

**Karolina Wojtasik, Marek S.  
Szczepański**

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# **CALIPHATE CALLS TO ARMS. EUROPEAN ISIS FIGHTERS IN THE LIGHT OF SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS**

ASSIST. PROF. KAROLINA WOJTASIK, PH.D.  
*University of Silesia in Katowice, Poland*

PROF. MAREK S. SZCZEPAŃSKI, PH.D.  
*University of Silesia in Katowice, Poland*

## **ABSTRACT**

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The article concerns European volunteers travelling to Iraq and Syria to participate in armed jihad. It includes an analysis of propaganda materials prepared for potential ISIS fighters from Europe and the broadly understood West and the characterisation of the type of motives leading to the decision to travel to the territories occupied by the so-called Islamic State (the Caliphate). The theoretical system of reference was based on push-pull model combined with the cost-benefit theory which allowed to analyse this phenomenon in the context of the most popular theories of migration.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

This article regards the volunteers from the broadly understood West who participate in the fighting going on in Syria and Iraq under the banner of the Islamic State. Our theoretical system of reference is based on selected theories of international migration. While analysing the phenomenon of migration of Europeans to the territories occupied by ISIS, the push-

pull model has been used in combination with the cost-benefit theory, to characterise potential costs of becoming an ISIS fighter (pull factors), the potential benefits of becoming an ISIS fighter (push factors), the potential costs of staying in a home country (push factors) and the potential benefits of staying in a home country (pull factors). Moreover, a detailed analysis has been performed on the propaganda and informational materials prepared for potential fighters. Also, the most frequent topical motives and argumentation used by recruiters were demonstrated.

The analysis includes various official materials issued by the so-called Islamic State, including both informational and journalistic publications related to the genesis and operation of the organisation and the Caliphate founded by it, as well as different publications prepared for potential volunteers. These include magazines, e-books, music (nasheed<sup>1</sup>) and various kinds of films, however, the area of analysis was limited to materials in English and Arabic. Other types of sources included publications from sources not related to ISIS, predominantly American and British think-tank reports, articles and analyses as well as publications of journalists who have visited the Middle East and have talked to ISIS mujahids<sup>2</sup>. This article focuses on volunteers and fighters, although the authors are aware that the Caliphate also attracts women from the broadly understood West<sup>3</sup>.

#### VOLUNTEERS FROM EUROPE

In a relatively short time the so-called Islamic State<sup>4</sup> has become a serious political power, a threat to the Middle East and a global problem. It is a terrorist group which spreads panic, and expands its territories and sphere of influence. ISIS keeps looking for new fighters and has at its disposition

<sup>1</sup> Nasheed – a melodic work of vocal music that is sung a cappella.

<sup>2</sup> Mujahid – a holy warrior, person engaged in jihad. Currently this term is used when referring to religiously-inspired Muslim fighters who participate in guerilla fights or fight against governments which they do not accept.

<sup>3</sup> cf. K. Wojtasik, *Ucieczka od wolności. Jak tzw. Państwo Islamskie kusi ochotniczeki spoza Lewantu*, [in:] *O kulturze strachu i przemyśle bezpieczeństwa*, ed. P. Żuk, P. Żuk, Warsaw 2015, p. 169–182.

<sup>4</sup> Hereinafter referred to as the Islamic State, the Caliphate, or the IS. Acronym ISIS/ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (Sham)/Levant) is also commonly used as it is the official name of the organisation between 2013–2014. There is also an acronym DAESH created from the Arabic name of the organisation. However, it is forbidden within the territories occupied by the so-called Islamic State because the word sounds similar to an Arabic verb meaning “to trample down” or “to tread into the ground”.

substantial amounts of money as well as advanced technological and propaganda capabilities. It is estimated that since the proclamation of the Caliphate on the 29th of June, 2014 several thousands of Europeans have joined the ranks of the fighters, mostly young Muslims. These numbers not only include the children of the emigrants from the Middle East but also people who have converted to Islam. Their decision to abandon relative stabilisation in Europe and travel to Iraq and Syria is a complex process which is a challenge for sociologists. Out of 70,000 mujahids fighting for the so-called Islamic State, foreign volunteers constitute 40%<sup>5</sup> and the majority of them are from the Middle East<sup>6</sup>. Currently, it is estimated that around 30,000 fighters from more than 100 countries<sup>7</sup> have joined the ranks of ISIS mujahids. Although volunteers have also joined the al-Nusra Front, 80% of the newcomers fight under the aegis of the Caliphate.

