight into the radicalization and recruitment process of the Islamic State. In addition, this research sets the stage for future studies that have the resources to gather more information and analyze larger samples.

Case Studies

This section looks at nine cases, six individuals and three pairs of siblings, in order to test the validity of each of the three explanations detailed above: strategic targeting, online connections, and kinship. I take a biographical approach in each case study, describing the individual's background and then examining them in relation to each explanation to ascertain if one, two, all, or none of the explanations apply to the individual. I gathered information mainly from news articles to answer questions about the applicability of each explanation.

Case 1: Ayu

Ayu is a 34-year-old Indonesian woman who is now the head of a pro-Islamic State network in Hong Kong.ⁱⁱ Her duties include spreading propaganda for the group, recruiting new members, and raising funds. Ayu gave an interview to Nava Nuraniyah, a researcher with the Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict based in Jakarta, Indonesia, for a *New York Times* article about the radicalization of Indonesian domestic workers living abroad.

ⁱⁱ The name Ayu is a pseudonym, as the woman feared the consequences of using her real name in an article published in *The New York Times*.

Ayu had a difficult life growing up. She became pregnant before the age of 20, and after giving birth left her baby behind and ran away from her abusive in-laws, fleeing from Indonesia to Hong Kong. She had depression, became addicted to alcohol and drugs, and lived on the streets for months after losing her job as a maid three separate times. She described herself as Muslim only in name until that point, but told Nuraniyah that as her life fell apart, she began seeking spiritual refuge. By this time, she was in her late twenties. It was 2011, the year that the war in Syria began. Ayu began devotedly checking the news for updates in Syria and accessing Islamic websites such as *voa-islam.com* and *kibalt.net*. She enrolled in an Islamic course, but dropped out after the teacher reported her to the police for holding radical views and supporting the Islamic State, which she did by spreading propaganda on Twitter and Telegram. Through social media she became friends with various international jihadists, and eventually met her husband, a jihadi, through Facebook. Her marriage brought her closer to pro-ISIS networks in Hong Kong and facilitated her rise to her current position.²⁶

Method 1: Strategic Targeting

Although Ayu was older than 25 at the time of her radicalization, she experienced difficult circumstances, such as an abusive family, pregnancy, and living on the streets, in her youth that made her vulnerable to radicalization. She could not keep a steady job, and felt that her life lacked meaning. In addition, she was a recent convert to Islam, and went through a rapid religious transformation that contributed to her radicalization. She did not experience high levels of discrimination in Indonesia as it was her home nation and Islam is the dominant religion there. Though Islam is less commonly practiced in Hong Kong, Ayu did not mention in her interview feelings of discrimination or alienation from society, though it is possible that she experienced both of these things, particularly when living on the streets in Hong Kong.²⁷

Method 2: Online Recruitment

Though Ayu did not explicitly state how often she used social media sites, through her interview it is clear that she was active on social media including Facebook and Twitter, and that she was in contact with radical individuals through these sites. In addition, she mentioned that she accessed websites such as *voa-islam.com* and *kibalt.net* and actively spread ISIS propaganda. There is no mention of whether she was in direct contact with an ISIS recruiter through the internet.²⁸

Method 3: Kinship Recruitment

Ayu met and eventually married a jihadi who had ties with ISIS. This marriage brought her further into pro-ISIS networks and facilitated her rise to her position as a head of a network that raises money and spreads propaganda for the Islamic State.²⁹

Table 1: Factors that influenced Ayu's radicalization and recruitment

Method	Indicators	Case 1: Ayu
Strategic Targeting	Youth	No
	Lack of a Sense of Purpose	Yes
	Discrimination	Unknown
	Isolation or Alienation	Unknown
	Difficult Circumstances	Yes
	Recent Convert or Strongly and Conservatively Religious	Yes
	Score	3
Online Recruitment	Social Media	Yes
	Radical Propaganda	Yes
	Contact with Radicals Online	Yes
	Contact with Recruiter Online	Unknown
	Score	3
Kinship Recruitment	Contact with family/friends already a member	Yes
	At same time as friend/family member	No
	Score	1

Strategic Targeting

A score of 3 means that Ayu was relatively vulnerable to radicalization and recruitment by ISIS.

Online Recruitment

Three yes's on this measure means that Ayu was most likely radicalized and recruited online.

Kinship Recruitment

One yes means that kinship recruitment played a role in Ayu's radicalization.

Case 2: Firda

Nuraniyah also interviewed Firda (again a pseudonym), an Indonesian maid living abroad in Singapore. Firda told Nuraniyah that though she had a decent job and a nice boss, she felt "empty" and "spiritually dry". She began listening to Salafi podcasts while working, and searched Facebook for people who seemed "very Islamic", desperate for friends who could guide her intensely. Similar to Ayu, Firda met her boyfriend online, and this man further radicalized her by introducing her to pro-ISIS websites including *millahibrahim.wordpress.com*.³⁰

Method 1: Strategic Targeting

A large amount of information for this measure was not publicly available for Firda. Her age was not mentioned in the *New York Times*, and as "Firda" is a pseudonym, other sources could not be found to determine this information. Though she mentions having a nice job and decent money, other details of her life, such as her living situation or the circumstances of her youth were not related, thus a definitive answer for multiple questions was unable to be formed.

Method 2: Online Recruitment

In her interview, Firda admitted that she was "online 24 hours every day." Her time online was spent searching Facebook and listening to Salafi podcasts accessed through the internet. After meeting her boyfriend online, she began to access websites that espoused ISIS

propaganda. It is unknown if she was directly contacted by a recruiter or if her online contact was only through radical individuals.

