

# Neuroscientific Evidence in the Strategic Exploit of the Disabled as a Fighter in the Islamic State

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In this paper we aim to address, through an innovative neuroscientific view, a significant recruitment strategy implemented by ISIS targeting individuals with disabilities. The use of strategies that reinforce empathy and the encouragement of the belief that one is capable of achieving a given goal, are strategically effective messages in terms of recruitment. Self-efficacy, which is the set of beliefs the individual holds about his or her own abilities, is another tool used to effectively recruit someone with a disability. The use of media messages also reinforces the “know how” and the feeling of “being”, that is, recognizing oneself in rewarding values. In analyzing the Entertainment-Education method, we identified some elements of persuasive storytelling that even in people with disabilities has led to success in terms of recruitment. An innovative multidisciplinary contrast activity with the contribution of neuroscience may therefore be effective in identifying behaviors and recruitment strategies that are effective with people with disabilities.

*Keywords:* Islamic State, recruitment, disabled, terrorism

## Premises

Subjects with disabilities are traditionally identified either as victim, bait, or target in a context of

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terroristic strategy.

The Islamic State has been able to overturn such perspective by exploiting individuals with disabilities in activities such as recruitment, propaganda, or as bombers (Moore, 2016).

In persuasive messaging, it is evident how effective the strategy of making the disabled person an active, motivated and incentivized protagonist to reach a final objective that will be favorable to himself as well has become.

Providing these subjects with a sort of collective identity increases an empathic effect that favors a profitable and strategic bond for the recruiter.

Identifying the neuropsychological and neuroscientific mechanisms that make effective not only the recruitment but also the terrorist operation of the disabled, is obviously of common interest in a multidisciplinary scientific perspective and in an increasingly innovative strategy of contrast and prevention.

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines a disability as a restriction or deficiency resulting from an impairment in the ability to perform an activity.

More specifically, disability can be understood as a lifelong condition, a condition related to advanced age, an episode in life, or a momentary condition.

The United States Federal Government defines a disabled as an individual who has a physical or mental impairment that limits one or more of his or her life behaviors, and who is known to have such an impairment and has documentation for it (Transportation Security Administration, n.d.).

Starting from a quote by Henry Ward Becher: "A man is rich or poor according to what he thinks of himself, not according to what he possesses", it becomes evident how fundamental it is to encourage the self-efficacy perceived by the disabled subject in the recruitment phase. The Entertainment-Education method, which is also used by the Islamic State, employs a persuasive narrative that aims precisely at enhancing the effectiveness of the resources that the subject possesses. Reinforcing the conviction that one possesses abilities that are indisputably useful for an action and that one has no difficulty in adequately managing a terrorist project, is favorable in increasing an immediate empathic effect between the recruiter and the recruited.

In this case, it is never an attempt to increase self-confidence, but rather a reinforcement of the belief that one is up to the task. The effectiveness of the recruitment is amplified by the so-called "self-efficacy", which is the set of beliefs that the subject possesses about his/her own abilities.

There is a constant increase in levels of motivation and at the same time there is an increase in cognitive resources which, as a final consequence, will lead to the conviction that they can perform all useful actions to control the task assigned. There is always an increase in the effectiveness perceived by the recruited subject who sees his/her own abilities judged with greater confidence, especially in facing the assigned objective.

The margin of failure with verbal and video messages is constantly demolished.

Through this well-refined methodology (from the media point of view) it will be possible to observe a strengthening of the sense of efficacy to the point of being able to entrust the subject with objectives that were initially unthinkable. In the case where the disability has occurred in adulthood, the subject perceives a fast acquisition of all the necessary strength to re-establish the same confidence in taking action that was present before the traumatic event. From a social integration perspective, these subjects are motivated so that not only they become an integral part of the community to which they belong, but they also act for the good of that same community. One of the most used methods used to build confidence and empowerment is the administration of images that highlight the success of subjects who have performed the terrorist act in a handicapped condition.

One of the elements that make this methodology successful is related to the perception of having the possibility to regain a fulfilling self-esteem. Media messages are particularly effective in reinforcing the “know how” and the feeling of “being”, that is, recognizing oneself in values that are again rewarding (Bloom, Horgan, & Winter, 2016). Therefore, the means of recruitment not only aim to increase self-esteem (meant as an evaluation of oneself) but also the so-called auto efficacy, which consists of the judgment that the subject gives him/herself in reference to his/her possibility of achieving a goal. The sense of high self-efficacy feeds a constant and unwavering commitment to carry out the instructions given.

