

# Propaganda and Radicalization: The Case of Daesh in Iran

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## Abstract

The process of becoming radicalized and joining extremist groups like Daesh, in countries with a Shi'a majority, such as Iran, is a controversial topic that has not received sufficient attention in the literature. This study examines Daesh's media content in Farsi and seeks to provide an analysis of Daesh's main messages, which have the primary objective of profoundly impacting their target audiences in Iran. This study collected data from 16 Iranian members of Daesh to discover how they were radicalized and why they decided to join Daesh. This study seeks to understand whether the media and Daesh's propaganda are indeed the key reasons behind the radicalization of Daesh's Iranian members and the creation of others' perception of their mindsets against Iran and its Shi'a population, and to discover other possible factors that play a role in the radicalization process. While Daesh media and messages hold salience in relation to the Daeshization of some, studying such complex socio-political issues is rooted in an amalgamation of different personal, social, political, economic, and cultural push and pull factors. Such phenomena cannot, therefore, be reduced to only one of the mentioned elements.

## Keywords

Daesh, ISIS, media, Iran, othering, radicalization

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## Introduction

Radicalization has become an overused term in the literature. Generally speaking, it is about dramatic changes in people's views and actions. The context of this study is Daesh<sup>1</sup> in Iran since there has not been enough attention to this topic in academia. This paper studies Daesh's media as one of the main reasons for its power since June 2014 and, based on the specified sources of data, it seeks to discover their role in the recent radicalization of 16 Iranian members of Daesh.

While existing research suggests different cultural, socio-political, and economic issues are important factors in the radicalization of people, this study focuses on Daesh's Persian content as an important aspect of its soft power in the process of "othering." Besides creating fear amongst its people through coercive institutions, tools, and methods, in line with Gramsci (1973), who considered the "media" to be part of hegemonic power, alongside the church, schools and trade unions, which create consent among people, Daesh has used media, schools and mosques to attract more supporters and also to rule its people through non-coercive ways and means.

To Daesh, the real war (which is similar to, if not greater than, a military war) is the media war (Dawlat al-Islamiyah, 2015; Wilayat Salah al-din Media Office, 2015). Since Daesh believes the war against Islam and Muslims is through the media, to transform or metamorphize the identity of the *Ummah* and distort Muslims' beliefs and values, it has invested in media activities to counteract its enemies' propaganda (Dawlat al-Islamiyah, 2015; Wilayat Salah al-din Media office, 2015). In disseminating its ideology, spreading its messages, and consequently increasing its power, Daesh's activities, both on- and offline, have been more professional, eye-catching, attractive, thoughtful, and complicated, if compared to other similar groups.

Media activity is a significant part of Daesh's power. In parallel with its military attacks or terrorist activities in different countries, including Iran, in 2017 and 2018, Daesh has prioritized developing a sophisticated communication strategy and has increased its use of various social media as important psychological warfare tools with which to attract more capable fighters. To reach this aim, through its diverse media productions, Daesh has not only presented a powerful and victorious self-image to the outside world, but it has also portrayed a weak and cowardly picture of its enemies.

This study attempts to answer the following research questions: What are the main messages of Daesh's media for its Iranian audiences? And how were several Iranian civilians radicalized and then joined Daesh, and why?

To answer the first question, relevant data were gathered by studying Daesh's media content on different platforms. There is a large body of data across Daesh's different official media, such as the *Al-Hayat* Media Center (including videos, *Dabiq*, and *Rumiyah* magazines), *Al-Bayan* radio, the *Al-Furqan* Media Center, the *Ajnad* Media Center, *Al-Himmah* publications, *Al-Nabā* newsletter and the *Wilayat* media offices, which reflect its various activities, including its approaches to Iran and the Shi'as.

To study the second question, the writer's attempt to access the first-hand data was impracticable due to security restrictions. As a result of the lack of sufficient

and reliable data, the stories of people who have joined Daesh in Iran are mostly generic. This makes it difficult to see a clear and accurate picture of how they were recruited by Daesh. Nevertheless, despite these limitations, their stories—available through official documents, news, interviews with the media or confessions in the courts—help us to understand how these people operate in or outside of Iran and what their motivations for joining Daesh were.

This study is structured as follows: firstly, it will review the relevant literature, explain the study's methods, theoretical framework, and research context. Then the main roots of radicalization will be studied. Subsequently, the study will focus on Daesh's Farsi propaganda regarding Iran to discover its aims in the setting that is being investigated and what their role in the "othering" process was. Then, the data on 16 Iranian members of Daesh are examined to understand how and why they were radicalized.

## Theoretical Framework and Research Context

The literature about Daesh in Iran relates to the wider academic framework of Salafism in Iran. In the past years, several scholars have created notable works on this topic, for instance, Jalali and Ebrahimi (2014) examine the Salafi-Takfiri groups in Iraqi Kurdistan, Iranian Kurdistan and continually warn the Iranian authorities about the increasing number of people who join Daesh from Kurdistan, Kermanshah, West Azerbaijan and Sistan and Baluchistan. Moreover, Vahid and Gholchin (2017) discuss Salafi Jihadism in Kurdistan province. They mention that Salafism in Kurdistan is rooted in the Muslim brotherhood, was imported into Iran. Seidabadi (2017) explains Salafism and its impact on the Sunnis of Iran. His focus is on Khorasan Razavi, North Khorasan, and South Khorasan provinces. His findings indicate that, following the victory of the Islamic Revolution in 1979, Salafi ideas have become more prevalent among Sunnis, and these ideas have led some to consider Shi'ites to be polytheists, which has created a division between the Sunni community and the dominant Shi'a government. Anbarmoo (2020) discusses the internal logic, attitude, and the mainstream of Salafism in Iran. His research shows that *Tablighi Jamm'at*, the Iranian Call and Reform Organization, and *Maktab -e Qu'ran* are the mainstream of the Sunnis in Iran. He considers Salafism to be a source of identity used to declare their existence in the socio-political sphere in Iran, and they were far from the hard core of Salafism. Instead, he believes, they have turned to a particular reading of moderate Salafism.

Furthermore, Ahmadi Kelisani studies Iranian Sunnis' approach to Takfir and the Takfiri movements. According to him, "Sunnis in Iran are against Wahhabism and follow two main schools, namely, *Shafi'i* and *Hanafi*" (Ahmadi Kelisani, 2020, pp. 22–23). Bamari and Haghighi (2020) also try to answer the question: how has the infiltration of Salafi thought in Sistan and Baluchistan province affected the national security of the Islamic Republic of Iran. They argue that the infiltration of Salafi thought has been a serious threat to the national security of Iran through the emergence of extremists' activities in the province and their relations with other Takfiri groups abroad, who are fighting against the Islamic Republic, and creating

ethnic and religious problems, terrorist activities and division of the country through the independence of the Sistan and Baluchistan province.

