

SPECIAL REPORT

An integrated approach to Islamic State recruitment

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محمد

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Cover image: A man types on a keyboard in front of a computer screen on which an Islamic State flag is displayed, in this picture illustration © Dado Ruvic / Reuters / Picture Media

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A supplied image obtained from Twitter on 9 March 2015 of an Australian man believed to be with Islamic State Jake Bilardi (centre) sits with two men believed to be Islamic State members in an image posted on Twitter in December 2014. (AAP Image/Twitter)

INTRODUCTION

With my martyrdom operation drawing closer, I want to tell you my story, how I came from being an Atheist school student in affluent Melbourne to a soldier of the *Khilafah* preparing to sacrifice my life for Islam in Ramadi, Iraq. Many people in Australia probably think they know the story, but the truth is, this is something that has remained between myself and Allah (*azza wa'jal*) until now.¹

Thus opens one of the last blog posts attributed to Jake Bilardi, an 18-year-old Australian who died in March 2015 after driving a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device into a position held by the Iraqi Security Forces' Eighth Brigade in Ramadi, Anbar Province. Immediately after Islamic State propagandists uploaded images onto Twitter celebrating the operation and eulogising Bilardi, he was identified as the enigmatic foreign fighter who had, in the months leading up to his death, been dubbed the 'baby-faced mujahid' by the tabloid press on account of his skin colour and 'meek-looking' appearance.²

Like so many of Islamic State's foreign contingent, Bilardi was active on social media and a profligate user of the Tumblr blogging platform. Under the pseudonym Abu Abdullah al-Australi, he wrote a long series entitled *From the eyes of a muhajir*, in which he tracked his passage from student to suicide bomber. Now offline, Bilardi's blog provides important insight into his path to jihadism, much of which can be gleaned from the 13 January 2015 post 'From Melbourne to Ramadi: my journey'. The post, in which Bilardi depicts his ideational journey to jihadism as an entirely linear process, is not just an intriguing read. It's also an arresting account of a much broader issue: jihadist recruitment for the social media generation.

Bilardi begins by writing of how, 'as an Atheist of only 13-years-of-age', he was keenly interested in international politics, entranced by the Israel–Palestine conflict—'the ultimate David and Goliath story'—and outraged at the 'system of lies and deception' upon which the modern world was founded.³ Before long, he claims to have come to the conclusion that such a system could only 'be destroyed by violent revolution', a struggle in which he would 'likely be killed'.⁴ He writes that, soon after he came to realise that Islam was 'the truth [that he] had been circling around for years', he resolved to join a jihadist group in Syria—something that he finally succeeded in doing towards the end of 2014.⁵ As Bilardi tells it, his radicalisation into jihadism and ultimate recruitment to Islamic State were linear, inevitable processes borne of a cocktail of his inquisitorial spirit, anger at real world injustice, and religion. A closer inspection of his account, however, points towards important structural elements to his recruitment that were anything but linear—elements that have occurred in a number of similar cases.

Today, jihadism is at once more globalised and closer to home than ever before. Indeed, because of the meteoric rise of Islamic State in the international media, the jihadists' modern-day iteration of the caliphate is now a familiar concept, and the term 'foreign fighter' has become an almost ubiquitous rubric. In seeking to explore how Islamic State has been able to attract tens of thousands of fighters from as many as 86 states across the world, the media limelight has shone brightly on stories like that of Bilardi—the narrative of the 'boy next door that joined Islamic State'—thereby forcing complicated processes such as recruitment into the mainstream lexicon.⁶ In so doing, nuanced understanding of these ideas is routinely sacrificed.

