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The reception of broadcast terrorism: recruitment and radicalisation

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ABSTRACT
The declaration of a caliphate by Islamic State in June 2014 witnessed the recruitment of increasing numbers of foreign terrorist fighters drawn from a diverse range of nations across the globe. This paper seeks to explore the appeal of extreme groups and how recruiters persuade young people to risk either their lives or lengthy terms of imprisonment. The processes of radicalization and recruitment are differentiated and compared with conventional means of encouraging individuals to enlist in state-sanctioned armed forces. The reasons why people join terrorist organizations are influenced by their education, formative experiences, and social or familial connections, whilst these variables, in turn, have an impact on the roles that they then undertake. Whether personality traits explain an over-representation of engineers and doctors amongst leaders of particular extremist groups remains a moot question. The increasing use of the internet and social media as instruments to propagate extremist philosophies may, in part, be responsible for the recent rise in sole actors. The need to involve respected and influential Muslim leaders and organizations is crucial in providing a counter-balance to the message of righteous adventure and belonging promoted by Islamic State.

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Introduction
Although a small number of terrorists achieve an international following, such as Osama bin Laden and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, or manage the transition into mainstream politics and government, the majority do not achieve career success in conventional terms. Indeed, the outcome for many terrorists is poor: lengthy terms of imprisonment, in hiding from security forces, or death, as a result of their actions. Terrorists tend to be young, so the loss of life and freedom are all the more significant. This prompts the question why would anyone wish to take on this role? Although Muslim terrorists are promised that martyrdom leads to significant rewards in the afterlife, this ideology has not been proposed as a significant driver to recruitment, but rather to explain why some individuals, once radicalized, are willing to die for their cause (Koomen & Van der Pligt, 2016, pp. 167–168). Currently, theories of terrorist recruitment are divided between explanations that focus on an ideological or religious appeal versus the appeal of group membership, notably belonging, comradeship, and a corporate sense of purpose (McCauley & Moskalenko, 2008; Rogers, 2011). This paper will explore the psychology of the terrorist in terms of vulnerabilities to the recruiter’s message. It will also investigate the techniques used to engage the interest of young people and how they encourage them to undertake high-risk or life-threatening tasks. A comparison will be drawn with campaigns designed to draw young men and women into conventional armed forces.

Definition
Under English law, terrorism is defined as the use or threat of an act ‘designed to influence the government or an international governmental organization or to intimidate the public or a section of the public … and … made for the purpose of advancing a political, religious, racial or ideological cause’ (Terrorism Act, 2000, part I, section 1). The European Council’s Framework Decision of 2002, which required member states to align their legislation, offered a comparable definition of terrorism, including acts with the aim of ‘seriously intimidating a population, or unduly compelling a Government or international organization to perform or abstain from performing any act, or seriously destabilizing or destroying the fundamental political, constitutional, economic, or social structures of a country or an international organization’
Development typified by the wide-scale recruitment of foreign terrorist fighters and broadcast terrorism

In the 1970s and 1980s, terrorist groups, such as the Irish Republican Army (IRA) in the UK, Red Army Faction in Germany, or Red Brigades in Italy, operated as clandestine organizations using covert means to plan and execute acts of violence against civilians and the state (Horchem, 1991; Neumann, 2005). Great effort was devoted to protecting the identity of members, whilst operatives worked in self-contained cells to limit the penetration of counter-terrorist intelligence. Although al-Qaeda and Islamic State conceal details of their operations and key personnel, they thrive on publicity and the status attached to key figures (Neumann & Rogers, 2007).

Terrorist organizations have been grouped into generational ‘waves’ based on their core characteristics, respectively, anarchist, anti-colonial, new left, and religious (Rapoport, 2004). The last found fullest expression in al-Qaeda, because of its aim to create a single Muslim state subject to Sharia law, and its willingness to conduct major attacks on military and government installations. The fifth wave, most powerfully represented by Islamic State (IS), is an evolutionary development typified by the wide-scale recruitment of foreign terrorist fighters and an aggressive agenda with global rather than national ambitions (Kaplan, 2007). IS not only rejects existing forms of society, it also offers a radical and transformative vision of the Muslim umma, a global community of faith, feeling, and brotherhood. Fifth wave terrorists seek to create a new ‘utopia’ in a single generation by an intense ethnic, racial, or tribal focus, and are willing to resort to extreme methods such as mass killing.

