



Inside the Mind of ISIS: Understanding their goals and ideology to better protect the Homeland

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Chairman Johnson, Ranking Member Carper, and distinguished members of the Senate Committee on Homeland Security, I wish to thank you for inviting me to discuss the question of what ISIS wants. It is an honor to appear before you. I thank you for your efforts to keep the American people safe from harm.

My name is Jessica Stern. I have been researching terrorism since 1988, when I was a doctoral student at Harvard. I recently joined the faculty of Boston University's Pardee School of Global Studies. *I believe that one of the major gaps in our response to ISIS is the lack of investment in developing and disseminating effective counter-narratives that are compelling to the millennial youth who are ISIS's principal targets for recruitment. To do this effectively, we need to listen closely to what ISIS says it wants to achieve, and to what it claims to offer youth.* Next Fall, I will be offering a course called P2P: Challenging Extremism, under the auspices of EdVentures Partners, the State Department and Facebook. This course is quite relevant to the subject of this hearing, in that it provides a pathway for university students in 30 countries (so far) to develop their own counter-narratives and digital responses to ISIS's and other terrorist groups' propaganda. I am proud to be part of this initiative.

My original work at Lawrence Livermore Lab and at the National Security Council was related to controlling terrorists' access to nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons. But I got curious about what might motivate individuals to choose to become terrorists. Much of my work over the last twenty years has been based on in-person interviews with terrorists in the field or in prisons. I have studied and spoken with terrorists across religions and ideologies – including Islamist terrorists in Pakistan, Indonesia, Lebanon, and Gaza; Identity Christian and anti-government terrorists in the United States; Jewish terrorists in Israel; and violent Hindu extremists in India. My remarks today will reflect not only what I have learned from ISIS's propaganda, the scholarly literature, and the reporting of courageous journalists, but also the understanding I have acquired as a result of sitting down with young people who made the mistake of joining terrorist organizations.

What Does ISIS Want: Individual Motivations

There are two parts to the question posed by this Committee: What do individuals who join ISIS

want, and what is the aim of the group taken as a whole? If we aim to stop ISIS's recruitment of individuals, we need to address both questions. ISIS members, at different levels of the organization, want many different things, some of them contradictory. And what they hope to achieve from belonging to the organization is likely to change over time. ***Terrorists and their leaders often start out seeking to change the world – in ISIS's case – to maintain and spread its so-called Caliphate, but over time, they may end up seeking fame or fortune more than the group's stated goals.*** This presents a vulnerability that we can exploit. Those living in ISIS-controlled territory are often disenfranchised Sunnis who feel ill-protected by their governments. Local recruits from Iraq and Syria have admitted that working for ISIS was the highest paying job they could find. To such disenfranchised Sunnis, ISIS offers physical protection, free housing, sexual partners, and a sense of purpose. It also offers what it refers to as the only Shari'a based state anywhere on earth.

Foreign volunteers are often drawn by the lure of avenging wrongs visited on the weak by the strong. But jihadis have often told me that they were also seeking adventure and a more glamorous life. Our research at Children's Hospital in Boston on refugee youth suggests that there is a correlation between delinquency, including support for violent extremism; and trauma exposure, social marginalization, and mental-health issues. We have also found that strong social bonds are protective.ⁱ Ignorance about Islam is hypothesized to make youth more vulnerable to jihadi ideology.

There is undeniable appeal to joining a group that is fired up with righteous indignation. Some people, moved to help others, join political parties, raise money for causes, or try to increase awareness of injustices around the world. Some risk their lives covering war zones as reporters or as physicians healing the sick. But some individuals are willing to kill civilians as part of their holy war against perceived oppression, even though all mainstream religions forbid this. ***Some individuals, sadly, see jihad as a cool way of expressing dissatisfaction with a power elite, whether that elite is real or imagined; whether power is held by totalitarian monarchs or by democratically elected leaders. Many seek redemption from a sense of deep humiliation; while still others may believe they are participating in the lead-up to the End of Times.*** ISIS appears to be deliberately recruiting psychopaths who are attracted to brutality. Because there is such a wide variety of "wants" satisfied by jihadi organizations, prevention and counter-

radicalization programs need to be tailored to individual needs.

ISIS's Collective Goals: Running a Totalitarian state vs. Goad[ing] the West to Invade

According to ISIS propaganda, the group recognizes that its two principal collective goals are in conflict. In the twelfth issue of *Dabiq*, ISIS's on-line magazine, the organization sets forth two principal but contradictory objectives, which it labels "options."ⁱⁱ ***The first goal is to spread a totalitarian caliphate throughout the region and, ultimately, the world. The second is to polarize Muslims against one another, to incite internal divisions within the West, and to turn the West against Islam, with the ultimate goal of "goad[ing] the West into launching an all-out ground attack,*** thereby setting the scene for the final battle between Muslims and the crusaders prophesized by religious texts to be held at Dabiq in Syria."