The media prominence of Islamic State obstructs popular understandings of recruitment. In no small part because of the tens of thousands of people—men *and* women—who joined the group in the past few years, there's a sense that the process of recruitment is short term, even instantaneous. What follows redresses some of those assumptions. Analysing, in particular, the phenomenon of recruitment to violent extremism as it pertains to Islamic State, this paper identifies three complementary mechanisms to 'recruitment' and re-establishes it as a *process*, rather than an immediate *act*. Those aspects are:

1. The echo chamber: a recruitee's exposure to and absorption into the jihadist microcommunity. Interaction with this group, whether online or offline, can catalyse an individual's radicalisation, isolate them and harden their extremist leanings.
2. The propaganda: as mainstream influencers and other channels of information are proactively avoided, the recruitee's pro-Islamic State persuasion can be contemporaneously amplified by a second aspect, propaganda, which can gradually realign a curious individual's moral norms.⁷
3. The enlister: echo chambers and propaganda alone rarely lead to recruitment. A third party, an enlister, is usually required before an individual takes the leap and physically joins the jihadist cause. The presence of the enlister, as a provider of logistical information and humaniser of risk, is critical.

After each of the three aspects is discussed in further detail, this paper returns to the case of Jake Bilardi. His story serves as a useful example of the real-world operationalisation of the three mechanisms.

As pointed out in a 2008 MI-5 report, 'individuals who become involved in violent extremism ... have varied characteristics and backgrounds and are, on the whole, demographically unremarkable.'⁸ This paper supports the thesis that there's no typical pathway to jihadism. However, it highlights three repeating factors in the recruitment of Western fighters (note that these mechanisms aren't always present; nor are they unique to jihadist radicalisation). As Horgan notes, the 'becoming involved' phase of violent extremism is not an instantaneous act but a multivalent process of socialisation.⁹ As such, its reduction to the term 'recruitment' in a media context is potentially misleading, as it oversimplifies the complexities at work and gives violent extremist organisations and their propaganda too much credit.

THE ECHO CHAMBER

Social media platforms don't foster a nuanced understanding of world events: people follow like-minded individuals who espouse views similar to their own. As Bolt writes, on social media there's a tendency towards 'group polarisation of opinions where self-selecting groups are driven to ever more prejudiced and extreme views through regular exchange'.¹⁰ Those who hold ideas at odds with a given user's worldview can end up excluded, as 'individuals edit out what they wish to hear from a cacophony of information', carving for themselves a place in an online social bubble or echo chamber.¹¹ This is applicable, to varying degrees, to all social media use, not just cases of online extremism. However, the phenomenon is particularly potent in the latter context.

The jihadist echo chamber plays a fundamentally important role in the recruitment process. Indeed, most individuals who at some point engage on social media in a pro-jihadist capacity—whether it's by proselytising or disseminating propaganda—do so having *at some point* participated in the jihadist echo chamber. People don't join social media and immediately express jihadist views out of the blue—this tends to come after an incremental process of socialisation. In any case, many of those who become active members of jihadist groups are drawn from this online activist collective.¹²

There's no typical pathway to the jihadist microcommunity—as Berger explains, some arrive at it organically, others through proactive selection on the part of jihadists—but, in either instance, it's not difficult to reach (even in the context of heightened suspension policies from the likes of Facebook and Twitter).¹³ A trajectory that has repeated often in the context of Islamic State begins offline, with an already Islamist individual's expression of interest in perceived injustices perpetrated against Muslims.¹⁴ Currently, the jihadist lightning rod is the Syrian war. In the past it's been, among others, Iraq, Bosnia and Afghanistan. By pursuing a nuance-less path on social media and following like-minded individuals who espouse a similar worldview—or, indeed, more extreme versions of it—the potential recruitee can find their sentiments sharpening. Foreign policy grievances—which are regularly conceived of as the root cause of problems facing Muslim-majority countries, even by those who aren't extremists—are exaggerated by the anonymous, unanimous voices bombarding the echo chamber discourse. For new entrants, distrust and disavowal of others—even family—are encouraged, as the recruitee's new peers incite them to jettison their former beliefs and friends, capitalising on the grievances that harden as a result of communal dislocation and isolation.¹⁵ Somewhat counterintuitively, this process can be accelerated by targeted suspensions on social media, which have become, according to Pearson, 'integral to Twitter life' for Islamic State supporters, as account suspension is touted as a badge of honour and a way to demonstrate commitment to the jihadist cause.¹⁶

