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Mobilization and Radicalization Through Persuasion: Manipulative Techniques in ISIS' Propaganda

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This paper explores the recent findings of some empirical research concerning Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham's (ISIS') communication and tries to synthesize them under the theoretical frame of propaganda's concept and practices. Many authors demonstrated how ISIS propaganda campaigns, in particular those deployed on cyberspace, proved to be effective in recruiting new members in both western and Muslim countries. However, while most of the researches focused on ISIS's communication contents and narratives, few works considered other methods and techniques used for actually delivering them. This is a regrettable missing point given the fact that communication's and neurosciences' studies demonstrate that not only what is communicated but also the techniques adopted bear important consequences on the receiver's perceptions and behavior. Therefore, this article analyzes in particular the findings of researches carried out by communication scholars, social psychologists, and neuro-cognitive scientists on ISIS' persuasive communication techniques and demonstrates their importance for security studies' analysis of ISIS' propaganda. It argues that ISIS' success in mobilizing people and make them prone to violent action relies on—among other factors—its knowledge and exploitation of sophisticated methods of perceptions' manipulation and behavior's influence. This, in turn, demonstrates ISIS' possession of state-like soft power capabilities effectively deployed in propaganda campaigns and therefore calls for a more complex understanding of its agency.

Keywords: ISIS, propaganda, soft power, persuasive communication, radicalization

Introduction

The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham's (ISIS') effectiveness in propaganda's and recruitment' activities is undeniable, although difficult to demonstrate in a quantitative way. Given the limited availability of primary sources, the dimensions of ISIS' affiliation can be roughly measured in two ways by relying on secondary sources data. Firstly, by the numbers of foreign fighters who have joined its ranks from abroad. US governmental data indicate that, by June 2016, more than 40,000 individuals from all over the world have reportedly travelled to fight in Iraq and Syria¹. In July 2016, according to *NBC*, "some 500 new western nationals travel to Iraq and Syria to fight for ISIS every month" (Arkin & Windrem, 2016). A second way, more difficult and prone to miscalculations, is that of counting ISIS' supporters who in many official documents are defined as "radicals"². However, what "radicalization" is and whether such a phenomenon

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¹ According to the U.S. State Department's acting Coordinator for Counterterrorism. See Justin Siberell (2016).

² For example, the French "Terrorism Prevention and Radicalisation Reporting File" (FSPRT) from its beginning in 2015 to August 2017 has detailed 18.550 French cases of what it defines as "Islamist radicalization". See Jean Chichizola (2017).

actually exists has been widely debated (Neuman, 2003, Hafez & Mullins, 2015; Borum, 2011a; 2011b; de Galember, 2016; Heath-Kelly, 2013; Crettiez, 2016; Schmid, 2013). Moreover, the relationship between radicalization, extremism, and terrorism is in itself contested (Richards, 2015). However, it is undeniable that in both Muslim and western countries ISIS exerts an unbeatable power of attraction to potential members—especially young people³—and of mobilizing them to violent action. Indeed, recruitment represents ISIS' most lasting success in face of its increasing territorial losses and military defeats. Deprivation, marginalization, frustration, poor economic conditions, and grievances of Muslim populations were assumed to be the main causes leading individuals to join violent Jihadists' groups (Roy, 2004; Kepel, 2008; Cesari, 2013). Yet, so far, the "sociological hypothesis" has received only partial empirical support, at least for what concerns ISIS' affiliation (Groppi, 2017; Reynolds & Hafez, 2017). Furthermore, the 2016 leaked documents containing details of 22,000 recruits (thus far one of the very few primary sources available about ISIS' personnel) have dismissed any possibility for producing a recruit's typical "socio-economic" profile (Dodwell, Milton, & Rasler, 2016). Social movements' theorists consider ideology as a vector in insurgents' activation (Snow & Benford, 1988) and some security studies' authors also argue that religious ideology plays an important role in violent Jihadist groups' mobilization (Rich, 2016; Hegghammer, 2009). Yet, many scholars contest this assumption (Esposito, 2015; Gunning & Jackson, 2011; Aly & Striegher, 2012)⁴ and empirical research has proved how, in most of the cases, ISIS's recruits have a very poor knowledge and even understanding of Islam (Roy, 2004; Kepel, 2008; Cesari, 2013; Speckhard & Yayl, 2015; Dettoni, 2015). This paper makes a critical departure from existing analysis of religion and, more in general, ideology as the only key-factor explaining ISIS' success in attracting and mobilizing people. As Kruglansky (2014) mentions, it considers psychology instead of theology at work in ISIS' recruitment strategy. However, it focuses more on *how* than *why* the mobilization process occurs and points to the persuasive communication techniques used by ISIS—mainly online but also offline—as an important factor in attracting individuals and making them prone to act violently. It starts from Cronin's (2006) fundamental observation according to which "the evolving character of today communications is changing the patterns of popular mobilization" (p. 84) and includes contributions coming from communication and media studies, social psychology, and neurocognitive sciences and unify them under the propaganda's concept and practices theoretical frame. By doing this, it accepts in some ways the challenge proposed by Conway (2016) for an interdisciplinary approach to the study of radicalization and terrorism. Many authors have analyzed ISIS' communication campaigns (Winter, 2015; Whiteside, 2016; Archetti, 2012) and most of them focused on the importance of online social platforms and the web in general for spreading ISIS' contents (Archetti, 2015; Aly et al., 2016; 2017; Bouchard & Levey, 2015). However, what has gone almost neglected so far, is that the communicative relationship between ISIS and its audiences is characterized by a wide and deep information asymmetry⁵ because it occurs in contexts, which, although open to interactivity, are nevertheless based on data uncertainty. Therefore, in delivering messages, ISIS holds a persuasive power, which is effective, since it is not considered by the receivers themselves. A second missed point is that, although contents and narratives (Mahood & Rane, 2017; Corman, 2011; Ginkel, 2015; Schmid,

