Understanding Youth Radicalization in the Age of ISIS: A Psychosocial Analysis

In December 2015, Malaysian police reported that the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) had set up camps in Kazakhstan and Syria to train and indoctrinate children as young as two years old to become militants. It was alleged that the camps were training children from all over the world in the use of firearms, as well as immersing them in what one senior Malaysian police officer called a 'false jihad'.

While the Kazakh ambassador in Singapore swiftly issued a rebuttal of the Malaysian claim, it is worth noting nevertheless that news is available – including apparently video evidence produced by ISIS itself- of Kazakh children being trained by ISIS. More generally, terrorism researchers have confirmed that ISIS 'actively recruits children' to engage in 'combat, including suicide missions' (Stern and Berger 2015: 210). In any case, Southeast Asian authorities were hardly surprised at the latest allegations of ISIS targeting youth for Islamist indoctrination. Since September 2014, it has been known that ISIS has set up a Southeast Asian unit of Malay-speaking militants, drawn from mainly Indonesia but also Malaysia. According to some estimates, the unit called Katibah Nusantara (KN), or the Malay Archipelago Unit, held sway amongst 450 Indonesian and Malaysian fighters and their families in the Syrian/Iraq region, as of November 2015 (Arianti and Singh, 2015).

Of particular interest, KN has apparently set up the Abdullah Azzam Academy for the education and military training of children of Malaysian and Indonesian fighters. The medium of instruction is in the Malay language, and KN appears desirous of training a new generation of Malay-speaking militants indoctrinated from childhood to be committed to ensuring that the so-called ISIS Caliphate, inaugurated by its titular leader Abu Bakar al-Baghdadi in June 2014, eventually encompasses Malay-speaking Southeast Asia as well. In March 2015, moreover, a two-minute video emerged via ISIS social media sources in which ethnic Malay-looking children were seen training with weapons. The video declared that these children will 'finish all oppressors, disbelievers, apostates'. The underlying message to Southeast Asian governments was unmistakable: 'These children will be the next generation of fighters. You can capture us, kill us, we will regenerate, no matter how hard you try'. Terrorism scholars agree in this connection that from the ISIS perspective, '[l]eadership decapitation is significantly less likely to be effective against organizations that prepare children to step into their fathers' shoes' (Stern and Berger, 2015b: 211).

ISIS is hardly unique in targeting youth – especially young males – for indoctrination. Its ideological parent Al Qaeda sought to radicalize youth into its virulent varieties of Islamist extremism as well. The British MI5 warned in 2007 that Al Qaeda and its affiliates were seeking to radicalize children as young as 15 into mounting terror attacks in the United Kingdom. In like vein the former Director of the US Central Intelligence Agency warned that Al Qaeda was seeking to radicalize western youth for the purpose of mounting terror attacks in the West. Some estimates suggest that youth between 15 and 18 years of age comprise 20 percent of all suicide bombers (Samuel, 2011:109-113). As we shall see, youth are particularly susceptible to radicalization into violent extremism of the ISIS and similar ills, for a variety of reasons. This article will first examine widely accepted definitions of the term 'youth'. It will then examine, drawing on a number of disciplinary perspectives, a few key intertwined factors – neurological, psychological, family and social – that impact the degree to which youth are rendered susceptible to the seductive ideological appeals of ISIS and the like, and ultimately radicalize into violent extremism. I shall then end the article by briefly suggesting ways to mitigate the relative vulnerability of youth to the highly professionalized and seductive Facebook, Twitter and

Understanding Youth Radicalization in the Age of ISIS: A Psychosocial Analysis

Written by Kumar Ramakrishna

YouTube propaganda of ISIS.