Method 3: Kinship Recruitment

A jihadi, Firda's boyfriend introduced her to pro-ISIS websites which advanced her radicalization.³¹

Table 2: Factors that influenced Firda's radicalization and recruitment

Method	Indicators	Case 2: Firda
Strategic Targeting	Youth	Unknown
	Lack of a Sense of Purpose	Yes
	Discrimination	Unknown
	Isolation or Alienation	Unknown
	Difficult Circumstances	Unknown
	Recent Convert or Strongly and Conservatively Religious	Yes
	Score	2
Online Recruitment	Social Media	Yes
	Radical Propaganda	Yes
	Contact with Radicals Online	Yes
	Contact with Recruiter Online	Unknown
	Score	3
Kinship Recruitment	Contact with family/friends already a member	Yes
	At same time as friend/family member	No
	Score	1

Strategic Targeting

A score of 2 means that Firda was at least slightly vulnerable to radicalization and recruitment by ISIS. It is possible that she was quite vulnerable, though with information on four of these categories unknown, this is difficult to determine.

Online Recruitment

Three yes's on this measure means that Firda was likely radicalized and recruited online.

Kinship Recruitment

One yes means that kinship recruitment played a role in Firda's radicalization.

Case 3: Yoki Pratama Windyarto

Yoki Pratama Windyarto was born in Indonesia in the small town of Purworejo Klampok, a community described as “tolerant.”³² By the time he was 21 he had joined the Islamic State and travelled to the Philippines, where ISIS is conducting its most intense campaign outside of Syria and Iraq. He was martyred only weeks after he disappeared from his home. His family still does not fully understand why he joined the Islamic State, and several of his relatives gave interviews to the *New York Times*.

Yoki grew up in a primarily Muslim neighborhood, and was described by relatives and others who knew him as being very devout, even when young. He held conservative religious views and expressed these to several family members; this included a belief that a woman’s place is in the home. However, relatives stated that they were not aware of how radical his views were. Though his family lived comfortably by local standards and his parents had decent jobs, they still could not afford to send Yoki to the university he had been accepted into. Instead, they sent him to the Indonesia Aviation School, a strict boarding school in Tangerang, where students were not allowed to leave or to communicate over phone with anyone for three months. He was described as “despondent” during his time there.³³

Method 1: Strategic Targeting

Yoki was 21 when he joined ISIS, a prime age for terrorist recruiters. In addition, he was frustrated that he had to attend aviation school, which he viewed as limiting his opportunities for later in life. It is not known whether he felt alienated from society, but it is possible that he felt isolated during his time at the aviation school. Though his family lived comfortably, he was still unable to attend university, which could classify as a “yes” under the difficult circumstances indicator. Yoki was strongly religious with conservative views, which also made him a target for

recruiters. Finally, it is unlikely that Yoki experienced ethnic or religious discrimination, as he was from Indonesia, a country in which Islam is the dominant religion.³⁴

Method 2: Online Recruitment

There is no information publicly available on whether Yoki used social media or was exposed to radical propaganda, nor is there information on the extent to which he had contact with recruiters online, though Sidney Jones, the Director of the Jakarta-based Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict and a leading expert on terrorism in Southeast Asia, believes he was likely recruited in person.³⁵

Method 3: Kinship Recruitment

Details of how Yoki was recruited to join ISIS are not available, but interviews with family members suggest he was not recruited through kinship connections. Over a dozen relatives said he had never spoken to them about the Islamic State and had not known he embraced the group's radical ideology. None of Yoki's family is known to be in ISIS or to hold radical views.

Table 3: Factors that influenced Yoki Windyarto's radicalization and recruitment

Method	Indicators	Case 3: Yoki
Strategic Targeting	Youth	Yes
	Lack of a Sense of Purpose	Yes
	Discrimination	Unknown, but unlikely
	Isolation or Alienation	Unknown
	Difficult Circumstances	Yes
	Recent Convert or Strongly and Conservatively Religious	Yes
	Score	4
Online Recruitment	Social Media	Unknown
	Radical Propaganda	Unknown
	Contact with Radicals Online	Unknown
	Contact with Recruiter Online	Unknown
	Score	0
Kinship Recruitment	Contact with family/friends already a member	Unknown
	At same time as friend/family member	No
	Score	0

Strategic Targeting

A score of 4 means that Yoki was highly vulnerable to radicalization and recruitment by ISIS.

Online Recruitment

There is very little information on the process of Yoki's recruitment, whether it was online or in person, so Yoki received a score of 0 on this explanation.

Kinship Recruitment

A score of 0 means that Yoki was probably not recruited through kinship relationships, though with some information unknown it is possible.

Case Study 4: Akhror Saidakhmetov

Around the age of 19, Akhror Saidakhmetov was arrested for providing material support to the Islamic State. Akhror described his radicalization in a 53-page memo given to the *New York Times*.

Akhror had a difficult life growing up. He was born in Kazakhstan, and at the age of four his mother took him and fled his abusive, alcoholic father to her hometown in the northern part

of the country. Months later they moved again, this time to Tashkent, Uzbekistan. To support her and her son, his mother, Saeira Gulyamova, worked long hours as a journalist, leaving Akhror alone in their apartment until around 9:00pm most nights. Saeira's journalism eventually put her at odds with the Uzebek government, and she moved to Brooklyn, New York, where she found work cleaning houses. A year later, Akhror, now 16, joined his mother. He again spent much of his time alone, as his mother was often working. He spoke only a small amount of English and despite attempts to get involved in his high school by joining the swim and martial arts teams, he had few friends. After being expelled from one high school, he dropped out of another and became depressed. He began spending more and more time on the internet, watching religious videos and listening to the lectures of Sheik Abdullah Bukhari, eventually gaining more radical views and "embracing the Islamic State."³⁶

