

# ISIS Recruiting: It's Not (Just) Ideological

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## E-Notes

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The jihadist recruiters of today are not just the most tech savvy ever of their kind; they are also deploying recruiting techniques that would be very familiar to any intelligence agency case officer. In this way, they greatly broaden their prospective recruiting pool and evade detection more easily.

The creation of the physical territory of the Islamic State in 2014 made for a compelling attraction for waves of young Europeans, not all of whom were raised in Muslim families. This was especially the case in France. [Research communities](#) in Europe all agree that there is no one single profile of a jihadist. [1] Any of the individual factors taken in isolation, such as rootlessness, problems of identity, a sense of isolation or marginalization, or personal connections to jihadists, are insufficient by themselves to predict that a given individual will radicalize.[2] The only consensus that exists relates to the typical age range of the recruits, this being 15-25 years of age.

In 2014, le Centre de Prévention contre les Dérives Sectaires liées à l'Islam (CPDSI) was tasked by the French

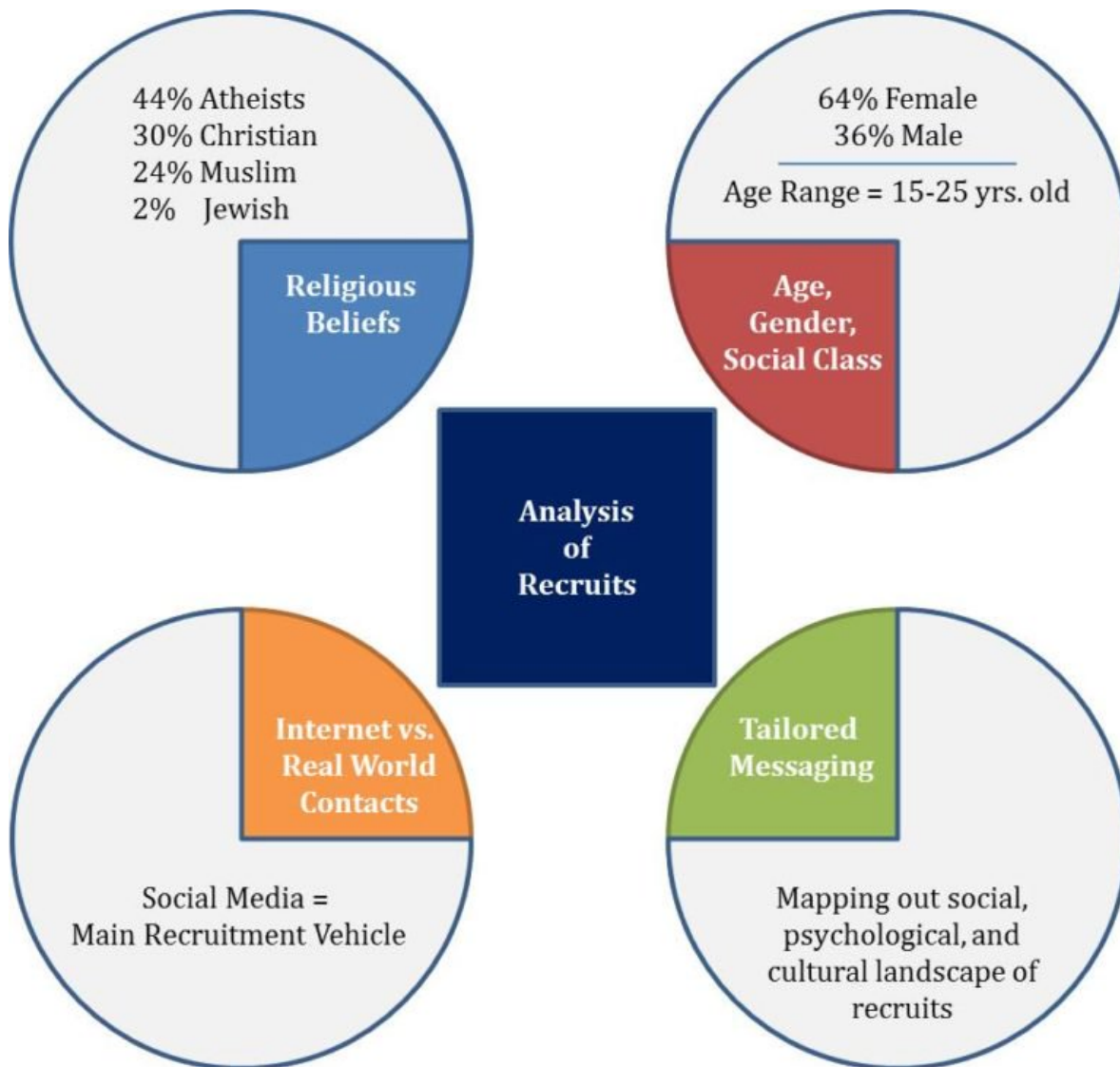
government to study the problem of radicalization, to train law enforcement personnel at the prefecture level, and to take charge of French teenagers who had been identified as radicalized. In August 2016, it published a progress report on the 1,134 young people who passed through the program. This number included 809 individuals who had been stopped at the French border on their way to Islamic State territory by either their parents or the police.<sup>[3]</sup> Apart from their youth, this population was indeed a diverse one in every respect: socio-economic class, religious background, recent immigration history, and gender.

