American Jihadi: Why Westerners Fight for the Islamic State

Media outlets and government circles both cringe and squirm when the subject of Westerners leaving the West to go fight in Syria and Iraq with the Islamic State arises. While acquiring data and calculating accurate numbers wildly diverges from source to source, there is no doubt that ANY number simply makes countries like the United States uncomfortable and perplexed: in short, how could anyone want to leave the land of the free, the tolerant, the open, the just and go fight for a group that represents the antithesis of such principles? Unfortunately for all those horrified by the images of beheadings and immolation, understanding this process (and more importantly the failure of the intelligence community and state department to make inroads against it) requires one to accept something most Americans cannot: that the American Dream for too many seems more myth than reality.

Reality in America, if you are not able to hook into upward mobility and access privileged success, is a fairly dull and even depressing situation: studies show a disturbing percentage of Americans are born, live, and die within an incredibly small 50-mile radius. They also show that the classic parental definition of the American Dream – that your children will be better off and have more than you – has become murky and ill-defined with the Millenial generation. When you travel into most cosmopolitan urban centers in America, if you are willing to travel to ALL corners of that city (and most are not), you will find not a smoothly fitted mosaic of multiple cultures and cross-cutting identity cleavages that make people realize that despite various differences there are always important similarities linking people together. Instead you find Balkanized enclaves where ‘people stick to their own’ and the ‘well-to-do’ and newly arrived are quickly made aware of the places not to venture into and where not to congregate. Almost exclusively those areas are ‘ethnic’ bastions or de facto racially segregated sections of the city. The idea of the American Dream is an amazing testimony to what any country should be: that anyone can succeed based on talent, ambition, merit, and effort; that despite obstacles and difficulty there will always be opportunity; that all people can live, love, and dream anything they want without interference. This idea, however, too often seems deeply taunting and impossible to the so-called wanna-bes or have-nots of denied American society.

The State Department clearly does not do a great job recognizing this reality of the American underground. What you come across more often are confused looks and exasperated gasps at the supposed stupidity of such decisions to leave and go fight with the Islamic State. But that incredulous exasperation is based on a vision of America that the underground does not see and, more importantly, does not believe is or ever will be available to it. In short, one can live ‘in the West’ and never feel a part ‘of the West.’ This is not just a matter of dismissively sneering at people who are too lazy or too unwilling to adapt to America. It is a complex interwoven sociological failure that comprises politics, economics, geography, religion, and psychology. And yet, one thing innate to America is true: people love to dream. They love to believe in a greatness, indeed any greatness, in a higher calling and purpose, that is available to them. If the American Dream classically defined is deemed inaccessible, then we in the West must be ready to believe more radical and seemingly inexplicable visions will be able to take its place. The vision of the Islamic State, which the mainstream West portrays in finely-tuned snippets heavy on atrocities and bloodshed, is in fact a slickly produced, media-savvy inundation focused on religious epiphany, glorious sacrifice, and noble causes to do battle. It is a clarion call heard through ages and has always been able to find willing ears and malleable minds. Only now it is being powerfully pushed through the technological and virtual advantages of the 21st century, making its reach and scope far beyond anything the West could ever think plausible.
Against this backdrop, it is inexcusable that American agents find themselves at a loss to understand the appeal of that small percentage willing to abandon the U.S. and go fight in a land that America says is barbarous, for a group only more barbarous and a cause most ignoble. To see the problem in this light is not so much a failure to understand the enemy as it is an admission of failure to see American society in all of its less-appealing shades of grey: flawed, unfulfilled, denied, isolated. The people going off to fight with the Islamic State are able to ‘leave the West’ because they clearly don’t feel as if they are leaving anything at all, except a myth not available to them or a taunt to make them feel demeaned. One of the fundamental principles in intelligence is to gain insight into adversaries by truly understanding their worldviews, their self-assessments, their cultures, their perceptions. How ironic, then, that this issue that is so close to home, that is not just about people rejecting America but the fear that these ‘foreign fighters’ might one day succeed in returning back to the homeland more radicalized and intent on committing mayhem on domestic shores instead of foreign, that we are still failing to assess and ascertain ‘enemy perceptions among us.’ We do not understand these people because we will not remove the blinders of the American Dream, thus making us ignorant to the world right outside our door. Fascinatingly, the key to understanding the attraction to the Islamic State might be first accepting the revulsion some have had symbolically beaten into them, Chinese water torture-like, day after day after day about America.

None of this is an entreaty to sympathize with those who leave American shores to take up arms with the Islamic State. The Islamic State is indeed a manipulative, corrupt, criminal, and mind-blowingly sadistic organization. Effective recruiting videos and social media campaigns notwithstanding, it is promising a life and society that is even more mythical than the American Dream. This is not an explanation justifying the decision to fight with them. It is rather the first step to expose why those of us in America charged with stopping this disturbing trend have proven, so far, to be utterly inept in unraveling the motivational calculus that goes through the minds of recruits. We have made it more complex than it needs to be. It is not about understanding the seduction of the beast without; it is about admitting the devastation of the beast within.

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