



*Inside the Mind of ISIS: Understanding Its Goals and Ideology to Better
Protect the Homeland*

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Chairman Johnson, Ranking Member Carper, and distinguished members of the committee, it is a privilege to speak in front of you today. Thank you for this opportunity.

Two characteristics define the current mobilization of Americans attracted to the Islamic State (also known as IS, ISIS, ISIL or Daesh): unprecedented size and astonishing diversity.

Small numbers of Americans joined jihadist causes already in the 1980s, when a handful traveled to Afghanistan to fight against the Soviet Union. In the 1990s, a few mobilized to the battlefields of Bosnia and Chechnya. And since 9/11 hundreds of U.S. citizens and residents have, in various ways, been involved with al Qaeda, the Taliban, al Shabaab, Lashkar e Taiba, and several other groups. But the magnitude of the mobilization that IS has triggered among American Muslims is unprecedented.

Let me be clear: the overwhelming majority of American Muslims reject the Islamic State's narrative and tactics. Those few who embrace them comprise a statistically insignificant percentage of a peaceful and law-abiding community. Moreover, several American Muslim organizations have made laudable efforts to proactively challenge IS's message and reach inside this country. The IS-related mobilization is a matter of individuals, not entire communities, becoming radicalized. It would be incorrect and dangerous to think otherwise.

Yet, even though the IS-related mobilization in America is not symptomatic of any widespread radicalization within the country's Muslim communities, its size is large enough to pose an unprecedented problem to law enforcement. In fact, publicly available data confirm a sharp surge in jihadist activities in the U.S., especially when compared to the dynamics seen in the years since the wave of arrests following the 9/11 attacks.

Last July, the Director of National Intelligence estimated that more than 250 individuals from the U.S. had traveled or attempted to travel to conflict areas where jihadists operate, a few dozens had joined the ranks of IS, and some 20 had died.¹ Since the first IS-related arrest in March 2014, more than 80 individuals in one way or another linked to IS have been charged in the U.S. for terrorism-related activities, and 61 in 2015 alone.

The collective number of Americans who have been arrested or joined IS in Iraq and Syria represent just the tip of the iceberg of the phenomenon. Tellingly, in May 2015, FBI Director

¹ Barbara Starr, "A Few Dozen Americans' in ISIS Ranks," *CNN*, July 15, 2015.

James Comey spoke of “hundreds, maybe thousands” of IS sympathizers and potential recruits across the country, disclosing that the Bureau had related investigations running in all 50 states.² A few months later, in October 2015, Comey revealed that the FBI had a staggering 900 active investigations against homegrown violent extremists.³ These numbers dwarf those of the al Qaeda-linked mobilization of the 2000s.

The second defining characteristic of the IS-related mobilization is the extremely heterogeneous background of those involved. Individuals charged with IS-related activities in the U.S. range from the son of a Boston police officer of Italian heritage to a battle-hardened Bosnian immigrant, from teenage girls in suburban Denver to U.S. military veterans in their 40s. Some radicalized rapidly and independently, often in front of a computer screen. For others, the radicalization process took place over a longer period of time and alongside other like-minded individuals. Some decided to travel abroad to join IS while others preferred to carry out attacks at home. In substance, there is no common profile or radicalization trajectory, no such thing as a “typical” American IS recruit or sympathizer.

These two aspects, large size and diversity, pose an enormous challenge to law enforcement agencies, tasked with detecting an unprecedented number of individuals with no common profile. Complicating the task further, most U.S.-based IS sympathizers possess no connections to international terrorist networks. The lack of communication with known overseas terrorists makes their detection even more challenging.

On a daily basis, authorities do identify individuals who, with varying degrees of intensity, sympathize with IS’s or, more generally, jihadist ideology. But there is no consistent indicator revealing who among the thousands of jihad enthusiasts will make the leap from “keyboard warrior,” espousing extremist but constitutionally protected views, to actual violence. Closely monitoring all of them is not only difficult from a legal point of view, but also unfeasible from a resource one.

The motivations

² Tom Vanden Brook, “ISIL Activity Drives up Pentagon Threat Level,” *USA Today*, May 8, 2015.

³ Kevin Johnson, “Comey: Feds have Roughly 900 Domestic Probes about Islamic State Operatives,” *USA Today*, October 23, 2015.