At this stage, the disabled person will be able to recognize all the potential he possesses despite his disability. This can lead him or her to have no uncertainties whatsoever, both in accepting the conditions dictated and, more importantly, in achieving the ultimate goal (Forest, 2006). Through positive empathy, the recruiter perceives and fully shares the satisfaction of the one who has achieved the given objective. This empathic mechanism is now well explainable thanks to the knowledge of the activity that some neurons perform in favor of the recognition of the satisfaction of others. Mirror neurons have evidently supported the identification of neurophysiological strategies that are activated in some brain area and which encourage positive empathy. Sharing the emotional experience of the other turns into a system that gives further strength to recruit videos and messages. Understanding the experience and success of others is what media messages intend to do, in an attempt to influence decision-making choices in favor of being recruited.

From a strictly scientific point of view, it is possible to measure the efficacy of these strategies by submitting tests of social prediction or affective role taking. These tests are useful in research contexts and always have favorable results in confirming the strategies described above.

Individuals with disabilities are thus used as propaganda tools and as systems of persuasion for recruitment. Some of them then go on to become protagonists of terrorist attacks. Among the operational activities, cases of SVBIED (Suicide Vehicle Borne Improvised Explosive Device; Nelson, 2007) have been highlighted. From an initial inclusive strategy in the community of belonging there is, in some cases, an operational evolution that is characterized by easy execution and great effectiveness. Evidently, these characteristics are found in the SVBIED, which is a system often used for the final operational stages.

In order to encourage the evolution from recruitment to terrorist activity, it is often used a method that leads to a rapid demolition of the perception of one’s disability. A perception that the disabled person understands as a sign of inferiority, inadequacy, and inability. It follows that the subject initially senses the possibility of eliminating the constant fear of rejection. In addition, the recruited person often expresses pride in belonging to a new reality in the initial stages.

This initial phase is favorable for the recruiter who will be able to select the most suitable recruits for a transition to action. The inability to perform activities of daily life as before the disability is cancelled by the one who finds value in the tasks assigned in the initial stages of recruitment (Fatah, 2007). The process of reorganization, supported by an empathic effect with the recruiter, undergoes a remarkable acceleration. Often there is even a reconstruction of identity. Through recruitment, the subject finds a clear reduction in the effort necessary for the acquisition of a personal autonomy, which is useful for achieving the goal that has been given to him/her.

Among the advantages of this type of recruitment there is obviously the surprise effect. In a very common vision, the disabled person is, in fact, perceived as incapable of carrying out terrorist actions. Recruiters use training programs to make the disabled person more aware of their potential.

Even subjects with an intellectual disability are not excluded from the possibility of being recruited. Intellectual disability is a heterogeneous clinical condition characterized by a deficit in intellectual functioning and a reduced ability to cope with the adaptive demands of the environmental and social context. It is distinguished into mild, moderate, severe, and extreme. In recruitment activities, strategies that make it possible and effective to enroll individuals with this deficit are often highlighted. The support that is provided, however, makes it possible to place the disabled person in a new social context, and he or she will receive not only adequate support, but also the opportunity to feel useful and have a purpose for the community.

It must be emphasized that in these cases there are emotional and cognitive aspects that can expose subjects to episodes of anger and aggression. Anger is evidently an initiator of aggressive behavior. In these cases, aggressive behaviors and anger are also used with a communicative function. It is often evident the lack of ability to manage emotionality, anger, and frustration. Such individuals may enact aggressive behaviors with the goal of obtaining psychological recognition that they could not achieve otherwise (Comolli, 2015). These characteristics are evidently in favor of this type of recruitment that, if well managed, will lead to the exploitation of the subject to carry out terrorist activities.

As we know, anger is a massive disorganization of the self. High perceived tension must be discharged verbally or physically. Subjects with intellectual disabilities may display episodes of anger, heteroaggression, and violent actions. To make these features useful in the case of terrorist acts is both possible and advantageous. Referring to an analysis of aggression, we can identify it as a phenomenon aimed at destruction, control and command, and as the result of an instinct characterized by destruction and death.

This becomes an added value for the recruiter, who uses strategies and gives instructions with the aim of increasing aggressiveness during an operation. In the Entertainment-Education systems, in fact, simple messages and images are highlighted in order to show the effectiveness of threatening postures before starting an aggression, the effective behavior during combat, and also the attitude of submission and obedience to any order. It is crucial that such orders are perceived by the disabled individual as an event in favor of their personal empowerment (Aggarwal, 2019).

Audiovisual strategies expose the utility of predatory aggression in a detailed and effective manner. Planned and goal-directed behaviors are highlighted. Adaptive methods to be implemented in the presence of dangerous environmental conditions are also shown. In cases of intellectual disability, however, these concepts are easy to acquire and are interpreted as reinforcing suggestions for self-improvement (Horgan, Bloom, Daymon, Kaczkowski, & Tiflati, 2017). The moment the subject expresses a particular need, recruiters will offer useful problem solving. By doing so the disabled person will deal with uncertainties, problems, and decisions using a problem-solving method provided by the recruiters. As a result, there will be a manipulation of the subject so that they can achieve their assigned goal.