The transition from passive echo chamber observer to active espouser of jihadist views can be slow or rapid, depending on the particular circumstances of the individual in question. In any case, the echo chamber's role is important—it normalises, isolates and 'gives [the recruitee] a sense of community'.¹⁷ An intense feeling of camaraderie is borne of this refined, interactive repository of collective extremism and identity.¹⁸ In its Islamic State iteration, the microcommunity of supporters—the members of which understand themselves as self-appointed 'diplomats' of the caliphate—seeks to become the recruitee's entire life by showering them with positive interactions. Supporters engage new entrants in 'high volume bursts ... often publishing 50 or 60 tweets a day', broadcasting constantly and egging each other on to express their individual and communal commitment.¹⁹

While the echo chamber isn't an artificial construct strategically created by the Islamic State organisation, it's intrinsic to the group's outreach success. As the extremists' preferred arena of evangelism, the echo chamber is an imagined space to identify and assimilate others into its fold.²⁰ The influence of this community shouldn't be underestimated. Indeed, its role is crucial, as it can become something of a 'family' for the recruitee—a consuming, intoxicating source of meaning, a place where friends are found, grievances aired and emotional support received.²¹ It's important to note that the echo chamber isn't just an internet phenomenon—one only need glance at the story of Umm A'isha or Callimachi's account of a young American woman's absorption into the Islamic State bubble to see how blurred the lines are between the on- and offline worlds.²²

In any case, relationships forged online may be more vivid and fast-moving than those made offline as, 'while online, some people self-disclose or act out more frequently or intensely than they would in person.'²³ The recruitee's interaction with other members of their online echo chamber 'family' can become something of an obsession. However, obsession alone doesn't cause an individual to sign up to a violent extremist organisation. Instead, with the individual's participation in the echo chamber, the foundations for such an act may be set—moral and ethical norms may be shifted as the recruitee receives 'an enormous amount of emotional and social benefits' from their participation.²⁴ Crucially, there's much more than ideology at work here; expressions of extremist rhetoric are rewarded and infused with a sense of counterculture. As Cottee points out, the Islamic State brand of jihad is more than theology—it synthesises 'traditional notions [of the jihadist ideology with] a strong undercurrent of postmodern cool', all of which is constantly broadcast online.²⁵

Closely linked to the idea of 'jihadi cool' is the expression of rebellion implicit in the act of making *hijra* (travelling to Iraq or Syria). It's marketed by Islamic State supporters as the ultimate aspirational act, a direct line to emancipation from the status quo and a panacea to all real and perceived grievances. First-hand stories of foreign fighters are passed around at a rate of knots and, in a handful of posts, a teenager from Glasgow can be catapulted from anonymity to celebrity, just by providing evidence of the fact that they are *there*, in Islamic State's caliphate.²⁶ Individuals who have taken their support for the group into the real world are celebrated and admired, their stories of heroism and adventure thrilling participants in the echo chamber. Hegghammer writes that, for the jihadist, 'life is emotionally intense, filled with the thrill of combat, the sorrow of loss, the joy of camaraderie and the elation of religious experience.'²⁷ In the online jihadist community, a virtual version of these very same feelings of intensity can be found.

An individual's embrace of and inclusion within the jihadist echo chamber can usefully be understood as a much watered-down version of making *hijra* to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's 'caliphate', a first level of participation in the Islamic State social community that usually comes long after an individual initially becomes predisposed to supporting the group. This isn't to say that all members of the echo chamber go on to become active violent extremists—far from it. The risks attached to online activism are far less than those attached to offline migration to the caliphate. Indeed, there's a vast gulf between the two that the majority never seek to bridge. However, embarking upon fervent engagement with the 'baqiya family', as it's affectionately termed by its participants, is one of the first steps in a thought process that can ultimately end—for a *minority* of individuals—in real-life activism in support of Islamic State's cause, be that by travelling to one of its 'provinces' or by committing a self-starter attack in its name.