Despite many studies about Salafism, the roots of Salafi-Takfiri ideology inside Iran and their threats, there is little specific literature about Daesh's activities in Iran, its memberships and their motivations and backgrounds. Zambelis (2017) focuses on Daesh's attacks in Iran on June 7, 2017, and notes that the use of Iranian recruits in the attack demonstrated the group's resilient external operations' capability and was most likely designed to sow sectarian discord in Iran and win the backing of the Sunni jihadi groups that are present on Iranian soil. Karami and Sohrabi (2019) studied Daesh's threats against Iran and compared these threats before and after its collapse. The findings of their study indicate that Daesh's threats against the Islamic Republic of Iran have increased since its collapse. Karmon (2017) examines different separatist groups in Iran and stresses that Daesh's threat to Iranian territory and interests will grow after being defeated militarily. Moreover, Simbar and Azin (2020) examine Sistan and Baluchistan security challenges following the presence of the Taliban and Daesh in Afghanistan. They note that this presentation may create social threats, such as demographic change and the incitement of Sunnis in Baluchistan, economic threats, drug trafficking; political threats, such as large-scale insecurity for the Iranian government; and, in the environmental dimension, will intensify the water crisis in the province.

There are also many articles in Farsi and other languages about Iran's strategy in dealing with the threat of Daesh, the causes of Iran's success in confronting Daesh, Iran's foreign policy, national interests and military strategy against Daesh, Daesh's impacts on Iran's national and regional security and the comparative study of US and Iranian counter-Daesh strategies (for e.g., Esfandiary & Tabatabai, 2015; Khani, 2019; Khosravi & Zarei, 2019; Parhoodeh et al., 2021; Sanaei & Kavianpour, 2016; Tabatabai & Esfandiary, 2017). Moreover, due to Daesh's on- and offline media activities, its media structure and media/propaganda strategy, analyzing its media products are other important topics that have attracted many researchers' attention (for e.g., Al-Ghazzi, 2018; Atwan, 2015; El-Damanhoury, 2017; Ingram, 2016a, 2016b; Kadivar, 2021; Kraidy, 2017; Krona, 2020; Zelin, 2015, etc.).

Nevertheless, while there is much research about Daesh's activities (including its media and military functions) in different countries and also about Iran's military actions, its strategy and foreign policy against Daesh, there is not much research about Daesh's activities, especially its media functionality, concerning Iran and the Farsi content of Daesh's media in the process of its othering of Iran and its Shi'a population. As a primary step, this study examines Daesh's media as an important part of its power, and studies Daesh's attempts to target Iranian audiences through analyzing its Farsi propaganda. Furthermore, through studying several pull and push factors, this study examines why and how some Iranian members of Daesh were radicalized, joined it, and then committed terror attacks in Iran.

This study investigates the use of the "othering" approach in Daesh's media against Iran and its Shi'a population, and explores how Daesh's media content has been used to justify violence against them. This approach is rooted in the *Takfiri*

ideology that labels other Muslims as *Kafir* (non-believer and infidel), and that is an integral dimension of Salafi-Takfiri groups, such as Daesh. Ghobadzdeh and Akbarzadeh (2015, p. 700) investigated the use of the “othering” discourse in classical Islam note that “IS relies on the long tradition of othering theology to propagate its message of hatred.” According to Brons:

Othering is the simultaneous construction of the self or in-group and the other or out-group in mutual and unequal opposition through identification of some desirable characteristic that the self/in-group has and the other/out-group lacks and/or some undesirable characteristic that the other/out-group has and the self/in-group lacks. Othering thus sets up a superior self/in-group in contrast to an inferior other/out-group, but this superiority/inferiority is nearly always left implicit. (Brons, 2015, p. 70)

The history of “othering” in Islam is based on Takfir, which dates back to the early *Khawarij*,<sup>2</sup> who emerged in the mid-seventh century and had a great impact on Islamic society, since they brought the tradition of Takfir, and this has remained as a presence throughout the Islamic world’s history. “Among the four mainstream schools of jurisprudence in Sunni Islam, scholars from the Hanbali School have relied most on the othering discourse” (Ghobadzdeh & Akbarzadeh, 2015, p. 695). Ibn Taymiyyah (1263–1328), in the fourteenth century, theorized the practice of Takfir against the Mongols, considered them to be “non-authentic” Muslims, whose conversion to Islam was invalid, and so Muslims had to fight them. Then, in the eighteenth century, Muhammad Ibn Abd Al-Wahhab (1703–1792) developed the label *Kafir* and allowed the Takfir of Muslims who did not accept strict Wahhabi thoughts and practices, condemning people who believed in saints as being *Kuffar* (infidels). In the mid-twentieth century, Sayyid Qutb (1906–1966) divided Muslim societies into good and evil Muslims through *Jahiliyyah*, which he used as a critical term in his writings since he considered it to be the sign of an ignorance of divine guidance (Kadivar, 2020b, pp. 12–13). Therefore, Islamic societies submit to God’s guidance and accept Shari’ah law; and *Jahili* societies, which ignore God’s guidance and submit to man-made laws, according to Qutb (Qutb, 2014, p. 112). These three are the leading scholars to have asked for purification of Islam from any form of deviation, and in their exclusivist reading of Islam, they dismiss all other readings of Islam as being illegitimate interpretations.

This doctrine not only considers Iran and its Shi’a population and Shi’a allies to be apostates but also excludes other Sunnis from the community of believers and introduces them as *Kafir*. However, the focus of this study is only on Daesh’s propaganda against Iran and the Shi’a.

To discover the importance of Daesh’s media and its messages in the process of the radicalization and othering of Iran and its Shi’a population, several of Daesh’s Farsi texts are discussed. Furthermore, 16 Iranian Daesh members, the main reasons behind their Daeshization, and Daesh’s media’s role, amongst other factors, are also studied. In consonance with Gramsci (1973), it considers Daesh’s media (including its Farsi content) to be an important part of its hegemonic power, which has spread its Salafi-Takfiri ideology in its othering process. This ideology,

which considers many Muslims to be infidels since they do not accept Daesh's interpretation of Islam, permits the killing of Muslims as "infidels" and "apostates."

The main methods used to collect data for this study are archival research, semi-structured interviews, and secondary sources. There is a large body of data across Daesh's official media sources, such as written texts, videos, audios and statements, and the study has chosen Daesh's major Farsi media productions. The data is also based on information about the 16 Iranian members of Daesh from various ethnic minorities that have mostly been released in the official Iranian media over the last four years. It also benefitted from several semi-structured interviews, including those with four Iranians: a Kurdish researcher, a Baluch researcher, an Arab researcher, and a journalist, and an Iraqi and a Moroccan experts each specializing on Daesh.

