

Roots of IS appeal to youths

THE Islamic State (IS) is arguably the most ruthless terrorist organisation in modern history. Its recent trail of destruction has caused chills to run down the collective spines of countries as powerful as the US, France and Britain.

In Malaysia, many of those detained by the law enforcement authorities allegedly due to their ties with IS are young people. Evidence indicates that IS is a movement of misguided young people who think a utopian "Islamic" state can be carved out of a trail of wanton death and destruction. So how can we begin to untangle the enigma of IS attraction to youths in a manner that pushes beyond stereotypical and over-simplistic explanations?

Drawing on anecdotal reports from captured IS members, research on gangs and other radical movements, and input from youth sociologists, a rough sketch can be made on how a phenomenon like IS might attract young followers. We refer to it as the 5Ds – deviance, disconnectedness, disempowerment, desperation, and disillusionment.

Deviance: IS recruits are without question influenced by deviant religious teachings and doctrine. Much of what IS calls Islam

goes against centuries of mainstream, traditional Islamic thinking and legal rulings. The recently-published fatwa by the erudite Syrian scholar Sheikh Muhammad al-Yaqubi titled *Refuting ISIS: A Rebuttal of Its Religious and Ideological Foundations* provides an authoritative refutation of IS' beliefs and crimes. Heterodox religious beliefs and practices may not be the primary factor influencing all young Muslims to join IS. Nevertheless, IS' arbitrary, decontextualised use of Koranic verses and hadith provide enough sanctions for unknowing youth to carry out heinous acts of violence and destruction in the name of God.

Disconnectedness: Young people in modern society are often disconnected from their own families, caring adults, teachers and pro-social networks. Disconnectedness results in having little constructive contact with family and fellow citizens, including those from other races and religions. A lack of social capital and sense of community can fuel feelings of disempowerment, loneliness, intolerance and even hatred towards others. When young people are socially disconnected, they become isolated and

easily influenced by what they read on the Internet. Disconnected youths lack the necessary social buffers to offset anti-social Internet-based content and, like the lone sheep that leaves the flock, they can easily fall prey to the hungry wolves.

Disempowerment: When young people are politically disconnected, lack voice within institutions and feel disempowered, they will often seek alternative ways to feel valued, important and useful. Fully aware of the large numbers of disempowered, disconnected and desperate Muslim youths out there, IS has grown adept at selling its "cause" to those who feel left out of mainstream society. Those who feel like they have no real stake in anything and no sense of purpose are most likely to respond to calls of a higher purpose and mission, regardless of how misguided these might be.

Desperation: It is often said that desperation leads to desperate measures. For some Muslim youths, desperation is the result of a combination of extreme frustration (often with what is happening to Muslims in other parts of the world), an overwhelming sense of powerlessness, and disillusionment with political process-

es and mainstream institutions. Sensing injustice occurring all around them, frustration easily grows into desperation when they feel they do not have access to sanctioned channels of reform. When young people feel desperate enough about a situation, they are often willing to go to great lengths to achieve change.

Disillusionment: Many young people – not only Muslims – are disillusioned with the modern world, corruption of leaders, destruction of the planet, injustices carried out on whole peoples, racism, inequality, and the list goes on. When combined with the other Ds, disillusionment can drive people to extreme measures in an attempt to create wholesale change overnight. Like many radical groups, IS calls on its followers to turn the existing political and social order on its head. This is appealing to young people who are disillusioned with the current state of affairs and who have an overly romanticised view of historical religious movements.

When viewed holistically, the 5Ds can help us begin to understand the unique yet deeply interconnected factors associated with youths' attraction to IS. Two recent case studies of Malaysian youths illustrate this. In the first, a

young man approached a local NGO leader about his desire to go to Syria. After being queried about his intention to join IS, the young man replied despondently that he felt his sins were so great that salvation was only possible by joining IS. In a second case, another young man told a counsellor that frustration stemming from problems with his in-laws caused him to want to leave his family and join IS. In both cases, erroneous beliefs, disconnectedness from loved ones and people of knowledge, and a sense of desperation made IS a legitimate option for dealing with their overpowering feelings.

Using the 5Ds as a starting point can help researchers to identify sources of risk for joining IS. Official religious "re-programming" efforts based on simplistic assumptions that fail to account for the often complex mix of internal and external stressors facing young people will be insufficient in stemming the IS tide. To solve a problem, we must first understand it.

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