Akhkor Saidakhmetov had been Muslim only in name until this point, but his newfound devotion to religion gave him "direction" and "purpose." However, it also led him to fights with his mother. After a particularly severe fight, she moved away from their home, again leaving Akhror, now 18, alone. Yet again he was abandoned, this time "at the worst time possible." Abdurasul Jurabov, a friend from the mosque he attended, who was 24 and even more devout than Akhror, moved in not long after Akhror's mother left. Jurabov influenced Akhror to more extreme views, as did major events that were occurring in the Middle East around this time. When the leader of the Islamic State Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi announced the formation of a caliphate in 2014, Akhror felt a "sense of belonging", that he was "a part of a worldwide online community [...] supporting a religious movement." This led him and Jurabov to post pro-ISIS comments on a jihadist website called *Hilofatnews*, praising, for example, a mass execution

by ISIS. He and Jurabov bought plane tickets to Istanbul, planning to enter Syria from Turkey to join the Islamic State, but were arrested before they were able to leave the country.³⁷

Method 1: Strategic Targeting

Akhror Saidakhmetov classifies as vulnerable to recruitment in multiple categories. He grew up in difficult circumstances, with an abusive father whom he fled when young, which led him to spend much of his childhood and youth alone while his mother worked. He spoke little English and had few friends when he moved to America. Though the *New York Times* does not explicitly mention experiences of discrimination due to his ethnicity or religion, it is likely that he faced prejudice living in the United States as a Kazakh, Muslim immigrant who spoke little English, and he certainly felt alienated from society. In his memo, he describes himself as finding Islam at a “time of ‘disconnection, loss, and lack of purpose.’” Islam and the Islamic State offered him a way out of his depression and loneliness, providing him with a sense of direction and belonging. He was also at an impressionable age at this time, not even 20 years old when his radicalization began.³⁸

Method 2: Online Recruitment

Though *The New York Times* article on Akhror did not mention the specific social media sites or websites that he accessed, his memo does state that it was through the internet that he found his religiosity and gained more conservative views. After Abdurasul Jurabov moved in with him, he began accessing clearly pro-ISIS sites, such as *Hilofatnews*. It is unclear if he was in contact with a recruiter online. From the testimony of FBI agent Ryan Singer in the case of *United States of America vs. Abdurasul Hasanovich Jurabov, Akhror Saidakhmetov, and Abror Habibov*, it appears that Jurabov contacted ISIS representatives multiple times on behalf of himself and Akhror.³⁹

Method 3: Kinship Recruitment

Akhror’s roommate Abdurasul Jurabov, who was the only person close to Akhror after his mother left, played a crucial role in his radicalization. Jurabov was extremely devout and well-versed in Islamic law, and he “quickly cast a spell on [Akhror]”, who referred to him as “sheikh”. It was when he lived with Jurabov that Akhror started paying more attention to the Islamic State and began planning his journey to join the organization.⁴⁰

Table 4: Factors that influenced Akhror Saidakhmetov’s radicalization and recruitment

Method	Indicators	Case 4: Akhror
Strategic Targeting	Youth	Yes
	Lack of a Sense of Purpose	Yes
	Discrimination	Unknown but likely
	Isolation or Alienation	Yes
	Difficult Circumstances	Yes
	Recent Convert or Strongly and Conservatively Religious	Yes
	Score	5
Online Recruitment	Social Media	Unknown
	Radical Propaganda	Yes
	Contact with Radicals Online	Unknown
	Contact with Recruiter Online	Unknown
	Score	1
Kinship Recruitment	Contact with family/friends already a member	Unknown
	At same time as friend/family member	Yes
	Score	1

Strategic Targeting

A score of 5 means that Akhror was highly vulnerable to radicalization and recruitment by ISIS.

Online Recruitment

One definitive yes on this measure is not enough to determine whether Akhror was recruited online, however it is known that he was at least influenced by ISIS propaganda accessed through the internet.

Kinship Recruitment

One yes means that kinship recruitment played a role in Akhror’s radicalization.

Case Study 5: Aqsa Mahmood

Aqsa Mahmood, a propagandist and recruiter for the Islamic State, uses social media such as Twitter and Tumblr to promote life in ISIS, persuade British Muslims to join the organization, and offer advice on how to do so, as well as to call for terror attacks against the West. She is also suspected of having a leadership role in the female al-Khannassaa Brigade in Raqqa, Syria. Her blog details how she came to join the Islamic State and what life in Syria is like as a young woman in ISIS.⁴¹

Aqsa is from a Pakistani immigrant family, but lived a privileged life in Glasgow, Scotland. She lived in an affluent neighborhood and attended elite private schools. She was intelligent, popular, and was studying at Glasgow Caledonian University. She had a stable home life and was raised as a moderate Muslim in an apolitical family. Despite this promising life however, in 2013, at the age of 19, Aqsa dropped out of university and disappeared to Syria.

A variety of factors influenced Aqsa Mahmood's radicalization. In her blog, she expressed that her motivations for joining ISIS were personal: she felt estranged from her family, dissatisfied with her life, and admired those fighting in the resistance. Though she grew up secular, she became more religious after the civil war in Syria began. Her blog also reveals a profound loss around this time that left her "vulnerable to seeking redemption through religious indoctrination: 'Even though last year was my most depressed year ever I'm so happy everything that happened to me, happened. Because if it didn't, I wouldn't have realized how amazing my life is with Allah in it.'" ISIS provided a sense of meaning to Aqsa after this loss. In addition, she had romanticized and uninformed expectations of what life in Syria under ISIS was like, which were fueled by the promise of marriage from Adeel Ulhaq, whom she met online.⁴²

Method 1: Strategic Targeting

Aqsa Mahmood's radicalization is "unusual" in that on the surface she does not fit the typical stereotype of an ISIS recruit. Her family was not poor, her education and employment opportunities were not limited, she did not experience discrimination and she had plenty of friends. However, below the surface, her life was not what she wanted. She felt some loss that played a major role in her radicalization. She was not satisfied with her life; it seemed to lack meaning, purpose. When Aqsa learned about events occurring in the Middle East, such as the Arab Spring and the Syrian Civil War, she was inspired to learn more about Islam and ISIS, and her rapid conversion to Islam left her vulnerable to manipulative messages from the group. In addition, her youth may have affected her reasoning, made her impulsive, and left her impressionable to promises of marriage and power.⁴³