There is no easy explanation for this relative surge in radicalization. It is difficult, if not outright impossible, to enter the minds and hearts of the many Americans who have either chosen to join or merely sympathize with IS and understand what led them to embark on such a puzzling journey. What is clear, however, is that individuals with such diverse backgrounds are unlikely to be motivated by the same factors.

Law enforcement agencies and academics around the world have formulated a number of explanatory theories about the underlying factors driving people to radicalize. Some focus on structural factors such as political tensions and cultural cleavages, the so-called “root causes” of radicalization. Others underscore personal and psychological factors such as the aftershock of a life-changing event. But, in substance, most experts agree that radicalization is a highly complex and individualized process, often shaped by a poorly understood interaction of structural and personal factors.

One of the triggers, cynically exploited by the propaganda of IS and other jihadist groups, is a deep sense of empathy. Compassion appears to have played an important role in initially motivating the first wave young Americans who became interested and invested in the Syrian conflict. Many were outraged by the appalling violence Bashar al Assad’s regime used to suppress the Syrian rebellion and the subsequent inaction on the part of the international community. Pictures and videos capturing the aftermath of civilian massacres perpetrated by the regime, displayed widely in both social and mainstream media, rocked the consciences of many—from those with a preexisting strong Sunni identity to those who were not Muslim—and led some to take the first steps to militancy.

A major shift began as the anti-regime rebellion in Syria came to be increasingly dominated by militant groups. By the time IS formally declared its caliphate in June 2014, the motivations of recruits appeared to revolve more around fulfilling perceived religious obligations.

Unquestionably, the primary one is that of living in a perfect Islamic society under the world’s only authentic Islamic government, as its supporters believe the caliphate declared by Abu Bakr al Baghdadi to be.

The idea of *hijrah* (emigration) is central to this mindset. In classical Islam the word refers to the migration of the prophet Mohammed and his early followers from Mecca, where they were persecuted, to Medina, where they could live an Islamic life free from oppression. For years

Salafist clerics have debated whether pious Muslims should be living in the West, as their narrative argues that believers are subjected to the same oppression and moral decay the early followers of Islam suffered in pre-Islamic Mecca.

Many Salafists have therefore argued that *hijrah* is mandatory, as a good Muslim should not be living in a morally corrupt society governed by laws others than those of a strict interpretation of the *sharia*. Yet those who follow this fringe mindset have consistently debated what constitutes a valid alternative to life in the West. For many of those who embrace Salafist ideology, in fact, no contemporary state adopts a purely Islamic form of government and legal code. In substance, even countries like Saudi Arabia are not Islamic enough, making *hijrah* an impossible imperative to fulfill.

The Islamic State is the first jihadist group (arguably after the Taliban in Afghanistan until 2001) to have established the kind of utopian Islamic society that the global jihadist community has yearned for. Indeed, despite the attention it has received in the West, IS's main appeal is not so much in its slick social media campaign. It is, rather, in its territoriality. What matters is the message, the substance. How that message is delivered amplifies its reach but is not the core reason for the message's appeal. The appeal of IS's message is that it has created a viable state to serve as the destination for the contemporary Salafist *hijrah*.

American jihadists are as galvanized and attracted by the unparalleled territorial entity that IS's self-proclaimed caliphate represents as their counterparts worldwide. Whether in online conversations with like-minded individuals or in interrogations with authorities following their arrest, the draw of living in this utopian Islamic society is cited by the vast majority of American IS sympathizers. "Khilafah offers us to live under the laws Allah prescribed for us," tweeted Munther Omar Saleh, a 20-year-old university student from Queens who was arrested in June 2015 for planning attacks in New York City, "if we fear him we would rush to the land to be governed by it."⁴ He praised the caliphate as the "land of no music, and no perverts taking girls out to violate them, no intoxication, no Filth, period!"⁵

As is typical of an ideology that mixes politics and religion, the obligation to join and defend the caliphate spans both. Similarly, motivations professed by American jihadists often frame what

⁴ <https://cchs.gwu.edu/sites/cchs.gwu.edu/files/downloads/Saleh%20Criminal%20Complaint.pdf> (pp. 4-5)

⁵ <https://cchs.gwu.edu/sites/cchs.gwu.edu/files/downloads/Saadeh%20A.%20Criminal%20Complaint.pdf> (p. 39)

could appear as religious factors in political terms and vice versa. Political grievances are seen through religious lenses. Similarly, their political solutions are framed as fulfillments of religious obligations.

