

Concerning Features of an Apocalyptic Cult in the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)

BY MARITA LA PALM

“**T**he ISIS death cult threatens the people of Iraq, the region, and the wider world,” stated Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott on September 14, 2014 from Malaysia.¹ Five days later, on September 19, United States Secretary of State John Kerry called the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL) “a militant cult masquerading as a religious movement.”² The term that both of those leaders chose to highlight is “cult.” However, sociologists dispute whether cults are simply deviant groups or whether they have the inherent quality of mind control. From context, it appears that both Abbot and Kerry believe the latter, relying on the theories of psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton. In his seminal 1961 work, *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalitarianism: A Study of Brainwashing in China*, Lifton created eight “psychological themes” for thought reform.³ It would appear that ISIL does meet

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Foreign Policy Journal, October 28, 2014

some of these criteria, and this should affect how governments respond to ISIL and lead to a focus on disruption of its recruitment practices.

The first aspect of Lifton's criteria is milieu control, in which "the totalist environment seeks to establish domain over not only the individual's communication with the outside (all that he sees and hears, reads and writes, experiences, and expresses), but also – in its penetration of his inner life – over what we may speak of as his communication with himself."⁴ The control that ISIS exerts is both positive and negative. The prohibitive aspect is far-reaching, from the typical Islamist enforcement of shari'a by male and female religious police to some unusual rules not allowing members to share pictures and videos on social media other than those put out by the official propaganda agency and death sentences for those who publicize ISIL's activities without permission. For example, seventeen-year-old Abdullah Bushi was executed in mid-October of this year in the Syrian city of Raqqa for making a video of ISIL's headquarters.⁵ In terms of education, ISIL has already decided that chemistry and philosophy are not fitting subjects for study in the lands it claims to control.⁶ Meanwhile, ISIL also maintains a very carefully orchestrated social media campaign that surpasses any extremist organization by far. Its videos create a mythology of heroes, especially through the repeated use of the term "the Muslims". Some members of the group are showcased as idols and that leads new recruits to feel excited to speak to them or meet them. There is strong use of "nasheeds," Islamic songs to bind the activities together. The common theme of the videos is how free and happy the group members are.

Where ISIL has appears uninterested in maintaining milieu control refers to former members and even some current ones. A true cult would be able to control current followers, and exiting followers would generally be bound by guilt and unable to criticize the group even mentally. An example of this can be found in Lifton's work, when the young Miss Darrow comments after her imprisonment in China, "I had made up my mind I would not

mention the chaining...I asked myself how much they would want me to say.”⁷ The two Austrian teens, Sabina Selimovic and Samra Kesimovic, who were betrothed and are now pregnant, admitted their error in joining ISIL.⁸ Additionally, a number of Western men and women have given interviews to reporters from Turkey confessing that they joined ISIL too hastily. ISIL has been unable or unwilling to prevent the escape of its members. Often cults do not allow believers any access to social media or their families, and multiple parents have reported speaking with their sons or daughters in Syria. In addition, it appears that ISIL jihadis have access to their cell phones, and although they seem to prefer their Islamist buddies, there is no reason to believe they don't have access to other news. From their magazine, *Dabiq*, it is actually clear that some of the jihadis do read and follow Western news quite closely. Nevertheless, I have never seen any examples of any current ISIL fighters criticizing the organization on social media. From this analysis, while ISIL does have many aspects of totalitarian control, it arrives at the control of milieu Lifton explains, but is not as extreme as some cult-like religious movements.

