

Psychology Not Theology: Overcoming ISIS' Secret Appeal

Written by Arie W. Kruglanski

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ARIE W. KRUGLANSKI, OCT 28 2014

Despite the intensifying military response to ISIS by the US and its allies, the realization is growing that “we cannot kill our way out of this mess,” to cite governor Romney’s famous quip, and that, as DHS chief Jeh Johnson recently stated, “our government should not overreact, or react out of fear, anger or prejudice.” Johnson pleaded instead for a moderate counter-narrative by Muslim clerics to sway potential recruits to extremism away from violence and back to the path of real Islam. In the same vein, Barack Obama and David Cameron, the British Prime Minister, declared ISIS activities un-Islamic, and over a hundred Muslims clerics have signed a letter to Abu Bakr Al Baghdadi, the leader of ISIS, with detailed scholastic arguments why ISIS’ conduct is all “wrong” and an “offense to Islam, to Muslims and to the entire world.” But the real question is whether the battle for the hearts and minds of starry-eyed enthusiasts for ISIS can be won on theological grounds alone, and whether it is the fervent quest for religious Truth that propels them to risk life and limb by flocking to the fight. On reflection, that is to be doubted. Rather, ISIS’ recruitment strategy may work through its *psychology*, not its *theology*.

The Need for Closure

From a psychological perspective, the appeal of violent extremism derives from a clever exploitation of two basic human needs: the need for *cognitive closure* and the need for *personal significance*. The need for closure amounts to the quest for certainty, and the eschewal of ambiguity; it is the desire to feel assured about the future, to know what to do and where to go. It is the quest for structure and coherence in one’s outlook and beliefs (Kruglanski, 1989; 2004).

The need for closure constitutes a common human experience. Many of us might crave closure when waiting for the results of a test, for example, marking time until our proposal is answered, or “holding our breath” until a murder mystery is solved. Some people experience the need for closure chronically, most of the time. A psychological scale exists [1] that taps this tendency reliably (Webster & Kruglanski, 1994). Moreover, some contexts induce the need for closure in most people (Kruglanski & Webster, 1996). The current world situation may constitute just such a context.

Unprecedented waves of immigration dislocate millions of people these days and prompt what Samuel Huntington dubbed the “clash of civilizations” (Huntington, 1993). The economic recession has left millions of young men and women unemployed, political orders in the Middle East seem to crumble, and multiple world locations are rocked by political instability. All these engender unsettling, anxiety-inducing uncertainties, which prompt cravings for coherence and closure. Fundamentalist ideologies are quintessentially fit to satisfy just such cravings.

They do so by painting a Manichean worldview characterized by sharp dichotomies and clear choices; a world of good versus evil, saints versus sinners, order versus chaos; a pure universe in black and white admitting no shades of gray. A fundamentalist ideology establishes clear contingencies between actions and consequences; it offers a future that is predictable and controllable. Such a perspective holds particular fascination for confused youths in transitional stages of their lives, who drift like rudderless ships and find themselves torn by conflicting cultural demands.

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In research supported by the National Science Foundation and the Department of Defense, among others, we found time and time again significant statistical relations between Need for Closure (NFC) and extremism (Kruglanski, Chen, Dechesne, Fishman & Orehek, 2009; Kruglanski, Belanger, Gelfand, Gunaratna, Hetiarrachchi, Orehek, Sasota & Sharvit, 2013; Orehek, Sasota, Kruglanski, Deschesne & Ridgeway, in press).

This relation was found regardless of where or when we looked, whether in Morocco, Spain, the Philippines, Palestine, Northern Ireland, or Sri Lanka. Though extremism was expressed differently in different locations (e.g., via religious fundamentalism or radical ethno-nationalism), its relation to NFC was the same: Individuals who craved closure held extreme views as well. They derogated others who did not share their opinions, portrayed them as despicable, and felt morally licensed to destroy them by any and all means.

The Quest for Significance

Beyond closure and coherence, the ISIS ideology offers its adherents an invaluable psychological reward, a prize like no other. It is the sense that, by joining the fight against infidels, they earn the status of heroes and martyrs, thus gaining a larger-than-life significance and earning a spot in history. Richard Barrett, a former intelligence officer, observed that Westerners tend to become jihadists because “people are seeking a greater purpose and meaning in their life.” Such quest for purpose and significance is a pre-eminent human motive, long recognized by psychological theorists (Fiske, 2004; Maslow, 1943). It denotes the supreme importance to humans of being noticed, mattering, and deserving honor and esteem.