## The Main Roots of Radicalization

Radicalization is a loose concept and can be viewed as a complicated process that displays changes in opinions, sensations, actions, and treatments. While studying the tools, methods, and contexts of radicalization (such as radicalization through media, religious places, schools, friends, families, etc.) are all imperative, it can be argued that radicalization cannot be reduced to a single event or reason. Radicalization is also not merely about the specific means through which it takes place, such as social media. Radicalization is a social process. It is about the collective influence of ideology, message and content on the mind(s) and heart(s) of a person or a group, or, as can be seen in cases such as Daesh's sympathizers, through specific procedures against others. Moreover, in studying radicalization, taking into account the social, political, and economic atmospheres that push people toward being radicalized is salient. So, radicalism has a direct relationship to its context, and the history of radicalism is, in many cases, inevitably related to the need for change or objections to the *status quo*, dominant values and prevailing power. Consequently, considering that each person may have his or her own story concerning his or her radicalization, which may be completely different from those of others, any kind of generalization about how and why people are radicalized is misleading.<sup>3</sup>

Vergani et al. (2018) examined 148 English scholarly articles and grouped the reasons for radicalization into three broad categories: push, pull and personal factors. While push factors largely focus on structural, political and sociological explanations (such as the loss of legitimacy, geopolitical factors and state repression), pull factors tend to focus on group-level socio-cognitive explanations (such as the consumption of propaganda, cultural congruence, identity fusion and identification, group dynamics, recruitment, and leadership, emotional and material incentives, etc.), and finally, personal factors (such as mental health conditions, depression, trauma, narcissism and impulsiveness) that are concerned primarily with individual psychological and biographical explanations (Vergani et al., 2018, pp. 4–6).

This study tries to find the push, pull and personal factors behind the radicalization of 16 Iranian members of Daesh and their actions against their

compatriots, based on their “othering” approach, to ascertain if becoming radicalized happens exclusively through (online) media, or whether other factors are involved. In other words, the key question about the radicalization of these people is not just the *why* behind the radicalization but also the *how*.

## The “Othering” Process in Daesh’s Propaganda About or Against Iran

Since Daesh’s inception in June 2014, media activity has been a significant part of its power to release its news and ideological propaganda. Daesh believes that the importance of the word is considerable (Dawlat al-Islamiyah, 2017, p. 1082), claims that “words [are] sometimes more powerful than the atomic bomb” (Dawlat al-Islamiyah, 2015, p. 11; Wilayat Salah al-din Media Office, 2015) and stresses that as “the religion and *Tawhid* in the modern era are under attack in different ways and in various fields...,” so, “media play a bigger role, as *kuffar* have become capable of entering all homes and rooms through satellite dishes” (Dawlat al-Islamiyah, 2017, p. 2703). Due to this, Daesh has invested remarkably in its media activities, targeting people both inside and outside its territory. For instance, *Yaqeen* Media, one of Daesh’s affiliated media channels, has published an infographic (Figure 1) showing that Daesh had 41,230 media releases between June 2014 and June 2017 (*Three years on the Islamic State*, 2017).



Figure 1. Three Years on the Islamic State.

Source: *Yaqeen* Telegram Channel, 2017.

Hisham Al-Hashimi, an Iraqi historian and researcher in security affairs points out that “Daesh has a media arsenal. A clever media discourse that seeks to intimidate its opponents and inflict the deepest psychological damage on their soldiers, leaders, and social and political incubators.”<sup>4</sup> In parallel with its attacks on Syrian and Iraqi cities, Daesh prioritized developing sophisticated online and offline media activities and intensified its use of different media as important psychological warfare tools to spread its cultural, political and economic messages among various audiences. Furthermore, in this regard, Mohamed Abdelouahab Al-Rafiqi, the Chairman of *Almizane* Centre in Morocco argues that Daesh plays on the passion for attracting audiences and claims that “the simplicity of the discourse of Daesh makes it easy for its publications to influence young people.”<sup>5</sup>

On the other hand, Siavash Fallahpour, an Iranian journalist covering Middle East and Arab affairs divides Daesh’s media activities according to its inter-organizational and extra-organizational relations and explains that its extra-organizational relations include communication activities that are aimed at some object outside the organization, such as recruitment and inter-organizational relations include activities that are aimed at training forces and the communication of confidential information.<sup>6</sup> For example, on the Tehran terrorist attacks in 2017, he claims, Daesh provided its members with preliminary training and taught them to use the Telegram instant messaging service (which was used before and during the terrorist operations) to coordinate the attack and send videos of the murder scene.

Consistent with Teun A. van Dijk’s “ideological square”—“people tend to speak positively about their own group, and negatively about those out-groups they define as opponents, competitors or enemies” (van Dijk, 2011, p. 397), since 2014, the strategy of magnifying the Iran/Shi’a threat as being a near enemy (*al-'adu al-qarib*) and hence, humiliating them, based on Daesh’s othering doctrine, has been at the forefront of Daesh’s propaganda. Daesh has indoctrinated Sunnis through its different media and diverse messages and has sought to show that the Shi’as have been absorbing Sunnis in recent decades. Moreover, apart from using an “appeal to fear” strategy to frighten and make Sunnis terrified of Iran and the “Shi’a Empire,” Daesh has spread fear among Sunnis by promoting claims such as “suddenly the ‘Shi’a Crescent’ was growing from a crescent into a solar eclipse, and ultimately threatening Islam everywhere” (Dabiq, 2015, p. 47).

Daesh has been worried about Iran/Shi’a influence in the region, and therefore, through its propaganda, reveals its anxiety about both Iran and the Shi’a. For example, in a message that was released by the Al-Furqan Foundation, Al-Muhājir (2016), the second spokesperson of Daesh, says:

The evil of the Magian state of Iran has reached its climax. The sparks spread, reaching all lands and harming all slaves. They murdered Ahlus- Sunnah in Iraq and Sham via their proxies, militias, experts, and advisers. The Sunni thereby became either a shackled prisoner or a submissive follower.

In its media, Daesh has also repeatedly used different derogatory terms in relation to Iran and its Shi’a population, including terms such as “Rafidah,”<sup>7</sup> “Majus,”<sup>8</sup>

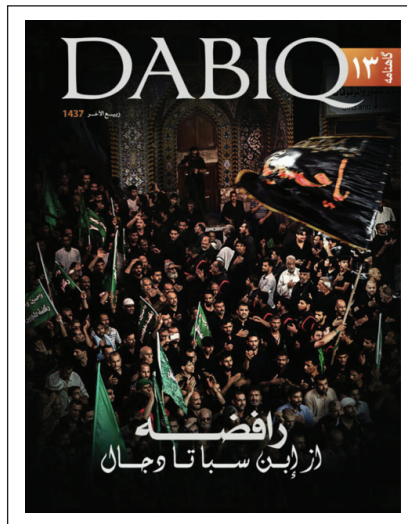


“paganism”<sup>9</sup> and “Safavid.”<sup>10</sup> It has also been argued that “the most evil enemy of Islam is the Safavī regime of Iran” (Dabiq, 2015, p. 4) or that “Al-Rafidah is a disease... There is no cure for them but the sword” (Al-Nabā, 2016, p. 4). In other contents, Daesh has used insulting words to describe Iran and its Shi’a population, such as “disgraced nation” (Al-Hayat Media Centre, 2017).