'Youth' Defined – and How ISIS 'Unleashes' Them

That ISIS seems keen on targeting young children and youth for recruitment into either active militants serving on the frontlines in Syria and Iraq, or so-called 'lone wolves' carrying out terrorist acts inspired but not necessarily orchestrated by the organization, is evident enough. A brief definitional discussion is warranted at this juncture before proceeding further. The term 'youth' is interpreted differently across national and institutional jurisdictions – and at times even within the latter. While the United Nations Secretariat and the World Bank both define 'youth' to refer to individuals between 15 and 24 years old, the Denmark Youth Council establishes the age range of individuals considered to be youth more expansively – as between 15 to 34 years of age (Ramakrishna, 2015: 115). The African Union further extends this latter definition of youth by a year, to age 35. Within the UN system itself, UNICEF's Convention on the Rights of the Child broadly defines the term 'youth' as a 'child until 18' while the UN Habitat identifies an age range from 15-32 years.

In any case, as mentioned, quite apart from the children in training camps that have been featured in ISIS propaganda videos, the ISIS message has clearly resonated with youth that are older, as evidenced by a cursory glance at newspaper headlines on lone wolf attacks in the second half of 2014 and throughout 2015. In September 2014, ISIS spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani – in response to the Obama administration's launching of airstrikes a month earlier to stem the terrorist army's seemingly inexorable advance in Iraq – issued via social media a call upon ISIS supporters worldwide to engage in so-called 'lone wolf' attacks in Western coalition capitals. This appeared to be deadly effective: two months after al-Adnani's call, a 25-year old ISIS-inspired lone wolf, Martin Roulea, ran over two Canadian soldiers in a Montreal parking lot before being killed by police. In January 2015, 20-year old Christopher Cornell was arrested by the FBI for a plot to open fire on US government officials and the Israeli embassy. He claimed to have been acting on behalf of ISIS. Six months later, during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, al-Adnani urged ISIS supporters to turn it into 'a month of disasters, defeats and disgrace for the kuffar [infidels] everywhere'. Subsequently, in the Tunisian tourist resort of Port el Kantaoui near the coastal city of Sousse, 20-year old Rafik el Chelly shot dead 37 mainly Western civilians near the beachside Rui Imperial Hotel (Ramakrishna, 2015).

Youth have featured heavily in lone wolf incidents in Australia as well. In September 2014 an 18-year-old male was killed by police after he had stabbed two counterterrorism police officers in Melbourne. In April 2015, several teenagers were arrested on suspicion of plotting an ISIS-inspired assault on police at a Veterans' Day ceremony. This particular plot even had a transnational dimension: Australian authorities revealed that the alleged mastermind of this plot was a 14-year-old British boy operating 'from his bedroom in northwestern England'. A month later, again in Melbourne, police arrested a 17-year-old for being implicated in a plot to detonate three homemade pipe bombs.

Youth and Radicalization into Violent Extremism: A Preliminary Psychosocial Analysis

Why are youth so heavily represented amongst militants radicalized by ISIS? While some argue that the role of social media is crucial in understanding how ISIS attracts today's tech savvy youth, in reality the Internet, though not unimportant, is merely an accelerant of the radicalization process (Homeland Security Institute 2009: 6). What makes youth vulnerable actually reside off-line in a real world context; to properly elucidate this assertion would require more space than is permissible in this article. Nevertheless, insights from several disciplines offer us some preliminary answers.

Neurological Factors

To start with, neurologically youth are pretty unique as their brain development proceeds in a rather uneven fashion. Specifically, during the teenage years the prefrontal cortex that guides reasoning and self-control develops more gradually than the amygdala – the center of human emotions. This helps explain why teenagers between 18 and 20 years of age often appear to many an exasperated parent as impulsive and rash (Leong, 2011). Second, the amygdala-driven and rather intense emotional turbulence that many teens more or less experience at regular

Understanding Youth Radicalization in the Age of ISIS: A Psychosocial Analysis

Written by Kumar Ramakrishna

intervals is not without implications. It suggests a certain psychological instability that expresses itself frequently in a quest for absolute cognitive certainty – which violent fundamentalist groups like ISIS conveniently appear to offer. In sum, youth are anything but regular folk: they are actually in a 'tumultuous biological, cognitive, social and emotional transition to adulthood' (Ramakrishna, 2015:116). It is precisely this process of transition that renders youth to be akin to psychological putty in the hands of skilled extremist ideologues.

