

Special Contribution

Multicultural Society and International Terrorism

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The number of foreign fighters who have joined the Islamic State (IS) is estimated to have passed 20,000, according to the International Center for the Study of Radicalization (ICSR) at King's College in London.

Over a half of them come from the Middle East. Tunisia leads the way with 1,500 to 3,000, followed by Saudi Arabia with 1,500 to 2,500. Morocco, Jordan and Lebanon follow with 1,500 to 900.

A number of Western civilians have also joined the IS. France has the most with 1,200, followed by the UK and Germany with 500 to 600 each. Belgium is believed to have 440 and the Netherlands with 200 to 250. The number of Americans and Canadians is believed to be about 100 each. The number of Westerners goes up to about 4,000, which is roughly one-fifth of the foreign fighters.

It is not just fighters but also young women and some intellectuals who have left their countries and joined the IS. What has motivated them to do so? Some may be attracted to the religious fanaticism or conservatism or to the extremist ideology that the IS offers. But some of the causes may be found in the societies they resided. Social or cultural alienation seems to be one of the major factors for their action.

The most recent edition of The New York Times Magazine carries an article entitled "Why Do They Go?" It tries to understand the reasons why jihad (generally interpreted as holy war against non-believers) pulls people in the West.

It says that many of the fighters from Britain – as well as those from Finland, Germany, France,

Belgium and the Netherlands – came from comfortable middle-class homes. Many were university students or graduates. A surprising number were women. Some may have been driven by romantic notions of jihad; some others, like the so-called “Jihadi John”, fully embraced the violence of the Islamic State.

There have been many conflicts in recent decades which have attracted religious extremists. Some jihadists went to Afghanistan in the 1980s to fight the Soviets; some went to Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo in the 1990s to fight with Muslims in the former Yugoslavia; many have joined and are still joining the Nusra Front in Syria or the Islamic State straddling Iraq and Syria. Those jihadists are considered hardened fighters and motivated to support fellow Muslims. And now, we are witnessing far larger strata of people, including young Westerners, joining the radical movements.

According to a former Islamic militant who is now working at the International Center for the Study of Radicalization, a typical British jihadist profile is male, in his early 20s, having university education and some association with activist groups. Radicalization is not necessarily driven by social deprivation or poverty.

Some are students of martyrdom and want to die as soon as possible to go directly to paradise. They become suicide bombers. Some are obviously taught that martyrdom in the defense of Islam takes you to paradise where you live happily surrounded by beautiful virgins! Many of the fighters are believed to be fighting for the *Umma* – the community of Muslims, which they see as being under threat.

What shocked the British society in January of this year was the disappearance of three female teenagers, two 15 year olds and one 16, who later were found to have crossed into Syria and joined the Islamic State. They were straight A students at a school in East London. What we know is that a girl from Glasgow, Scotland, who was studying with these three girls at the same school, left to marry an IS militant in 2013, and was in frequent contact with one of the three girls on Twitter. Even though she complained of the boredom of housework, this was not enough to deter the three girls. Two of the girls are the second generation of immigrants from Bangladesh, a Muslim country, and the third from Ethiopia, living in a comfortable, middle-class

neighborhood. While Ethiopia is largely a Christian country, it has a large Muslim minority.

The Islamic State, more than any other extremist groups, has mastered social media for its recruitment campaign, indeed with considerable impact. A recent Brookings Institution report estimates that at least 46,000 Twitter accounts are held and used by Islamic State supporters, primarily in Iraq and Syria. Efforts to remove those Twitter accounts have not been very successful in countering the propaganda and recruitment activities of the Islamic State. The US Government estimates that roughly 96,000 tweets are daily sent out by jihadists.

Among the Western European countries, France has a Muslim population of 6.13 million in 2014, which constitutes 9.6 percent of the population. Germany counts 4.03 million Muslims, 5 percent of the population. The UK has 2.95 million Muslims, 4.6 percent of the population. Belgium has 0.67 million, 6.2 percent; The Netherlands has 0.92 million Muslim, 5.5 percent of the population, and Sweden has a much smaller Muslim population with 0.47 million, but that constitutes 4.9 percent of the population.

