

## **A SOCIO-PSYCHOLOGICAL AND CULTURAL APPROACH TO ISIL ACTIONS**

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### **ABSTRACT:**

*THE ANALYSIS UNDERTAKEN IN THIS ARTICLE IS MEANT TO EXPLORE THE COMPLEX SOCIOLOGICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL DYNAMICS THAT LEAD TO THE CREATION OF ISIL. THIS TERRORIST GROUP IS BY FAR THE MOST VIOLENT, CRUEL AND ALSO THE MOST MILITARY DEVELOPED OF ALL TERRORIST ORGANIZATIONS UP TO PRESENT DAY. WE HAVE EXAMINED THE SPECIFIC IDEOLOGICAL, RELIGIOUS AND POLITICAL BACKGROUND OF THE ISLAMIC STATE AND THE GEO-POLITICAL CONTEXT THAT LED TO THE VACUUM OF POWER THAT HAS CREATED ISIL. WE HAVE ALSO EXPLORED THE PSYCHOLOGICAL DRIVES OF THE MUJAHIDEEN AND THE RELEVANCE OF THEIR CULTURAL BACKGROUND. IN THE END OF THIS STUDY WE ANALYZE THE DYNAMIC EFFECTS OF THIS TYPE OF TERRORISM ON THE PSYCHOLOGY OF WESTERN INDIVIDUALS.*

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**KEY WORDS:** ISLAMIC STATE, TERRORISM, MIDDLE EAST, AL-QAEDA, PSYCHOLOGY, SOCIOLOGY

### **INTRODUCTION**

People tend to regard terrorism as the biggest threat to mankind, democracy and society. This perception is easily justified looking at current world events. We all saw from 9/11 how a terrorist group can bring even the strongest state to its knees. Also in more recent times we have seen a level of cruelty, violence and aggression never before reached. The terrorist organization that is responsible for this dread calls itself ISIL. As far as Islamic terrorist organizations go, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant differs from others due to a high level of military expertise and tactical preparation, strategic planning, recruitment of foreign resources and very high level of financial funding. At this time there is a major debate on what causes this kind of phenomenon whether it is the radical ideology of Islamic culture or, if there are there bigger interests at stake.

### **A SOCIO-PSYCHOLOGICAL AND CULTURAL APPROACH TO ISIL ACTIONS**

First of all, terrorism is not a new phenomenon. From a historical perspective, it can be dated back either to the 1<sup>st</sup> century Sicarii Zealots or later to 11<sup>th</sup> century Al-Hashshashin. According to the U.S. Department of State there are now 59 active foreign terrorist

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organizations and 12 delisted ones<sup>2</sup>. Since 1970 there have been over 140 000 terrorist attacks 58,000 bombings, 15,000 assassinations, and 6,000 kidnappings<sup>3</sup>. For example 2014 saw an 80 percent increase in terrorist activity, with the number of deaths rising from 18,111 in 2013 to 32,685 in 2014. The number of deaths due to terrorism is nine times greater than it was 15 years ago. 57 percent of all attacks and 78 percent of all deaths have occurred in only five countries; Iraq, Nigeria, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Syria.<sup>4</sup> Over half of these deaths are attributed to ISIL and Boko Haram. A particularity of ISIL is the fact that they kill three times more people on the battlefield than in terrorist acts. An estimate shows that they inflicted over 20,000 deaths by war killing combatants and civilians alike and close to 6000 by terrorist acts.

ISIL is a salafi jihadist group that has adopted a fundamentalist and radical Sunni Islamic doctrine of Wahhabism. Their purpose is to create a caliphate that will have political, religious and military authority over the muslim world. Today, this group has occupied a vast part of Iraq and Syria, imposing their own interpretation of sharia law. It is important to note at this point that their agenda is far more complex than that of any other terrorist group, with inflicting terror being second to creating their own state.

From a cultural and psychological point of view, it is important to examine the specific ideological elements of their beliefs first of all. ISIL is a jihadist group, which means that they justify the whole range of violence and aggression through specific parts of the Quran. Jihad is a term that appears quite often in their holy book; it means to struggle or to strive in the name of faith or God-Allah. Even though it is often translated by the mass-media as "holy-war", it has a double significance- jihad is at the same time a symbol for inner spiritual transformation and the fight against the enemies of their culture. A follower of jihad is called a Mujahideen.

