

Who Are the ISIS People?

By Vera Mironova

Abstract

By definition, an “armed group” is a group of individuals which threatens or uses violence to achieve its goals.[1] And while a significant body of academic and policy research is looking at the “violence” aspect of the definition, trying to understand why and how groups engage in violence, the “group” aspect of it (the people involved) often receives less attention. Yet without the people, there is no group and, as a result, no one to conduct those acts of violence. So to truly understand the prospects of an armed group like ISIS in the future, we need to understand what we can about their cadre, in particular: 1) who ISIS 1.0 members were, 2) who among them survived and what are their plans, and 3) who could potentially be inspired by the group’s proposed goals in the future. By understanding these issues, it becomes easier to develop better policies for discouraging current members from continuing operations (“de-radicalization”) and for preventing new people from joining.

Keywords: ISIS, Syria, Iraq, human resources

Introduction

Jacob Shapiro shows that one of the main difficulties armed groups struggle with is their human resources. [2] Jeremy Weinstein, in comparing leading insurgency groups in different countries, looks at why some rebellions are ideologically motivated while others are more oriented toward immediate profit and how it affects recruitment.[3] Research looks at the first step prospective fighters take, answering the question, “What makes individuals take up weapons?” For example, organizers of rebellions use three principal ways to recruit soldiers: forced recruitment,[4] offering immediate material incentives or promising such benefits in the future,[5] or appealing to the fighters’ sense of grievance.[6] It has also been shown that relative deprivation,[7] in-group ties and bonds,[8] out-group aversions,[9] the desire to improve one’s social status,[10] the relative danger of remaining a civilian,[11] social networks,[12] and even simple boredom[13] drive people to mobilize for violence.

While the majority of previous research looks at local fighters, it is impossible to ignore the growing role of foreign fighters in civil conflicts. Hegghammer,[14] Malet,[15] Bakke,[16] Dawson and Amarasingam[17] all shed light on recruitment of foreigners and their motivation for joining, but I will look beyond that to how these fighters choose a group and why some quit and leave.

My research is based on extensive interviews with members of different armed groups fighting in Syria. Active ISIS foreign members were conducted in Syria and Turkey in person by my research assistant and in Mosul and Hawija by phone. The majority of interviews with ex-foreign fighters were conducted in Turkey, Ukraine, Russia and Fergana Valley (Central Asia), where they were hiding or free after serving their sentence in prison. Due to the snowball methodology, foreign fighters from the former Soviet Union are overrepresented in the sample. On one side, it limits the generalizability of findings (although they were one of the biggest groups of foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq), but on the other side, it allows for a case study from different angles; my Russian background and age afforded me a similar cultural background and allowed for more open discussion with these fighters. Also, although there were female group members, my research is limited to male fighters.

In interviews I was asking not only about a respondent’s motivation and behavior but also about their brothers in arms. On one side talking about abstract others (instead of themselves) makes them more honest in their answers, and on the other side it allows to mitigate the survivors’ bias.

ISIS 1.0 Manpower

The majority of ISIS human resources were local people who joined the armed group for different reasons like ideology, money, power, or because they simply did not have other options. And although the Islamic State had the same name across both Iraq and Syria, a variety of people, reasons, and regions in each of those countries came into play in these fighters' choices to join.

In northwestern Syria, there was an extensive list of armed groups a fighter could have joined, all of which had significantly different goals, proposed enemies, risk tolerance, financial backing, and political power. So in general, a person looked for a group he most aligned with. If someone wanted to fight against Assad, he would have chosen a non-ISIS group such as Al Nusra or Ahrar al-Sham because they were the strongest groups pursuing that goal. However, those groups were extremely active in combat and, as a result, had big casualties while providing only basic necessities to its members. So although the goal resonated with local fighters, the risks involved with these groups were significant while the benefits were small.

ISIS on the other side had a better offer. According to interviewed fighters, while Al Nusra offered around \$300 a month to its fighters, ISIS provided the same salary in addition to major benefits ranging from cell phones to cars. Also ISIS, in general, was less involved in fighting (there were even civilian jobs offered for group members away from the dangers of the frontline) and more involved in controlling a large territory, so group members not engaged in risky combat activities spent their time exercising power over civilians. As a result, fighters more interested in money and power and less interested in the potential risks associated with group membership were choosing ISIS over other groups. One interviewed local ISIS member from Raqqa explained, "When Al Nusra was in Raqqa, I was thinking about joining them. But then ISIS came, and since I did not see much difference and I wanted to stay home, I joined them instead. Because I was studying computer science before the war, I went to work for Amni [Internal Security]. It was a good place to work. It paid \$250 a month and I was far from the frontline."