Earlier organizations, such as the IRA or Basque Homeland and Liberty (ETA), ascribed to the propaganda of the deed, the notion that actions rather than words conveyed purpose (Wright, 1991). Their formal announcements were terse, commonly to issue warnings or to claim responsibility for an action. In contrast, al-Qaeda and IS have embraced the broadcast media (O’Shaughnessy & Baines, 2009). To advance their political interpretation of Salafist values, IS make significant use of on-line technology. It produces 90-minute documentaries with shorter features on fighters’ lives and current events. Handbooks are uploaded to their websites together with the IS magazine, Dabiq, translated into half a dozen European languages, and a new publication, Rumiyah, launched in September 2016 (Neumann, 2016). To facilitate dialogue, they and their supporters make widespread use of social media: messages spread via Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and WhatsApp (Edwards & Gribbon, 2013; Von Behr, Reding, Edwards, & Gribbon, 2013). The revolution in information technology has allowed terrorist groups to connect with a vast population of potential recruits. In contrast, al-Qaeda during the 1990s had only a few hundred active supporters (Neumann, 2016, p. 174). The worldwide reach of on-line networks lends credibility to the claim of IS to be defending the Islamist umma, the global community of faith.

Without the need for physical contact, social media facilitates dialogue and networking and provides increased opportunities for self-radicalization. Radical virtual dawa, where Muslims are invited to discuss their faith, serve not only to change beliefs, but also to encourage membership or action (Hoffman, 2006; Ryan, 2007). By providing an environment in which extreme and otherwise unacceptable views are discussed under the cloak of anonymity, on-line dialogue may normalize violent behaviour (Neumann, 2008). Because it is innovative, information technology appeals to the young, and is thought to accelerate the process of radicalization (Stevens & Neumann, 2009). The internet is easily accessed, while Inspire (a high-quality web magazine launched by al-Qaeda in June 2010) and Dabiq (published by IS from July 2014)
were designed not only to recruit, but also prepare sole actors. However, anyone in the UK who downloads the magazines without a ‘reasonable excuse’ risks being likely to be prosecuted for the offence of disseminating a terrorist publication contrary to the Terrorism Act 2006 (Terrorism Act, 2006, part I, section 2). To evade the security services, information is commonly transmitted by encryption, and increasing use is made of the dark web. As a global phenomenon, the internet is difficult to police, particularly as Google, Microsoft, and Apple seek to safeguard their customers’ data against criminals and surveillance, whilst repeatedly bringing out new applications and ways of communicating. Apple, for example, designed its messaging and video chat apps to use end-to-end encryption, which means that the company cannot read historical communications. It resisted US Department of Justice demands to modify its system to wiretap messages in real time (Simonite, 2015).

When mosques and prisons were key sites for recruitment, it was argued that the internet played a secondary role. Group loyalties based on personal contacts and social networks were considered necessary to engage those about to undertake high-risk activities (Sageman, 2004). With burgeoning use of on-line communication, it was thought that some lone actors may have been engaged and motivated without the need for direct contact. However, a recent literature review, supported by 15 interviews, concluded that the internet alone was not responsible for the adoption of radical beliefs. In each case subjects had offline contact with family or friends who were sympathetic to an extreme political stance (Von Behr et al., 2013). Although the internet may sometimes play a primary role in the process of radicalization and recruitment, this study suggests that it requires secondary reinforcement from trusted individuals.

Recruitment and radicalization

Although radicalization may be part of recruitment, the two activities need to be differentiated. Recruitment is a dynamic process by which a willing or unwilling individual is encouraged or dissuaded from joining a group; it involves a measure of assessment on both sides. In terms of its form, radicalization refers to a process of belief modification, which can be gradual with a tipping point or, on occasion, achieved within a short period of time. In the context of terrorism, radicalization requires a progression from feeling sympathy towards violence for a political goal to direct involvement in such activities (Neumann, 2013; Neumann & Rogers, 2007).

Although research into these formative processes is difficult to conduct, it is often assumed that most terrorists have been radicalized before they seek to join an organization that routinely employs violence as a tactic (Koomen & Van der Pligt, 2016). Studies have focused on how individuals in the West (often second and third generation Muslim immigrants or Middle Eastern students) are socialized ideologically and psychologically by terrorist propaganda and/or recruiters of terrorist organizations (Malthaner, 2010). This theory of terrorism places newly-acquired or reinforced beliefs about the self in relation to society at the core of membership and action. Although this model may explain why individuals support a particular cause, it does not tell us why they resort to violence rather than a legitimate, political campaign. Indeed, some authors have questioned the validity of ideological indoctrination as a core driver for violent protest (Mueller, 2012; Schmid, 2013).