Besides Daesh’s key policy of polarizing the region and escalating disputes between the Shi’as and Sunnis inside Iraq and Syria, and also between Iran and Sunnis all over the world, since 2017, perhaps the most important objective of Daesh’s propaganda has been to polarize Iran domestically and to stir up sectarian and religious disputes between the Shi’as and Sunnis in Iran through its “othering” doctrine. This has been done through producing Farsi content and provoking Sunnis against Shi’as. To obtain this objective, it has emphasized the sectarian aspect of its propaganda in its Farsi messages in diverse genres. Thus, Daesh hopes to foster dissatisfaction amongst Iranian Sunnis and frames their narrative in a sectarian tone, as noted by some of the Iranian researchers belonging to ethnic or religious minorities.<sup>11</sup>

Apart from producing news in Farsi, Daesh has translated a variety of official content into Farsi and has released such content on different Farsi platforms to attract larger Persian audiences. For example, *Dabiq* (2016), was completely translated from English to Persian. This issue was dedicated to the Shi’a and the accusations made by Daesh against Shi’a Muslims, and its main article notes that the *Takfir* of *Rawafid* (Shi’a Muslims) is a “necessity of religion (Figure 2).”

As can be seen from the discussion thus far, as with other target audiences, Daesh has used its Persian media (Figure 3) to disseminate its Salafi-Takfiri ideology, spread its sectarian messages, recruit new members, communicate, teach, and fundraise.



**Figure 2.** Translation of Dabiq Issue 13 to Farsi.

**Source:** Monaserin Telegram Channel, 2016.



**Figure 3.** Translation of Part I of Daesh’s Memo About Takfir in Persian.

**Source:** *Monaserin* Telegram Channel, 2017.

Repetition is an important strategy in Daesh’s propaganda. This is in line with Gramsci’s stress on the importance of repetition, explaining that “repetition is the best didactic means for working on the popular mentality” (Gramsci, 1999, p. 625). Thus, Daesh repeated its Farsi messages across its various media, as the following extracts indicate, to convince its audiences of the validity of its messages and encourage them to believe in and follow those messages.

Since the announcement of its Khilafah (caliphate) in 2014, Daesh leaders and media have targeted Iranian audiences, besides those of other nationalities and from 2017, Daesh has increased its sectarian propaganda—targeting Iran’s Sunni minorities, especially its Kurd, Baluch, and Arab populations. The timing of Daesh’s propaganda is also important, since Daesh apparently wants to emphasize the point that despite defeats in Iraq and Syria and the loss of its territories, it still remains (*baqiya*) a powerful actor that wants to expand (*tatamadad*) and foster chaos in other countries, including in Iran. The Daesh targets Iran not only because of its sectarian outlook and inherent anti-Shi’a ideology (Crooke, 2014), but also because Iran has been at the forefront of the war against Daesh in Iraq and Syria leading to its military defeats. Furthermore, Daesh is worried about increasing power and influence of Iran and its Shi’a allies in the region.

For example, the first video Daesh released in Farsi was in March 2017; Wilāyat Diyālā released this video, “Persia Between Yesterday and Today” (Wilāyat Diyālā Media Office, 2017). This 37-min-long video not only makes a direct threat against the Iranian leaders and the Iranian state, but it also tries to present a specific historical narrative that targets the Sunnis of Iran to provoke them to rise against the state. The narrator calls Iran *Dar Al-Kufr* (the Domain of Disbelief) and refers to Daesh as a legitimate state. It features several Iranian Baluch, Arab and Kurd fighters threatening Iran, criticizing Iran for its hostility toward Sunnis, and called on the Sunnis living in Iran to rise against the theocratic regime. One of them called for attacks on major cities such as Tehran, Mashhad, Qom, and Isfahan, and called for them to “burn the land beneath their feet.” Daesh also threatens Iran for its role in the region’s conflicts and criticizes Iran’s attempt to spread Shi’ism (Rafidism in Daesh’s literature) around the world: “We will conquer Iran and restore it to the Sunni Muslim nation as it was before,” says one of the narrators in the video ( Wilāyat Diyālā Media Office, 2017).

Another of Daesh’s videos is “They Left Their Beds Empty” (2018), from Wilāyat al-Jazirah. This 14-min-long video focuses on four young boys: a Russian, Iranian, Turkish and Turkmen, who behead their prisoners. An Iranian teenager (Qatadah al-Farsi), who speaks in Kurdish-accented Farsi, stresses the polarization policy of Daesh and warns and threatens Iran and its Shi’a population, saying: “We will destroy your land and country on your head, we will disrupt your security, and we will shed your blood” (Wilāyat al-Jazirah Media Office, 2018).

In addition, another video released by the Amaq News Agency, one day after the Tehran attacks on June 7, 2017, contains recorded footage of the five attackers; one of them, who speaks in Kurdish and repeats Daesh’s dominant discourse about Iran and Shi’a, and says “... we are the Ummah of Islam, and Rafidah is the Ummah of Kufr... *Bi-Iznillah*, we will burn you... we will kill all of you” (Amaq News Agency, 2017b). He calls for Iranian Sunnis to be armed and asks to join them.

During its terror attack in Tehran, Daesh posted a short video, from inside the Parliament building, on the Amaq Telegram channel (2017a). In this video, a voice is heard shouting in Arabic, and that voice repeats Daesh’s famous motto: “We’re not going anywhere. We’re remaining forever.” Moreover, in “Holocaust of the Magi” (*Mahraquat al-Majus*), a video released by Wilāyat Janub, Daesh threatened to launch new attacks in Iran two months after the two attacks in Tehran (2017). The video shows a masked man with a Kalashnikov rifle, speaking Farsi, asking Daesh’s supporters if they could not join the group in Iraq and the Levant [Syria], “rise to jihad” in their homeland and carry out operations against Iran (Wilāyat Janub Media Office, 2017). In this 16 min-long, video Daesh also threatened the Iranian population with beheading.

In addition, after the Tehran attacks, in an audio message that was released by Al-Furqan, the 2nd spokesperson of Daesh, Abu Hasan Al-Muhājir (2017), claimed that “... the house of the Majusi (Zoroastrians) state is weaker than the house of a spider,” to convey the weak state of Iran. In this message, he refers to a Qur’anic verse (29: 41) as an appeal to the authority fallacy.

Furthermore, after the Ahvaz Attack on September 22, 2018, Daesh released another video (2018) showing three fighters who claimed responsibility for the

terrorist strike. Two men spoke in Arabic, and the 3rd in Persian, saying that Iran's Revolution Guards would be their main target. Later, a spokesman for Daesh said, in a recording carried by Al Furqan media, "The Ahvaz Attack will not be the last, God willing" (Al-Muhājir, 2018). Daesh was not the only group to take responsibility for the Ahvaz attack. Apart from Daesh, several groups, including The Arab Struggle Movement for the Liberation of Ahwaz (ASMLA),<sup>12</sup> claimed responsibility for the attack but later denied involvement (BBC Monitoring, 2018, quoted in IAGCI, UK, 2019, p. 25; Sardarizadeh, 2018). Nevertheless, it may be possible that there are links between Daesh members and separatist movements, such as ASMLA. For example, according to Karmon (2017, p. 12), "ISIS cells and terrorists could cooperate with, or join, Sunni Separatist movements in Ahwaz, Kurdistan and Baluchistan, and thus increase the efficiency and the lethality of the attacks inside Iran, and possibly in Tehran."