At the same time in areas like Deir Ezzor, where there was a lot of anti-Kurdish sentiment even before the war, some people joined ISIS with the sole purpose of fighting against the Kurds. According to these recruits' logic, it was better a radical-but-Arab group controlled the region than any sort of Kurdish rule.

Later in the conflict, many locals were forced to join ISIS simply because they had run out of food and were not able to support themselves. According to one interviewed low-level ISIS member, he joined the group in 2017, during the last three months ISIS controlled his territory, in order to earn enough to buy just basic food he and his family needed to live.

In Iraq, the situation was different. Many people joined ISIS because of its anti-Shia government (in case of Northern Iraq) or anti-Kurd sentiment (in case of Diyala area) and because they were interested in building a separate Sunni Arab state. Also because there was no other Sunni Arab group fighting for that cause, ISIS enjoyed a monopoly on recruitment among the Sunni Arab population. As a result, ISIS group members in Iraq, from the very beginning of the war, were more dedicated to fighting and more willing to die in combat compared to local Syrian fighters, many of whom had joined for money and power.

Because many locals in Syria did not want to take part in risky operations, ISIS recruited foreign fighters who would. In general, the foreign fighters were more dedicated to the group. Not only did they risk life and limb to get to Syria, once in the group, they had very little hope of ever leaving and returning to civilian life because they absolutely depended on the group for survival. At the same time, foreign fighters' subjective goals for participating in the conflict were different not only from those of their local brothers in arms, but also from the goals of other foreign fighters.

Some foreign fighters, especially in the beginning of the conflict, went to Syria with an honest desire to help the local population fight against the dictator. For example, after the August 2013 chemical attack by Assad, the numbers of foreign fighters heading to Syria increased. Others went for ideological reasons ranging from fighting for an abstract jihad against disbelievers to dying and going to heaven to meet 72 virgins promised

to the martyr. For those who were professional mercenaries, experts in their military specialty, and people involved in weapons trade, the main reason for going was money. According to an interviewed foreign fighter who, in addition to fighting, was engaged in weapons trade, “We were actually thinking about going to Libya, but did not manage to get there on time. If not Syria, we would have gone somewhere else.” For others, the conflict was about power and fame; Chechen fighters going to ISIS were often accused of this by other Chechens for leaving instead of defending Chechnya against the Russians.

Some foreigners came because they were involved in criminal activities and, as a result, had problems with the law in their home country. They saw Syria as a place they could hide. According to a Chechen fighter who came to Syria after living in Turkey, “There were people who were wanted for rape and pedophilia in Turkey, so they left to Syria to hide from law enforcement and continue their behavior.”

Some foreigners went to Syria interested in personal monetary gains. For example, one interviewed ex-ISIS foreign fighter from Central Asia admitted that before going to Syria, he was involved in robbing malls in Russia and Turkey. Syria, he thought, provided an even better opportunity for self-enrichment. Other foreign fighters simply wanted to fight. According to a foreign fighter from Dagestan, one of his friends from Ingushetia (before coming to Syria) had planned to join the French Foreign Legion. “Fighting was his thing. He was strong and brave, loved sports, and was very good at shooting,” remembered his comrade.

After the summer of 2014 when ISIS declared Caliphate, a different wave of foreigners went. Instead of going to Syria to fight and die, foreigners were now going to live, especially from countries where there was dictatorship and discrimination. ISIS’s utopian propaganda played a major role in attracting both fighters and civilians, heralding the dawn of an Islamic state where oppressed Muslims were free to live and practice their religion safely.[18] Many even brought school books for their children from back home so as to not interrupt their children’s education. They believed they were going to an Islamic state where they would be pleased to hear the sound of an azan calling for prayer and with leadership they considered truly Muslim; ISIS propaganda had depicted Syria as a comfortable place to live.

When asked about who the most oppressed foreigners in their home countries were, many interviewed foreign fighters cited Uzbeks, who made up a sizable group of foreigners in Syria (relative to the size of their country). According to an ex-ISIS foreign fighter from Dagestan, “It’s not surprising there are so many Uzbeks here. The government in Uzbekistan is so anti-Muslim that people can’t even go to a mosque without raising suspicion. There, only old people can have a beard, and you can get arrested if police find a praying rag in your car.” [19] At the same time, Uzbeks had limited options for immigrating to peaceful places; a visa to any Western country was hard to get and it was very unlikely they would get a refugee status anywhere. In addition, if the government of Uzbekistan looked for them, countries like Russia and Turkey (main destinations for Uzbeki emigrants) would deport them back home where they would most likely face torture and prison.