The political grievances of American IS sympathizers run the gamut. Some are of global nature, ranging from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to various theaters where American forces are involved. But, interestingly, many American IS sympathizers are equally, if not more, interested in domestic events. The riots in Ferguson, Missouri, or the current debate about Islam in America are no less of interest to some U.S.-based IS sympathizers than the conflicts in Iraq or Afghanistan. They all represent, in the conspiratorial worldview they have adopted, proof of the evil nature of America and every other entity or idea IS opposes.

An example of this mindset is represented by Terrence J. McNeil, a 25-year-old from Akron, Ohio, who was arrested in November 2015 on federal charges of soliciting the murder of members of the U.S. military. McNeil harbored strong anti-American feelings and had written on Tumblr: “I’m native American, German, and black, the US has been killing my ancestors for awhile [sic].”⁶ He apparently found in IS the perfect channel for his hatred for his country. In fact, in another post he stated: “Before I embraced Islam, I supported the Mujahideen for my hatred of the US. Now I support the Mujahideen for my love of the Muslim ummah.”⁷

In substance, the various ideological motivations are deeply intertwined. Perfectly encapsulating this overlap is the letter Mohammed Hamzah Khan, a 19-year-old from the Chicago suburbs, left to his parents before leaving on a Syria-bound flight. The letter outlined Khan’s feelings of empathy and guilt about the massacres taking place in Syria (“Me living in comfort with my family while my other family are getting killed is plain selfish”). But Khan also argued that “an Islamic State has been established, and it is thus obligatory upon every able-bodied male and female to migrate.” He also expressed anti-American sentiments, concluding that he did not want to “live under a law in which I am afraid to speak my beliefs.”⁸ These sentiments were echoed

⁶ <https://cchs.gwu.edu/sites/cchs.gwu.edu/files/downloads/mcneil%201.pdf> (p. 14)

⁷ <https://cchs.gwu.edu/sites/cchs.gwu.edu/files/downloads/mcneil%201.pdf> (p. 15)

⁸ <http://www.rollingstone.com/culture/features/teenage-jihad-inside-the-world-of-american-kids-seduced-by-isis-20150325?page=2>

by his younger brother (“This nation is openly against Islam and Muslims,” “Living in this land is *haram* [sinful],” “The evil of this country makes me sick.”).⁹

Mohammed Khan, his 17-year-old sister and 16-year-old brother were arrested in October 2014 for attempting to join IS. The case is interesting on many levels, but one particularly noteworthy aspect is the background of the three teenagers. Many US-based IS sympathizers, whether they were born into the faith or have converted to Islam (as about 40% of those arrested for IS-related activities are), possess a purely superficial understanding of Islam. This lack of even the most basic knowledge of the tenets of the faith is cunningly exploited by IS recruiters, who can peddle their simplistic interpretation of Islamic concepts without much resistance. But the Khan siblings had all memorized the Quran by an early age and attended exclusively Islamic schools in the Chicago area all their lives. The case proves that, also when it comes to knowledge of Islam, no one profile of an American IS sympathizer and no one radicalization trajectory exist.

Religious and political motivations are also impossible to separate from personal ones. The National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC) fittingly observed that those who embrace IS’s ideology tend to be “disenfranchised individuals seeking ideological, religious and personal fulfillment.”¹⁰ Indeed, a search for belonging, meaning, and/or identity appears to be a crucial motivator for many Americans (and other Westerners) who embrace IS’s ideology.

The case of Ariel Bradley personifies this misguided quest. Bradley was born in an underprivileged family in the Chattanooga suburb of Hixson (incidentally, the same suburb where the perpetrator of the July 2015 Chattanooga shooting Mohammad Abdulazeez lived). Bradley was homeschooled by her evangelical Christian mother until she rebelled and left home as a teenager. According to friends interviewed for her extensive profile in *BuzzFeed News*, Bradley spent the following years wandering, seemingly in search of something.¹¹

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Testimony of Nicholas J. Rasmussen, Director, National Counterterrorism Center, *Countering Violent Extremism: The Urgent Threat of Foreign Fighters and Homegrown Terror*, House Homeland Security Committee, February 11, 2015.