The Family Context

The essential psychological vulnerability of youth arising from neurological factors is further influenced by the immediate family context. British psychiatrist Russell Razzaque in this respect has argued that the 'the initial parental bond' is utterly crucial for the healthy emotional development of youth (2008: 80-83). He asserts that 'just as oxygen deprivation can impair growth or cause damage to the unborn child, so lack of attachment and emotional deprivation can harm the growing infant and stunt his psychological development'. Razzaque warns that a youth growing up without a stable role model in the immediate family context 'will see things in a very different light from the way adults do, even as he grows older'. This requires elaboration. Psychologically speaking, it has long been understood that 'our personality, character, thoughts, and feelings are shaped by our early childhood experiences', and central to the process of ego and identity formation until even well into adulthood is as noted the 'early and influential parent-child dyad' (Jones, 2008: 119). Hence those youth who, because of a deeply dysfunctional relationship with early parental figures, possess 'fragile senses of identity and unhealthily developed egos', they would lack the utterly important 'inner strength and personal stability required to endure life's ordinary trials and tribulations' (Alper, 2006:173-4). A weak and/or dysfunctional immediate family context, therefore, could well render a youth 'desperately hungry' for 'external objects that claim to be perfect and ideal', and that supposedly offer 'that necessary sense of connection to something of value' that can 'buttress his self-esteem' (Jones, 2008: 133-4). This is the point where for instance ISIS extremist ideologues can strike home with their social media appeals. The adverse impact of a poor family background is no exaggeration. In Saudi Arabia as one instance, it was found that many who had grown up in homes of relatives 'without their parents present' were in need of attention, as their 'personal and social problems' appeared to 'contribute to radicalization' (International Peace Institute, 2010: 9).

The Social Milieu

Another factor that plays an instrumental role in at times rendering youth susceptible to ISIS extremist appeals for example is the wider social milieu within which they and their immediate families are embedded. Of special concern are Muslim communities or sub-cultures that are relatively insulated from the wider polity and have been beset by a range of political, historical and socioeconomic setbacks that have generated a sense of alienation vis-a-vis dominant out-groups. In some cases, such 'countercultures' – not just in the Middle East but including poorly integrated migrant communities in the West or elsewhere– may share a generalized perception that their communities are facing political and socioeconomic marginalization – or worse (Juergensmeyer, 2000: 12). In a broadly similar way, the aforementioned training camps for children ISIS has apparently set up can be considered as seminal 'cultures of violence', that are 'a crucial part of understanding religious terrorism' (Jones, 2008: 120). Youth that are immersed in their formative years in such stressed communities rarely emerge unscathed. From a neurological perspective, growing up immersed in a countercultural milieu characterized by interactions and experiences that heighten out-group prejudice has a significant impact on their highly plastic youthful brains. Specifically, within the hippocampus, a part of the ancient limbic system of the brain, strong emotional reactions to experiences of social and economic discrimination or worse at the hands of out-groups – as well as repeated exposure to negative out-group stereotyping – cannot but be stored as long-term memory (Johnson, 2004: 8); (Wilson, 1999: 116-17); (Newberg and Waldman, 2006: 32).

Freud elaborated on this process with his concept of so-called critical periods. During such periods the unique architecture of a youth's hippocampus stabilizes in a relatively enduring way. Hence when such critical and brief windows close, the youth's learned habits, beliefs and attitudes become relatively resistant to change; put another way, once certain neural pathways are laid down, they become entrenched (Doidge, 2008: 52-3); (Ridley, 2004: 167-70). In essence, therefore, youth who come of age within cultures of hatred 'tend to be self-righteous, prejudicial and condemnatory toward people outside their groups', whilst possessing an especially pronounced ''us versus

Understanding Youth Radicalization in the Age of ISIS: A Psychosocial Analysis

Written by Kumar Ramakrishna

them' mentality that many will carry throughout their lives' – shaped in no small part as well by 'the stories' they have 'heard and read while growing up'(Newberg and Weldman, 2006: 121).