The examples above, from Daesh's sectarian propaganda, have illustrated that the main goals of Daesh have been four-fold: (a) to topple Iran's Shi'a state; (b) to manipulate the Sunni population of Iran into following its loose and narrow interpretation of Islam;<sup>13</sup> (c) the annihilation of the Shi'a population; and (d) to establish a Sunni state in Iran. To reach these ambitious aims, it has released diverse content to indoctrinate vulnerable Sunni people and then trigger terror attacks in Iran.

## **Daesh's Terror Attacks in Iran: How and Why?**

Hundreds of supporters of Salafi-Takfiri ideology from different parts of Iran have joined Daesh since 2014. Although Daesh's ideology holds little appeal for mainstream Sunni Iranians according to a Baluch-origin Iranian researcher,<sup>14</sup> the Takfiri groups' offline and online propaganda has nevertheless managed to find its audiences in Sunni areas, and consequently, Daesh has succeeded in attracting a significant number of Sunni people.

It is difficult to accurately count the number of Iranians who have joined Daesh. The Iranian authorities have been unwilling to announce relevant statistics, but they have still confirmed and warned that Daesh has managed to recruit people from among the Iranians. In addition, much data has been released about the arrests of Daesh members in different parts of Iran (PressTV, 2017b), which indicates the gradual increase in Daesh's appeal, especially among the youth. Regarding the Iranians joining Daesh, it should be noted that the number of people who joined Daesh from the Kurdish areas was greater than the numbers in other provinces, such as the Khuzestan and Sistan and Baluchistan provinces. According to some unofficial reports, "although the number of Iranians affiliated with Daesh and Al-Nusra is small, more than 80% of them are citizens of the provinces of West Azerbaijan, Kermanshah and Kurdistan" (Vahid & Gholchin, 2017, p. 139).

However, while the number of Iranian Kurds who have joined Daesh is unknown, according to an Iranian-Kurdish researcher nearly "3,500 of the Iranian Kurd members of Al-Qaeda and Daesh have been killed in recent years in Syria

and Iraq.”<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, Mokhtar Houshmand estimates that close to 400 Iranian Kurds went to Syria and Iraq to join the group and around 170 of them, from Iranian Kurdistan, have been killed or wounded (Ghajar & Alavi, 2017). The number of Iranian Arabs from the Khuzestan province and Baluchs from the Sistan and Baluchistan province, who have joined Daesh, has not been announced. Like other foreign fighters, the Iranian recruits have killed, and have been killed, on the battlegrounds. In addition, they have participated in the fights, suicide bombings, beheadings, and terror attacks in their home country. For example, in 2015, Daesh introduced the first Iranian suicide bomber as Abu Qatada Irani (2015). Furthermore, Winter (2017) claims that between December 1, 2015 and November 30, 2016, 186 foreigners died as suicide operatives, seven of them being Iranians.

Daesh's Iranian recruits are demographically diverse. While they were mostly young men from dissatisfied and underdeveloped areas near the borders, where Wahhabi, Salafi and Takfiri groups have been active in recent decades based on three Iranian researchers belonging to Arab, Kurdish and Baluch ethnic minorities, Daesh has attracted more supporters in Kurdish areas than in any other place.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, according to an Iranian activist and researcher of Arab origin, besides the extensive logistical and organizational capacity of Daesh, the most important factor in recruiting from Khuzestan was “the successes of Daesh in Iraq and Syria, especially, the conquests of Mosul in Iraq, and Dayr al-Zawr in Syria, which maximized the motivation of all identity groups in the region, and specifically in the Khuzestan province.”<sup>17</sup> He further believes that Daesh's recruitment in Khuzestan can almost be seen as being different from that in the rest of the country since this province is a Shi'a province and its people were mostly not attracted to Daesh for ideological reasons. In the last decade, though, he notes, there have been some identity-seeking currents in Khuzestan, which have several decades of political, cultural, and even armed activities. They were attempting to divide Khuzestan, and they have changed their strategy to include religious fundamentalism and religious conversion to Sunni when faced with strategic failure. The key to the success of the approach to recruit in Khuzestan was, and still is, clearly the operational code of discrimination and propaganda by external actors.<sup>18</sup>

Moreover, many of the members of Daesh and other Takfiri groups have a history of criminal activities and offenses.<sup>19</sup> In addition, they or their family members, have a separatist background.<sup>20</sup> They have been influenced by the Takfiri ideology in different ways and settings, either in the real world, by the imams of mosques, family members, friends, the satellite programs of extremists' media; or in the virtual world, through different social and mobile media platforms. In this regard, the neighboring countries, such as Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and some Arab countries around the Persian Gulf, have also facilitated Iranians' access to the extremists' messages, as noted by several Iranian researchers.<sup>21</sup>

Iran has long been fighting against Daesh in both Iraq and Syria. However, Iran had not faced any Daesh attacks within its borders before the June 7, 2017 attacks. These attacks on Iran's parliament and the Ayatollah Khomeini mausoleum killed at least 17 people and wounded more than 50 (PressTV, 2017a). The September 22, 2018 attack in Ahvaz killed 25 people, with 60 others wounded (Mehr News

Agency, 2018). The symbolic status of the two places attacked by the Tehran attackers and the timing of the Ahvaz attack in 2018 are noteworthy. Unlike most of Daesh's terror attacks in other countries, the three terror attacks in Iran involved meaningful messages. The assault on the Iranian parliament, as one of the main government institutions, was an attack on a symbol of man-made law and an important part of Iran's political power. Attacking the Ayatollah Khomeini's tomb, that of the leader of the 1979 Iranian Revolution and also founder of the Islamic Republic of Iran, was an attack on a symbol of Shi'a authority, and finally, attacking the Ahvaz Military Parade during its annual commemoration (commemorating the start of the Iraq War against Iran in 1980) was Daesh's attack on a symbol of Iranian military power. With these attacks, Daesh wanted to show its power by penetrating the important places in Iran and tried to highlight Iran's weakness as a country that takes pride in defeating Daesh in Syria and Iraq. These attacks were also designed to divert attention from its defeats in Iraq and Syria and rebuild its supporters' spirits. According to a Baluch-origin Iranian researcher, another reason behind the attacks was to "escalate sectarian disputes in Iran"<sup>22</sup> and gain the support of Sunni Takfiri groups there since Daesh exploits disorder and chaos.

Considering that the attackers were Sunni Kurds and Arabs, Daesh anticipated that Iran would increase its pressure against these minorities, igniting the sectarian disputes between Sunni and Shi'a and other ethnicities. Furthermore, according to Zambelis (2017), "at a time of deep anger against Iran in the Sunni Arab world, because it intervened in Syria, the Islamic State likely saw the attack as a way to help its fundraising and recruitment efforts." These terrorist activities help Daesh's survival, which has become its main goal after losing its territory in Syria and Iraq.