### **Video Analysis**

In analyzing the Entertainment-Education methodology, we identified some elements of persuasive storytelling that even the disabled themselves recognized as a key asset in a terrorist context. These films often feature individuals directly involved in active roles even in the battlefield or on the verge of an SVBIED attack. With strategic media acumen, individuals with disabilities are often shown performing civilian roles and tasks of public benefit, followed by videos that show individuals with disabilities in military roles viewed from a perspective of positive evolution. In the movie *Inside the Caliphate* we can witness the activity of an amputee

of American origin who is encouraging every disabled person to “get up with one leg or without legs”. A recurring motivation is to be able to quickly reach the gates of Jannah (Paradise). In the movie mentioned above, the disabled person incites the handicapped to carry out terrorist acts even in their own territory.

In the same series of videos released in 2018, it is narrated that “the sons of the Khilafah stood up as one body despite their injuries in response to the call of Jihad”. Throughout the footage are depicted fighters with amputated limbs and other disabilities. A possible martyrdom operation is often announced despite the presence of disabilities. These individuals claim to have been well instructed on how to make their intention active and in what areas they can act. The video *The Assault of the Muwahideen* was released in October 2018 and another video in December of the same year. The videos feature disabled subjects actively fighting on the front lines. It is shown how it is possible to get into an armored vehicle despite having the amputation of a lower limb or how it is possible to use an automatic weapon during an attack using only one upper limb. In other videos produced by al-Hayat from Wilayat (Sirte), fighters in wheelchair are shown executing prisoners. From a media perspective, such propaganda has also fostered a sense of guilt in the physically healthy who failed to answer the call to Jihad.

The recurring message is to emphasize how the disabled person is useful to himself, to the group, and how he/she is capable of achieving the goal given to him/her. From the analysis of the Entertainment-Education systems it is evident how this strategy of recruiting disabled people is privileged by ISIS. In a broader view, however, it is possible to identify a method of recruitment aimed at subjects that are not normally associated with the common conception of a terrorist act. Children and the elderly are proposed as valid protagonists with increasing frequency, especially in SVBIED attacks.

From a neuroscientific perspective, it has been shown how ISIS propaganda video clips that utilize heroic or martyrdom narratives are effective narrative systems that make participation in terrorist activities attractive. This can be traced back to the fact that heroic videos show an increase in beta power on frontal sites and an overall increase in alpha power (Yoder, Ruby, Pape, & Decety, 2020). Such data are now assessable with non-invasive and easily applied EEG (electroencephalogram) methods. We have also confirmed this result, albeit on a few subjects, through EEG systems with recording of the empathic response during the viewing of narratives and propaganda videos spread by ISIS.

## Conclusions

Recruitment strategies involving individuals with disabilities in terrorist contexts have been known for years. The methods of approach and possible recruitment have evolved over time, favored by two main elements: the unexpected increase in social isolation (pandemic) and the significant improvement in media and communication skills by terrorist groups. The Entertainment-Education systems stimulate the empathic effect and make every disability an added value. With regard to the empathic effect, we have been able to confirm evidence that was already documented in the literature. In particular, we have found, through the use of EEG recording systems during the viewing of video propaganda, an increase in the beta wave on the frontal areas and a global increase in the alpha wave.

The strategy requires that the recruited subject perceives the media message as an effective way to make their physical or mental deficit as not limiting, but rather as an element in favor of a feeling of integration and belonging to a group in which their personal success can be guaranteed. The effectiveness of these strategies is now verifiable with non-invasive EEG recording systems and through the viewing of propaganda videos.

In the case of mental disabilities, there is a phenomenon of problem solving implemented by the recruiter. This strategy guarantees an effective manipulation of the decision-making process in order to achieve the objective (strategic and terroristic) assigned to the disabled person.

In an increasingly innovative vision, law enforcement must consider that any type of disability does not preclude the subject from being recruited. This concept must be kept in mind especially in the preliminary stages of recruitment.

Even outside the areas classically defined as sensitive (airports, checkpoints, crowded places) it will be necessary to proceed with an awareness strategy intended for security professionals in the area. In the same way that any able-bodied person can be a possible terrorist threat, the same consideration should be made with a disabled person.

The strategic effectiveness of recruitment requires a multidisciplinary, specialized and updated activity of contrast, with particular attention to the evolution of the strategies put in action, which can also be demonstrated through the innovations in the field of neurosciences. Consequently, the ability to identify factors capable of significantly increasing the empathic relationship between the parties is fundamental to make any terrorist strategy ineffective.

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