The quest for significance can be inflamed by a substantial loss, such as that which the extremist communicators graphically depict. Humiliation of Muslims by the West, their suffering in Iraq, Afghanistan, Palestine, or Bosnia, are described in vivid colors to highlight the affront and dishonor that Muslims around the globe have been dealt [2]. This theme is a mainstay of fundamentalist propaganda: Yehia Al Libi, a major Al Qaeda propagandist, summoned Muslims to action by these fiery words: “Jihad in Algeria today is your hope with permission from Allah in redemption from the hell of the unjust ruling regimes whose prisons are congested with your youths and children if not with your women.”

Frustrated youths without coherent purpose, uncertain prospects, and on the receiving end of rejection are particularly prone to resonate to loss of significance of Muslims as a group. Thus, Barrett suggests that jihadists tend to be “disaffected, aimless, and lacking a sense of identity or belonging.” But it is not only they, apparently, who find the ISIS message attractive; the appeal to one's (trampled) identity and the depiction of one's group's degradation can incense individuals who may otherwise be seen as well-adjusted and with a promising future. According to reports, Nasser Muthana, a 20-year-old volunteer to ISIS, was accepted as a student by four medical schools, while Muhammad Hamidur Rahman was gainfully employed and had a well-to-do father. The psychological appeal of this particular approach can therefore be seen to work across demographics and circumstantial contexts.

Instincts Released

There is no doubt that ISIS' recruitment strategy has been strikingly effective. Whereas only months ago the number of its fighters was estimated at 10,000, an early September update by the CIA had it at 31,500, a staggering increase. 12,000 of these are foreign fighters, with 3,000 of those from the West. From the psychological perspective, ISIS' allure in large part lies in the quick-fix remedy it offers to significance loss, and the secure path it offers for significance gain. These are based on humans' most primordial proclivities, those for aggression and for sex.

The quest for significance is universal; we all possess it to a substantial degree. There is nothing “wrong” with such quest, as far as it goes. To the contrary, it can spawn noble pro-social pursuits, attested by works of great humanitarians like Mother Theresa, Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, or Mahatma Ghandi. But the selfless work of a humanitarian can be arduous and thankless. It requires patience and tenacity, a struggle against overwhelming odds; it often takes years to accomplish, with little encouragement, and little assurance of success. It is a *slow track* to significance that calls for patience and tenacity. A much *faster track* to significance is through violence and combat. This has been so from times immemorial. It motivated young men in the Middle Ages to join the Crusades,

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inspired Lord Byron to join the Greeks' struggle for independence, enticed international volunteers to join the Spanish civil war, stirred Mujahadeen to join the fight in Afghanistan, and it currently galvanizes thousands of foreign fighters to join ISIS in Syria and Iraq.

Though other routes to significance exist, violence has an instinctual, evolutionary appeal. It is through aggressive domination that animals across the phylogenetic spectrum, from the lowly crayfish to the exalted human, assert their standing. It is how little children construct their social hierarchies, and how nations establish their place in the international order (Duntley & Shackelford, 2008). The ISIS call to arms for the lofty sake of a Caliphate can thus have an irresistible cognitive resonance for some.

An added, yet hardly insignificant, aspect of the ISIS' strategy is the clever use of sex as an accolade for aggression, and this, too, has primordial origins. In the animal kingdom, the males often gain access to the females through their aggressive domination over rivals (Duntley & Buss, 2011). Sexual access is the most primitive assertion of significance and a perpetuation of one's name and genes into the future (Buss & Kenrick, 1998). ISIS has turned the strategic use of sex into a well-oiled machine that delivers. Young, often sexually frustrated men are promised sexual Shangri La for their bravery: there are brides eager to marry the fighters for Islam, rape of non-believers is legitimized, and fatwas are issued proclaiming a "sexual jihad," forcing girls to be married to militants. There have been reports of marriage centers being set up where women register to be wed to fighters, and captured Iraqi women are reportedly forced into sex slavery in brothels run by female jihadists. Moreover, should they die in battle or in a suicide attack, fighters are promised the status of martyrs (shahids) whose ultimate reward is marrying beautiful virgins on entry into Paradise.