Moreover, around Iran's borders, there are many unhappy ethnic and religious minorities—especially the Kurds<sup>23</sup> in the Northwest, Arabs<sup>24</sup> in the South, the Baluchis<sup>25</sup> in the Southeast and Turkmens<sup>26</sup> in the North and Northeast, who felt that they were discriminated against, humiliated, marginalized, and who considered themselves to be 2nd class citizens. It is important to note that Iran employed the "othering" policy in relation to its minorities. This is based on its dominant Shi'a jurisprudence about other religious groups and worries about political and security matters in the country. This "othering" policy—as a push factor—has created a willing and conducive atmosphere for the discontent of ethnic and religious civilians in Iran and has provided fertile ground in which to grow radicalism.

In this regard, according to Hawramy (2020), "Salafist jihadist ideology has spread to every corner of the Kurdish region in Iran, with hundreds, perhaps thousands, of young men ... ready to take up jihad." A common religion and close relationship with the Salafists in Iraqi Kurdistan have been the two main pull factors for Iranian Kurds. However, as Houshmand mentions, "The emergence of Salafism in Kurdistan and giving room to Salafists cannot be analyzed without the question of marginalizing Kurdish nationalism" (Ghajar & Alavi, 2017), which is considered to be another pull factor. Moreover, different extremist groups, such as the *Jaish ul-Adl* (which is fighting for the independence of the Sistan and Baluchistan province and has launched several terrorist attacks in this province)

or *Harakat an-Nidhāl al-Arabi li Tahrir al-Ahwāz* (which supports the separation of Khuzestan province from Iran and has made many terrorist attacks in this province) and their separatists' demands, are among other pull factors that have paved the way for other radical groups, including Daesh. One of the interviewees, an Iranian-Kurdish researcher, regards opposition to the government, separatist views, and divergent backgrounds among family members, participating in ideological classes, and networking as important factors that have facilitated people's inclinations to join Takfiri groups, such as Daesh.<sup>27</sup>

### **Pull, Push and Personal Factors in Radicalization of Iranian Members of Daesh**

The following sections, which are based on the available data, focus on 16 Iranian members of Daesh, who were demographically diverse, to understand how and why they joined Daesh and find the pull, push and personal factors behind their radicalization. They were selected from different ethnic minorities of Iran, various ages, areas, and backgrounds to display their diversities. Secondly, most of them involved in terrorist activities in Tehran and Ahvaz or migrated from Iran to Iraq and Syria to serve the caliphate, or participated in beheadings of people and suicide attacks in those countries. Thirdly, either they or their family members had an interview with media about their motivations to join Daesh or they confessed in the courts about the reasons behind their activities.

1. Bahauddin Mohammadian (1978–2015) was a Turkmen and Sunni Physician from Gonbad Kavous in the Gulestan province. He joined Daesh in 2014, and since joining Daesh, he has cured the “mujahidin” (2015). During 2002–2012 he was Sufi. After reading Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya and hearing the inviters' calls, he says, he began to accept and follow the Saudi Salafi approach. Then, after announcing *Dawlah al-Khilafah* (Caliphate State), he and his family joined Daesh. Data indicates that his Salafi-Takfiri background, propaganda of the inviters and the appeal of living in the Khilafah of Daesh were the main reasons behind him joining Daesh.
2. Towhid Qureshi (1983) is from a village in the Gilan province. Before joining Daesh, he was the Sunni cleric and Imam of the village of Shalqun Talesh. Through discovering Daesh's websites and studying the Arabic content, he became acquainted with Daesh. He mentions that the main reason he joined Daesh was the crimes that took place in Syria, the killing of people and violation of their honor. “I went there to defend the people and to confront this oppression and crime” he stresses (Rezapour & Mousavi, 2016). Consumption of Daesh's online propaganda and philanthropic reasons for helping the Syrian people were the two main factors behind him joining Daesh.
3. Mohammad Ebrahimi or Abu Aisha Al-Kurdi (1971–2016) was from Kamyaran in the Kurdistan province. According to the *Oweis News Agency*

Telegram Channel (2017), “Ebrahimi was known as *Hameh Sharti* (a phrase used to refer to his gambling habit) as he spent most of his time in Kamyaran playing computer games and betting,” which indicates his adventurous and risk-taking character. However, he joined Daesh in 2014 and appeared in Daesh propaganda videos, beheading captured *peshmerga* (the Kurdish fighters in Northern Iraq) captives (2015) (Figure 4). Besides his personal character as a risk-taking man, the propaganda of Takfiri groups and Takfiri ideology influenced him to join Daesh.

4. Isa Jaznia (1997) is from Chabahar in the Sistan and Baluchistan province. He was a student when he joined Daesh. This process took place under the influence of his friend, Sultan Singeleh, and also of Daesh activities on different virtual networks, especially WhatsApp. However, after leaving Iran, he experienced regret and returned home (Qarebaghi, 2017). Belonging to a non-prosperous family from the Baluch minority, the roles of a friend and the social/mobile media were the main factors causing Isa to join Daesh.
5. Sultan Singeleh from Chabahar in the Sistan and Baluchistan province, was also killed in Syria. Sultan’s father considers WhatsApp and cyberspace to be the main causes for his son’s joining Daesh. “These WhatsApps deceive these kids ... WhatsApp spoiled them,” his father mentions (Qarebaghi, 2017).
6. Serias Sadeghi was a resident of Paveh in the Kermanshah province. He was one of the key Iranian Daesh members who played a major role in the Tehran attacks and assaulted Ayatollah Khomeini tomb in 2017 (Figure 5). He was eventually killed in the suicide bombing. As an occupation, he ran a bakery with his brother in Paveh. During recent decades, hundreds of radical Salafi clerics have been active in Kurdish areas and have radicalized people, and these radicalized people, such as Sadeghi, became recruiters for Takfiri groups, such as Daesh, and encouraged people to join Daesh in their turn. The roles of mosques, their imams, and the consumption of the Takfiri ideology were the main factors in his radicalization.
7. Soleiman Mozafari (1963–2018), one of the organizers of the 2017 attacks in Tehran, was from Ravansar, in Kermanshah province. Interestingly, he was self-employed and had a history of membership in *Kata’ib Kurdistan* (Kurdish Battalions), the Muslim brotherhood and al-Qaeda. He had had a Salafi orientation for years, left Iran in 2015 to join Daesh (Mizan News Agency, 2018a, 2018b). He was radicalized by the Salafi-Takfiri ideology by being a member of the groups mentioned above and his presence in a friendship network with connections to Daesh. Besides these reasons, he was influenced by a combination of Salafi-Takfiri preachers, mosques, religious organizations, and Salafi CD propaganda (IRIB News Agency, 2017b).
8. Rahman Behruz (1970–2018) was from Sarpol Zahab in the Kermanshah province and had only studied in the 1st class of the Literacy Movement Organization of Iran. He lived for 18 years in Iraq and then returned to Iran. “In addition to sports club coaching, he also bought and sold cars and was not in financial poverty,” the Prosecutor’s representative said in court (Mizan News Agency, 2018d). He had a criminal record by 2007 since he



was convicted of buying and carrying weapons and ammunition, collaborating with al-Qaeda, and had pledged allegiance to the *Kataeib Kurdistan* Group. According to his confessions, he got in touch with Daesh through his friends (IRIB News Agency, 2017b; Mizan News Agency, 2018a, 2018d). In his interview, and also in court, he explained many times that he joined and cooperated with Daesh because of the money. “I was deceived by money,” he says repeatedly (Mizan News Agency, 2018a, 2018d). So, besides several personal issues, such as illiteracy and lack of education, his history of living in Iraq and having a criminal record, the main pull factor that caused Behruz to join Daesh was the material incentive.