An alternative approach explores the impact that membership of a terrorist organization may have on the person’s daily life and mental state (Ranstorp, 2010; Sageman, 2008). McCauley and Moskalenko (2011, p. 89) argue that some may ‘join a radical group for thrills and status, some for love, some for connection and comradeship. Personal and group grievances can move individuals toward violence, with ideology serving only to rationalize the violence’. Right-wing militants who become terrorists often have little ideological baggage, whilst theological knowledge among religious terrorists is often superficial or recently acquired (Schmid, 2013, p. 28). For some, a wish to address a grievance is the primary driver, and ideology is sought only later as rationalization (Kushner, 1996). Under different circumstances, some of those recruited might have joined a criminal gang, a religious sect, or even the armed forces of their country (Nesser, 2016, pp. 15–17). There has emerged something of a consensus around the idea that the path to terrorism involves a search for identity and belonging (Choudry, 2007). Extremist movements are said to offer potential recruits ‘identities of empowerment’, which allow them to reconstruct their sense of self and gain new confidence (Neumann & Rogers, 2007, p. 68). Atran (2010) proposed a ‘devoted actor’ hypothesis, whereby individuals adopt a new identity fused with the ‘sacred values’ of the terrorist group. These privileged beliefs not only guide behaviour, but also allow old loyalties to be abandoned.

As in conventional armed forces, the roles that individuals are required to play also influence selection criteria. From his survey of terrorist cells, Nesser (2016) identified four characteristic types. The leader
and strategist (the ‘entrepreneur’) is motivated by a political or ideological agenda and commonly adopts violence only to serve these ends. Such individuals tend to be well-read and ambitious. Mohammed Siddique Khan, leader of the London bombers, was a university graduate and community worker who ran a bookshop and had established two gyms with government funding. Also well-educated is the technical specialist and second-in-command (the ‘protégé’), who gains inspiration from the leader. The foot soldiers, who are numerically greater, Nesser divided into those with a troubled background or a criminal record (the ‘misfit’) and those who are recruited as a result of social or family connections (the ‘drifter’); the latter could equally have joined a different form of organization. This model, informed by detailed analysis of contemporary terrorist cells, has not yet been used to frame testable hypotheses. Indeed, a major research challenge is to gain access to subjects in sufficient numbers to conduct meaningful population studies.

Based on a sample of 497 members of extremist Islamic groups, Gambetta and Hertog (2016, p. 20), found that engineering graduates were over-represented. Although relative deprivation created by reduced employment opportunities may, in part, have explained their motivation, it was found that engineers were more likely than other graduates to join Islamist or right-wing groups. To explain why left-wing organizations seemed to be less attractive to them, despite the need for their expertise, Gambetta and Hertog suggested that certain personality traits associated with their discipline drew them in a particular political direction. These included, proneness to disgust, a need for order and certainty through cognitive closure, and a rigid in–out group distinction. Doctors were also over-represented, but at a markedly lower level than engineers, whilst humanities and social science graduates were more likely to join left-wing extremist groups. Whether key personality traits determine terrorist allegiance in leaders remains an interesting question, insofar as the authors concede that their samples were not random and under-represented groups from North Africa and South Asia.

Recruitment is often divided into push-factors (social, economic, and political factors that create a sense of injustice and discrimination) and pull-factors (sense of belonging to a cause or network, adventure, and an opportunity to do something worthwhile or heroic). Within these two categories, a range of psychological processes are seen to be operating. They include rational choice theory, social learning theory, stress theory (Stroink, 2007; Victoroff, 2005), general strain theory (Rice, 2009), and uncertainty-identity theory (Hogg & Adelman, 2013). Strain theory, for example, has been proposed to explain why individuals are vulnerable to the recruiter’s message: personal feelings of discrimination or loss of autonomy can fuel negative emotions, which in turn drive a desire for corrective action and even violence. One reason for the diversity of causal hypotheses is the difficulty of conducting in-depth cohort studies.

**The message**

The content of the radical narrative (the pull-factor) has been analysed in a number of ways. A comparison with traditional methods of recruiting young men to join the armed forces at a time of war suggests that there are certain core elements. There is often a dual appeal: to do something worthwhile and glorious for the greater good of a particular group, balanced against a message of shame should the person fail to take part. In the First World War, for example, young Britons were encouraged to volunteer by posters which drew on their membership of social groups. ‘Come lad slip across and help’ (1915) showed a smiling soldier extend his hand from Flanders to a civilian standing in southeast England (Aulich, 2007, p. 83). During the Battle of the Somme, an appeal to fellowship was emphasized in a poster showing a battalion of cheerful soldiers with the caption, ‘Come and join this Happy Throng off to the Front’ (Imperial War Museum, 1916, Art. IWM PST 13604). Recruitment propaganda depicting the sinking of the S.S. _Lusitania_, together with attacks on civilians and their homes, was designed to create a sense of righteousness and purpose (Imperial War Museum, 1915a, 1915b, Art. IWM PST 13654, Art. IWM PST 13654). Posters such as ‘What did YOU do in the war Daddy?’ (which depicted two children questioning their father about his contribution to the war effort) and ‘Women of Britain say GO!’ sought to shame men into military service (Aulich, 2007, pp. 82, 88–89).

