

How IS teaches hate: insights from an ex-al-Qaeda jihadist

by [Nicholas Blanford](#)

June 4, 2015

([The Christian Science Monitor](#)) The rise of the self-described Islamic State has been so quick and its behavior so brutal that in the world's collective consciousness the Sunni jihadist group has come to overshadow even al-Qaeda.

For Aiden Dean, a young former Bahraini (and now British) citizen who runs a consulting company in Dubai, the rise of IS is simply the latest iteration of a process of radicalization that breeds ever greater extremism.

The emergence of a powerful and virulent IS ideology “was an inevitable conclusion,” he said. “When you take people and put them in training camps to become fighters and jihadists and you pump into their mind the idea that they are going to fight against apostate regimes, it is a natural evolution that they will end up with higher levels of hate and anger against their own societies and against the world in general.”

The mild-mannered and bespectacled Dean, whose fluent English is delivered at top speed, should know. He was once a senior member of al-Qaeda and confidant of Osama bin Laden before switching sides and spying for British intelligence for eight years. In a recent interview with the BBC he said he helped foil suicide and poison attacks in the West.

More threatening than al-Qaeda

The contacts and insight he amassed during his career as a jihadist—from Bosnia in the mid 1990s, through Afghanistan, and as an al-Qaeda recruiter in London—has given him a sharp understanding of the background, recruitment, and operational strategies of IS.

It's a group, he said, that is far more capable, organized, and threatening than al-Qaeda. Its success in producing throngs of committed fighters, he said, has

depended on fostering recruits' "spiritual ascension" through a sense of religious guilt and victimhood.

But Dean, who spoke on the sidelines of the annual U.S.-Islamic World Forum in Doha, organized by the Brookings Institution and the Qatari Foreign Ministry, doesn't have easy answers as to how to deal with IS.

Dean said that al-Qaeda was a fragmented organization with branches in North Africa, Somalia, and Yemen as well as affiliates across the Islamic world. Its scattered nature meant that local interests and grievances soon overshadowed its original unified vision.

'The psychopath within'

Unlike al-Qaeda, whose eventual goal was to establish a global Islamic State, or Caliphate, IS chose to create the state first, which they see as a religiously legitimate base from which to "establish God's rule on earth," Dean said.

A year ago, IS conquered much of Sunni-populated Anbar Province in western Iraq and overran Mosul, Iraq's largest northern city. It also has gained territories in neighboring Syria and currently controls about half the country. Last month, IS took over Ramadi in western Iraq and Palmyra in central Syria, leaving the organization potentially poised for advances toward the capitals of both countries.

Underpinning these IS gains is the strategic thinking at the heart of the organization, including a global recruitment campaign targeting "a certain demographic vulnerable to the unholy trinity of violent extremism," Dean said.

The "unholy trinity" includes invoking religious guilt among young Muslims that they are not sufficiently pious, then persuading them that the West is waging a war against Islam. The third phase is psychological in which the potential recruit develops a persecution complex because he is a Muslim, withdraws from society, and eventually comes to believe that he is superior to those surrounding him.

"With his spiritual ascension, he starts to see everyone else as nothing but pigs and cows," Dean said. "And that unleashes the psychopath within in order for him to go and slaughter people without any remorse whatsoever."

Extensive commercial networks

The message, delivered through astute use of social media platforms, has seen IS strength rocket up to around 70,000 fighters drawn from the Arab world, Europe, and further afield. Iraqi prime minister Haidar al-Abadi said Tuesday that IS presently has more foreign fighters within its ranks than Iraqis.

IS has bankrolled its expansion through an extensive commercial network that earns hundreds of millions of dollars in Iraq and Syria as well as neighboring Turkey. In Turkey, IS has some 4,000 sympathizers operating networks across the country dealing in food, vehicles, oil and gas equipment and pharmaceuticals, Dean said.

Despite the seemingly unstoppable IS march, Dean argues that enacting a “hostile containment” policy that reduces the group’s ability to expand geographically and recruit followers could lead to internal feuds. Eventually, the result could be its implosion due to its stringent ideology of religious intolerance.

Still, Dean said, the faltering international campaign to check IS and the fact that the group is “a hundred times more organized than the original al-Qaeda” means that “it will be with us for a while.”