Those are major reasons for joining ISIS in Syria and Iraq, but joining was just the first step in individual career in ISIS. What happened to people after they took a weapon under the ISIS black flag?

Who Is Left?

It would be a mistake to assume it was a random group of those who first enlisted with ISIS who were the first to die. Individual reasons for enlisting with ISIS highly correlated with an individual behaviour and, as a result, his survival or lack thereof.

Based on the interviews, ISIS members killed during the war fell into several categories:

1) *Jihadists*. People who joined with the abstract goal of dying in jihad and going to heaven. They not only fulfilled their goal of dying at least, but did it early in the conflict. According to fighters interviewed, those recruits volunteered for suicidal missions immediately after arrival. Some of such group members would intentionally chose a group to switch to where the line of fighters waiting to conduct suicide missions was the shortest.

2) *Fighting to fight*. Group members only interested in fighting for fighting's sake also fought until the last breath and rarely survived post 2017. According to interviewed fighters, these fighters would choose to participate in the hardest and most dangerous missions and, as a result, were also disproportionately killed.

3) *The barely trained*. As the war against ISIS intensified, more and more fighters were needed on the frontline, so training time was reduced to a bare minimum. Thus many of the fighters did not know how to fight or even behave in a combat zone. According to an interviewed foreign fighter, "once we left a young fresh fighter from Moldova to guard a tank on the battlefield. Assad forces started shooting with artillery and this stupid guy, instead of running away, climbed inside the tank. Of course the Assad forces were targeting the tank, and the fighter burned inside when they finally hit it." Often those scarcely trained recruits killed not only themselves but others around them, especially while working with explosive devices.

4) *Those seeking Utopia*. Low-level foreign group members who had come to take part in a utopian Islamic State also did not survive the war. Although they had initially gone to Syria with money (after selling their property back home), by the time the ISIS regime was falling and they wanted to leave, they had run out of money and were not able to afford the exorbitant costs smugglers were asking (between \$7,000 and \$10,000 per person). One ISIS member from the Caucasus who had lived in Al Mayadin, Syria, with his family started trying to leave in 2016.

5) *The ultra-radical*. Finally, a highly-ideological group of people who disagreed with ISIS leadership which happened when they realized the Islamic State was not the utopia they had dreamed of. Because they openly questioned ISIS ideology and posed a threat to their legitimacy, ISIS perceived them as a fifth column, and they were targeted by the group itself. As a result, many of them were killed. They were either executed in prisons or, when the demand for manpower increased, sent to the most dangerous frontlines in Kobane, Deir Ezzor, and Hama.

Just as the goals and ideologies of these five categories made them less likely to survive, the different goals and ideologies of the following categories afforded them the best chance of survival past the ISIS defeat:

1) *Draftees and survivors*. Low-level local fighters who had joined for money or were drafted. Not only did they not take risks in combat, but given the opportunity, they would choose to surrender. They knew that because they were only low-level group members, they would get lighter prison sentences (in Iraq) or avoid any punishment altogether (in Syria). According to interviews conducted in Iraq with members of the armed forces, court judges and lawyers, those in prison are mostly low-level local fighters who had surrendered or were taken alive. One example is a 30-year-old man from Mosul, whose trial I had attended in Tel Kaif in January 2018. He had only been a member of ISIS for the final few months of the group's occupation and had joined because he had run out of food for his family. ISIS was paying him 5000 dinars (about \$5) per day.

2) *Foreign group members who left early in the conflict*. Because ISIS eventually prohibited its fighters from leaving (and would kill anyone suspected of planning an escape), those who left before the main wave of desertion started had the best chances of doing so successfully. In addition, the prices for being smuggled out increased with time, and many foreigners were priced out of trying to escape.

This category included four groups who left before 2016:

First, the professional foreign fighters. In addition to mainly working in training camps, their chances of being killed on the frontline were significantly smaller. Also, many who had initially gone to Syria left when another conflict started elsewhere. One Chechen mercenary who had trained opposition groups in Syria at the beginning of the conflict left for the Ukraine when Russia invaded in 2014 and started his own battalion to train Ukrainian forces. Many other Chechens (from non-ISIS groups) who had come to fight Russia in Syria also relocated to the Ukraine. A good example is the Ajnad al-Kavkaz group who turned to fighting in the Sheikh Mansour Battalion in the Ukraine where there were more Russians to fight and it was closer to home. Fighters of other nationalities, particularly ones from Central Asia, also went to Afghanistan when it became clear that ISIS in Syria and Iraq would fall.