Since the 80's of the XX century (the Soviet–Afghan War), throughout the 90's (the Balkans, Chechnya) and at the beginning of the XXI century (Iraq, Somalia, Afghanistan) militants identifying themselves with various forms of armed jihad<sup>8</sup> fight and die in conflicts and wars. Their number is estimated between 10,000 and 30,000. In the case of the Syrian Civil War, on one hand a phenomenon known for more than 30 years can be observed – participation of ideologically motivated fighters from various countries, and on the other no previous Middle Eastern conflict has involved so many volunteers from the broadly understood West<sup>9</sup>.

A report<sup>10</sup> from 2015 on foreign terrorist fighters prepared for the United Nations Security Council reveals that more than 22,000<sup>11</sup> foreign fight-

<sup>5</sup> A. P. Schmid, J. Tinnes, *Foreign (Terrorist) Fighters with IS: A European Perspective*, ICCT Policy Brief, 2015, p. 7–8.

<sup>6</sup> The largest numbers from Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, Libya and Jemen.

<sup>7</sup> A. P. Schmid, *Foreign (Terrorist) Fighter Estimates: Conceptual and Data Issues*, ICCT Policy Brief, 2015, p. 1.

<sup>8</sup> Jihad is a term referring to all efforts made towards spreading and strengthening Islam: mainly through internal struggle and spiritual development of the follower or converting infidels. Radical terrorist groups Define jihad as an armed struggle against infidels. In the media this term is frequently but not accurately translated as „holy war”.

<sup>9</sup> T. Hegghammer, *The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters: Islam and Globalization of Jihad*, „International Security”, v. 35, no. 3, p. 53.

<sup>10</sup> [http://www.un.org/en/sc/ctc/docs/2015/N1508457\\_EN.pdf](http://www.un.org/en/sc/ctc/docs/2015/N1508457_EN.pdf), accessed 20.09.2015.

<sup>11</sup> Depending on the source, the number of foreign fighters varies between 22 thousand and more than 30 thousand. However, it is to be noted that hundreds of fighters die in battles and they are constantly replaced by new volunteers.

ers are involved in armed conflicts in Syria and Iraq, fighting for either the so-called Islamic State or the al-Nusra Front associated with al-Qaeda. For comparison, there are 6,500 foreign terrorists fighting currently in Afghanistan. Between June 2014 and March 2015 the number of volunteer terrorists has increased by 71%, a significant increase was also noted in the number of volunteers from UN member states. The report states that, although a general description of volunteer fighters can be prepared, it is impossible to construct an overall profile. A volunteer terrorist who comes to Syria is usually a male between the ages of 15 and 35. However, IS ranks are also composed of much older veterans of the Soviet–Afghan War as well as the First and Second Chechen Wars. Syria and Iraq are the destinations of both radicalised Islamic fundamentalists (recruited in Islamic centres in Great Britain or Belgium), and alienated and bored with their present lives young people who are searching for their own path. In the cases of volunteers from France and Austria it has been noted that a considerable number of them infringed the law in the past and received a sentence for “common” offences. In the case of fighters from Morocco and Saudi Arabia such relationships were not observed.

Just as there is no statistical volunteer fighter, according to the quoted report, there is no single pattern of fighter recruitment. Networks of people responsible for “new personnel” exist in religious centres (UK), prisons (France) or within criminal organisations (in the case of Chechen minority living in Austria). Personal contact, family and friendship ties within the same ethnic/religious group as well as access to information from people “on location” are very important. The Internet significantly facilitates establishing and maintaining these kinds of contacts, which allows easier and safer communication. Apart from that, it is a part of the social life of many of the young fighters.

Although the terrorists from the so-called Islamic State despise modernity, progress and everything that they associate with the moral rot of the West, they use the latest technological developments, utilise the Internet and social media extremely efficiently and, furthermore, are aware that a stable country requires specialists to function in today’s world. Although they criticise “Western” education, they need engineers, doctors and professionals from the financial sector educated in the West. The Caliphate’s authorities invite not only fighters who will expand the territory seized by ISIS, but also educated specialists who will ensure the quasi-state’s everyday operation. While referring to migration, the authors