The objective of this article is to share current reflections on how jihadist recruiters have begun to study the profiles of their prey so as to better adapt the jihadist ideology to their different emotional, social, and political aspirations. Just as criminology has established that crime is the final outcome of a psychological process that is composed of a series of stages that may be detected, we wish to study the jihadist engagement process so as to better detect instances of such processes. The interviews with the radicalized individuals demonstrate that jihadist recruiters leverage relational, emotional, and ideological dimensions in their recruiting. This strategy is ideally tailored for the young age demographic as people at this age typically search for an ideal, a group to which to belong, and the experiencing of strong emotions.

## **Method**

The method used to study the jihadist engagement process in the sample population was qualitative analysis of the 809 individuals who had endeavored to depart for Syria. This analysis was performed in an indirect manner, with 1:1 exchanges between CPDSI staff and the subjects, which were captured in interview notes. These interviews consisted of semi-directed conversations with the teenagers, accompanied by either their families or other radicalized individuals, or both. In the majority of cases, the teenager's posts and browsing history on social media from their computers and cell phones were provided by the parents and made available to CPDSI for analysis.

The analysis of this population identified or underscored the following four key points:



### Age, Sex, and Social Class of Recruits

In the sample, every socio-economic class was represented. The teenagers came from the slums, middle-class families, and quite affluent households. Sixty four percent of the teenagers were female. This figure may be somewhat skewed, as the signs of radicalization among girls are more evident: the obvious signs are the discontinuance of attendance at school or participation in sports, and changes in their clothing, including wearing a *niqab*.<sup>[4]</sup> The age range of the population was consistent with the CIPC observation, though there were four 12 year-old girls who tried to depart for Syria on three separate occasions. CPDSI is not aware of any males younger than 15 trying to depart for Syria. The majority of males were between 17 and 25 years of age.

### Religious Beliefs of the Families

Those families who identified as Muslim (24%) were very likely under-represented in our sample just as working class families were, owing to a heightened lack of trust in the French authorities. Forty four percent of the families self-identified as atheists, 30% as some type of Christian, and 2% as Jewish.

### Internet vs. Real World Contacts

All of the subjects had used social media. In-person meetings could either precede viewing of content online, or accompany it. The internet offered recruiters a significant advantage: they could pose as anyone—and anything—convenient to attract their target, for example a teacher, a fellow student, an expert in a given area, etc. Using the

anonymity of computers, of course, enables recruiters to conduct outreach to a much larger population of targets. Note that the term “recruiter” does not just mean recruiters specifically tasked by ISIS, but also the recruits themselves as they try to “save” their friends and family from “corrupt society” by “revealing the truth” to them.