Secondly ISIL is a Salafi group, which means they identify with a specific political and religious ideology that considers jihad as being a physical fight against all those who do not conform to their view of "true Sunni Islam". Salafism from a sociological point of view was developed as a distinct ideology by the so called Afghan Arabs who fought as volunteers against the Soviets in the Soviet-Afghan War. The most prolific Salafi terrorist group was al-Qaeda. ISIL has adopted Wahhabism as their main doctrine. This doctrine which is also called the Wahhabi Mission is the most extreme, austere and fundamentalist religious branch of Sunni Islam. The main drive of this branch is the implementation of what they consider to be pure Islam.

Understanding this set of views, ideology and doctrine it is pertinent to consider that at this time there is no bigger threat than ISIL to global security. An ISIL adept based on this structure will not only think but will believe with strong conviction that any other human being who does not adhere to his own set of beliefs deserves to die. There is no third way for this type of radical fighter- either someone is ISIL, or God (in their opinion) wants that person violently destroyed. Chaos above order could be used to describe the way of thinking of the ISIL Mujahideen. This inner psychological drive, of the truth detaining individual who wants to transform the world into a better place through the destruction of opposition is not unique or new. It has been used before in the most brutal and tyrannical political movements such as Nazism and Communism. There is an important difference between the two, even though in other tyrannical regimes ideology was the motivational factor for killing others, it

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<sup>2</sup>US Department of State- Foreign Terrorist Organizations, <http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/other/des/123085.htm>.

<sup>3</sup>Overview of the GTD, <https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/about/>.

<sup>4</sup>Global Terrorism Index 2015, page 2, <http://economicsandpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Global-Terrorism-Index-2015.pdf>.

was imposed by the state or the dictator, who didn't present himself as being God. The ISIL radical fighter considers that his actions are justified, rewarded and requested by a higher authority than any man-Allah. In this sense we could consider that the ISIL mujahideen has a lack of reason and moral structure to his personality being capable of the most horrific acts in the name of his self-imposed image of god. In our opinion this cocktail of fundamentalist ideas mixed together with the vast geographical spread and high number of resources available to ISIL can only give birth to threats far greater than any radical movement ever seen before.

At this point it is important to examine the sociological origins of this terrorist group. After the events in 9/11, the United States and its allies started a war against terrorism. Very rapidly they took control of both Iraq and Afghanistan. What is often considered to be The Second Gulf War led to the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's tyrannical regime, the collapse of the government and the dismantle of the army. All things considered, this set of events should have led to a stable political environment going towards democracy. What experts failed to take into consideration was the brittle social fabric in the area where the Sunni-Shi'ite conflict played a significant role. During the period between 2003-2011 when the U.S Army was stationed in the region they failed to create effective security forces in the new Iraq Army. Another factor that played a vital role in what would be ISIL was the alienation of the Sunni citizens who traditionally had influence and control over the country (even though they were a minority) by forcing a Shi'ite regime under Nouri al-Maliki with the support of the United States.

From a historical point of view, ISIL was a branch of al-Qaeda which was created and coordinated between 2004 and 2006 by Musab al-Zarqawi. Their first name was „al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia” and their purpose was to wage a terrorist guerilla war against the U.S Army and the Shi'ite population. After his death in June 2006 this organization continued to grow under a new name: The Islamic State in Iraq (ISI). A large number of jihadist organizations joined their call and fought against Shi'ites and the U.S Army. Thanks to good policy that strengthened the Sunni regime and well planned military operations ISI was seriously weakened at the end of 2011. After the U.S Army left Iraq ISI recovered and grew becoming far larger and more powerful than anyone had ever anticipated. In this same year the Syrian civil war started and ISI formed a support front in Syria called the Al-Nusra Front. Soon after this some dissension appeared between al-Qaeda and ISI that led to the establishment of a new organization called The Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria (ISIS).<sup>5</sup> After 2014, this terrorist organization managed to achieve some very important military victories. For example Mosul, the second largest city in Iraq was taken on June 4–10, 2014, ISIS defeated the Iraqi army and announced the beginning of the creation of the Islamic Caliphate under the rule of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

The Middle East and especially Iraq and Afghanistan differ psychologically and as a culture from much of the rest of the world. People in these cultures are driven by particular mechanism and dynamics that cannot be easily understood by people not from those cultures. According to ITIC attempts by the U.S. and the Soviet Union to help, as well as the Israeli intervention in Lebanon have all failed, to create political stability and opportunity for democracy. In all this three instances external intervention led to what could be considered far worst events such as the creation of ISIS, al-Qaeda and Hezbollah that still exist today and represent a real threat to the entire world.

