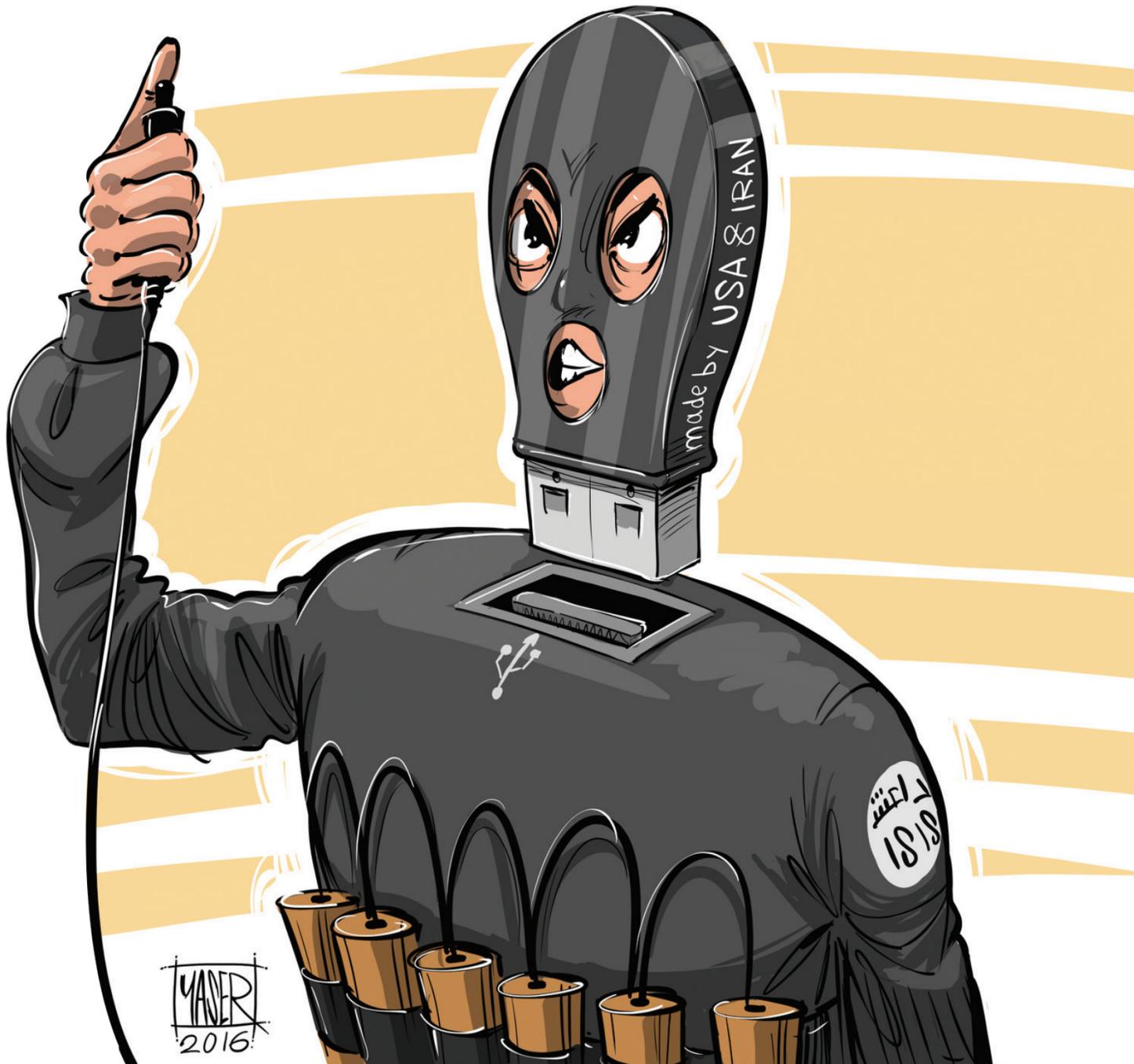## Special Focus

Deciphering the mindset of ISIS jihadists

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Samar Kadi

Beirut

The first question that comes to mind about suicide bombings in which civilians, including women and children, are killed is: "How can any normal person commit such an atrocity?"

"They must be crazy," the common rationale goes. "They have distorted minds and personalities."

Gruesome images of beheadings, mutilations and torture committed by boastful Islamic State (ISIS) jihadists made people shiver throughout the world. ISIS's apparent popularity among Arab and foreign fighters has confounded analysts and politicians.

Many explanations have been offered: Discrimination and prejudice at home, poverty, political, social and psychological frustration, an aversion to Western culture and the influence of imams.

Lebanese writer Hazem al-Amin, who has been profiling jihadists, said suicide bombers were predisposed to kill themselves for a variety of reasons before ISIS existed.

"ISIS offered them the narrative framework with which they could achieve their aspirations. In fact, it was the receptor of the outcome of many crises because all its members came from areas in crisis or have personal problems and issues," Amin said at a discussion hosted by Carnegie Middle East Centre titled "Inside the Jihadi Mind."

"All the problems and failures of the world and the region resulted in the rise of ISIS. The failure of the French, for example, in integrating their migrants. The failure of Turkey in controlling its borders and the failure to mend Sunni-Shia divisions, etc."

The flow of suicide bombers to ISIS is not so much related to the group's ideology as it is to a range of deeper underlying and complex causes, Amin said, noting that, during the battle of Mosul, the jihadi group sent 20-30 bombers daily — some 900 suicide bombers in seven months.