THE PROPAGANDA

Islamic State is infamous for its propaganda. It's unmatched in its ability to create targeted messaging to bewilder populations around the world, attract new recruits and donors, and provoke adversary states. Through its constant dissemination of videos that are 'designed to be a grotesque form of clickbait', the group has a regular slot at the top of the international news hour and routinely takes pole position in global newspapers.²⁸ This is no coincidence. Rather, it's the outcome of a carefully devised strategy.²⁹

Misconceptions about Islamic State's propaganda abound. It's all too regularly understood simply in terms of ultraviolence and quality, at the expense of a sound comprehension of its tactical and strategic application. Through the delivery of gruesome executions, and their instantaneous transmission across the world via social media, Islamic State's propaganda strategists have created a captive audience of the international media.³⁰ What's more, by understanding and segmenting their target audiences, they've been able to dictate their narratives practically word for word, whether it's to disengaged 'enemy' populations, engaged adversaries or curious sympathisers.

The caliphate brand is comprehensive; it presents a holistic worldview that few non-supporters scrutinise properly. Hence, if Islamic State's appeal is to be truly understood—and the means by which its propaganda affects an individual's passage to becoming an active recruit of the organisation is to be properly comprehended—it's necessary to examine exactly what's being marketed.

Every day, Islamic State propagandists circulate more than 38 units of official propaganda—videos, photo reports, *da'wa* materials, posters, magazines, radio programs, news bulletins and so on.³¹ The vast majority of this material is in Arabic, though the group's multilingual repertoire is expanding. At the time of writing, for example, there are official propaganda channels operating in no less than nine languages, from Arabic and Turkish to German and Italian, and news bulletins are circulated like clockwork in Arabic, English, Turkish, French, Uyghur and Russian (and occasionally in Bengali and Bosnian, too). All official materials—which are invariably produced by one of Islamic State's 48 propaganda units—are uniformly branded with homogeneous iconography and shared *anashid* (jihadist chants), something that implicitly, and misleadingly, reinforces the organisation's claims that it's a contiguous, centrally planned 'state'. Despite the scale of the operation, the underlying strategic message of its propaganda is tightly controlled. This confirms the existence of the central 'Base Foundation' tasked with dictating the Islamic State line and issuing calls for tactically produced media, which is always based on one of the six constituent parts of the caliphate brand—mercy, belonging, ultraviolence, victimhood, war or utopianism.³²

Islamic State's propaganda is important not simply because of its existence, but also because of the means by which it's delivered.³³ Paragons of adaptability and insurgent learning, the group's propaganda disseminators are constantly working to circumvent the limitations placed upon them by adversary governments or social media platforms. Even when thousands of users are suspended, the disseminators are able to sidestep the censors and spread the caliphate message far and wide.³⁴ The initial point of dissemination for official media changes regularly but, once it reaches open source social media platforms such as Twitter, its treatment by portions of the pro-Islamic State echo chamber remains the same. Encouraged by Islamic State officials, virtual legions distribute its audiovisual representations across the internet, sabotaging unrelated hashtags and globalising the brand.

Often, but not always, those who disseminate the product are members of the aforementioned ‘baqiya family’, who translate and spread propaganda in an expression of their activist devotion to the caliphate.

The consumption of propaganda is an important part of recruitment. It gradually reduces the level of risk perceived by the recruitee and normalises the most abhorrent acts of violence. By conveying a comprehensive picture of what life’s like in the caliphate, it presents it as a viable utopia where ‘pristine Islam’ is enacted over the land. By constantly driving home such themes as camaraderie and economic plenty, life under Islamic State is portrayed as a realistic alternative to the status quo, not just some far-off jihadist myth where one goes to die. Reflecting this, people don’t tend to join Islamic State seeking instant death. Many join it seeking a new life—in this sense, Bilardi was an exception to the rule.