Helpfully, ISIS has described for us those steps it regards as necessary to achieve the second option. As an ISIS author—writing under the name of British hostage John Cantlie—observes, *option two would likely require "an operation overseas that is so destructive that America and its allies will have no alternative but to send in an army.* This would have to be something on the scale, if not bigger, than 9/11. Then again I'm just guessing, American 'hawks' may very well come to Dabiq on their own without the Islamic State needing to blow up any dirty bombs in Manhattan."ⁱⁱⁱ

Mohammed al-Adnani, official spokesperson of ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, has repeatedly urged Muslims to carry out a jihad at home.^{iv} The goal of attacking the West, ISIS says, is to eliminate the "grayzone" of moderate Islam and to force Muslims living in the West to either join ISIS or "apostasize and adopt the kufri religion."^v To date, self-starters, or "lone wolves," have carried out the majority of these attacks with little direction from central leadership. But it was only a matter of time before ISIS would attempt to coordinate attacks outside its territory. Indeed, U.S. and European officials say that Abu Mohammed al-Adnani's role is now to oversee ISIS-directed attacks outside of Iraq and Syria.^{vi}

Finding Labor^{vii}: How ISIS Seduces Personnel With a Promise of Protection and Redemption

Sophisticated attacks outside ISIS-controlled territory require trained fighters, as evidenced in the November 2015 attack in Paris. But such attacks are significantly easier to carry out with operational assistance of local personnel. For ISIS, finding labor is less taxing when they can recruit from an existing pool of disenfranchised Muslims. In examining ISIS recruitment, many of my colleagues have focused on ISIS's "winner's" narrative and the carefully choreographed branding whereby ISIS advertises—and attempts to create—a utopian state.^{viii} This line of argument suggests that ISIS's defense of its territory is critical to its ability to recruit Westerners. But I would suggest that ISIS attempts to create a somewhat different narrative—the redemption of the oppressed.

The narrative of victory most appeals to those who feel they have lost something. And ISIS deliberately appeals to disenfranchised Muslims, as well as to potential converts, around the world; to those—as ISIS puts it—“drowning in oceans of disgrace, being nursed on the milk of humiliation, and being ruled by the vilest of all people.”^{ix} *To those oppressed, ISIS promises the opportunity “to remove the garments of dishonor, and shake off the dust of humiliation and disgrace,* for the era of lamenting and moaning has gone and the dawn of honor has emerged anew.”^x ISIS proclaims, “[t]he sun of jihad has risen.” In the twelfth issue of *Dabiq*, ISIS refers to its followers as “the brothers who have refused to live a life of humiliation.”^{xi}

An essay in *Dabiq* Issue 9 further underscores the promised reversal of fortunes. There, the author admonishes those who conflate having sex with a slave with rape or prostitution and notes that taking slaves through war “is a great prophetic Sunnah [tradition] containing many divine wisdoms and religious benefits, regardless of whether the people are aware of this.” The author gloats that ISIS has established a true caliphate, with “honor and pride for the Muslim and humiliation and degradation for the kaffir (apostates).” The victory ISIS speaks of is the victory of the formerly oppressed.

Civilizational humiliation at the hands of the West is a central theme for jihadists. This narrative of humiliation resonates among some Muslims, who recognize that Islamic civilization was once the greatest on earth. That is no longer the case, and jihadists blame the West. The leader of a Pakistani jihadi group once told me he founded his group because he wanted to reclaim the

golden period of Islam and "to recover what we lost."^{xii} He lamented, "Muslims have been overpowered by the West. Our ego hurts. We are not able to live up to our own standards for ourselves."

There are many reasons why this narrative of humiliation and redemption resonates in the Middle East, socio-political among others. According to a study by the Carnegie Middle East Center, Arab youth are not being adequately prepared to compete in a globalized society. And the Middle East Policy Council finds that labor markets in many Arab states are incapable of producing enough jobs to sustain their growing youth populations.^{xiii} **Poor governance** creates the conditions under which extremist groups thrive and are able to spread their message that the West is responsible for Arab plight. Many economists believe that a "**natural-resource curse**" prevents oil-rich countries from achieving viable democracies.^{xiv} But, as demonstrated by the U.S. attempt to impose Iraqi democracy, democratization is not necessarily the best way to fight Islamic extremism. To the contrary, where there is an absence of institutions to protect minorities, **majoritarian rule can actually lead to an increase in violence**. According to Marwan Muasher, in many cases, people join ISIS not because of its ideology, but rather "because it represents to them a rallying force against establishments that have failed them, or against the West."