**Figure 4.** The Infamous Terrorist, Abu Aisha Al-Kurdi.

**Source:** ABNA News Agency, 2017.



**Figure 5.** Footage of the Video of the Five Tehran Attackers.

**Source:** Amaq Telegram Channel, 2017b.

9. Esmail Sufi (1985–2018) was from Sarpol Zahab, Kermanshah province, and was a farmer. His brother, Fereydoun Sufi (who joined Daesh around 2015), was involved in the Tehran terrorist operation and was killed in June 2017, and had influenced him to join Daesh, Esmail says (IRIB News Agency, 2017a). While Esmail says that he was in touch with Daesh through his brother (Fereydoun), and notes that “I would never have made this mistake if my brother had not been among them,” he stresses that he accepted and believed Daesh’s thoughts and ideology (Mizan News Agency, 2018a, 2018c). A mixture of a family member’s influence and the appeal of Daesh’s ideology played important role in his radicalization and decision to join Daesh.
- 10–13. Mehdi, Ahmad, and Mahmoud Mansouri, three brothers, and their cousin, Ayad Mansouri, were from Ahvaz, in the Khuzestan province. They were Shi’a Arabs but changed their religion to Sunni with a Wahhabi orientation (IRIB News Agency, 2018). The oldest brother, Mehdi, was a hairdresser and did not have any financial problems, according to his wife (Javanonline, 2018). Mehdi joined Daesh and was killed in a suicide operation there. The 2nd brother, Ahmad, had a bachelor’s degree in petrochemicals, and the 3rd brother, Mahmoud (Fo’ad), had a bachelor’s degree in electronics. These two brothers were in touch with and under the influence of their older brother. This gradually triggered them to change their religion and accept the Salafi-Takfiri ideology and join Daesh. The two brothers (who were carpenters and cabinet-makers), their cousin Ayad Mansouri, who had also changed his religion and had been under the influence of his family members and the Harakat an-Nidhāl (ASMLA), according to what his father said (IRIB News Agency, 2018), and two other Daesh members attacked the Ahvaz Military Parade on September 22, 2018 (Figure 6). Besides the role of Mehdi (the older brother mentioned) in the radicalization of his family members, according to Ahmad and Mahmoud’s father and also Ayad’s father, a combination of a network of friends, Internet, mobile telephony, and satellite programs, such as Wesal and Kalemeh, were important factors in their sons’ changing from Shi’a to become Sunni Wahhabi, and then their decision to join Daesh.
14. Hassan Darvishi, from the Khuzestan province, was another Daesh member who was killed during the Ahvaz incident and had been undergoing treatment for psychological problems at the Ahvaz Welfare Organization for some time, his father said (Fars News Agency, 2018). However, there is no more data about Darvishi’s process of radicalization. So, based on the data, personal factors, such as psychological disorders and mental health issues, may have been important factors in this process.
15. Abu Balqis was a leader of the Daesh branch in the Khuzestan province. He lived in Kuwait and returned to Iran during the Iraq–Kuwait war. He was a taxi driver and became addicted to drugs. His brother has a separatist, divergent background and is a refugee in the Netherlands. After quitting addiction, Abu Balqis was active in cyberspace. “I met Takfiri-Salafi people on Facebook, became familiar with them, and became interested in



**Figure 6.** Farsi Translation of the Terror Attack in Ahvaz.

**Source:** Amaq Telegram Channel, 2018.

them,” he said (Javanonline, 2018). When Daesh was at the peak of its power in 2014, he joined the group and moved to Iraq. After three months, he returned to Iran and started working in the virtual world, especially on the Telegram platform. He created a Telegram group chat that had around 90 members, including Ahmad and Mahmoud Mansouri, two of the Ahvaz terrorist attackers. Based on his confessions, a combination of propaganda on social media and the appeal of the ideology had collectively formed the main factors behind his radicalization.

16. The last case is Mobin, a 19-year-old boy, who was arrested when he was 16, and who was, by then, a member of Daesh’s terror team. Mobin’s ethnicity and where he was born were not mentioned in the news. However, he says that he was attracted to Daesh through its Telegram channels and by watching its videos. “I thought, I will go there to have fun,” he notes in court (Sharq Daily, 2020). He adds, “at first I thought this group is rich, and that as soon as I joined them, I would get a car, a motorbike and money, but when I moved to Iraq, I realized that all my dreams were wrong and that this group had nothing but violence and lies” (Sharq Daily, 2020). As a consumer of Daesh’s Telegram Channels, the reason behind his joining Daesh could therefore be said to be the material incentives that he believed were offered.

**Table 1.** Push, Pull and Personal Factors of 16 Iranians to Join Daesh.

Name	Career	Pull Factors	Push Factors	Personal Factors
Bahauddin Moham-madian	Physician	Appeal to ideology, offline propa- ganda of preachers and the appeal of living in the Khilafah	Belongs to Sunni and Turkmen minorities, a feeling of inequality, discrimination, political grievances, discon- tent, underdevelopment, and marginalization	Had a Sufi background
Towhid Qureshi	Cleric and Imam of the mosque	Appeal to ideology, online propa- ganda, and philanthropic reasons	Belongs to Sunni minority, a feeling of inequality, discrimination, political grievances and discontent, underdevelopment, and marginalization	
Moham- mad Ebrahimi	Playing computer games and betting	Propa- ganda and appeal to ideology	Belongs to Sunni Kurd minorities, a feeling of in- equality, discrimination, political grievances, discon- tent, underdevelopment, and marginalization	Adventurous and risk-taking personality
Isa Jaznia	Student	Friend and online propa- ganda	Belongs to Sunni Baluchs minority, a feeling of in- equality, discrimination, political grievances, discon- tent, underdevelopment, marginalization, and poverty	
Sultan Singeleh	Student	Online propa- ganda and cyber- space	Belongs to Sunni Baluchs minority, a feeling of in- equality, discrimination, political grievances, discon- tent, underdevelopment, and marginalization	
Serias Sadeghi	Ran a bakery	Offline propa- ganda in mosques and appeal of ideology	Belongs to Sunni Kurds minority, a feeling of inequal- ity, discrimination, political grievances, discontent, underdevelopment, and marginalization	
Soleiman Mozafari	Self-employed	Offline propa- ganda in mosques and other religious organiza- tions, digital propa- ganda, appeals to Salafi-Takfiri ideology and network of friends	Belongs to Sunni Kurds minority, a feeling of inequal- ity, discrimination, political grievances, discontent, underdevelopment, and marginalization	Had a Salafi-Takfiri orientation for years
Rahman Behruz	Sports club coach- ing, also buys and sells cars	Material incentives, network of friends and appeal of ideology	Belongs to Sunni Kurds minority, a feeling of inequal- ity, discrimination, political grievances, discontent, underdevelopment, and marginalization	Had a Salafi-Takfiri orientation for years, a criminal record, illiteracy, lack of education and living for 18 years in Iraq