Lifton's second criteria, mystical manipulation, and the very similar fifth, sacred science, are clearly present in the Islamic State literature, “They are the agents ‘chosen’ (by history, by God, or by some other supernature force) to carry out the ‘mystical imperative,’ the pursuit of which must supersede all considerations of decency or of immediate human welfare.”⁹ *Dabiq* 4 gives multiple examples of this ideology. One example is, “For this reason, you find the words of a’immah (plural of imam) full of absolute conviction in Allah’s support for the Islamic State. They have not a mustard seed of doubt regarding this.”¹⁰ An unbelievably ridiculous double logical fallacy later on in *Dabiq* contends:

“Before Shaytan reveals his doubts to the weak-minded and weak hearted, one should remember that enslaving the families of the kuffar and taking their women as concubines is a firmly established aspect of the Shari’ah that if one were to deny or mock, he would be

denying or mocking the verses of the Qur'an and the narrations of the Prophet (sallallahu 'alayhi wa salam), and thereby apostatizing from Islam."¹¹

Not only are ISIL members pressured to believe they have been called by God to establish a caliphate – no longer just fight Assad – but also they are told how to interpret Qur'an and Shari'ah. If they disagree with the interpretation – not the law- they are apostates. That is heavy ideology, and should not be underestimated. I was also fascinated by Lifton's comment that mystical manipulation can lead thought control receivers to be oblivious to how they are harming themselves or others. Another of Lifton's famed works is *Destroying the World to Save It: Aum Shinrikyo, Apocalyptic Violence, and the New Global Terrorism*. In it, he astutely writes, "Aum (Shinrikyo) was part of a loosely connected, still-developing global sub-culture of apocalyptic violence – of violence conceived in sweeping terms as a purification and renewal of humankind through the total or near-total destruction of the planet."¹² Likewise, ISIL leadership believes that they are applying Shari'ah faithfully whereas other religious leaders are not. They claim that by killing Shi'a they are killing "rafidah," or Muslims rejecting Mohammed's successors. They justify enslaving and raping Yazidi women through a convoluted tale of religious research and quoting of scholars.¹³ Therefore, it is pointless to use reason with ISIL, but solid Islamic interpretation would go a long way to combating their ideas. Understanding that their goal is the purification of Islam makes it easy to see that idealism is an important characteristic of its members.

The third theme, demand for purity, creates a black and white world. Donna M. Webster of the University of Florida and University of Maryland researcher Arie W. Kruglanski carried out a notable 1994 study on the need for cognitive closure. Some individuals have a strong urge to organize concepts into good or bad while others avoid categorizing at all. Terrorists in general appear to fall into the first group. Previous examples have demonstrated that disputing group beliefs is seen as apostatizing. In the Islamic State, such behavior can

lead to execution. ISIL also leads members to feel guilty by using a technique called “love-bombing.” This means that they flood new fighters with kindness so that they feel guilty for wanting to leave or thinking critical thoughts. One defector from Syria explained to NPR how strongly this affected him, “His introduction to the group began with a 40-day stint in a religious training camp to absorb ISIS ideology. His teacher was a charismatic man from Saudi Arabia, he says, so ‘kind and convincing’ that the defector was ‘ready to become a suicide bomber if he asked me.’”¹⁴ De-radicalization of ISIL members, which is already necessary for exiting jihadis, must necessarily include work in the area of increasing comfort with ambiguity and understanding the manipulation they have undergone.

While I have seen no indications of the fourth theme, confession, in the upper echelons of the group, I have noticed it in its public enforcement of Shari’ah. The Vice News documentary *Islamic State* documents how the religious police travel around confronting ordinary citizens for their “sins” such as women wearing see-through veils or vendors selling water during Ramadan.¹⁵ Offenders are re-educated according to ISIL teaching. In addition, a most disturbing video was distributed on Twitter recently showing the stoning of a girl by ISIL fighters in front of her own father while she begged for forgiveness.¹⁶ There is definitely a culture of forcing confession, but so-called criminals might be killed for their offense. Still, there have been no reports of jihadi confessions being used against them by their higher ups. Perhaps defectors are brainwashed in that they are unable to identify manipulation, or they have not been high enough up in the hierarchy to be aware of the violations of privacy.