Method 2: Online Recruitment

Aqsa's parents maintain that their daughter was radicalized online by Adeel Ulhaq, and it is clear that she spent much of her time online, writing her blog, perusing religious texts, and following news of events in the Middle East.⁴⁴

Method 3: Kinship Recruitment

Aqsa's family did not play a role in her radicalization or recruitment, as they were moderate and apolitical and have since condemned her decision to join the Islamic State, releasing a statement pleading with youth not to join the group. They call Aqsa's words "'twisted and evil' and said she is no longer the daughter they raised." Adeel Ulhaq, a man she met online who promised her marriage, did play a role in her radicalization, however, she left for Syria before they were married, and she is now married to a different jihadi whom she met in Syria.⁴⁵

Table 5: Factors that influenced Aqsa Mahmood’s radicalization and recruitment

Method	Indicators	Case 5: Aqsa
Strategic Targeting	Youth	Yes
	Lack of a Sense of Purpose	Yes
	Discrimination	No
	Isolation or Alienation	No
	Difficult Circumstances	No
	Recent Convert or Strongly and Conservatively Religious	Yes
	Score	3
Online Recruitment	Social Media	Yes
	Radical Propaganda	Unknown
	Contact with Radicals Online	Yes
	Contact with Recruiter Online	Unknown
	Score	2
Kinship Recruitment	Contact with family/friends already a member	Yes
	At same time as friend/family member	No
	Score	1

Strategic Targeting

A score of 3 means that Aqsa was relatively vulnerable to radicalization and recruitment by ISIS.

Online Recruitment

Two yes’s on this measure means that Aqsa was likely radicalized and recruited online.

Kinship Recruitment

One yes signifies that kinship recruitment played a role in Aqsa’s radicalization.

Case Study 6: Najim Laachraoui

On March 22, 2016 at Brussels Airport in Belgium, 24-year-old Najim Laacharaoui killed 15 people with a suicide bomb as a part of a three-pronged terrorist attack by the Islamic State in the city. He is suspected of having built the bombs for both the Brussels attacks and the 2015 Paris attacks.

Though Najim was born in Morocco, his family immigrated to Belgium when he was young and he grew up in Schaerbeek, Brussels, a neighborhood with a “long history of racism” where the unemployment rate for Muslim youths is around 40%. During his youth, he

“grappl[ed] with what kind of Muslim he wanted to be”, and by the time he graduated from his Catholic high school he had abandoned his moderate views, adopting Salafist dress and “refusing to shake hands with women.” The purist, extremist Islam he adhered to disapproved of the West and Najim felt like an outsider in his high school. This feeling deepened when he enrolled in the Universit e Libre de Bruxelles to study electrical engineering, where he was even more of a minority. He left the university after only a year and dropped out of a second university as well. The young Najim, lacking a direction in life, feeling alienated from society, and possessing extremist views, was vulnerable to recruitment. It was at this time that he met Khalid Zerkani, a charismatic street preacher who solidified Najim’s recruitment into ISIS.⁴⁶

Method 1: Strategic Targeting

Najim was 22 when he disappeared from his family in Belgium, travelling to Syria to join the Islamic State. Growing up as both a religious and ethnic minority was difficult for Najim, and he felt isolated from the surrounding community. Racism and Islamophobia in Belgium decreased the work opportunities available to him, and though his good grades in high school enabled him to attend university, he dropped out twice, struggling to discover his purpose in life and reconcile his conservative views with the Western society in which he lived. He was not a recent convert to Islam, but he did have conservative views that, combined with other factors, left him vulnerable to radicalization.⁴⁷

Method 2: Online Recruitment

Najim radicalized invisibly, not in prison, but in school. His in-person contact with the preacher Khalid Zerkani is what drew him to the Islamic State. Information on his use of social media or exposure to radical websites is not currently publicly available.

Method 3: Kinship Recruitment

Kinship did not play a large role in Najim’s recruitment. None of his family members share his extremist views or are members of the Islamic State.

Table 6: Factors that influenced Najim Laarouchi’s radicalization and recruitment

Method	Indicators	Case 6: Najim
Strategic Targeting	Youth	Yes
	Lack of a Sense of Purpose	Yes
	Discrimination	Yes
	Isolation or Alienation	Yes
	Difficult Circumstances	Yes
	Recent Convert or Strongly and Conservatively Religious	Yes
	Score	6
Online Recruitment	Social Media	Unknown
	Radical Propaganda	Unknown
	Contact with Radicals Online	Unknown
	Contact with Recruiter Online	Unknown, but unlikely
	Score	0
Kinship Recruitment	Contact with family/friends already a member	No
	At same time as friend/family member	No
	Score	0

Strategic Targeting

A score of 6 means that Najim was extremely vulnerable to radicalization and recruitment by ISIS.

Online Recruitment

A score of 0 means that Najim was not radicalized and recruited online, though with information on each indicator lacking, it is possible that propaganda on the internet was a factor in his radicalization.

Kinship Recruitment

A score of 0 means that kinship recruitment did not play a role in Najim’s radicalization.

Case Study 7: Ibrahim and Khalid el-Bakraoui

Ibrahim and Khalid el-Bakraoui were brothers involved in the same Brussels attacks that Najim Laarouchi participated in. The two brothers were of Moroccan descent but were born in Brussels and lived in Belgium throughout their lives. They grew up in a working-class neighborhood with their father, a devout Muslim who emigrated from Morocco, and their mother, who is “conservative and reclusive.” Both had long violent criminal records and were imprisoned multiple times, including for armed robbery, carjacking, and possession of weapons.⁴⁸ They were likely radicalized by their cousin Oussama Atar, the mastermind of the Brussels attacks who visited them 20 times while they were in prison.⁴⁹ Both were released on parole in 2014. Ibrahim then attempted to travel to Syria to join the Islamic State, but was stopped at the Turkish-Syrian border and deported to the Netherlands. Turkish authorities claim they warned Belgian and Dutch officials that he was “a foreign terrorist fighter.” At the time of the attacks, Ibrahim was 29 and Khalid was 27.⁵⁰

Method 1: Strategic Targeting

Though both Ibrahim and Khalid were older than 25 when they committed the suicide bombings in Brussels, they may have been radicalized while younger. They were believed to have been radicalized in prison; for Khalid, this would have been when he was 25 and younger. Little is known about the two men, making it difficult to determine whether they lacked a sense of direction, whether they felt alienated from society, and whether they faced discrimination or difficult circumstances growing up. Their parents were devout and conservative; growing up in this environment may have led them to be both as well.