Borrowing from the secular anti-colonialist Franz Fanon, jihadi ideologues argue that violence is a way to cure the pernicious effects of centuries of humiliation, and a "cleansing force" that frees an oppressed youth from his "inferiority complex," "despair" and "inaction," and restores his self-respect.^{xv} However, unlike al Qaeda, **ISIS is a populist organization**. It is seeking to seduce anyone and everyone who might be willing to join. ***One of the unique features of the group is that it tailors its narrative to individual recruits. But the overarching "victory" narrative, in my view, is meant to seduce those who feel the need to rise up against the oppressors.*** I hypothesize that the theme of civilizational humiliation resonates most deeply with individuals who have been subject to extreme trauma and personal humiliations, such as torture, pederasty, and rape. The topic of personal victimization as a risk factor in recruitment is one I hope to explore in future scholarship.

ISIS and the jihadi movement are in some ways similar to earlier revolutionary movements,

such as Communism. In the Middle East, ISIS is exploiting Sunni disenfranchisement. But in the West, where many of its recruits are converts, we can compare its seductive appeal to the anti-establishment youth movements of the 1960s and '70s, although its goals and the values it represents are of course quite different. Jihadis express their dissatisfaction with the status quo by making war, not love. They are seduced by Thanatos rather than Eros. They “love death as much as you [in the West] love life,” in Osama bin Laden’s famous and often-paraphrased words.

For Now, Western Recruits Represent the Most Significant Threat to the United States

Western recruits represent the principal threat to the United States, at least for now. ISIS would very much like to turn Western Muslims against their homelands, and for now, this has proven more easily accomplished in Europe than in the United States. One primary explanation may be that the pool of disenfranchised Muslim youth is larger in Europe. European Muslim youth describe themselves, often accurately, as victims of prejudice in the workplace and in society more generally. In the most recent *European Union Minorities and Discrimination Survey*, one in three Muslim respondents reported experiencing discrimination, with the effect greatest among Muslims aged sixteen to twenty-four (overall discrimination rates decline with age). Muslims in Europe are far more likely to be unemployed and to receive lower pay for the same work than "native" Europeans. Consequently, Muslim immigrants in Europe are disproportionately impoverished. While ten percent of native Belgians live below the poverty line, that number is 59 percent for Turks and 56 percent for Moroccans in Belgium. There are 4.7 million Muslims living in France, many of them in poverty. An estimated 1,550 French citizens have left for Syria or Iraq; some 11,400 citizens have been identified as radical Islamists in French surveillance data.^{xvi}

By contrast, a majority of American Muslims are deeply integrated into American society. A 2011 Pew poll found that Muslim Americans feel happier with their lives than does the general population in the United States.^{xvii} That sentiment could change, however, with growing talk of imposing Nuremburg-style laws and requiring Muslims to register with the US government, a type of political speech that could actually facilitate ISIS’s goals of alienating American Muslims. But even without the assistance of such speech, ISIS is working hard to attract

Americans. Refugee youth, whose parents imagine them to be most secure inside their homes and on-line, often don't recognize that the Internet is not necessarily a safe place for children. Training such parents about potential Internet dangers is important.

Which of its "Wants" will ISIS Pursue?

ISIS will continue to pursue its two goals simultaneously, though those objectives are clearly antithetical. To one end, ISIS will continue to recruit foreign citizens for the creation of its caliphate. And to the other, it will continue to recruit volunteers to conduct attacks in the West aimed at triggering the all-out ground attack and prophesied final battle. **We can expect that attacks in the West will grow more sophisticated and become more common. As an intermediate step, while ISIS exercises both of its antithetical options, the group will do its best to increase tensions between the "crusaders" and ordinary Muslims, to polarize Muslims against one another, and to incite internal divisions within the West.**

How to Study What ISIS Wants: Why We Need To Reconsider IRB Rules as Applied to Terrorism Studies

