

## THE AUSTRALIAN

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# Jack the Insider: Understanding terrorism is the only way to defeat it

JACK THE INSIDER THE AUSTRALIAN MARCH 24, 2016 1:46PM

**The terrorist attacks in Brussels, where at least 31 people were killed earlier this week, has forced us once again to comprehend the almost incomprehensible. Why do people turn their backs on the relative comfort of their lives to join the brutal organisation that is Islamic State and commit terrorist offences and mass murder?**

In mid- 2014, US Special Operations commander in the Middle East Major General Michael Nagata assembled a group of relative outsiders in the search for an answer. These people included business and law professors and marketing specialists. According to notes taken of that conference leaked to The New York Times, Nagata said, “We do not understand the (Islamic State) movement and until we do, we are not going to defeat it. We have not defeated the idea. We do not even understand the idea.”

The answers are becoming clearer through criminological studies and intelligence analysis and this data speaks of myriad causes and correlations.

The counter-terrorism experts have identified four waves of jihadis, with the most recent finding life and expression after the outbreak of the Syrian civil war.

The first wave is described as the mujaheddin, who travelled to Afghanistan to fight the Soviets and fell into the orbit of Osama bin Laden — who, with Ayman al-Zawahiri, would go on to establish the al-Qa’ida terrorist network.

The second wave was a group of middle-class Arabs who had been educated in European universities. They, too, were trained in Afghanistan and were sent out to fight in places like Bosnia, Chechnya, Kashmir and the Philippines. This wave includes the group who perpetrated the 9/11 attacks against the US.

These first two waves virtually stopped as the response to 9/11 attacks had the al-Qa’ida training camps in Afghanistan destroyed, its members arrested or killed and terrorist cells around the world broken up.

The third wave came in the wake of the US-led coalition’s invasion of Iraq in 2003. This group established cells in Europe, the US and in Australia but, as al-Qa’ida’s capacity had been degraded, they were unable to train and become lethal. As the Iraq war came to an end, this wave also petered out.

The commonalities of the first three waves are religious zeal, an extremist interpretation of Islam and an awareness of geopolitical issues, which drove the jihadis

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The current group of jihadis, which includes suspected Paris bomber Salah Abdeslam, 26, and the [bombmaker in Brussels, Najim Laachraoui](#), 24, are the fourth wave of jihadis that arose from the Syrian civil war.

While similarities exist, especially between the third wave and this one, there are some very clear distinctions.

The first thing we find — and this is a phenomenon that has shocked us in Australia — is the age of those who affiliate with Islamic State either by travelling to Syria or staying at home to promote and conspire on the organisation's behalf. This fourth wave is much younger than their predecessors, who on average took up arms in their 30s.

A [16-year-old Sydney girl is before the courts having allegedly transferred money to Islamic State forces](#) in Syria. If convicted, she faces a 25-year jail term. A 13-year-old Belgian national is believed to be the youngest to make the trip to Syria. The average age of this fourth wave of western jihadis is somewhere around 20.

In an interview with the Combating Terrorist Centre in the US in August last year, Alain Grignard, a senior member of the counter-terror unit in the Belgian Federal Police and a university lecturer in political Islam said: “There's no doubt there has been a shift. The travel flow we are seeing to Syria is to a significant degree an extension of the ‘inner-city’ gang phenomenon. Young Muslim men with a history of social and criminal delinquency are joining up with the Islamic State as part of a sort of ‘super-gang.’ Previously we were mostly dealing with ‘radical Islamists’, individuals radicalized toward violence by an extremist interpretation of Islam but now we're increasingly dealing with what are best described as ‘Islamized radicals.’ The young Muslims from inner-city areas of Belgium, France, and other European countries joining up with the Islamic State were radical before they were religious.”

The other obvious distinction is the speed with which this fourth wave of jihadis decides to join IS or, in general terms, radicalises. Unlike with their predecessors, the radicalisation process can take days rather than years.

A Europol report published in response to the Paris attacks in November last year revealed that “information on foreigners joining the ranks of IS suggests that recruitment can take place very quickly, without necessarily requiring a long radicalisation process. Age plays a role: younger people are found to be more impressionable and radicalise quicker than older candidates”.