*(Table 1 continued)*

(Table 1 continued)

Name	Career	Pull Factors	Push Factors	Personal Factors
Esmail Sufi	Farmer	Appeal of Ideology and brother's influence	Belongs to Sunni Kurds minority, a feeling of inequality, discrimination, political grievances, discontent, underdevelopment, and marginalization	
Mehdi Mansouri	Hairdresser	Appeal of a new religion with a Wahhabi orientation	Belongs to Arab minority in Khuzestan, a feeling of inequality, discrimination, political grievances, discontent, underdevelopment, and marginalization	Changing his religion
Ahmad Mansouri	Carpenter and cabinet-maker	The oldest brother's influence, network of friends, online propaganda, the Internet, mobile and satellite programs	Belongs to Arab minority in Khuzestan, a feeling of inequality, discrimination, political grievances, discontent, underdevelopment, and marginalization	Changing his religion
Mahmoud Mansouri	Carpenter and cabinet-maker	The oldest brother's influence, network of friends, online propaganda, the Internet, mobile and satellite programs	Belongs to Arab minority in Khuzestan, a feeling of inequality, discrimination, political grievances, discontent, underdevelopment, and marginalization	Changing his religion
Ayad Mansouri		The influence of family members, friends, online propaganda and ASMLA movement	Belongs to Arab minority in Khuzestan, a feeling of inequality, discrimination, political grievances, discontent, underdevelopment, and marginalization	Changing his religion
Hassan Darvishi			Belongs to Arab minority in Khuzestan, a feeling of inequality, discrimination, political grievances, discontent, underdevelopment, and marginalization	History of psychological disorders and mental health issues
Abu Balqis	Taxi driver	Propaganda on social media and the appeal of the ideology	Belongs to Arab minority in Khuzestan, a feeling of inequality, discrimination, political grievances, discontent, underdevelopment, and marginalization	History of addiction to drugs, a separatist divergent background of a family member and was living in Kuwait
Mobin	Student	Propaganda on social media, fun and material incentives		Adventurous person

**Source:** The author.

While, based on the available data, there is no explicit evidence about the main push factors, which create the contextual conditions behind these people's radicalization, since almost all of these cases belong to various ethnic and religious minorities, it might be supposed that structural conditions (such as living in the areas along Iran's East, West, North and Southern borders, unemployment, the "othering" policy of Iran about its minorities, a sense of otherness among ethnic and religious minorities, a feeling of inequality, discrimination, political grievances and discontent, marginalization, etc.) were the key push reasons behind their joining Daesh. These factors indicate that people do not radicalize in isolation. Nevertheless, pull factors (such as the appeal of living inside the Khilafah, attraction of Salafi-Takfiri ideology, propaganda and media content, networking, material incentives, etc.) and personal factors are different based on the cases that have previously been mentioned. Table 1 summarizes various push, pull and personal factors that were operative in these 16 Iranian civilians deciding to join Daesh.

## **Concluding Remarks and the Study's Limitations**

Daesh's media activities are a continuation of its military actions and play an influential role in its psychological war. This study has concentrated on Daesh's Farsi media content to discover their main messages, who their target audiences are and why they released those messages. Based on the study's findings, the main goals of Daesh's propaganda have been to fulfill the "othering" process through igniting ethno-sectarian divisions in Iran; encouraging Iranian Sunnis to follow its Takfiri ideology to fight against their Shi'a government, and, finally, to topple it.

One of the limitations of this study is the admittedly too limited data regarding Iranian Daesh members, which makes it difficult to draw any definitive conclusions. As a primary step, studying 16 examples offer a better understanding of how Daesh operates in Iran, whom it recruits and why those people join Daesh. Some of the study's limitations have to do with the topic's sensitivity and consequent efforts to access Daesh members, their families and more informed interviewees about Daesh in Iran hit major obstacles.

Generally speaking, the ways that the Iranian members of Daesh were radicalized were very different from each other. In the process of radicalization, based on the available data, besides personal factors (which are specific to each person) and push factors (such as political and economic marginalization, subjugation, discrimination, ethnic and religious grievances, poverty, underdevelopment and oppression), various pull factors, including networks of family, friends, mosques and other religious institutions, ideological appeals, the fascination of living in the Khilafah State, material incentives and the consumption of media are significant.

While the media are important tools in Daesh's power and in the process of radicalization, through studying 16 Iranian Daesh members, this study has rejected any deterministic approach toward the media and their role as being a causal

factor in the radicalization of those people, since radicalization is not limited to a single event, reason, or specific means, such as the media. Furthermore, the evidence has indicated that the examined Iranians' reasons for joining Daesh varied, and they ranged from the ideological to the political, economic, philanthropic, or even to a combination of these reasons. Moreover, while around 10% of the Iranian population (around eight million people) are Sunnis, the number of people who joined Daesh is very small compared to the number of Sunnis in Iran. This indicates that Daesh's propaganda has not found what might be called a considerable audience amongst the mainstream Sunnis in Iran.

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### **Notes**

1. Daesh (also known as The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant or ISIL, The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria or ISIS and Islamic State or IS) is an Arabic acronym formed from the initial letters of the *al-Dawla al-Islamiya fil Iraq wa al-Sham*. It is a transnational Sunni militant organization that follows a Salafi-Takfiri doctrine. On June 29, 2014, after occupying significant territories in Iraq and Syria, it proclaimed itself a worldwide Caliphate and proclaimed Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi to be the Caliph of Muslims. The foundations of Daesh were laid in the 1990s and early 2000s, when Abu Musab al-Zarqawi founded *Jama'at al-Tawhid wa'al-Jihad*, and then Al-Qaeda in Iraq, which was founded by him in 2004. Since losing its main leaders and its territory in Iraq and Syria, Daesh has been a direct threat to regional countries, such as Iran.
2. In a battle at *Siffin* (657 AD), when the 4th pious caliph (the first imam of the Shi'a), Ali ibn Abi Talib's armies were close to overcoming Muawiyah's troops, Muawiyah suggested arbitration. Several soldiers from Ali's army turned against him when he agreed to Muawiyah's arbitration. These fighters became famous as the *Khawarij* and believed that God alone has the right to judge; they suggested that Ali's agreement to arbitrate was a violation of divine will, and they announced that Ali and his supporters were apostates (Kadivar, 2020a).
3. Personal interaction with an Iranian researcher of Baluch origin (name withheld on request) via WhatsApp, September 19, 2020.
4. Personal interaction with Hisham Al-Hashimi via WhatsApp, October 20, 2017. He was killed in 2020.
5. Personal interaction with Mohamed Abdelouahab Al-Rafiqui through Email, November 20, 2017.
6. Personal interaction with Siavash Fallahpour through Email, February 27, 2017.
7. A derogatory term referring to Shi'a, which means rejecter, rejectionist.
8. Meaning Zoroastrians, to show Iranians to be insincere Muslims.
9. A pejorative term for a polytheistic group, in order to ridicule Shi'a beliefs.





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