The subject of this hearing is important; the success of our war against ISIS depends in part on our having an accurate understanding of what ISIS wants and what it claims to offer the individuals it is trying to recruit. But we cannot learn why individuals choose to become terrorists (or how to dissuade them from doing so) from large-N studies, the kind of studies that are favored by the academy and represent the lion's share of studies funded by our government. If we want to understand individual motivations, there is no substitute for talking to individual terrorists or individuals who have demonstrated interest. But this kind of work is harder and harder to do, in part because IRB rules make it almost impossible for scholars to talk to extremists in the field, and even harder to interview terrorists who are incarcerated. The tension between US laws regarding disclosure and Institutional Review Boards at our universities make it impossible to ask important questions such as, "If you were recruited by ISIS, why would you join? If you would not join, why not?" For example, I am not allowed to speak with presumed ISIS members on line to ask them what they want without violating IRB rules mandated by US law. Nor may I ask individuals if they have joined a terrorist group without violating either US law or IRB regulations. The IRB Regulations were designed to protect individuals from

unscrupulous scientific researchers. Today, as applied to research on terrorism, these IRB rules are harming national security. While this is not the forum to review in detail the barriers to research on this question, I believe that this Committee could provide an immense service by highlighting this problem and developing a policy consensus and common sense approach to ensuring that IRB rules and government regulations designed for the protection of vulnerable populations do not hinder vital scholarly research on the motivations of terrorists.

How Should We Respond? Military Responses Are Necessary but Insufficient

Given enough political will and ground forces, the West can defeat the Islamic State in the territory it controls. This would require a massive military commitment, though the West certainly has the means. One problem, of course, is that many of the millions of people living under ISIS rule do not support ISIS and desperately wish to leave. These innocent people will, almost certainly, become collateral casualties and the West must grapple with this moral dilemma. In that regard, even attacks aimed at the ISIS economy prove problematic; many truckers smuggling oil out of ISIS-held territory are not ideologically motivated, but trying to feed their families.^{xviii} These are the types of people we would count on to rise up against the Islamic State given the opportunity. Still, many argue that, with the stakes so high, the right approach is the “merciless” war French President Francois Hollande called for in the wake of the 2015 Paris attacks.

But even this “merciless” approach is only a temporary fix. Defeating ISIS in Syria requires ending the civil war there and for our troops to remain in the region until Sunni safety is assured. Even if the United States and allied forces were prepared to occupy Iraq and Syria for the next thirty years—as General Powell once argued for with regard to the war in Iraq—there is no guarantee of success.^{xix} And ISIS has now spread into *wilayat* or provinces in some eight countries, where, there too, it capitalizes on poor governance.^{xx}

The United States and its allies can and should deploy more special-operations forces. We can and should get better at sharing intelligence among our allies, and we and our allies will have to reconsider the post-Snowden anti-surveillance mood. The “expeditionary force” announced recently by Defense Secretary Ashton Carter will provide an important enhancement to current

intelligence capacities.^{xxi} ***There are compelling reasons to expand the number of ground forces in Iraq above the current 3,500 troops, but it would be far better if those forces were made up, not of “crusaders,” but Sunni Arabs.***^{xxii} But it’s necessary to be realistic about the impact of these efforts, which will not defeat the Salafi jihadist ideology that fuels ISIS and its expansive tendencies unless and until the international community finds a way to undermine its appeal.

Importantly, ***Salafi jihadists are not known to sit idle after their refuges are destroyed. They simply seek out new ones.*** One example is Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who founded the predecessor organization to ISIS. Zarqawi had been running an al Qaeda camp in Afghanistan when the United States invaded. He was wounded in a U.S. bombing raid, and fled to Iran, and from there to Iraq where he joined an organization that was fascinated by chemical weapons. Zarqawi would later try, unsuccessfully, to carry out a chemical attack in Jordan. Abu Musab al-Zarqawi is now quoted on the cover of every issue of *Dabiq*, and is a kind of mascot for ISIS.

The most difficult task ahead is not containing ISIS militarily. Rather, it is to contain ISIS’s appeal among those who want to reinvent themselves as heroes in a global war against “infidels.”

How to Contain ISIS’s Psychological Operations

Individuals who escaped from ISIS-controlled territory told the *Washington Post* that the organization has recruited personnel, often from the West, with expertise in social media, sophisticated film-making, magazine layout, story-telling, etc.; and that the ***individuals involved in ISIS’s psychological operations are paid more than its fighters. We need to respond in kind.***^{xxiii}

During the Cold War, psychological operations were a critically important part of the strategy to defeat the Soviet Union. In George Kennan’s 1946 “long telegram,” later published in *Foreign Affairs* as “The Sources of Soviet Conduct,” Kennan described the difficulties faced by the Marxists in attempting to spread their revolutionary movement in Russia, and urged that the West should contain the Soviets rather than attempt to defeat them.^{xxiv} There, he wrote

[L]acking wide popular support for the choice of bloody revolution as a means of social betterment, these revolutionists found in Marxist theory *a highly convenient*