Method 2: Online Recruitment

The internet does not appear to have played much of a role in the Bakraoui brothers' recruitment. They were likely recruited in person by their cousin. Information on whether they used social media or accessed radical websites is not currently available.

Method 3: Kinship Recruitment

Kinship recruitment played a major role in the Bakraoui brothers' recruitment. They joined ISIS together, and it is suspected that they were recruited by their cousin during his visits to them while they were in prison.

Table 7: Factors that influenced Ibrahim and Khalid el-Bakraoui's radicalization and recruitment

Method	Indicators	Case 7a: Ibrahim	Case 7b: Khalid
Strategic Targeting	Youth	No	Yes
	Lack of a Sense of Purpose	Unknown	Unknown
	Discrimination	Unknown	Unknown
	Isolation or Alienation	Unknown	Unknown
	Difficult Circumstances	Unknown	Unknown
	Recent Convert or Strongly and Conservatively Religious	Unknown	Unknown
	Score	0	1
Online Recruitment	Social Media	Unknown	Unknown
	Radical Propaganda	Unknown	Unknown
	Contact with Radicals Online	Unknown	Unknown
	Contact with Recruiter Online	No	No
	Score	0	0
Kinship Recruitment	Contact with family/friends already a member	Yes	Yes
	At same time as friend/family member	Yes	Yes
	Score	2	2

Strategic Targeting

A score of 0 suggests that Ibrahim was not at all vulnerable to radicalization, while a score of 1 suggests that Khalid was only slightly susceptible to radicalization and recruitment by

ISIS. However, as the information for most of these indicators is unknown, more information about the brothers could show that they were much more susceptible to recruitment.

Online Recruitment

Scores of 0 signify that neither brother was radicalized and recruited online. More information on several indicators is needed to concretely determine if this was the case or if the internet did in fact play a role in their radicalization.

Kinship Recruitment

A score of 2 means that kinship ties played a significant role in the radicalization and recruitment of both Ibrahim and Khalid.

Case Study 8: Brahim and Salah Abdeslam

In 2015, the Islamic State orchestrated attacks on Paris that killed 130 people and injured many more. Brahim, 31 at the time, and Salah Abdeslam, 26, were two brothers involved in these attacks. The two brothers were of Moroccan descent and were French nationals, but were born in Brussels and grew up in Molenbeek, a district in Brussels from which multiple jihadists have emerged.⁵¹ Brahim and Salah were friends with Abdelhamid Abaaoud, an Islamic State operative and the organizer of the Paris attacks, in childhood and he guided the two brothers' recruitment into ISIS.⁵² Unlike Abaaoud, neither Salah nor Brahim had histories of religious extremism. They lived secular lifestyles, spending much of their time drinking, smoking, playing cards, and flirting with girls. Opportunities for work were limited.

Salah was a mechanic, but was a poor employee and was eventually fired. A few years later he began helping Brahim manage a bar in Molenbeek but it was not a great success, and they sold it just weeks before the attacks. Both Salah and Brahim also had criminal records for minor crimes during their youth and in the years leading up to the Paris attacks, and Salah spent some time in prison with Abdelhamid Abaaoud. Abaaoud, who had travelled to Syria in 2014 where he made ties with ISIS, influenced Salah to become more radical when he returned, and

Salah in turn influenced Brahim. Salah's ex-fiancé confirmed that he was radicalized by Abaaoud after he returned from Syria.⁵³

Method 1: Strategic Targeting

Salah was 25 around the time that Abaaoud returned from Syria, which is when he was radicalized. Brahim, however, was older. They lived secular lives until just months before the attacks, suggesting that they were both recent converts to Islam. They lived in difficult circumstances; Salah was fired and unemployed for several years until he began helping his brother manage a bar and several other businesses, but these were not particularly successful, and they were both involved in crime. It is unclear whether they lacked a sense of purpose or whether they felt discriminated against or alienated from society.

Method 2: Online Recruitment

Salah and Brahim were likely not radicalized online. Information on their internet use was not accessible, but it is likely that they were recruited in-person by their friend Abdelhamid Abaaoud and not by a recruiter online.

Method 3: Kinship Recruitment

Salah and Brahim were radicalized together and by Abdelhamid Abaaoud, a life-long friend, which classifies as kinship recruitment.

Table 8: Factors that influenced Brahim and Salah Abdeslam’s radicalization and recruitment

Method	Indicators	Case 8a: Brahim	Case 8b: Salah
Strategic Targeting	Youth	No	Yes
	Lack of a Sense of Purpose	Unknown	Unknown
	Discrimination	Unknown	Unknown
	Isolation or Alienation	Unknown	Unknown
	Difficult Circumstances	Yes	Yes
	Recent Convert or Strongly and Conservatively Religious	Yes	Yes
	Score	2	3
Online Recruitment	Social Media	Unknown	Unknown
	Radical Propaganda	Unknown	Unknown
	Contact with Radicals Online	Unknown	Unknown
	Contact with Recruiter Online	No	No
	Score	0	0
Kinship Recruitment	Contact with family/friends already a member	Yes	Yes
	At same time as friend/family member	Yes	Yes
	Score	2	2

Strategic Targeting

A score of 2 suggests that Brahim was only slightly susceptible to radicalization, while a score of 3 suggests that Khalid was fairly susceptible to radicalization and recruitment by ISIS. However, as the information for several of these indicators is unknown, more information about the brothers could show that they were much more susceptible to recruitment.