¹¹ Ellie Hall, “How One Young Woman Went From Fundamentalist Christian to ISIS Bride,” *Buzzfeed News*, July 20, 2015.

“She was definitely always looking for love,” said a former roommate “always looking for that sense of belonging.” Another friend recalled Bradley’s “clearly segmented life”: “When I first met her she was a Christian, and then she was a socialist, and then she was an atheist, and then a Muslim. As far as I could tell it was always in relation to whatever guy she was interested in, so if she meets a guy that’s an atheist then she’s an atheist, falls into that for a year. Then the guy leaves and she meets somebody new, and it starts all over again.... It seemed like whatever guy she was with, she would just crawl into his skin and kind of become him.”¹²

At one point Bradley fell in love with a Muslim patron of the pizza parlor where she used to work. To get close to him, she converted to Islam. While things never worked out with the original love interest, Bradley began frequenting Muslim marriage websites where, in August 2011, she met an Iraqi man living in Sweden. Shortly thereafter the two married and had a child. Likely under the influence of her husband, Bradley’s faith became increasingly conservative and militant. In early 2014 the couple left for Syria, where they have reportedly been living in IS-controlled territory. Bradley is active online, particularly on Twitter and Instagram, where she discusses her life and praises IS. In the immediate aftermath of the Chattanooga attacks, which killed five military personnel in her hometown, she tweeted: “*in sha Allah* [God willing] this will make the camps of *Emaan* [believers] and *Kuffr* [non-believers] known within Chattanooga.”¹³

It is tempting to caricature Bradley as a naïve girl with personal problems whose jihadist trajectory is the outcome of an unfortunate childhood. It is also easy to assume that her actions were driven by a quest for a romantic partner. But, even in the most extreme cases, multiple factors contribute to an individual’s decision. Her friend’s analysis highlights this dynamic: “Be it religion, be it a man, be it a marriage, be it a child, be it IS, Ariel was always looking for something to define herself, an identity to cling to.”¹⁴ Given her particular pattern of behavior, it is likely that Bradley might have accepted other extremist ideologies, if circumstances allowed, so long as they satiated her hunger for community, love, and identity.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

Still, it is difficult to fully comprehend the complex mental processes that led Bradley, like other young Americans, to embark on such an extreme journey to IS's caliphate. What is apparent is that IS and its propaganda machine have been particularly adept at exploiting the emotions, needs, and weaknesses of young Americans, irrespective of their demographic backgrounds. A handful of IS-related cases have involved individuals who are particularly vulnerable, not just because of emotional issues, like Bradley, but because of personality disorders and mental health issues. But in many other cases the individuals who embraced IS's credo, or jihadist ideology more generally, suffered from no apparent disorder. Rather, they were simply individuals on a personal quest.

This search for meaning was perfectly encapsulated in the words of Moner Abu Salha, the 22-year-old Floridian who is the first American known to have died in a suicide mission in Syria on behalf not of IS but of Jabhat al Nusra (a competing group which, nonetheless, adopts an ideology that is virtually identical to IS's). "I lived in America," stated Abu Salha in a 2014 video released after his death. "I know how it is. You have all the fancy amusement parks and the restaurants and the food and all this crap and the cars. You think you're happy. You're not happy. You're never happy. I was never happy. I was always sad and depressed. Life sucked."¹⁵ In contrast, he described life fighting in Syria as "the best I've ever lived."

What is also noteworthy about Abu Salha's case is that he grew up in a gated community in South Florida, where his family owned a small chain of grocery stores. He, like most other American IS sympathizers, suffered from none of the socio-economic and integration issues that are often, and somewhat superficially, considered main causes of radicalization of many European Muslims. A subset of American IS sympathizers, such as some individuals who come from Minneapolis' Somali diaspora community, is indeed underprivileged (although the direct, causal link between that condition and radicalization is also questionable). But most are not, making the often-adopted "radicalization-is-caused-by-lack-of-integration" mantra highly debatable. The kind of societal integration missing in most cases is not socio-economic in nature but, rather, personal and/or emotional. When looking for explanations of radicalization processes

¹⁵ Mona El-Naggat and Quynhanh Do, "Video Released of U.S. Bomber in Syria," *New York Times*, July 31, 2014.

it is therefore arguable that psychological rather than sociological (which, to be sure, should not be totally dismissed) analyses are the most likely to cede answers.