The generic elements in British recruitment material of the First World War are evident in Salafist propaganda. The dual message is apparent in IS recruitment films, literature, and websites. Salafist jihad is presented as a duty, a righteous campaign to save Muslim peoples from an iniquitous and persecutory West (O’Shaughnessy & Baines, 2009). In fact, key words, such as ‘jihad’ and ‘Salafist’ have been injected with radical meaning. Jihad means a struggle, and can be applied in a range of contexts from social, economic, political, or ecological, and represents a
struggle for greater justice not only against discrimination and racism, but also to support freedom of expression and in defence of civil responsibilities (Ramadan, 2004, p. 113). ‘Salafism’, a form of Sunni Islam, derives from the expression ‘al-salaf al-salih’, meaning the ‘pious predecessors’ and refers to the first three generations of Muslims who were closest to the Prophet Muhammad (Leiken, 2016; Olidort, 2015). Thus, Islamic State through a concerted internet campaign has succeeded in associating the term Salafi-jihadism with a narrow interpretation that seeks to achieve change through violent conflict.

There is significant difference in how Salafists apply their religious philosophy to politics (Hellmich, 2008). Maher (2016) has proposed three sub-groups: quietists, activists-challengers, and violent rejectionists; only the latter advocate conflict as a tactic. The Salafist rejectionists challenge Western democracy, human rights, and foreign policy. They offer order and certainty through a closed system of rules and injunctions for any eventuality. Martyrdom is lauded and comes with rewards for the individual and his family, whilst failure to take part results in shame and punishment in the afterlife. In addition, videos of IS fighters present jihad as an exciting brotherhood of determined and valiant young men who avenge violations of the Muslim umma. This form of Salafism stresses community to provide a sense of belonging and unity designed to recruit the troubled and aggrieved.

The message to Muslim women to encourage them to migrate to IS parallels that directed at young men (Saltman & Smith, 2015). An appeal is made to their religious duty to build a utopian Caliphate in which they serve as wives, mothers, nurses, and teachers. Heavenly rewards are promised, together with a sense of belonging through a sisterhood. The general tone is one of adventure and romance targeted at the impressionable and idealistic.

Conclusions

Because terrorist groups deliberately challenge the rule of law and are willing to commit acts of violence against civilians to deliver their political goals, they are sometimes framed as being beyond comprehension. Without seeking to minimize the serious threat posed by extremists, this paper suggests that they can be understood by drawing on existing paradigms and by reference to past conflicts. The word ‘jihad’ has been subverted by a Salafist sub-group as part of their propaganda to mean an armed struggle against unbelievers. In reality, it is a term that can be applied in a range of political and social contexts and even to support fundamental human rights (Ramadan, 2004). A significant challenge is to find an alternative but compelling narrative to appeal to disaffected or marginalized groups. This is no small task, not least because extremist groups are willing to mislead and distort, promising immediate and unrealistic rewards. There is a further issue of finding trusted individuals to deliver the message as official or state-funded sources have little, in any, credibility, and many established Muslim leaders have been undermined by Salafist propaganda. Following a government review of the Muslim Brotherhood lead by Sir John Jenkins (House of Commons, 2015), David Cameron, issued a formal statement in which he observed that parts of the organization have ‘a highly ambiguous relationship with violent extremism. Both as an ideology and as a network it has been a rite of passage for some individuals and groups who have gone on to engage in violence and terrorism’ (Cameron, 2015). However, the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, chaired by Crispin Blunt, MP, was critical of a number of the review’s findings. First, it had ‘neglected to mention the most significant event in the Brotherhood’s history: its removal from power in Egypt in 2013, the year after being democratically elected, through a military intervention’ (House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, 2016, p. 4). It had failed to acknowledge that ‘some political Islamists have been very pragmatic in power’ and were committed to non-violent, democratic processes. The Committee concluded that the Brotherhood was not a terrorist organization, whilst the pragmatism demonstrated by some political Islamists provided an opportunity for engagement and a role as a credible ‘counter-narrative against more extremist ideologies’ (House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, 2016, p. 50).

A recent population study has identified the importance of democratic engagement (actions such as voting in local elections, signing a petition, or paying fees to a charity or campaigning organization) in reducing vulnerability to radical appeals (Blui, Cruz, Topciu, & Jones, 2016). Whilst the growth and evolution of the internet presents a significant challenge for counter-terrorism policing because of its capacity to reach so many people and encourage recruitment, it also demonstrated that it is no explosive power without personal contacts to support its messages. This suggests that the nature of our society and its democratic institutions play a role in inhibiting radicalization, and that those potentially vulnerable to
recruitment need to be targeted, as well as those engaged in terrorist activities.

**Disclosure statement**

The author reports no conflicts of interest. The author alone is responsible for the content and writing of the paper.

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