³ According to Peter Bergen, in his testimony to the US Senate Committee on Homeland Security, in July 2016, the average age of foreign fighters in Syria being 25, 22 for female.

⁴ See also the letter undersigned by religious leaders and religion sciences' scholars and sent to ISIS' (ex) leader available at <http://www.lettertobaghdadi.com/>

⁵ The concept of information asymmetry was originally developed in economic sciences and applied to marketing. See Akerlof (1970).

2014) represent important features of ISIS' propaganda campaigns, also *how* (i.e. the techniques used) and *by who* (i.e. the sender of the message) narratives and contents are delivered do play a crucial role. So far, within security studies literature only Ingram (2016) has codified the actual persuasive communicative mechanisms deployed in militant Islamist propaganda. He identified them in meaning, credibility formation, and behavioral change. Moreover, he argues that such a strategy is not an ISIS' peculiarity, but it is common to a variety of violent non-state groups and movements with political agendas. This paper will build on this contribution by including further empirical research findings, which confirm his argument. It also adopts his refusal of the rational actor and unbounded choice models adopted by most of the security studies' literature and will argue that, contrary to both mainstream sociological and psychological approaches, mobilization and "radicalization" can be *induced* processes. In other terms, every individual subject to persuasive, manipulative techniques within coercive as well as *not-coercive* contexts can be mobilized to action and "radicalized".

In summary, this paper neither contexts nor demonstrates the existence of the "radicalization process". Rather, it intends to attract the attention of security studies' scholars on the importance of the techniques used by ISIS in mobilizing individuals to violent action by taking into account other research areas' findings. Its final goal is to raise questions about the agency of an actor, which, by making an extremely skillful use of psychological operations traditionally adopted by states in their propaganda campaigns, demonstrates the possession of a remarkable state-like soft power.

A Theoretical Framework: Propaganda and Persuasive Communication

For Jowatt and O'Donnell (2012) propaganda is "the deliberate, systemic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behaviour to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist". Traditionally, the main goal of states' propaganda activities has been to influence individuals' and public opinions' perceptions with the final aim of guiding their behavior towards expected outcomes (usually the support of given domestic and/or foreign policies): As Schmid (2014) effectively synthesizes "[v]iolence aims at behaviour modification by coercion. Propaganda aims at the same by persuasion". State actors traditionally resort to persuasive communicative techniques for their propaganda campaigns. According to Stiff and Mongeau (2016) "persuasive communication represents any message that is intended to shape, reinforce, or change the responses of another, or others" (p. 12). Such a definition, which stresses the intentionality of the message's sender, includes what the authors summarize as the three fundamental dimensions of a persuasive activity: response-shaping, response-reinforcing, and response-changing. The manipulative power of persuasive communication is based, on one side, on the asymmetric and uncertain features of the communicative contexts and, on the other side, on human beings' mechanisms of decision-making and behavioral responses. Cognitive, psychological, and behavioral sciences' recent developments demonstrate how human behavior is mostly constituted by automatism triggered more by perceptions and emotions than by rational thinking (World Bank, 2015, chapter 1; Kahneman, 2011; Gigerenzer & Selten, 2002; Gigerenzer & Gaissmaier, 2011; Tversky & Kahneman, 1985; Coz, 2014). More importantly, this appears to be particularly the case in an information-saturated environment (like the cyberspace, for example). In fact, because of some cognitive energy-saving mechanisms, it is especially in a context of "information redundancy" that individuals tend to refer the decisions-making process to someone they trust on, assuming uncritically this person's decisions and opinions (Brock & Balloun, 1967). Therefore, what ends to count in a decision-making process is the perceived credibility of the subject (Druckman, 2001)

