

Why would a teenager want to join the Islamic State?

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Gijsbert Stoet, a Reader in Psychology at the University of Glasgow, considers why so many teenagers have sought to join the Islamic State. He identifies sensation seeking, identity, and unchallenged religious beliefs as three root causes.

Recently, there have been many discussions about the reasons why so many teenagers from Western European countries want to join the Islamic State (IS). As a psychologist, I have followed the news about this with great interest; after all, psychology is the study of human thought and behaviour. In order to prevent these children going, we need to understand what drives them. And for secularists, it will be of interest to know to what degree a lack of separation of politics, education, and religion adds to the problem.

Psychological theory offers more useful explanations than the ones I have heard on the news. I believe that the motivation for joining the Islamic State is the result of a very specific combination of three factors, namely a high level of sensation seeking, a search for identity, and a strong unchallenged set of religious beliefs. I will explain these three factors first:

1) Sensation seeking is the search for intense and novel experiences. There is a lot of psychological research about this psychological trait. People scoring high on sensation seeking typically take greater risks. They might be sky divers, street racers, or explore many sexual adventures. We know that especially young people score high on [sensation seeking scales](#). It is easy to see why going to the Islamic State offers lots of opportunities for sensation seekers.

2) [Teenagers explore their identity](#). It is a well-studied psychological process in which they find out who they are or want to be. In the process, they can go through stages of forming cliques, following specific dress codes, and so on. It is a stage we have all gone through. There are different groups one might identify with, such as being a fan of a specific band, football team, political movement, etc. For young Muslims, this might be identifying with their family's religion, and being teenagers, they do this in a more extreme way (for example, they might be in search for an Islamic Utopia). Also, Islam offers a very strict set of rules and dress code, which might all be elements that help the identity exploration.

3) Strong unchallenged beliefs. All people have a set of beliefs of how the world works. Religious beliefs differ from other beliefs in the sense that they are typically strongly reinforced through religious education and family ties, and by a fear of punishment and of potentially losing out from paradise. Because religious beliefs are of a special nature, that is they are faith based and can thus not be evaluated in an empirical or strictly logical way, they are by definition treated according to a different standard. When people live in communities where most other people hold the same beliefs, it is unlikely people will critically evaluate them.

What is important is that it really takes these three factors to coincide for kids to decide to join the Islamic State. Obviously, strong religious beliefs and a strong identification with the Muslim community will be part of it, but it certainly not enough. Only if such a person is also a sensation

seeker, there starts to be a real risk of them leaving.

It will be quite difficult to change the likelihood of these factors coinciding for the following reasons, although not impossible.

1) A high level of sensation seeking is something you have or you don't have. A warning message from the Metropolitan police in London, such as "[Syria is a dangerous place, and we don't want you to go there](#)" unlikely deters high sensation seeking teenagers, just like you will not deter base jumpers by telling them that they might break a leg.

Because of the religious identity and conviction, common sensation seeking activities might be less attractive to these youngsters. For example, alcohol and soft-drug consumption or sexual experimenting are unlikely alternatives for devout Muslims. Instead of warning against the dangers, it makes far more sense to find alternative activities that have a thrill and a novelty event.

2) Feelings of identity builds up gradually, and it is no big surprise that children growing up in Islamic family and neighbourhood choose this specific identity. The less ethnics and religious variety there is within communities, the fewer alternatives there are for the identity exploration. In the UK, there has arguably been [growing divisions between groups](#), and certainly the community [the three girls](#) that recently went to Syria are from [is known for this](#). In the long run, it would be good if there is more mixing of people, but this would take decades to accomplish, and only if there is a strong sustained political will to do so (i.e., this is unlikely to happen).

3) Beliefs. Religious beliefs are typically taken over from the family and school. With an increasing number of faith schools and a stronger grouping of people by religion and ethnicity in non-faith schools will limit opportunities for critical thinking about deeply held convictions. The lack of interaction with people from other religions leads to a less critical engagement with their own beliefs and convictions. Apart from that, questioning religious beliefs is discouraged in our society for all sorts of reasons as part of our social etiquette. For example, it is seen as simply impolite to question sincerely and deeply held beliefs. The fact that religious convictions cannot be easily debated or even criticized, especially not religious convictions of minorities might lead to a side effect: Youngsters might find it attractive and empowering that people do not dare to criticize them.

Altogether, if my assessment of the motivation of those teenagers joining the Islamic State is right, we are in a difficult situation. Whether you like it or not, just for statistical reasons there will teenagers with high levels of sensation seeking, who view Islam as something that one can identify with, and who have never thought critically about the convictions they hold, especially because nobody really challenged them.

What can policy makers do? Interestingly, [European education ministers are meeting to discuss these issues](#). The Commissioner for Education, Culture, Youth and Sport, Tibor Navracsics, states: "Now more than ever, we need to build cohesive communities, and find ways to live together as a society. Education helps us to understand and accept our differences, overcome alienation, and create belonging and inclusion. I hope to see all education ministers in Paris so that we can show solidarity and start a debate on the role education can play - and how Europe can make a difference."

This sounds nice, but does it deal with the three factors listed above? I don't think so. Instead, we need to work on those factors where we can most likely make a change, and I think we can in particular control factors 1 and 3. Although it is impossible to prevent that some teenagers will be sensation seekers, we can develop alternative outlets for their sensation-seeking. Further, we need to approach religious ideas differently. Religious ideas should not be treated any different from non-

religious ideas. Children will need to learn to answer and engage with challenging questions about their own religious beliefs, and they will need to learn how to apply the same standards of critical thinking, logic, and evidence to religious ideas as they do with ideas and problems in other school subjects.

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