of materials in English consistently use the Arabic word hijrah which means both migration and the journey of the prophet Muhammad from Mecca to Medina in 622. In the first issue of the official press organ of IS, *Dabiq*, there appeared a rallying call encouraging all Muslims to travel (migrate) to the newly-created Caliphate<sup>12</sup>. On the following pages, the author of the call addresses particularly “ [...] scholars, fuqaha’ (experts in Islamic jurisprudence), and callers, especially the judges, as well as people with military, administrative, and service expertise, and medical doctors and engineers of all different specializations and fields”<sup>13</sup>. They are called to arrive and participate in building the power of a state which is in great need of highly educated personnel. The third issue featured another article in a similar vein convincing that the Caliphate is the right place for every Muslim<sup>14</sup>. The articles in the subsequent issues of the magazine depict the advantages of living in the Caliphate. Peace, safety, a regular supply of power and water, good infrastructure, efficient public institutions and all of the benefits related to life in a welfare state are only some of the positive sides of living in the Caliphate. Thus the volunteers are encouraged to come with their families because nowhere else would it be possible to raise children in a God-fearing and wealthy society.

#### PROPAGANDA AIMED AT FUTURE FIGHTERS OF THE CALIPHATE

The large-scale propaganda, directed first of all at the volunteers from the West, depicts fighting for the Islamic State as a mission, adventure and trial of manhood<sup>15</sup>. ISIS skillfully exerts its influence on the minds and hearts of young radicals, fuels their hatred and provides them with avenues for action. It speaks their language, adjusts the level of the messages to the intellectual capabilities of the receivers and chooses its arguments very carefully. An extremely important role in delivering such content is played out via social networking sites and the other possibilities offered by the Internet. Movies produced by the media wing of ISIS (usually *Al-Hayat Media Center* and *Al-Furqan Institute*, but, on the regional level, also smaller agencies document the operations in each province of the Ca-

<sup>12</sup> “Dabiq” no. 1/2014, p. 10.

<sup>13</sup> Ibidem, p. 11.

<sup>14</sup> „Dabiq” no. 3/2014, p. 26.

<sup>15</sup> cf. K. Wojtasik, *Dlaczego młodzi Europejczycy walczą dla tzw. Państwa Islamskiego? Analiza materiałów propagandowych i oficjalnych mediów ISIS*, [in:] *Implementacja zasad religijnych w sferze politycznej*, R. Michalak (ed), Zielona Góra 2016, p. 143–158.

liphate) spread across the Web very quickly due to the thousands of profiles of ISIS sympathisers and fighters. Materials which are reposted, shared and commented on are very popular, contribute to radicalisation and are practically impossible to remove from the Internet.

It should be noted that, although social media plays a significant role in the process of radicalisation and recruitment of fighters, real bonds and social interactions are equally important. It is also noteworthy that departure of one of the family members usually leads to departure of another – brother, cousin, sister, or bringing a wife and children to Iraq/Syria. Brothers or cousins who fight in Syria become the best and the most trusted source of information because of contacts and the exchange of information between fighters and their families living in the West, which usually takes place. Volunteers frequently leave their homes in small groups consisting of several people who already know each other, who are bound by friendship, share memories and who are connected with emotional ties. ISIS even encourages to depart with a friend as it will make the adjustment to difficult conditions easier. Recruitment takes place in mosques, cultural centres, and in the lectures of charismatic clerics. Recruiters operate in numerous European cities, frequently making friends with potential volunteers, by building trust, and becoming confidants and advisers. The materials published on the Internet are important, however, the role of personal contact and existing ties between fighters and potential volunteers cannot be disregarded<sup>16</sup>.

#### HIJRAH IN THE LIGHT OF MIGRATION THEORY

Every decision to migrate to the Caliphate is a complex process determined by various factors. Thus not only should the individual be investigated, but also the community in the country of residence, family and community ties as well as the conditions offered by the country (in this case a quasi-country) chosen by the potential fighter.

Three approaches can be defined within the theory explaining the phenomenon of migration. Firstly, the micro approach which analyses the system of values of a given individual, needs, goals and human capital. Secondly, the macro approach which concentrates on the economic, political and demographic situations. Thirdly, the meso approach stresses an additional dimension in the form of collective links, i.e., social and symbolic ties

<sup>16</sup> cf. J. A. Carter, Shiraz Maher, Peter R. Neumann, *#Greenbirds: Measuring Importance and Influence in Syrian Foreign Fighter Networks*, ICSR 2014.