Second, some Western foreign fighters who had gone to gain glory in the so-called jihad very soon realized the situation in Syria is not quite what the group's propaganda had portrayed. For example, one ex-foreign fighter from Central Asia in the interview explained why he eventually decided to leave: "I got disappointed in jihad before I even entered Syria. When were we still in a safe house in Turkey preparing to cross into Syria, my future emir in a Uzbek jamaat in Syria asked me to bring two huge bags of carrots with me into Syria. I was carrying so many carrots that it was basically my entire luggage." He continued: "Apparently, there were no good carrots in Syria, and they are essential to prepare national Uzbek food, but already then I kind of felt that it [the jihad] is not this computer-game-type-jihad I thought it should have been. I thought I would be carrying in weapons and ammunition! But instead, it was only carrots." Several months later, this fighter left Syria on the first occasion that arose.

Third, fighters who had gone for self-enrichment. For example, according to interviews with fighters and families of dead ISIS fighters, many Chechen ISIS members from Georgia were sending money back home. Often those people were not satisfied with the fairness of the loot division, so they took revenge on the group by stealing its money. One interviewed ex-ISIS foreign fighter admitted that he not only stole several cars before leaving ISIS, he even tricked them into paying for his travel to Turkey, claiming he was going there to meet his family and bring them back to Syria. Some even stole bigger sums from ISIS on their way out of the group. Often, an ISIS fighter would receive funds to buy military equipment, but would instead abscond with the cash. ISIS tried to catch such people in Turkey, but they were not very successful and many were able to escape.

Fourth, during 2014 and 2015, when ISIS was at the apex of its power, highly ideological people who disagreed with ISIS's idea of an Islamic state and brand of Islam sought to leave the group by any means possible. Some of them succeeded.

3) *High-level group leadership*. Because most leadership did not participate in combat, they were only in danger of death in the case of a precise airstrike. They were also free to leave at any time because no one in ISIS could prevent them from doing so. According to local civilians, they noticed that group leaders (and in particular foreign leaders) started leaving Syria before a battle for Raqqa began. And with the liberation of Mosul in August 2017, some ISIS leaders, who understood the group would not recover from its territorial losses also left, taking large amounts of the group's money with them. The money enabled them to bribe their way out and, in the case of foreign ISIS leaders, buy themselves new documents so they could travel freely.

4) *Amni*. Similar to group leadership, members of Amni (Internal Security) had the means and freedom to leave at will despite the group's no-exit policy. They also had the added benefit of near anonymity. Because they were part of a secret organization within ISIS and had often wore masks in public, rarely did civilians or even fighters know who they were. This meant they did not even have to bribe their way out or be concerned about being recognized once they were free.

Potential for Recruitment of New Members

While it was only a small minority of qualified, high-level group members who disproportionately survived (and low-level fighters did not), it would not be hard for ISIS leadership to quickly regain new low-level fighters; oppressive governmental policies continue to contribute to the pool of young, disenfranchised men ready to take up arms. Instead of seizing the opportunity to correct the issues that drove their citizens to Syria in the first place—issues like unemployment and oppression—in many cases, the situations have become even worse. This is especially true in the Middle East, US, and Central Asia. And while collaborative military operations were successful in killing off the vast majority of fighting-age males who chose to fight with ISIS, new potential group members are quickly growing up and could soon take up weapons.

Reasons for joining:	Level in the organization	Killed	Survived
Money (Self Enrichment)	High		+
Money (To Survive)	Low		+
Anti-Kurdish Grievance	Low	+	
Anti-Shia Grievance	Low	+	
Power	High		+
Draft	Low		+
Grievance Against Foreign Government	Low	+	
Going to Heaven	Low	+	
Life Experience	Low	+	
Professional Military	High		+
Religious Ideology	Low		+
Fame	High	+	

The biggest number of low-level group members were people who joined for either money and because of grievances. And new recruits in those categories are the most needed to regain lost territories. People who joined for money are not loyal to the group and left as soon as the group was defeated but are needed to increase group numbers and fill administrative positions and people who joined because of the dedication were disproportionately killed but are needed to feel fighters positions. So what will be driving factors for new recruits?

1) *Money*. In the Middle East, problems with initial unemployment rate have not only persisted, they've gotten worse due to the war. Also, many ISIS families lost their husbands, who were the sole breadwinners, and the government is as unwilling as they are unable to support them. And already ISIS is stepping in. According to interviewed law enforcement members in Mosul, ISIS is already supporting the widows and orphans of ISIS dead fighters. In the event of a resurgence, these people are likely to join ISIS, with young sons becoming fighters, if ISIS would offer them even a basic salary.

