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Title	The curious case of Wang Yuandongyi: why do some want to fight with anti-ISIS groups?
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Citation	Jayakumar, S. (2016). The curious case of Wang Yuandongyi: why do some want to fight with anti-ISIS groups? (RSIS Commentaries, No. 074). RSIS Commentaries. Singapore: Nanyang Technological University.
Date	2016
URL	http://hdl.handle.net/10220/40440
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The Curious Case of Wang Yuandongyi: Why Do Some Want to Fight With Anti-ISIS Groups?

By Shashi Jayakumar

Synopsis

The arrest in March 2016 of a Singapore citizen, Wang Yuandongyi, for attempting to travel to Syria to fight with a Kurdish militia against ISIS raises questions about the psychological processes of individuals attempting to join anti-ISIS groups. Should these individuals be treated in the same manner as those attempting to fight for ISIS?

Commentary

THE ARREST of a Singapore citizen, Wang Yuandongyi, in March 2016 for attempting to travel to Syria to fight with a Kurdish militia against Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has focussed attention on the phenomenon of individuals attracted to the cause of fighting ISIS - not for it. Analysis by CENS, the Centre of Excellence for National Security at RSIS, of the background, motivations and nationalities of over 200 "lone wolves" who have made the journey to fight ISIS, suggests that about half fight with the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) the major Kurdish opposition to ISIS in northern Syria.

A smaller number of the 400-500 actually on the ground fight with the Peshmerga of the Kurdish Regional Government in Iraq, and an even smaller number have joined Assyrian Christian militia in Syria. At least 12 of the foreign anti-ISIS "lone-wolves" with these groups have been killed. Americans, especially military veterans, make up approximately 50 per cent of the total number of anti-ISIS fighters. Apart from a small number of fighters (particularly from Europe) who are second-generation members of the Kurdish diaspora, very few have a direct connection with the conflict.

Different strokes for different folks

A recurring theme with these fighters as gleaned from their social media posts is giving meaningful help to peoples who are oppressed, and not wanting to sit by while people suffer under the ISIS yoke. A significant proportion of anti-ISIS fighters combine these pull factors with “push” factors.

They include unsettled domestic circumstances, or a sense of “drift” or dislocation from the orthodox dictates of society. Should there be commonality in treatment of would-be fighters and returning fighters on both sides – for and against ISIS?

Some countries such as the United States strongly discourage their citizens from fighting against ISIS, but have not criminalised such actions, choosing in effect to turn a blind eye. In Australia, there is specific legislation introduced in 2014 that criminalises fighting on any side of the conflict in Syria and Iraq.

In the West, where these issues have more public traction, supporters and family members of anti-ISIS fighters (in countries ranging from the UK to Australia) have initiated petitions calling on their governments to reconsider their treatment of those who have returned home after fighting ISIS, observing that there is no moral equivalence between fighting for and against IS, and that the two should be considered quite separately.

The Curious Case of Wang Yuandongyi

In Singapore, the Government has made it clear in connection with Wang Yuandongyi that it takes a stern view of anyone who undertakes or makes preparations to undertake armed violence, regardless of how they rationalise violence or where the violence in question takes place. But should the authorities go further and make this legally explicit, banning any Singaporean (or even foreigners based here) from fighting abroad in any armed conflict, regardless of which side he or she supports?

There may be long term advantages to this approach. In some cases, issues of right and wrong might be clear – at least in the minds of some would-be fighters. But many other situations like insurgency, civil war, rebellion may be less clear-cut.

The authorities would also presumably not want a situation where Singaporeans find themselves face to face against each other in a foreign battleground. This scenario (which is one the US and several European nations are already confronting in Syria and Iraq) could lead to blowback and tensions between groups within Singapore.

Authorities should also consider what to do with individuals on the verge of going to help the Kurds in auxiliary or humanitarian roles that do not involve fighting, but which might conceivably draw such individuals into violence downstream - should this be criminalised too? There are some provisions in the law (the Internal Security Act) which are relevant to the possibilities above, but these may need updating.

Motivations and “Rehabilitation”

Anti-ISIS lone wolves have different motivations for taking up their cause. Some cite

an altruistic need to help the Kurds, but it is also clear that some seek the same form of adventure that impelled ISIS fighters. And similar to ISIS foreign fighters, many seek a sense of meaning, perhaps alienated from their home culture and suffering from rootlessness, anomie, or mental dislocation. Studying these individuals might yield insights into those who join ISIS, as there may be common ground in their motivations.

There is also the tricky issue of “rehabilitation”. In Singapore, the authorities recognise that Wang’s attempt to help the Kurds was not “ideologically-driven”, yet have suggested that he will undergo psychological counselling to steer him away from resorting to violence. It is not, however, clear that Wang was in the first place predisposed to violent acts. Would established processes such as counselling by the Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG) or by others work in these cases? Should new ways be considered?

The media has reported the conflict with ISIS as an existential one – almost as a Manichean struggle between good and evil. This inevitably has had an impact on a millennial generation in search of experience and meaning. What might therefore be needed in various countries is not only official injunction or punitive warnings against fighting with the YPG or other militia, but a broader effort.

In countries where there is a rising commitment to social or civic activism, other outlets for expressing such activism need to be found: outlets that could divert restless individuals and allow them to find expression for their altruistic energies.

Trusted and credible sources – not necessarily simply government sources – should be used to disseminate the messages that individuals should not get involved in foreign conflicts (not just the ones in Iraq and Syria), and that one runs the very real risk of being killed, or else being drawn into wider conflicts which they have not signed up for. The overall message should be this: there are other ways to help the people at risk, and these conflicts are not their fight.

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