Online Recruitment

Scores of 0 indicate that neither Brahim nor Salah was radicalized and recruited online, though with information on several indicators lacking, it is possible that the internet could have played a role in their radicalization.

Kinship Recruitment

A score of 2 means that kinship ties played a significant role in the radicalization and recruitment of both Brahim and Salah Abdeslam.

Case Study 9: Zahra and Salma Halane

Zahra and Salma Halane, the “terror twins” as they have been called by several news sources, are British Somalian twins who ran off to become jihadi brides and join ISIS in 2014 at the age of 16. They are now recruiters for the group.

Zahra and Salma Halane's parents fled Somalia to Denmark as refugees, and lived there for several years. Zahra and Salma were born in Denmark, then the family later moved to Manchester, England. The teens were "well integrated members of Western society;" they were good students with futures that seemed to be full of opportunity. Nevertheless, the two sisters were influenced by radical messages online and may have been encouraged by their older brother Ahmed. By the end of 2013 they were viewing ISIS propaganda online, including images of British jihadist Abu Qaqa and suicide bombs. Aqsa Mahmood's Tumblr blog also helped inspire their radicalization, and she arranged their marriages to ISIS jihadists whom they met online before travelling to Syria. Once in Syria they also tried to recruit their younger brothers and then their whole family, claiming that it is a duty to join the Islamic State and "obey the caliph."⁵⁴

Method 1: Strategic Targeting

Only 16 at the time they fled to Syria, Zahra and Salma were at a very impressionable age, leaving them vulnerable to radicalization. They may have faced discrimination, as women who wear traditional Islamic dress are often victims of hate crimes in the United Kingdom. However, there is no evidence that they experienced this or alienation from society. Instead those who knew them seemed to believe they were well-adapted to Western society. In addition, they did not have unstable home lives, and they had good education and bright futures. However, it is possible they felt their lives lacked direction, as once they reached the Islamic State they sent messages to their family that imply they now feel their lives have purpose and meaning. Information on their faith in Islam throughout their childhood and youth could not be found, so it is unknown whether they were recent converts or if they had always held strong, conservative beliefs.

Method 2: Online Recruitment

Zahra and Salma Halane were inspired by propaganda they saw online, including messages from Aqsa Mahmood and images of methods ISIS uses to carry out its attacks. Specific websites or social media they accessed or used could not be found. They had contact with radical individuals online, including their brother Ahmed, and with ISIS recruiters, including Aqsa Mahmood and possibly Abu Qaqa, who has claimed that he lured the girls into the group.

Method 3: Kinship Recruitment

The twins radicalized and joined the Islamic State together, and they also may have been influenced by their older brother Ahmed, who held radical views and had left home in 2013, first to fight for al-Shabab in Somalia, then moving to Syria to join ISIS⁵⁵.

Table 9: Factors that influenced Zahra and Salma Halane's radicalization and recruitment

Method	Indicators	Case 9a: Zahra	Case 9b: Salma
Strategic Targeting	Youth	Yes	Yes
	Lack of a Sense of Purpose	Unknown	Unknown
	Discrimination	Unknown	Unknown
	Isolation or Alienation	No	No
	Difficult Circumstances	No	No
	Recent Convert or Strongly and Conservatively Religious	Unknown	Unknown
	Score	1	1
Online Recruitment	Social Media	Unknown, but likely	Unknown, but likely
	Radical Propaganda	Yes	Yes
	Contact with Radicals Online	Yes	Yes
	Contact with Recruiter Online	Yes	Yes
	Score	3	3
Kinship Recruitment	Contact with family/friends already a member	Yes	Yes
	At same time as friend/family member	Yes	Yes
	Score	2	2

Strategic Targeting

A score of 1 implies that Zahra and Salma Halane were only slightly susceptible to radicalization. However, as the information for half of these indicators is lacking, more information about the sisters could show that they were more vulnerable to recruitment.

Online Recruitment

Scores of 3 indicate that online radicalization played a large role in the recruitment of Zahra and Salma.

Kinship Recruitment

A score of 2 means that kinship ties played a significant role in the radicalization and recruitment of both Zahra and Salma Halane.

Findings

This section of the paper synthesizes the results from each of the nine case studies to ascertain the validity of the explanations of strategic targeting, online recruitment, and kinship recruitment in accounting for how the Islamic State enlists foreign fighters.

If an individual has a score of 1 or higher on the strategic targeting measure, he or she is at least slightly vulnerable to radicalization and this theory of recruitment applies to him or her. For an individual to have been recruited online, he or she must have received a score of 2 or higher on this measure. Finally, kinship recruitment applies to an individual if his or her score is above 0. If an explanation applies to two-thirds of the cases, it can be considered a strong explanation of ISIS' recruitment strategies. If an explanation applies to between one-third and two-thirds of cases it is a moderate explanation, and if it applies to fewer than one-third of cases the explanation is weak.

These case studies reveal that both strategic targeting and kinship recruitment are strong explanations of ISIS' recruitment methods, and that online recruitment is a moderately strong explanation. This can be seen in Table 10. The explanation of strategic targeting applies to 11 of the 12 cases (91.7%). This implies that this is a very strong explanation of ISIS' recruitment methods. Kinship recruitment, which applies to 10 of the 12 individuals studied, or 83.3% of

cases studies, is also a strong explanation of ISIS' recruitment strategies. The explanation of online recruitment, however, is only a moderately strong explanation: only 5 of the 12 individuals satisfied the requirements of this measure. It must be recognized however, that online recruitment does apply to 41.7% of the individuals studied, still a large percentage. In addition, information was lacking for some of these individuals, which may have kept the scores lower than they would have been with complete information. It is therefore possible that with more information it would be seen that online recruitment applies to over two-thirds of the cases and thus is a strong explanation of ISIS' recruitment methods.