## Customization of the Message

The recruiters have become increasingly sophisticated, using techniques very similar to those of intelligence officers. Employing classic case officer modus operandi, the recruiters present themselves as new friends over the internet. They initiate conversations with the aim of evaluating the individual vulnerabilities of their targets, and of building a trusted relationship with them. Once the recruiter has mapped out the potential recruit’s social, psychological, and cultural level, he will begin to progressively introduce the jihadist ideology in an appropriately tailored manner. As of this writing, seven different common narratives used by jihadist recruiters have been identified. The seventh—the Fortress Narrative—is the newest and bears upon recent cases of radicalization in the United States. Each of these narratives offers the recruit the triplet of an ideal, a group, and strong emotions. Note that when jihadist recruiters do outreach, they are targeting profiles whose content suggests that the individual might be particularly vulnerable to one or more of these narratives. Initial interactions will solicit confirmation of the target’s susceptibility and gather further details to exploit it.

### The Seven Narratives

#### 1. *The Search for a Better World Narrative*

Once a recruiter has identified an individual who is disillusioned with society, the recruiters try to convince the target that he or she is building a new society in which equality, brotherhood, and solidarity

truly reign. The recruits are pointed towards videos which show men and women of all origins sharing meals together and helping one another, of children in nurseries playing with toys, of sacks of rice being distributed to the poor, etc. The recruiters link this utopic society with a total submission to divine law.

#### 2. *The “Mother Teresa” Narrative*

When a recruiter has identified a young person who is planning a career in social work, nursing, medicine, or other occupations centered on helping people, the recruiter will leverage the recruit’s desire to be societally useful to convince the target that he or she needs to go where the most good can be done. This genre of recruit will be



pointed towards horrible—and real—videos of infants who were gassed in Syria by Assad, which provoke what James Jaspers calls “moral shock” [5] in which the observer internalizes the suffering of the victims in the video; jihadism is presented as the only option to put an end to the suffering.

### 3. *The Savior Narrative*

When the recruiter encounters someone who has recently experienced the loss of a loved one, he leverages the youth’s desire to be reunited with that loved one. The videos in this case calm the youth’s grief with a portrait of an enchanting paradise in heaven. A prediction that the end of the world is near is often associated with this narrative.

### 4. *The Marriage Narrative*

“Finding a husband who will never abandon them” is the reason cited by girls recruited under this narrative once they have become radicalized. However, it is easy to perceive that these young women are both physically and psychologically vulnerable. More than 90% of these women have been victims of attempted or actual sexual abuse, but had never sought treatment or discussed it with anyone. A world in which the sexes are kept separate is presented as the ideal fix for the sexual perversity of men. Marriage to a genuine hero who is fighting to save the helpless victims of Assad further enhances the feeling of being protected as if by a noble knight.

### 5. *The “Lancelot” Narrative*

This narrative targets young men who fantasize about being knights or similarly heroic historical characters. It has a specific video associated with it that utilizes music from “Pirates of the Caribbean.” These youths are attracted by the idea of a community of warrior-adventurers. They want to prove their courage, to learn what they capable of, and to prove that they are men. There is often a theme of helping the oppressed and weak to rise up and take vengeance, and of restoring their dignity. The videos and discourse associated with this narrative focus on the sacrifice of self for History and Posterity that is necessary given the inaction of the international community against Assad. In listening to the subjects’ statements, we were left with the impression that unlike those attracted by the “Savior” narrative, targets who were attracted by this narrative were willing to die for their “new community” more than for their family. Many of these individuals had strived for a career in law enforcement or in the military; others were the children of military families.