the process is transferred to and who usually holds or is perceived as holding some forms of “charismatic” power or authority—being it academic, political, social or religious. It is evident that such mechanisms offer room for a deliberate manipulation which can be exercised by the credible subject himself. As a consequence, credibility becomes of central importance in the process of attributing meanings to events and info (Origgi, 2008; 2013). According to Origgi, even in a standard context of available information, individual decision-making process is not related to information themselves but to “trust”. Another point to consider is that neuro-cognitive scientists (Pylyshyn, 2003; World Bank, 2015, chapter 3) confirm that perceptions themselves are filtered through internal representations of reality, a paradigm of knowledge’s construction previously proposed by constructionist approaches to social sciences. Therefore, they are such “mental maps” which influence the process of attributing meaning to events more than reality itself does. This allows the manipulation of individuals’ behavior through the exposure to visual, verbal, not-verbal and para-verbal stimuli deliberately manufactured for mental maps’ construction. The ability of language in particular to shape perceptions and then to create representations of reality was already theorized by Aristotle. Not surprisingly, most of the techniques adopted in states’ propaganda campaigns are built on language’s instrumentalization. The more commonly used of them are: rhetoric; discourse’s polarization; argumentative fallacies (Hamblin, 1970); framing techniques⁶; truths’ concealment, and, finally, fake-news’ and half-truths’ spread⁷. Because of the web’s technological and structural features—i.e. interactivity within a communicative context which is asymmetric in terms of info owned and users’ identity availability—the leverage for such techniques’ opportunistic use, especially through social media and networks, has increased (Fogg, 2003; Lieto & Venero, 2013; 2014; Thielman, 2016).

ISIS’ Propaganda: Persuasive Techniques in Communication and Recruitment

Ingram (2016) argues that persuasive and manipulative communication techniques play a fundamental role in ISIS’ recruitment and propaganda campaigns. Other researches confirm his findings. For example, Khalil (2017) demonstrates that ISIS uses frame’s techniques to promote its objectives through its official publication *Dabiq*⁸. Ali (2015) details the spread of false info and half thrust in ISIS’ communication as well as its manipulative approach to the women’ roles and attitudes issue according to factors as the intended audience effect. Pelletier proves that ISIS shifts its messaging from mainstream Islamic law to a unified and radical re-interpretation of it (Pelletier et al., 2016), showing a skillful capacity of religion’s and ideology’s manipulation. Salazar (2015) explains how ISIS is able to fully exploit rhetoric persuasive power; more recently, Honig and Reichard (2017) prove the opportunistic distinction ISIS is able to make between an ideological use of rhetoric and a “public relations” oriented one. Ascone (2017) analyses the rhetoric strategies which make Jihadist discourse appealing to young people and shows how the readers of ISIS’ reviews *Dabiq* and *Dar al-Islam* are manipulated through a persuasive interconnection of obligations, rewards, menaces, and interdictions spread throughout the texts. Fiordelisi (2016) in his empirical analysis of ISIS web sites finds that most of ISIS’ communication finalized to foreign fighters’ recruitment is based on argumentative fallacies. ISIS’ use of discourse polarization for shaping readers’ perceptions and gaining their support was also empirically

⁶ According to Robert Entman (1993), framing is the promotion of “a particular problem definition, casual interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment condition”.

⁷ Other techniques are agenda-setting and priming.

⁸ On ISIS’ use of frames see also Stern and Berger (2015).

demonstrated by Ingram (2017) and other analysts (Hak, 2015; Hussein, 2015)⁹. From a different angle, Gendron (2017) stresses the importance of ISIS' "charismatic" preachers whose activities, strategies, and techniques are carefully planned for building relationships finalized to recruit new members. Beevor (2017) puts in evidence how "initially unwilling subjects" can be motivated to violent behavior by the sense of dependency on the leaders and their instructions. Both the last two analyses are unsurprising given the relation described above among leaders' charisma, decision-making processes, and individuals' behavior. Concerning ISIS' on-line recruitment activities in particular, Alarid (2016) underlines how the web's inherent technological asymmetry (which allows the web-site owner to detect the users meanwhile remaining sheltered by absolute anonymity) facilitates the tailored manipulation of recruits. In particular, she refers to the manipulative communication techniques at work in recruitment campaigns, noting that:

Many people who become caught up in online propaganda did not seek it out — it found them. [...] Once someone is mobilized, next steps vary. Some begin to research the causes that various extremist groups are fighting for. This leads to their discovery of the radical groups — and, more troublingly, to the groups' discovery of them. The Internet makes it easy to be found. (Alarid, 2016)

Some practitioners even referred to the possible use on the web of Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) as well as of other sophisticated persuasive methods usually adopted in psychological wars (Radio Free Europe, 2014). Empirical researches undertaken independently by social psychologists Marina Shorer-Zeltser and Galit Ben-Israel, social psychologist and security studies scholar Robin Torok, and neurocognitivist scientist Yannick Bressan, proved that such techniques are actually at work in ISIS' propaganda and recruitment campaigns. Built on some psychotherapists' practices and transformational grammar's theory (Chomsky, 1957; 1965; Bach, 1974), NLP can be briefly defined as a psychological-linguistic approach to human behavior and to verbal psychotherapy (Linder-Pelz & Hall, 2007). The main aim of the researches which led to the development of NLP was that of making those techniques which induce changes in patients' behavior learnable. The privileged means by which such changes could be induced were found in language structures. Recent studies confirm the PNL potential to change learning and responsive behavioral patterns (Tosey, Mathison, & Michelli, 2005; Tosey & Mathison, 2010). By using NLP techniques to analyze some Muslim internet sites, Shorer-Zeltser and Ben-Israel (2016) found that sites perceived as belonging to different groups and communities are rather homogeneous in communication strategies in terms of content and techniques used, as well as of synchronization of messages. In fact, they tend to use religious contents to establish direct, emotional, and impulsive connections with their audiences. Additionally, through such a deep relationship they build a new universe of significance which leads to a detachment from physical reality. Therefore, it would be because of the religious contents' and language's exploitation that some religious Muslim sites are successfully used by violent Islamist groups to attract members and mobilize them to action. Torok (2015a) has carried out an ethnographic studies monitoring for four years Jihadists' communications on Facebook for a total amount of five thousand pages, groups and profiles. She found that both sophisticated manipulative propaganda and NLP tools (mainly anchoring, association/dissociation, and future pacing) were clearly present in such communications. More interestingly, she outlines how those propaganda's tools—which, although aimed to change the cognitive belief structures of the readers, utilize a strong affective and emotional dimension—“were

⁹ ISIS' theoretical stances about polarization as published on its official review are available at: <http://media.clarionproject.org/files/islamic-state/islamic-state-dabiq-magazine-issue-7-from-hypocrisy-to-apostasy.pdf>.

used by many with an implicit knowledge of the techniques” (pp. 61-62). In another work (Torok, 2015b), she shows how young people are more prone to be lured by ISIS’ persuasive communication techniques because of their ongoing process of social identity construction. Bressan applies the findings of his researches on mental representations—Metz-Lutz, Bressan, Heider, and Otzenberger (2010)—to ISIS’ recruitment and communication campaigns¹⁰. He demonstrates how ISIS’ appeal is intentionally manufactured and how the radicalization process is induced through the exploitation of hypnotic methods aimed to construct mental maps within potential recruits’ minds. Such representations of a different, virtual reality end to substitute the reality itself, shape perceptions and lead individuals’ behavior. Therefore, for him affiliation to ISIS and radicalization up to violent action are not the results of individuals’ fully free and rational choices but they actually represent merely the final products of a gradual and carefully planned manipulation process.

Some scholars and practitioners go further in demonstrating persuasive and manipulative techniques at work in the recruitment-radicalization process of ISIS members. Their final argument is that ISIS is a cult-like group, or that it acts as a cult concerning recruitment and indoctrination activities at least (Barron & Maye, 2017; Hassan, 2016; 2014)¹¹. In particular, neurobiologist Kathleen Turner equalizes the process of brainwashing by stealth to the radicalization experienced by ISIS’ recruits (Taylor, 2005; 2017, p. 13). Cults expert M. Hassan defines ISIS recruiters’ techniques as “mind-control methods” and similarly effective (Clements, 2015). Leading persuasive communication scholars Stiff and Mongeau (2016) see the process of new recruits’ joining ISIS as an example of “response-changing” effect obtained through persuasive communication and compare it to what usually happens when individuals join a cult or cult-like group. Graub (2016) is one of the few security studies works devoted to the analysis of ISIS as a cult. She points to some of the typical cults’ features—i.e. recruitment and mind control techniques, the logic of violence, the no-exit scenario—and explains how they are strongly present in ISIS. Moreover, she stresses that defining ISIS as a mere terrorist organization or a proto-state with territorial ambitions without considering its cult-like dimensions undermines strategies and actions aimed at reducing ISIS’ threat. Recently, ISIS has showed some typical “cult” features, such as oaths of allegiance by newcomers (Moren, 2016; Callimachi, 2016), a psychologically coercive environment (Sommerville, 2016), and “therapist-like” ability in recruiters (Callimachi, 2017) among others¹², which make the “ISIS as a cult organization” hypothesis likely and therefore worth being further investigated empirically.