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<sup>5</sup>”The Historical Roots and Stages in the Development of ISIS”, originally published by The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, <http://www.crethiplethi.com/the-historical-roots-and-stages-in-the-development-of-isis/islamic-countries/syria-islamic-countries/2015/>.

From a cultural point of view, by understanding the history, psychology and ideology of ISIL, we can infer that this militant group is a culture against all culture. Even though they pretend to despise western society and any other which is not their own they profit from the objects of their hatred. ISIL is probably the first terrorist organization to use extensive video and internet technology to recruit western civilians as resources, and to promote their propaganda through media. Violent and non-violent videos have been made public presenting either horrific acts (beheadings, shootings and torture) or terrorist and ideological threats with a high degree of Hollywood-like video editing. In the same paradoxical manner, ISIL is known for destroying ancient monuments, museums, mosques and churches that do not align with their beliefs. They claim that this is for creating their own pathological utopia when in fact a large part of their financing comes from smuggling looted artifacts.

Certainly ISIL has impacted the whole world raising a series of important unsettling red flags. The first concern to note is the high number of terrorist attacks linked to this militant group the most recent of which was the March 22, 2016 Brussels bombing which resulted in 32 deaths. This caused panic and uncertainty in the western population. Before this, a 2014 poll showed that 47% of U.S citizens feel less safe now than before the 9/11 terrorist attack<sup>6</sup> a more recent one shows that 7 out of 10 Americans consider ISIL to be the biggest threat to the security of the world<sup>7</sup>. It is interesting to note a parallel between the Middle East and the western world. In the fragile sociocultural fabric of the Middle East, the population does not feel secure. As a result, they tend to support tyrannical regimes. In the western world, the feeling of individual security is also dropping, and we see more and more extreme political parties winning elections. As an example, both Donald Trump in the U.S. and the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) are gaining ground, running on xenophobic and anti-immigrant rhetoric.

Another red flag is the high number of foreign fighters that flow towards Iraq and Syria to join either ISIL or affiliate terrorist groups. An estimate shows that almost 30, 000 fighters have joined the war since 2001. This number is rapidly growing, The Global Terrorism Index (2015) shows that 7,000 individuals joined the militant group just in the few first months of 2015. The foreign fighters are motley from the Middle East and North Africa but an alarming 21% account for European citizens. This fact represent a serious cause for concern unveiling the fact that ISIL has constructed a well thought out system of recruitment and radicalization, targeting psychological vulnerabilities in the western world. This indicates a level of complexity that has never been reached before by any other terrorist organization. One example is a series of videos that shocked the world showing a number of beheadings performed by a European individual later called Jihadi John.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion the world is facing not only a war between terrorism and democracy but a war that challenges society and culture as a whole. ISIL came to power as a result of a very vulnerable socio-economic climate and a vacuum of power and stability. The Middle East has always presented a particular and unique socio-psychological profile in which the individual is more prone to archaic and tribal thinking than to an orderly system of government. Islamic culture does play a role in the justification of ISIL's brutality, violence and aggression taking

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<sup>6</sup>S.A. Miller, "Homeland Insecurity: American feel less safe than any time since 9/11, poll finds", The Washington Times, September 10, 2014, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2014/sep/10/america-feel-more-unsafe-anytime-911-ready-militar/>.

<sup>7</sup>Jonathan Martin, Dalia Sussman, "Fear of Terrorism Lifts Donald Trump in New York Times/CBS Poll", The New York Times, December 10, 2015, <http://mobile.nytimes.com/2015/12/11/us/politics/fear-of-terrorism-lifts-donald-trump-in-new-york-times-cbs-poll.html?referer=>.

into consideration that this terrorist group bases its ideology and doctrine on an extreme interpretation of the Quran, however this doesn't completely account for the grotesque acts which they have committed. For the first time in history a terrorist organization has managed to occupy a vast territory and since June 29, 2014 they have declared their occupied territory The New Islamist Caliphate with a population close to 8 million according to most sources.

If we identified the 3 most pressing socio-cultural problems of the current situation they would be: the high number of European citizens who flee democracy to go fight for ISIL, the winning streak of radical political parties around the democratic world and the high percentage of people that feel insecure and afraid we could conclude that this is not a fight between good and evil but in fact is a fight between a culture that values freedom, development and human rights and a culture that tries to impose an archaic and traditional view by force.

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