

Why people become terrorists – and the reason it happens over and over again

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Whether individuals go abroad to fight for radical groups such as IS largely depends on two groups of people interacting – vulnerable individuals seeking an identity and the recruiters who provide them with one, finds research from LSE IDEAS (<http://www.lse.ac.uk/ideas>).

Asya Metodieva, at the foreign policy think tank at the London School of Economics, researched why people become radicalised. Based on the foreign fighters from Kosovo that joined IS and other radical groups, she found that the interaction between two specific groups is integral to the process of radicalisation.

They were; ‘identity seekers’, vulnerable individuals searching for an identity, and ‘identity producers’, individuals who build extremist groups by providing these seekers with identities.

After the Kosovo War, Kosovo was left poor and underdeveloped, struggling with unemployment, poverty, and a weak economy. In this aftermath, radical religious groups grew in the region under the guise of Middle Eastern charities, which were providing financial aid alongside radical ideas and practices. Over time, these thoughts led to young Kosovans, who were seeking an identity, being willing to travel to Syria as foreign fighters when the Syria War started.

Asya’s research highlights that foreign fighters emerge due to long-term targeting by extremist groups run by identity producers who use politics, religion, war, and ethnic tensions to motivate followers and justify violence. They exploit changes in society and the economy, such as those after the Kosovo War, to radicalise vulnerable individuals. But the foreign fighters shown in the media are just a highly visible part of terrorism; identity producers are a much greater issue.

Asya says,

“To tackle the root of radicalisation, we must understand how and why people become radicalised. Policymakers and security experts are preoccupied with the symptoms of radicalisation and ‘winning the war on terror’, while neglecting the causes behind it. Individuals going abroad to fight for IS and other radical groups are just the tip of the iceberg, with those motivating and recruiting these fighters being a much greater security concern.

“If policymakers and security experts want to make meaningful change, then they should be focused less on the foreign fighters and returnees from radical groups, and should direct more attention to the individuals convincing them to go fight in the first place.”

Radicalisation is a deeply complex issue. These findings provide clear guidance of where efforts should be directed; toward the identity producers who are proactively recruiting vulnerable people to join terrorist groups.

These findings come from the examination of official documents, media reports, and semi-constructed interviews with returnees from Syria and local communities in Kosovo, including police and religious

leaders.

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