The Middle East offers one illustration of how culturally sanctioned out-group prejudice can be socialized into youth: 'hatred for Jews and Zionists' is widespread in the mainstream and social media and even in textbooks for children as young as three years old, 'complete with illustrations of Jews with monster-like qualities'. In short, Jews are painted as 'bloodsuckers who attack the Palestinians' (Ali 2013: 37). Not entirely surprising perhaps then that in one Palestinian refugee camp in the Gaza Strip a Hamas official informed the terrorism scholar Scott Atran in 2004 that 'our youth are running into martyrdom' (Atran 2010: 353). So generalized and pervasive was the countercultural hatred of Israelis that one young man very matter-of-factly discussed with Atran the 'costs and benefits of a roadside versus suicide bombing', a topic that appeared normal within the 'group's moral frame' (2010: 355). Even more remarkable was the little boy kicking a frayed soccer ball near the border crossing at Bayt Lahiyah who assured Atran that 'he wanted to die a *shaheed*, killing Israelis' (2010: 356). It is thus not hard to see how immersion in a countercultural milieu characterized by deep out-group hatred and prejudice can – in tandem with the neurological, psychological and family factors just discussed – erode the ability of youth to withstand the siren call of violent extremist ideologues, like those that currently promote the seductive ISIS narrative across various social media platforms.

Conclusion: Promoting Good Families via Good Societies

The United Nations Secretary-General recently inaugurated his Plan of Action for Preventing Violent Extremism, which *inter alia,* identified the importance of strategies of preventing radicalization into violent extremism to complement security-oriented counter-terrorist approaches. He specifically identified youth, moreover, as a critical global resource that had to be protected against the deleterious pull of virulent extremist ideologies. By way of conclusion, the foregoing analysis of the unique psychosocial attributes of youth suggests that at a minimum, a suite of policies guided perhaps by the principle of promoting 'good families via good societies' may represent a way forward to cope with the youth radicalization problem. A 'good family' here is defined as one possessing a*strong parent-child dyad* at its core. As seen this helps foster healthy and normal ego and intellectual development in youth (Jones 2008: 119-20). What the eminent psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott (2006:148-9, 236-8) termed 'ordinary good homes' are needed to nurture youth capable of navigating the adolescent journey from emotional dependence on parents to mature adult independence in the context of a democratic society – with its emphasis on inter-ethnic and inter-religious tolerance.

However good families presuppose the prior and enabling existence of the good political and socioeconomic governance provided by what Ervin Staub considers as good societies (Staud 2005: 76). Apart from programs addressing the poverty that 'creates stress and negatively affects parenting', good societies construct 'cultural and societal institutions in a manner that helps adults and children fulfill their needs in constructive ways' and leverages upon the 'resulting potential and inclinations' to further promote inclusiveness instead of out-group 'devaluation' and 'discrimination' (Staub, 2005). Moreover, the good-family/good- society relationship is mutually reinforcing as well: strong and stable families help 'build commitment to mainstream values in the larger social system'; hence Wills and Resko reiterate the importance of 'social policies that are 'friendly' toward children and families' so as to ensure that parents are empowered 'to act supportively'. This is needed they tellingly add, to generate salutary 'long-range effects in terms of pro-social behavior' (in Miller, 2005: 419-36). In sum, a suite of policies that promote good families via good societies would arguably go a long way to enhance the preventive capacity of communities to discourage youth recruitment into violent extremism (Ozerdem and Podder 2011: 71). If, as the UN Secretary-General recently warned, the world ignores the need to 'harness the idealism, creativity and energy of young people' in the struggle against ISIS and its ilk, the prognosis for the future will be that much bleaker. The hearts and minds of today's youth therefore, is one battle-space that we 'need to reclaim' (Report of the UN Secretary-General, 2015*).*

References

Ali, Ayaan Hirsi (2013), "Raised on Hatred", *New Perspectives Quarterly*, 30 (2), pp. 37-9.

Understanding Youth Radicalization in the Age of ISIS: A Psychosocial Analysis

Written by Kumar Ramakrishna

Alper, Matthew (2006) *The "God" Part of the Brain: A Scientific Interpretation of Human Spirituality and God* , Naperville: Sourcebooks.