Though some may understandably view ISIS' sexual strategies as a horrific and cynical exploitation of women, not all women may see it quite that way. According to *The Guardian*, young ladies find appeal in the prospect of marriage to a perceived hero and the raising of children who will be future fighters for the glory of Islam. Just like their male counterparts, females too may tire of the empty and lackluster existence that "business as usual" affords. They too may be keen to enact the glamorous role that ISIS offers them and they may enthusiastically embrace the prospect of serving a hugely important cause infinitely larger than themselves.

In his momentous study on "Civilization and its Discontents," Sigmund Freud described how cultures, through the erection of moral systems, restrain the primitive urges of aggression and sex, thus allowing societies to function and to thrive (Freud, 1930). By sanctifying these primordial instincts, the ISIS propaganda, in an intriguing *tour de force*, transmutes the profane into the sacred, unleashing vast motivational forces and turning killers into martyrs in their own eyes and in the eyes of those who watch.

Conclusion

At the end of the day, ISIS' unique blitzkrieg has been as psychological as it was military. Its cruelty, severity, and domination project a "larger than life" sense of power, depicting a "strong horse" in bin Laden's well-known metaphor that offers glory and significance to those who bet on its victory. And in a "war of theologies," one that offers coherence and closure, promises supreme significance, and rewards its adherents with sex is likely to trump that which "claim to fame" is merely a superior scholastic interpretation of religious texts.

The challenge, therefore, is to understand the magic of ISIS' draw and use it wisely in creating a psychologically effective counter-narrative. Appeals to moderation, tolerance, and peaceful coexistence might not be persuasive to doubt-ridden youths eager to be noticed. Nor would learned scholastic arguments alone do the job. Rather, the fight against extremism needs to harness the same psychological forces that made extremism attractive in the first place. If simplicity and closure are what did it, the counter-narrative must be equally simple and assured. If it was the promise of glory and significance, the counter-narrative must offer these as well, albeit in a different frame. Young men and women might be called to mobilize against the apostates who disgrace their religion, and challenged to defend its honor. They might be encouraged to express their disgust of brutal aggressors and be invited to envisage a collective engagement with a different, but equally passionate, story. The counter-radicalization narrative should be presented boldly and assertively. It should be delivered by charismatic role models who inspire and arouse. "Cold

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cognition" and reasoned arguments wouldn't do the job, the situation calls instead for fiery arguments and sweltering "hot cognition" (Thagard & Kunda, 1987).

In the opinion of this author, the military response to ISIS that the US and its allies have undertaken is inevitable and essential: psychologically, victory over the enemy will destroy its image of invincibility and reveal that joining it may bring about ignominy, an unglamorous death in the desert with no one to care. Yet a great deal more must be done on the interpretative level of public communication to make sure that it is our message and not ISIS' that prevails. Understanding the psychology of it all may be indispensable in this enterprise.

Notes

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[1] Translated into numerous languages. Webster, D.M., & Kruglanski, A.W. (1994). Individual differences in Need for Cognitive Closure. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 67, 1049-1062.

[2] Relevant quote: "America and its allies remained watching the plight of the Muslims upon the hands of the nusayriyyah. They watched with happiness seeing the killing, abuse, expulsion, and destruction, neither interested in, nor concerned about, the hundreds of thousands of dead, wounded, and imprisoned Muslims, and the millions displaced – including men, women and children – all over the world at the hands of the jews, crusaders, rāfidah, nusayriyyah, hindus, atheists, and apostates, in Palestine, Yemen, Syria, Iraq, Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Burma, Nigeria, Somalia, Afghanistan, Indonesia, India, China, the Caucasus, and elsewhere" (p. 5).

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Psychology Not Theology: Overcoming ISIS' Secret Appeal

Written by Arie W. Kruglanski

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Arie W. Kruglanski (PhD, UCLA) is Distinguished University Professor of Psychology at the University of Maryland, and a co-founding PI at START, the national center of excellence for the study of terrorism and the response to terrorism. He has published widely on human judgment and decision making, motivation, group processes, and the psychology of terrorism. His awards include among others the Donald Campbell Award from Society of Personality and Social Psychology, the Distinguished Scientific Contribution Award from the Society for Experimental Social Psychology, and the Senior Humboldt Research Award. He has served as editor of the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology: Attitudes and Social Cognition section, editor of the Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, and Associate Editor of the American Psychologist. Dr. Kruglanski served on National Academy panels for the study of terrorism and political violence and is presently serving as President of the Society for the Study of Motivation.