These figures show that these countries have 5 to 10 percent of the population who are Muslims. As noted at the outset, many young people from these countries have joined the Islamic State.

Why have they decided to leave their countries? Does the society they lived in have anything to do with it?

It can be noted that many of these young people are the second or third generation of immigrants from Muslim countries. Their parents tend to retain their culture and ways of life without being fully assimilated into Western society. However, they have accepted the wall that exists between them and the host country. Their children, on the other hand, are born and raised in the local culture. And yet, they seem to feel that they are not fully accepted into the society. Instead, they find a sense of identity and are attracted to the appeal of jihadism and return to a more rigid religious way of life promulgated by the Islamic fundamentalists.

Not all Western societies are the same, but a sense of alienation seems to be a common thread of some of those who seek to escape from their society. British society, for example, still maintains a

strong sense of class, and anyone from non-British society, however successful, seems to be having a hard time being accepted by the upper classes. While inter-racial marriages are observed quite often among British-born young people, the cultural divide in the society as a whole seems to be strong. They practice a form of multiculturalism, where those immigrants and their descendants can retain their cultures and traditions, coexisting with the British culture and traditions, but a sense of “them” and “us” still remains. There is also an implicit element of racism in this type of multiculturalism.

France, on the other hand, retains a strong sense of French identity - from culture to cuisine to language. They want everyone to become as French as the French are. They, for example, have banned hijab in schools, as it symbolizes a particular religion. Even though this action was taken on the basis of the separation of politics and religion, the French do not accept a veil covering women's face, as it is against their French culture. A veil is tolerated in Britain and many other societies.

Sweden is probably among the most tolerant of other cultures and religions. However, some youngsters, who grew up in Muslim families, have left their community and joined the Islamic State. They seem to have been kept at the margins of society and may have lost their sense of belonging.

Terrorism could be home-grown, as we have witnessed in various countries. Some are clearly influenced by radical preachers at home as well as through online propaganda efforts. The relationship between alienation and random acts of terrorism can be clearly seen when we consider some recent, tragic examples.

The point to note here is that the immigrant communities are susceptible to radicalization and recruitment. For example, some of those who have joined Al-Shabaab in Somalia came from the Somali communities in the US and Canada. The Boston Marathon bombing in 2013 was caused by two Chechen brothers, who immigrated to the US with their family. Two brothers who attacked Charli Hebdo in Paris were born to the immigrant Algerian family.

The US is a country of immigrants and in that sense different from European countries in

dealing with immigrants. Many different immigrant communities co-exist in the US. What they do is to create a new American identity, people who are loyal to the country, while retaining their customs, traditions and religious practices. There, the flag is a preeminently significant symbol of unity.

What is worrying now is an increasing anti-immigrant movement observed in a number of Western European countries. The National Front in France, which is led by Marine Le Pen, is gaining popular support for its anti-immigrant and anti-EU platform. PEDIGA is a new anti-Islamic party in Germany, which is spreading its influence in and out of the country. The Party for Freedom led by Geert Wilders is also deriding immigrants in The Netherlands. The Independence Party in the UK is gaining ground on an anti-immigrant and anti-EU platform. Stagnating economy, high unemployment, particularly among the youth and the blue-collar workers, terrorist incidents created by Islamic extremists, all contribute to the rise of the far right groups in a number of Western European countries. These far-right groups tend to be supported largely by lower working classes, who feel that their jobs are threatened or taken away by immigrants. The removal of borders within the European Union facilitates labor movements across member countries. Heightening intolerance and exclusive national sentiments are dangerous to the multi-cultural society and to the multi-cultural value system.

The movements against immigrants and foreign workers are not unique to Western Europe. The recent violence targeting foreign workers in South Africa was a xenophobic reaction by a certain segment of the local population, who felt frustrated about the high and long-lasting unemployment and perennial poverty in a country rich with natural resources and industrial economy.

These extremists, left or right-wing, are still a relative minority. But the emergence of these groups poses a serious challenge. It raises a soul-searching question of whether these multicultural societies can overcome increasing intolerance and ideas of exclusion. While we believe in fundamental human values, what we consider to be of universal value is being challenged. It would require the concerted efforts of all of us to find ways of creating a more tolerant and inclusive society.