between an individual and a community<sup>17</sup>. A popular model of the macro type which explains the root causes of migration is the push and pull theory. According to this theory and in accordance with the fact that decisions to leave one's home country is usually a complex process, there are several reasons – factors which push a person from the current place of residence and several factors pulling a person towards a given destination<sup>18</sup>. This approach has received substantial criticism, e.g. A. Giddens notes<sup>19</sup> that complex mechanisms and multilateral migration processes are overly simplified. Thus migrations should be treated as a result of interactions between phenomena occurring at the macro and micro levels. The macro level includes factors which operate universally in a given sphere (migration laws and regulations, global economic changes), whereas the micro level is related to resources, level of knowledge and an immigrants' definition of the situation. While analysing the phenomenon of migration to the territories of the so-called Islamic State, a mixed theory was used which combines the push-pull model with the cost-benefit theory to investigate the phenomenon both at the micro and macro level<sup>20</sup>. Two sets of potential costs and two sets of potential benefits which are related to migration into the Caliphate are presented below. The A set includes real or potential costs of joining the ISIS fighters – these are arguments which discourage the departure from the current country of residence and which inhibit the decision-making process. The B set consists of factors pulling a volunteer to the Caliphate – potential benefits resulting from becoming an ISIS fighter. The C set presents push factors – potential costs which the candidate would have to incur by staying in the country of residence. The D set includes potential benefits related to staying in the home country which are the factors inhibiting the decision to migrate to the Caliphate. If the influence of the factors placed in the B and C sets are greater than of those listed in the A and D sets, it is probable that a decision to migrate would be made. The above factors are presented in below. However, considering that every decision is influenced by a different set of factors, the most popular factors were listed.

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<sup>17</sup> Th. Faist, *The Volume and Dynamics of International Migration and Transnational Social Spaces*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 2000, p. 7 after: J. Balicki, P. Stalker, *Polityka imigracyjna i azylowa*, Warszawa 2006, p. 29.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 35–36.

<sup>19</sup> A. Giddens, *Sociology*, Warszawa 2010, p. 283.

<sup>20</sup> J. Balicki, P. Stalker, *op. cit.*, p. 37–39.



**COSTS AND BENEFITS OF BECOMING AN ISIS FIGHTER<sup>21</sup>:**

**A. POTENTIAL COSTS OF BECOMING AN ISIS FIGHTER (PULL FACTORS):**

- costs and difficulties of travel to Syria/Iraq,
- the lack of possibility to return to the current country of residence,
- danger of being intercepted at a border/airport and arrested on charges of terrorism,
- surveillance of potential and real fighters by the appropriate forces,
- separation from one's family and friends, abandonment of the current life,
- cultural differences, language barrier,
- being alone among fighters from different cultures,
- constantly risking one's life, risk of disablement or death,
- life in a brutal, totalitarian quasi-state,
- difficulties related to living on the frontline, Spartan conditions, brutality of drill instructors,
- absolute obedience and death penalty for desertion/treason,
- official ban on alcohol consumption, smoking tobacco, drug use,
- being forced to kill innocent people,
- being forced to kill Muslims.

**B. POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF BECOMING AN ISIS FIGHTER (PUSH FACTORS):**

- religious duty,
- a chance to become a martyr (shahid) and enter Paradise after death,
- benefits related to entering Paradise after death (access to happiness, alcohol and houris),
- armed combat with infidels, killing infidels,
- revenge for imperial politics of the Crusaders<sup>22</sup>, colonialism, invasion on Iraq, injustices committed against Muslims,

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<sup>21</sup> Based on the table "Potential costs and benefits of migration" in K. Slany, *Między przymusem a wyborem. Kontynentalne i zamorskie emigracje z krajów Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej (1939–1989)*, Kraków 1995, p. 45–46, after: J. Balicki, P. Stalker, op. cit., p. 37–39.

<sup>22</sup> Countries of the broadly understood West. In the official media of the IS, notions "countries of the West" and "the Crusaders" are used interchangeably. Cf. „Dabiq” no. 2/2014, „Dabiq” no. 6/2014. The same terminology is used in the Inspire magazine issued by AQAP (Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula)

- promise of a true men's adventure,
- vision of brotherhood and friendship between the fighters, the so-called brotherhood in arms,
- a chance to give vent to sadistic tendencies, killing and committing acts condemned by the Western societies<sup>23</sup>,
- material advantages (pay, support, spoils of war),
- a chance to escape from the punishment for crimes committed in the home country,
- right to bring one's family and being able to provide for them,
- a promise of safety and social care for the fighter's family,
- fighter's family receives material compensation in case of his death,
- a chance to start a family and raise children in a Muslim society,
- a promise of living in a country created for Muslims by Muslims.