The organisation’s outreach strategists go to great lengths to demonstrate that participation in its jihad isn’t limited to martyrdom. Inasmuch as this is the case, propaganda equips the proselytiser community with an evidence base—a means by which they can back up their claims of its millenarian ideal. To an extent, the sheer volume of Islamic State’s officially produced media reduces the need for charisma in the recruitment process—instead of waiting for someone else to persuade them, supporters and sympathisers are able to convince themselves of its viability independently, simply by consuming its propaganda and rejecting as false any channel of information that contests the Islamic State narrative. To that end, non-jihadist news channels are rejected—as one supporter tells their followers on Telegram, ‘kuffur [*sic*] media is number 1 in lying’.³⁵

In itself, the act of *disseminating* propaganda is a crucial part of the recruitment process, too. Similarly to overt (but anonymous) activism in the jihadist echo chamber, distributing propaganda to one’s own network represents another step in the radicalisation process. As an act of defiance and rebellion, it breaks an imagined boundary and intoxicates the virgin disseminator. The French philosopher Ellul wrote at length about this barrier-breaking aspect of propaganda, and the fact that disseminating gives a recruitee a way to passively participate.³⁶ Individuals can engage without risking much, practically speaking. Like a ‘supporter of a football team, though not physically in the game, [Islamic State supporters can make their] presence felt psychologically by rooting for the players’.³⁷ And, like supporters of a football team, they routinely end up doing so in a competitive manner, which can then accelerate radicalisation. If this active role ends in their social media accounts being suspended, as it almost invariably does nowadays, then so be it. As mentioned above, account suspensions are treated as ‘a badge of honour’.³⁸

In this way, the dissemination of propaganda is closely connected to consumption when it comes to its impact on the recruitment process. However, in neither case—consumption or dissemination—can it be said that propaganda alone recruits. Certainly, it normalises risks that are initially deterrents and presents life as a member of Islamic State in an overwhelmingly positive light, but it alone rarely causes an individual to decide to travel to the caliphate or carry out an act of terrorism in its name. Rather, in the context of Islamic State recruitment, propaganda is more of strategic than tactical value. It establishes a milieu of myths within which an individual can come to understand their support for a group’s extremist program. Gradually, it can break down perceived barriers to entry. However, its role in the recruitment process is primarily passive, and complementary to the activism of the echo chamber’s cheerleaders or the Islamic State-based enlisters.

THE ENLISTERS

A third repeating aspect of Islamic State recruitment is interaction with an ‘enlister’. This is the point at which the process usually enters encrypted communications and becomes clandestine.³⁹ The enlister role is fulfilled by someone who is usually (but not always) based in Syria or Iraq and can therefore provide the requisite logistical advice on *hijra* through one-to-one, private contact with the recruitee. The enlister is the deviant peer who has already taken the leap to join Islamic State and now wants to attract others.⁴⁰ Of all the organisation’s supporters, these individuals come closest to deserving the title ‘recruiter’—conversations with them are regularly tipping points for recruitees.⁴¹ However, to label them simply as recruiters risks giving them too much credit—echo chamber activism and propaganda are just as essential to the process as the enlister’s words of advice.

Enlisters are active influencers who operate further downstream in the recruitment process than propaganda and participation within the echo chamber. Recruittees usually approach them long after they first enter the pro-Islamic State microcommunity. This is logical: besides the fact that successfully identifying people who are actually members of Islamic State has become a difficult task, closed communications with a proscribed violent extremist in Syria or Iraq are something that few novices to jihadism are willing to risk.