These results suggest that the process of recruitment into a terrorist organization such as ISIS is influenced by a combination of a variety of factors and differs for each individual, though the extremely high percentages for both strategic targeting and kinship recruitment indicate that there are common methods that the Islamic State typically uses to gain new members.

Table 10: Summary of Case Scores

Summary of Case Scores						
Cases	Strategic Targeting		Online Recruitment		Kinship Recruitment	
	Score	Applies?	Score	Applies?	Score	Applies?
1: Ayu	3	Yes	3	Yes	1	Yes
2: Firda	2	Yes	3	Yes	1	Yes
3: Yoki	4	Yes	0	No	0	No
4: Akhror	5	Yes	1	No	1	Yes
5: Aqsa	3	Yes	2	Yes	1	Yes
6: Najim	6	Yes	0	No	0	No
7a: Ibrahim	0	No	0	No	2	Yes
7b: Khalid	1	Yes	0	No	2	Yes
8a: Ibrahim	2	Yes	0	No	2	Yes
8b: Salah	3	Yes	0	No	2	Yes
9a: Zahra	1	Yes	3	Yes	2	Yes
9b: Salma	1	Yes	3	Yes	2	Yes
Score Required for a strategy to apply	1 or higher		2 or higher		1 or higher	
		11		5		10
Total		91.7% of cases		41.7% of cases		83.3% of cases

Conclusion

In the conclusion, I discuss the current status of the Islamic State, offer implications of the results of this study, and propose several policy suggestions for combatting the organization. I suggest areas for future research as well. Finally, I provide a brief summary of the study.

Policy Implications

The results of this study indicate that ISIS recruits individuals by exploiting their vulnerabilities and kinship connections, as well as suggest that much of this is done online through the use of various websites and social media platforms. These methods have enabled ISIS to be extremely effective at recruiting individuals from all parts of the world to join the group and support its cause. Part of ISIS' success in recruitment is a result of its remarkable ability to gain control of vast amounts of territory in Iraq and Syria despite its size and lack of resources compared to the international powers fighting it as a global coalition. ISIS displays this strength through propaganda and uses it to persuade individuals that joining the group is the right decision. However, recent losses for the Islamic State may negatively affect its ability to recruit. In the past year, the Islamic State has lost about 98% of the territory it once held in Iraq and Syria, including both Raqqa and Mosul, two key ISIS strongholds. The group's revenue has also been steadily declining.⁵⁶ This decline has revealed the weaknesses of ISIS, which could decrease the number of recruits the organization is able to attract as it is difficult to persuade people to join a group that is floundering, especially one that is so risky. People are less willing to accept the potential consequences of joining a terrorist group if they do not believe it will succeed. Recent losses also impact ISIS' capabilities as it reduces its wealth and access to resources.

Though recent losses may impair the Islamic States' ability to recruit and weaken the group as a whole, ISIS remains a threat and it is still necessary to devise ways to ensure its defeat. Short-term strategies include continuing military involvement, cutting off fundraising capabilities by targeting military strikes on cash storage sites and oil facilities, and restricting ISIS' use of the internet. Twitter has banned hundreds of thousands of accounts but more keep arising, and many users switch to Telegram, a more private service that is difficult to regulate. *YouTube* and Facebook remove ISIS uploads, but the group continuously adds new content that neither service can keep up with.⁵⁷ Restricting ISIS' use of various websites and social media accounts can hinder its recruitment efforts, but this is only a short-term solution that should supplement other methods that address the root causes of why people join ISIS and provide more long-term effects. ISIS recruits by appealing to vulnerable individuals and family members. To counter this, the U.S. government and other nations must address the root causes of why people join ISIS through education and the implementation of policies and programs that ensure non-discrimination is practiced in all aspects of society.

First, education is a crucial strategy to counter the Islamic State's recruitment as many ISIS recruits are around school-age when they join the group. There are a variety of methods to provide this education. One is an anti-propaganda campaign. Spreading messages that counter ISIS' claims can reduce its appeal. Discussions of Islam that correct misreadings of the Quran delegitimize ISIS' claims. Imams teaching that killing and brutality are antithetical to true Islam could show naïve recent converts that the Islam that ISIS espouses is a manipulation of the religion, that it is a type of Islam that the vast majority of Muslims condemn.⁵⁸ Showing the reality of life in ISIS through videos can dispel the myth that ISIS propagates that life with ISIS is glamorous and laudable. Involving returning foreign fighters who have renounced ISIS

would be crucial to this campaign.⁵⁹ The U.S. State Department's campaign, "Think Again, Turn Away", and the *YouTube* cartoon series by Average Mohamed are examples of anti-propaganda campaigns, but these have only had limited effect. Jigsaw, a Google-owned think tank, however has devised a strategy that is promising: the Redirect Method. The Redirect Method is a targeted advertising campaign that uses Google's search advertising algorithms and *YouTube* to dissuade potential recruits from joining ISIS. Ads and *YouTube* clips that counter ISIS' messages appear when individuals search certain keywords or phrases that Jigsaw has determined indicate a person may be attracted to the Islamic State. These include videos that deliberately contradict ISIS' messages but also "hidden counter-argument content" that appears neutral.⁶⁰

Education should also involve creating curriculum in schools that teaches students about the Islamic State so that they have accurate information about the organization rather than information that comes solely from the media or the group itself. Curriculum that discusses Islam and its principles and makes clear that Islam is not singular and that the version of the religion that ISIS embraces is not popular or widespread is also crucial, as is countering the stereotype of Muslims as terrorists that is pervasive in the United States and other Western countries. This stereotype leads to discrimination and isolation of Muslims or people of Middle Eastern descent in these countries. ISIS targets individuals who experience discrimination based on their race, ethnicity, or religion, as this discrimination can create feelings of isolation or alienation from and resentment of society. To lessen these feelings and promote inclusivity, there must be a change in the prejudicial rhetoric promulgated by some key members of the U.S. administration, some media sites and news outlets, and other key figures. Since the 1990's there has been a rise in right-wing extremism in the United States, which the election of Donald Trump in 2016 has exacerbated.⁶¹ President Trump's election validated phenomena such as white supremacy,

racism, Islamophobia, and xenophobia as he was elected despite comments and actions that legitimized these beliefs. It is the responsibility of the education system and the media to refute these ideas and facilitate discussions on these topics. It is also the responsibility of President Trump and his administration to condemn these ideologies and to change the official discourse of the United States.