Amin documented cases of jihadists from Lebanon, almost exclusively from Tripoli, a city that is historically, geographically and socially close to Syria.

"Tripoli sent 100 to 200 jihadists. Their reasons for joining ISIS were different from jihadists who came from other countries and environments," Amin said. "Although each is a different case, they have common features such as broken families, poverty and poor education. On top of that, sectarian tensions (Sunni-Shia) made it easy for ISIS to recruit them."

Joseph Khoury, assistant professor of clinical psychiatry at the American University of Beirut, agreed that there was no standard terrorist profile but there are recurring characteristics.

"Each member in ISIS has his own story and reasons for ending up in the group," Khoury said in the debate. "Of course, there is a psychological aspect to that but psychology cannot give all the answers. Explaining ISIS involves a combination of social and political factors and surrounding circumstances."

"Many joined because they wanted to live in an Islamic caliphate, others because their friends have joined, some were more interested in the harm that ISIS could cause to the West, and many (rebels without a cause) had nothing better to do because their life was meaningless. Each wanted something from Daesh," Khoury added, using an Arab acronym for ISIS.

He stressed that the reasons for the rise of ISIS were related to the politics of the Middle East. Its demise will not change the basic elements of the situation, he said.

"Military action is necessary but should not be the only means to pacify jihadi minds. How can we prevent future radicalisation? The role of psychiatry is to gather all the data and use it in a way to prevent a new phenomenon like Daesh from arising. I have to try to understand the motivations of potential jihadists in order to dissuade them."

Jihadists say mass casualty attacks are payback for current and historical grievances, such as dictatorships supporting Israel in the occupied territories, bombing civilians, interfering in civil wars and plundering oil wealth.

Khoury pointed out that the use of psychology and human sciences to explain terrorism started in the 1970s when terrorism was a label used to describe leftist parties and regimes. However, dealing with a "monster" like ISIS is unprecedented.

"Groups accused of terrorism in the past were small and well defined, such as the [Irish Republican Army] and the Palestinian Fatah Revolutionary Council of Abu Nidal. ISIS is a totally different phenomenon. Here, we are talking about a whole system with fighters, families, women and children, administrators and ideologists."

Countries such as Saudi Arabia have worked on rehabilitating jihadists but little is known about the outcome or how successful they are.

Amin said ISIS was born as a result of socio-political problems.

"Any settlement that does not take that into consideration will fail to prevent future radicalisation," he said. "In Mosul, for instance, there is a feeling that the Shias defeated the Sunnis. So, unless there is a political settlement that includes the Sunnis in Iraq, the ground will remain fertile for the rise of another Daesh monster."

> **"**
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> **"**

Lebanese writer
Hazem al-Amin

Islamic State sliding from defeat to defeat: A timeline

The Islamic State (ISIS) seized large parts of Iraq and Syria in 2014 as it sought to establish its self-declared caliphate but has faced a series of major defeats in recent months. Its significant losses include:

▶ **Syria**

Kobane: The Kurdish town in northern Syria became an early symbol of the fight against ISIS when the jihadists were driven out by US-backed Kurdish forces in January 2015 after a battle of more than four months.

Palmyra: This ancient desert city was seized by ISIS in May 2015 when the jihadists destroyed UNESCO-listed Roman-era temples and looted ancient relics.

Syrian regime forces, backed by Russian warplanes and allied militias, ousted them in March 2016 but the extremists won back control by the end of that year before being expelled a second time in March 2017.

Manbij: ISIS seized this strategic town near the border with Turkey in 2014 and used it as a hub for moving jihadists and supplies to and from Europe. It was recaptured in August 2016 after a two-month battle led by a coalition of Arab and Kurdish fighters backed by US air strikes.

Dabiq: Syrian rebels supported by Turkish warplanes and artillery captured Dabiq in October 2016. Under ISIS control since August 2014, the fight for the city was significant because of a prophecy that Christian and Muslim forces will battle there at the end of time.

Battle for Raqqa: A US-backed alliance of Kurdish and Arab fighters launched an operation to capture Raqqa in November 2016. They say they control 60% of the city, with an estimated 5,000-10,000 jihadists having fled.

Deir ez-Zor: On September 5, Russian-backed Syrian forces broke a years-long ISIS siege on a government enclave in Deir ez-Zor city and entered a military base on its western edge after weeks of advances in the eastern oil-rich region.

▶ **Iraq**

Tikrit: The hometown of late dictator Saddam Hussein, north of Baghdad, fell to ISIS in June 2014. It was retaken in March 2015 by Iraqi troops, police and Shia-dominated paramilitary forces.

Sinjar: Iraqi Kurdish forces backed by US-led coalition air strikes recaptured this northern town in November 2015 after jihadists had killed or abducted thousands of members of the Yazidi minority.

Ramadi/Falluja: The capital of Anbar, Iraq's largest province, Ramadi was declared fully recaptured in February 2016. Neighbouring Falluja, the first Iraqi city seized by ISIS in January 2014, was reclaimed in June 2016.

Qayyarah: Iraqi forces backed by coalition aircraft retook Qayyarah in August 2016, providing Baghdad with a platform to move on Mosul, the country's second city 60km away.

Mosul: Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi declared victory in Mosul on July 9 after a fierce nine-month offensive.

Tal Afar: The last major ISIS urban stronghold in northern Iraq was declared "liberated" on August 31.

(Agence France-Presse)