It’s often the case that the enlister is known to the potential recruit before the recruit makes *hijra*. Indeed, social media analysis demonstrates that offline relationships routinely transcend national boundaries through the internet, which explains the many cases involving people who have been, seemingly, recruited as part of a peer group—the Bethnal Green girls, the Manchester boys, the Portsmouth five and the Gothenburg contingent, to mention but four.⁴² In all of those cases, the enlisters were previously known to the new recruits, who were fellow travellers on the trajectory of radicalisation, just at earlier stages of it when the enlister originally departed.

However, the recruitee doesn’t always have to have prior knowledge of the enlister: investigations—including the author’s own—demonstrate that some Western members of Islamic State in Syria and Iraq aren’t ‘picky’ when it comes to responding to random requests for advice from anonymous onlookers.⁴³ Indeed, even the most prominent Islamic State members on social media actively advertise themselves as sources of logistical information, as online ‘shepherds’ for *hijra*.⁴⁴ As Omar Hussain (aka Abu Sa’eed al-Britani) writes, ‘many brothers and sisters have been guided through social media’, which acts as ‘a powerful means of propagating the message of Islam and the propagation of hijrah and jihad’.⁴⁵ He encourages the curious to contact him without hesitation: ‘just ask [questions] straight away inshaaAllaah’.⁴⁶ Notorious violent extremists rendering their services available online can draw in the curious, sympathetic onlooker. After all, to not-yet-active supporters of violent extremism, these people are regarded as role models, as aspirational figures who are, so to speak, ‘living the jihadist dream’. Hence, to be able to engage with them directly can be an alluring thought for the recruitee.⁴⁷

A common trope in analyses of recruitment to Islamic State is that foreign members of the group are ‘grooming’ the vulnerable into joining them in the caliphate.⁴⁸ While there’s a strong argument to be made for using such terminology, it’s important to do so with care: as Elliott and Bloom demonstrate in a forthcoming paper on children’s involvement in violent extremist organisations, the grooming model, if applied in a nuanced manner, ‘does appear to have some explanatory value in the context of recruitment for violent extremism.’⁴⁹ However, when it appears in a news media context, the requisite nuanced understanding of grooming theory is often abandoned as

reporters imply, for simplicity's sake, that Islamic State recruits have had their hands held by enlisters from the very beginning of their paths to the organisation.⁵⁰

While this renders the processes at work less confounding to the outside observer, there's not much evidence to back up this media-friendly hypothesis. Instead, conversations with enlisters that have been made public point towards a level of reticence, almost restraint, when an enlister interacts with the curious onlooker.⁵¹ Intensity, fervour and enthusiasm are found elsewhere in the echo chamber. The enlister, on the other hand, is introduced into the recruitment process further down the line, as a source of practical advice and quiet encouragement. This shouldn't surprise: recruits who seek out enlisters are already hardened extremists. They don't need to be convinced of anything by them; rather, the conversations they have are simply the point at which aspirations can be realised, and deviant thoughts can become deviant actions.

Whether or not the enlister is known to the individual beforehand, their role is crucial. Routinely advertising their contact details for encrypted communications platforms (Kik and Telegram foremost among them) on open sources, these individuals provide recruits with the practical information they need to get to the Islamic State caliphate.⁵²

Without Islamic State's enlister network, the processes that are initiated in the echo chamber and compounded by the consumption and dissemination of propaganda would conceivably manifest in full recruitment on an irregular basis. Encouragement from like-minded individuals is important in the initial stages of Horgan's 'becoming involved' phase of violent extremist activism, but words from 'fanboys' and 'fangirls' can only go so far. The same can be said of propaganda: it may incite and encourage action, and present a comprehensive alternative to one's personal status quo, but consuming it alone is rarely enough to push an individual to sign up to a jihadist group. That final momentum can come from the enlister, who is at once the lynchpin and peak of the recruitment process—the point at which the curious onlooker can be taken from support to participation by the simple fact of the enlister's bearing proof that making *hijra* can 'work', and that echo chamber rumours and propaganda promises actually ring true. In that sense, recruitment to violent extremism is a process that can *include* grooming, but it isn't one of grooming *alone*.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