Second, the United States and other Western governments must implement policies and programs that reduce discrimination and increase the inclusion of minorities in society. One such policy would build support networks to increase inclusion, which could reduce the number of individuals vulnerable to radicalization. Support networks include community organizations such as clubs, associations, and sports teams, as well as training programs and volunteering opportunities. These help integrate people into society and strengthen their connections with their community.⁶² People who lack a sense of meaning or purpose and who feel alienated from society are highly vulnerable to radicalization by an extremist group, particularly a terrorist group like ISIS that specifically targets these people. Getting vulnerable people involved in their community can make them feel more included and provide them with a sense of meaning and purpose.

Building support networks is an important aspect of decreasing marginalization, as is providing education and employment opportunities to minorities, particularly individuals of Middle Eastern descent. Working to eliminate discriminatory practices in education and employment are vital to combatting ISIS' recruitment. Ratifying the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, a key international human rights treaty that guarantees non-discrimination in both education and employment, is a key step in this effort. Developing legislation that commits the United States to following this treaty and other international human

rights treaties is an important broad-scale step that the U.S. can take to reduce discrimination. This is not an immediate change, but overtime could make a large impact. A more inclusive country will make people feel more accepted and thus less vulnerable to radicalization and recruitment by ISIS.

Addressing the reasons that people join the Islamic State is a crucial method of combatting ISIS' recruitment. Combining these methods with strategies that address the means of recruitment, such as restricting ISIS' access to the internet and cutting off its funding capabilities, is an effective way to severely hamper ISIS' ability to recruit, which will in turn hasten the group's decline.

Suggestions for Future Research

Future research could expand on this study by examining other explanations of ISIS' recruitment and determining their validity. Such explanations include one-on-one recruitment, recruitment of psychopathic individuals, recruitment of individuals with criminal records, and recruitment of Western Muslim women. Research on these topics could reveal more information that could be used to devise additional strategies to counter ISIS' recruitment and help lead to the defeat of the Islamic State. In addition, I relied on news stories for the information about the cases included in this study. Access to more and better resources would provide valuable information and could be used in future projects to evaluate both these explanations and those investigated in this study. Sources useful to this research would include interviews with current or past members of the Islamic State and with individuals who knew them well, including family members, friends, teachers, employers, and others. A database of extensive information on foreign fighters would be a valuable source as well.

Summary

Through the use of case studies this study suggests that ISIS relies heavily on targeting vulnerable individuals and siblings to recruit new members. Use of the internet plays a fairly large role in the radicalization and recruitment process. Hindering the Islamic State's ability to recruit through long-term strategies that address the reasons why people join ISIS, including providing education, promoting inclusive rhetoric, and implementing policies and programs that decrease marginalization and reduce discrimination, can accelerate the decline of the group. These strategies are useful in fighting not only ISIS, but also other terrorist groups that currently exist and that will arise in the future. Even if the Islamic State is defeated, its ideas will still exist and a new organization will likely emerge in its stead. It is thus important to continue to research and study ways to defeat terrorist groups. Limiting the ability of a terrorist organization to recruit members is one such method on which further research should be conducted.

Endnotes

- ¹ “Global Terrorism Database”
- ² Cassman
- ³ Olidort
- ⁴ Olidort
- ⁵ Neer and O’Toole, 145
- ⁶ “The Islamic State and the Crisis in Iraq and Syria in Maps”
- ⁷ “Foreign Fighters: An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq”
- ⁸ Yan
- ⁹ “Brain Maturity Extends Well Beyond Teen Years”
- ¹⁰ Awan
- ¹¹ Gendron
- ¹² Atran and Hamid
- ¹³ Mahood and Rane
- ¹⁴ Mahood and Rane
- ¹⁵ Mursheed and Pavan; Neer and O’Toole, 149
- ¹⁶ Kotnis et. al.
- ¹⁷ Gendron
- ¹⁸ Neer and O’Toole, 147
- ¹⁹ Safizadeh and Sardarnia
- ²⁰ Nuraniyah
- ²¹ Awan; Safizadeh and Sadarnia
- ²² Blackman and Carriere
- ²³ Blackman and Carriere
- ²⁴ Neer and O’Toole, 150
- ²⁵ Callimachi, Shane, and Yardley
- ²⁶ Nuraniyah
- ²⁷ Nuraniyah
- ²⁸ Nuraniyah
- ²⁹ Nuraniyah
- ³⁰ Nuraniyah
- ³¹ Nuraniyah
- ³² Paddock
- ³³ Paddock
- ³⁴ Paddock
- ³⁵ Paddock
- ³⁶ Feuer
- ³⁷ Feuer
- ³⁸ Feuer
- ³⁹ “United States of America v. Abdurasul Hasanovich Juraboev, Akhror Saidakhmetov, and Abror Habibov”
- ⁴⁰ Feuer
- ⁴¹ “Aqsa Mahmood”
- ⁴² Windsor

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- 43 Windsor
44 “Aqsa Mahmood”
45 “Aqsa Mahmood”
46 Rubin
47 Rubin
48 “Ibrahim and Khalid El-Bakraoui: From Bank Robbers to Brussels Bombers”
49 Pop
50 “Ibrahim el-Bakraoui”; “Khalid el-Bakraoui.”
51 Pop
52 Pop
53 Davis
54 Calderwood
55 “Ahmed Halane”
56 “The Islamic State and the Crisis in Iraq and Syria in Maps”
57 Greenberg
58 Greenberg; Neer and O’Toole
59 Greenberg
60 Redirect Method
61 Perliger
62 Nuraniyah

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