This is only part of the story. Not all IS foreign recruits from the West are criminals and gang members who promptly travel to Syria or Iraq to be part of the IS ‘super gang’. There is a second group who have had little or no contact with police, no record of delinquency. While lower-class children and grandchildren of migrants into Europe are overrepresented in IS recruits from the West, there are others who have enjoyed

wealth and comfort.

A pervasive sense of social detachment and hopelessness is driving Islamic State's recruitment of foreign fighters and homegrown terrorists, according to Professor of International Relations at Ghent University and terrorism expert Rik Coolsaet. His paper "Facing the Fourth Foreign Fighters Wave" uses the phrase 'no future' — a term that became a motif of the nihilist punk movement in the 1970s and 80s.

The process of radicalisation takes many forms but those subject to it invariably shelter in personal networks, where their rejection of society is reinforced by their peers or, on occasion, through family members.

A study of 140 jihadis by the Counterterrorism and Extremist unit attached to the Dutch Police found the educational level of that group was below that of the average population (none had completed higher education) and where some had found employment it was invariably of an unskilled and temporary nature.

It is too easy to blame sociological factors associated with poverty and diminished opportunity. These may be contributing or corollary pressures but few who live in poverty turn to extremism. Likewise, there are foreign fighters in Islamic State who hold university degrees and have come from relatively wealthy backgrounds.

Similarly, while there is a certain harsh reality to Europe's failed immigration policies — or "[failed integration policies](#)" as [Malcolm Turnbull described them yesterday](#) — there are other cultural forces at work.

It was former CIA Operations Officer in Islamabad turned academic Marc Sageman who created the term 'jihadi cool' in his 2008 book *Leaderless Jihad*, suggesting the pull factor gives Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi the same sort of street cred as gangsta rapper 50 Cent.

Chief Crown Prosecutor of the Crown Prosecution Service for North West England Nazir Azfal also spoke of the cultural forces at play in this fourth wave of jihadis.

"The boys want to be like them and the girls want to be with them. That's what they used to say about the Beatles and more recently One Direction and Justin Bieber," Azfal said last year.

Certainly there is a twisted form of adventurism on display. How else to explain the jihadi selfies in combat fatigues, or black pyjamas, grinning idiotically, toting AK-47s? Some, as we've seen with our own Khalid Sharrouf, are psychopaths while others are adventure-seekers, looking for thrills and violence.

In the fourth wave Islam is a corollary, a context and an invariable one but it is not causation.

To paraphrase the experts, the fourth wave of jihadis are young, dumb and full of bloodlust. Unlike the previous three waves they have little or no regard for geopolitics

bloodlust. Unlike the previous three waves they have little or no regard for geopolitics or religion. They appropriate Islam because it suits their purposes. Certain phrases are learned by rote or parroted, developing in the same way as an urban patois — “We will kill all the kafir Inshallah.”

British jihadis Mohammed Nahin Ahmed and Yusuf Zubair Sarwar, both 22, were convicted of terrorist offences in Great Britain after spending eight months in Syria. On their return, they were arrested at Heathrow Airport. In evidence at their trial, the prosecution described how the two men had purchased copies of *Islam For Dummies*, *The Koran For Dummies* and *Arabic For Dummies* from Amazon before leaving for Syria.

In this respect, the fourth wave has much in common with the terrorist organisations in the 1970s like Baader-Meinhoff and Italy’s Red Brigade, who had only a superficial attachment to communism.

Coolsaet concludes his paper: “The fourth wave of foreign fighters is thus not about radicalisation, as is often touted by authorities and the media. Neither is it rooted in a fundamentalist reading of the scriptures. It originates in a small subculture at the margins of society and of Muslim communities with whom they do not feel connected either.”

While many would disagree with elements of that statement, his is at least a thoughtful contribution and a means of expanding our understanding of Islamist terrorism and of comprehending the seemingly incomprehensible.

As US Major-General Michael Nagata said two years ago, we can’t defeat something if we don’t understand it.