It now serves to return to the case of Jake Bilardi. Through his blog, we can track the influence of each of the three mechanisms set out above. Early on in his post, ‘From Melbourne to Ramadi’, Bilardi spoke of his ‘many years’ of ‘political admiration’ for jihadists, which was sharpened as ‘the war in Sham progressed’. Somewhat candidly, he admitted that he was initially opposed to Islamic State and that it took ‘conversations with brothers from the State online [to get him] to question [his] view of the organisation and the stories [he] heard about it’. The fact that he went on to say that these same ‘brothers’ couldn’t assist him in making *hijra* suggests that they weren’t active members of Islamic State but simply supporters of it—that is, the Islamic State echo chamber.⁵³

In the same post, Bilardi wrote at length about his prejudices towards Islamic State and how it was that he found out the ‘truth’. Through his consumption of propaganda, he noted that he came to ‘love the State, [as he recognised] that they are the only people in the region establishing the Islamic system of governance, providing services for the people and most importantly they possess a sound aqeedah [creed] and manhaj [methodology] that has led to their correct and effective implementation of the Sharia’.⁵⁴ Here, the photos and videos presenting ‘evidence’ of Islamic State’s governance were of critical importance, as Bilardi was able to consume them in the context of the echo chamber’s confirmation bias.

Crucially, he also noted that, despite being convinced that Islamic State was ‘upon the truth’ and his ‘desire to make hijra’ was total, he was at a loss without logistical advice. While other individuals may know—indirectly or otherwise—foreign members of jihadist groups, Bilardi clearly did not. He wrote that he had to seek out a ‘brother online who promised to bring [him] across the border’, admitting that ‘it was a risky decision to trust someone online but [that he] was desperate to leave and was confident the brother was genuine’.⁵⁵ At the same time as being able to humanise his dream of joining Islamic State, Bilardi was also put within reach of the practical advice he so needed to make the journey to Syria and, ultimately, Iraq. Without this final set of interactions with an enlister, the practical obstacles to Bilardi’s aspirations would probably have continued to be insurmountable.

In this sense, then, Bilardi’s case is a paradigm of the three dimensions of online recruitment outlined above. He was convinced of his pro-Islamic State persuasion by ‘brothers from the State online’ (the echo chamber), able to calm his nerves by consuming ‘evidence’ of utopian governance (the propaganda), and made *hijra* only upon receiving advice from ‘a brother online’ (the enlister).⁵⁶

This tripartite convergence of supporters, propaganda and active members is by no means a standard for recruitment, but it’s a recipe that repeats. As stated above, there’s no typical radicalisation process; nor is there a generalisable passage from being a supporter of the global jihad to being an active member within it. Furthermore, as the United Nations’ Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate notes, ‘even though social media are an important radicalization tool, research shows that three in every four FTFs [foreign terrorist fighters] to al-Qaida and ISIL join through friends and that around one in five join with family’.⁵⁷ The internet facilitates radicalisation and recruitment, but causes neither. Nevertheless, the rise and persistent existence of the Islamic State caliphate over recent years has ushered in an era of analysis in which both processes are implied to be, in the majority of cases, confined to the internet, straightforward and nigh-on instantaneous.

It's critical that these assumptions are challenged. As is argued above, recruitment to Islamic State—or, for that matter, any other jihadist group—doesn't happen overnight. First, the recruitee must be curious, such that they can be assimilated into understanding the world through a binary, jihadist lens. Through exposure to, and ultimately participation in, the echo chamber, extremist views can harden. This engagement is complemented by the flood of propaganda that's produced and disseminated on a daily basis. While it's rare that propaganda alone radicalises, it plays a critical role in normalising violence and backing up assertions made by the Islamic State rumour mill.⁵⁸ Propaganda and armchair jihadism alone aren't enough to push someone to travel hundreds of miles to live in a barbaric rendition of the Islamic caliphate, let alone travel thousands to blow themselves up, as Bilardi did. For that to happen, the third mechanism is required, a further, active influence, one that is external, interactive and human: the enlister.