2) *Grievances in the Middle East*. Many people who joined ISIS with anti-Kurdish sentiment were from areas that are still administered by Kurds, a situation that only increases anti-Kurdish sentiment. As a result, those locals are already looking for any group that will help them act on their grievance, including the Shia militias they fought against while part of ISIS. But now they are better than nothing because they are anti Kurdish.

On the other side, anti-Shia sentiment would also continue to supply fighters to ISIS. In Mosul, many locals welcomed ISIS in the first place because they disagreed with what they deemed Baghdad's radical Shia government and its abusive law enforcement. Even before ISIS, if Al Qaeda wanted to target a civilian for recruitment, it would start by reporting that person to Iraq's internal security as an Al Qaeda member knowing the civilian would be arrested, thrown in prison, beaten and tortured and released only after his family had bribed the corrupt law enforcement.[20] After such an experience, that civilian was often more than ready to volunteer for any anti-Shia government movement that approached him.

Now, after Mosul's liberation, official government forces left law enforcement responsibilities for the territory to radical Shia militias who also abuse their law enforcement powers. According to Human Rights Watch report in Mosul, the National Security Service runs illegal prisons where they detain Sunni locals.[21] Those prisons are overcrowded, unsanitary, and provide inadequate medical treatment. Inmate management includes regular beatings and even torture. Some inmates in those prisons are not even there because of a connection to ISIS but simply because of Iraqi bureaucracy. Not only is such treatment of inmates questionable from ethical

and legal standpoints, such handling only increases anti-government grievances and, as a result, radicalization. In an interview, one ex-inmate mentioned that everyone in his cell was excited at any news about successful ISIS operations, not because they were pro-ISIS, but because they were anti-government: “While many of them [inmates] did not sympathize with, and had even suffered under, ISIS,” he explained, “they were also against the Iraqi government that was holding them in those terrible conditions, and ISIS was the only force fighting them.” Such situations increased grievance and negated any appreciation locals might have had for the central government liberating the territory from ISIS.

3) *Native Country Grievances.* For many people in non-democratic countries (that were major suppliers of foreign fighters to ISIS), there were two main reasons they initially joined the war—the abuse and corruption of local law enforcement and the inability to peacefully demonstrate against it. Now, new and harsh anti-terrorism laws serve not only as a gold mine for corruption, but also a great excuse for law enforcement to crack down on opposition, real or imagined.

According to the logic of corrupt law enforcement, since the punishments for terrorism crimes are harsher, they can demand even bigger bribes from families of individuals even remotely affiliated with ISIS. Even for a charge as small as receiving a phone message with a radical religious video attached, a family might be expected to pay huge sums of money to liberate the offending relative. In several known cases in one Central Asian republic, raising the required money for bribes meant families had to sell their own houses, often leaving them homeless.

For people accused of supporting terrorism there is an added financial burden. Often law enforcement will not allow them to travel freely, even after they have served their sentence, and because they have a hard time finding local work, they are much more likely to pursue criminal activities to obtain money.

Such behavior from law enforcement does nothing to increase the citizens’ trust in their government. Instead, it fuels anti-government sentiment and moves people closer to any rebel cause. According to one interviewee in a Uzbek-majority town in Kyrgyzstan, the sister of a person imprisoned on terrorism support charges, “He [her brother] was just a quiet religious guy before he was imprisoned. But I am sure now he will become a radical anti-government ISIS sympathizer.”

We have now looked at the human resources of ISIS 1.0, who among them survived and how they could replace those who were killed. What are the implications?

Conclusion

Since high-level group members like leadership and Amni were able to flee and thus survive, their experience and connections could allow them to re-establish ISIS in their new location. And while high-level group members have to hide, for example, in the insurgency, members of Amni who are less known to both the public and governmental intelligence could more freely prepare ground for new major operations. And because of domestic grievances and general poverty, a whole new pool of recruits would be willing to join them once the call is given. Experienced professional group members and weapons traders who remain, although on other battlefields, would potentially be able to return and train new recruits.

Although current counter-propaganda efforts could stop new recruits who might join for “life experience,” “fame,” or “going to heaven,” it will do little to stop those recruits with grievances, which comprise the much bigger category. Since not much has improved in the domestic policies of certain countries, and abuses have even gotten worse, some would undoubtedly act on their grievances.

And because of its perceived effectiveness, the ISIS brand may still attract new members who may have grievances in their home country. If those people can travel to a battlefield to join an armed group; they will do so. If not, they will conduct small-scale attacks and solo terrorism attacks against domestic targets.

About the Author: Vera Mironova is a Visiting Fellow at Harvard University Economics Department. She received her Ph.D. in Political Science from the University of Maryland.

Notes

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