### 6. *The “Zeus” Narrative*

“Imposing Sharia law on the entire world” is the specific engagement motivation most cited by subjects who were recruited under this narrative. Once they’ve entered CPDSI’s de-radicalization program, however, it became clear that most of these young people regularly engaged in very risky behavior (e.g. drugs, unprotected sex, high speed driving, etc.). In short, they act as if they were omnipotent—they test their limits. They do not submit to God’s will, but rather use the name of God to cause others to submit to them. Jihadist ideology provides them with a mechanism to do just this. Some of the videos associated with this narrative depict ISIS all but killing rebels, resuscitating them, and then actually killing them.

### 7. *The Fortress Narrative*

The name stems from an observation made by interviewing certain young male recruits who are propelled by sexual obsessions. These men can be hetero- or homosexual, as well as in some cases pedophilic. These obsessions seem to derail the youth, who is terrified of yielding to them. The reference to a fortress comes from interview statements in which the subjects indicated that in radical Islam they were looking to discover a better version of themselves, and specifically the hope that it would protect them from following through on these obsessions. This desire can be seen as a quest for purity, for saintliness, for containing their verboten sexual urges—of building a fortress around their bodies.

## **The Fortress Narrative in Focus**



Sexual questions are an important theme of adolescence, which causes us to wonder whether this narrative should be considered as a distinct one or if it is always an implicit factor. However, the individuals who were indoctrinated (mostly) under this narrative are clearly distinct in that sexual continence is the stated objective.

After it becomes clear that adherence to the jihadist ideology did not produce the desired effect, death through martyrdom is presented as the only means of realizing this ideal version of self. This manifests itself in the paradoxical alternating viewings of Kamikaze videos, or even sermons on “marriage fatwas,” with pornographic videos.

This phenomenon helps explain why [numerous attackers](#) frequented prostitutes or were clearly promiscuous in the weeks leading up to their attacks. It is less about dissimulation as is often reported, and much more about liberated sexual behavior prior to a planned ascent into heaven as a reward for martyrdom, in which all such behavior will be permitted. Omar Mateen, the Orlando nightclub attacker, very likely fall under this category. There is evidence that he visited gay clubs and online destinations, and thus likely had homosexual inclinations. In front of his family, however, he manifested aggressive homophobic behavior that was likely an attempt to overcompensate.

## From Narratives to Tracking Recruitment

The diversity of the seven narratives makes tracking recruitment more difficult than tracking ideologically oriented, one-size-fits-most narratives. As we have seen, not all recruits are ideologically driven at the outset of recruitment. More importantly, the use of such methods dramatically increases the size of the potential recruiting pool to anyone who is significantly disaffected with society and/or with his/her own life in some way. These tactics and narratives used as recruiting techniques pose an expanded threat not only to France, but also to the United States.

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[1] « Comment prévenir la radicalisation ? Une revue systématique, » *Comité interministériel de prévention de la délinquance (CIPD)*, Décembre 2015, pp.43-50.

[2] Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko, “Individual and Group Mechanisms of Radicalization,” in *Protecting the Homeland from International and Domestic Terrorism Threats: Current Multi-Disciplinary Perspectives on Root Causes, the Role of Ideology, and Programs for Counter-radicalization and Disengagement*, ed. Sarah Canna (January 2010): pp. 82-91.

[http://www.start.umd.edu/sites/default/files/files/publications/U\\_Counter\\_Terrorism\\_White\\_Paper\\_Final\\_January\\_2010.pdf](http://www.start.umd.edu/sites/default/files/files/publications/U_Counter_Terrorism_White_Paper_Final_January_2010.pdf).

[3] The remaining 325 people were assessed as quietist Salafists, which is to say non-violent and against ISIS even if they shared a similar vision of the world.

[4] A veil worn by some Muslim women in public, covering all of the face apart from the eyes.

[5] James M. Jasper, *The Art of Moral Protest* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1999).