Conclusions

This paper tried to explain ISIS’ attractiveness by including recent communication studies, social

¹⁰ Yannick Bressan, « Hypnothérapie et (dé)radicalisation. Première partie : Processus hypnotique de la radicalisation », Note de réflexion n°20, décembre 2015; « L’image mentale : une bombe à fragmentation neuropsychologique », Note de réflexion n°19, août 2015; « Daesh ou le théâtre de la mort : Le pouvoir de la mise en scène dans la communication de l’Etat islamique », Note de réflexion n°18, avril 2015; « La force des psyops de Daesh. Leurs méthodes analysées à l’aune du phénomène neuropsychologique d’adhésion émergentiste : Quelles perspectives de lutte ? », *Tribune libre* n°54, mars 2015. All the articles are available at www.cf2r.org.

¹¹ See also the interview by Fareed Zakaria to Phil Mudd, former CIA and FBI counterterrorism analyst aired at CNN on April 3, 2016.

¹² According to experts, the perpetrators of the terrorist attacks in Catalonia, Spain, held in August 2017 belong to a ISIS’ cell showing important “cult” features. See “Offline, cultlike Spain terror cell evade detection”, *France 24*, August, 24, 2017, available at <http://www.france24.com/en/20170824-offline-cultlike-spain-terror-cell-evaded-detection>. To organize a terrorist cell like a cult which relies on close offline personal relationships (after the recruitment phase which usually takes place online) gives members more options of avoiding being monitored by investigative authorities. See Kelly Maclaughlin (2017).

psychology, and neuroscience research findings, which have demonstrated its skillful use of persuasive communication techniques, a feature of ISIS' propaganda which has so far been underestimated in security studies. Ingram (2014) states that the Islamic State has been able to deploy a type of information warfare in which info-ops have played a central role. I would refine his argument saying that ISIS has been carrying out a "cognitive war" (Francart, 2000; Harbulot & Lucas, 2002; Harbulot, Moinet, & Lucas, 2002) by means of psychological operations delivered through persuasive techniques and aimed at managing meanings about events, shaping and manipulating perceptions, and influencing recruits' behavior with the final aim of making them act violently. This paper's unconventional argument represents a departure from both the literature focused on ideology as the key-factor explaining individuals' mobilization and that based on sociological hypothesis. Having showed the possible induced nature of the "radicalization process", it engages also with the debate about such a process and calls for complexity in understanding it. Furthermore, it approaches the problem of prevention activities' effectiveness by suggesting that strategies aimed at countering recruiters' persuasive capabilities can be more effective than those focused on potential recruits.

This paper's argument intended to raise questions also about ISIS' soft power capabilities deployed in attracting, recruiting, and mobilizing individuals to action. In fact if, as Jacques Ellul (2008) noted, "[i]t is with knowledge of the human being, his tendencies, his desires, his needs, his psychic mechanisms, his automatism as well as knowledge of social psychology and analytical psychology that propaganda refines its techniques", then ISIS has carried out a masterly refined propaganda, demonstrating a deep knowledge of both psychic mechanisms and the way to opportunistically exploit them. Given that soft power is the "the ability to affect the behavior of others to get the outcomes one wants" (Nye, 2007, p. 389) or, in other words, "a way to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion" (Nye, 1990, p. X), then propaganda's capabilities—which make possible that attraction on which soft power is based on but which Nye left largely under-defined (Mattern, 2005)—can be treated as a proxy for soft power itself. Therefore, having demonstrated the remarkable attractive strength of its propaganda, it can be argued that ISIS' soft power is comparable to that of a state. For carrying out a "cognitive war", soft power capabilities matter more than hard power ones do. Moreover, the fact that propaganda through the web can effectively be pursued despite of territorial losses and with very limited material and financial assets means that ISIS's soft power can last much longer than its military power and territorial dimensions. Then, the hypothesis of social psychology experts at work among its ranks—and on the cyber domain in particular—should be further tested by conducting extensive ethnographic work and interviews with former members and by concentrating on leaked ISIS documents. Finally, this type of research could turn useful in achieving those deeper insights about ISIS' agency that are still being missed in the theoretical debate.

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