*rationalization of their own instinctive desires. It afforded **pseudo-scientific justification...for their yearning for power and revenge** and for their inclination to cut corners in the pursuit of it.*

If we exchange “Salafi jihadist theory” for “Marxist theory,” this description might equally apply to ISIS. Kennan argued that the establishment of dictatorial power becomes a necessity when the broader population does not share in the revolutionaries’ zeal. And it is for this reason, that ISIS has imposed dictatorial powers, as described by some who have managed to escape.^{xxv}

Kennan, the architect of containment, considered **psychological operations, or “political warfare,”** to be even more important than military operations in the effort to defeat the Soviet regime and its false promises. In 1948, he argued that

political warfare is the logical application of Clausewitz's doctrine in time of peace. In broadest definition, political warfare is the employment of all the means at a nation's command, short of war, to achieve its national objectives. Such operations are both overt and covert. They range from such overt actions as political alliances, economic measures (as ERP), and "white" propaganda to such covert operations as clandestine support of "friendly" foreign elements, "black" psychological warfare and even encouragement of underground resistance in hostile states.^{xxvi}

In 1949, a group of prominent business leaders, attorneys and philanthropists came together with the government to launch the National Committee for Free Europe (NCFE) and the Office of Policy Coordination.^{xxvii} These programs would eventually give rise to Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty as well as efforts to promote anti-Soviet intellectuals – with the goal of contesting the Communist regime’s false narrative and totalitarian rule.

Our containment effort against ISIS needs to be beefed up significantly: It could profitably be modeled on an updated version of Kennan’s notion of political warfare. Initiating it will require input from business leaders, attorneys, philanthropists, and the government, just as was the case for political-warfare operations against the Soviet Union. Students and teachers should be brought into the effort: The counter-narrative course that EdVenture Partners is offering, together

with the State Department and Facebook, needs to be expanded into high schools, so that younger students can participate in addressing ISIS's false appeal. The Saudi Ministry of Education has already expressed a strong interest in having EdVenture Partners expand P2P to include Saudi high school students.

An effective political warfare operation will require, in the words of Bernard Haykel, "engaging in cultural and educational efforts to defeat ISIS's ideology that sanctifies violence as the only means for Sunni empowerment and glory."^{xxviii} Western governments are not equipped to do this alone. He notes, "[i]t is an effort that must emerge from within the Arab and Muslim communities." Saudi Arabia, as the source of the "**untamed Wahhabism**" that underlies ISIS ideology, has an important role to play moving forward.^{xxix} Perhaps even more than we need their military support, we need the Arab states to lead the containment of ISIS ideology and to model alternative narratives.

ISIS is spreading a **bad - but still seductive -- idea** that has dispersed way beyond the borders of its caliphate, not only into areas of poor governance and weak states, but also into the West. We cannot deploy drones against an ideology, and we cannot deploy them against our ISIS-affiliated enemies in the West. Thus, countering ISIS's propaganda efforts is essential.

During World War 2, the American people expected to sacrifice to help achieve the war aims. During the continuing war on jihadi terrorism, only a relatively small number of people have volunteered to serve our nation. Containing ISIS requires a national (and international) effort. Entertainment, Internet, and media companies that know how to appeal to millennial audiences should play a much larger role in crafting and disseminating compelling counter-narratives, bringing to bear their considerable expertise in market research and messaging. Students all over the world should be brought into this effort.^{xxx} We need an army of individual volunteers who are willing and able to speak, credibly and persuasively, one-on-one, with youth who are attracted to "jihad-chic," long before they are drawn to violate the law. To this end, we should be deploying former terrorists—individuals who have abandoned jihadist organizations and can provide a more accurate picture of the jihadist way of life. They are uniquely equipped to explain that counter to ISIS's propaganda, there is nothing heroic about ISIS.

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- ⁱⁱⁱ John Cantlie, "Paradigm Shift Part II," *Dabiq* 12 (2015): 47-50.
- ^{iv} Pieter Vanostaeyen, "Abū Muhammad al-ʿAdnānī ash-Shāmī – Indeed Your Lord Is Ever Watchful," September 25, 2014, <https://pietervanostaeyen.wordpress.com/2014/09/25/abu-muhammad-al-adnani-ash-shami-indeed-your-lord-is-ever-watchful/>.
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- ^{vi} Eric Schmitt, "Paris Attacks and Other Assaults Seen as Evidence of a Shift by ISIS," *The New York Times*, November 22, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/23/world/europe/paris-attacks-isis-threatens-west.html?ref=topics&_r=1.
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^{xxx} Google Ideas and Facebook are already investing in this effort. Facebook’s decision to invest in P2P should be acknowledged with a nod and a hug.