This paper doesn't not seek to present an exhaustive account of how all foreigners join Islamic State. Rather, it merely attempts to unpack a term—'recruitment'—that's bandied around without nuance in the foreign fighter media storm. Unless the minutiae of this complex process are better understood, it will be impossible to counter it meaningfully. Recruitment to any jihadist organisation is the outcome of very personal sets of circumstances for which there are no standard models. That said, there are identifiable elements that repeat in this context: the milieu within which one exists before the act of joining; the way in which wannabe jihadists are able to, at one and the same time, allay their fears and lower their perception of risk through the consumption and dissemination of propaganda; and their ability to, if willing, easily receive logistical advice from *in situ* enlistees on how to realise their aspirations.

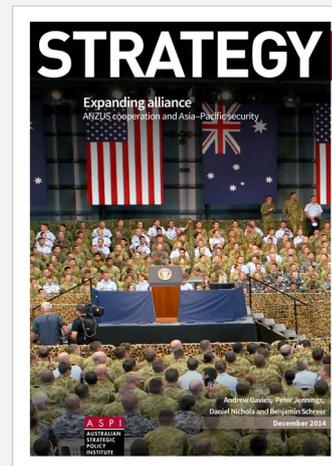
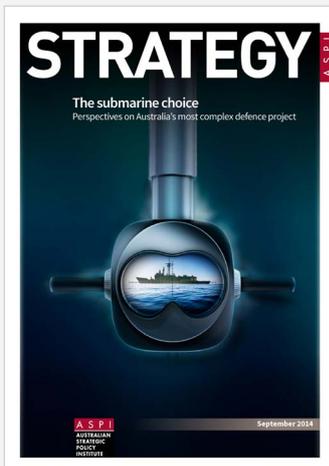
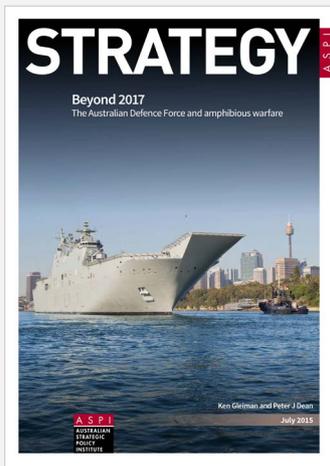
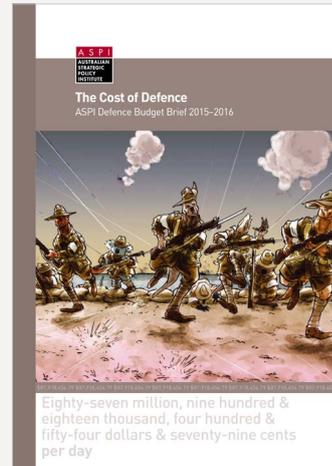
There's no silver bullet for the problem of jihadist recruitment. It's crucial that, in working to mitigate the phenomenon, policymakers recognise this and approach the issue with a granular and nuanced understanding. While it might be tempting to demand 'back doors' into encrypted social media communications and call for blanket censorship of propaganda, such reactive measures would only have marginal, short-term results. In seeking to counter jihadist recruitment—whether it's to Islamic State or another group such as al-Qaeda—policy must be proactive and take into account antecedents to the point of enlistment, not just the act of enlistment itself. An authoritarian, legislation-heavy approach may seem to offer quicker wins in the fight against violent extremist recruitment, but such efforts risk worsening the problem if predicated upon oversimplifications. Instead, an integrated, society-led approach is required—one that addresses the grievances that render the echo chamber's offer of identity appealing, presents an alternative narrative to that peddled in extremist propaganda, and obstructs the practicalities of enlistment.

NOTES

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