Arianti, V. and Jasminder Singh (2015) "ISIS' Southeast Asia Unit: Raising the Security Threat", *RSIS Commentary* CO 15220, Available: https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/icpvtr/co15220-isis-southeast-asia-unit-raising-the-security-threat/#.Vlkcv2DFH-Y (November 28, 2015).

Atran, Scott (2010) *Talking to the Enemy: Violent Extremism, Sacred Values and What it Means to be Human,* London: Allen Lane.

Doidge, Norman (2008)*The Brain that Changes Itself: Stories of Personal Triumph from the Frontiers of Brain Science*, London: Penguin.

Ellie, B and Nur Laiq (2010) *A New Approach? Deradicalization Programs and Counterterrorism* , New York: International Peace Institute. Available: http://www.ipinst.org/wp-content/uploads/publications/a_new_approach_epub.pdf, (November 20, 2015).

Johnson, Steven (2004) *Mind Wide Open: Why You Are What You Think*, London: Penguin.

Jones, James W. (2008) *Blood that Cries Out from the Earth: The Psychology of Religious Terrorism* , Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Juergensmeyer, Mark (2000) *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence* updated edition with a new preface, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Leong, Goh Chee (2011) "How, What and Why: Understanding Them – A Psychological Overview of the Youth", Southeast Asia Regional Centre for Counter-Terrorism (SEARCCT) Symposium on the Dynamics of Youth and Terrorism, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

Newberg, Andrew and Mark Robert Waldman (2006)*Why We Believe What We Believe: Uncovering our Biological Need for Meaning, Spirituality and Truth,* New York: Free Press.

Ozerdem, A. and S. Podder (2011) "Disarming Youth Combatants: Mitigating Youth Radicalization and Violent Extremism", *Journal of Strategic Security*, 4 (4), pp. 63-80.

Ramakrishna, Kumar. (2015) "The Paris Attacks: Ramping Up of Islamic State 'Indirect Strategy?'" *Eurasia Review*, Available: http://www.eurasiareview.com/18112015-the-paris-attacks-ramping-up-of-islamic-state-indirect-strategy-analysis/ (November 20, 2015).

Ramakrishna, Kumar. (2015) *Islamist Terrorism and Militancy in Indonesia: the Power of the Manichean Mindset* , Singapore, Springer.

Report of the UN Secretary-General: Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism (2015) Available: http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N15/456/22/PDF/N1545622.pdf?OpenElement (November 20, 2015).

Ridley, Matt (2004) *The Agile Gene: How Nature Turns on Nurture*, New York: Perennial.

Samuel, Thomas K.(2011) "The Lure of Youth into Terrorism", *SEARCCT's Selection of Articles*, Vol. 2, pp. 109-113.

Staub, Ervin, (2005) 'Basic Human Needs, Altruism, and Aggression', in *The Social Psychology of Good and Evil* , A.G. Miller (ed.), New York and London: The Guildford Pres**s.**

Understanding Youth Radicalization in the Age of ISIS: A Psychosocial Analysis
Written by Kumar Ramakrishna

Stern, Jessica and J.M. Berger (2015) *ISIS: The State of Terror,* New York: Ecco.

The Internet as a Terrorist Tool for Recruitment and Radicalization of Youth (2009) Washington D.C: Homeland Security Institute, Available: http://www.homelandsecurity.org/docs/reports/internet_radicalization.pdf (January 12, 2016).

Wills, Thomas. A. and Jody A. Resko. (2005) 'Social Support and Behavior Toward Others'. In A.G Miller (ed.).*The Social Psychology of Good and Evil*, New York and London: The Guildford Press.

Wilson, E.O.(1999) *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge*, New York: Vintage Books.

Winnicott, Donald W. (2006) *The Family and Individual Development* – With a New Introduction by Martha Nussbaum, London and New York: Routledge.

About the author:

Kumar Ramakrishna is Associate Professor and Head of Policy Studies at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies in Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. He is an expert in counterterrorism with a focus on radicalisation. Elements of this analysis are based on his book *Islamist Terrorism and Militancy in Indonesia: the Power of the Manichean Mindset* (2015).