Initially, what led me to consider whether ISIL met the criteria for a cult months before Kerry and Abbott’s proclamations was their loaded language. Lifton wittily expresses this as, “The most far-reaching and complex of human problems are compressed into brief, highly reductive definitive-sounding phrases, easily memorized and easily expressed...it is part of an expression of unity and exclusiveness.”¹⁷ Twitter user “ghazishami”, who claimed to not be

part of ISIL and yet for all appearances is a recruiter, often used the term “green birds” on his Ask FM page. It seems to be an Islamist reference to martyrdom. Other common keywords of ISIL are, among others, *takfir*, *kuffar*, *khawarij*, *khilafah*, *tawhid*, *rafidah*, Islamic State, *ummah*, *hijrah*, and my favorite, *ghanimah* (war booty). Not only that, but the one-finger gesture so common in ISIL photographs accompanied by the cry of “Takbir!” and anashid leads to a mind-numbing which is exactly what Lifton describes. A recent *New York Times* article confirmed this, “When you fight over there, it’s like being in a trance,’ said Can, who asked to be referred to only by his middle name for fear of reprisal. ‘Everyone shouts, ‘God is the greatest,’ which gives you divine strength to kill the enemy without being fazed by blood or splattered guts,’ he said.”¹⁸ In addition, the members address each other as *akhi*, or brother, and this implies that they are all brothers, no longer part of their birth families. This characteristic of ISIL is perhaps its most concerning indication of a mindless obedience to an ideology.

In doctrine over person, Lifton discusses the creation of a myth in which the narrative of the member’s life is placed. In the “Flames of War” video posted on Youtube, one fighter said, “From the mujahideen, on the other hand, came the believers who would rebuild the khilafah. They were chosen by Allah. They were the Khorabah, the few of the few, from all corners of the earth, who answered the call of the prophet waha wa sahlam.” There have also been rumors on Twitter of the ISIL obsession with the white mosque (Umayyad mosque) of Syria, believed to be a site of the end times. ISIL ideology hinges upon apocalyptic Islamic theology, and thus their expectations for the future are easily predictable. They believe that the end of the earth will soon ensue, exactly according to the *hadith*. A simple civil war has thus become the beginning of the end days for ISIL members. Therefore, for them there is no life or death, just ideology. The myth is extremely powerful for the members, and surely the heart of what they discuss among themselves.

ISIL does fit Lifton's final criteria of dispensing of existence in a most frightful way. Young, inexperienced soldiers are sent into battle to fight willingly in a conflict they often know little about. Many support toppling Assad, but ISIL has taken it even further to slaughter Yazidi Kurds and the massacre of hundreds in the Sheitat tribe of Syria, just to name a few. They have had to expand their ideology to encompass this genocide which in their minds is necessary to consolidate their power. In addition, jihadis become what Fathali Moghaddam of Georgetown University calls "fodder" when they are used as suicide bombers.¹⁹ During the battle around Erbil, one Kurdish soldier commented that ISIL jihadis didn't cover themselves or hide to shoot. They have no fear of death. In that sense, the group has been quite clever to recruit young, often unattached individuals. This theme is useful in that it gives a clue to the mental confusion that all but the most sociopathic members must be feeling and pinpoints young people vulnerable to recruitment: adolescents who do not have parents watching their social media behavior and who might not be able to stop them from leaving their home countries on time.

While many Islamist extremist organizations have cult-like features, ISIL is perhaps the most cultish in history. The loaded language, myth creation, and strict ideology mean that the members are not participating in what we would call the real world. They live in an imaginary world in which jihadi heroes prepare for the apocalypse. In spite of that intense thought control, some members are repelled by the brutality. The long-term effects of participating in that ideology and those systems will be post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). One UK fighter has already returned home, greatly "traumatised" in the words of his mother.²⁰ Most theorists would agree that Islamic extremists follow an ideology; many would disagree that fighters receive thought reform and some might argue that John Kerry and Tony Abbott were referring to the definition of a cult as a deviant group. However, a careful study of Lifton's criteria leads to the suggestion that consideration of this aspect might lead to more

successful prevention of radicalization, some de-radicalization ideas, and methods to fight the group which has so terrorized such a long-suffering region.

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