Radicalizing in America

Before concluding, please allow me to highlight a few additional dynamics. The first has to do with the role of social media. Unquestionably IS's ability to directly and constantly reach Americans through social media has played a huge role in triggering this mobilization, whether it is in the initial stages of the radicalization process (introducing individuals to its message, reinforcing their views through propaganda and direct communication), or at the end of that trajectory (helping them mobilize to leave for Syria to join the group and/or inciting them to carry out attacks in America).

Yet, it would be incorrect to overemphasize the impact of social media by considering it the sole medium of radicalization and mobilization for American IS supporters. A close examination of the individuals charged for IS-related activities reveals a significantly more nuanced reality in which the importance of social media, while present in all cases, differs substantially from case to case.

Instances in which radicalization is confined to the virtual space, completely devoid of contact with like-minded individuals in the physical world, have become increasingly frequent. Yet, in many cases the role of the Internet is not as all-encompassing, but rather complementary to equally, if not more, important dynamics in the physical world. In these cases, individual IS sympathizers did not begin their radicalization trajectories alone in front of a computer screen, but rather via face-to-face interactions through preexisting social contacts who already embraced jihadist ideology. Over time, these individuals tend to form a cluster: a small informal group of like-minded individuals whose internal dynamics reinforce the beliefs of its members. Just as the virtual community of IS supporters acts as an echo chamber, these real-life connections reinforce and strengthen individual commitment to IS.

Individuals who belong to these informal clusters typically become consumers of jihadist propaganda on the Internet. While the online echo chamber undoubtedly contributes to the individual's and thus the cluster's radicalization, the one-on-one and group dynamics cultivated in the physical world sometimes play a greater role. In these scenarios, online and offline

dynamics complement one another, both contributing to and accelerating the cluster's members' radicalization.

These group dynamics are also common in several European countries, where informal clusters often form at the margins of radical mosques, Salafist organizations, or student groups, or simply through the interaction of like-minded acquaintances in the neighborhoods of many European cities and towns. This phenomenon is not very widespread in the U.S. but it does exist. In some cases (out of Minneapolis, New York City, and St. Louis, for example), in fact, we have witnessed the formation of small, informal groups of individuals that come together at the local level based on their common interest in jihadist activities. The group's members might come together for a number of reasons: because they had known each other before radicalizing, as the result of shared ethnic roots, through the Internet, or by frequenting mosques and events linked to very conservative yet not openly militant Islamist groups.

A final and crucial point I would like to make has to do with the role of ideology, a word I commend you for using in the title of this hearing. There has been a tendency to focus almost obsessively on IS. But the vast majority of individuals who seek to join IS, whether in America or elsewhere, do so because they are attracted by jihadist ideology in general, not IS specifically. They do seek to join IS because it is, at this point in time, the most successful of an array of groups that, while at times fighting among themselves, belong to the same ideological family.

At times we focus, almost obsessively, on dynamics among jihadist groups and in trying to determine whether one specific attack or perpetrator was linked to a given jihadist group. These are relevant dynamics with important operational consequences. But drawing such a clear distinction between, for example, al Qaeda and IS when it comes to grassroots appeal among American and, more generally, Western aspiring jihadists seems to somewhat miss the point. Most aspiring jihadists want to fight jihad and care little about whether they do so with al Qaeda, the Islamic State, al Shabaab, or any other group within the global jihadist community. In many cases, they join one of these groups not so much because they have a clear preference for one over the others (even though it is undeniable that IS is the "trendiest" these days), but rather because of chance encounters and logistical circumstances.

From an operational perspective, determining whether the attackers in Chattanooga or San Bernardino were linked to al Qaeda, IS, or any other group is crucially important. But once it

was established that neither attack had any kind of operational link to abroad, determining whether the perpetrators' inspiration came from one group to the other is not only close to impossible but also moot. What motivated them is the same poisonous ideology and that is precisely what we should focus on fighting.

Thank you very much for your attention and I look forward to answering your questions.