

ISIS and Gang Activity: The emerging international model of gang violence and global terrorism

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Oppositional cultures, subcultures that reject and refuse to conform to mainstream societal norms/values, are found globally and amongst widely diverse populations. Their appeal affords the solidarity and expressive strategies to recruit disenfranchised groups from South Central Los Angeles to Holland to the Middle East. Urban gangs, as well as international terrorist organizations, promote themselves through violent propaganda in order to bolster images of strength and power, which appeal to youth who feel helpless and disempowered within their own societies. Commonalities in what draws individuals to join street gangs and terrorist organizations include violent imagery, revenge against the mainstream society in which they're alienated from, political/religious conviction as well as monetary incentives. Despite the fact that the U.S. government is not held responsible for the rise of gangs and terrorism, the globalization of gangs is rooted in U.S. history, alongside the blowback of international terrorism on the new world economy.

According to Sanyika Shakur, author of *Autobiography of an L.A. Gang Member*, street organizations pursue what he terms "revolutionary nationalism", "but in a warped lopsided way". Consistent with this idea is the fact that both types of organizations (street gangs and terrorist factions) originate from small, communal, tightly knit societies with a shared ideology. Whereas street gangs express an oppressed consciousness within the urban communities of the United States based on conditions of poverty where the presence of law enforcement is perceived as an invading force, terrorist organizations express an oppressed consciousness based on a rejection of foreign invasion and neoliberal policies. Street gangs, like terrorist organizations,

have shared symbols, they view themselves as military units and they view outside forces, including law enforcement, as outside occupying armies (Hayden). Similarly, contemporary terrorist organizations, such as ISIS, which label themselves as the “Islamic State”, have interpreted Jihad into a religious war against Western forces. Both carry out acts of rebellion, based on contrasting moral codes, however, the underlying commonality exists in their upholding of revenge as sacred.

In gang structure, there is a universal idea that you cannot be at peace with someone who has killed your loved ones. Whether the revenge is against a rival gang or, for the terrorist organizations, an entire civilization, the revenge is never completely satisfied as the wars carry on. Most people involved in gang wars have had a loved one killed and may place the blame on a larger group associated with the individual who killed their loved one. Similarly, for ISIS, the sacredness of revenge is attributed to Jihad. For both urban street gangs and international terrorist groups it is understood that one will die for the cause; it is expected.

Moral solidarity is achieved within both street gangs and ISIS through specific loyalties, fictive kinship, tradition, honor, favors, bureaucracy of patronage, bribes, favors, and social factors that constitute mechanical solidarity. This stands in contrast to Western society’s larger, more globalized, division of labor comprised of capitalism, standard individual rules, bureaucracy, law and rationalization. Therefore, in regards to global terrorism and ISIS, countering recruitment strategies becomes what Assistant Attorney General John Carlin called, a “war of ideas – we ought to win,” (quoted in Reitman 2015)—a poorly articulated statement since it undermines the societal and global causes of terrorism. Like any war that the U.S. engages in, (e.g. the war on communism, the war on drugs and now the war on gangs and the war on terror) the ‘material support statues’ of the criminal justice system, which have been used in over 200 cases since the September 11th attacks, are aimed towards “radicalized” individuals – mostly young adults (Reitman). The motivation behind the prosecution of so many people is not necessarily out of

genuine danger or threat, but rather the fear of 'missing one'. This makes certain youth of the post 9/11 era victims of a hyper-sensitive criminal justice system and makes them potential recruitment targets for terror organizations such as ISIS which play on cultural insecurities.

Potential teenage recruits for domestic street gangs and terrorist groups abroad feel disenfranchised by popular culture, by their social conditions, or by both in that their foreign roots are stigmatized by mainstream society (in the news, media etc.). These disenfranchised youth have a need for defining their own identity in hopes of gaining a sense of purpose. For many youth around the world who are in the search of an identity, culture, (or rather a fractured culture), plays an important role. For example, a middle class Muslim teenager may find solidarity in the idea of helping the 'Islamic State' because of what it claims to stand for without really understanding the issues. Mainstream media, with its' constant reporting and stigmatization of the Islamic State, can lead many young Muslim youth to believe that the United States is openly against Muslims, since mass media stories refer to Muslims almost synonymously with violence. To misled youth the image and charisma of ISIS becomes similar to what Eric Hobsbawm, author of *Bandits*, refers to as the 'social bandit'; outlaws with a cause, the weak against the strong, a social phenomenon that often occurs in states where power is unstable.

Domestic street gangs, on the other hand, are in fact rooted in Hobsbawm's idea of 'social banditry'. During the late 1960's in Los Angeles, before the crack epidemic and after the assassination of many civil rights leaders, alienated youth who were part of the remnants of the civil rights era, (some of them former Black Panther members) attempted to create their own social movement, known as the C.R.I.P.S. – Community Revolution In Progress (Shakur). What made the founding Crips social bandits was that they were WW outlaws protecting the community, vigilantes fighting the dominant power – racism, economic oppression, and social injustice (Shakur). This organization began with the hopes of continuing the legacy of the

Panthers, however, as the organization expanded within lower socioeconomic communities of the Los Angeles area, struggles for power disbanded their initial unity and pitted the organization against each other (Shakur). Four and a half decades later, the Crips, the once social bandits, are now “apt to be described, equally uncritically, as ‘terrorists’, a sign of the historic decline of the bandit image in the second half of the twentieth century” (Hobsbawm)—and a sign of the new pathological response to alienation by the youth of today.

To many in Western society, the thought of a dead gang-banger or a dead terrorist is a good thing, a “good riddance” (Hayden). Being regarded in this way by society, a disregard for life is inherited and becomes part of the outlaw identity. Sociologist W.I. Thomas labels this behavior ‘secondary deviance’, whereby an individual continually violates a given norm and then inherits the deviant behavior and incorporates it as part of their own identity. With their lack of fear (or forced fearlessness) of death, domestic gang bangers and terrorists engage in what can be considered two different types of suicide – religious altruistic suicide and slow suicide.

Specifically, in the case of jihad martyrdom, religious altruistic suicide is rationalized in the sense that these “suicide missions are viewed as adequate means for both egoistic and altruistic goals” (Tosini). On the other hand, the slow suicide committed by gang bangers is more of an unconscious, yet still altruistic, self-destruction through engaging in the gang life—a life of violence and crime. While suicide is more commonly understood in terms of anomic situations, this suicide which is seemingly for honor and solidarity, produces new globally understood terms such as ‘suicide bomber’.

In the United States people are often shocked at the manner in which suicide bombers are revered in other cultures and societies, however, American society also reveres those who have made “the ultimate” sacrifice for their country and which resulted in their death. For example, the Purple Heart Medal is used by the U.S. military system to honor those soldiers who have been involved in violent situations. Therefore, both U.S. military forces as well as its enemies are

willing to sacrifice lives for a cause they believe in (e.g. Japanese suicide fighter pilots (kamikazes)).

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