### C. POTENTIAL COSTS OF STAYING IN THE HOME COUNTRY (PUSH FACTORS):

- an inability to fully participate in jihad<sup>24</sup>,
- no hopes for armed combat with infidels,
- legislation and stricter control measures perceived as persecution of religious/racial grounds,
- unemployment, lack of prospects, living in deprived districts of the Western cities,
- problems related to entering adulthood, entering the labour market, problems at school,
- lack of prospects,
- anomie<sup>25</sup>,
- search for own identity,
- the so-called moral rot of the West,
- search for consistent set of ethical and moral principles<sup>26</sup>.

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<sup>23</sup> Not applicable to all fighters.

<sup>24</sup> Understood by the terrorists from ISIS as armed struggle against everyone who does not share their views.

<sup>25</sup> Anomie – an inconsistency within the axionormative system, sense of uncertainty and pointlessness in the society as the result of sudden social changes and breakdown of social order.

<sup>26</sup> Despite their promises, ISIS does not actually provide any ethical or moral principles.

#### D. POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF STAYING IN THE HOME COUNTRY (PULL FACTORS):

- a relatively safe and stable life in the Western society,
- presence of one's family and friends,
- social/medical care offered by the European countries,
- access to education, labour market, public services,
- citizenship of a Western country and rights resulting from it,
- civil liberties and democratic system,
- a chance to carry out/prepare a terrorist attack in the home country facilitated by own knowledge of the area, conditions, etc.,
- a chance to establish terrorist cells,
- a chance to carry out an attack as a so-called lone wolf.

#### CONCLUSIONS

The Caliphate's fighters are constantly engaged in fighting and defending the territories previously seized by the organisation. They die on the front-lines and new recruits are needed. ISIS (also al-Qaeda and AQAP) deploys more and more fighters from outside of the Middle East. They are usually young Muslims from immigrant families or people who converted to Islam. They abandon their previous lives and travel to Syria and Iraq attracted by the idea of global jihad, a promise of combat with infidels and brotherhood of arms. They come mainly from France, Germany, Great Britain, Belgium, Austria, the Netherlands, Scandinavian countries but also from Russia and Caucasian republics. Both British teenagers and veterans of the First and the Second Chechen Wars travel to Syria and Iraq. Their motives are radically different, the same is true for their experience, skills and knowledge about the world. There are different ways of recruitment or radicalisation and different factors which influence the decision to participate in armed jihad, thus the authors focused mainly on young fighters from countries of Western Europe.

The candidates for jihadists frequently do not know Arabic language, their familiarity with the Middle East, culture models or customs is limited and their knowledge of Islam is rudimentary. Therefore, it is easier to convince them to come and fight and then persuade them to carry out brutality in the name of religion. They are more likely to believe in idyllic pictures presenting happy fighters, victorious campaigns, brother-

hood, friendship and prosperity. Weiss and Hassan<sup>27</sup> emphasise that foreign fighters do not know much about the countries they arrive to and, most importantly, do not understand the reasons behind the conflict they want to participate in. Patrick Cockburn states that ISIS commanders are distrustful towards Europeans and frequently send them on dangerous missions. Problems with adjusting to harsh conditions and new culture as well as the language barrier makes the volunteers decide on suicide attacks which appear to be the only way to escape the hell they have found themselves in. It should be noted that Cockburn defines fighters from Europe as a cannon fodder of the ISIS<sup>28</sup>.

It is also noteworthy that with each military defeat of ISIS, the number of volunteers from Europe dwindles. The Caliphate loses more and more cities and areas of control, its fighters die on the frontlines and offers of the terrorist organisation (right to bring your family to join you, material benefits, pay, social support) lose their attractiveness. In 2016, the number of fighters leaving Europe decreased significantly. However, it is alarming that there are thousands of radicalised, potential volunteers left in France, England, Germany and Belgium, who are inspired by propaganda, ready to kill infidels and looking for a chance to wage armed jihad. They can attack as the so-called lone wolves, establish sleeper cells or organise acts of terror. Terrorist organisations provide them with instructions, mujahid manuals and overtly encourage them to kill infidels in the countries of Western Europe and the USA.

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#### AUTHORS

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**MAREK S. Szczepański** – sociologist, Professor; Head of the Department of Sociology of Development at the Institute of Sociology (University of Silesia in Katowice). Main research interests: sociology of social change, sociology of the city and the region, sociology of education. Author and co-author of 350 research papers published among others in the USA, UK, France, Canada, the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

**KAROLINA WOJTASIK** – a graduate of sociology and political science, PhD, Assistant Professor at the Institute of Sociology (University of Silesia in Katowice). The author of articles on terrorism and international conflicts. Main research interests: analysis of the official media of contemporary terrorist organizations.

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